

Jihad Joy

**Agony in Afghanistan
Outlier Mercenaries, #1**

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Raven Crow earned her degree in Near Eastern Languages from Princeton University then married Aamir who's the scion of an influential family in Afghanistan. Her husband brought her home to meet the in-laws. Raven entered the Middle East naive and happily married, but flees two weeks later as an experienced killer.

Prologue

The Central Intelligence Agency section chief for the Middle East, Cecil Haywood, wasn't happy to be on a ride to meet with Homeland Security. It was a hot and muggy August day in downtown Washington and for some reason his armored limo's air conditioning died within minutes of his being picked up.

„Sir we can have another limo here within twenty minutes,” his driver informed him.

„No that won't be necessary. Just pull over and let me sit up front so I can put the damn window down and get some air. Security be damn. I doubt that some terrorist disabled the air conditioning just to get a shot at me.”

The meeting was being held at the Federal Bureau of Investigation building; however the section chief was surprised by the number of various agencies attending.

Christ, even that General who heads up army intelligence is here, what the fuck is going on? It's got to be Iran. Those bastards must have rattled the president's nerves again.

An aide ushered him to the only seat available and without fanfare the lights dimmed and images began to appear on the huge computer screen mounted on the far wall. A figure clad in a black burqa walked slowly toward a nearby well. Whoever was wearing that burqa appeared to be injured. The gait was unsteady and she or he was carrying what appeared to be a two liter gasoline can.

Five adult males and two boys that seemed to be in their early teens were pushed and prodded toward the well, hands all tied behind their backs. The adults were gut shot by the burqa clad figure. The armed cohorts summarily tossed the wounded men alive and apparently screaming into the well's depths. One of the young boys fainted in terror and the other looked on in horror as the figure clad in the burqa poured the gas into the well and followed it with a lit rolled up newspaper.

As the flames shot out of the well the mysterious figure took a pistol from one of the armed men and calmly shot the left knee of the boy who hadn't fainted. Then slapped the other boy to awareness and brutally kneecapped him in his right knee. Something seemed to trigger an alarm in the individual. He or she rapidly turned and fired directly at the camera.

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The Homeland Security agent was the first to speak.

„What you've just viewed was uploaded to YouTube over a year ago. It never came to our attention until now. Circumstances now demand that we find this individual. Analysis confirms it's indeed a female. The internet groupies refer to her as Jihad Joy, but that may not be an accurate name. Watch what appears as I close in and center just below where her breast would be under that burqa.“

As the camera zoomed in, it became apparent that the female was wearing a Star of David about her neck.

„Jesus, was this a Mossad opt?“ Someone asked.

The speaker shook his head. „Definitely not Mossad. However, there's a group of ultra-Orthodox Jews called the Haredi who allow their women to wear a burqa, however it's basically a woman's movement and most Rabbis disapprove. The women claim they need protection from the lust men feel if they view them. Whether she's a Haredi sect member is currently being investigated nonetheless it's very doubtful. The sect has less than four-hundred members. We've leads on the special ops team that committed this atrocity but the State Department has requested we table our investigation of them. You're here because this female has apparently struck again. This time in New Jersey. I've another clip to show you. The next one was filmed three days ago.“

Chapter 1

Afghanistan—December 2011

Former Marine Major Alex York and his four fellow contractors were about to board their Mi 24 Hind chopper when an Afghan captain was added to their mission. The newer Mi 24 was a loaner from the Polish IASF firebase located in friendlier Northern Afghanistan. All five contractors were dressed as Pashtun tribesmen and the plan was to insert them by night into the border regions of nearby Pakistan. Their team was composed of all foreign contractors because of the mistrust felt for the Afghan troops.

An unexpected Afghan officer approached the group; York looked at his second in command Jesse Redbone and shook his head, he didn't need anyone claiming that the captain's arrival was seen as a problem.

„Major York, I am Captain Abdid. I have been ordered to join your team on its assignment. I know nothing of your objective but have been assured that you will advise me of our target in flight. It is a pleasure to be assigned to you sir.“

„Welcome to our special ops team Captain. Your addition will make it even more special. We'll fly over our target area just after nightfall, and our flight is a normal supply run for the next outpost. So with luck the locals should have no reason to suspect that a team is about to be inserted. We'll rappel down from the helicopter; I hope you've been trained in rappelling?“

The captain looked a bit uneasy, „Ah no sir, I have not. To be honest I am afraid of heights.“

Alex looked at the young captain and shook his head. He looked at the other four men and they had trouble containing their laughter. Finally the major put an end to it.

„No problem Captain, I understand completely. We're not all cut out for special ops; so we'll help with your descent from the helicopter. We'll lower you by rope to the ground. All you'll need to do is back up to the door, step out and we'll make sure you get to the ground.“

The six threw their gear into the Mi 24 Hind and within minutes they were a thousand meters high skirting their way through the valleys with mountain peaks surrounding them. Just after dark the Hind began to hover. Alex motioned the Afghan captain to the door.

„Time to descend Captain. We're going to lower you at the same time I rappel down another rope. I'll be by your side all the way. Stand up I want to hook this rope to your safety harness. Okay team grab the rope and make sure you've a good grip on it. Even a two-meter drop can hurt a trooper.“

The captain stood in the door. There was no need to close his eyes because the darkness hid the height. He smiled as he saw the other four men take up the slack of the rope. He stepped backward into a thousand meters of empty space.

„Oops we dropped him.“ Redbone exclaimed.

The major's special ops team continued on for another two-kilometers and the Hind then hovered over the ground while the team jumped the few meters to the hardened packed earth below. York led his team to the caves that overlooked the only road that passed through the valley.

They were there to capture an important Taliban chieftain reported to be conducting operations within the area. A column of what appeared to be old Russian troop carriers was to be used as bait. Taliban who had been captured in previous encounters were seated in the rear of each truck. They along with their drivers were all dressed as Afghan army and each given unloaded AK47s. The men were from the same village. They had been told that if they failed to cooperate their village would be razed from the earth, males over the age of fourteen shot and killed. All females over the age of ten raped and then left to fend for themselves. Those village boys under the age of fourteen would be rounded up and sent to Kabul to learn to become a „dancing boy“ to satisfy the perverse desires of the elite men living there. After what their village experienced during the Soviet occupation it was easy to believe all this could come to pass.

The tribesmen hated to bring death to their fellow Taliban but they had little choice. Each knew that their chances of survival were nil. Each was chained into position and so escape was impossible. Alex knew what was going on and didn't approve, but he was now a contractor. A member and officer of the best mercenary force in the world—the *Outlier Ltd.*

Two days later in the early morning hours he and his men spotted movement, however his team was immediately spotted and challenged. He walked to the ledge held his AK47 in his left hand and rapidly pumped it up and down ten times. This response upon being challenged had been obtained by torture. The three tribesmen who gave up the information were shot shortly after obtaining it.

Shit. I hope those fuckers were telling the truth. I wasn't there, so I have to trust the judgment of their interrogators.

York stood still until the right-handed response was given in return. An AK47 pumped five times rapidly in the air while held in the right hand.

Within minutes of the arrival of the Taliban, the convoy could be heard climbing the mountain pass road. Gears were heard being downshifted as the convoy climbed slowly up the pass. As the trucks reached a point directly below them gigantic boulders began to rain down. One truck was swept over the edge to a sudden stop five-thousand meters below. Two-dozen Taliban raced downward to finish off any survivors.

Alex looked about and found their target, Azid the leader of this band was standing behind cover directing his men. Along with Azid were his two closest friends and fellow commanders. They were only thirty meters away. One of the contractors yelled and made as if charging the convoy only to stop and face Azid. Before his friends could protect him, Azid saw them crumple with a well-placed shot to the back of their heads. Alex put his rifle down and smiled as he saw his teammate use the wooden stock of his AK47 to knock out Azid's front teeth. Azid fell backward against a boulder thereby insuring he would not continue rolling down the slope.

The tribesmen were gathered around the trucks and shooting the survivors even though they knew they were also Taliban. They felt betrayed but then felt nothing but heat and a pounding force that blew them into separate body parts that poured down upon the scene. Major York casually threw the control unit on the ground. Each truck had been carrying shrapnel bombs set to go off by one of his team pushing a code into the control units each had carried. Alex was sure no one had survived but his team swept forward to kill if necessary.

„Red One, Red One, this is Red Four, I repeat Red Four requesting pickup. Package ready. One package. One package only.“

As Alex waited, he began to feel eyes upon him. There was nothing to base his feelings on but such feelings had saved him numerous times.

„Okay team keep an eye peeled. Someone is eyeballing us. Red One, Red One, we may be under observation. Have gunships strafe area before touch down time.“

Within minutes two older model Hind gunships appeared and began to blow the hell out of the surrounding mountainsides. Red One came in, touched down and the team threw their package aboard. Alex gave final instructions to the medical crew aboard the Hind and turned to leave to return to his team. As he held onto the door frame with one foot on a skid he caught a bullet in the thigh. With one last struggle he threw himself forward and hands reached out to pull him to safety.

„Red Two, Red Two, this is Red One; I repeat this is Red One. Have casualty aboard. Need medical assistance for Major Alex York. Shattered leg with major

artery damage. Looks like he'll need a blood transfusion. Be advised. Medical team needs to be there with the blood he needs. Time is critical."

York looked up at his medical crew who were aboard to safe guard the package. They were all yelling to him to hold on.

„Hold on Alex it'll be all right."

„Blood is only twenty minutes away!"

„Hold on Major, hold on!"

„It'll be alright!"

They were wrong. He would survive but it would not turn out all right. Jesse Redbone, a former Green Beret captain, shook his head in disgust while listening to the damage report on the major. After lying down some serious fire power upon what they perceived to be the sniper's position, Jesse ordered the rest of the team to board their Hind gunship. The team had a secondary target to attack and destroy before it got too light in the coming dawn.

„Okay guys we're down one man. It'll be the four of us against between ten or fourteen of the drug cartel we need to take out. Leave the AK47s in the Hind and everyone carry the AA 12, as all action will be in close quarters. If we need long range fire power, we'll cherry pick weapons from the dead cartel members." The team had chosen the Atchisson (AA 12) 12 gauge shotgun as its best house to house clearing weapon. Jesse swore by its massive knock down power and dependability.

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Their Hind found a landing zone near the compound they were going to raid. The occupants felt secure in their safety because a Hind was expected that morning. It was a scheduled supply run for the workers but also a way to return with a cargo of drugs. Their supply Hind had been delayed by *Outlier* men holding the crew at gun point and in the early morning light one Hind looks similar to all the others.

Storming the compound was relatively simple. Only one guard to be dispatch by a quick stab in the kidney and a deft twisting of the knife until the man died from shock. However Redbone was unprepared for the scene he and the others found upon entering the main hall. The occupants were caught with their pants down-literally. The object of their rapt attention was an Arabic looking young woman who was putting up a heroic struggle until a fist slammed into her lovely jaw and she went night-night.

Redbone tossed a 12 gauge shell into their midst. The shell rolling on the floor got their attention. One clown made a try for his AK47 and was shredded by the blasts from four shotguns.

Jesus Christ. I thought Muslims had this modesty thing about being seen naked. Hell it looks like these guys aren't very observant followers, not with their dicks swinging in the wind like a decadent college Frat member.

Then he noticed a passport next to the woman with a Star of David lying nearby. As he bent to pick up the passport he saw that her ring finger was completely missing.

What have we stumbled upon? This is quite interesting. Quite interesting indeed.

Jesse Redbone had no idea of just how interesting. The legend of Jihad Joy had just begun.

Chapter 2

Edwin Perkins of Naval Criminal Investigative Service interrupted. „Before you show the second clip, I'd like to identify one of those men attending that slaughter by the well.”

The Homeland Security official looked a bit pained, as he wasn't there to open a can of worms. The State Department had seemed less concerned about the slaughter then in capturing this wild female killer dubbed Jihad Joy.

„Okay Perkins spill it, who is he and how do you know his identity?”

„His name is Jesse Redbone and I met him in Nam back in 1972. He's outwardly a black man like me but is officially an enrolled Nanticoke American Indian. He was a Green Beret captain in 1972 and I was a marine manning a firebase when he and a Hmong tribesman stopped by. I asked him for a favor and he granted it.”

The sixty-four year old NCIS agent's eyes looked backward forty-two years as he began his story.

He recalled the day Redbone and a Hmong trooper had stopped off at his marine forward firebase to resupply their medical equipment.

„Just before their chopper was to pick them up I approached him.”

* * * * *

„Sir, I'd like to ask you for a favor.”

„Yeah Gunny anything for a senior NCO. What do you need?”

„Sir my LT. has constipation of his bowels.”

„Gunny what do you want? Do you want me to scare the shit out of your officer?”

„Captain, I've always heard that the 'Green Beanies' were smart, but until now I just dismissed it as a rumor. Exactly Sir. I want you to scare the living shit out of that there white boy, Sir.”

Intrigued the black captain looked at the equally dark gunny.

„Tell me more.” Redbone had replied with a wide grin.

Perkins explained he had been having trouble with this young Lt. who was fresh out of OCS and wouldn't listen to the advice given to him by the experienced gunny. It seemed that the Lt. was always wandering throughout the firebase without his weapon.

„Captain, no disrespect Sir, but I'm trying to keep that young 'white bread' from being killed.”

„What would you have me do gunny?”

„There he goes now Captain, on his way to the latrine. No weapon. Here's what you do, Sir.”

Perkins had handed Redbone twenty-five rounds of .45-caliber ammunition that had the bullets removed and tops sealed with hot wax. Blanks but non-dangerous

blanks, the wax would instantly melt on its way out the barrel. He also handed him an empty magazine for the M3 sub machine gun his Hmong aide was carrying. Along with the magazine there was a conical straw hat, a pair of tire-tread sandals and black pajamas. His Hmong understood English well and had already surmised the plan. He was busy stripping off his clothing and throwing it onto the chopper that just landed.

„Don't worry about friendly fire, Captain. Everyone here is in on the plan. Your man is safe.”

Redbone looked up and saw a major and a captain emerge from a shelter with big grins on their faces. He snapped them a quick salute and watched his partner now looking very much like the Viet Cong enemy stride to the latrine, throw open the door and blast away at the terrified Lt. while screaming curses in Vietnamese.

Laughing the Viet Cong imposter ran and jumped into the waiting helicopter alongside of Redbone, he rapidly shed the Viet Cong outfit as the chopper lifted off nose down and headed toward the latrine. The thoroughly shaken Lt. emerged to a camp that looked like they had no idea of what had just transpired.

The event was never mentioned; however the Lt. carried his piece with him everywhere he went from that time forward. It did eventually save his life. Perkins' firebase had later been infiltrated by a Viet Cong sliding under the wire, but the Lt. shot the man dead before he could set off Claymore mines that had been turned inward to fire upon the awakened encampment.

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„Perkins you're identifying this man as someone who was a Green Beret captain back in 1972? Man that would make his age at least sixty-six years old or there about.”

„Director, he and I are about the same age and I'm still serving in NCIS,” Perkins replied.

The director shook his head in bemusement. Looked around the room to note the response to Perkins statements and replied.

„Yeah but you aren't running around in the tribal areas carrying a 12 gauge Atchisson assault shotgun that weighs over sixteen-pounds and appearing to be a dark skin Pashtun. Look at the way that man moved. He doesn't move and act like a man of age sixty. Hell he moves quicker than a man in his thirties, doesn't matter if it's him or not him State don't want him. I'll note the identification and pass it on to State for verification. But and this is a big but, State don't care about him. They want this woman called Jihad Joy.”

Chapter 3

Princeton University June 2011

Raven Crow was a happy twenty-two year old. She'd just been awarded her Bachelor of Arts degree in Near Eastern Studies. She spoke fluent Arabic, Urdu,

and Farsi, not all learned at Princeton. She had a flair for languages and was drawn to the Near Eastern Studies because she looked Arabic.

Raven was in a hurry to bury her past. She was a mixed blood child born of a union of a blue collar working black man and a white intellectual Jewish mother. Although discrimination was said to be a thing of decades long gone, Raven found passing as an Arab student gave her access to social groups that may well have denied her if her heritage be known.

Then she had met Aamir Agha and fell for his dark good looks and beautiful jet black pupils. His eyes transfixed her. She hid her past from him, afraid that in his eyes she would be a Jew even though she never considered herself one. The only thing that connected her to her mother's religion was her grandmother's Star of David which she hid from sight.

Aamir claimed to be a modern Muslim. One that was not observant. He relished a drink in the East Village bars and had ogled the women until he met Raven. Raven cured him of all others. He couldn't get enough of her and within a few weeks of them meeting she was with child. Two months later while on vacation they were married and Raven had herself tested to find out the sex of their child. It was to be a boy, so Aamir was ecstatic.

„Raven we must go to my parents' home and tell them the good news!”

„Aamir, I'm pregnant and you wish to fly us into a war zone?”

„No my sweet thing. It's not like that. My people live in a safe area near the Pakistan border but while we visit we will stay at our Kabul residence. Kabul is safe for us to visit. My Pashtun people inhabit both countries. You know that the stupid British screwed up many ancient tribal areas by redrawing country borders, but the Pashtun in Afghanistan and Pakistan still feel as one people.”

„I'll make a deal with you. We'll visit your parents if we can spend one week in a choice hotel in Atlantic City. I've always wanted to see the famed Steel Pier and the boardwalk. I understand the city is a pale imitation of what it once was but I'd love to be by the sea again.”

„Ah my love it may be hard to get a suite at this late date because of reservations but my family has influence something might be arranged.”

Something was arranged and the pair spent two weeks instead of one, driving about the coast, lying on the white sand beaches and making sweet love in the afternoon in their rooms that overlooked the gentle Atlantic Ocean. They toured the casinos, Aamir loved the dollar slots but Raven ever frugal played for nickels and dimes. When she won a jackpot she celebrated like it had been a jackpot of dollars not nickels and dimes. Aamir gazed upon her as she danced up and down overjoyed at winning another small jackpot.

I love this woman with all my heart and she will bear me a wonderful son.

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Aamir had arranged two first class tickets to Kabul. Upon arrival they were met by a large security detail with two limos. Raven had known her in-laws were wealthy but had never inquired as to the means of their wealth, however she was about to find out.

„Why two limos? I see the security team is divided into three SUVs and the other limo is empty. How come?“ Raven looked other at her husband. „We really aren't safe are we?“

„Sweet thing, trust me. Two limos confuse possible evil doers. Just like your president's Secret Service confuses the bad guys with two limos or two helicopters, my family does the same. We're wealthy and fear kidnapping, plus one never knows about the Taliban. My family pays tribute of course but we never trust anyone completely. Except family.“

Raven thought Kabul dirty, depressing and unorganized. Traffic was terrible because drivers seemed to pay no attention to the rules of the road, but they did pay attention to the two limos. As the limos approached, cars would pull over and make room as if they were emergency vehicles, Raven was unaware that fear of the Agha family was the reason for their ability to navigate the roads at a reasonable speed.

The limo pulled into what could be called a villa, but a villa surrounded by walls ten feet high and four feet thick; topped with razor wire. Amir's father and mother met them at the entrance. Both of the parents appeared to be what Hollywood would call „the beautiful people“. The mother was quite tall and slim but without the cavernous look of a starving diet conscious woman. Raven knew from conversations with her husband that his mother ran a total of twenty miles a day every day. However she did all on a treadmill inside the protective walls of her courtyard. The father looked like an aging diplomat that kept himself in fine athletic tone. Handsome with the same eyes as Aamir and wonderful salt and pepper hair. Both appeared to be in their early fifties.

„Wow did I ever marry into the right family. If you even look half as good as your father at his age I'll be happy“.

Aamir took his wife by the hand and led her into the gigantic living room. He was surprised to see three of his male cousins whom he hadn't heard from for several years.

Welcome home for me or family business?

He found out quickly as his mother stepped around her son and landed a right cross to the side of Ravens jaw. Raven went down but not out.

„Please don't hit me. If you're angry at me, I'll go away but why? Why did you hit me? I'm carrying your first grandson in my belly. Why would you want to hurt me?“

The family matriarch's face took on the look of sheer maniacal hate as she stared down at the women who she believed had tricked her son into marriage. Aamir tried to lunge to his wife's defense but as soon as he moved his three cousins grabbed him and kept him immobile.

„Hurt you? Hurt you? No, I am going to have you killed. That abomination growing in you is not my grandson. It's a beast and shall not survive this day. How could you Aamir? How could you marry this Jewess?“ She took a deep breath. „Not only is she Jewish her father is an American nigger. Yes that's right my son, you have dishonored our family greatly. Luckily no one outside our family knows and no one ever will.“

Aamir was released by his cousins as all his intentions of aiding Raven were gone. He looked at his wife in despair, knowing that she and their unborn son were destined to die.

Nothing I can do to save them, if I try I'll be banished from my family and forced to support myself. I couldn't live that sort of life. No, mother is right they must die.

„Mother, I had no idea; she claimed to be adopted from an unknown Arab country. I had no idea.”

„Why did you not investigate? I know she said she was adopted but for a thousand dollars I had a private investigator find the ugly truth. Aamir my son you cannot stay here. Go out to the limo and have security deliver you to the airport. Go back to the United States. The family business can use you there and the move will protect you from retribution for your failures as a Muslim man. Go now. Do not concern yourself for this harlot and the animal growing inside.”

He turned to leave knowing now that he could return to the United States and forget about this mess he had created for his family. Their marriage had been while on vacation in Mexico so there would be no record of it within the United States.

With luck no one will ever know. I can still count on the family money and eventually the family fortune will come to me and my half siblings.

„Wait, my son I have something to take with you.”

She left the room and returned with a large pair of hedge clippers. While her husband held Raven's hand still, she cut the ring finger completely off. She then tossed it to Aamir while Raven screamed in pain.

„Here son, a souvenir to take back to New York. Flush the finger down a toilet at the airport but keep the rings as a memento to how you disgraced your family”.

She then walked over to the weeping Raven and viciously kicked her in the abdomen repeatedly. Amir's father followed suit as did the three cousins. The kicks designed to induce a miscarriage did so almost immediately. The men dragged Raven into the bathroom stripped her and placed her in the tub to soak. Her finger stub was treated to stop the bleeding and later after several showers she was put to bed to recover from the internal injuries. The men had plans for using Raven before she died. The father gazed upon her battered naked body lying on the bed and shook his head in approval.

I must say son she's a beauty. I would partake of her myself once she recovers but I am afraid your mother would be incensed by that action. She hates this woman. No, in a week or so we'll pass her around to the men manning the drug depots. Sexually abusing a Jewess will be good for their morale.

He returned to the other room to see his wife gathering Raven's things.

„There's a record of her leaving the United States and entering the country with our son,” she stated. „We must find someone that looks like her and send her to the USA to confuse the authorities if a search is launched for her.”

„My love,” her husband replied. „She's a nobody. She'll be just another missing person that wanted to disappear in a strange exotic land. Nevertheless I will send her passport and that cursed Star of David with her when we deliver her to our field workers and instruct them to send another woman into Pakistan using her passport.”

Chapter 4

Redbone flipped the lovely young naked woman over to secure her hands behind her back.

No point in taking chances. She might be a Mossad agent and give us a world of hurt before we convinced her we mean her no harm.

He then went to the kitchen and filled up two buckets with warm soapy water. He returned to the rape room and ascertained that his fellow contractors had secured the other captive's hands behind their backs with plastic ties; however the men had been allowed to don their pants.

They're all going to die but there's no need to advertise the fact. Make them all comfortable and then do them.

As he approached the bed he noticed the girl begin to stir. Taking one bucket of water he tossed it between her open legs. The shock of the warm water hitting her personal areas brought Raven instantly awake. Redbone grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around so she was now facing up on the bed. He reached for the second pail of warm soapy water and threw that between her legs.

„What the hell are you doing to me?“ Raven screamed in Urdu and Redbone replied in English.

„Probably saving your life. Now I need to know just what the hell was happening here. Yeah I know you were gang raped but I don't know why. Also your ring finger is missing and you appear to be a Jew who's stupid enough to carry a Star of David around in a dangerous Muslim country. So tell me why you're here?“

Redbone listened in rapt attention to Raven. At the end of her story she told of the three cousins that had just left by Humvee shortly before his team had rescued her.

„You did rescue me? You came here for me, right? Aamir sent you?“

„No your husband didn't send us. We're on a separate mission and you just happen to be lucky enough to have been at the wrong place, at the right time.“

„Wrong place at the right time nice word choice,“ she countered. „Now what am I to do, walk the fuck out of this horrible country?“

Redbone smiled, he was beginning to like this girl.

„Raven, I'm going to cut you loose but be aware if you make any suspicious moves on my team you'll be cut in half by one of these shotguns. You clear on that?“

„Jesus H Christ yes. Cut me loose and take me to the bathroom. I need to soak away some soreness, but why are you here if not to rescue me?“

„No time for that bath. We need to go within twenty minutes. You need to suck it up and live with the soreness. Put on that burqa over there, you probably wore it here and get those flip-flops that guy has on. He won't need them much longer. What do you want done with your rapists? Oh and for your information we came to eradicate this crew. This cartel upset a few fellow drug producers and we've been well paid to provide the Agha family with an object lesson.“

Raven smiled. „See that big asshole standing over by the window? Yeah the one that smells like goat shit. That’s him. Bring him over here, pull his pants down and throw him face down on the bed.”

The team looked at her quizzically.

„That bastard sodomized me. I want to return the favor.”

As the man was dragged to the now water soaked bed, Raven asked for Redbone’s 12 gauge shotgun.

„Could you hand it to me please?”

He handed his Atchisson assault shotgun to her but made sure another team member had her covered. Redbone watched in amazement as she calmly walked to bed, shoved several inches of cold barrel up the unfortunate’s rectum and pulled the trigger three times. The bulk of the shot tore through the man’s body and took his head off. The remaining prisoners went to their knees and begged for mercy. No mercy was to be given. They met their fate at the well.

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After Raven had turned to shoot at something, Redbone had knocked her hand down to keep her from firing at what he now perceived to be friendly troops. A trio of All Terrain Vehicles were leaving the hill that she’d fired upon.

„The Taliban don’t use ATVs. Probably our own U.S. Special Forces. They may have been sent to record our success or failure, look we can’t leave you here, plus I like your style. If you want to personally do those three cousins come with us, I know where they probably went and that Hind can get us there in ten minutes. You want?”

„I want,” she replied. „I want.”

Redbone wiped the gore from the barrel of his shotgun, gave Raven a quick instruction on the safe use of the weapon then the team with an additional member, climbed aboard the Hind. The chopper whisked them to their new target in eight minutes.

Chapter 5

Perkins had bristled inwardly at the director’s curt reply, but allowed no trace of his mounting ire to show.

Something is terribly wrong. State wants to bury the slaughter in Afghanistan but is hot to find one young woman? Sounds like Nam all over again. State is most likely protecting some high up official either here or over there. Big money involved.

His attention soon fixed on the beginning of the second film clip. It showed a burqa clad figure walking to an old Toyota mini-van, unlocking the door and driving the van from a parking lot next to a Baptist church. Next the van was shown at a nearby gas station where the driver bought forty dollars of gas and paid in cash.

The picture then jumped to the van pulling into what appeared to be an isolated country setting. The van back up to a large tree and the driver got out. After

looking about the figure opened the van's doors and pulled a bound figure out. The figure hit the ground and appeared to try and resist to no avail.

A rope was tied about the prisoner's ankles and one end thrown over a sturdy limb. The free end was tied to the van's bumper and the figure was hung upside down as the truck pulled forward. A discarded tire was then set directly under the hanging person. Pine cones, leaves and other fuel were tossed into the tire and set on fire.

