

Paul Preston



THE PERSIAN PRINCESS
Obsession Series, Book 3

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The Persian Princess
Book Three of the Obsessions Series
by Paul Preston

ISBN: 978-1-945648-02-1

A Pink Flamingo Media Ebook

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Chapter One

Agent Zardooz

The call from my Handler came on the Friday after Thanksgiving. I told my parents the usual cover story. My company was sending me once again on an extended business trip overseas. I would be constantly traveling and I had no idea how long I'd be gone.

"You only just arrived a few days ago Brittany! Don't you ever get a break? I don't like that company you work for. We never get to see you," Mom said, upset.

"I know, but what am I going to do? It's my job Mom," I said.

"You have to leave right away?" Dad asked.

"I'm afraid so," I said.

I packed quickly and my parents drove me to the airport. The chances were better than average I would never see them again. I hugged and kissed them goodbye at the curb. Mom turned away, wiping tears from her cheeks. I kept my feelings inside.

"Take care honey," Dad said, looking deeply into my eyes.

From what little information my Handler could convey on the secured line, the new assignment would begin immediately, was extremely dangerous and involved undercover sexual activity. Just my cup of tea. My Handler told the CIA Director I wasn't ready to take on a new assignment and needed more time to decompress, but his assessment was apparently overruled since the new mission was of utmost urgency to the national security of the United States. I was ordered to catch the next flight to Chicago and given an address where the meeting was to take place. Only the Directors of the CIA, FBI, and the President of the United States knew about the meeting, as well as my Handler and another field operator. The details would be explained at the meeting.

“You made it kid,” my Handler said. “You’re playing in the big leagues now.”

I arrived in Chicago, caught a cab and gave my driver the address of the meeting. As most men do when they first see me, the cabbie wanted to chat. In other words... how can I put this delicately? He wanted to have sex with me. I know you may think I’m boasting, but it’s simply a statement of fact. I’ve got a pretty face, a sensuous body and an uninhibited nature, a lethal combination to the opposite sex. Every man, married or single, responds to me in the same way. When they first see my long thick black hair, my dark eyes and pale skin, and especially the heavy white flesh of my breasts, men always seem to want to “talk” to me. The driver asked if I was Persian.

“Baleh,” I said, in a friendly manner. (Yes.)

The cab driver responded excitedly in Farsi that he was from Iran as well. He asked me for my name, where I was from, offered to show me around Chicago and take me to dinner and a show. I guess he thought I looked like the kind of woman who might say yes, if asked politely. I suppose my open, flirtatious nature and the provocative way I dressed did give the impression I was up for an anonymous hookup. I made eye contact with him through the rear view mirror and he flashed a hopeful smile.

I politely declined his offer, but the idea did cross my mind. Am I that much of a slut? Was I seriously considering having sex on the way to perhaps the most important meeting of my career? If I arrived late smelling of raunchy cab driver sex I know my Handler would find it highly inappropriate, but not unexpected. You see, it’s no secret. I have a reputation. My life has passed by in a haze of sexual encounters, even before the CIA officially sanctioned my promiscuity. Everyone from the Director to the custodians at Langley knows I’m fair game.

After leaving behind a trail broken hearts I tried, half-heartedly, to change my evil ways. Several years ago I went

to a meeting in the basement of a church in DC and admitted to a group of strangers in a dimly lit room that I, Brittany Milani, was a sex and love addict. I knew I was supposed to feel remorse for my licentious behavior, but as soon as the admission left my lips I secretly felt proud, like it was a badge of honor to be sexually liberated.

The way I saw it I could give my obsessions over to a "Higher Power" I didn't believe in, or I could stop worrying about what other people think and completely let my sexuality free. The choice was simple. After the meeting I was assigned a dark handsome man as my sponsor to help me "manage" my addiction. Big mistake. Over coffee I seduced the poor gentleman and we had wild sex in a cheap hotel room around the block from the church basement. So much for my 12-Step Program. Rather than fighting my sensual inclinations, I gave in to them. Completely.

