

The Interrogation

Justin Hall, prequel

by Ethan Jones, ...

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*To the brave women and men defending our country,
whose names we will never know*

I opened my eyes. Water dripped from them. My world had turned upside down. It took me a moment to realize I was hanging by my feet and tied to a large hook fastened to the dungeon's ceiling. My hands were cuffed behind my back, and I was stripped of most of my clothes.

"The infidel's waking up," a guard shouted in Arabic, a language the guards didn't realize I knew.

He got up from his chair and left, slamming the iron door behind him.

It was strange for him to leave. Earlier, after throwing a bucket of cold water on my head to bring me back to my senses, the guards continued to interrogate me, punching me in between questions. Not this time.

I looked around the dungeon. A dim lamp on a small desk lit the area. The smell of urine and vomit overwhelmed my nose, summoning swelling nausea in my stomach. Pools of brownish liquid stained the floor. Whom did they torture here before me? How long had I been there? I remembered when they dragged me to this place, after the rescue operation to free the Canadian hostages went wrong. Was that last night? Two nights ago?

The door creaked. A small man walked in, followed by two large guards. He helped his limping leg by leaning on a walking stick. A metallic briefcase glinted in the hand of one of the guards, ominous. I remembered the pain he caused me with his knife and I clenched my teeth. And I remembered the guard's name too. Tarek.

"Hello, Mister Unbreakable. Nice to meet you," the small man said in English. "My name's Ali."

"The pleasure's all yours; the pain's all mine," I managed to say between wincing.

I hadn't told them my name, Justin Hall, or that I worked for the Canadian Intelligence Service. I hadn't given them anything. That's why this man, Ali, was here.

I stared at his face, but in the dark cell I couldn't discern any features. He stepped closer to the light, and Tarek placed Ali's briefcase on the table. Ali's hook nose became visible, along with his steep brow and thick, gray moustache. He looked older than in the photo in our office files. Ali Akbar Hassani, the leader of the Armed Islamic Front, an Algerian terrorist group, sat in the chair with a small sigh.

"How are they treating you here?" he asked.

I grinned. Ali was playing the good interrogator. The one that "cared" about you and wanted to gain your trust. His dogs had told him torturing me was going nowhere. Still, I didn't think they played the good cop, bad cop routine in Libya. In Afghanistan and Iran, two places where I had seen the inside of a jail cell, there were only torturers. And they were not bad; they were evil.

"Pull him down," Ali barked at the guards. "Gently."

They untied the rope and dropped me to the floor. My face stood inches from the brown stain. Blood. My own blood.

Four large hands lifted me up and placed me in a chair across from Ali.

"That's better, isn't it?" Ali asked.

"*Na'am, shukran.*" A "yes" and a "thank you" in Arabic. "*Sheikh Hassani,*" I added. It was the coveted title Ali had been seeking for years.

Ali's eyebrows arched. His jaw dropped. They weren't expecting me to speak Arabic, and Ali didn't think I would recognize him. Always know your enemy.

"You've done your homework," Ali said with a nod, his face as still as a corpse. His eyes peered at my bloody chest where Tarek had carved his initial with a sharp knife. "What's your name?"

"You can call me 'the Canadian,'" I said in a soft voice. "And I have some intel for you."

A self-righteous smile spread across Ali's face. He looked at the guards to emphasize that he was the one getting the intelligence out of me. Perhaps he thought his presence had broken me. It hadn't. I was willing to talk to stall the terrorists and give the rescue team time. The information I planned to give to Ali would cause no harm to my agency or any other intelligence agency. The intel might even do some good if Ali chose to act upon it.

"Go on," he said. He gave the guards a smile and nodded at me.

"The intel's very sensitive. For your ears only."

"I trust my men completely." Ali's voice rose to a shout.

"I have no doubts you do. But you need to hear this first."

Ali glanced at his walking stick, then at the guards.

"I'm handcuffed," I said. "I can't go anywhere."

He snapped open his briefcase. It contained the tools of his trade and resembled a field surgeon's case: scalpels, knives, pliers, and scissors. Instruments of pain. Ali picked up a knife with a long, serrated blade and held it tight in his hand. He pointed it at me, then barked at the guards, "Outside."

I waited until the door was shut before saying, "Thank you, Sheik."

"What are the Canadians going to do?"

I shook my head. "Honestly, I don't know. I hope they'll send a rescue mission. But I'm here, and I can't be sure."