The burqa clad assailant reached into the van and brought out a fire extinguisher, then stood by as the flames slowly attacked the now doomed person. First to go was the hair and then eventually the whole of the body was engulfed.

After a few minutes, the assailant moved forward and put out the flames. Apparently the victim was still alive because some motion could be seen. The extinguisher was sprayed once again over the body and the tire. The tire was then kicked over and sprayed again. It was apparent that the assailant was being careful not to start a fire that could consume the area. After wiping the extinguisher down for any possible prints or DNA evidence, it was tossed aside, and the burqa figure reentered the van. The van was pulled to the left to stretch the rope at a right angle about a second tree. This caused the man's body to rise several more feet. The rope was then cut from the rear bumper and securely tied to the second tree. Then she left.

The Central Intelligence Agency man, Cecil Hayward, looked down at his feet after the clip was shown and commented: „Well that takes care of any thoughts about eating for a while. Who in the hell got that last footage?”

„A boy scout leader with five boys on an overnight camping trip. They were camped only fifty feet away, but the heavy brush and the dark hid their tents. This occurred at an abandoned cranberry farm in southern New Jersey. The van was stolen from that Baptist church while security cameras rolled. We searched all gas stations nearby on a hunch that gas might be needed. The van was eventually found in a Wilmington Delaware parking lot with a shaved key still in the ignition,” the director replied.

„Oh and did you see how she handled the weight of his body.” Hayward asked. „She used the leverage of the second tree to lessen the load upon the rope, so when cut she would have the strength to hold the weight and secure it to the tree. Smart very smart and well thought through. Jesus, I hope those kids seek help. It's got to be a shock that will stay with them their whole lives.”

The director continued. „The scout leader made a wise decision not to intervene. His responsibility was to safeguard those young boys. It was tough for him to stand by and do nothing because he served two combat tours in Iraq. Once the van left, he and his patrol had to hike a mile before his cell phone found a network connection. He then called the New Jersey state troopers. Later a call from Salem, New Jersey was received by a Vincent Browne of the South Jersey Gazette newspaper alerting him to the location. He described the caller as sounding like a young woman.”

So this is why State is hot on the trail of Jihad Joy. They want to squash this before it raises questions of what transpired in Afghanistan. They're protecting the team that threw those men in the well. Perkins thought and then asked.

„Has the victim been identified?”

Cecil Hayward stared at Perkins.

This Perkins is going to be trouble, I can feel it. Maybe State can bring pressure on NCIS to keep this agent off the case. Why did we have to involve their agency? Not their jurisdiction at all. Homeland apparently just wanted all eyes on Jihad Joy.

„Yes Perkins,” Hayward replied. „The victim is Aamir Agha, an Afghan national and he survived, barely.

Chapter 6

Afghanistan, December, 2011

The team had reached the other compound shortly before the Humvee carrying the Agha cousins drove up. Taking control had posed no problems because the cartel workers were sleeping off a hard day's work. Eight men were found inside of the main structure and surrendered immediately. After arrival the three cousins were ordered out of their Humvee at gunpoint and taken inside the compound. No shots were fired, so Redbone felt confident that he need not rush. There would be no intervention of cartel forces because of a telltale firefight.

Raven had noticed a piece of machinery she was familiar with sitting outside, it was an old tractor fitted with a backhoe and a bulldozer blade. She had operated a similar one while working for her uncle who had a plumbing business.

„Redbone, there's a backhoe out there sitting by a long trench that looks fresh. I know how to operate backhoes. Could I have a few moments to check what's buried?”

„Sure kid, but you'll probably not like what you'll find. Hell while you're at it, dig a new one for these guys.”

Raven climbed aboard the tractor which was fitted with a simple start button. It didn't take long to find what lay under the freshly disturbed earth. Men and women. She stopped when she saw the child's body. After covering her grizzly find with the earth she'd disturbed she started on a new trench, one deep enough to hold the bodies of the bastards inside the main building. She finished her task and went inside.

„Well kid, did you find anything?”

„Redbone I found more then I needed. I got the trench ready, so bring the bastards outside and let me do them.”

The captives were lined up in front of the long deep trench except for the three cousins. Raven calmly put a 9 mm slug in the back of each head and the bodies fell forward into the mass grave. She then had the cousins brought forward and pushed them each alive and screaming onto the pile of their dead comrades.

She remounted the tractor and filled the trench until the screams stopped. Then after resting a bit, she filled the trench completely.

„Kid, I truly, truly love your style,” Redbone exclaimed.

* * * * *

A week later Raven was released from a hospital in Uzbekistan. Redbone was there to pick her up. He also had new identification for Raven, she was now an Arab born in Lebanon. Outlier Ltd. had put together quite a package for Raven. Not only were they impressed by her performance as an amateur in the field but they had high hopes that someday she might join their organization. Outlier arranged for her to be given a position at a private university located in northern New Jersey within miles of New York City.

„Kid I know that you don't think that being a contractor for Outlier Ltd. is a good deal for you; nevertheless I believe you're making a mistake by walking away. Hell you can make two times your teaching salary as an operative with Outlier Ltd.”

Raven was tempted by the offer but wanted to resist the blood lust she felt while blowing away the bad guys for Outlier while in Afghanistan. She wanted to return to the halls of knowledge, to help students find their paths to a secure future. She wanted to build, to help lives, and not take them.

„Jesse I really can't. I'll forever be grateful to Outlier Ltd. for saving my butt; however I don't want to be a professional killer. It isn't me.”

Jesse chuckled and looked at her with fondness. He knew that the world would probably catch up to her and force her back into the fold.

She may have two years before they find her, but find her they will. The Agha Cartel are bastards with strong memories. They can't stand up against Outlier Ltd. but they sure can pick off this kid once they find her.

„Okay Raven have it your way, but answer this question truthfully. If you were to find any of the Agha family walking about would you do them?”

„Do them? Hell yes I'd do them and the slower the better. If I ever catch that bitch of a mother, I'll gleefully pull every piece of skin off her god damn face with a potato peeler!”

Jesse looked at Raven.

Ouch that would hurt and this little girl would do it.

„Raven we'll transport you to Turkey. From there you can make your way back to the USA. I've no idea of how you plan to handle your disappearance from your parents. Contacting your friends and relatives from your old life can be deadly. Start over. I recommend building time teaching at the private college, then look for a new teaching position elsewhere. If your cover gets blown, contact Outlier Ltd. immediately. We'll take you in and create a new identity for you.”

She looked over at the kindly but deadly man, a man old enough to be her grandfather. She had never known either grandfather, both were in their graves at time of her birth. As they left the hospital Raven turned and asked:

„Jesse will you be my grandfather?”

Redbone stopped for a moment and looked down upon the girl he had befriended. A tear started to form in one eye, he quickly blinked it away.

„Sure kid sure. I'd be honored to be your grandfather. But don't forget you have other family at Outlier Ltd. A hell of a lot of uncles that will protect you if the need arises.”

Mrs. Agha was beyond rage when the damage reports to their drug cartel came the next day. She knew that Raven wasn't responsible for the two raids but her body had not yet been located and she did not need accusations of attempting to murder a citizen of the United States circulating. Therefore she was severely distressed when the video of her daughter-in-law slaughtering her rapists surfaced on YouTube.

Maybe that little harlot was more than she seemed? Mossad? Something is not quite right. A thousand dollars for a quick private investigator might have been my mistake. Maybe the story of a nigger father and a Jew for a mother was deep cover. She could damn well be an Israeli agent or an Iranian one. Neither country has any great love for the Agha Cartel.

She walked into her husband's study and accidentally interrupted his quality time with their Philippine maid. The young lovely girl looked aghast but the wife just waved her away.

„Are you aware of the implications of that YouTube video?” As he nodded his head yes she continued. „What are we to do?”

„Nothing, we do nothing.”

„Why?”

„Ah my dear, when I got my master's at Yale; I became fascinated by the Americans and their sayings.”

„Sayings? You are concerning yourself with American sayings when our family and business has been attacked? That sounds insane,” as she finished the husband noted a flush of anger come to her beautiful face.

„Sweetness, sweetness they have two sayings that are very apt for our current situation. ‘Don't stir the pot’ and ‘Let sleeping dogs lie.’ Each means that trouble may be found if you look for it. Let her go. We do not need more trouble. If she reappears we kill her or those close to her.”

„Ah, I see,” she replied.

„Now sweetness why not take advantage of what our maid started? Bring that beautiful face over here. I have a use for it.”

Chapter 7

Anisa Abadi proved to be a very popular instructor at the small Otterman College located in the New Jersey countryside just a short trip away from exciting New York City. Anisa didn't claim to have a doctorate so she was freed from the need to do constant research and publish. Of course the publish or perish threat wouldn't apply to her in any case. Anisa Abadi's salary and benefits were an endowment to the small college made by Outlier Ltd. Raven didn't know it but she was already on Outlier's payroll.

The Dean, Jenny Johnson, was currently looking in on one of Abadi's history classes that dealt with the spread of Islam throughout the Middle East and how Christianity had survived in Abadi's own country of Lebanon.

Outstanding. Her mode of delivery keeps the students focused on her every word. Miss Abadi most certainly should pursue a doctorate; she was born to be a university professor, and such a gentle soul. Even the students that have anger issues are calmed by her compassion. Even if the endowment by Outlier Ltd. ceased, I'd recommend hiring her at her current benefit level but with a ten percent increase.

Raven noticed Dean Johnson watching from the rear of the classroom, however she wasn't concerned. The respect that the staff showed her, made Raven feel totally secure. She remembered Jesse's advice about teaching a few years and moving on to a new identity and teaching position.

No way would I leave here. Five-thousand a month and free dental and medical, within an hour from New York City and its Village. This is Heaven, and all I ever really wanted.

Raven wrapped her class up, gathered her teaching materials and headed out to the parking lot. There set her Mini Cooper that she was leasing. Jesse had stressed the need to be able to abandon and walk away from possessions. If she needed to flee leaving a leased vehicle made more financial sense then sacrificing one that she owned. She also kept the bulk of her savings in a bank safety deposit box, she was cautioned not to use credit cards or try to cash a check once she had to disappear. Cash assured that she couldn't be traced through bank and credit card transactions.

No, I'll never leave here, it's ideal but thank you Jesse for showing me the way to disappear. I doubt I'll ever need it but thanks anyway. Today I'll visit the East Village to just hang out, have a drink and relax.

* * * * *

Anisa Abadi was having a relaxing screwdriver at her favorite East Village bar. The last year and one-half had been good to Raven; she wore her new identity like a tight fitting glove. A glove on her right hand of course. The missing ring finger was a constant question of those first meeting her. She had a simple reply. Her finger had been ripped off by her rings snagging an object while she waved her hand out the window of a speeding auto.

All was well in her world until Aamir Agha walked in with his new bride. Raven put her sunglasses on and pulled her boonies hat out of her backpack. She kept an eye on the couple until Aamir finally got up to use the restroom. Seizing her chance she quickly walked to Aamir's table, stopped and said a few words in Arabic to the young dark hair beauty. She found that the wife was something Raven wasn't. The wife was an Arab Muslim from Lebanon. She saw the restroom door opening, said her goodbyes to the lovely young woman and left quickly.

Damn the bastard had the balls to give her my old rings; the son of a bitch probably gets his jollies by gazing at them.

„Who was that my love?“

„Oh she's from Lebanon also; she heard us speaking Arabic and stopped for a quick chat. I am glad she left before you returned as she was definitely your type. Your type that is before you married me.“

Raven hung about the stores across from the bar. There were plenty of taxis about and she had always wanted to say: „Follow that cab”. It wasn't to be. The couple came out hand in hand and walked to a beautiful brownstone a few blocks away. She followed the couple from a distance; never taking a chance on being spotted although if spotted a lone female is rarely viewed as a threat.

Then the couple stopped before mounting the stairs. The wife was patting her stomach and Aamir leaned forward and kissed his wife's navel area. Raven felt chills, she and Aamir had once done exactly the same.

Oh my, she's pregnant. Pregnant with a child and wearing the rings meant for me. Her child will be accepted into the Agha family while mine was brutally kicked to death by his grandparents.

Raven felt the blood lust rising and was close to being thrown into a homicidal rage.

After the Aghas were inside for a few minutes, she approached their doorway. There was a heavy duty metal mailbox built into the masonry. It was designed to stop thieves who were concerned with making noise not someone who just wanted the contents and didn't care about noise. She knew that if she could get into that box on a heavy mail day it would provide her with much needed information on the Agha family.

* * * * *

Raven needed to relax and calm down. The sight of her husband and possibly pregnant new wife brought emotions to the surfaced that she had buried under months of living a normal life. Now she felt the urge to revenge her unborn son. Not just revenge but a brutal sadistic slaughtering that would harden her heart ever further, and destroy her present idyllic life.

I could forget it and just stay out of the East Village. My career at Otterman would continue and I'd be safe from retribution from the Agha family. They took the life of my unborn son but should I take theirs? Do the Aghas have the right to grandchildren? Of course not, the child would grow up like Aamir or even worse.

Caution dictated planning. If she chose to kill, she needed to plan the slaughter of Aamir to make it as horrific as possible to draw his parents to the United States where they would become more vulnerable. She knew it was hopeless to attack the Aghas in their own country. Therefore she needed to think about the wisest course of action.

Raven drove her Mini Cooper to a country road about three-miles from her parent's farm. Three-miles but a hard three-miles of underbrush, sticky pine needles and briars, lots of briars. She knew the chance of seeing her mother or father were practically nil. She also knew the area well; it had been the playground of her youth. There were at least two clear trails leading through the dense growth that would deliver her to the family back door if she chose to use them. She chose not to, instead she turned on a gravel road leading to a sand plant company that had recently went out of business because of the decreased sales of glass bottles.

The company had sold silica sand to the bottle industry where it was melted in gigantic brick tanks that held tons of molten glass and then turned into bottles. The glass making industry had machines capable of turning out two hundred and

eighty beer bottles per minute. Glass bottle making had been one of America's first industries, that and iron producing. Pig iron and glass bottles helped support south Jersey's economy for hundreds of years.

After traveling a mile down the road she parked her car, locked it and started to walk a deeply rutted old trail that was called Stage Coach Road and had once been the major highway from Philadelphia to New Jersey's Atlantic coast. As she walked the old overgrown trail she was surrounded by tall pine trees that were dripping sap because of the intense one hundred and five degree heat. She breathed in the smell of the pines and listened to silence.

Too hot to be moving. All the critters are immobile trying to survive the heat. Even the flies and mosquitoes are nowhere to be found. I'm the only animal moving so how smart am I?

She walked off the trail to follow a deer path forty yards into the dense pines and was rewarded by two deer being roused from their pine needle bed directly in front of her. Raven turned and quickly retraced her steps to avoid the ticks and lice that were now looking for another host

When I get home I'll check carefully for ticks, no way do I need to come down with Lyme disease.

Walking in the pines of her youth settled her thinking. She took in another deep breath through her nose to savor the smell of her pines and then quickly retreated to the air conditioning of her car.

I've made up my mind; I'll kill Aamir, to draw my in-laws to New Jersey, and then kill them both but I need a weapon that I can carry that will defeat metal detectors.

Raven found what she needed on the internet, a knife completely made of ceramic material with no added powdered metal to alert metal detectors, and enclosed in a sheath. She bought one.

* * * * *

She returned to the couple's brownstone a few days later and was surprised to see newspapers building up on the front steps. Just as she was about to check if any mail could be seen through the mail slot a voice asked her what she was doing. She could tell by the accent that the man was probably elderly and from northern Africa.

„Well sir I came to see my old classmate Aamir Agha when I saw all these newspapers. He and I both attended Princeton. I hope Aamir and his lovely wife are alright.”

Hearing his beloved tongue spoken in his own dialect cause the elderly man to blossom like a rose too long without water, suddenly able to have its fill.

„My dear do not worry. I forgot to pick up the newspapers. Your friend will be gone for two weeks. He and his wife are on a trip to San Francisco to see his mother. Do you know her? Such a lovely proper lady.”

Hearing her calculating cold bitch of a mother in-law described as a „lovely proper lady” almost made Raven laugh but she caught herself in time and thanked the elderly gentleman for his help and then made a graceful exit.

Well that went well. I'll wait another week for mail to pile up and then come back with a pry bar. Got to make the phone call. I should have done it a year and a half ago, but I definitely need to now.

* * * * *

Corey Crow jumped when the telephone rang. He and the Mrs. got very few calls since their daughter Raven had disappeared. He had filed a missing person report two years earlier but in his heart he knew she'd just left. Just left so she could enter the white man's world with her new degree and none of the social stigma of having a black man as a father.

„Hello.“

„Don't talk your phone may be tapped. Just listen. Your lives may be in danger. Take the deer season plug out of your pump shotgun and load five in the tube and keep one in the chamber. Keep your two pistols at hand. Let your two dogs sleep outside at night. It's summer so they'll be comfortable. Carry extra ammo at all times. Better yet leave tomorrow for a long vacation. Load up the dogs and wife and leave without telling anyone. Use cash only. No credit cards.“

Crow looked in amazement at his phone after his daughter hung up. He stood still long enough for his wife to notice,

„Who was it honey?“

„It was Raven and I think we're in deep shit.“

Chapter 8

Alex York anxiously waited for his roommate Don to appear. Alex's caregiver had needed a few hours off to attend a friend's wedding.

Damn I need a fucking drink. Come on Don, get the fuck home and stop ogling the girls on Telegraph Avenue.

At that moment Don Browning walked through the front door and into the living room.

Oh shit Don has a babe with him. She doesn't look like a hooker. Oh probably one of Don's students. Probably wants to get into his PhD. Program; damn she's a beautiful blonde with a southern accent.

She spied Alex, looked over at Don and started to leave. Don reached out with one of his disfigured hands and grabbed her sweater.

„Why are you trying to leave? We made a deal. I promised you I could help you but I'm not going to help you if you leave.“

„Him, you didn't tell me about him. I thought we would be alone but now he knows. I told you I don't want anyone to know,“ she whispered desperately into his ear. „No one.“

„Abby go down the hall and go to the room on the right. I'll be with you shortly. My friend doesn't know you. He probably doesn't want to know you. Now forget about it and move your undergrad ass down that hallway.“

Abby turned a deep red from embarrassment, but did as she was told. Dr. Browning was the head of the department that she attended and she had a chance of pursuing graduate work there. She would do anything to be accepted into Dr. Browning's program.

Don shot Alex a glance and received a lifting of the eyebrows in return. Then he looked about and noticed Ryan their shared attendant was nowhere to be seen.

„Oh shit Alex, I forgot about him going to the wedding. What do you need? Stupid question, you need water and a bite to eat.”

Alex smiled at his friend and housemate. They made quite the odd couple. Alex, although a quadriplegic, was still a handsome man, Don was hideously scarred from burns he had received on an Outlier Ltd. operation in Iraq gone bad. He possessed a PhD and an I.Q. that was off the charts.

„I'm good on the food, Don. Ryan sat some treats on the table I was able to retrieve with my mouth, same with the aqua. What I really need is a good taste of whiskey.”

Don quickly retrieved a quart bottle of Jack Daniels from the cupboard and slowly let his friend sip from the glass. The glass was specially shaped so that Alex could hold it with his teeth and drink by tilting his head back.

„Hey Don, go screw your little undergrad student. Damn she looked good to me. Nice body and obviously she must have brains to be a student of yours. So go do her.”

„Yeah Alex, she's a twenty-two year old hottie. I want you to know that she suggested it. She's very anxious to be accepted into my grad program. She probably would've made it anyway but she offered that body up in trade and I thought why be stupid?”

„No need to explain Don she's over twenty-one and no one's twisting her arm, go do her.”

When Don walked into his bedroom he found his young nubile student sitting in a chair facing his single size bed.

„Dr. Browning I meant to apply some makeup but there doesn't appear to be a mirror anywhere. Do I look good enough for you?”

Don achieved an instant erection as he noticed her towel slip below an erect nipple. *God what a babe. If only she doesn't cringe from me. Please Lord let me have one good piece of ass without the humiliation.*

„Abby you look fine. I'll just take a minute to undress.”

He removed his shirt and undershirt while standing. Once upon the bed he struggled to get his pants off his scarred legs. Finally Abby stood, walked over and grabbed his trousers and pulled them off with one yank. She climbed aboard closed her eyes and began to grind her hips to and fro.

Damn, this might not be so bad after all. I'll close my eyes as if in ecstasy. Don't have to see what I'm screwing. Hell, I'm going to enjoy this. I'll have this guy pussy whipped, and if he wants to get more of this, he'll do as I say.

* * * * *

Forty minutes later Alex was still sitting in the same position as Abby started to walk past him. She could feel his eyes staring at her. Rather than just leave she decided to confront him.

„Have a good look. I know you know what this is all about. But you choose to judge me. That man in there is a genius and he can help my career!”

„Shh, please speak softly. If Dr. Browning hears you, his feelings will be hurt. He doesn't often bring young women home with him and you must mean something special to him.”

„Special are you kidding me? I may not be a street whore but I just traded this body for that man's support. I had to close my eyes to do it. Do you think if you were still able to have sex, that you could make love to a horribly burned woman? I doubt it. I doubt it very much. I did what I had to do.”

„Quiet please,” he begged. „Please lower your voice. He might hear you.”

„Hear me? The professor went to sleep after I drained him three times. He's sound asleep and I'm tired of you staring at me, judging me. You've no right to judge me.”

„Abby, Abby, Abby,” he replied sadly. „I don't judge you.”

„Then why in the hell do you keep staring at me?” She asked.

„Abby I stare at you because I wish I had the ability to screw you. I'd trade bodies with Dr. Browning in a heartbeat. At least he can feel from the neck down. I'd love to feel your body nestled close to mine but I can't feel a thing from the neck down.”

Abby stared at the handsome helpless man and her heart melted. She crossed the room quickly shed her top and bra and buried his head between her boobs. Finally she stood back put bra and top back on, kissed his forehead and left.

Thank you dear girl thank you. That was the most fun I've had in two years.

Don hadn't been asleep. Abby's words cut him. He had been under no illusions as to why she screwed him but he thought she at least liked him. Liked him as a person and admired his intelligence, however all that was now in doubt. He sat up and went into the shower. Twenty minutes later he was with his friend and former fellow mercenary.

„That Abby is quite the girl Don. I'd give the next five years of my life for one hour of sex with that woman while in a completely healthy body.”

„Alex, I mean this. I'd give the rest of my life; just to have a normal man's body without all this scar tissue for one year. Give me one more year of normal sex, normal walking, normal driving a car, and being handsome once more; yes one year and then I'd die a happy man.”

Alex looked at his horribly burned friend and shook his head in sadness. He remembered Don carrying the squad automatic weapon and laying down intense cover fire that had saved the team many times, but also the day he had been burned when teenaged Taliban doused him in gasoline by dropping Molotov cocktails from their rooftops. Now both were invalids.

Granted Alex was now a personnel director at Outlier Ltd. which main office was located a mile from the home he shared with Don. Browning had used his lack of a social life to pursue degrees. Now he was a well-paid tenured professor at the University of California-Berkeley. However money is no good if you can't enjoy life.

God Almighty, what a fucked up pair. I'd settle to be him right now and he would give up the rest of his life to be as he used to be.

Chapter 9

Ten days after Aamir and wife had left for vacation; Raven rode her bike up to the steps of his brownstone. She withdrew a short but sturdy pry bar from her backpack, followed by a steel tube that would slip over the pry bar and provide more leverage. The front of the box came off with little trouble and without making a lot of noise. She scooped the mail into her pack, threw in the pry bar with the extension and left the scene.

Back in the safety of her Flat she began to sort through her treasures. Within hours she knew when she would kidnap her husband and where but not the how. The next day she knew the how, by researching the internet on the subject of shaved keys and stealing older Japanese made cars. A ring of shaved keys was readily purchased from one of the drug dealers in the East Village. She opted to steal an old Toyota van, and she found the perfect van in a Baptist church parking lot. The van was covered with dust with cat prints all over it so it hadn't moved recently.

Must not be used a lot. Damn it may have a dead battery. I could take a chance and test it the night before but if they have security cameras and spot me, they could arrest me when I came back. Better to wait until the night before I abduct the bastard.

However two nights later the van's motor turn over quickly when she used a shaved key in the ignition. Not bothering to warm up the engine, she drove out of the lot and proceeded at a normal rate of speed. She looked at the gauges.

Damn, less than a quarter of a tank of gas. Got to fill up. Well one nice thing about wearing a burqa American men tend not to see you. No one ogles or hits on a woman wearing a burqa in the USA.

Raven stopped at the nearest station and filled the tank. Sure enough the male attendant did his best to avoid looking at her, even when handed the money. It was seven in the morning and Aamir would soon be finished with his early dentist appointment with Dr. Carter. Aamir didn't like to wait in lines. He expected to be served at his time and choosing, and Dr. Carter was well paid for the early service.

As Raven entered the parking garage it appeared to be very empty. She backed her stolen van into a parking space two away from Aamir's BMW convertible. Exiting the van she opened the passenger door and then picked up the large empty cardboard box she'd set on the passenger's seat. Raven turned a corner and waited. Ten minutes later she heard the elevator stop at the garage level. She stepped out and walked to her van apparently staggering under the weight of the box.

Aamir was surprised to see a Muslim woman wearing a burqa.

„May I carry the box for you Madam?”

„No, no but you could open my van's side door for me Sir.”

As Aamir opened the side door, Raven closed the distance, dropped the box and put the hand held Taser to his neck. As the shock put him down she pushed his body into the van. She grabbed the strips of duct tape she'd previously hung on

the vans inside walls and began to secure her prey. The rope, gas, and old tire were already aboard. There was nothing more to do but hide out until dark.

* * * * *

The old woods road she pulled into hadn't been used in years. She had to plow her way through the undergrowth and brush that had grown there since she had last visited six years previously. The road led to a clearing where there was a small pond that was fed by underground springs.

I could do him here but then I'd destroy the memory of this blissful place. No I'll wait for nightfall to hang, then burn the bastard at the old Weatherbee cranberry farm. The Weatherbee kids always claimed that an escaped slave from Delaware had been caught near there by his owners and hung from that tree. They always called it the hanging tree. Well tonight it'll have a new victim.

While she was going through Aamir pockets she found his wallet and removed five-thousand cash all in hundreds, Aamir finally became aware of his surroundings. He looked about wildly his eyes bulging no one had ever dared to treat him this way. Raven roughly jammed the wallet back into his rear pants pocket. She wanted him found and identified.

No, oh no it must be Raven. Why doesn't she speak to me? At least speak to me. What's she going to do, kill me? Oh no if she finds out that Jamila is pregnant with our son, she'll kill them also. God I got to pee can't hold it anymore.

Raven became aware of the sharp smell of urine.

Ah Afshan Agha's little boy pissed his pants? Well fucker you'll shit your pants when hanging from that tree. Well maybe not. It might be impossible to shit while hanging upside down.

She grabbed one of the air fresheners that she'd foreseen might be needed and emptied half a can into the back of the van. He started to kick and squirmed about trying in vain to loosen the duct tape. Raven had no desire to question him, she had him and having him would draw his bitch of a mother into her reach. She calmly reached down and jolted him again and again with the Taser until he gave up and kept still. Finally it was time, but now she needed to vent her feelings to the doomed man lying in the back of the van.