Accepting my natural desires has proven to make me a more effective asset for the CIA. I've been used by the agency precisely because of my sexual addiction. I've been involved in two major missions over the last five years. In a covert operation between the CIA and the DEA, I was instrumental in gathering evidence that led to the convictions of the leaders of a major network of drug suppliers and distributors across America. And in my last case, I helped break up one of the largest and most lucrative international sex trafficking rings in Europe.

Both assignments were very difficult on me, both physically and psychologically. I've lost count of the number of men I've had sex with along the way. Like an actress seamlessly disappearing into her role, I've successfully infiltrated the worlds of drug trafficking and white female slavery. My fellow agents on the ground have always managed to pull me out just in time before my identity was compromised and my mind still relatively intact. Though I was made to do some pretty unmentionable things to the suspects under investigation, I believe the ends always

justified the means. We got some dangerous individuals off the street and my actions, however dishonorable, made the world a safer place.

After we scored convictions on the last of the court cases, my cache within the department grew. Several agents in the office approached me to shake my hand and congratulate me. I think most analysts and fellow field officers think I'm a somewhat haunted and extremely complex person, based on my particular skill set. I know I'm an outsider at the agency, without an ally. I don't even consider my shadowy CIA Handler as a friend. Though I've worked with him for several years, I don't even know his name. Some agents, particularly the female officers, look down on me for what I do. I'm fully aware I've been hired as a prostitute for the government. I've thought of quitting many times, but I have no idea what I would do with the rest of my life. Perhaps deep down I'm afraid if I quit the CIA, I'd become a prostitute for real. I've fantasized about what it would be like on occasion.

When the cab stopped, I smiled, tipped my drooling driver and got out at the entrance of this nondescript black warehouse off the highway on the outskirts of Chicago.

"Are you sure this is the place?" I asked.

"Yes, Miss. This is the address you gave me," the driver said. "Listen, are you sure you don't wish me to show you around town? I can swing by later if you'd like."

"Thank you, but no," I said. "Khoda Hafez." (Goodbye.)

The meeting was at this night club called Obsessions. I liked the place immediately. I'd heard about places like this which cater to dominants and their submissives, but I had never actually visited one before. There were attractive women in various stages of undress, in all shapes and sizes, with and without slave collars. The sexy ladies were scattered throughout the club, with wrists cuffed to the tables and walls or standing on a raised platform with arms raised overhead attached to chains dangling from the

ceiling and ankles cuffed to the floor. Several well-dressed gentlemen walked throughout the club and ordered drinks at the bar. I watched from the entrance for a moment, mesmerized by the scene.

Other than working an undercover assignment, I had never been involved with a dominant male or played the role of a submissive. I wondered what it would be like to give your mind, body and soul over to a man, to be owned as his property and dominated, to be in total unquestioning obedience and subservience to him. In my professional work, I enjoyed taking the role of the submissive in the bedroom and relished giving pleasure to a man in whatever way he so desired, including oral and anal sex. Becoming a submissive has always been a strong sexual fantasy of mine but I was a little afraid that if I ever tried it in an actual relationship, it would have the power to take over my life. Playacting the role of a submissive in an artificial environment like Obsessions seemed like a much safer and saner thing for a compulsive person like me to do. I checked my watch, wondering if I had a few minutes to jump into the pool and literally get my toes a little wet in this alternative sexual world, chained and fondled by several men at once on the raised platform I saw in front of me. But since the flight had landed a few minutes behind schedule, I was running late for my meeting. My obsessions would have to wait.

A very pretty well-endowed black haired woman approached me in a sexy silk robe. Was it lingerie night at the club? Why wasn't I told? I was much too conservatively dressed in my short but tasteful black business skirt, jacket and white top. At least the rings of my areolas and the tips of my nipples could clearly be seen under the sheer material of my blouse. I stopped wearing a bra after I left my parent's house for college. Although some of the latest models are sexy, I don't really like the feel of them on my breasts. I find them constrictive.

