

Missing

Mike Paull

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Spy Thriller

One

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His ankles were shackled, and he strained against the noose that chafed the sides of his neck. His wrists were bound, but he managed to cradle a copy of the Quran. He read aloud to make his voice heard above the shouting and he spewed back curses that were hurled at him. Today, Saddam Hussein, the man who built the scaffold and condemned so many to it, would himself die on it.

The Americans agreed the execution would be handled by the Iraqis. That meant no U.S. military; however, two Americans were allowed to attend: Randy Nichols, the station chief for the American Intelligence unit in Baghdad, and his partner, Craig Cooper.

As the big moment drew closer, the mood of the onlookers morphed from anger to rage and finally to hysteria. A glassy-eyed man dressed in a loosely-fitting robe and a wrapped head scarf, maneuvered for a more advantageous position. He wedged his shoulders between Coop and Randy and when he was in range, he delivered the ultimate insult in this part of the world. He slipped off his sandals and one at a time launched them

at Saddam.

The executioner pulled a hood from his pocket and tried to place it over Saddam's head. Saddam jerked away and spit on the man's shirt. The hangman shrugged and looked to the group of military officers seated in the front row. The one with the thickest mustache and the largest cluster of medals nodded. The executioner tugged on a handle and the floor dropped from under Saddam. The sound of his neck snapping, like a dead branch being ripped from a giant oak, temporarily muted the apoplectic spectators.

Witnessing a man die wasn't new to Coop, and he was trained not to have a visceral response, but this time he could taste the bile from his stomach rise to the bottom of his throat. He swallowed hard to force it back and he peered around the room; the delirium was starting all over again. He spotted the door and headed for it.

He let the door slam behind him. The quiet of the hallway was a welcome relief. He leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette, but before he could get a second drag, the door opened and Randy stepped out to join him. "You left in a hurry," he said.

Coop inhaled, savoring the bitter taste of the unfiltered Turkish tobacco before letting the smoke seep out through his nostrils. "Yeah, I ran out of popcorn."

Randy squinted and shook his head. "I don't get it. What's your problem?"

"I just don't think a hanging should be a spectator sport."

"Look, the asshole's dead. That's all that matters. Who knows, maybe it'll make our job easier."

"Maybe." Coop tossed his cigarette to the concrete

floor, but before he could snuff it out, the door opened and throngs of people spilled into the hallway. The crowd moved toward the exit, sweeping Coop and Randy along in the wave.

The Camp Justice military base had cordoned off a section of the parade grounds nearest the prison and turned it into a parking lot for the day's spectacle. As Coop and Randy approached, a wind off the Tigris River blew a damp mist through the air that permeated Coop's windbreaker. He began to shiver and hugged his shoulders. Randy keyed the lock to their mud-spattered Honda and settled in behind the wheel. Coop lost no time slipping into the seat next to him.

Two soldiers waved the line of cars through the gates and onto the road bordering the river. Coop looked at his watch. It wasn't yet 7 a.m., but in spite of the dank weather, the streets were jammed with civilians. They were laughing and cheering, some were dancing and a few were even firing guns into the air.

"Okay, he's dead. So, how d'ya figure it'll be easier for us now?" Coop said.

"I'm thinking it may loosen up some tongues. I've got a guy who wants to meet with us tonight."

"A guy? What guy?"

"I'm not sure, but he says he knows where Saddam hid the gold."

Coop suppressed a laugh, holding it to a smirk. "That's convenient. Where did he come from all of a sudden?"

"Probably heard about the reward."

"So did the last dozen guys. You know how that turned out."

Randy shook his head. “Don’t be such a fuckin’ cynic, it’s the way our job works, right?”

The question sounded rhetorical; Coop ignored it. Instead, he lit another cigarette. Randy narrowed his eyes and shot him an icy look. It was the same one Coop’s mother planted on him when he was thirteen and she caught him in the basement smoking one of his dad’s cigars.