„Yes it's me Aamir, your adoring and trusting first wife. The wife you loved and protected so well against those insane racist parents of yours. You allowed your unborn son to be brutally kicked to death by your family and now you start a replacement family with my wedding rings? Is it going to be a boy or girl this time? I know she's pregnant I saw you kiss her belly, just as you did mine.”

She knows! She'll kill them; her hatred for my family knows no bounds. She'll kill my unborn child just like our child died. She'll never allow an Agha child to survive even my half brother and sister will meet their end if she finds out about them.

„You're wondering if I'll kill your child Aamir. Maybe I'll kill your second wife after she has the baby and then raise the child as my own.”

She could tell that her words were having a severe emotional impact upon her captive.

Good the bastard needs to suffer.

„Enough of the small talk about old times and what the future holds for your unborn. Now I'll tell you your immediate future. I'm going to hang you upside down from a tree, that tire over there will be set directly under your head, soaked with gasoline from that container near you and then lit on fire. I just thought you would like to know.”

Turning the van within the clearing wasn't a problem. The van plowed its way back to the main highway and headed directly to the deserted cranberry farm. She parked under the hanging limb, opened the doors and pulled the helpless Aamir out of the van like a sack of rice.

After securing the rope to his ankles it was tossed over the limb. While doing so Aamir locked eyes with her but was speechless because of the duct tape across his mouth. The van pulled his weight up until he hung a few feet over the ground. When the tire was placed under his head he gave out a terrible moan and fainted. The flames licking at his face brought him back to consciousness and the act of insanity.

I am going to die, going to die and I can do nothing.

As the flames licked up his body Aamir had a moment of bravery. He breathed deep of the flames, took them into his lungs in an attempt to end his life.

That's enough. Time to make sure to put this fire out, no need to burn down the Pine Barrens. If he isn't dead, no matter. His body dead or alive will be enough to use as bait. Hopefully here in the states or if need be over there in Afghanistan.

Chapter 10

The county sheriff was the first to arrive followed by the ambulance and then the state troopers. Sheriff Brewster hadn't bothered to cut the body down because at this stage it was just dead evidence hanging from a tree.

„Jesus Christ we have a pulse! Help me get him down,” an emergency medical technician yelled to his partner.

As his body was gently taken down a wallet fell from his back pocket. The officer from the state police picked up the slightly seared wallet and opened it. It contained no cash but many credit cards and Aamir Agha's driver's license. The trooper went to his car to call the information into dispatch. The ambulance was on its way out of the cranberry farm when the trooper got the call.

„This is Captain Davis. You're ordered to lock down the scene. No press is to be allowed into the crime scene. No information is to be given out by anyone. Please advise the county sheriff, that this case no longer concerns his agency or that of ours. It's now a Federal Bureau of Investigation case exclusively. Are your orders clear?”

The trooper looked about and located the Sheriff, and walked over to share his orders with him. The Sheriff was none too happy.

„Who the fuck do those guys think they are? I've a guy hanging in my jurisdiction, nearly burnt alive and those bastards are telling me to preserve the crime scene but keep my ass out of the investigation? Fuck them!”

After a few minutes of reflection the Sheriff cooled down and also thought about consequences of his failure to check for signs of life when he was first on the scene.

Shit, best I keep quiet. I fucked up and maybe the Feds will be stupid enough not to discover my mistake.

He and the state trooper cleared the scene and outlined it in yellow crime scene tape. They then moved their cars to block any attempt at entering by road and sat back to wait on the Feds. Within thirty minutes a helicopter was heard inbound. The Sheriff scanned the sky but couldn't see it. Eventually it appeared, flying dangerously low above the tall pine trees.

Jesus Christ, I hope those bastards are smart enough not to land near the crime scene. Those rotors will blow sand and muck all over.

The helicopter continued to close and then hover near the tree. Paper, sand and muck began to fly about as it landed.

Ah I see they still hire the best and the brightest.

* * * * *

Raven crossed the Wilmington Delaware Bridge less than two hours of leaving the cranberry farm. She parked and left the van within walking distance of Wilmington's airport. She left it unlocked with the key in the ignition, hoping someone would steal it thereby helping to cover her tracks even further.

After opening the side door of the van she grabbed her suitcase, extended the handle, set it on its wheels and walked to the airport. Frontier Airlines had a non-stop flight to Orlando, Florida and that's where she intended to meet up with the next member of the Agha family.

„Hi I need a one way ticket to Orlando please.”

The ticket counter lady looked up at Raven and instantly liked what she saw. *Something about those eyes. Mysterious, deadly even. Damn I wonder if she swings my way.* „Name please?”

„Anisa Abadi.”

„Could you spell that please?” *God she's hot! The name even turns me on. Oh my word she's missing a finger. Jeez I'm getting wet.*

„Here you need to see my identification anyway copy it from my driver's license.”

„Thank you Miss Abadi. You're lucky; I can put you on a flight to Orlando right now. It'll board in twenty minutes.”

After paying for the ticket with some of Aamir's hundreds, Raven turned to walk toward the gate where her plane was waiting. The hair on the back of her neck started to rise, she turned and saw the ticket counter girl watching her. The girl smiled gave her a wink and blew a kiss.

Wow that's a relief. I thought they were on to me however it was just a horny Lesbian. Not my style but she was cute.

The ticket girl watched Raven's hips as she strolled away. Was it her imagination or did Raven swing her hips more after she saw her wink and blow a kiss?

I know her name, her address and phone number. I'm going to look Anisa Abadi up on Facebook, Twitter and everywhere else. She's hot and I want her.

Chapter 11

Afshan Agha was beyond rage, she was a walking nuclear bomb that could be set off by any hint of personal insult. The news that her only son had been burned horribly and near death was almost too much to bear even for a harden bitch such as she. She paced the floor planning revenge but not knowing how to exact revenge on this ghostly figure of a woman she once tried to have murdered.

That idiot of a husband is nowhere to be found. His security team handed him off to the team in Indonesia and now I cannot contact him. While I am grieving over our son, he is off somewhere with his little Asian second wife and their son and daughter. He still will not trust me with their schedules. Just because I hit her and called her a bitch the last time we were together. I hope the bastard has enough sense to stay protected; Raven is out to kill us all.

„Madam Agha you must rest your nerves,” cautioned her female physician.

„Shut up and keep away from me. I am going to have killed anyone that had anything to do with my son's burning. I will also kill their families!”

The doctor fled the room in fear; she did not need to hear discussions about impending murders. As a witness to possible death threats the madam might later decide to eliminate the doctor.

Families that's it, her family. That nigger father and Jew of a mother. They are good as dead, but first I shall have Raven Crow's background checked back to the day she was born. No agency would be able to fake an in depth background that complete. Her medical shots. What grade school did she attend? All the little things that can prove or disprove her parentage.

„Shakar get in here, I have an assignment for you.”

Within hours with cost of the search not important, a bevy of researchers based in New York City began their electronic investigation of Raven Crow and her family. It took only six hours to confirm and reconfirm that Raven Crow was the real deal and her parents still resided at the same address they had lived for decades.

„Madam Agha, I have the results of your inquiry.”

The ageless woman of the Agha clan rose from behind her beautiful 17th century desk. She walked toward Shakar as if stalking prey. He knew that look and what was to come so it excited him to his core.

„So what are the conclusions my Shakar?”

He felt himself begin to wilt under those deep probing eyes that inhabited a face that would have reviled that of Helen of Troy. Again he felt the urgent swelling in his groin. She looked down knowing what she would see.

„Tell me Shakar and then I shall release you of your obvious stress.”

Ten minutes later she was still on her knees servicing her employee. The orders to slaughter Raven's family had excited them both and the Madam was having sex in the way she most enjoyed. On her knees looking up.

I need the release as much as he.

Orgasm after orgasm shook her body as she felt Shakar spew his seed within her mouth.

* * * * *

While Madam Agha was releasing her pent up emotions by oral means, Raven had tracked Aamir's father to the Fantastic World's Resort. With the help of the pilfered mail she'd obtained from Aamir's mail box, she knew the exact itinerary of the senior Agha and his second family. She was currently following them about Fantastic World two days after she had burnt Aamir and the Aghas had apparently come without a security detail.

Damn go on the Pirates of the Mediterranean. Go on that ride and you're dead meat. I'll know exactly where to do you and the exit I'll take to escape.

Raven had once dated a young man who worked at Fantastic World as a means to pay for his college tuition. He once explained the exits and entrances used to maintain all the rides to her in great detail, but she knew that to use most of them she would have to exit through the employee area which was located underground beneath the rides. Most people had no idea that the service area was built on the flat ground and all the rides and surface areas of Fantastic World were built on a raised platform of over fifteen feet in height.

The husband, wife, son and daughter went and stood in the Pirates of the Mediterranean line. She stood directly behind them. Today she wore another blond wig with heavy makeup and sun hat pulled low over her brow. Sunglasses completed her attempt to mask her identity; she also kept her three finger hand from view.

He acts completely unaware of Aamir's fate. Is it possible that he has himself cut completely off from all communication with the rest of the family? He ordered Aamir not to tell anyone where he was going but did provide this cell phone number. The news of Aamir surviving and being sent to a burn center may not have been televised this far south. He acts so unaware, he mustn't know.

Their turn came to board the cars and the two kids set in one seat while their parents climbed in behind them. She grabbed the seat directly behind him. A young girl of about ten years set next to her. Raven took her cell phone out and held it in her left hand; speed dial was set for Agha's number.

„Hey you can't use that in here lady," the girl informed her.

As the ride entered the darken area she knew well, Raven pressed the speed dial; Agha felt the phone vibrate in his pocket. Only his son Aamir had the number.

„Yes son?"

„It's Raven and you're dead."

The ceramic knife came out of her pocket and sheath. She dropped the cell phone yanked his head back by using his long main of hair and slit his throat. As she jumped off the train the screams of her terrified fellow passengers couldn't be

distinguished from the other riders. She exited the ride enclosure, and walked directly to a bathroom for female employees. She threw the wig, and pullover she was wearing into the trash. She walked out looking like an employee of Arab descent. As she left the park sirens could be heard converging from all directions, but she was unconcerned.

Way too many people to contain. My description will be put out there. The girl may have heard me say Raven but maybe not. It doesn't matter because sooner or later the authorities will be alerted to one Raven Crow, but Anisa Abadi may still be safe.

Chapter 12

Two weeks after their daughter's mysterious phone call, Corey noticed a large black sports utility vehicle on the state highway pass by his home several times. The sight raised the hair on the back of his neck. He had taken his daughter's warning seriously. Serious enough to purchase two new Mossberg riot 12 gauge shotguns and five boxes of number one buckshot. Just in case he needed to shoot through a vehicle, he also took home a box of rifled slugs for the two shotguns. His wife proved more comfortable with the AK47 he bought her. Corey hadn't contacted authorities because he knew they wouldn't be able to provide around the clock protection.

The Crows lived one-hundred yards off the state highway. Their home was surrounded on three sides by cleared fields. The back of their home faced three miles of dense briar infested maple, pine, and oak tree swamp.

When they come for us there will be a frontal assault. They will drive straight in like visitors. No way are strangers going to plod through three miles of swamp. I could do it but I know the trails. No they will drive straight up to the house and probably today just at dusk.

Later that day the Crows set up camp in their outbuildings; keeping food, water and weapons near at hand. The dogs were left to roam the outside fields. Corey strung a wire across the road entrance near their home that was connected to tin cans filled with pebbles. If a car came up the road it would snag the wire and rattle the cans. The cans and dogs would be their alarm system as they slept.

Raven's mother had filled their Jeep Cherokee wagon with supplies, and then drove it into the woods to be out of sight; safe for a quick getaway. They had twenty-thousand in cash ready if needed. The Crows each felt that they would be assaulted before nightfall and they weren't wrong. Shortly before sundown a black SUV came up the driveway and snagged the wire.

* * * * *

Hadi Al Reshedi was certain the Crows were at home. The only vehicle they had seen was still parked in front of the home. As they rode by for the fourth time the front porch light came on preparing for the nightfall that would arrive shortly.

It would be best to go in while we can still see. I doubt that they have any inkling they are in danger but even so we'll have them outgunned. An older married couple

against four professional assassins stand no chance of survival. Once they are dead, we burn everything and head for the Newark airport.

Al Reshedi drove leisurely up the Crow's driveway until the bumper snagged the wire. Knowing he had been had, he quickly sped the remaining yards and slammed on the brakes.

„You two in the back clear the house. Kill anything that's alive. Adiz you and I will clear the outbuildings.”

* * * * *

The Crows moved rapidly out of their outbuilding when they heard the clash of metal and their dogs growling. Both were kneeling behind an old sandstone foundation of a building long gone. Corky signaled to his wife to shoot the two men currently spraying their home with automatic fire. He popped up and took out both Hadi and his cohort Adiz with shots of number one buckshot directly to each man's chest. The two men that had been his wife's targets dropped, riddled with five to six bullets each. The dogs were unhurt but were now busy ripping and tearing at the bodies.

„Alright! That rocked my boat baby. Hang back and cover me, I'm going to check those guys for identification.”

As Corky headed to the bodies less than forty feet away, his wife kept an eye out for movement.

I doubt if any of those bastards are alive but if one moves he'll get a few more drilled into his worthless butt from this old country girl.

Corky stripped the bodies of their wallets and passports then ran back to his wife.

„Go get the Jeep baby; we need to haul ass out of here before the county sheriff or state troopers show up. I know our neighbors are far away and are used to our target practice but with those machine guns going off they might call the cops.”

The Mrs. returned with their vehicle; they rapidly threw their long guns under their camping gear, but kept pistols near at hand. Corky policed up his two spent shotgun shells but didn't bother with her AK47 brass.

„Baby before we start driving break down your AK47, we need to get rid of it. No way can my shotgun be traced to the killing of those two guys over there, but your kills will have slugs in them, plus your brass is scattered all over. So we ditch your weapon, no point in getting caught with it.”

„But Corky the dead are in our backyard, they're going to damn well know we did it.”

Her husband laughed.

„Knowing and proving it are two different things.”

He was busy looking at the four passports he had found on the bodies.

Oh shit! What the fuck has our baby daughter gotten herself involved in? One a Saudi, one an Algerian, one a Syrian, and last but not least a fucking Nigerian.

„What's wrong Corky you look stunned?”

He turned to his wife, but before replying he threw the passports plus other papers into the stone barbeque near them and set the documents ablaze. He

quickly added some dried leaves nearby for fuel, as he desperately needed to destroy any DNA or fingerprints that he may have left on the papers.

Damn, I should have connected her to the guy found burned almost to death at the old farm, but I had no idea that she could do such an act. Besides the media played it up as an act of homosexual bashing, which was probably an act of misdirection by the authorities.

After he was sure the papers would be consumed, he got the two dogs into the Jeep and him and the Mrs. left their home of thirty years.

„We're in deeper shit honey then I first thought. Those dead guys were from four different countries.”

„What difference does that make Corky?”

„A world of difference sweetie, a world of difference. All four had diplomatic passports, which means they were all agents for their countries. Evidently we have leaders of four countries intent on seeing us dead.”

Chapter 13

„Sheriff this is Tom Bates.”

„Yeah Bates you still wanting to get together for some deep sea fishing?”

„Absolutely Sheriff but we got bigger fish than that to fry. Best get your squad car over to the Crows as quick as you can. The crows are starting to eat the eyes out of four dead men lying outside.”

What the fuck is he talking about? I've never known Tom to get wasted on drugs or alcohol. Must be some kind of put on.

„Tom are you accusing the Corky and Cora of killing four men and eating their eyes?”

„Shit no Brewster, there are four foreigners dead outside of their shot up house. Each body has a machine pistol next to it and the damn crows are coming down from the tall pines to eat their fill of the kill.”

Brewster stood in silence absorbing the information but knew exactly what to do.

„Tom did you drive that big ass dump truck over there this morning.”

„Sure did.”

„Take that old behemoth of yours out to the main highway and block the entrance to the Crows. Don't touch a damn thing. No one enters except me. This case is now being turned over to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I'm on my way.”

„The Sheriff keyed in his mike as he started to roll.

„Dispatch, Sheriff what can I do for you?”

„Connie call that number of the Federal Bureau of Investigation guy in charge of the burning man case. Advise him four dead men armed with machine pistols have been found at Corky Crow's farm. Give them general directions and tell them to look for my flashing lights at the farm.”

„Oh shit! Sorry Sheriff, will do right now.”

Brewster took his patrol car up to eighty miles per hour, as the site was twenty miles away and he needed to get there before the Feds. He pulled in next to Bates' dump truck in a bit over sixteen minutes of white knuckle driving. Climbing from the car he left the light bar flashing as a beacon for the helicopter that was sure to come.

„Sheriff aren't you going to check to see if Corky and Cora are alright?”

Brewster took the time to think about the question and then he spat his used up chewing gum at the shoulder of the state highway. The Feds had more than rubbed him the wrong way; they had irritated the shit out of him.

„No Tom, they are either gone and alive or lying dead inside. In this day everyone has a cell phone nearby. If they were wounded too bad to make a nine one one call last evening when you heard the fireworks go off, they would be stone cold dead by now.”

Sirens could be heard coming fast and Brewster thought he could hear the faint noise of rotor blades of a helicopter approaching. Two state troopers pulled in from different directions along with a State Fish and Game warden. Eventually the chopper came into sight and set down on the road near them. The two troopers immediately went to the highway and assumed the role of traffic control. Brewster noted the caution of the pilot not to upset the crime scene.

Hmm maybe there's a new crew on the scene. Maybe just maybe the case grew too large and complicated for the last Federal Bureau of Investigation idiot to handle.

The Sheriff's musings proved correct. A tall lean figure approached him and stuck out his hand. He was trailed by a disheveled looking older woman who also had a special agent badge hanging from her neck. Brewster took the offered hand.

„Sheriff I'm agent Ted Whitestone. I'm now the agent in charge of both this and the earlier case. I want to personally thank you for securing the scene and calling the Federal Bureau of Investigation as soon as you possibly could.”

„Not necessary agent Whitestone. I knew this was out of my league as soon as I heard four machine pistols with four foreign looking dead men, but I can probably tell you what actually happened without looking at the scene.”

Whitestone stopped and look at Brewster. „Jesus that would be great. What exactly happened here?”

„Simple enough. An international hit team descended on the Crows to eliminate them. They expected an older defenseless couple, but got the shit shot out of them by two south Jersey gun nuts. The Crows were hunters. The team were probably professional assassins but no match for hunters that knew the lay of their land.”

The agent looked at the sheriff with respect. *These county sheriffs might not be so dumb after all. That's a better assessment than I received from my investigative staff.*

„Agent Whitestone I suggest we walk in a skirmish line until we reach the house, that way we may find some evidence on the way.”

„Sounds like a plan, Sheriff. Let's do it.” Whitestone replied.

Tom Bates had been sworn in as a deputy sheriff while awaiting the arrival of the Feds. He, the Sheriff, Whitestone and the State Fish and Game warden lined up five yards apart and found nothing until the trip wire defense system.

„You were right Sheriff. It seems the Crows knew they were coming, set up a trip wire alarm system and shot the crap out of them. But can you tell me how they knew?” Whitestone asked.

Chapter 14

As Corky left their driveway and turned left onto the state highway, his wife finally asked something that was suddenly bothering her.

„Corky you have a plan?”

Corky laughed in reply, it was so like Cora to trust him with her life until the last moment and then want to know all.

„Yeah sweetie, I’ve a plan, one hell of a plan. Once we ditch that AK47 there will be no evidence to tie us to the killings. We need to drop out of sight for months if need be and I’ve just the place to go. I told Tom Bates that we might disappear for a while, just traveling the country. I asked him to check in on our place from time to time. Not sure that will be needed now, because no one will have the balls to burglarize our home now. Not with the cops searching for us.”

A railroad crossing suddenly started flashing lights to stop and the wooden gate came down. Both husband and wife suddenly had pistols in their hands, but it wasn’t a trap it was a train of empty Coal cars moving slowly along the tracks. He grabbed the assault rifle parts from Cora’s lap and raced to the tracks then threw parts of the rifle into different coal hoppers.

„Okay baby next your cell phone. Take that little pillow I threw in the backseat, turn your phone off and stuff it through the slit I made in the cover. Great next we find a pickup truck going in the opposite direction.”

As they passed a popular Steakhouse they saw a pickup truck with Cape May, New Jersey stickers plastered all over it.

„Perfect. If that truck goes to Cape May it’ll throw the hounds off for a while.”

He drove to the side of the pickup so he was able to look down and see that the bed was covered with rubble from a construction project. Bits of sheet rock, brick and glass filled half the bed.

Fucking perfect.

He threw the pillow under the broken sheet rock.

Fucking perfect, the gods are smiling on the Crows tonight.

Cora knew that look of satisfaction on his face but she didn’t feel as confident. After all it wasn’t in her experience to have had to kill to defend the lives of herself and husband. She needed assurances that they would be safe from new attempts to liquidate them.

„Honey I understand what you’re trying to do with the phone but why should it be turned off and what are we going to do? Where will we stay?”

Corky drove the Jeep out of the steakhouse’s parking lot and headed toward Camden, New Jersey. Cora was obviously starting to feel the effects of what had transpired. The emotional realities of having killed two men was dawning on her.

Cora's complicated. She may embrace the fact she put down two killers or have a guilt trip over it. Most mothers would've come apart when their daughter disappeared. Not Cora. Once she heard that Raven had married some Muslim from Raven's classmates, she and I assumed that Raven had wanted to disappear from our world and we accepted it. What has my baby girl got herself into?

„Baby I do have a plan. I called Bobby Jackson and told him that you and I might need a bolt hole. I didn't go into detail and Bobby never pushed as to why. He just told me to drive up to his old shop in Camden. Bobby turned his Philadelphia home over to his kids five years ago when his wife Jean died and is now living over his old body shop in a three bedroom apartment. I told him of the dogs and he said no problem. You turned the phone off to save the battery. Cell phones can be tracked even if turned off. The only way to be sure you aren't tracked is to take the battery out.”

„Bobby Jackson the old Black Panther?” Cora asked incredulously. „What made you call him? You guys haven't talked in years. How did you know he was still alive?”

„Cora baby, I contacted him precisely because I haven't seen or heard from him in ten years. We needed a clean break. To be able to hide with someone we could never be connected to. I spent a few dollars at a pay phone thirty miles from our home setting up this deal, and I made damn sure I wasn't followed. After I called Bobby I invested in a throwaway phone that has no record of who bought it. I'll call him when we're a few minutes from his auto body shop and he'll have the shop open for us to drive straight in through the open door.

Bobby trusts me because I never ratted him out for taking those shots at that Newark fat ass cop. He saw me standing there afterward but never said a word and neither did I.

As he entered the outskirts of Camden, he handed the cell phone to Cora and pushed speed dial. After three rings Bobby answered the phone.

Cora spoke into the phone.

„We're three minutes out.”

„Good, I'll be ready. Now throw away your phone.”

Cora tossed the phone out the window after wiping it down for prints. It landed on a strip of lawn near a cemetery and a group of black teenagers.

Chapter 15

The day after killing the father, it hadn't been difficult for Raven to discover the hospital that her husband had been taken to because there was only one good burn center in Philadelphia. Upon returning to Newark airport she took a chance to go to her safety deposit box at the Chase bank listed under the name, Anisa Abadi. She put the nineteen-thousand dollars she had managed to save in her two years of teaching in her backpack, returned the empty safety deposit box, and left the bank. She knew better than to return to her small apartment.

Nothing there I can't replace. With Aamir's money added to mine I've a total of over twenty-four thousand in cash. But I need to find a place to stay. No motel or hotel is safe. The airports have facial recognition software. I'm screwed if I can't find a place to stay, that no one can connect me with. Damn except for the naps on the airplanes, I've had little sleep or rest.

She had donned another blond wig that she purchased at a discount store and bookish style glasses that were equipped with plain glass lenses. She now appeared to be a young student. Entering a coffee house in a nice section of Philadelphia she spied rooms for rent on the bulletin board. She had purchased a „pay as you go phone” from the local Walmart, and started calling numbers. One ad was for a bedroom with private bath for six hundred a month and was located down the block from the coffee house.

The landlady was a widow of eighty who looked ninety but was very young in attitude. Raven instantly liked her, liked the room and so she gave her fourteen hundred in cash for first and last month rent and two hundred for security deposit. Mrs. Abbott was thrilled to have rented the room with no need for bargaining.

„My dear make yourself at home but please to not have young gentlemen spend the night here.“

„Mrs. Abbott, I may not be here much for the first two weeks. I'm trying out for different movie roles so I'll be in and out. Some days I may come home very late, so please don't worry over me.“

The next morning Mrs. Abbott heard the young lady leave the house. She hurried to the front window to wave good morning to her but the only person she saw walking was a nun dressed in full habit.

Darn I so wished to see the lovely young girl before she left this morning. Such a sweet thing. She's a gentle soul.

Under the habit the „gentle soul” was wearing cargo pants with her money stuffed in the pockets near her knees. Her ceramic knife was worn in its sheath that was secured by the belt she wore with the shorts. She was on her way to the hospital to act the part of a volunteer and thus gain access to the floor where Aamir's room was located.

She stopped and bought a dozen small roses which she carried openly in her good hand as she passed through the security gate. A beep resounded, so she passed back through, smiled an apology to the guard and placed her keys on the tray. As she passed back through a second time the guard handed her keys.

„Have a nice visit sister.“

She smiled, nodded and began to circulate among the patient's rooms. She picked those with no visitors, chatted awhile, left a rose for them and moved on. When she emerged on Aamir's floor it was apparent which room was his because there was an armed guard sitting in a chair by his door. She busied herself talking to the lonely patients and each time leaving a rose. As she neared the entrance of Aamir's room she spotted a doctor that appeared to be of Pakistani descent enter the room. On a hunch she stopped and engaged the guard in small talk and was rewarded by hearing the doctor tell Aamir in Urdu that his mother would visit him the next day.

„I must see to the lonely patients on the next floor. Maybe I'll see you again?”

„Yes sister, I've been posted here until they no longer need me. Have a nice day and God bless you for what you do.” The guard responded.

I doubt any god is about to bless me for all my „good works,” maybe Satan?

Leaving the hospital she walked directly to a coffee shop nearby and used the restroom to change from her habit. She carefully folded the garment and head dress, placed them into a plastic bag she had with her, slipped the knife and sheath off her belt and pocketed it. Then she walked out the door looking like the nice young woman that Mrs. Abbott would expect to see entering her home.

The widow Abbott was thrilled to see her new boarder come up her steps. Raven spent a relaxing afternoon telling stories about her own past that were just concocted on the spot. Mrs. Abbott had lived a mundane life. Her husband had died a few years previously and their only child was killed many years before in a car accident on the way home from his high school prom.

„Mrs. Abbott I'm trying out for a new part in a play.”

„Really? Tell me more.”

„I can't tell you the name of the play because the producer insists on keeping it secret but it's a very important role. It may well decide my future.”

„Well when you get rich, famous and have fans chasing you all day, don't forget you'll always have a safe haven here. You'll always be welcome to visit me child.”

Well I doubt very much your invitation will be valid once you find you've been living with a serial killer.

„Gee thanks, that's so kind of you. I've been so busy chasing my chosen career that I haven't had time to develop friendships. Mostly hit and run interactions with strangers. They're here one day and gone the next.”

The widow smiled at the young woman. *A gentle soul, such a sweet young lady.*

„Mrs. Abbott, I can tell you this about my hopefully upcoming role. I'll be playing a Nun. It's a crucial role in the play. Everything pivots around the character. I tell you this because today I dressed as a Nun to see if I was believable in that persona. No one questioned me. It was so exciting. Tomorrow I need to show up early for the reading of the part. I'll leave here dressed in character, so don't be alarmed if you see a Nun walking about your house.”