“Are you Brittany Milani?” the woman asked in a soft voice.

“I am,” I said somewhat apprehensively, not liking anyone to know my actual name.

“I’m Grace, the submissive of the club’s owner, Jim Jefferson,” she said. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Thank you.”

“How was your flight?”

“Fine. You’re so pretty Grace. Mr. Jefferson is a lucky man.”

“Well, I try to keep him... amused. Follow me please.”

Grace appeared nervous and kept looking over her shoulder, as if she expected some unwelcome guest to arrive at any moment. She escorted me through the crowded club, past a bar and down a long corridor. On the way, we passed several people standing against a glass wall looking in at some B and D scenarios being acted out inside two enclosed rooms. Unfortunately, I only caught a quick glimpse of a man wielding a long black whip as we walked by. Interesting... Grace stopped at a door near the end of the corridor and tapped lightly upon it.

“Enter,” a deep voice said on the other side.

Grace opened the office door to let me in and three gentlemen stood up to greet me. Grace didn’t come in and shut the door quietly behind me.

I recognized one man with the dark circles under his eyes as my Handler. I hadn’t actually seen him in the flesh since he arranged the logistics of my last mission.

“You’re late, Agent Milani,” my Handler said.

“Sorry, Sir. My flight was delayed,” I said.

There were two other men in the room. One was a large well-dressed man, broodingly handsome despite a facial scar, which I assumed was the Dominant of Grace. To my complete surprise, the other was an attractive Persian man, my sponsor from the 12 Step Meeting! What a small world! I didn’t recall his name, but I did remember the smell of his

fragrant skin, his muscular frame and his sweet desperate passion in bed. He seemed surprised to see me as well. We looked into each other's eyes. What was his name?

"Good evening Agent Milani," my 12-Step sponsor said.

"Hey you," I said, smiling.

"So you two apparently know each other," my Handler said.

"No, not really," the man said, looking away.

"I showed you Agent Milani's photograph when you arrived for this meeting. Why didn't you tell me you had a past association with her, Agent Zardooz?" my Handler said, clearly annoyed.

Zardooz. That was his name. He didn't answer the question, so I answered for him.

"It meant nothing, sir. We had a... brief encounter... several years ago in DC. I never saw him again. I'm sure Agent Zardooz completely forgot about it."

In my mind, it had no bearing on the mission whether I slept with him or not. We're all adults here. I lost count of the amount of men I've slept with, for business or pleasure or both.

"Salam, Agent Zardooz," I said with my usual friendly smile.

"Salam," Zardooz said with a tense smile.

"I didn't know you were CIA," I said.

"I'm FBI," Zardooz said.

"Oh..." I said.

An uncomfortable pause passed.

"So, are we going to have any issues here, Agents?" my Handler asked.

"No, Sir. No issues," I said. "I didn't even remember his name. No offense, Agent Zardooz."

"None taken," Zardooz said.

I was a little embarrassed to have completely forgotten what his name. Richard? Roger? No, it was something more exotic. He kept his Persian first name, I think. But I did

remember rolling around in the seedy hotel room and copulating like sex addicts on a bender. We made love to each other like it was Armageddon and there was one last chance to have an orgasm before the world imploded around us.

“I am not happy about this, Agent Milani. I’m beginning to have some second thoughts here. I already told the Director you needed more time to decompress, but it was not my call to make. This mission is of a sensitive and extremely dangerous nature. We cannot afford any distractions. One mistake could cost both of you your lives as well as further endanger our National Security,” my Handler warned.

Agent Zardooz stood his ground.

“I wouldn’t think twice about it, Sir. As I recall, the sex wasn’t all that great,” Zardooz said, as if he was entirely bored with the conversation.

I’m sorry, but I couldn’t let that pass. I have my reputation to consider. I took my favorite shade of lipstick out of my purse, cherry red, and painted on another coat.

“Yes. Unfortunately I don’t think they had pills for erectile dysfunction back then,” I said.

My new partner didn’t miss a beat.

