

## **PERILOUS PANACEA**

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### **PROLOGUE**

Ian Deby arrived home from work, checked his e-mail, and found a message from his sister in England.

Dear Hassan,

Did you hear the rumors about Iran being invaded by the Israelis and Americans?

Can this be what we are praying for?

Love,

BahAmin

Deby checked his watch: almost 6:30. He grabbed the remote from the end of the couch, clicked on the TV, dropped onto the couch, and pondered BahAmin's words while he waited for the commercials to end.

"Good evening on this Tuesday, November second," the anchor woman for CBS Evening News said.

"Today's top story is the surprise military attack carried out on nuclear installations in Iran. The objective was presumably the destruction of Iran's nuclear-processing capability to produce weapons-grade uranium that they allegedly acquired over the past decade. Radio Tehran alerted the world to the raid late last night, when they reported an air attack on military and civilian installations. Iranian officials accused the U.S. and Israel of making an unprovoked attack. Although Iranian officials have blocked all foreign news reporters from sending out pictures, Tehran has released video showing protesters in the streets with signs castigating The Great Satan and their Israeli lapdogs.

"Earlier this afternoon, the Israeli Prime Minister's office released a statement confirming that they carried out the raid. They justified the attack by citing the recent verbal threats by Iranian officials and stating that they could not stand idly by as Iran manufactured nuclear weapons. No U.S. involvement was indicated in the statement, in spite of reports of meetings between the President and the Secretaries of State and Defense that lasted well into the evening. Until an hour ago, there had been no official response to the Iranian accusations from the Gordon Administration. For details, we take you to Stuart Warner at the Pentagon."

Deby thought about his parents and his sisters and brother in Iran. What now? Would there be an uprising like after the elections last year? Would the U.S. attack Iran and help any revolt by the opposition? He turned his attention back to the TV.

“The Gordon administration’s response was delivered at the Pentagon by Press Secretary Jason Mayo who read a brief statement from Defense Secretary Romig denying U.S. involvement in the alleged attack. The statement said the United States understands Israeli concern about a nuclear presence in the area, but....”

On the screen, the press secretary read his statement that added nothing new, after which the reporter came back on.

“CBS has learned from various sources that at about 5 a.m. this morning in Iran, 8 p.m. last night Eastern Standard Time in the U.S., Israeli fighter planes attacked a secret installation thought to contain centrifuges to produce bomb-grade uranium. The raid destroyed the above-ground installation twenty-five miles southwest of the town of Turut on the northern edge of the Dasht-e-Kavir Desert. Israeli commandos invaded the site prior to the air raid and demolished strategic portions of the underground facilities with explosives, thus making them more vulnerable to the bomber attack. If, as reported, helicopters were used to transport the commandos, it would have been by sea, a capability the Israelis are not thought to possess.

“Iran claims they are only interested in peaceful nuclear power and not in bombs. They are signatories of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and claim they are living up to the provisions of that agreement.

“Russia and China condemned the attack, as did several European and South American countries. Russia’s ambassador to the United Nations called for a Security Council meeting to condemn the actions of the United States and Israel. The Venezuelan ambassador called for—”

Ian clicked off the reporter in mid-sentence, his thoughts turning to his father in an Iranian prison. Would this be his chance to get out? Would it be possible to get his family out of Iran to be with him and BahAmin? He dug his cell phone from his pocket and dialed BahAmin’s number.

## CHAPTER ONE

Ian Deby switched the grocery bag to his left arm, unlocked the door, flicked the light switch, and bumped the door shut with his hip. The door rebounded, and the doorknob banged his hip.

A dark complected stranger stood in the doorway. “Hassan Mohammed Nagubi?” the stranger asked in slightly accented English.

“You’ve got the wrong person, my name—”

Of slight build and Deby’s height—five-foot-ten—in a light-brown suit, white shirt, dark-brown tie, he pushed past Deby and glanced around the tiny living room. “Regardless of what you call yourself, you are Iranian, and your name is Hassan Mohammed Nagubi.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Ahmed Sherbani, a representative of *your* Iranian government. We know who you really are.”