Ah that's who I saw walking down the street. She fooled me, but who really looks at a Nun? This young woman is a gem. So smart, so pretty, what a future she's going to have.

Chapter 16

Corky turned on the street that led to the body shop. He hadn't driven down the street in many years and was dismayed by the look of the neighborhood.

Looks like a fucking war zone. Christ Camden was once a beautiful city. Now it looks like parts of St. Louis and Detroit, just devastated.

The door to the garage was half open but as Corky blinked his high beams the door opened fully. As soon as the Jeep entered the door was closed and locked. Bobby approached the Jeep and gave Corky a bear hug, which caused their handguns in each others waistbands to clink together.

„Jesus Corky, you trying to get my dick shot off accidentally?”

„Nah Bobby but why you packing? No one knows we be coming here.”

„Neighborhood Bro, neighborhood.” Bobby replied. „The young gangstas know I be a mean motherfucker but one nether know, do one? Okay let the dogs out I'll put them in the fenced in side yard. Plenty of room for them to run. Also be good protection from the local punks, grab your gear and I'll show you my humble abode.”

Corky noticed the upstairs had almost as much room as Bobby's former house. There would be plenty of room for the three of them.

„Bobby this is obviously a man's apartment but I must say I really like the decor.”

„Thanks Cora. Since the wife died I had a few ladies interested in me. Hell they wanted to make curtains and put covers on my chairs but it wasn't me. At seventy-five I've no need of a woman. I don't want the trouble of courting a woman, what for? To cook? I do all right for myself. Clean? Christ how much dirt can I make by myself. Sex? Baby that train left the station a few years ago.”

The Crows broke out in good nature laughter at their friend's blunt assessment of his life. It had been awhile since they had a good chuckle, and above all they felt safe.

„Cora, tomorrow I'll take you to a woman hair dresser I know. We put you in cornrows. At best you'll look like a light skin sister, at worse a wannabe. No one will connect you to a women being looked for. Corky, I got clippers. I clip off what hair you have and then shave it bald. Then we get the biggest pair of bad ass sunglasses for you, grow out your beard and I tell people you just got released from State after serving twenty for manslaughter. Now best you both try for some sleep.”

Chapter 17

Raven awoke at seven in the morning. She went downstairs to make a cup of coffee and found the widow fussing about in the kitchen.

„Hi honey did you sleep well? Nervous about the big day? Care to join me for a cup of coffee?”

Smiling in gratitude she sat at the table and had Mrs. Abbott bring her a large cup of black coffee.

Yeah I slept well, nervous? Hell no I can't wait to cut that bitch if I can get close to her. Coffee, hell yeah, lots of it.

„Not too nervous Mr. Abbott. I'm confident that I can play the part to perfection. Hopefully if I'm successful you'll see the full series played out on television and you can say; I know that girl.”

„Oh that would be so wonderful my dear. That would give me bragging rights and something to talk about if I ever go to the local senior center.”

After setting, drinking and chatting for thirty minutes, Raven got up to return to her room and dress for the upcoming role. She looked about the room for the last time. She knew she couldn't return, that she had to find other digs but that was no problem, she had a plan. Upon descending the stairway, Mrs. Abbott clapped her hands to the sides of her face.

„Oh my, oh my you look so ravishing. Oh no, I shouldn't have used that expression. Nuns shouldn't appear ravishing, but on you honey it works.”

„Thank you very much but I need to run to make my appointment. I'll let you know how I did when I return.”

As she left the home the widow watched her descend the stairs and hurry up the street.

What a lovely, lovely human being. Maybe she should have been a real life Nun. Such compassion. The only thing marring her beauty is the loss of her ring finger, but I never asked how it happened.

* * * * *

She entered into the same flower shop as the day before but this time bought three dozen roses. Running out of gifts to the lonely patients wasn't an option this day. This day should be the day she exacted revenge on the bitch that cut her finger off and murdered her unborn son.

Everything needs to be perfect. No lapse of judgment, look for opportunity and then pounce on the prey.

Approaching the entrance to the hospital she was glad to see the same guard as yesterday.

Familiarity works. Get them use to a pattern and they will accept it as the norm.

Before passing through the metal detector she held her keys up and then placed them in the holder. The guard smiled at her, then handed her back the keys.

„Have a very good day sister. Oh I see you brought many more roses, so you plan to be busy today. God bless you for your continued good works.”

She smiled back and continued on her way.

Christ he may be the guy who attempts to shoot me after I do the old bitch.

Incoming visitors all smiled at the friendly Nun giving out roses to the elderly visitors, but no one paid apt attention. Even the guard forgot she was there. Raven had become part of the background. Less than two hours had passed when a limo arrived outside and the target appeared with three security men. Raven was about to go to Aamir's floor since she wanted to be there when the bitch entered her son's room. She was surprised when her mother-in-law went directly to the ladies restroom. Seizing her chance she approached the guard.

„May I set my roses near you for safe keeping? I need to use the restroom.”

„Certainly sister.”

The security team had noticed the Nun but saw the exchange with the guard so they felt no threat as she entered the bathroom. The matron of the Agha family was applying makeup as Raven walked up alongside of her to apparently wash her

hands. Her father had taught her the simple technique of applying a „sleeper hold” when he decided it was time for his daughter to protect herself against school yard bullies. Once after being assaulted physically by an older boy of fourteen a twelve year old Raven had risen from the ground, approached the boy from behind and within four seconds he was passed out on the school ground. The school suspended the boy for three days but she a week. Mr. Crow was proud of her, and she wasn’t bullied thereafter. It was just as easy with the bitch. She slipped quickly behind her, applied a sleeper hold, watched Afshan’s eyes widen with fear, and then laid her unconscious on the restroom floor. Within seconds she had used her ceramic blade to cut off the nose and both ears of the hapless leader of the Agha Cartel. Raven walked to a stall and flushed her prizes into the sewage of Philadelphia. A quick check for blood spilled on her clothing showed nothing. She slipped the knife into its sheath wiped her hands and walked out the door.

I might regret killing her later; but I know that losing her beauty and knowing her body parts were flushed down to the sewers will create a living hell for her. A living hell that she can’t escape. Besides I can always do her later.

Chapter 18

An elderly lady toddled over with a walker to use the ladies room. The Agha security detail looked at her and decided she wasn’t a threat. As they opened the door for her, the old woman screamed and collapsed. However, one of the security men was quick enough to grab her; he eased her to the floor then looked into the room and saw his once beautiful employer looking like a scene from a horror movie. Two holes where her beautiful nose had once been and blood flowing from both sides of her head from the location of her missing ears. Afshan stood up, looked at her image in the mirror and began a low mournful keening.

After leaving the restroom Raven collected her roses and left the building. Walking swiftly down the street, she entered an alley that led to several bars and cafes; as no one was in sight she quickly slipped the habit off and shoved it into a dumpster. The ceramic knife and leather sheath was removed from her belt and placed in a cargo pocket above her money. She exited the alley at the other end, and hailed a cab for the Philadelphia airport.

She went directly to a commuter plane service counter and bought a ticket to the Wilmington airport. Upon arrival she exited the plane and walked to the Frontier counter. As she approached the counter she felt a set of eyes upon her. Turning she was gratified to see it was the girl she had been about to seek out.

„Oh my god you’re Anisa. I thought it was you but you seem so different. Not just the wig, you emit an aura of mystery and danger.”

More than you know baby. Much, much more. Raven then asked.

„Look I’d like to go out and have a drink with you tonight. What time does your shift end? Also you remember my name but I’ve no idea of yours.”

„Oh god, oh god, this is so unexpected. My name is Misha. Misha Zarankin. My grandparents were from the Ukraine. I just finished a shift ten minutes ago and was about to leave. Is your car in the parking lot?“

„No Misha I just flew in by commuter jet. You see I kept thinking about that smile and wink you gave me and it made me hot. Hot to see you Misha. I've never been with a woman but let's go for a drink and talk of the possibilities.“

„Oh my god, let's go. I've my Honda Fit parked in the employee lot and I know a quiet little bar where we can get to know each other better.“

* * * * *

The security men knew they were doomed. A search for the two ears and nose had come up empty. Madam Agha would not be having them sewed back on with plastic surgery to cover the scars. The sound of a toilet being flushed was all the evidence needed to surmise the fate of the body parts. Shakar was especially angry.

Such a beautiful face. Madam never lack the power to instantly excite men as she slowly sank to her knees to service them. Now any man would have his manhood wilt upon looking down at such a horror. First Aamir and now the madam. I must warn the master and tell him what has transpired. Where in the world has he hidden himself?

Aamir's father was currently lying on a cold coroner's table in the sunny state of Florida. His little Indonesian wife had been cautioned never to expose her husband's true identity to anyone, anywhere and at any time. Mr. Agha lay dead for several days before his true identity become known and when it did, the world intelligence community was stunned. In less than one week an amateur had taken down the nucleus of an international crime family.

Some raised their glasses in a toast to Jihad Joy while others hunted her as prey.

* * * * *

The widow Abbott was watching her favorite morning news program when the station announced important breaking news. The report stated that a woman had been badly mutilated in a restroom of a Philadelphia hospital and the assailant was clad as a Nun. Footage was shown of the assailant moving about the hospital handing out roses, and then she entered a ladies room only to emerge less than a minute later. Nearby store security cameras tracked her into an alley where they lost sight of her.

Oh no! I know that girl, she's my boarder!

„Nine one one, what's your emergency?“

„The girl, the girl dressed as a Nun, the one who cut the woman she's my boarder. She rents a room from me. Please help me, she may return any moment. Please save me!“

„We have patrol units on way to your address now. Please give me your name.“

„Gertrude, Gertrude Abbott. Please hurry!“

A black and white came sliding to the curb. Two officers one of which was armed with a twelve gauge pump shotgun bounded up the front steps and pounded on the door.

„Philadelphia police, Philadelphia police! Open the door Mrs. Abbott we're here to protect you.”

A visually shaken Mrs. Abbott opened the door to the officers as two more squad cars pulled up and blocked the street from either direction.

„Officer oh my God, I'll never trust a stranger to stay in my home ever again. The girl was so sweet but she must be a demon to have inflicted such mayhem upon that lady whose picture was so beautiful.”

A detective who had just entered overheard the elderly woman's words.

„Mrs. Abbott it may be of small comfort to you but Jihad Joy has her reasons. Mrs. Agha cut the finger off her hand to get back wedding rings. Then she viciously kicked her daughter in-law in the stomach so her own grandchild would not be born. That mutilated beautiful woman is a well-known thug, a leader of a notorious crime cartel. Anisa Abadi seemed like a kind, gentle person because she is but for those who violated her Raven Crow has turned deadly.”

The detective took an incoming cell phone call.

„That was the Police Commissioner boys, we're to stand down and secure the scene for the Feds.”

Chapter 19

Misha was excited to show Raven her favorite bar. She'd recently broken off a three year relationship with SooLin, a Chinese beauty from Baltimore.

SooLin broke it off, but this Arab girl is hot. The word will filter back to SooLin that I recovered quite nicely from our former relationship.

As they enter all eyes focused on the pair. Raven had never knowingly gone to a gay bar, nor did she know what to expect, however she liked what she saw. Dark booths where couples made out in privacy before deciding on whether to hook up or not.

„Misha forgive me but this is all new to me. Aren't men allowed to patronize this bar?”

Misha laughed, shook her head no, then squeezed Raven's good hand and drew her out to the dance floor.

Wow Anisa I'm falling hard for you. You must be five foot ten inches easy and I barely make five feet tall. God I love being in your arms.

Misha dropped her hands from around Raven's waist and cupped her butt instead. As they swayed to the music, she pulled Raven hard against her own body and began a slow sexual grind. The slow dance music stopped, replaced by a loud thumping beat. Misha was in no mood for fast music so she led her conquest to the darkest booth she could find.

Drinks were ordered, but Raven cautiously watched her own intake. Misha was so hot for her she didn't notice that Raven had far less to drink than her. At first

Raven was a bit tense during the first kiss but after two drinks she started to enjoy it. It was becoming apparent to her that Misha was expecting her to be the dominant partner, so Raven started to explore the possibilities. The music had changed back to slow; she pulled the smaller woman from the booth.

„Listen Misha, I've never dominated a woman before but I've dominated many men in many ways. If you want to be my bitch you shall obey me. You understand? Say yes Mistress or I'll pick up that bitch over there and go home with her. Understood?”

Misha melded into Raven's taller body, causing Raven to experience a new sense of control over the woman that was sexually stimulating.

„Yes my Mistress yes,” and she started to grind her body back and forth stimulating Raven even more.

As she ran her hands up and down Ravens thighs she felt a hard bulge.

„What's that on your thigh?”

„It's a ceramic knife in a sheath which has Velcro straps, I've strapped to my thigh. In my chosen work I need a weapon on me at all times and this blade can pass through metal detectors.”

Misha trembled with excitement.

I knew it, I knew it! I recognized that she was mysterious the first time I saw her. She's the woman of my dreams.

* * * * *

A few hours later, Raven had decided it was time to make an exit. They were beginning to attract too much attention and Raven didn't want to stand out in anyone's memory. Misha was in no hurry to leave, but came along without comment when her arm was grabbed and she was propelled toward the door. Some of the patrons notice the action and smiled. Once outside, Raven took complete control.

„Look you little bitch; I'm driving you home, because you're in no shape to drive. You can point out directions to me as we go. Now kiss me bitch.”

On their way to Misha's they spotted an Adult Book store. Misha giggled when she was told to stay in the car while Raven bought some items. She returned to the car with a bag containing leg shackles, three sets of handcuffs, a dog collar with lock and chain. Misha had passed out asleep. After looking at her identification she found Misha's address, when she was a few blocks away she woke her up.

„Come on bitch, time to show me where you live so we can play.”

Misha giggled again and kissed Raven on the neck. She directed her down several streets and they pulled into an upscale apartment building parking lot.

„I live on the ground floor so we can drive right up to my door. Over there. Number 212. Oh god I need to go potty.”

While the other girl was busy in the bathroom, Raven sized up the tiny one bedroom apartment. The bedroom had a beautiful heavy duty queen size brass bed.

Ah my dear the better to chain you. Shackles on your legs, locked collar about your neck, hands cuffed in front of you and the long chain from the collar to the bed should immobilize you until I make arrangements.

The shower could be heard running; so she made sure that the apartment doors were securely locked, stripped off her clothes and joined her new roommate in the shower.

„Wash me bitch.” Raven demanded.

„Yes my Mistress, yes, yes, yes,” came the subdued reply.

Misha soaped her Mistress all over and then used the shower head to rinse her off. She smiled at Raven and indicated that the taller woman should bend forward, suddenly Raven felt the rinse change to a rapid warm pulsating beat applied directly to her genitals.

„Oh my Misha, oh my. I think I’m having an orgasm.”

* * * * *

The next morning Misha awoke in chains, she looked over at her new demanding Mistress who after a night of being pleased by a woman for the first time was sleeping because of sexual exhaustion.

She began kissing the dusky beauty on the stomach and wove her tongue lower and lower. Raven moaned in her sleep but her legs came akimbo and her slave began in earnest. Raven woke as they both achieved orgasm.

Jesus sweet Jesus why haven’t I tried this before? Whoa that was intense and I only got to experience the part where I was awake.

Arising from the bed, she unlocked her captive’s leash from the bedpost and led her to the bathroom. While Misha done her toiletry Raven went into the living room to unplug the television, and locate Misha’s cell phone.

The chains should keep her from reaching any of them. I sure as hell don’t want her to see any news reports.

Upon hearing the flush of the toilet Raven entered the bathroom just as Misha was getting ready to stand up. Grabbing the neck chain she pulled her to her feet.

„Get in the shower bitch I need to wash you.”

Once both had entered the shower Raven soaped up her prize.

„Turn around and bend over.”

Raven’s rough treatment and digital penetration caused the girl to ride a wave of climaxes. After the shower the girls dried off; then Raven led her sex slave back to the bed to be locked by the neck and long chain to the bedpost. She’d spied a bottle of one-hundred proof vodka on the kitchen counter and orange juice in the refrigerator. A drink was mixed calculated to put Misha asleep for a few hours.

„Drink this. I didn’t bring you anything to eat because you’re going to eat me for breakfast.”

Misha giggled, drank the screwdriver and laid back to allow her Mistress to ride her face.

Chapter 20

Bobby went to the Crow’s bedroom door a few minutes after he had told them to get some sleep, and knocked loudly. Upon being told to enter he told the couple.

„Well I got good news and not so good news. The good news is that your girl is alive, the bad news is that she's a killer dubbed Jihad Joy and is being hunted by several world intelligence agencies including our Federal Bureau of Investigation and Homeland Security.”

„What? That makes no sense at all,” Cora replied.

„Yes it does Cora, once you get the whole story.” Bobby responded. „Evidently that raghead your daughter married is the guy found burned and hung at the Weatherbee farm. His father had his throat slit at Fantastic World's Resort and the mother just had her nose and both ears introduced to the sewers of Philadelphia. According to the story released just a few minutes ago, her husband took her home to Afghanistan to meet his folks. They had researched her, found her blood-line and didn't approve. They beat her, cut off her ring finger, and then sent her to the countryside to be raped and killed. There she turned the tables on her captives and slaughtered all but the two youngest.”

Corky was stunned. Deep down inside he had thought that his daughter had been recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency because of her language skills and Princeton degree, but this?

„There's more and you need to brace yourselves,” Bobby calmly stated. „You lost your first grandchild. It would've been a grandson. The mother kicked Raven in the belly until she lost the child, and the Agha family is a known international crime cartel.”

Cora broke down and wept. Corky grabbed her in his arms and held her tight.

Those motherfuckers! Go get them girl. Kill every last one of that damn family.

„But why are the federal authorities looking for our child?” Cora asked. „She's the victim, hell they should be helping her.”

„Very good question Cora, very good question. Something stinks,” Bobby responded. „Now go back to your room and try to get some needed sleep.”

* * * * *

Jimmy Mingin was excited about the new tagging that he and crew were about to embark upon. Using Google they had discovered what appeared to be a perfect street to tag in nearby Camden. The street ran parallel to a major traffic artery by just a few blocks and made their escape from being arrested by the police or mugged by the locals less likely. Tagging Camden had become the new rage for the high school taggers that lived in the mainly white inhabited small towns outside of Camden. He and his crew hailed from Glassboro a town known for its university.

Jimmy and the others convinced their affluent parents that they were going to attend an all-night party at a friend's home. At two in the morning the tagging crew parked Jimmy's completely restored 1983 CJ7 Jeep Renegade across from Bobby's body shop and headed to the target wall a few yards down the street.

As they were about to spray, two large booms resounded and the classic Jeep rocked back and forth. Jimmy looked back and saw that the tires on the driver's side were shredded.

„Let's get the fuck out of here,” he screamed.

Dropping his pack which held painting supplies he ran toward the relative safety of the main traffic artery a few blocks away followed by his three friends.

Corky woke to the sounds of two loud gunshots, knowing exactly what he had heard. He rolled out of bed to grab one of his shotguns, pumped a round into the chamber and headed out the bedroom door. Cora had done exactly the same but was a few steps behind him.

Bobby was standing in the living room holding an old double barrel 12 gauge shotgun which he was currently ejecting shells from but Corky noticed he seemed not to be in a hurry to reload. Corky relaxed but was puzzled as to why Bobby would chance firing a shotgun while they were in hiding. Bobby grinned.

„Look out the window,” he suggested.

Looking out the window the Crows saw the Jeep with two flattened tires, backpacks, and what appeared to be spray cans of paint on the sidewalk. They then understood. Bobby had run off taggers.

„Bobby was it smart to fire a shotgun? Are you sure it won't bring the police to investigate?” Corky asked.

„No way Corky is anyone in the hood about to call the cops. In three hours that Jeep will be stripped. You and Cora go back and get some sleep. The white boys will report the Jeep stolen and their insurance will total it out and pay them a check. Those boys will have a story to tell, but they will never ever come back to this hood. Go back to bed.”

When Corky arose six hours later he found Bobby cleaning the old Stevens shotgun. He put the shotgun aside and reached for his steaming hot mug of instant coffee. After blowing at the top of the coffee he ventured a careful sip then look at Corky.

„Look out the window.”

Corky did as suggested and looked upon what was left of the Jeep. The stripped vehicle was resting on its side. All the seats were gone, radio appeared gone, both doors removed, soft top nowhere to be seen and worse of all the motor and four wheel drive axles had been removed.

„Bro when I shot that Jeep I provided this hood some much needed income. That shell will be gone next. Some Junker will come by with a torch and pickup truck, cut that sheet metal up and voila the whole Jeep has disappeared. Life is good in the hood.”

Corky laughed.

Chapter 21

Raven knew she was being hunted with a vengeance—literally. The money and power of the Agha Cartel had been used to track first her real identity and she was sure her Anisa Abadi cover was compromised by now. She had no choice but to seek outside aid.

Jesse told me that Outlier Ltd. would always be there for me in my time of need. Well I sure as hell need. Christ I hope that old man is still alive.

She called the first of the two numbers she'd committed to memory years ago and it was answered upon the first ring.

* * * * *

„Mr. York I’ve an emergency dental appointment at three p.m. for my son David. He fell at school today and knocked a tooth loose. May I leave two hours early?”

York looked over at the beautiful but harried young mother of three sons. David’s father was on his third tour in Afghanistan. Outlier Ltd. was holding a place open for David senior once he was discharged from the Army Rangers.

„Of course Carol go ahead and leave. It’s a slow day and I’ve no interviews scheduled for the afternoon. I can handle the phones.”

Damn is it my imagination or did I just feel my left hand? Ah shit just as I need to concentrate on my body that goddamn phone has to ring. Whoa it’s one of our numbers given out only to those we wish to recruit. Oh well that’s what I’m paid to do.

„Outlier Ltd. Alex York director of personnel speaking how may I help you?”

„Mr. York I need to speak to my grandfather Jesse Redbone, it’s a matter of great urgency.”

York suddenly paid strict attention; they had been expecting this call for help. Raven’s exploits were well known throughout the intelligence community and Outlier Ltd. knew she would be run to ground eventually.

„Yes I recognize your voice. Your grandfather and uncles have been waiting to hear from you. Do you have a place to stay?”

„I’m staying with a friend on the East Coast but I’d be willing to come visit you there in Berkeley.”

„No need my dear, call this number in twenty minutes and please use a pay phone.”

Twenty minutes later York’s phone rang.

„Kid this is Jesse. I’m in Washington D.C. York has patched me in for a conference call. Take this number down and go buy several throwaway phones and call back soon. Throw away any cell phones you now have then get away from that phone booth and never go back. Buy the phones fast and call that number. It’ll be secure for a while but it might be tracked within a few hours.”

* * * * *

The Wilmington police department had received three phone calls from patrons of the bar where Misha and Raven had their drinks but none could supply a last name, place of work, or address.

Finally a call came in from a co-worker of Misha and an address was given. The first cars on the scene arrived silently. The door was kicked in and officers entered with M16s and riot shotguns. They cleared the kitchen and living room, but were unprepared for the sight that awaited them in the bedroom. After clearing the bathroom four officers looked down at a sleeping naked beauty that was chained to the bed by a long chain ending with a locked spiked dog collar. One of the officers couldn’t help but smile.

Damn, handcuffs and leg shackles also. What the hell is she into, or is she just an innocent captive? Jesus maybe I should look her up after all this shakes out.

* * * * *

Raven had just left the store with two „pay as you go” phones when she heard sirens approaching from all directions. She was only a mile or so away from Misha’s apartment so she feared the worst.

Damn how long could I drive her Honda without getting busted?

As she approached the Honda Fit she noticed a police car riding up and down checking car plates. It stopped by Misha’s car.

Not long, not long at all. They already got the word out.

While putting distance between her and the patrol car she spotted an old beat up Toyota Celica. She still had a ring of shaved keys in her pocket. The second one she tried got her in and started the engine. She drove from the parking lot and headed for Interstate 95 which would lead her to Washington, D.C. Not wanting to waste time in pulling over to call, she took the chance that she wouldn’t be seen making a quick cell phone call. Jesse answered immediately.

„Jesse I’m so busted. I’m fleeing on Interstate 95 toward Washington. Bought two cell phones and threw my old one away. Running out of options here.”

„Hey Kid maintain a steady fifty-five miles an hour, I’m getting in my car and will head up Interstate 95 to intercept you. I can speed because I’ve a badge and lights to flash. Do you remember the second phone number I gave you? Good that number was intended for this type of situation. There’s no record of it. It’ll take some time before this conversation is found by the National Security Agency. After we hang up throw the phone you’re using away. Call me in exactly thirty minutes with the other phone; by then we should be near each other.”

Raven waited until traffic was light and tossed the phone out of the passenger window onto the side of the highway. She looked at the gas gauge it indicated a half tank of fuel. She drove at a steady speed of fifty-five and stayed in the right lane.

Damn that last twenty minutes seem like an hour. Only ten more to go. Oh shit, there’s a cop car coming up fast. Damn he went by so fast he shook my car; there must be an accident up ahead.

Ten minutes later she called the second number. Just as before Jesse answered on first ring.

„Pull over and stop on the shoulder of road, with your flasher lights on. If my calculations are correct you should be within five miles of me.” He began to slow his speed while his partner, Ben watched the opposite side of the Interstate 95.

„There she is Jesse, and there’s an off ramp a half-mile ahead.”

Jesse hit his siren and blinked his headlights and sped to the off ramp. Cars pulled over at the top of the ramp to allow him access. He made the left turn without hesitating then a sharp left to return to the Interstate and Raven’s car. Just as he pulled onto the shoulder of the Interstate 95 a police car came rapidly from behind him, slowed then gave him a salute and sped off.

Whoa that was close. Cops love to help women in distress, so the Kid came close to getting nabbed.

Raven was ready for him as he pulled in alongside of the stolen car. Without a word but a quick look to see if it was he, she jumped into the backseat and he

sped off but with no siren or lights flashing. He had her under his protection and there was no need for haste anymore.

Chapter 22

Agent Whitestone was suspicious of Misha Zarankin. After her rescue she had been detained by the local police and examined at the hospital. DNA swabs were taken to see if they matched up with that of Raven Crow aka Anisa Abadi. Crow's DNA had been obtained from a hairbrush left behind at Mrs. Gertrude Abbott's home. The results were in and he was poised to ask some very hard and direct questions of Miss Zarankin who was now awaiting him at the Wilmington Delaware Satellite Federal Bureau of Investigation Office. Upon first glance at the young girl sitting in the interrogation room she looked incapable of being a sexual deviate.

Damn she sure looks like and has the mannerisms of a Sunday school teacher. My oh my the press is going to eat this up once they become aware of Misha Zarankin. Christ it didn't take long for the story of why she started decimating the Agha family to surface. Doesn't excuse her crimes committed on United States soil but if Raven gets to Europe they would never extradite her.

„Miss Zarankin my name is Whitestone. I'm the lead investigator on what has become known as the Jihad Joy case. Before we start with my questioning is there anything you require? No? Good, let's begin.

„Have you known Raven or as you knew her Anisa very long?”

„No sir, first time I saw her I sold her a one way ticket to Orlando, Florida.”

„When?”

„Maybe a week ago. The next time I saw her she had just arrived by commuter plane at the Wilmington airport.”

„Why?”

„She came back to see me because I had flirted with her and she said she wanted to have a few drinks with me.”

„Go on.”