“Anyway from what I’ve heard, you’d have a hard time assigning someone who hasn’t slept with Agent Milani,” Zardooz said.

That was a little below the belt, but I let it pass, knowing he was just trying not to get removed from the case. Despite his rudeness, I liked Agent Zardooz. I found him attractive in an aloof sort of way. Like a moth to the flame, I’ve always been drawn to inaccessible men. I seem to recall he told me he was married back then, though I didn’t see a ring on his finger.

“There’s no issues here Sir,” Zardooz stated.

“So why don’t I believe you, Agent Zardooz?” my Handler said, looking into his deep brown eyes.

“And by the way, there is one man in the CIA I haven’t slept with. Sadly, I’ve never been handled by my Handler,” I said, trying to break the tension.

Of course, my ever serious G-Man didn’t pick up on the humor.

“I guess you do have a moral compass after all, Milani,” Zardooz said, cuttingly.

“It’s Agent Milani...” I said with an edge to my voice.

My Handler rubbed his temple in irritation.

“Great. This should go well. You’re sniping at each other like a married couple already,” my Handler said.

“No. I don’t believe in marriage or monogamy. I’m destined to be a single girl,” I said. “But as I recall, Agent Zardooz is a happily married man.”

I unintentionally touched a nerve. Zardooz looked away.

“I’m divorced actually,” Zardooz said.

“Oh...” I said. “Sorry...”

Awkward... I looked at my Handler and he slowly shook his head. There was another long pause. The gentleman with the scar intervened.

“Perhaps I should give your agents some time to speak privately,” he said courteously, while making a move toward the door.

My boss reached out and touched Jefferson’s arm.

“Thank you Mr. Jefferson, but I need you here. Despite how uncomfortable this may be, we have no time to replace either of these Agents. So this is the team we’re stuck with, whether we like it or not.”

Zardooz and I exchanged a glance, like a couple of school kids who just barely escaped detention.

“Mr. Jefferson, as I mentioned earlier to you earlier before the agents arrived, it is highly irregular to use a private citizen in a covert CIA operation of this magnitude. As far as I know, it has never been attempted before in the history of American espionage. The last time we went outside the agency, a former FBI agent we hired as a contractor

disappeared in Iran in 2007. His whereabouts are still unknown and he is presumed dead.”

My Handler took a short breath before continuing.

“I know I’m breaking every rule in the book here. I haven’t even spoken to the CIA Director about this detail of my plan because I know for a fact he’d never allow it. I’m 30 years in, just a few years away from retirement. I may lose my job over this decision. But the way I see it, we have no other option. There is no time to train anyone else. Even if I attempted to have you replaced in the sting, our suspect has already heard your voice on the phone. I judge you to be quite a capable man, Mr. Jefferson. You may be our most important asset here. As I told you, you can refuse to do this. I know you had training as a police officer, but you need to be aware that you are taking on a huge risk to your personal safety,” my Handler told the scarred man.

“As I said, despite the risk, I am more than happy to help you catch this terrorist in any way I can. I am at your disposal,” Mr. Jefferson said.

“You’re a brave man Mr. Jefferson and the Central Intelligence Agency appreciates your service to our country,” my Handler said.

My Handler looked at the three of us and nodded.

“OK. Let’s get started then. I’d like to show these agents photographs of the major players. May I use your computer, Mr. Jefferson?”

“Of course,” Jefferson said.

As we gathered around the desk to begin the briefing, I touched Mr. Jefferson’s arm.

“Mr. Jefferson. I met your submissive Grace on the way in. She’s absolutely charming,” I said.

“Thank you, Agent Milani. She is the love of my life,” Mr. Jefferson said with complete sincerity.

Then Jefferson turned to address my boss.

“I also appreciate your offer to help with Lucius Barrington,” Jefferson said.

“Of course, Mr. Jefferson. Not a problem,” my Handler said.

“Who is Lucius Barrington?” I asked.