Ali raised his knife an inch and leaned forward. "So what is it you have to tell me? Will the Canadians negotiate the hostages' release?"

"I wouldn't count on it. We sent in a rescue team, which failed. The second one will not."

"This isn't real intelligence and is not worth my time." He shook his head.

"I'm not finished. I want to tell you about Farook Abazza."

Ali fell back in his seat. "How do you know that dog?"

Abazza was a powerful Algerian terrorist mastermind and Ali's archenemy.

"I know about him. And I know what happened." I pointed at Ali's useless leg.

"What do you know?"

"How it happened and more importantly, who did it."

"You're going to tell me it's that dog who ambushed me?"

"I'm gonna prove to you it was Abazza who organized it."

"I'm listening."

"Your convoy was coming from Dellys to Algiers, when a bomb blew up the lead car. Your Mercedes wasn't far enough away, so your leg was crushed. What you don't know is that the bomb was placed under the car when the driver filled up at a gas station in Dellys. One of the men at the station worked for Abazza."

"You want me to believe this?"

“No, not yet. I want you to check it first. The name of the station worker is Rafet. He’s Turkish. You’ll find him at one of Abazza’s safe houses in the suburbs of Algiers. The one with the swimming pool. He’ll tell you the exact same story, after a bit of persuasion.” I nodded toward his briefcase.

“OK. I’ll check it out,” Ali said. He didn’t sound very convinced.

“One more thing. Your new bodyguards, the Syrians. I would double-check their references. You’ll find out they worked for Abazza less than a year ago.”

“If this is true, how would you know all this about me and my enemies?”

“As you said earlier, I do my homework,” I said, keeping a patronizing tone out of my voice. “You deal in pain; I deal in intel.”

Ali nodded. “Guards,” he called.

The two guards barged in, ready for action. Tarek placed his large hand on my shoulder. I winced, so that Ali could see the distortion of my face, although I felt no new pain.

“No one lays a hand on him until I come back,” Ali ordered the guards as he climbed to his feet.

Tarek withdrew his hand and nodded with some reluctance. The other guard picked up Ali’s briefcase.

Ali nodded. “Clean him up, move him to a nicer cell, and get him some water.”

I smiled. Information is power. I thanked God for the files we received from our men in Algiers.

“He won’t protect you forever,” Tarek muttered as he closed the cell door.

* * * * *

The next time I saw Ali, he was in a bad mood. A very bad mood.

As soon as they entered my new cell, he shouted at the guards, “Tie him up.”

“Why? What—”

One of the guards punched me in the jaw. My head slammed against the wall and I fell into darkness.

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My world was upside down when I came back to my senses. I was in the dungeon, but this time blood dripped from my nose. Tarek stood in front of me, his fists and chest blood-stained.

“What the hell happened?” I shouted. “Ali, what the hell—”

“You lied to me.” Ali’s voice came from behind me, as a razor-sharp pain pierced my side.

“Aaaah,” I screamed. A blade cut through my flesh. “Aaaaaaah.”

I tried to think why Ali might be furious, but my mind went blank. I had told him the truth and given him no reason for this reaction.

Ali circled me, howling in my face like a rabid beast. “You said there was no rescue mission. Now I hear that your partner, a crazy witch, is tearing up Tripoli, looking for you and the hostages.” He wiped the blade on my face, right under my cheekbone, slicing my skin. Blood oozed down, blinding my right eye.

“I... we didn’t talk about that. I said—”

Tarek interrupted me with a quick blow to my stomach. Blood bubbled in my throat, and the room began to spin around.

“Throw him face down on the table,” Ali shouted at the guards. “I’ll cut him up like a lamb.”

I struggled, but the guards overpowered me. I closed my eyes, wishing I could turn off the pain and shut down my body just as easily as my mind. But there was no escape. A flurry of blows came from both guards.

“Easy, easy,” Ali said. “I want him to be awake for this. I want him to feel every second of this pain.”

His knife pierced the skin under my shoulder blade. I bit the table, trying to kill the pain and my screams. Ali’s trained hands followed the curve of my shoulders, the blade travelling down my spine, carving a long strip of skin and flesh.

“Ah...” I muffled my scream and writhed in agony.

“Ask me,” Ali whispered in my ear. “Ask me to kill you and end your misery.”

“F... fuck you,” I spat out.

Tarek’s fist landed on my head and punched me back into a world of darkness.