„I'm a lesbian. To be more specific, I'm a lesbian with submissive and masochistic desires. I love to be brutally dominated by women.”

„Did Raven do so?”

„Oh yeah, oh yeah, I get hot even now thinking of our encounter. She was the perfect Mistress even though she had never been with a woman before.”

„Are you telling me Raven isn't a Lesbian or most likely maybe a bisexual?”

„Yep I could tell. At first it was just an act on her part but then she started to enjoy it. Really, really, really enjoy it.”

Whitestone had to smile. He would never ever begin to understand what made Misha Zarankin tick but he liked her immensely and he was positive there was nothing more to be gained from her.

„Miss Zarankin we're going to cut you loose with no charges, but I got to give you some advice. The advice may well keep you alive. There are some very mean

people out there that would torture you for information of Raven's whereabouts if they thought you knew. You're also about to become a very wealthy young woman. Hire an agent to book the television shows for you and to negotiate the movie deals that are sure to be offered. Be yourself, hide nothing and play yourself in any films made. No need for acting lessons, you already have the whole package. Now is there anything more I need to know?"

„Yeah Anisa wasn't a lesbian when I met her but she sure as hell might be one now. She liked it."

Whitestone stood up, shook her hand, and laughed as he left the room.

* * * * *

„Agent Whitestone an officer needs to have a word with you at the front desk," a secretary informed him as she passed by.

He proceeded to the front desk and spied a Wilmington Delaware police officer waiting patiently for him. As he approached the officer he noted his Marine style haircut and boot camp spit shined shoes.

Either former Marine or fresh out of police academy or maybe both.

„Agent Whitestone here, what can I do for you?"

„Officer Holley sir. I may have some late breaking info on the Jihad Joy case."

„Yes and what might that be officer?"

„Well an older Toyota Celica was abandoned on Interstate 95. It just got towed to the impound yard and a hit came back that it was stolen from a parking lot where the Zarankin girl's Honda Fit was parked. The owner had left it there for a few days and just noticed it missing. He filed a report of it being stolen after the car was towed. I was about to pull over to check on the car driven by a woman who I now know matches Jihad Joy's description, when a cruiser from a Federal jurisdiction got there first. I gave him a salute to tell him I was leaving. I then observed the female jump into the back of the cruiser and leave. Problem is sir; it appears as if some other Federal agency is playing games with your Jihad Joy."

„Interesting officer Holley, very interesting."

Chapter 23

Within hours Whitestone was sitting with representatives of the National Security Agency, Homeland Security and the Central Intelligence Agency. He was presenting his findings.

„So we have what appears to be some hick girl being accepted by Princeton University to study Near Eastern languages. While there she just happens to meet Aamir Agha who's the scion of a well know crime cartel. Without disclosing her true identity she marries Aamir and travels to Afghanistan to meet the not so loving in-laws. Upon arrival in December 2011 she's unmasked as an imposter, brutally assaulted, and sent to the countryside. There she just happens to be rescued in a secondary op by elements of Outlier Ltd. who just happens to have an operation ongoing in the immediate area. This country girl with no training

brutally slaughters the men who held her captive, however she leaves two teenage boys alive but crippled for life to tell the story. Then she accompanied the team on a subsequent raid to wipe out more members of the Agha Cartel. Then Outlier Ltd. pays Otterman University to hire her as a lecturer under the name of Anisa Abadi.

„Now in late 2013 in less than a week she hangs and burns her husband, slits the throat of the head of the Agha Cartel and then mutilates Afshan Agha before she's even aware that her husband is dead, lying on a slab in Florida.

„I can't swallow the story that she's an amateur. She's a Princeton graduate and we all know the Agency that loves to recruit from Princeton. Last but not least is that I've a witness that saw our girl leaving a stolen car and being picked up by what appeared to be some Federal agents. What are you not sharing here? Outlier Ltd. must be involved with that woman. Maybe trained her?”

The Homeland Security representative was visibly disturbed. After composing himself and taking a large gulp of coffee he looked intently at Whitestone.

„Agent Whitestone if you value your career and pension you'll forget that line of reasoning. You and your agency have been advised numerous times that we're only interested in capturing Raven Crow aka Jihad Joy. The State Department has made it clear that Outlier Ltd. isn't a part nor should be a part of this investigation. I've also been told to relay the decision to no longer pursue Jihad Joy by federal officers. From now on it will be a matter for the police where the crimes or alleged crimes took place.”

Whitestone hadn't expected this. It was becoming apparent to him that the Agha family had opened a can of worms that everyone was hoping could be contained.

What the fuck is State up to, but more importantly why should I care? Protect my pension and get out. Hell I might even get a promotion out of this.

„Look at my record and you'll see that I've always been a team player. My retirement is getting close and I'd dearly love to advance that one more grade to increase my monthly benefit. I see no reason to jeopardize my possible promotion by asking the wrong question about this case. Now that most of the story has been revealed, public opinion is on Raven's side. She's being viewed as a hero. No, gentlemen, the State Department has no need to fear any more input from me, I'm looking forward to my retirement.”

The other three men looked at each other and smiled. They then nodded their heads in unspoken agreement. The representative of the National Security Agency spoke.

„Mr. Whitestone we value your service. We also have the power to increase your retirement benefits by two grade levels if you so choose to retire at this time.”

„I so choose.” Whitestone replied.

„Good, see the secretary at the outer office and she shall draw up the needed documents. Good luck in your retirement Whitestone. This meeting is adjourned.”

Jesus that was quick, easy and certainly painless. Well if I get bored in retirement I just may apply to Outlier Ltd. They seem to have the juice in Washington to make things happen.

After he left the room the other men continued their meeting. The Homeland Security man was concerned that the Agha family would continue to seek revenge within the territory of the United States.

„They tried to slaughter the Crows damn it and that crazy Agha woman may well do so again.”

The Central Intelligence Agency agent Hayward chimed in. „Don’t think so, she screwed up by involving four different embassies. They are pissed at her for getting their undercover agents killed in such a public manner. They will ride herd on her from now on and she will comply to protect her business interests.”

The Homeland Security rep looked bemused.

„You’re right of course and we’ve put out the word not to violate our borders or suffer the consequences, so I think her parents will be safe enough from retaliation. However if they go outside our borders while on vacation, all bets are off.”

The National Security Agency rep listened taking it all in and then replied:

„The terrifying truth of the matter is that an untrained twenty-two year old wreaked horrific damage upon one of the world’s toughest crime cartels in less than a week. This girl must have an innate ability for wet work. Even with all the security I have about me day after day, I’d never ever want to get on the bad side of Jihad Joy.”

* * * * *

Whitestone spent an hour in the outer office finalizing his retirement papers. He had walked in as a lead agent on an important case but now he was about to leave as a civilian retroactive to the previous day. He whistled a happy tune on the way out the door. It wasn’t even necessary for him to clear out his office, the retirement agreement called for him to avoid his home office for the next month and complete non-disclosure to any media including newspapers, television, or the social media. His wife was less than ecstatic upon hearing the news of his early retirement, nevertheless she began to cheer up upon seeing the size of the monthly benefit.

* * * * *

Two nights later she invited him to watch her new favorite show, *Life on your side*, hosted by LaTrisTa Mahood.

„Now sweetheart why would I want to watch a show that caters to bleeding heart ladies. Christ I’ve been in shootouts with the scum these people help promote and protect with their liberal ideas on crime.”

„You of all people will want to watch this show because she’s interviewing Misha Zarankin and Gertrude Abbott and the show is live so what you see is what you get. Absolutely no rewrite.”

Whitestone thought back to the conversation he had with the alluring young lesbian. He had also interviewed the old crone Mrs. Abbott.

„For once you’re right, first time in thirty-five years of marriage, but this time you are so right. I need to see this and you’re going to really enjoy it. That Misha is going to be the star of the show.”

Whitestone couldn’t have been more wrong.

Chapter 24

„Good evening America, welcome to *Life on your side*. I'm the host LaTrisTa Mahood. Tonight we have two women all America is talking about; give it up for Misha Zarankin and Gertrude Abbott.”

Whitestone had to laugh when the camera cut away to pan the audience. A group of college boys stood up and showed off the t-shirts they were wearing that were emblazoned with: We Love Lesbians but the word lesbian had been crossed out and replaced with bisexual women.

„Misha let me start with you. There's talk of a movie deal in the works and is it true that you want to portray yourself in the movie?”

Misha giggled then giggled again. „Oh yeah I do, I really, really do!”

The host paused and looked at her with speculation.

Damn I think she has been drinking. This could turn out very good.

„Why Misha, why do you desire to portray yourself?”

„Ah desire, desire.”

„Excuse me Misha what are you trying to say?”

Misha looked like she had snapped back into reality because she set up and replied:

„Desire you mentioned that I desire to portray myself. Desire is a word that works magic to my heart and befuddles my brain.”

Damn this is good.

„And Misha, and?”

„I always wanted to do a sadistic porn flick.”

The audience was shocked into silence.

Crashed and burned, crashed and burned.

„Well that's certainly very interesting Misha but who should play the part of Raven or Anisa if you prefer that name?”

„You, I want you to play Anisa. You're a black woman with an Arab name who better than you? Besides I've been getting vibes from you. We would make sweet love together.”

The college boys went wild; however the older women in the crowd went silent. A station break was called and after the commercials the cameras return to the set and Misha was no longer there.

„Welcome back folks. The time allowed for the interview with Misha Zarankin has elapsed so she decided to leave early as she had an appointment with a movie agent. Now it's time for Mrs. Gertrude Abbott.

„Mrs. Abbott I must say you look good for a lady of eighty.”

„Look sweetie, when I walked in here I looked ninety years old. The makeup artists here at the studio achieved the possible, they made me look eighty years old again. If they were really good they would've tried for the impossible and shot for seventy.”

Both the college boys and the older women loved that. Finally the laughter and applause died down and LaTrisTa spoke again.

„Mrs. Abbott I've very few questions to ask you so if you wish to ask me something, please do.”

„Yeah I do have a question. On the way in here I was told by that little Misha how much she was paid to appear here tonight. It's like twenty times what I received. Christ for that kind of money I would've slept with Raven.”

The audience went wild. The college boys started to chant „Granny, Granny, Granny“ and the rest of the audience joined the chant.

Not bad, not bad at all granny, you just might salvage the show.

As the noise abated Mahood asked if she had another question.

„Yeah how come you don't ask me who should play my part?”

„Okay Mrs. Abbott who should portray you?”

„Clint Eastwood.”

„Clint Eastwood? Why do you think Clint Eastwood should portray you?”

Gertrude look at Mahood with wonder.

„Miss Mahood you really have no idea why?”

„No I do not.”

„Have you seen pictures of him lately?”

„Yes I have.”

„Well Miss Mahood it's apparent that I want Clint Eastwood to portray me because he has fewer lines in his face.”

Damn she's good. I played straight man right into that setup.

„Granny, granny, granny”, the audience was on its feet going wild. The college boys had turned their t-shirts inside out and wrote „We love our Granny!” in big black letters.

The show added to the legend of Jihad Joy; however the movie producers were rethinking Misha's and Gertrude's roles in the film. Gertrude was looking good right now.

Chapter 25

Raven jumped into the backseat and Redbone sped out into the slow lane.

„Hey granddad long time no see and I see you brought Ben with you. Ben I remember you twisted your ankle walking to the helicopter when we finished doing the Agha cousins. Heal okay?”

„Hey Raven, you had us worried,” Ben replied. „If the local cops had caught you there would've been little choice but to go to trial and ask for mitigation of your sentence due to the circumstances. You would've done serious hard time but we got you in time. That freaking ankle still gives me trouble during cold weather but it's healed.”

Redbone looked at her in the mirror. The Kid had just out run the law, and seriously hurt the Agha family; nonetheless she sat and talked like a girl who just passed her college boards.

Damn we need her, she's a natural operative. What a waste if she chooses to go into hiding as a civilian again.

„Raven honey you're going to have to make a choice soon. That three finger hand limits your options. Hell it might be better for you if we chopped it off at least it might confuse your pursuers. We can make you a new identity and set you up in some foreign country such as South Africa, Australia and the like, but within a few years they might ferret you out again. If you're living in a foreign country the Aghas can reach you. In the United States they dare not. The four countries that were tied to your parents' attempted destruction have promised that the Agha Cartel would be eliminated to the last man, woman and child if they strike within the United States or our territory ever again and those countries mean it.”

„How are my Ma and Pa Crow?”

„We don't know Raven,” Ben answered. „To be honest we're not sure they're even alive, but no bodies have turned up. We think your parents shot the hell out of those hit men and then had a bolt hole where they found safety.”

„I know where they must be hiding. Dad would've contacted an old friend, someone he absolutely trusted but couldn't be linked to because of the amount of time that had elapsed since they had contacted each other. I know such a man.”

Ben looked at Redbone smiled and thought:

Damn she's good.

„So Grandpa what do you want your favorite granddaughter to do?”

Jesse had been concentrating on his driving and constantly eyeballing the surrounding area. At the present time he had his eye on a motorcycle that had been staying behind him. The rider and passenger both appeared to be male. He had bumped knees with Ben to alert him to a possible threat but at the next exit the bike got off and stayed off. Jesse looked to see if they could be under observation by someone running a tag team but it didn't appear likely.

„Ben I think we're in the clear. Have the Lear start getting prepped for takeoff. Baltimore airport isn't that far from here. Tell pilots to file flight plans to Oakland, I want Raven to set down with York and negotiate a contract of employment.”

„So that's it Jesse? You've made up your mind that I'm going to work for Outlier Ltd.?”

„No Kid I haven't. First of all I know no one will ever make you do anything. You just don't allow yourself to be pushed around. I want you to meet York. He got messed up bad in that last op.”

„Did he lose that leg? I remember you told me that he had a leg shattered by a bullet but we parted ways before a report came back. Then you ordered me never to contact you until it was necessary, so I know nothing of what happened to your Major York.”

Both Ben and Jesse went silent she could tell the memory of what ever did the damage to York hurt them badly but she needed to know because she'd already decided to join Outlier Ltd.. Living on the edge was addictive, it made her come alive and she felt nothing but satisfaction upon dispatching her foes. No guilt trips, no glee nothing but satisfaction of having succeeded at doing a job. A profession that involved killing and mayhem, however killing and mayhem provided the very edge she wanted to live upon.

Ben turned and told her the story of York's injuries.

„Raven as you know the op that saved you was a secondary one. If we had time to do it, we would do it. When the Major got it, we could have canceled that op and stayed with him. If we'd stayed with him, you would be dead now. You had nothing to do with our decision and yes knowing what we know now, as hard as it is to say, we would abandon York to save you.”

„But how did his wound turn out so badly,” she asked.

„York is paralyzed from the neck down. It may be permanent or he may recover. He was taken to an Afghan Army hospital because he needed blood and it was close by. While he was lying on the table one of our medics caught a Pakistani doctor who volunteered to work at the base injecting something into Alex's neck vertebra. Our medic blew the traitor away but the hypodermic needle got crushed and stepped on many times in the panic that ensued. Thus we had no way of testing what was injected and by the time Alex got to American doctors his body absorbed and hid the traces of whatever was injected.”

Well that's the life I'm about to opt to live. At least I doubt I'll die from boredom.

It seemed almost like Jesse was attuned to her thoughts as his eyes locked hers by means of the rear view mirror. He looked away but shook his head several times as if to clear his thinking.

„Kid we at Outlier Ltd. aren't all special ops. Outlier hires all kinds of technical people and those that speak the languages of the world. We're sometimes described as a giant peace corps private for profit company. We do more than kill people. Ninety percent of our work is for the good of humanity, some would argue so is the other ten percent. I want you to set down and talk to York and have the two of you decide what place in the Outlier family fits you best.”

Chapter 26

The Lear Jet made a smooth landing at Oakland International. As the plane pulled onto the tarmac used by business Jets to unload passengers, a black GMC sports utility vehicle appeared. Raven had used the time in the air to nap so felt refreshed and alert as she entered the SUV for the trip to Berkeley.

„Welcome to paradise Raven, the San Francisco Bay Area has some of the best weather in the country. Very seldom freezes when near the coast and the fog keeps the heat away in the summers,” Ben then added. „We get thunder storms and lightening maybe once every five years. Wonderful place to live.”

She looked out the windows while riding on Interstate 80 and liked what she saw. The hills on the far right were lush with greenery and homes that looked like they might topple at any moment. The homes nearby were a mixture of many styles. One style she knew of was called a Queen Anne Victorian and she spotted many. She also spotted signs of urban decay. Trash blowing in the wind and a few boarded up houses.

The GMC took the Broadway exit. The driver sensed that his new passenger was enjoying the sightseeing and opted for the city route instead of the quicker Freeway. Heading toward the hills she spotted a Chinatown on the right as soon

as they exited the freeway. At 14th and Broadway she knew she was in the city center. People were waiting for buses and the area just had the look of being very busy.

Eventually the driver made a left turn went a few blocks and turned right on San Pablo Avenue and the urban decay became apparent once more. Hookers were to be found every few blocks. Most were black girls but some were white or Hispanic.

Hmm no Asians. Maybe they work out of houses or massage parlors?

Raven's thoughts seemed confirmed when she saw a beautiful young Chinese appearing girl enter a massage studio carrying a small suitcase.

Probably showing up for work with a change of work clothing.

The SUV made a right turn and went several blocks and turned on College Avenue. Raven could make out the California College of Arts and Crafts directly on her right as they continued their turn. College age people milled around coming and going from various shops and cafes that catered to the university crowd.

Jesus what a fucking difference between this avenue and the other. No boarded up stores, no bars on windows, this is what San Pablo Avenue may have looked like years before the decay sat in.

Finally the driver turned into an entrance to a garage that had an office building built over it. He parked near an elevator and waited for his passengers to get out. Jesse and Ben walked to the elevator without comment, so Raven fell in behind. Once in the elevator Ben pushed the top floor button and they emerged into the recruiting center of Outlier Ltd.

She followed as they walked in, nodded to the secretary and entered York's office unannounced. Maybe unannounced but it was obvious York knew to the moment when they arrived. Raven saw a bank of monitors that showed camera angles of the elevator, entrance to the garage and other places she not yet familiar to her.

Impressive but I expected no less. Alex York is impressive also. Even though he's a Quad he looks dangerous.

„Raven Crow, so glad to finally meet you. Have a seat anywhere, as you can see I've no need for a desk so it would be useless to me and take up space. Let's talk in private as to what Outlier can offer you and what you have to offer Outlier.”

As if it were normal routine, Jesse went to the nearby bar to mix York a drink in a special cup that was designed specifically for handicap people with limited motion. Jesse returned to York and mounted the cup securely to the Velcro holder.

„Okay Kid, Ben and I are gone. We left an ongoing operation back in D.C and we need to be back there soonest.”

Ben strolled over and to her surprise bent to kiss her goodbye on the forehead then added his input.

Raven no matter what you finally decide you'll always be one of us. We'll always protect your back when needed. Choose wisely.”

After they had left, Alex York looked at their new prospect and began.

„Normally we haggle over what a potential employee is worth. You Raven have already proved your worth to Outlier Ltd. No matter how many times we deny the fact, your exploits have been attributed to our company. This isn't a bad thing. Your media persona of Jihad Joy is a gift that keeps on giving.

„If you choose to become part of special ops, we'll start you at the rate of our top contractors which is a basic rate followed by bonuses for operations that go well. Two thousand a week paid in a country that has a very low tax rate, thus you'll avoid United States taxes. Most likely you'll cease to live within the territory of the United States because we don't want some overzealous local police chief to have you arrested for crimes committed while in their jurisdiction.

We'll train you on explosives, also the rudiments of hand to hand combat. There's no need to be a black belt of some martial arts. Most of that fancy stuff never gets used when the crap comes down on you. Knowing a few quick overpowering moves will end the fight. Just as an example, what would you do if a car pulled up and a large man started to get out to assault you?"

She took a while to think the question through and could find no problem with the answer she was about to offer.

„One guy about to jump me. Odds are I'd lose a fight with a man one on one, so I either flee or use a weapon to put him down."

York looked at her a very long time.

„Is that the best you can do?"

„Yes," she answered but her confidence was shaken.

„Not good." York replied. „But it's the answer ninety-nine percent of the people interviewed have given. Unless you were a gang member or street fighter you wouldn't be expected to know the proper way to dispose of the threat."

„Which is?" She inquired.

„The driver has momentum. His momentum needs to be interrupted and then stopped without drawing a weapon. No time for you to draw that weapon, he's coming for you. He's providing you with a weapon, what is it?"

Momentum, he keeps stressing the momentum.

„Okay guy is out of the car and he's rushing at me, I sidestep him and take him down right?"

„Wrong you most likely would end up dead. His car door is the weapon. When he opens the door as soon as he plants his left foot on the ground and shifts his body weight to that leg, you kick the door shut with as much force as you can muster. Aim your kick at just below the door handle.

„The door should break his leg, but kick it again for good measure, then open the door while the shock of the pain is still fresh, pull him from the car and kill him by stomping the back or front of his neck."

Goddamn, I could do that, in fact I not only could do that, I'd enjoy it.

„When do I start Alex, when and where do I start?"

„You already have Raven. You're drawing a two thousand a week salary with health benefits starting when you first called me for help. You'll be sent to a farm outside of the small city of Courtland which is on the delta of the Sacramento River. There you'll receive training. I want you to really excel in the making of

electronic bombs. Garage door openers, cell phones, tablets and computers are an excellent means of taking a target out. Now is there anything you require?"

Raven thought for a moment.

„Could you shoot a video of me as Jihad Joy? I mean dressed in a burqa with my Star of David about my neck?"

„Sure, but what for?" Raven told him and he laughed.

Jesus Christ she's the gift that keeps on giving and giving.

* * * * *

Raven was entranced by the Sacramento delta. When she had spare time she would ride about the area on one of the many bikes that were at the training center. She loved the old Chinese town of Locke and was awed by the stories of the Chinese immigrants who had built the delta's systems of dikes over a century before. Those dikes appeared to be at least twenty to twenty-five feet high and held the river from flooding the islands.

What the locals referred to as islands was land that existed as dry livable land simply because the water was kept from entering. That land was also in the process of sinking ever deeper thus raising the danger that a break in the dikes would flood the area with even more water.

Once in a while she would spy the critter most responsible for the dikes being breached by the Sacramento during a heavy storm. Muskrats, the little rodent that looked similar to a beaver, would burrow into the dikes to eat the root of the trees growing atop the massive structures. Water would follow the muskrat and eventually water might be seen seeping from the side of the dike opposite the river. During a wind driven rain storm this small seepage could result in a disastrous break and people would flee for their lives.

Sirens like air raid sirens of old would warn the residents to evacuate. Police cars would race back and forth on the dikes sirens blaring, lights flashing and the amplified voice urging people to get to high ground. The dikes were solid but the muskrats plentiful. The Sacramento delta was in danger of being overwhelmed and if it ever happened on a large scale, California would severely suffer from the loss of that much farm land and crop revenue.

The dikes could also collapse in the event of a major earthquake occurring under the area that they covered. It was a scary thought. However, Raven had no plans to buy a house that could be underwater the next day if a disaster occurred but Courtland seemed to be built on higher ground.

The summer days were hot, but not muggy. Humidity was practically non-existent.

Back in New Jersey if it's ninety degrees it'll be the same in your home or even hotter. Here you can walk into the shade of a tree or your home and cool off. Ah there's the pear farm up ahead, I know it's against the law to pick fruit uninvited but I just need one pear.

Just as she was slowing down the farmer looked up from working below the dike. He obviously knew what she intended or maybe he had seen her do it before. He look like a man in his later years and was obviously of Chinese decent.

„Go ahead Miss pick one or two. I know you're staying somewhere on the delta. I don't mind you having a few from time to time. It's the damn outsiders who drive up here in their fancy sport cars and try to steal a bushel. Hell their cars cost more than I clear in two years of farming.”

Raven smiled down at him and asked his name.

„Wong, George Wong. You may mistake me for my identical twin, Washington Wong. So if you see either of us just call us George Washington. That's how most people handle it. We were born in Locke on George Washington day. Mother had a difficult time birthing us, so a white doctor was called. After he delivered us he filled out our birth certificates. Mom spoke no English and he no Chinese but he knew her last name was Wong, so it being George Washington's birthday he named us after him. True story, ask anyone.”

„Thank you Mr. Wong. Thank you for the pears and your lovely story. Oh my name is Lisa. Goodbye hope to see you or your brother again.

„Goodbye Lisa, I'll tell him about you. Please feel free to pick a juicy pear anytime when passing by.”

Chapter 27

„Cora, Corky come here quick.”

The Crows entered into the living room where Bobby was sitting in his recliner watching his favorite show, the news. Bobby was a news junkie. When the regular news was off the air he turned to the talking heads of MSNBC, CNN and if really desperate Fox News. Tonight it was the local area Philadelphia station.

„What's up Bobby? Corky asked. „Is it something to do with Raven?”

„Sure as hell is,” Bobby replied. „The script going across the bottom of the screen states that the person known as Jihad Joy is about to release a statement via video recording. It's supposed to air in less than a minute according to my calculations.”

Corky and Cora set back and awaited their first sight of their daughter in many years. Both were excited but also heartbroken that their Raven had left and ignored them after a few years at Princeton. *She was unhappy with what she was; I wonder if she's happy with what she has become?* Her father wondered.

Then the news cast faded replace with a burqa clad figure with a Star of David about her neck. The figure held up her left hand to show her ring finger was missing.

„Hello my fellow citizens I'm Raven Crow also known as Anisa Abadi. The press also has taken to referring to me as Jihad Joy, which I accept proudly, as I'm on a Jihad to wipe the Agha Cartel family from this Earth.

„I've no problems with the foot soldiers of this cartel it's the upper management level that targeted me for death. At this time I wish to clear up a misconception. No one seems to know who exactly killed those four assassins at my parent's farm. I know the who and the why. The who was I and the why those bastards were sent to kill me.

„They had tracked me to the farm. Luckily my parents had just left for vacation, a fact supported by their neighbor Tom Bates' testimony. I was at my parents' home when I saw the vehicle pass by on the state highway. I was suspicious, grabbed two of my parent's firearms and waited for them to make their move. They made their move and I blew their asses away. That's all, thank you. This is Jihad Joy signing off.”

Bobby and her parents set speechless staring at the now continued regular news and their talking assessment of what had been said by Jihad Joy. Finally Corky looked over at and then hugged his wife.

„Looks like we can go home sweets it looks like we can return home.”

* * * * *

The next morning the Jeep was reloaded, dogs were put inside the cargo area and Corky and Cora turned to say their goodbyes. Bobby was about to tear up, but before he could Cora gave him a big kiss on the cheek. Corky reached into the Jeep and brought out one of the new shotguns and a box of shells and handed them to him.

„What's that for?” Bobby asked.

„Just in case some of these local street punks forget that you're a mean ass mother fucker and you need to reassert the fact Bro!”

Bobby choked with laughter.

„Hey I'm going to miss you both. Stop by anytime.”

„Bobby anytime you want to come down to the farm do so. We can always use the company.”

* * * * *

The ride from Camden down highway 55 was uneventful. It only took forty-five minutes but just outside of the city limits Sheriff Brewster pulled out in front of their Jeep with his lights flashing and siren screaming. As they crept along at the twenty-five mile per hour speed limit; Cora wondered if they would ever get home.

What in the hell does Brewster think he's doing?

As the cars started to line up behind their Jeep it was apparent the town was welcoming them back home. As they turned into their driveway they met cars coming from the other direction. The news had spread via cell phone and the internet that the Crows were coming home. Corky looked at his wife with tears in his eyes.