“Barrington is a local practitioner of the occult who has been causing a nuisance in his club and bothering Mr. Jefferson’s girlfriend,” My Handler said. “First I’ll bring you up to speed on the counterterrorism operation which begins here tomorrow evening and then we’ll discuss tonight’s plan to rid Chicago of that pesky Satanist.”

“Satanist? No one mentioned a word to me about that. My Director led me to believe we had bigger fish to fry,” Zardooz said.

“Barrington is a low profile collar for us, certainly,” my Handler said. “Normally I wouldn’t waste the agency’s time on someone like him, but Mr. Jefferson has asked for assistance in this matter. We’ll turn him over to the local authorities as soon as we’re done with him. It should be a relatively easy and will only take a few hours. Perhaps you two lovebirds can gain some experience working together this evening. Now that your little... tryst... has been brought to my attention, I’m glad I set this other operation up. Consider the gig tonight with this devil-worshipper a warm-up. The real action starts tomorrow, Agents.”

“OK. So what’s the plan?” I asked.

My Handler opened a confidential file on the computer. We stared at the screen.

“This morning Mr. Jefferson brought to our attention that one of the world’s foremost terrorists, Khaled Al Khatani, is currently in Chicago and will be attending this club tomorrow evening. We’ve been tracking the movements of this man for a few years now. We have reason to believe Khatani might be plotting a major bombing in the next few months on American soil. The CIA and the FBI, working together, are going to uncover this plot and gather incriminating evidence against him. What do you think of doing some undercover work for the CIA , Agent Zardooz?”

“You can count me in Sir,” Zardooz said with conviction.

Despite his bravura, Agent Zardooz seemed like a sensitive person behind the gruff exterior. I would have to watch out for him over there. Perhaps it would be safer if I walked into the jaws of Hell alone.

“No offense, Agent Zardooz, but why do we need the FBI in on this? I usually work alone,” I said.

“A fair question. Of all the agents in the CIA and FBI, you are the only two who are fluent in both Arabic and Farsi. If we don’t gather the evidence we need to arrest our suspect here, the mission will take both of you to Saudi Arabia where we have a field office set up. If all goes according to plan, Agent Milani will infiltrate our suspect’s home in Riyadh... by any means necessary... and gather information to avert the possible terrorist attack against the United States. She will then convey this intel to you on the ground, Agent Zardooz.”

By any means necessary. I didn’t need to ask what that meant. It was fairly obvious the CIA would offer me as bait. I would seduce the suspect, become his lover and allow him to have repeated sexual relations with me. Once I was in his inner circle, perhaps I would overhear something. The play worked like a charm in Mexico and Europe for my last two cases. Men are fairly predictable creatures. Why not Saudi Arabia?

“Through our surveillance of the subject we’ve learned a very important meeting will take place in early February in Tehran where Agent Zardooz has extensive personal contacts. We need you at that meeting Agent Milani,” my Handler said.

Undercover in Tehran. I am in the big leagues now.

“Understood,” I said.

“Agent Zardooz is also a practicing Muslim and knows the spiritual terrain,” my Handler added.

“A Muslim? Really? That must make you popular over at the Bureau,” I said, teasing him.

Zardooz became deadly serious, once again not catching my humor. G-Men are such stiff.

“Last time I checked, our Constitution grants me freedom of religion, Agent Milani,” Zardooz said.

“Yeah but couldn’t you pick a religion that’s a little less annoying, like everyone else?” I said.

“It is the faith of my Father and his Father before him,” Zardooz countered.

I realized it was inappropriate, but it was so much fun teasing the guy and so easy.

“I guess your Mother’s belief system didn’t enter into the equation,” I said.

“My family’s beliefs are none of your concern, Agent,” Zardooz said back, gruffly.

“Lighten up Big Guy. I’m just kidding,” I said.

My boss looked impatiently at us.

“If you two are quite finished may we continue the briefing?” my Handler said.

Zardooz and I gave each other sideways glances and nodded.