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I had no idea how long I’d been out cold. It was dark, and I was lying on my stomach on a cold floor. I tried to turn to my side, but jolts of pain stopped me. My feet were free, but my hands were cuffed to the front. I limped to my knees, and then to my feet. Where was I? The same cell? Another cell?

My back touched a wall and a scream left my lips. My back sizzled with pain, and the torture scene came back to my mind. I tried to focus on the reason for Ali’s outburst and his actions. Why was he so enraged? Was he talking about Carrie? It had to be. She’d never allow a rescue team to go without her.

The thought of my trusted CIS partner gave me hope. If Ali was furious because of Carrie’s rescue team, that meant she was close. Very close. And maybe there was hope for the Canadian doctors held hostage as well.

I took a few steps around the cell. My feet were weak, but I could walk. I decided to save my energy and rest. I tried to sit on the floor, but as my skin stretched, I felt three snakes of pain crawling through my back. The wounds Ali had inflicted on me began seeping. Within moments I could feel my entire back covered in blood.

I cursed Ali and the guards, and ignored the aches surging through my back. The wounds felt superficial. If no ligaments and muscles were severed, I would be as good as new in a few weeks. There would be some scars, but the wounds would heal. The grave marks carved in memory would take much longer to heal. Some might never heal.

I kept pacing. I needed an escape plan, in case Carrie’s team couldn’t make it. But what could I trade with Ali? What could buy me some time? The intel about his rival’s terrorist network and the people wanting him dead was repaid with a slashed back. Maybe he would be more thankful for a favor for his family. His sons? Yes, his younger son.

I heard keys rattling, and someone opened the door. Then they turned on the ceiling bulb. I raised my hand to protect my eyes from the blinding light.

Tarek was the first one to come in. “You’re alive?” He spat on the ground.

Ali hobbled in after a second man, one I hadn’t seen before.

“Leave us,” Ali told Tarek.

I locked eyes with Ali and then with his bodyguard.

“Why?” I asked when Tarek had left the cell. “I gave you good intel. This is how you pay me back?”

Ali shrugged, then sighed. “I checked and I know your intelligence was good. But I had to do it. Your friends killed three of my men and almost found the safe house and the hostages. If not me, then it would have been Tarek. And he would have not been that kind.”

“Kind? We have a different concept of the word.”

“I have three dead men, and you have three scars. I think that’s fair.”

I kept silent, ignoring a throbbing pain in my chest.

“Anything else you want to tell me?” Ali asked.

My eyes went to his bodyguard. I didn’t recognize him from the office files.

“You can speak freely,” Ali said. “He can be trusted.”

“Can you? I’m not interested in more scars.”

“I thought we were over that. As long as your friends make no moves, you’re safe.”

“Give me a phone, and I’ll make sure of that.”

Ali laughed. “No, no phones. I know about code words and phone interceptions. I can’t have you talking to anyone.”

“You know she’ll try again and again until she finds me.”

“We’re moving you tonight, so that’s not going to happen. Now why don’t we worry about making your stay with us more pleasant, shall we? Who else wants to kill me?”

“The list is so long, where do I start?”

Ali smiled. “With the most dangerous.”

“No, I have a different idea. How about we talk about your boy, Mustafa?”

Ali’s bodyguard took a step forward, his shoulders rising up at the mentioning of Ali’s younger son.

“Leave my son out of this,” Ali said. “This is between you and me.”

“Yes, but it involves him. In a good way.”

Ali shook his head. “I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Maybe, but it will help him hear.”

His eyes narrowed in confusion, or perhaps irritation. “What? What did you just say?”

“I said I know how to help your son hear.”

Ali craned his head. “Mustafa lost his hearing five years ago, shortly after his birth. But how do you know that?”

“It’s my job. And you’re *almost* correct. Your doctor at the Algerian hospital told you that. Have you sought a second opinion?”

Ali sighed. “Of course I have. We saw two other doctors. Both trained abroad, in the UK and Germany. They both said there’s no hope.”

“There’s always hope. I know of a specialist in Europe who’s renowned for returning hearing to many patients like your son.”

Ali swallowed hard and looked at his bodyguard, who returned a blank stare.

“What do you have to lose?” I asked.

“How would this work?”

"I'll make the arrangements. You can send your wife and your son, since you're on so many no-fly lists." I offered Ali a small smile.

He grinned.

"I'm assuming you'll make all the necessary checks," I said. "For my part, I'll convince the doctor to see your son. He owes me a favor."