He had short black hair, with a gaunt, clean-shaven face and intense dark-brown eyes. A smile played on his lips, as if Deby’s confusion amused him. “Your mother, brother, and two sisters are still in Iran, in Mashhad. They left Teheran to go back to her people after your father went away. You write to her every two months.”

Deby studied Sherbani more closely. For a moment, he thought he was about to be scolded for not writing often enough. Sherbani was probably around his father’s age, mid-fifties, his black hair flecked with gray.

“My father did not go away,” Deby said as he wondered about the color of his father’s hair. “The Iranian government put him in prison.”

Recently, he hadn’t thought about those days twenty-one years ago when he was seven, a distant time now that he was submerged in his new and busy life. His father planned to get the family out and sent him and his older sister BahAmin ahead with Uncle Behrouz. He was arrested a week later.

“Your father was plotting against the government, plotting an assassination of the President.”

“No way,” Deby said, his voice breaking. He wondered about his father: was he a freedom fighter, or was he falsely accused by the Revolutionary Guards? “The Revolutionary Guards said—”

“They are the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution,” Sherbani snapped. “They are protectors of the Iranian people. They are true Muslims.”

“My father loves Allah as much as any man. He taught us the Koran and *Sharia*; the *Hajji* was in all his children’s future.”

“It has been a terrible time for Muslims for too long. It is even worse when Muslims fight Muslims, Iranians fight Iranians.”

“You mean like what happened last year after the rigged election when the Revolutionary Guards shot protesters?”

“The election was fair. A few trouble makers decided to stir up the people by claiming the election was stolen. It wasn’t. The majority of our people rejected them.”

Deby knew it was useless to argue the point. He set the groceries on the floor next to the wall and turned to face the man. “What do you want with me?”

“I am told you are a brilliant nuclear engineer, and we need you,” Sherbani said, stepping forward and stopping a couple feet from Deby, his gaze fixed on Deby’s eyes. “We are going to build an atomic bomb. You’ve heard of the Islamic Bomb of Pakistan. We’re going to build the *real* Islamic bomb.”

“I am no longer a Muslim.” It dawned on him that he had never said that before, or even thought it.

“A tiger cannot change his stripes, and you cannot change your birth. How can you live

among these devils that invaded our country last month, invaded *your* country? Their women wear clothing that reveals their navel, their legs, their thighs. Would you want your sisters to dress like that? You are Muslim, and I am here to enlist you in the struggle of Islam.”

“It’s not my struggle,” Deby said as his mind flashed to the young suicide bombers that kept blowing up themselves and others. What was the struggle? Were the Tehran protesters against the government his part of the struggle?

“Iran is a difficult land, thanks to our war with the Great Satan, and their Little Satan, their Israeli lapdogs. Iran is very difficult for a woman without a man. Your mother tries hard, but things could become difficult. And then there is your uncle in England who raised you. Like your father, he is a traitor. I think you know why you will help.”

Deby understood. His Uncle Behrouz was a lawyer in Iran; he now owned a restaurant in Birmingham, England, and lived in constant terror, expecting the “Ayatollah’s men” to pounce at any moment, even though *his* Ayatollah, the Ayatollah Khomeini, died in 1989, the year they got out of Iran.

Yet, in every letter from Uncle Behrouz, he warned Deby to be wary of his father’s jailers. To Deby, a dead Ayatollah had always been a dead threat, just as the present Ayatollah had never seemed a threat to him. He was wrong.

“I do not wish to threaten,” Sherbani said. “I just explain how things are. Muslims are besieged everywhere, from Afghanistan to France, from Iraq to Indonesia to the United States. Look at the Palestinians in the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan and the oppression they live under on the West Bank and Gaza. The Israelis shoot women and children. Muslims are made fun of in books and the press. We Muslims are not vindictive, but the Koran says: ‘And fight for the cause of God against those that fight against you; but commit not the injustice of attacking them first; verily God loveth not the unjust.’”