“Agent Zardooz has set up a safe house for our operation on the outskirts of Tehran. We’ve also rented an apartment with a clear view of our second suspect’s home. The apartment will be supplied with surveillance equipment for you, Agent Zardooz. Agent Milani will do the undercover work while you, Agent Zardooz, will be our eyes on the ground. Once you get the information we seek, Agent Zardooz will get you to the safe house and out of the country.”

After a pause my Handler gave me a concerned look.

“I have to warn you, this will be the most dangerous mission of your career, Agent Milani. Other than Agent Zardooz, you’ll be completely on your own over there. I have a bad feeling about this. We needed more time to properly plan this out and the operation has been thrown together in the last 12 hours. As your direct supervisor I

advise you to reconsider this assignment, Agent Milani. I give you my word your decision will not adversely affect your career in any way," my Handler said.

This was the once in a lifetime case I dreamed about. If I could pull this off, it could lead to a promotion within the agency, even to a Station Chief position. But more importantly, when I retired I would look back on this case as the crowning achievement of my intelligence career.

"Are you kidding? I'm not backing out now! I'm all in, boss. So, go on. What's the play?" I asked.

My Handler nodded gravely and clicked on a file labeled, "Hellfire." A photograph of an exceedingly well-dressed Saudi man appeared on the screen.

"Take a good long look at this man, Agent Milani. This is your target. Prince Khaled Al Khatani. If our information is accurate from the chatter the NSA has picked up, this man is secretly financing terrorist networks worldwide. We believe Khatani is actively pursuing a small nuclear weapon and intends to detonate it in the US. You'll be getting to know this man quite well, Agent Milani," my Handler said.

Prince Khaled Al Khatani.

As soon as I saw his clean shaven, handsome face, my heart started pumping. He looked more like the young CEO of an immensely successful Fortune 500 company, not some deluded fanatic hiding in a cave. Damn, why couldn't he grow a disgusting rat's tail of a beard like all the other terrorists? I suddenly felt a little dizzy and weak at the knees. I needed to sit down, but there was nowhere to sit. My Handler caught me staring a little too long at his picture.

"He's a Prince?" I managed to say.

"Yes," my Handler answered. "He's been indoctrinated in radical Islam and he's rich enough to purchase a suitcase bomb or finance the construction of one. We believe that Al Qaeda's chief bomb-maker, Abdullah Al Juhani, also a Saudi, may have the ability to build one, if he had access to the

fissile materials. As of yet, there's been no recorded contact between Al Khatani and Al Juhani, however."

I stared down at the picture of our suspect. I knew myself well enough by now that no matter how sinister he was purported to be, I was powerfully attracted to this Saudi Arabian man. Why was I so immediately attracted to him? I always had this image of a fantasy man I would picture to distract me when I was on a job, under the sweating fat body of a drug lord or sex trafficker. It was as if my fantasy had come to life on the computer screen. Khatani had a romantic, movie star quality about him, like Omar Sharif in *Laurence of Arabia*, only much sexier. He didn't look like a terrorist at all, with his \$1500 Armani suit, Rolex watch and charming smile. I felt a little moisture growing between my thighs and my hands trembled slightly, just from being shown his photograph. "Brittany, he's a terrorist, a terrorist," I said to myself as I tried to slow my pounding heart. Based on my visceral reaction, perhaps my Handler was correct in his assertion that I needed more time to decompress. Part of me wanted to ask to be reassigned to another case before this strikingly beautiful man got onto my personal 10 Most Wanted List. I angled my hips and sat down on the edge of the table before I became more light-headed.

"Excuse me, Mr. Jefferson, could I trouble you for something to drink. A soda water perhaps?"

"Certainly Ms. Milani, I'll have the bartender bring us all refreshment," Mr. Jefferson said, sending a text on his phone.