Coop opened his window and fanned the smoke in its direction as he surveyed the landscape. He was told Baghdad was once a beautiful city, but that was before the invasion of 2003 and well before he arrived thirteen months ago. Now it was pretty grim. Boarded-up buildings were covered with graffiti, homeless camps dotted the roadway, and a stench from the polluted Tigris river overpowered the fresh fragrance of the morning drizzle.

One section of the city, the International Green Zone, hadn’t changed. It still looked as it did before the war. Thick concrete walls and heavily armed guards surrounded Saddam’s former presidential complex. Within its walls, thousands of Americans, mostly government employees, lived and worked and played. They referred to it as the Ultimate Gated Community.

Randy pulled to the West Gate where two Humvees and a half dozen soldiers were strategically positioned next to the entrance. One of the soldiers, sporting sergeant stripes on his sleeve, approached the driver’s side of the Honda. “Morning, sir. Credentials?”

Coop handed his papers to Randy, who piled his own on top and passed them to the sergeant. The guard examined the documents, handed them back to Randy

and signaled another soldier to open the barrier.

“Have a good day, sir,” the sergeant said. Randy gave an artificial salute and drove into the Green Zone.

“So, what time are we meeting this guy?” Coop asked.

“Around midnight.”

Coop stared at him. “He can’t get into the Green Zone that late at night.”

“He won’t have to. The meeting’s in Sadr City.”

The hair on the back of Coop’s neck stood on end. “You’re kidding me. That’s the body bag capital of Iraq.”

“That’s where he wants to meet, okay? So don’t worry about it.”

“Doesn’t smell right to me.”

Randy pulled into the Embassy garage and squeezed the Honda between a couple of SUVs. “It doesn’t matter. You’re not going.”

“What’re you saying?”

“I’m saying you’ve got a crappy attitude. I’ll handle it myself.”

“Bullshit, you’re not going to Sadr City alone.”

“Ahmad will be with me.”

“He’s an interpreter. He doesn’t even carry a weapon. I’m going with you.”

“No, you’re not.”

Coop’s face turned crimson and his eyes narrowed. “So, you’re asking me to stay home?”

Randy got out of the car and slammed the door as hard as he could. “It’s not a request, it’s an order.”

Two

Ahmad was young for his job—only twenty-three—but he had a couple of things going for him. He was born in Baghdad, knew it like the back of his hand and he spoke English so flawlessly he was often taken for a Brit. He was the perfect fit to multitask as driver and interpreter.

The choice from the motor pool was an Opel or a Ford. The temperature had dropped another twelve degrees, so Ahmad picked the Ford. It had the better heater. Randy arrived just before eleven-fifteen and slipped into the passenger seat. Despite the cold temperature, beads of sweat dotted his forehead. His left eye began to twitch, a sign his nagging habit had returned. He handed Ahmad a piece of paper. “Can you find it?”

He studied the Sadr City address. “It’s not a problem, but you know this area is crawling with insurgents, and Americans aren’t safe there.”

A voice from the back seat piped up. “That’s why I’m coming along.”

Randy turned around and saw Coop grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Damn it, Coop. Get outa the car.”

“No.”

“I’m still in charge around here. I said, get out.”

Coop lit a cigarette and settled back into the seat. Ahmad grimaced. He’d been witness to other arguments between these two. “Sir, we’re going to be late,” he said.

Randy checked his watch. “Shit. Okay, get going.” He glared at Coop. “When we get back, you can pack your bags.”

A threat from Randy was not something new. Coop knew if the meeting went well and history repeated itself, Randy would renege and forget all about tonight. They’d be laughing over it at breakfast tomorrow morning.

Ahmad stopped at the exit gate and rolled down his window. The night sergeant peered in and asked if they’d be returning tonight. Ahmad turned to Randy who leaned toward the open window. “Yeah, we’ll be back in a couple of hours.” The sergeant signaled for the gate to open.