„Jesus Christ Cora they're welcoming us back home. That State Trooper we passed parked on the side of the highway must have called our passing into the sheriff's office. Isn't this something?”

Pulling up behind their house, Cora expressed surprise that all the damages looked repaired. The yard had been kept clean and their extensive lawn recently mowed.

Oh my, she thought. We must owe a few bucks for the upkeep and repair. Christ the house has a new coat of paint and those windows are much better than the ones that got shot out.

Corky started thinking the same thing as shaking all the hands led him around his entire home. Then he spied Tom Bates.

„Tom, Tom come over here. Jesus Tom what do I owe you for all the work you done around here?”

„Nothing, I didn’t do it. All I did was mow the lawn and keep the yard clean.”

Sheriff Brewster tapped him on the shoulder and pointed out a group of folks standing off to the side. Corky recognized them as the town’s supplier of windows, building supply and local carpenters, sheet rock hangers and house painters.

„Corky these people supplied the material and did the work for you and Cora. They don’t want to be paid or thanked they’re just glad that you’re both safe and home again.”

Corky and Cora both broke down and cried.

Chapter 28

She had been on the farm at Courtland for a month. It had been said that she was a quick learner or that she was a born natural but the truth was more simple, she loved the training. Loved making the bombs and running simulated ops in nearby Sacramento.

Jesse came to visit one day.

„Washington op still ongoing or has it reached a conclusion?” She asked.

Jesse looked a bit uncomfortable; she got the feeling he was thinking of how to spin his answer. As usual her intuition was spot on.

„Well Kid it’s a bit complicated. It’s ongoing but currently suspended.”

„Why suspended?”

„Because of you.”

„Me? What the fuck do I have to do with an operation I know nothing about?”

„You will eventually. Jihad Joy is our best chance at closing that op and that’s all I can say right now. Anyway you about ready for you first official kill?”

„Absolutely but I’d like to try something first before getting out there with the real bad guys,” she said with a smile.

Jesse rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders he knew that he was about to hear something outrageous.

„Okay Kid let’s hear it and make it good.”

„I want to make up four cell phone bombs to take out the punks that keep stealing them. I’d like to set one off in Richmond, Oakland, San Jose, and San Francisco.”

„What have you got against the punks in this area?”

Raven laughed. „I’ve nothing personally against them, they’re just expendable. No one will care about them; in fact I’ll be a hero for most folks tired of being ripped off by sixteen year old gangstas. Besides it’s good practice. Naturally we’ll release another tape of me as Jihad Joy.”

Jesus Christ York was correct. My little granddaughter is a gift that keeps on giving.

* * * * *

Raven refused any help, assembling the smart phone bombs herself, and packing four different sweaters; four different hats and four different pair of sunglasses for the operation. She wore a long dress that she could easily slip out of but had denim jeans on underneath. She was prepared to change her appearance as needed.

A cab took her Sacramento and a bus to Oakland where she purchased a Bay Area Rapid Transit ticket that would exceed the amount she needed to ride BART to where she planned to have her phones stolen. She entered the system at 13th and Broadway downtown Oakland where she caught the train to Richmond. She got off the train, strolled casually about while looking at her phone, acting like a young woman who was awaiting a ride home.

Within minutes a BMW pulled to the curb. A young black thug grabbed her phone and then jumped back into the BMW. The car took off fast but never cleared the parking lot before a brilliant flash was seen from within the driver compartment followed by the sound of a blast. Raven smiled and caught the very next train that was leaving for San Francisco; 22nd and Mission was to be her next stop. While traveling through the tube that ran under the bay, she used the diminished lighting to her advantage by changing outfits and thus her appearance.

Well here is my stop, 22nd and Mission. Let's see if the Hispanic kids jump at the bait quicker.

They did. Two ran up to her and grabbed the phone before she climbed one stair to get to the street above. The young thugs ran laughing down Mission Street until the stolen phone blew the side of one kid's face off when he went to dial his homies and brag about the theft.

Two down, two to go. Damn this is too easy. Well 13th and Broadway, downtown Oakland you're up next. Get ready for Jihad Joy.

While in the tube under the bay she once again changed her appearance. After exiting the train she climbed the stairs to Broadway and across the street was a Burger King. She ordered a whopper and took it to sit at a window seat. Everyone passing by could see that she had an expensive smart phone. Knowing her sunglasses hid her eyes, she kept the three young gangsta looking black men within her field of vision. Once she had finished her burger and started toward the door the young men looked about to see if the cops were around. Ten feet from the door one of the men flashed a gun in his waistband. Acting terrified she calmly handed it over, while they just as calmly walked down Broadway to 12th street. The calm was shattered by a blast that blinded two of the men and blew the hand off of the thug showing the phone to them. She walked quickly to the parked taxi cabs opposite of Burger King on 13th street and asked a cab driver to be taken to San Jose. The cabbie had been listening to loud rap music so he was unaware of the bombing until returning to Oakland after a ninety mile round trip.

It took about an hour for the first three bombings and another hour for the ride to San Jose State University so the news that a bomber was loose in the Bay Area had not yet reached the mass public. Raven had no idea of the bad parts of San Jose but she had reasoned that students with cell phones and laptops had to be a prime target. It took a while longer but eventually a car with two Asian teens

dressed in the thug style pulled their car over to rob her by knife point. The car got three blocks away before the bomb exploded.

Raven went to a cabbie and asked to be driven to Emeryville's Amtrak station; Emeryville was once a part of Oakland but later became a separate city. She caught the Amtrak train to Sacramento and then a cab to Courtland.

Damn what a fucking rush. I wonder what the body count will be.

Chapter 29

Whitestone watched the news in astonishment. Two men killed while driving a stolen BMW by a cell phone rigged to blow up. The blast was confined within the car because the men had the windows up according to the Richmond bomb squad.

Within a half-hour a thug died instantly as the right side of his face and brain blew with the wind down Mission Street. The San Francisco bomb squad stated that the victim had just stolen a cell phone from a young woman who was about to exit the underground BART station.

A surveillance camera then showed a young woman entering a Burger King restaurant at 13th and Broadway. Upon exiting it appeared that three men robbed her of her cell phone. Two were blinded and one lost his hand. The surveillance footage captured the woman's image catching a nearby cab.

How ironic, 13th and Broadway is near the Federal buildings. I wonder if she's sending a message to my former employer.

After the third bombing a Bay Area alert went out to all the police departments but it came too late for San Jose. Two teenage thugs had their throats damaged by exploding cell phone parts then bled to death before EMTs could reach them.

Authorities had footage of all the crimes except San Jose. It was readily apparent to all that the same young woman had done the three bombings and that she was missing her left hand ring finger.

Jesus Christ, Jihad Joy has become a domestic terrorist. How the fuck will the Federal Bureau of Investigation overlook these acts of domestic violence?

* * * * *

At that very moment a four-way secured conference call was trying to decide that issue. The National Security Agency, Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Central Intelligence Agency had discussed the subject for an hour, until finally the National Security Agency agent had enough.

„We all think that Raven Crow is being protected by rogue elements of Outlier Ltd. Outlier should be made aware of our suspicions and told that if we stumble upon her in the next few days she's gone—disappeared. If she's with some elements of Outlier special ops it would behoove them to quickly move her out of the country. We can't allow anymore incidents to occur. We need to put a lid on this quickly and let the public's fascination with this woman die.”

The National Security Agency man listened to a message with his ear bud and looked up at a huge monitor on his wall.

„If you haven't received the same message I just got, Jihad Joy has announced a new video that will be shown on all local channels within five minutes.”

* * * * *

Five minutes later the local news anchor interrupted the current programing.

„This just in. Jihad Joy has released a new video message in which she admits to four acts of domestic terrorism and promises more such acts will take place.”

The news woman was replaced with the stark figure of a woman in black burqa and a Star of David about her neck.

„Greetings once again from the woman you all have chosen to call Jihad Joy. Yesterday I completed a set of operations designed to instill fear within the gangsta thugs of our inner cities. The operations were highly successful. I killed five and maimed three others. This is but the beginning. I'll be leaving the Bay Area to operate about the country to bring death or severe injury to those that steal cell phones or computers. Be afraid punks be very afraid.”

As the screen returned to the regular newscast there could be heard a „oh shit” on the conference line.

* * * * *

Alex York called Jesse Redbone and asked him to visit the office. Redbone took the call but already knew what his friend intended to discuss. Raven's little sideshow hadn't been shown to York or the others in the management section of special ops for their approval. Redbone had known the risks of what he had approved but felt the results were well worth the possible repercussions.

As he entered the outside office he was amused when Carol the secretary made a hanging motion with her right hand, and hung her head sideways with her tongue sticking out.

„Ah Carol, it can't be that bad.”

It wasn't. York and Redbone had been through so many firefights the boss and employee relationship never had a chance to plant roots.

„What the fuck were you thinking Jesse? And while you're up mix me another drink.”

„Will do Alex, Will do.” As he stirred the mix drink Redbone contemplated his answer. Then he walked over and attached the drink to York's mobile chair.

„Well, it must have been something good in order to risk having the Feds jump down our throat at this critical time.”

„Yeah York I figured the Feds would go nuts, but so fucking what. As to our suspended on-going Washington op we know that Raven is the key. Our people in Washington have no idea she's even working for us but they suspect she's under our protection. I needed to see her do a planned operation. Raven did it all with no help from us other than supplies. The supplies consisted of confiscated smart phones from drug dealers and explosives that can't be traced. The girl has a huge natural talent and I believe it's time to send her down to Mexico City to eliminate that little rat in the pantry.”

„I agree with everything you just said. Let's start planning the Mexico City op.”

Chapter 30

Misha Zarankin watched her love declare war on the thugs of America's inner cities. After the debacle of the *Life On Your Side* the movie offers had dwindled. The producers felt that the subject matter was too taboo for the American public.

A few days after Raven's latest broadcast as Jihad Joy her agent called.

„Misha baby don't talk to anyone or sign a damn thing without my approval. Baby you're hot once more. Offers are pouring in for adult movie deals; however the talk shows want you only if they prerecord you. Baby you and I are about to make some serious money.”

Serious money, serious money, any money would be serious right now. I lost my job with Frontier for mentioning their name in interviews so Im flat fucking broke.

As if he could read her mind, the agent added. „Look baby doll, I know it has been a tough month or so but I appreciate you staying with me as a client. Send me your current bills and I'll pay them. I'll even advance you a thousand dollars a week against monies to be earned in the future. Okay sweetie?”

Shit last week the little rat bastard wouldn't return my phone calls. I bet I can find more agents that would represent me plus offer me a better deal.

„Fuck you Rudy. Take your lousy thousand a week and wipe your fat ass with it.”

* * * * *

The widow Abbott wasn't concerned by the loss of revenue from the promised film rights; her role had never commanded a large amount of money. She was currently earning more than what was offered by renting out Raven's old room at a hundred dollar a day rate, and booked two months in advance.

The recent appearance of Jihad Joy caused her mailmen to deliver her mail in sacks instead of the normal thirty to forty letters she had received daily after life on your side aired.

Damn this girl has been a gold mine for my retirement years.

Gertrude pushed the remote to her new sixty-two inch flat screen television and prepared to watch the evening newscast.

Ah modern technology, the spice of life. The idiots run about bemoaning the loss of the „good old days“. Bullshit there were no good old days. Microwaves, personal computers and cell phones didn't exist. Cars needed engine rebuilds at 125,000 miles. No way. Today beats out any day of the past.

The newscaster was reporting a new poll taken to tract the public's concern about Jihad Joy.

„This poll found that Jihad Joy is more popular than our current president. That her Republican Party member approval rate is at ninety percent and the Democratic Party member approval stands at eighty-four percent.”

Mrs. Abbott smiled.

Chapter 31

Two months after joining Outlier Ltd. Raven sat on the bed of a cheap hotel room located on the outskirts of Mexico City eyeballing her Outlier Ltd. handler.

Oh shit this guy must be queer. He has never once given my cleavage a second look.

She looked up at the handsome man before her. Boris had obviously benefited from Viking rule of historic Russia.

Boris, you would've made the Nazi's proud. Blonde hair, blue eyes and the palest skin I've ever laid my peepers upon. What a specimen.

As she gazed at Boris, her mind was taking in the detail of her newest assignment. Boris interrupted her thoughts.

„Raven Crow are you clear on your orders? Do you have any questions before you proceed?”

„Why him? What's so important about this low level Central Intelligence Agency employee?”

„Raven, I don't know. Like you I do what my superiors tell me to do. I can tell you this, I'm a little uneasy about this assignment. Why did they separate you from your original handler? Why me? I have very little experience in Latin American operations. My expertise is Eastern Europe. Something is not right, so be careful Raven Crow, be very careful. Any other questions?”

„Are you queer?”

Boris had been in the process of taking a sip of apple juice when Raven asked her question. The question so surprised him that he promptly spit out the juice during a fit of laughter. Finally he regained control.

„Damn Raven, I hope I can be your handler on another assignment. I know we would have a good relationship. Your demeanor is so blunt and honest. No I am not queer. I am married to a lovely woman who has no idea what her husband and father of her three children is doing for a living. She thinks I am in charge of importing needed grain from other countries for Outlier. If she ever found out I am a mercenary it would break her heart. You are a very seductive woman but I have taken a vow to stay true to the one I married. That is why I have not propositioned you. I won't engage in that kind of improper behavior.”

Raven smiled. One side of her wanted to try to seduce her earnest new handler, but the woman in her rebelled at the thought of corrupting such a faithful husband just to satisfy a whim. Raven stood to leave and begin her new assignment.

* * * * *

Lenny Woodward couldn't believe it when the sultry Latina beauty sat beside him in his hotel bar.

„Buy me drink, Mister?”

Lenny knew she had to be a hooker; way too expensive for his pockets. Even with the extra money coming in he wouldn't be able to afford this beauty. However it was worth the price of a few drinks to be seen with her. After buying two rounds of drinks, introducing themselves and setting quietly she finally turned to him.

„Lenny boy, you no like what you see? Maria please you very much so. You wait; I makes you a happy Lenny boy.”

„Maria, you're very beautiful, I can't afford you.”

„Forty dollar? You can no afford forty dollar? I am sorry to bother you. Thank you for drink.”

As she turned on her bar stool and stood to leave, Lenny grabbed her upper right arm to stop her.

„On my, Lenny boy change mind? You like rough stuff? Rough stuff twelve dollar more. You whip my ass good and Maria scream loud. Turn Lenny boy on.”

Lenny threw a five-dollar tip on the bar, grabbed Maria by the hand and led his killer to his room. As Raven stripped to her bra and panties, Lenny took a quick pee in his bathroom but never took his eyes off the beauty perched upon his bed.

Christ even if I get a bad case of the clap, this bitch will surely be worth it. God what a fucking body.

As he padded back into the bedroom naked, with his erection swinging to and fro; Raven looked at the equipment on the young man and was shocked.

„Oh Senor I may have to charge you double for huge thing. Maybe do you free for enjoyment. You big surprise Maria. I get you off fast, then hard again. You can do more than once? I want long time with long dick!”

„Oh shit Maria that would be incredible. Damn, I need to get you a fake passport and take you home with me.”

„You do that, I do you every night. I love go USA. I no Mexican. I from Honduras. Mexican police find me; they send home but rape and beat Maria first. I be good to Lenny boy. I do all he want. Make Lenny boy happy. Very happy.”

„Mama baby, I can get you any passport you want. Tell me country you want passport from? I know you'll prefer USA but it may be better to have a Mexican Passport. Less suspicion. You want to live with me? Hell I know guys that will pay two hundred dollars for sex with you. Two hundred dollars baby. Think about it.”

„I no think. I like already. We do. Lay down. Maria get you ready. More you want?”

Lenny just sighed, laid back and prepared to enjoy himself.

However Raven decided to put Lenny boy away and complete her assignment.

Jesus. I'm about to do a disservice to the women of this world by killing this guy. Damn, he should have been a porn star. Looks like a nerd, not a jock, but god he's hung! I hope he has kids somewhere; it would be a shame to put lights out on this guy's DNA. I've seen a lot of cock but never this big. After I do him, I should cut it off, have it stuffed and sent to the Smithsonian. Lenny you're a freak of nature.

She reached into her purse and pulled out the small silenced .380 automatic pistol.

„Lenny you asshole I'm an Outlier assassin. Night, night baby.” His body was still quivering from two slugs to the head when the door was kicked in and three operatives entered the room with their Mac10s at the ready. She knew better then

to try and resist, she didn't doubt that the killers would unload their thirty round .45 caliber magazines into her body if given the chance. After a few tense moments, a man entered.

„Raven Crow it's my pleasure to meet you, finally. You've pissed me off one too many times, now I'm about to take you out of the Game.”

She quickly ran the options. All top operatives were given some low level information that they could give up to buy time. Information that might result in disrupting ops but the suspended ops were of no importance if it bought Raven time. However the man just smiled, because he also knew the Game.

„No my dear girl, I don't care about any information that you might have. You'll beg to give it to me later of course, once the Agha family start on you. No need to get dressed Raven, I'm sure the Aghas will appreciate not having to rip your clothes off before they rape you. You see darling girl, I've just traded your sweet ass to them for their help in completing a difficult assassination. The surviving Aghas especially Afshan Agha are about to get what they desire most—you.”

„Just who the fuck are you?” Raven asked genuinely interested.

„You've no idea of who I am? Incredible. All this time I thought you were a major player although I now see you as a pawn, as a pawn to sacrifice and that worries me. You see Lenny here was a pawn. I knew he was supplying genuine passports to the Agha Cartel. I knew because they told me. I used Lenny as bait to draw you in for the kill. The Central Intelligence Agency paid Outlier for an assassin and we requested you, however I now wonder if I've walked into an elaborate snare.”

„That's a nice speech asshole but who are you?”

Suddenly sections of both side walls dropped inward and the three men with the Mac10s were cut down by silenced machine pistols.

The man who had captured her now appeared to be scared for his life. He held his hands straight up in the air and screamed:

„I'm Cecil Hayward an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. Please don't shoot I'm surrendering.”

Jesse and Ben walked across the fallen side walls to face Hayward. Jesse gave him a backhand across the face which propelled him into the waiting arms of four Mexican police who were on the raid.

„I know who you are you little weasel. I've been tracking a mole for the State Department for weeks and it turns out to be you.”

Raven look about at the collapsed side walls.

„How did you manage all this?”

One of the policemen handed her clothing and explained.

„Very simple senorita we told everyone on this floor we needed to do plumbing work. Mr. Lenny was given a temporary room for a day. We altered two walls enough for a large section to push out and down so we could fire. The walls are lightweight but look sturdy from inside his room.”

Chapter 32

Whitestone had heard rumors that the Naval Criminal Investigative Service had ordered agent Perkins not to spend any more time on the Jihad Joy case. Although NCIS had every right to pull an agent from a case that didn't fall within their jurisdictional guidelines, speculation persisted that Perkins was sidelined because of pressure from the Department of State. Forty years in law enforcement had honed Whitestone's sense of curiosity. He wanted, no needed to know, why State was so involved.

Well I met Perkins several times when jurisdiction overlapped on cases I was assigned, I'm sure he'll remember me. I must have his number somewhere.

He found the number and made the call.

„NCIS special agent Perkins, how may I be of service?“

„Perkins former Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Whitestone here and I'd like to get together with you and talk about some former old cases that have grown cold, very cold.“

„Ah the agent that got his ass kicked out of the plane at 30,000 feet but was given a golden parachute of two pay rate increases to soften the landing. Hell yes, coffee where?“

The two agreed that it would be smart to meet somewhere away from all the coffee shops where Washington's federal agents frequented. A little mom and pop cafe that served only coffee and donuts, located outside of the beltway was to be the meeting locale.

Whitestone drove to the meeting with his windows up and the air conditioner on full blast. It was another hot, muggy, miserable day in the Washington area but unusual for late October.

Got to be global warming. Damn I hate this fucking heat. No not the heat, my old bones would probably love Palm Springs, California. It's the humidity. Maybe I can talk sense to Norma about selling our house and getting the hell out of here. San Diego would be nice but she would bitch about being three thousand miles away from the grand kids. Shit.

As he pulled up in front of the coffee shop he could tell that he was the first to arrive. The cafe had half dozen customers but none were Perkins. He entered the shop and waited for the cute young thing behind the counter to take his order.

„What would you like sir?“

He smiled and thought about the question.

About three hours in bed with you at a local motel.

„Hmm I need a couple of plain old fashion donuts with a large black coffee.“

Whitestone watched her walk to the coffee urn and draw his coffee; she had to reach up to a cupboard to get a fresh supply of napkins. Stretching on her toes, tightened her dress and made her legs look outstanding.

Down boy down, she's young enough to be your granddaughter. Damn what a body.

Just as she returned with his order, Perkins walked into the cafe. Whitestone smiled, he just couldn't resist.

„Give this guy anything he wants and put it on my bill. He's one of Washington's unfortunate citizens that happens to be unemployed and homeless.“

The girl placed his order on the counter but looked totally confused.

Damn she doesn't know a jibe when she hears one. Beautiful body but dense mind. Even better for my three-hour motel fantasy.

„That's okay Miss, he really isn't homeless, I was just making a joke. Hey Perkins what do you want.”

Perkins looked at Whitestone then back to the cute girl.

A case of beer Whitestone. A case of beer and a weekend at my fishing cabin with that little lady.

„A large coffee with a heavy dose of cream. No sugar but I'll have a plain twist. That one right there will do.”

As the girl turned to walk to the coffee urn both older agents watched her move, then turned shook their heads and smiled at each other.

„Oh to be young again,” Perkins stated.

They carried their trays to a table far enough away from other customers to ensure that they were not overheard. They sat slowly sipping their coffees and nibbling at their pastry until Perkins finally broke the silence.

„So what cold cases are we going to mull over today?”

„Okay Perkins, I won't bullshit you I'm just curious about the Jihad Joy case and the apparent cover up of atrocities in Afghanistan.”

„Why, what the hell do you care about a bunch of ragheads getting slaughtered in Afghanistan?”

„Well I've actually thought about putting in a resume with Outlier Ltd.”

Perkins paused for a moment and then looked intently at Whitestone.

„That's a bad idea, Whitestone. Not only a bad idea but possibly a fatal one.”

Perkins response startled Whitestone. He had considered that he could be seen as a threat to Outlier, but a threat that would be eliminated by killing, that was entirely inconceivable.

„I can't believe that an organization like Outlier would perceive me as a threat to their organization. How could I be a threat?”

„Jesus Whitestone for a former Federal Bureau of Investigation agent you sure are naive. First there would always be a nagging suspicion about your goals. Are you a mole sent by the FBI, or do you want to expose Outlier and bring discredit to the Federal Bureau of Investigation? That's just the tip of the iceberg. What would you do if you came face to face with Raven Crow at an Outlier meeting? Would you make a citizen's arrest? I know that sounds stupid but doubts like these could get you killed if you made a honest mistake that increased their suspicion of you. All of this means nothing because they wouldn't hire you under any circumstance. Please stay away from that organization.”

Whitestone set silently for a moment and absorbed the heartfelt advice. He certainly did not need to jeopardize his life over a bit of curiosity.

„Perkins I promise that when we leave this cafe I'll no longer pursue any angles on this subject. To be honest, you've just scared the living shit out of me, however before we leave I want to share what caused me to contact you.”

He related the story about Raven Crow stealing the car and then being picked up by a federal agency vehicle. Perkins decided to feed him a little information to satisfy Whitestone's curiosity.

„Okay once we walkout everything discussed here is forgotten and never happened. Jesse Redbone is currently driving a Department of State car and has been flashing identification as a special consultant to the U.S. State Department. So there's a strong possibility that Redbone either rescued Raven Crow or killed her to keep her from embarrassing Outlier Ltd.”

Whitestone now knew for a certainty that he wanted to forget about Outlier but he had to know one more thing.

„Perkins one more thing. Why? Why does State hire outfits like Outlier?”

„Special ops can only do so much Whitestone. The SEALs and Delta Force don't want to get accused of atrocities, thus the need to farm out special projects. Private enterprise gives the countries employing Outlier plausible denial, especially when the contractors are recruited from many different countries.

„The small wars are being fought by private contractors. Once the U.S. Army has stabilized an area, private contractors move in to keep the government in power stable. Go home and forget about everything that took place here, except for that lovely girl. Go home and stay alive.”

A visibly shaken Whitestone rose to his feet and shook Perkins hand.

„Thanks Perkins, thank you very much.”

On the way out the door, he stopped and slipped the girl a ten dollar tip, later Perkins did the same.

The girl was pleased and surprised.

„Why so much, I don't understand?”

Perkins laughed, smiled and replied:

„You will sweetie, you will. About forty years from now.”

When he was sure that Whitestone was a few miles away from the lot, he called a number.

„Alex York here.”

„It's Perkins.”

„Well Perkins?”

„Done and over, I scared the living shit out of him.”

„Good job Perkins. Put in your NCIS request for retirement. Welcome aboard Outlier Ltd. Your Outlier Ltd. salary started yesterday.”

Chapter 33

Cecil Haywood had been transported to a concrete structure out in the countryside away from Mexico City. Blood stains and pieces of indeterminate organic tissue lay strewn about the bare interrogation room.

Upon entering the room Hayward began to quake.

„Don't do this please, I'll tell you everything. All my contacts everything. No need to torture me, no need.”

„But there is a need. I want the pleasure of cutting you into pieces of meat like those dried and left on this floor. This is what you planned for me but now I get to

do you.” Raven stated as she glared at him. „Throw him on the table face down, but you’ll need to turn him over later so I can cut his dick off.”

Cecil was body slammed face down upon the heavy plank table and hands and feet secured by thick leather straps that showed signs of constant use. He instantly voided his bowels and bladder. Raven didn’t stop. She was clad in a throwaway rubberized suit complete with face shield and rubber gloves. She began to cut his clothes off with a heavy pair of shears, while at it she took the tips of each of his little fingers off. Hayward screamed and then fainted.

May as well give him a taste of what’s coming.

After the clothing was completely cut though she exposed the back of his body. Grabbing a hose that usually washed blood down the drain she sprayed the feces and urine off the table and into the drain. The shock of the cold water hitting his body brought Hayward back to consciousness. Most of the smell left the room with the water, except for the smell of fear.

„Jose I need a bottle of hot sauce from the kitchen,” she yelled.

„Si, si senorita.”

While awaiting the hot sauce Raven used her ceramic blade to cut two huge x marks on Hayward’s ass. One on each cheek. When the hot sauce arrived she spread it liberally upon the open wounds. Cecil began moving up and down on the table while yelling in pain. Jesse took that moment to enter the room and sized up the situation.

Damn that girl got moves! Not bad for the first time and she’s definitely enjoying it.

„Hey Kid take a break. He’ll last a week or better if you slow it down some.”

As Raven left the room. Jesse bent down and looked hard at Cecil’s eyes and laughed.

„Boy you’re scared shitless—literally. I don’t blame you, that girl is a born sadist. She told us what she planned to do with your dick but I’m not supposed to tell you. However, I could offer you a deal that would allow you to walk out of here alive and stay alive if you agree to my terms.”

„Yeah, yeah I give you anything, anything at all.”

„Cecil, you’ve already told us that before she started on you. See the problem is I think you might perceive this as ›good cop bad cop‹. But it’s really ›bad cop sadistic cop‹ and I want to make sure you realize this isn’t a ruse. If you agree to do as we say, you’ll be taken to a hospital to live but you’ll live under our control the rest of your miserable life. If you cross us, that sadistic little girl will keep you alive for weeks cutting you bit by bit by bit. Enough of this bullshit. Jose tell Raven to get back in here and bring the cutting torch.”