"Thank you, Mr. Jefferson," my Handler said. "After we took out Osama Bin Laden on May 2, 2011, we cut the head off the snake, so to speak. Though we continue to closely watch the activities of Hezbollah, the Taliban, Hamas and Al-Qaeda, there has been no large scale terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11. We've been vigilant in preventing further Terrorist actions and significantly crippled the Al

Qaeda Network by the Drone attacks ordered by President Obama over the last few years and the recent missile attacks against the ISIS. But somehow, Khaled Al Khatani flew completely under our radar. He might be forming an entirely new terrorist cell, a far more sophisticated and dangerous one that we've ever encountered."

"What is Al Khatani's actual connection to the terrorist networks you've mentioned?" Zardooz asked.

"We're not exactly sure yet," my Boss said. "If you recall, a former Russian defector claimed in the late 1980's that 84 small tactical nuclear weapons went unaccounted for, each weighing under 100 pounds and capable of fitting into a backpack or a suitcase. He claimed the Russians planted them in secret locations in the US and Europe. But after an extensive search, none of the bombs were located. If even one of these miniaturized bombs were detonated in the right location, it is estimated to create a 150 foot crater and could easily kill 100,000 people in a concentrated population center. Like Chernobyl, the clean-up of the nuclear waste at the site would take years. It was rumored that Bin Laden had procured one or more of these deadly suitcase bombs from Chechnya, but of course it never materialized when his compound was raided, nor have any of the missing bombs ever been found. Though most experts believe the whole story was the delusion of the Russian defector seeking asylum in the US, what if it were true? These powerful portable weapons gaining access to American soil has been one of our government's greatest fears..."

I had heard about the missing suitcase bombs before, but so far the case against Al Khatani seemed to be built on CIA paranoia and not hard evidence. Was I defending him in my mind already? He had such an attractive innocent face. How could he be a radical?

"If we're not even sure whether Al Khatani is a terrorist, what makes you think he may be trying to acquire a

suitcase bomb?" I asked.

"As I mentioned NSA recently picked up chatter from terrorist network phone lines and have detected the words, suitcase bomb, hellfire, equipment manager, Al Khatani as well as a known Iranian associate of Khatani in Tehran, a man named Amir Akbari," my Handler said.

My Handler clicked the computer and the photograph of the cherubic face and wide open eyes of Akbari was revealed. He was a sweet-faced man with the innocent dreamy look of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, in custody for the Boston Marathon Bombings. We heard a knock on the door and I shuddered slightly. My nerves were definitely on edge. Maybe I should've taken more time off between assignments. But it was too late to turn back now.

The bartender came in carrying a tray of frosted glasses and bottles of Perrier. He poured our drinks in silence and left the office. We took refreshment while my Handler continued the briefing.

"Following the money, Al Khatani has made wire transfers recently of large sums into Akbari's account. Al Khatani and Akbari met while studying at UC Berkley and seem to be relatively comfortable in the West. They both graduated with degrees in Engineering and have business interests here. Especially Al Khatani, whose family owns luxury hotels in several major cities across the US. They have no criminal record here to speak of, not even a parking ticket. They were never on a Terrorist Watch List, but based on these intercepted phone transmissions, we got permission from the Saudis to bug Al Khatani's home three weeks ago. Apparently, Al Khatani's has some very clever people working for him. His security team discovered the hidden devices within 24 hours, even though they were planted by our best operators. We can't track his cell phone usage, since he uses burner phones. But then CIA got a very interesting call from Mr. Jefferson that led us to his club this

evening. Why don't you let the agents in on the contents of your conversation with our suspect, Mr. Jefferson?"