They drove out of the gate and onto the nearby boulevard. It was crowded for this time of night, but a couple of miles to the east the four lanes shrank to two and the traffic thinned. Five minutes later, the Ford was the only car on the road. Ahmad spotted an unlit alley and took a quick left into the pitch-black hole. He pulled to a stop in front of a set of run-down buildings that appeared to be one step ahead of a bulldozer. He cut the lights.

They’d been through this drill before—a couple minutes of wait time before their eyes accommodated to the darkness. The details of the buildings began to come into focus. Randy and Coop un-holstered their pistols and the three men got out of the car. About twenty yards

ahead, they spied the glow of a cigarette and inched toward it. Randy poked Ahmad's shoulder. "His name's Mustafa."

Ahmad shouted in the direction of the light. "Mustafa?"

A bearded man dressed in peasant clothing came into view. He was trembling and barely able to hold his cigarette. His eyes darted around the perimeter. He said something in Arabic. Randy leaned toward Ahmad, "Ask him what he has for us."

Ahmad rattled off a few words in Arabic and waited for a response. "He says he has the information you're looking for, but he wants to know about the reward first."

"That figures. Tell him it depends on the info."

"He says he knows where Saddam hid the gold."

"How could he know that?" Coop asked.

Arabic got thrown back and forth between Ahmad and Mustafa, while Randy and Coop stood by. Ahmad turned to Randy. "He says he grew up with Saddam in Tikrit. He helped him when he was on the run."

Coop said, "So wh..."

Randy held up his hand. "Coop, I'll handle this. Okay?"

Coop pursed his lips and clenched his teeth. "Yeah. Fine."

"Tell him I could care less who helped Saddam. Ask him about the gold," Randy said.

"He says he was with Saddam when several trucks unloaded a bunch of barrels into a warehouse. There were armed guards all over the place."

"So why did he think it was gold?"

“Because Saddam said it was,” Ahmad answered.

“Okay. Tomorrow he takes us to the warehouse.”

Mustafa muttered a few sentences to Ahmad. Ahmad looked at Randy. “He wants to know how much first.”

“Tell him twenty-thousand American...but only if the gold’s there.”

Ahmad passed the number to Mustafa, who mumbled a few words back to him. “He wants something more. He wants you to get him and his family out of the country.”

Randy shook his head. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“He knows that, but he says as soon as Saddam went to the gallows, his life was put in danger. He says you’re not the only one who will come looking for the gold.”

Coop leaned over to whisper into Randy’s ear, but Randy waved him off and said to Ahmad, “Okay, if the gold’s in the warehouse, we’ll get them to Turkey.” He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and handed it to Mustafa. “Five thousand...the rest depends on what we find in the warehouse.”

Mustafa grasped the cash. Out of the darkness, a red laser dot appeared on his neck. Coop recognized it immediately and lunged to push Mustafa out of the way, but a flash and a simultaneous gunshot burst from an adjacent building. Reflexively, Mustafa’s left hand reached for his neck where blood spurted from the wound. He crumpled to the ground with his right hand still clutching the money.

“Goddammit, goddammit, get to the car,” Randy yelled. Coop and Ahmad took off, but Randy paused to

pry the money from the dead man's grip.

Ahmad, the youngest and the fastest of the group, reached the car first and jumped into the driver's seat. Coop was only a few steps behind. Randy, who was carrying an extra layer of fat around his midsection, was not able to keep up and lagged several yards back.

Another gunshot rang out. Coop kept running, but after a few strides felt a hot sensation working its way down his back. He reached around to tug at his shirt; it was wet and sticky. The heat intensified until it felt like a hot poker was working its way into his lungs. He dropped to his knees, looked at his blood-soaked hand and fell face down in the dirt.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there, but when he regained consciousness, his nostrils were filled with the sweet smell of charcoal with a hint of sulfur—the unmistakable odor of gunpowder. He knew he had to get to the car, but his legs felt like jelly, so he crawled. He clawed at the dirt and he pulled himself forward, an inch at a time until he sensed he was close. He strained to lift his head and blinked several times as he peered into the darkness. The car was gone.