Cecil screamed and screamed louder a few minutes later when Raven rolled a welders cutting torch into the room, lit it and went to work.

* * * * *

A few weeks after her mutilation and the death of her son, the widow Agha returned home to her country wearing a burqa. No longer did she wish to have men gaze upon her, nor did she want to be pitied. Contrary to expectations no discipline had been dealt out to her security team, nevertheless they all thought

each day would become their last. Her fascination of giving fellatio continued but she was covered with a burqa while performing her favorite sex act.

Later she began to plan, to plan for an operation to take place against Raven's parents, by using local talent.

Shakar however did not want to risk the ultimatum that was previously given to them. He did not doubt that the countries involved would make good on their threat to eliminate all the cartel members and their extended families. Afshan Agha needed to be removed but Shakar could not risk his position by assassination from within. He contacted a friend in the Saudi intelligence who contacted the others. It was decided that the matron of the cartel should be eliminated and Shakar to be allowed a free rein to establish control once she was gone. The hit upon Afshan Agha was contracted out to Outlier Ltd. but it was too late to stop the order to kill the Crow family.

* * * * *

Abdul Al Hussein was born Roscoe Adams but received his new Muslim name while incarcerated at Attica State Prison. Hussein would often brag that although he had a graduate degree from New York State University, his real education came while at Attica. He was the current emir of the Newark Islamists.

„My brothers I bring you great news. Allah has blessed us. We've received one-hundred thousand dollars and weapons to cleanse this earth of the parents of Raven Crow, the one who has dishonored all Muslims by wearing a burqa with a Star of David. This stain of dishonor shall be removed by our brotherhood shedding the parents' blood.

„We've been given six AK47s that fire full automatic, that are equipped with the hundred round magazines, and two rocket propelled grenade launchers with a dozen grenades. Our benefactors have two black SUVs currently rented for us that we'll use to travel south to the small town where the infidels live.

„I'm confident of our ability to slaughter the Crows then evade capture. The farmhouse is well within the effective range of the two RPG-7 rocket launchers we now have at our disposal. The operation is simple; we drive there then stop on the state highway. Two of us get out of the SUVs and fire two grenades each as our fellow Jihadists, speed toward the house to mop up any survivors. We then drive toward Atlantic City, and return to Newark by using the Garden State Parkway. Any questions?"

The only flaw in Abdul Al Hussein's plan was that the county sheriff already knew they were coming and when. The description of the two vehicles and their tag numbers and other information was delivered to him by an international phone call made by Shakar.

* * * * *

Sheriff Brewster was relaxing behind his desk when he received a phone call to his private cell number.

„Brewster here."

„Sheriff this is Vincent Browne of the South Jersey Gazette, we're trying to shed light on the Raven Crow murder of Aamir Agha have you made any progress?"

The Sheriff pushed his chair back and sat up straight, nearby deputies found important things to do because they recognized that he was mad and about to explode verbally.

That little conniving asshole, how in the fuck did he get this number? I've had it less than two weeks and that prick calls me up. I'd like to take this phone and shove it up his ass; then call to make it vibrate. Nah that's no good, he'd probably ask for more.

„Well sheriff is there any progress to report to my legions of readers?”

Legions of readers my ass. You're lucky to get rid of a thousand copies a week you ass.

„Nice to hear from you Browne, we do have an ongoing investigation. As you know Raven Crow has confessed to the crime by video recording so our job is to find her not to gather evidence. Evidence is no longer needed unless she says it wasn't her under that burqa, which I doubt she would do because, she's proud of her ability to strike terror into the hearts of that international criminal cartel.

„I doubt sincerely that she's in our County jurisdiction. I also doubt that she's within the jurisdiction of the State of New Jersey. Thus it would be a waste of time and resources to chase up and down hunting a woman who isn't even here.”

Stupid asshole. I've known Raven since she was a child; no way would I arrest her. Hell arrest her, I'd hide her from the state troopers if needed.

Brewster's phone rang again shortly after he slammed the receiver down. He looked down at the number and recognized it as a foreign call.

Hell maybe Raven is calling me to say hello.

„Sheriff Brewster speaking.”

„Sheriff what I have to tell you will be a little hard for you to believe, so let me tell you some information that wasn't in the newspapers about the four men found dead at the farm of the Crow family.”

Well shit, this guy knows how to get your attention.

„Go ahead stranger tell me.”

„The black man from Nigeria had the lobe from his left ear missing. The assassin from Saudi Arabia had two gold front teeth.”

The sheriff wasn't sure about the missing ear lobe but he had personally seen that one of the guys had two gold front teeth.

„You've established that you're worth listening to, what do you wish to convey?”

„Sheriff there's an organization in Newark New Jersey that's a gang but a gang of all Islamic members. Many of the members have traveled to Yemen to train for Islamic Jihad. None of those members are currently suspected by your authorities. The Newark Islamists as they call themselves has been given a hundred-thousand dollar contract to kill Raven Crow's parents. This contract was awarded to them by the Agha Cartel of which I'm a member. Our cartel has been warned not to engage in acts of violence within the United States or its territories on pain of death. Mrs. Agha must be mentally crazy to have taken this chance. I will fax you at your office information about the six assassins and the arms that they will be given to use during the operation.”

„Can I assume that once this Newark Islamists operation fails that Mrs. Agha may disappear?“ Brewster asked.

„Yes you can Sheriff. She has fallen in disfavor but if you mention a word an impending operation by your friend may fail.“

Holy shit Raven's going to take her down.

„No need to fear that friend and I now think of you as a best friend forever.“ Brewster replied.

„Just one more thing Sheriff. The organization in Newark has at least five members from your nearby counties. After you kill and I suggest kill not capture the six paid assassins, plant a rumor in the local press that you have two moles working within that organization. Hopefully that will kill off a few more. Goodbye and good luck.“

The Sheriff then immediately called the sheriffs of Ocean, Cape May and Salem counties to apprise them of the situation. He didn't consult with the New Jersey State Police or Federal Bureau of Investigation.

* * * * *

A day later Brewster was getting the ambush in place when the question of not calling in the state troopers arose.

„Fuck the State and the Feds, I want these gangsters dead. The fucking State and Feds would capture them, while probably getting a few of us killed in the process. We know they are coming now and should arrive within thirty minutes. When the two men get out with the RPGs make sure that they're holding weapons, and then riddle their asses and the SUVs. Watch out for crossfire and for Christ sakes make sure it isn't two carloads of innocent tourists trying to snap some pictures. Okay men I hear they've made good time. They're ahead of schedule. Get to your hides and blow the punk bastards away.“

A few minutes after the SWAT teams were in their hides two black SUVs pulled up fast, braked hard and two men with RPGs jumped out started to raise them on target but were cut to pieces with double ought buckshot from the riot guns that SWAT were carrying. One SUV made it a hundred yards down the road before it lumbered to a stop driven by a dead man whose head had been decapitated by a rifle slug fired from a shotgun.

As the SWAT members advanced on the two vehicles they continued to fire until a grenade in one vehicle exploded accidentally when hit by a rifle slug. The other vehicle a hundred yards down the highway was then checked for survivors. Two shotgun blasts were heard.

Well looks like two Islamists survived the shootout. Darn shame, they must have made a sudden move for a weapon. I guess we just sent a message to the gangs up north, don't fuck with the southern county sheriffs because they will kill you.

Chapter 34

„It appears that the Afshan Agha has recovered well from the loss of her son and husband. Even with the horrific disfiguring of her face, she has found a way to be alluring and mysterious. How many men can say no to an offer of fellatio from a woman with beautiful eyes clad head to toe in a burqa?” Jesse asked his planning group.

Alex York waved his hand slightly to the amazement of those sitting nearby. It wasn't much of a gesture but it was movement and York seemed unaware of what had just transpired.

„What, why are you guys looking at me?”

Then he looked down and saw that both hands were palms up and spread to the side in the universal body language of asking a question. He tried to move his hands but couldn't. Eventually his forearms fell to the table.

„What just happened? I'd no idea my hands and arms had moved. They moved when I wasn't trying, however when I did try to move them I couldn't.”

Raven moved to his side to rub his neck. She knew he could feel the nape of his neck and enjoyed the sense of touch as she massaged. Without saying a thing she started rubbing his trapeze muscles. She dug her fingers into the light weight knitted shirt and he rolled his head back and forth and hunched his shoulders without knowing. Using all the strength she could muster she gripped both trapezes hard.

„Ouch what the hell did you hurt me for?”

He then became aware that it did hurt, that he was finally able to feel pain again near his shoulders and it felt so good.

„Raven, massage my shoulders please?”

„You're working in Berkeley,” Ben interjected, obviously excited by the turn of events. „We can have a professional over here with his or her own massage table in twenty minutes. I suggest two. I'll call and stress it's non-sexual but medical in nature. While we wait for them to arrive we need to move on with the planning to eliminate Afshan Agha.”

„Not much to plan guys, I got it covered.”

„Raven you may have it covered but it's best if you run it by us to see if there are holes in it.” York cautioned.

„Okay the information that Cecil Hayward gave us has all checked out exactly as he gave it to us. I believe that she will be at that Dude Ranch in Wyoming as stated. That date is two weeks from today. I plan to start a two week stay there a week before she shows up.”

The meeting adjourned before the massage team appeared. It was the consensus of those attending that Raven had a very good chance at succeeding at killing the head of the Agha Cartel.

* * * * *

Raven decided to use Afshan's fascination with young men as a means to lure her in for the kill. First she went to a hair salon that she could tell was run by two lesbian partners. She requested a „butch type” cut with her black hair dyed a light brown. Raven caused a bit of domestic jealousy when the girl cutting her hair decided to pay a lot of attention to her client. She defused the situation by starting

a conversation with the much older partner whom soon realized that Raven wasn't interested in her younger lover.

„What do you want with this haircut? Do you want to look female with a man's haircut or like a natural born male?“ The older woman asked.

„I want to completely look like all man. I plan on wearing loose cowboy shirts, a ten-gallon hat and wide-body denims. I want to be able to walk into a men's room, enter a stall for privacy, take a pee, and walk out with no one the wiser.“

The younger partner asked, „Why do you wear gloves on a day like today? It's way too hot to wear gloves.“

„I've extremely dry skin on my hands. Doctors advised me to buy natural non dyed cotton gloves and to wear them over my hand lotion. I put hand lotion on every few hours.“ Raven replied.

The girl finished and spun Raven about in the barber style chair. Raven couldn't believe the transformation. She went from a beautiful woman to a handsome young man in a few short hours. Raven paid the fee plus a thirty percent fee for a job well done. She shook the hands of both women;

„Well shucks ladies, this here haircut looks mighty fine on this here old country boy.“ She winked, turned and left the shop.

Next up clothing, but before that I need a good suitcase.

There was a department store nearby so she decided on one-stop shopping. She found a suitcase to fit her needs and took it to men's wear, there she found denim pants that would fit her but were several inches too long. She bought six pair but each by a different manufacturer.

Length no problem I'll just roll them up like they did back in the old days and fit them over my boots. Ah look at those cowboy shirts. Got to grab at least six different ones. Boots, boots, right over there and looky, looky cowboy hats. Well this is Sacramento so I guess there are people here that wear them to keep the sun from boiling them. I'm so not riding a horse, no need for those uncomfortable square toe high heel boots needed for riding. Nah I need boots that give the appearance of being cowboy boots. These half-boots are perfect. I'll just let my rolled up pant legs cover the tops of the boots so no one will notice.

She gathered her clothing, paid for it and had the sales clerk put her purchases into the suitcase, all but the half-boots and Stetson which she wore from the store.

Next on the agenda was a trip to an optometrist. She spotted a sign advertising eyeglasses a few blocks away. The receptionist looked up as the door open and was instantly attracted to the young man who entered. By the time the customer stood before her, she was disappointed because s/he was clad in a female blouse and had a prominent bust line.

Damn just my luck, I get turned on at first sight and I find a lesbian or a guy with gender issues. Either way I'm not interested.

„Hi my name is Nancy how can I help you?“

Raven looked at the young Hispanic girl.

Funny when I walked through the door, I felt vibes from her. She thought I was hot and now she's all business. I guess she's disappointed with me being a female.

„Hi Nancy. I don't have a vision problem as you can see I've a gender issue problem which is currently being treated by many, many doctors. I'm in the process of changing my body identity. I'd like to change my brown eyes to blue. I know they have contacts that do this; does the doctor here stock them?"

Wow this guy or girl is strictly Looney Tunes, but a client is a client.

„Yes we do and the doctor is currently available. Let me go get him."

An hour later after an unnecessary eye exam and then practice of putting the lens in and taking them out, Raven left the shop as a blue-eyed person of undetermined gender.

She found an adult book store on a side street and went in and ask the clerk if he sold any type of padding that would give her an appearance of having male genitalia. She purchased three pairs of padded boxer shorts and walked out the door.

Raven checked into a motel, went to her second floor room, threw the suitcase on the bed, hung her Stetson on a rack and lay down on the uncluttered side of the bed. After thinking things through she finally got up then carried the suitcase to the motel laundry room. She got the needed change from the coin machine, cut the purchase tags from all her new clothing, dumped it all into one machine, fed the coins in and set back to wait for it to finish. Twenty minutes later she tossed it all into one dryer and started the machine. She left the clothes for a moment to buy a soda from the machine on the outside walkway, upon her return she saw two men stuffing her clothes into a laundry bag.

„Put the clothes back in the dryer and you both walk away without problems."

„Fuck you punk or are you really a bitch? Don't matter none either way. Now get the fuck out of the way before we walk over your body."

When Raven didn't move the larger of the two Hispanic men rushed at her, she side-stepped, grabbed the back of his neck and by using his momentum threw him over the second story walkway railing. He was lucky enough to land in the shallow end of the motel's pool.

The second small Hispanic dropped her clothing but pulled a knife. Raven reached into her pocket and pulled out her ceramic blade.

„Listen idiot I'm much better at hand to hand combat then you can ever hope to be. Put that knife away and walk out of here. No cops no fuss. But check on your dirt bag friend. If he's alive get him out of here, if dead leave the asshole where he lies. What's your pleasure?"

The man looked at her cold blue eyes and knew she was serious, that he was up against a professional.

„No cops if I walk away?"

„No cops, no need, your pal may need an ambulance but that's his fucking problem. Make up a bullshit story that he tripped and fell. Now leave."

The man made the knife disappear and Raven gave him room enough for safe passage. She put the clothes back in the dryer. No outcry was heard, no one apparently saw what happen or no one cared.

Once her clothing dried, Raven quickly dressed and left the motel. She was worried that the Sacramento police might be called by the pair of thugs who had tried to steal her clothing. It wouldn't make sense for them to do so but it was

better to leave and just return to Berkeley. She had walked into the motel appearing trans-gender, she left looking all man.

She retrieved her rental car from the parking lot and drove to the Interstate 80 on ramp.

I got enough time to get to Berkeley before they close up shop. I can spring my new identity on them and check on Alex's progress at the same time. Damn every time I think of him, I imagine him as he once was or may be again. I've got to keep my feelings in control, a relationship between he and I would be no good for either of us or Outlier Ltd. It would cause us both to lose focus on what's important and that's always a successful operation.

Within two hours Raven was back in the city of Berkeley, she pulled her rental car into a lot reserved for visitors but used her right palm print to access the level that led directly to York's office. She walked directly to Carol's desk. Carol appeared to be somewhat confused by her sudden appearance.

„Hello how may I help you?“

„I need to see Alexander York.“

Carol was really confused, no one in Outlier Ltd. ever referred to Alex as Alexander, No one. She stared at the young man carefully, he looked like some cowboy who just rode in on his horse. Even had riding clothes on.

„Do you have an appointment?“

„Don't need one.“ Raven snarled.

„Why do you not need an appointment to see Mr. York?“

„Because I'm a bad ass. Anyone that's a bad ass can see York.“

Redbone was relaxing in York's vacant office when he heard the name Alexander York.

„Okay bad ass screw you and the horse that you rode in on. Get the hell out of here!“

„Now Carol that's no way to treat a visitor. Hello young man I'm Alexander York, how may I be of service?“

Raven looked at Jesse and smirked.

„No way are you York. You look like an escapee from an elder care nursing home.“

Redbone shook his head side to side in regret for not being able to defuse the situation. He moved forward to grab the man and force him to leave.

„Stop right there partner or I'll drop you quicker than a used stinky, spunky, smelly rubber.“ Raven snarled.

For the first time Jesse noticed the gloves.

„Young man please remove your gloves.“

Raven took her hat off instead and tossed it onto a chair alongside of her.

„Ah shit Jesse how did you know?“

„I didn't Kid. I still can't believe your transition. Even with the knowledge that you planned to look like a man, you got by me. Carol here has no idea of what we're talking about, so you completely fooled her, also the gloves don't fit in here at the office but at the ranch they will be seen as normal attire.“

Jihad Joy the gift to Outlier Ltd. that keeps on giving and giving.

Chapter 35

Raven knew she was being irrational and might put her upcoming assignment in jeopardy but she needed to do it. Needed the release from the tensions she was feeling and the guilt, the guilt of causing Misha Zarankin to lose her job at Frontier Airlines. She needed to see her, not to have contact with her but just to be near her. So she rented a motel room near Oakland International just to store her suitcase of needed clothing for the Wyoming op. After seeing Misha she intended to return to the motel, retrieve her belongings then fly to her assignment.

Without clearing it with Outlier she purchased a one way ticket to Baltimore leaving from Oakland International using her new identity. She flew as a female with gender issues, a female version of Frankie Hajar complete with ten-gallon hat and her western style half-boots. A butchy girl appearance with earrings that looked like miniature handcuffs. As she boarded the aircraft with just a small carry-on bag, both men and women gave her admiring looks.

In her bag she always carried a folded up burqa but the Star of David hung inside of the feminine western blouse she chose to wear. Once seated she took her Stetson off and laid it on her lap.

A female passenger on her right attempted conversation but Raven's brief reply left no doubt that she wasn't interested in small talk. Within minutes Raven fell deep asleep but awoke as the plane began its decent. After renting a small compact car at Avis she was on her way to Wilmington. She knew from her Outlier connections that Misha still lived in the same apartment but that she had changed her cell phone number several times.

When she rang the number Misha answered.

„Who is this, I just got this number and haven't even used it yet?”

„It's me baby. Are you at home?”

Misha was stunned, Anisa was calling her after she'd almost given up hope.

Oh my Lord it's her. She hasn't forgotten me.

„Anisa where are you? No I'm not at home; I'm at the bar where I took you. I'm currently drowning my sorrow over you leaving me.”

„I had no choice Misha. I had to run to save my life, you understand?”

„Yes love, I understand.”

„Misha I must go now. Hang in there, and don't worry about money. I'll send you some soon. Got to go now.”

Misha looked at the phone in despair as her lover clicked off. Ten minutes later SooLin walked into the bar followed by an honest to goodness cowgirl complete with Stetson hat. Misha took a long look at the cowgirl and liked what she saw.

Very butch but those duds aren't cheap. She's probably a real cowgirl from out west. If I wasn't so in love with my Mistress I could go for her.

SooLin and Raven sat next to each other at the bar.

Funny they both look like dominantes; they definitely wouldn't try to pick each other up. Hmm, SooLin is showing a box to the people at the bar. Oh shit she's coming my way.

After sitting down next to her, SooLin put her arms about Misha's shoulders to show her the box which held an engagement ring. Raven knew what was about to take place because SooLin had boasted at the bar that she was about to reclaim her former slave Misha. That Jihad Joy was long gone and she was going to give her a ring and make her grovel at her feet. Raven retreated to the darkened parking lot to look through the window to see what would occur. Fearing the worst she placed her Stetson behind a bush, donned the burqa and put the Star of David over her neck on the outside of the garment. She saw SooLin slap Misha twice hard in the face. She had seen enough, she rushed through the door to everyone's surprise, yanked the Asian girl out of the booth, pinned her against the wall and cut a thin line down one cheek with her ceramic knife.

„I just cut you bitch as a warning! You and all others must leave my woman alone.”

Raven turned and walked quickly from the bar, stripped off the burqa and the Star of David, stashed them in her bag, donned the Stetson then ran back into the bar and screamed, „Jihad Joy was in the parking lot. She just drove away in a Porsche.”

The bar patrons ran out; not to see Jihad Joy drive away but to get in their cars and flee the scene before the cops arrived. Most had families who were not aware of their sexual preference.

Raven used the confusion in the bar to walk over to Misha and hand her an envelope containing a thousand dollars. She put a finger to her lips and whispered:

„In a few weeks love, in a few weeks.”

Misha sat stunned as her lover walked out the door; drove back to the airport for a trip back to Oakland International.

Chapter 36

The week that she had spent waiting for her mother-in-law to arrive was interesting but not enjoyable to Raven. She spent time walking about the ranch and watching the animals. One day as she stood observing a young foal learning to walk one of the crew came to talk to her. Roy the cowboy as he called himself was a lean handsome man of about twenty-eight and not wearing a wedding band.

„Hey Frankie how ya doing? Yeah that foal is the cutest thing. Say did you see that woman that signed in today wearing that nun type outfit? Her last name is Agha and seems like an Arab like you.”

Frankie laughed.

„No Roy I didn't. That outfit is a burqa and meant to keep the woman free from strange men lusting over them. Also her name sounds more like someone from Afghanistan.”

„Afghanistan, did you serve in Afghanistan? That where you lost that finger? Yeah you try to hide it with riding gloves but you forgot I was nearby and washed your hands in front of me.”

„Yeah Roy I served there and left that finger there. It got severed in a hand to hand combat situation, but I hope you won't tell anyone. That's why I'm here. I suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. I came to heal myself and purge some bad memories.”

Roy looked over at Frankie.

„Damn you can never tell who the hard asses are by looking at them. You don't look like a killer or fighter. You look like a lover. Someone good in the sack if you know what I mean. Speaking of good in the sack. One of the boys forgot to take some luggage to that burqa lady's room. Almost walked in on them but he saw her on her knees doing the guy she checked in with. What beats all is she still had that burqa thing on.”

„Yeah Roy you don't see stuff like that every day.”

„Well come to think of it I heard there was a cowboy who liked to hit his knees buck-naked but wearing a ten-gallon hat while doing his partner.”

He gave Frankie a huge wink and strolled off but turned around.

„Hey if you get lonely and need some special attention I've a private cabin. It's number twenty-one.”

„Thanks Roy I'll keep it in mind.”

* * * * *

Alex took the woman in his arms and kissed her. She turned suddenly and pressed her butt against his rising erection as he fondle her ample breasts with each hand.

„Raven, Raven I can't...”

He awoke with the sudden realization that he had just had a wet dream, a wet dream that he experienced and felt. His erection was still evident under the sheet then it slowly shrank and as it did he could feel it subside.

Holy shit the therapists are right I'm getting back to normal.

He had been making steady improvements since the planning meeting where he first experienced once more the movement of his hands. The two hours of massage work after that meeting convinced him to return to therapy sessions. He now was able to walk with the aid of a walker. He still needed help to stand up but that was because time had taken a toll on his muscles.

The doctors made no promises but were delighted by his progress. They had never discovered what the Pakistani doctor had done to Alex but whatever it was; his body was now healing itself. Privately the doctors were predicting a full recovery.

Damn I just had a wet dream and it was about Raven. Am I subconsciously desiring her or could it be my manhood challenging the stories that she's no longer interested in men, that she's now a committed lesbian? Well who the fuck cares, the dream felt good, literally felt good and real. Got to get up shower and go to the gym. Need to get my ass fit again.

* * * * *

Outlier provided a well-equipped weight room at the bottom level of its Berkeley office. The gym provided a way for their employees to keep in fighting shape

without exposing themselves to possible danger while working out at public gyms. Working out with heavy weights is an undertaking requiring intense concentration, and could cause operatives to be unaware of surrounding threats. Thus the secure workout room at Outlier.

The room was also used to rehabilitate their wounded warriors. Unlike the U. S. fighting forces Outlier's wounded were rehabilitated if possible and placed in a position that continued to benefit their employer.

At 11:45a.m. Alex York was exercising his body to regain the strength he had lost in the time he was chair bound, however his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking about Raven Crow when Jesse Redbone walked up to him.

„Bang, bang you're dead,” Redbone whispered.

„Damn you Jesse, you got me and I never saw or heard you coming. Too deep in thought I guess.”

„Well guy it looks like you're making good progress. You evidently came down to the gym alone and I don't see a therapist anywhere about, so what are you thinking?”

„Well if I recover all my strength and agility should I go back to field work? Or should I be trusted to do field work? We still have no idea what I was injected with. It's quite possible for me to have a relapse while out on an operation and that would endanger more lives than just my own.”

Jesse thought it over and replied, „Too soon to worry about any of that.”

„Yeah, yeah I know Jesse, but I still worry about what the future is going to be like for me.”

Jesse laughed because he had just thought of his crusty old grandpa.

„Look guy, my old grandpa used to have a multitude of sayings that he would refer to in situations like this. You know what he would say about your future after all you've been through?”

„No Jesse I don't but I imagine it'll be good. Go ahead and tell me.”

„Okay it would go down this a way. Grandpa would look at you, spit his tobacco juice out to the side and say: «Son you should be happier than a hound dog with five assholes, that you still have a future».”

Despite trying not to Alex had to laugh. He and Jesse made small talk for a while until Jesse left to check progress reports on operations currently taking place. Raven's assignment was reported in by her cell phone every day at Noon PST.

Jesse walked to an isolated area to take the incoming call he expected. At exactly noon the cell phone rang.

„Yeah Kid, what's up?”

„Jesse, I plan to go shopping today and the weatherman has predicted light to heavy rain. I doubt that it'll interfere with my shopping which shouldn't take ten minutes but it would be nice if you pick me up at the spot you usually find me. My mom won't be with me, I plan on leaving her behind.”

He had the message and completely understood; she would kill Afshan Agha later that afternoon or night during a storm that would provide cover for her activities. However the storm wouldn't put Jesse at risk while flying in to pluck her from the local private airport. Also she would be leaving the body behind for the authorities to find.

„Okay Kid should be available by nightfall. Definitely don't want you to wait in the rain. Anything else?”

After a bit of silence Raven asked, „How's my guy Alex?”

There it is again. Those two definitely had some kind of attraction going on.

Most of the people who knew Raven thought she had switched sexual preferences Jesse wasn't so sure. In Outlier's world sexual preference was a private thing. A gay operative could kill just as well as a straight operative, sometimes even better. If the soldier or assassin was outwardly gay, many men didn't recognize the threat until it was too late.

„Alex is doing fine Raven. His progress is amazing, almost like he has no problems except to regain muscle strength and tone.”

„Great to hear Jesse great to hear. Oh has he inquired about my visit with mother?”

„Raven he worries and thinks about you a lot. You know that. Now clear your head for the shopping trip or you might forget an important item.”

„Not a chance Jesse, not a chance in hell. I won't forget what's on the shopping list. I'll do Mama right.”

„Okay Kid. I'll be where I'll be right before the sun goes down. See you then.”

* * * * *

What is it about Raven? I can't seem to get her out of my mind. I think Jesse suspects that I care a lot about her, I do. From the day she walked into the personnel office I came under her charisma. It's so overpowering that it sucks you in like a vortex, never to let go. Each week she gains more inner power and charisma. It's hard to believe that just six months ago she was a wide eyed innocent to international intrigue but now finds herself a major player. Not many have gain the attention she has in such a short time. If and when she knocks off Afshan Agha she will be solid gold for Outlier Ltd.