"Certainly. The conversation lasted just under a minute. I happened to be at work this morning doing payroll and someone named Prince Al Khatani called, asking to rent one of the private rooms at Obsessions for tomorrow night from 9PM-11PM. We happened to have a last minute cancellation and I told him I could accommodate his request. I asked him to come at 8:30 so we could meet, arrange payment and discuss the basic rules of the club. He agreed, but had one favor to ask. For his own safety, he asked if his guards could do a security sweep of the premises and especially the room they were renting. He told me he was a Prince of a Middle-Eastern country. I told him sure, we cater to all fantasies here at Obsessions. He laughed pleasantly and hung up. I thought he was just another one of my usual crackpots, but just for fun I Googled his name and to my surprise discovered Prince Al Khatani actually was a distant relative of the Royal Family. Still, it seemed suspicious to me that he traveled with security personnel and wanted my club swept for surveillance devices. I thought perhaps he may have been involved in some illicit business, drugs perhaps. Why else would he be travelling with guards? So I decided to call the local authorities to alert them about it. I certainly didn't want to create a situation that would endanger the patrons of my club. I waited but no one from the Chicago Police Department called me back. So I went over their heads and called the FBI's Chicago Branch. They were more responsive. Because of the Middle-Eastern connection I suppose they referred me to the CIA. I left a message there and got a call back from you within the hour Sir," Jefferson said.

"And due to your vigilance Mr. Jefferson, you may have played a role in helping to avert an act of terrorism on US soil. Now we have the perfect opportunity to get video and audio recordings of Al Khatani tomorrow night and gather

crucial evidence against him. Agents, something's about to go down with this guy. I can feel it in my bones."

"With all due respect, I still don't see how you can jump to that conclusion Sir," I said.

Was I already protecting my Saudi Prince?

"Let me explain, Agent. During the 24 hours we had his home, phone and computer system under surveillance last month, we recorded him talking to his friend Akbari and making reservations for two round trip first class tickets from Riyadh to Tehran leaving the evening of February 1 and returning the following night on Feb. 2," he said.

"February 2 falls on a Sunday next year," Zardooz said, checking the calendar on his I-Phone.

"So Al Khatani made a plane reservation to visit his friend on the weekend. I still don't see why -"

"Listen to this short exchange, Agents," my Handler said, interrupting me.

He turned the volume up on the computer, tapped a key and two distinct voices were heard. My Handler said the first voice was Al Khatani and the second was Akbari.

"Be'man be'go. Aya hameh vasayel modir toyeh sakhteman hast?"

"Baleh, Allahu Akbar!"

All of us stood frozen behind the computer screen.

"What does that mean? What did they say?" Jefferson asked.

I translated.

"Al Khatani asks in Farsi, "Tell me. Is the equipment manager in the building?" And Akbari replies in Farsi and Arabic, "Yes. God is greatest."

A period of silence passed between us.

"Allahu Akbar is what the terrorists were reported to have shouted before the suicide bombings in Paris," I mentioned.

My Handler nodded his head.

"What also troubles me," my boss said, "is these two men are from Saudi Arabia and Iran, countries fighting a

proxy war against each other in Yemen. I've often worried about what would happen if terrorists from the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam stopped fighting each other and pooled their resources to form an alliance against the West."

"What do they mean by equipment manager?" Jefferson asked.

"We don't know yet, but we intend to find out," my Handler said. "It is my gut feeling that something is going down at that meeting. If we can't get the information we need here Agent Milani, I want you on that plane sitting next to the Prince. I want you there in Tehran to find out who or what this "equipment manager" is. I need you to find out if the term "hellfire" refers to our drone missile strikes or if it means something else. And most importantly, get any information you can about their possession of a suitcase bomb. The play is this. Your name is Aisha Nayef. Your travel documents have all been prepared. Aisha was the Prophet Mohammed's youngest and most beloved wife, so hopefully the name will help trigger his lust for you. You were born and raised in Chicago and now are completely on your own, mourning the loss of your parents in a recent car accident. You consider yourself a modest Muslim woman, but you wish to learn more about the religion. Perhaps this is your way in. It will stroke Al Khatani's ego if you ask for his instruction on how to become a proper Muslim woman. I'll let you take it from there. We need you to gather incriminating evidence against him if he is indeed masterminding a terrorist attack in America. It is of the utmost importance to the security of our country."

"I see," I said.

It sounded like a fairly standard play. I wish I had more time to study the subject's tendencies, his likes and dislikes. But there was no time for extensive research on this case. We would have to wing it tomorrow. My Handler continued to prep me.