Ali peered at me. "You're being quite vague," he said. "No name of the doctor, no name of the country..."

"Last time I gave you specifics, I was tortured. But since you insist, find me pen and paper, and I'll write down the name and the address of the doctor."

Ali looked at his bodyguard, who patted his shirt and pants for a pen. After finding none, he opened the door and shouted at one of the guards. A few seconds later, he brought in a broken pencil and a hundred-dollar bill.

I scribbled on the banknote and handed it over to Ali.

"Sch... Schwarg..." Ali struggled to pronounce the name of the Swiss doctor.

"Just dial the number and explain to the doctor what you need. Tell him someone he knows will talk to him about your child."

Ali nodded. "What do you want in exchange?"

"I want a doctor too. For my wounds." I motioned toward my back. "Before they get infected."

"I'll see what I can do. Anything else?" he asked with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes. A pistol."

The bodyguard snorted, but Ali's face remained calm. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Your son's life for mine," I replied. "He'll get to hear again. I'll get to be free again."

"You really think you can fight your way through my men with a pistol?" He whipped me an incredulous look.

"I'll need some ammo as well. A full mag should do the trick."

"All right. You'll get your gun after I confirm everything you told me is true." Ali waved the hundred-dollar bill in my face.

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

The bodyguard gave me an angry stare as he followed Ali outside the cell.

* * * * *

I paced the small cell, waiting for Ali's return. The information I gave him was true, so I wasn't worried about that. I wondered whether he would come through with his promise. Whether he would give me a gun. A gun that actually worked. A gun and ammo, so I could break out. Abdul, my local operative with the *mukhabarat*, Libyan secret intelligence, was held in another cell somewhere in this place. I had to look for him and free him too. Would my mind game work? Would Ali betray his cause for his son? He said so, but he was a terrorist. I couldn't trust him. I couldn't trust anyone.

Someone threw open the door and a guard brought in a short man I didn't know. He carried a metallic briefcase similar to Ali's and looked as happy as I was to be in my cell.

"*Tabeeb*," the guard said and gave me a look of disgust.

“Thank you, doctor,” I welcomed the short man.

“Down on the floor,” he barked. “Ali ordered me to tend to your wounds.”

He was a doctor with a terrorist organization. I couldn’t expect any kindness from him.

I heard the briefcase snap open. The doctor poured a liquid on my shoulders, which I suspected was alcohol because of the nose-piercing smell. It stung as if an entire beehive was assaulting my skin. He proceeded to clean my wounds, paying little care to the roughness of his rag on my sliced skin. I spared him the pleasure of hearing me gasp in pain. I took deep breaths and counted the seconds until my ordeal would be over.

The doctor placed what I hoped were sterile pads over my wounds. I was glad he didn’t insist on stitches. I couldn’t trust that the needle was sterile or the doctor’s skills stellar. Not to mention that I was still his enemy.

Finally, he stretched a strip of adhesive tape across my wounds. The doctor had completed my treatment. He struggled to shut his briefcase. Its hinges creaked.

“They’ll heal and you’ll be fine.” The doctor’s gloomy voice sounded as if he was telling me I had only a few days to live.

I stood up. My back was already feeling better. The bleeding had stopped. The doctor had eased my pain. “Thank you.”

The doctor shrugged.

The guard unlocked the door and they both left.

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The next time the door opened, Ali stumbled inside alone. Tarek hesitated a second, but Ali waved him off with a head gesture, and Tarek shut the door. Ali’s briefcase hung in his left hand.

“I checked with our Swiss doctor,” he said, shifting his body weight onto his good leg. “Everything matches up. The problem is, he needs to talk to you.”

“Yes, I told you I have to convince him to see your son. Why is that a problem?”

Ali stepped closer to me. “I can’t have you using a phone.”

“Why? You don’t trust me?”

He grinned. “We all work for someone. The people I work for monitor all phone calls from this location. I used a secure phone at a friend’s house. I can’t take you there.”

I noticed resentment in his low voice. Ali’s head hung low.

“But I can give you this.” He offered me the briefcase.

I held it with my cuffed hands while Ali opened it. I looked at a shining Beretta pistol.

“It works?” I asked.

“Why else would I give it to you?”

“Ammo?”

“Thirteen rounds. Should be enough.”

“It’s more than enough.”

I took a deep breath. Was I playing Ali or was Ali playing me?