He finished his workout then used his walker to gain the elevator. Upon exiting the elevator he found Carol sobbing and a few others surrounding her.

Damn, must be her husband.

Ben approached him.

„How bad Ben, I know nothing.”

„Her husband lost his right foot by a leftover Russian land mine that had been missed somehow when they cleared mines from the area.”

Alex smiled at Ben and he smiled back, they both knew it was her husband's ticket out of the army and into Outlier Ltd. He lost a foot but gained a new family.

Alex walked slowly up to Carol and put a shaky arm about her. Carol leaned into him and sobbed.

„Carol honey we want him to be discharged as soon as possible,” Alex stated. „As of now he's an Outlier employee and will undergo all rehab here at this location. That way you and your son can help speed his recovery.”

* * * * *

Three days after her arrival, the head of the Agha Cartel began to take an interest in the fresh faced Frankie. Once both her husband and only child were

dead any inhibitions of having sex with younger men disappeared. Hiding behind a burqa enabled her to conceal not only her age but her injuries.

She would often take trips to Pakistan, rent a suite of rooms for her and the security team and have young men brought to her for her pleasure. The men were paid reasonably well for allowing her to service them. None had any idea that the woman on her knees before them was capable of having them and their families completely eliminated. They reasoned she must be a rich foreign woman hiding her identity by pretending to be a Muslim.

A few of the men at the ranch had already experienced the delight of her expertise. She had hit on the hunk, Roy the cowboy, but he had rebuffed her, but gently as not to offend her. She watched him curious as to his lack of interest and found he spent a lot of time trying to be around Frankie.

Ha now I see that he is a male whore. Either he gets down on his knees or he wants Frankie to do so. I feel that great big hunk of a man is exactly like me; he loves to service men while kneeling before them in submission. At least I have climax after climax while doing them. What's his motivation? If no climax what good comes from the act? Just satisfying partner?

Raven had spotted the intense interest that her mother-in-law first took in Roy. Later she noticed that whenever Roy was chatting her up, Afshan would pass by.

Tonight's the night I'll do the old bitch. I'll signal her the next time I'm with Roy and she passes by.

Later that day just before twilight, Raven positioned herself at the corral fence. A small rain shower was about to happen and people were heading to the bunkhouse or their individual cabins but Roy had just enough time to approach her for a talk.

„Hey Frankie how you doing? Hey just between us have you had that burqa woman on her knees yet?”

„No not interested.” Raven replied.

„Why not, not interested in getting some head?”

„Nah Roy, I love getting head but she isn't my type, besides I enjoy watching what I've down there doing me.”

„Yeah most men do enjoy the power over that individual doing them. Serving in Afghanistan must have been a bitch. No whorehouses. What did you do to get off?” Roy asked as his face rapidly flushed.

„My unit had this Afghan private attached to us as an interpreter. He spent his nights going from bunk to bunk doing us one at a time.” Raven replied.

„I did exactly that,” Roy admitted. „I was in the Navy, when the lights went out, I blew as many guys as I could before going to bed. God I loved it.”

The widow Agha was slowly approaching and the rain had started to come down lightly.

„Roy go home. At nine tonight I'll see if you're really that good.”

Raven patted Roy on his ass and the cowboy walked rapidly to his cabin to prepare for the night and get out of the rain.

As Agha passed by Raven made a pumping up and down motion in front of her lips with her fist and pointed toward Roy. The widow returned the motion but with two hands and a flicking tongue. Raven noticed that everyone was now inside and

the storm had caused it to go dark. It was hard to see within seconds. Raven grabbed the woman by the arm and ushered her through the barn door. Inside sat the old Chevy Suburban that guests had the right to use at any time. Some used the wide seats for a quick tryst while away from their wives and husbands.

* * * * *

Shakar had watched the interchange going on between his superior and the young man named Frankie Hajjar. In the past he would have stayed close to protect her. Even as she was on her knees in Pakistan and various other locales he had been nearby ready to use his silenced automatic pistol if the man seemed to present a threat. He had shot one man dead for slapping her in the head after he had climaxed. The bitch had kept on blowing the man during his final twitches; she said it was like sucking the life out of him.

This could be it, by this time tomorrow I may well be on the way to controlling the cartel. Of course it will be renamed Shakar Alliance.

* * * * *

Afshan had promptly dropped to her knees; then rubbed her face like a cat attracted to catnip against Raven's crotch. Raven grabbed the back of the woman's head and moved it back and forth. Within moments her mother in-law was moaning with desire.

The widow unbuckled the western belt that held the jeans, reached up and ripped the jeans down to around the ankles. She moaned in pleasure at the size of the package within the boxer shorts, and then with a look of naked lust she searched Raven's blue eyes for consent.

Raven nodded, then as her conquest looked again at the size of her crotch she discarded her gloves and drew her knife. Afshan sniffed at her like a dog and with a cry of lust, passion, and lurid desire pulled the padded boxer shorts down to lie on the denims. Raven allowed her a moment of being shocked before she grabbed the top of the burqa with her left hand pulled Afshan's head back and used the ceramic blade to slice through the widow's throat.

„Just like your husband bitch. You both die by the same knife in the same way.”

Raven made sure Afshan's dying eyes saw the hand with the missing finger. As the life ebbed from her, Afshan kicked her feet about as if to protest the indignity of her death. Finally she laid still, one less evil in the world.

After pulling up her shorts and jeans, Raven wiped the blade on the burqa. Most of the blood had been held back by the outer garment which then allowed the inner clothes to sop up the blood. The area had remained remarkably free of blood.

She hid the body behind bales of hay and went to inspect the scene once more. No signs of blood. However to be safe she kicked sand and hay about; then walked over to the barn doors and opened them wide. She had retrieved her gloves and put them back on to avoid prints on the suburban. She knew that the DNA within her room would tie her to the crime but she was betting they wouldn't pursue the case that far.

She walked to her room to retrieve her previously packed suitcase; called the number agreed upon and then went out into the rain but now protected by a rain slicker. She started the car, and drove outside the doors which she then closed

after shutting the barn's lights off. Rachel reached for her cell phone. Jesse answered as always on the first ring.

„Shopping list completed, be home in less then forty minutes.”

„Understood sweetie, your grandpappy is patiently awaiting.”

Chapter 37

Shakar stood and watched from his darkened window. He waited knowing Frankie would return to the barn. He could barely see the figure of Frankie as he emerged from the room.

A professional assassin would never stick around after a major hit. No he will drive the old suburban car away to a nearby spot to be evacuated. Probably the small private air strip we landed on when we arrived.

Shakar nodded with approval when he saw the young man enter the car after shutting the barn doors and drive away.

Just one thing left to do; I must see that she's dead. I doubt he would take the body with him, far too much risk for so little gain.

He walked quickly through the pelting rain and entered through the regular door to the side of the larger doors. It took a while to find the lights and a bit more to find the body.

She's dead. God is great but since I don't believe in fairy tales I prefer the children's rhyme better. Hi ho the wicked witch is dead. Enough of this, I best get out of here.

Shakar reached into his pocket to get his cell phone. He pushed a number on speed dial. It was answered on the second ring.

It's done, time to go.”

The limo pulled into the ranch thirty minutes later and Shakar left. He was confident that the body wouldn't be found until morning and he would be out of the United States by private jet within that time.

His driver looked back in confusion when he heard Shakar singing what he knew to be child's nursery rhyme. He listened intently and then smiled broadly as he realized the songs intent.

„Ding dong the BITCH is dead...”

* * * * *

The pickup was to be made at a small private airport by the same Lear jet that rescued her from Baltimore. In thirty-five minutes of careful driving she pulled the suburban up next to the plane which already had both engines warming up. Jesse came down the door ramp, grabbed her gear and they left Wyoming behind.

„Well Kid that op just paid your salary for the next ten years,” Jesse stated with a smile. „Congrats. Not often one of us gets to take out a personal enemy and have Outlier pay for the assassination. Anything bothering you about this operation?”

„Yeah two things. I left Shakar behind—healthy.”

„Not a problem Kid. Today he's our best friend tomorrow Outlier might be paid to kill him. That's one thing, what's the other?"

„That traitor Cecil Hayward. He got a complete get out of jail free card. He was a traitor at the highest level and he walks free."

Redbone looked at Raven. *She's very young but eventually she'll learn the real ways of the world Outlier Ltd dealt with on a day by day basis. Not pretty at all, just the way it happens to be.*

„Look Kid we're not employees of the United States government. We are private business. We've the power to make and break deals. Outlier will never work against the United States but we do some nasty work for drug cartels and other firms that need it done but want clean hands. The State Department hired us to find and shut down the mole within the Central Intelligence Agency, we did it our way. Cecil Hayward has his life but little else. His trophy wife of one year left him immediately. We liquidated and confiscated all his illegal funds, had him sign his government retirement account over to his first wife who deserves it. Now he has twenty-five hundred a month he earns as a janitor for Outlier Ltd. It was either accept that deal or we would deliver him to you at an undisclosed location. He chose to give up all his funds and become our janitor. Say hello to him when you see him sweeping Outlier's floors forty hours a week."

Raven laughed at the thought of making small talk with a man she'd cut toes off of, one by one with a blow torch, then she had a sobering fault.

Who am I really? At the time I was operating that torch I was ready to cut on him until he died. Hayward knows that and he's just thankful to have survived. Has Raven Crow survived? Have I given in to the dark side like Darth Vader or is it I just want to kill the bad guys? What about my sexuality? When I think about Misha I want to dominate her and it definitely gets me off, but then I think about Alex and I feel all motherly and want to have him well enough to take me in his arms and make sweet gentle love to me. Damn I'm so screwed up in my head.

Jesse Redbone could sense the pensive change that had overtaken Raven. He reached over and held her hand for the next ten minutes.

Raven it's time we have a talk, first as a supervisor and then as a grandfather. It was reckless for you to fly back east to see your little friend. Not only did you put yourself in danger but you jeopardized your possible termination of your sadistic mother in-law. No we're not following you but we were on to you the moment you bought the ticket under your identity as Frankie Hajjar. Anyone flying with the last name of Hajjar automatically gets their name entered into the Homeland Security search list. Lucky for you they thought that Frankie was a man or they would've grabbed and detained you. We also had an agent inside the bar when you did the Jihad Joy act. You can't let personal feeling get in the way of an operation. Hate for the target is okay but petty interpersonal relations are not.

„Now that's the end of the supervisor talk, now begins the kindly grandfather one. What's bothering you Kid?"

She gripped his hand hard and wondered where to begin but she knew she'd just had thoughts awhile before that needed to be talked out. Either with Jesse or a psychiatrist, however Jesse was here at the moment.

„I'm afraid Jesse, I'm deeply afraid."

„What are you afraid of Kid?”

„I’m afraid that I’m losing my sense of humanity. I’ve taken sadistic pleasure in what I’ve done to other human beings. Granted they deserved to die but I enjoyed making them suffer.”

„No problem Kid. Revenge is best tasted while in a sadistic mood. Flow with it and enjoy the moment. All those bastards deserved to die. I can prove you aren’t a sadistic killer.”

„How Jesse, how can you convince me that I’m not?”

„Raven back in Afghanistan you would’ve thrown those two young boys into the well. They had both raped you but you showed compassion.”

„Compassion? I crippled them both for life!”

„That was an act of compassion Raven. Those boys may live to adulthood. Having a crippled leg exempts them from the military. Have you ever thought about accosting Aamir’s second wife and cutting her finger off to reclaim your wedding rings?”

„No Jesse that would be terrible; she’s innocent of wrong doing.”

„Have you ever thought about taking that ceramic knife and cutting the Mrs. open and killing her unborn?”

„Hell no Jesse. If something happen to her, I’d gladly raise the child. A child is a child to be protected and loved.”

„So in that case Aamir’s half brother and sister are safe from you?”

„Absolutely Jesse absolutely.”

„Well that proves you aren’t a sadist but I’m not so sure that you aren’t a dominant lesbian.”

„Ah hell Jesse you know everything. Yeah my first experience was with Misha and I have to admit that I loved it. I tried at first to say it was something that I’d never do again but I started missing a connection with Misha. I just needed to lay eyes upon her, but now I plan to take her off to a foreign vacation if I can have some time off.”

Jesse thought for a few minutes.

„Excuse me a bit Kid I’ll be right back, got to drain my lizard,” and he headed for the on-board toilet. Then a few minutes later he returned and gazed at her.

„What about your feelings for York. What happens if he makes a full recovery and gets good in the sack again. Will you get jealous when he parades his girlfriends in your face?”

„Christ Jesse is there anything you don’t know?”

„Yeah there’s something I don’t know. I’ve no idea how this love triangle will evolve. If I was York I’d play house with both of you. Hell the Muslims have had two wives since their religion started and let’s not forget the early Mormons.”

God to have them both, now that’s a happy thought.

Chapter 38

Gertrude Abbott had just made an appointment with the best plastic surgeon she could find in Philadelphia.

Why look ninety when I might be able to look sixty or sixty-five. I may as well spend the money I've been making and get a complete makeover. All this excess skin that just hangs—gone. Face tight with but a few wrinkles and a whole set of implanted teeth in just one day.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the afternoon newspaper hitting her door. She went to fetch the paper and a headline caught her eye.

Jihad Joy Takes Revenge

The body of Afshan Agha was discovered early today at a dude ranch in Wyoming. The authorities believe she was killed by Raven Crow also known as Jihad Joy. Raven Crow admitted that she had killed many members of the Agha family and would not stop until those responsible for the death of her unborn son had been brought to justice.

She turned on her television and just caught the image of Jihad Joy signing off from a new message to the American public.

Time to think an overnight rate increase. Oh hell no, I'll go live somewhere else and rent the whole house out weekly to Jihad Joy groupies. Her phone began to ring. She smiled.

Ka-Ching.

* * * * *

Seven days before Christmas, Misha Zarankin received both a package and letter special delivery. Misha signed for both when she saw it was from a Mistress Blackbird.

Oh my, it could only be her.

She opened the letter first with trembling hands and found a cashier's check drawn on Bank of America for five thousand dollars and a note saying to get ready for a vacation sometime after first of the year.

Next she opened the box. A wide flat band of gold with a pair of handcuffs inscribed on the outer surface. On the inside was inscribed:

To my love, Jihad Joy.

Weeping she slipped it on her left hand ring finger. It was a perfect fit.

How did Mistress know my size?

* * * * *

Welcome to life on your side, I'm your host, LaTrisTa Mahood. Tonight's guests include the dean of Otterman College where Anisa Abadi also known as Raven Crow and called by the mass media Jihad Joy was employed as a professor for two years without being discovered by the authorities. We also have Jerry Stevens a twenty year old former student at Otterman who now has created a product based on Jihad Joy that's earning him a substantial amount of money. First I'll start with Dean Johnson."

„Dean was Jihad Joy a good instructor?”

„Absolutely Miss Mahood, Anisa Abadi as I prefer to call her was excellent with the students and had a commanding knowledge of her subject matter.”

„Then why did you allow a private company to buy her position by endowing her wage and benefit package?” Mahood countered.

Taken back by the insinuation, Dean Johnson took a bit of time to formulate her response.

She's trying to set me and Otterman up for a fall; I need to be very careful with my answers.

„Still waiting for a reply Dean.”

„Miss Mahood no disrespect intended but you are obviously not familiar with the education industry. All colleges will accept endowments and yes many might let the pressure of the endowment influence who teaches the subjects so endowed. Our agreement with Outlier Ltd. was for Miss Abadi to teach one semester only on trial. If she didn't succeed she could be let go but the endowment would continue. In fact Otterman vacated her position when she was being sought by authorities; but Outlier Ltd. has continued said endowment.”

„I see,” Mahood commented. „Are you aware that Outlier Ltd. has been accused of having a military wing?”

„I'm aware that Outlier Ltd. is a private company that does good throughout the world. I know nothing or heard nothing to dispute my opinion of said organization.”

Mahood stared at Dean Johnson intently allowing the tension to build.

Damn this dean is good, so far nothing. I got to throw her off balance.

„Does Otterman College make a habit of hiring criminals?”

Johnson could feel her ire rising. This interview could end her position and career at Otterman.

Go slow girl. Think before responding and be friendly.

„Oh LaTrisTa, Anisa Abadi had committed no crimes within the United States jurisdiction at the time of her hiring. Otterman didn't hire someone wanted by our authorities or for that matter any other countries authorities. Even now I know of no crimes that she's being sought for in foreign countries, so the answer is no we don't hire criminals.”

„Ah but Dean she entered the United States under a false passport.”

Dean Johnson decided on a hail Mary pass that would go over the not so smart LaTrisTa.

„That's not true, LaTrisTa. My contacts in Washington D.C. state that the passport is genuine and was issued by the United States to protect her from retribution from the crime syndicate. Thus she was in something similar to a witness protection program.”

The Dean had no way to know but her stab in the dark was the absolute truth. Phones in Washington started ringing and demands to plug a leak that didn't exist were issued.

Mahood knew she'd been bested but the audience probably did not.

Best to let it be and move on.

„We need to take a station break. Hold fast we'll return and interview Jerry Stevens who may or may not have become a new millionaire in just three weeks.”

* * * * *

„Welcome back folks our next person to be interviewed is a student at Otterman College and loves to draw cartoon characters. One such character has made him a millionaire in just three short weeks. Give it up for Jerry Stevens.

„Jerry tell me exactly what has happen to you.”

„Well LaTrisTa after Raven disfigured her mother in-law clad as a Nun I started doodling characters that depicted her in a cartoonist way. One of my characters was seen by a journalism instructor at Rutgers University. He helped with the process of insuring a copyright and then he and I contacted a T-shirt manufacturer in mainland China. The shirts were advertised on the internet and sales took off. Now I've more than one factory producing them all in less than a month's time.”

„Jerry tell us how many paid orders you've received and passed on to be processed by the T-shirt printers.”

Jerry checked his smart phone whistled, smiled and answered.

„As of this very moment 1,178,009.”

The audience was awed into silence.

„Jerry what's your profit margin?”

Jerry laughed and then laughed again.

„Well my partner and I make three dollars on every shirt we sell.”

The audience wasn't just awed. They jumped to their feet shutting and clapping for the young man's incredible tale of success. After they had resumed their seats and quieted down a giant monitor showed the image that was driving the sales of the T-shirt through the world.

A menacing Crow with handcuff earrings, a Star of David about its neck, holding an Atchisson AA .12 shotgun in a threatening manner. Above the image the words, *Don't Tread On Me*. Under the image the name, *Raving Crow*.

LaTrisTa let the audience go wild again and when they calmed down asked:

„Was Raven's name misspelled?”

„Oh no LaTrisTa, I did that on purpose.”

„Why Jerry, why did you prefer Raving over her real name of Raven?”

„Because LaTrisTa when you piss that Crow off she gets to Raving.” Jerry replied.

The audience went wild and Jerry checked his sales, he had sold 75,000 more since he was on the show.

LaTrisTa looked at Jerry fondly. He had saved her ass by creating a show to remember. No one would remember Dean Johnson.

God I love this job. Ka-Ching, Ka-Ching!

„Ladies and gentlemen we kept our first two interviews short tonight so we could bring you an important interview. More after this station break.”

* * * * *

„Welcome back to life on your side. We now will introduce you to a lady that deserves our kindness and respect Mrs. Jamila Agha. This may prove to be the

most difficult interview of my life ladies and gentlemen Mrs. Agha is the pregnant widow of the late Aamir Agha, husband of Raven Crow.”

Mrs. Agha was given subdued polite applause as she walked to the interview table.

„Jamila could you please explain to the viewers and audience why you consented to be interviewed?”

„I’m happy to do so LaTrisTa. I as you Americans say wanted to set the record straight. I want all of the United States people to know that I’m a naturalized citizen and plan to stay in my New York City brownstone home. I’ll raise my child there to become an upright law abiding citizen. One that this country can be proud of and expect good things from him.

„I bare no ill will toward Raven Crow. My husband’s family was evil. What they did to their own unborn grand child is inconceivable to a civilized society. I’d like to think that Aamir would have protected his unborn son and wife more, and maybe he had no choice but he used the rings off of her severed finger to wed me. That’s also inconceivable. What kind of a man could look at my wedding rings every day and not wonder about his dead unborn son?”

The widow started to sob. LaTrisTa got up then moved across to the couch and sat by her. She put her arm about her and hugged her close Jamila could hold it in no longer she broke down and cried. Wiping the tears from her eyes she started saying over and over:

„I’m so ashamed, so ashamed.”

„There’s no shame on your part Jamila honey. You did no wrong.”

„I let that monster impregnate me. How can I hide all this from my son in this day of electronic marvels? It’ll always be out there for him to find. Even the recording of this show will be there forever.”

„Jamila be strong. Be honest with him as soon as he asks about his father. Believe this Jamila, there are hundreds of men out there right now who will become mentors of your child until he’s an adult. At this time and for all time forward he is America’s child.”

Chapter 39

Jesse and Ben found Alex York skipping rope like he was in training for an upcoming boxing match. His full recovery amazed doctors and his medical history was now being discussed in medical journals throughout the world. Both men were glad to see their former team leader back in fighting trim, but the chance of Alex York leading a team in the field was still in doubt. Nothing was known about the cause of neither his paralysis nor why he seemed to have fully recovered.

„Alex do you know what this day is?” Jesse asked.

„I believe it’s a Friday,” York replied.

„You’re such a smart ass,” Ben interjected. „This is the day you caught the bullet that shattered that leg you’re so busy abusing by skipping rope.”

„Yeah I know,” Alex replied. „Also the day that Raven Crow became one of us.”

Jesse looked at Alex and knew he was under tension. Tension that he and the others couldn't help relieve. The more Alex recovered, the more Raven seemed to stay away.

These two kids need to work through this sexual tension between them or it'll start to effect operations. „Hey Ben could you leave me and Alex alone for a few minutes please?

Ben nodded his assent and left the gym knowing that Jesse was about to give Alex a heart to heart talk about interpersonal relationships and how they might affect their employer's missions.

„Alex you need to get with Raven and work this out. If it takes jumping her bones then do it. It wouldn't be the first affair between agents of Outlier and won't be the last. People find others that fascinate and attract them and there's no denying that you and Raven are a couple whether you like it or not. You're destined to be with each other. It might not work out but you must try. The only way to get rid of that tension is to find out what it feels like to take her in your arms and kiss her. You'll know then if you're meant for each other or you both should walk away and stay just friends.”

„Jesse I'd love to do that but I can't force myself on her. Hell I can't force myself on anyone. If they want to avoid me, I stay away from them. Raven avoids me.”

„Alex, Raven cares deeply for you she told me that. We discussed her sexuality and yes she's smitten by Misha Zarankin but she loves you. I know it. I knew it when she would massage your neck, she loves you. Misha Zarankin is also a love of hers that she needs. Why not embrace the idea of her having two loves? You have an unconventional job why not a different way of running a household. Hell if it were me and I could get two for the price of one, why not?”

Alex York looked at his old friend and combat team member. He looked beyond the words, deep within Jesse's eyes and knew he was hearing truth.

„Why not, why not indeed?”

* * * * *

Alex York completed the paper work that leased the new 2014 Mini Cooper convertible to Outlier Ltd. As a manager for Outlier he was entitled to a company car, but for the last two years he had no need of one. He drove the little sport car through the narrow crowded streets of Berkeley to connect to highway 24 and then through the tunnel to Walnut Creek. Traffic was light as he left the cool sixty-five degree weather of the coast and emerged five minutes later in the hot ninety-five degree valley weather on the other side of the mountains.

Unbelievable, cooling off one minute and five minutes later I'm roasting. Damn it is hot for December, must be global warming.

He kept the speed under seventy passed Walnut Creek and then Concord. He got in the right lane to make the turn on highway 4 but slowed down a bit. Highway 4 was notorious for its head on fatalities.

Be just my luck to get better and then die because some drunk ran into my pretty sport car.

He continue up the highway until he saw the turn for the Antioch bridge. After paying the toll he crossed the bridge and began driving along the Sacramento

River on his way to Courtland to try and get some time with the girl he believed was in love with him. The car handled beautifully along the narrow dike road and seemed clued to the pavement though the curves. The air felt like it was getting even hotter.

Probably like a hundred or a hundred and five degrees by now. Same damn heat as I suffered in Iraq. Dry and it'll suck the water right out of your skin.

Finally he reached Courtland and the training center and was told that Raven had rode the bike a mile or so down the road to pick a few pears from the trees. Alex reentered the car and went out to find her. He slowly coasted down the road to her after he spied her on tip toes, holding on to a branch to reach a pear just out of reach.

As he walked toward her he asked. „Need some help love?”

Startled she turned and found him suddenly within a few inches of her. „Alex no...”

Before she could finish her sentence he grabbed her into his arms to kiss her fervently about the eyes, cheeks and then her lovely lips. Once their lips had locked together all resistance from Raven melted replaced with heat and a sudden lust until they each heard a clearing of the throat.

Alex looked to the left and downward to the farmland below and saw two identical wizened Chinese men looking up at him with the same big grin.

„Jesus Christ Raven you've caused me to see double.”

„No my love and you're my love; you've just met my friend Washington Wong and his brother George. There's quite a story in that but right now I need you alone. George Washington this is my soon to be lover Alex York.”

„Ah Alex your lady is so direct and honest. You're a lucky man. Be good to her and keep her safe. Bye for now.”

„As the Wongs left Alex put the bike in the car as best as he could. It would hang over the side but they only had to travel a mile or so to the training center.

„How do you tell the Wongs apart”

„You don't,” she replied. „You just call either George Washington.”

After dropping the bike off at the training center, they returned to the Wong's orchard.

„Stop, stop, I never got my pear.” Raven pleaded.

Jumping from the car she ran to a tree where the upper branches were readily available to the roadway and pick two of the ripest she could find and returned to the driver's side. She threw the two pears on the passenger seat, leaned down and gave Alex a long, lingering, hungry kiss.

A couple riding by on a tandem bicycle yelled out, „Hey get a room!”

„Get us a room Alex. Sacramento is that way,” she stated as she pointed in the direction that the couple on the tandem had taken.

As they drove toward Sacramento they slowed down to pass the biking couple.

„Thanks for the suggestion,” Raven shouted.

„We're off to Sacramento to get a room.” Alex added.

Upon entering the outskirts of the city Alex drove aimlessly about looking for a suitable small motel where he and Raven could spend a few hours. They found themselves on a deserted stretch of road with few buildings when Alex heard the

roar of a motorcycle approaching fast. As he brought the Mini Cooper to a quick full stop the man on the back of the motorcycle had a revolver in his right hand, but then he developed a third eye caused by Raven's .380 slug boring through his forehead.

„Oh shit,” yelled the other man as he gunned the bike, laid over the handle bars to avoid presenting a large target and took off. Raven held her fire to let him escape.

„Assassins?” She asked.

„No they were probably just punks who were out to steal the car and sell it to a chop shop, but you did the right thing. Kill first and then sort it out.”

„Alex there appears to be no witnesses, so no need to dump the car. Now I strongly suggest we find a hotel in downtown Sacramento where they have their own garage and hotel security. Find us a place that makes me feel secure Alex. I'm just a defenseless little twenty-four year old woman surrounded by a multitude of dangers that threaten my virtue or my very life. Find a nice hotel Alex, find it now.”

„Yes baby, it shall be as you say.” Alex replied with a smirk. “Anything else the defenseless little girl wants to add?”

„Oh yes Alex, oh yes,” she replied. „Killing makes me so horny.”