He read my mind. “I’m doing this so my son can hear me when I talk to him. So he can hear when his mother sings to him. I’m not doing this for you.”

I nodded and picked up the Beretta. It felt right in my hand, and I had to suppress the urge to jam it against Ali's throat. He locked the briefcase while I hid the Beretta in my khakis.

"Abdul, your associate, is three cells down, to the left. There are two guards outside your door and one outside his. There are more guards downstairs and upstairs. They all carry AK-47s."

Perhaps Ali gave me the last piece of intel as a warning. I took it as a word of advice: You need to upgrade your gun really soon.

"Thank you. I'll make sure your son sees the doctor. Then it's in God's hands if he'll hear again."

"*Insha'Allah*," Ali said. "And remember, if you do not keep your word, I will hunt you down and will slice you to pieces. I'll finish the job I started here."

I nodded my understanding.

He hobbled to the door and called out to the guards. Tarek opened the door just as Ali turned to me. "You lie, you lie, you keep lying, you infidel," he shouted. He raised his walking stick and brought it down hard on my left arm. I cringed, although the lash caused little pain. "You'll rot in here until you tell me the truth," Ali howled and stormed outside the cell.

Tarek grinned, while I retreated to a corner. "I'll be back, and you'll start talking."

The cold steel of the Beretta urged me to pull it out and blow the smirk off his face. I looked away. I had to bide my time and wait for the right moment.

* * * * *

The right moment came sooner than I expected, but I was ready for it. Tarek kicked open my cell door. Another guard closed it behind him, leaving me alone with my tormentor.

"You ready for this?" he shouted. His knife gleamed as he tossed it from his left hand to his right.

"Are you?" I said, venom in my voice.

Tarek grinned. "You forgot already? Your blood is still dripping from my knife." He pointed at his instrument of pain.

The sight of my blood staining his blade pushed me over the edge. I pulled out the Beretta. "Things are different now."

Tarek's eyes almost popped out of their sockets as he gaped at the gun. He stumbled for words for a couple of seconds, then dropped the knife. He raised both hands in the air.

"How did you get—"

"Shut up if you want to live."

Tarek kept quiet.

"On your knees."

"You're going to kill me?" He sounded scared and confused.

"If you don't shut up."

He dropped to his knees with a loud thud.

"Quiet, quiet," I whispered in his ear. "Spread your arms."

I slammed my foot on his back and threw him to the ground. "Stay there and don't move."

I took his pistol, an old Makarov, and put it aside. I searched his pockets for the handcuff keys. "Where are the keys?"

The realization that I was still cuffed gave Tarek courage. He shoved me with his elbow, then swung around. I hit him on the side of the head with the Beretta. He responded with a sharp blow to my ribs, which sucked the air out of my lungs. He reached for my gun, but I pulled back in time. Tarek lifted up a knee and kicked me, the boot landing on my side. I hit the wall and almost dropped the Beretta.

"Don't move." I pointed the gun at Tarek, who was crawling toward his pistol, two steps away from him.

"Or what? You're going to shoot me?" He sneered.

"Don't move," I repeated. I didn't want to alert the guards by shooting him. But I couldn't have him get back his gun. "Don't."

Tarek's hand gripped the gun, and he swung it around. Before he could fire, I pulled the trigger. My shot rang out like a cannon in the small cell. The bullet pierced Tarek's neck. His hand fell, but not before his fingers squeezed off a round from the Makarov.

The door opened and an AK-47-wielding guard charged in. I slid behind Tarek's body and planted a bullet in the guard's chest.

Where were the stupid keys? I rummaged through Tarek's pants pockets and finally found them. Voices and footsteps from outside the hall grew louder. I fiddled with the handcuffs and got them open just as another guard entered the cell. My AK-47 barrage cut him down before he had a chance.

OK, Abdul, where are you?

I took a quick peek and fired a shot into the hall. Someone returned fire and I ducked. A bullet whizzed past my head. I retreated inside, collecting the two pistols and the other AK-47. Abdul and I would need all the firepower we could get.

Waiting for a pause in the shooting, I muttered a short prayer. "Lord, help me die another day."

I fired a small burst, followed by a longer burst, as I stepped outside the cell. I walked quickly to my left toward Abdul's cell. I threw a fleeting glance to the right. The exit was in that direction. A bright light came from under the door. In a few seconds, Abdul and I would be running toward that door. That's where our real fight would begin.