Deby remembered the passage: *Jihad*, The Holy War. “I’m not a Muslim. I am a British citizen.”

“A *British* citizen? What a joke. You acquired a British passport and a British accent, but did your fellow students at the University of Birmingham accept you as British? No. Not even after you Anglicized your name. You were still a turban head. And things did not change at UCLA, did they? You worked for a Muslim professor for your Ph.D. Are things better here at the great Princeton University?”

Sherbani’s mention of his British accent reminded him of torturous hours spent eliminating his Iranian accent and refining the speech patterns and mannerisms of his new British self. For years, he sought out Michael Cain movies and patterned his speech after him. He learned British slang and sayings so well Americans sometimes didn’t understand him. All that work was about to pay off, for he would soon have a permanent academic position. His UCLA professor called last week about a faculty opening at the University of Wisconsin.

“To the Americans, you are a foreign lackey. To us, you are important. You can do much for your people. You can help them regain the respect Allah has deemed for us.”

“I will not help a government that shoots its own people when they protest in the street, a

government that arrests someone for disagreeing with them, like they did to my father.”

“We will see,” Sherbani said and turned to leave. At the door, he stopped and looked back. “You want to see your father free, do you not?” Then he was gone.

Deby was in his bed above Uncle Behrouz’s restaurant when the burglar alarm screamed, stopped, and then screamed again. He fought free of sleep, recognized he was dreaming, and the burglar alarm was the phone next to his bed in Princeton.

“Hassan? Is that you, Hassan?” a familiar voice asked in Farsi.

“Mother.” He spoke in Farsi, his first use of the language in months. This was her first call ever. She didn’t have his phone number, and she didn’t have a phone or the money to make such a call.

After she gained control of her voice—they hadn’t spoken in 15 years—they talked about family things. Then she mentioned a visit from a government man. “He said my job might be in danger, and we might have to move to a smaller apartment if you do not do what they want you to do. He said to tell you that, and now I did. Hassan, do what you need to do. That is what your father would want, and—”

The phone went dead.

That evening, Sherbani appeared carrying a thin black briefcase. He pushed past Deby, led him across the room, sat on the brown couch and motioned Deby to sit next to him. He spoke again about the difficulties of being Muslim. “But things are changing. Praised be Allah! Iran now has the leaders we need to win back respect.”

“Israel just took away your bombs. They won’t let you get another one.”

“The U.S. devils took it away, but revenge is the father of glory.”

“Do you have a scientific staff for the job? Do you have the nuclear material?”

Sherbani shook his head. “We have you, a brilliant nuclear engineer.” He snapped open the briefcase and removed a book and a stack of papers—newspaper clippings. “Here is the answer to our bomb.”

The book: *The Curve of Binding Energy* by John McPhee published in 1973. According to the dust jacket, the book explained the dangers of nuclear material being stolen from the United States nuclear program and used to make an atom bomb. Deby shuffled through the copies of newspaper clippings, which dealt with the potential for diversion of nuclear material. Most of the clippings were from the last century—the seventies and early eighties. Headlines of two of them: *245 Pounds of Uranium Lost at Plant Since 1968* and *Could Steal Enough for Bomb without Detection*, the latter a quote from a U.S. General Accounting Office report. The *New York Times* article from 1978 began, “Enough plutonium for a nuclear bomb could be easily stolen from a federal reprocessing plant, and the government might not even detect it.”

“This book and the newspaper stories are over thirty-years old” Deby said. “U.S. security has tightened since the 1970s. Do you have some of this nuclear material?”

“No. That is what we want you for.”

“*Me? Steal it? Then get it out of the country and make a bomb?*”

“It could be difficult, but for Allah, nothing is impossible. We will give you all the assistance you need. Think about it. Read that material.”

“I could never—”

“You will need to recruit scientific help. You have a friend who works for the U.S. government, a very bright and ambitious computer expert. Our scientists say computers are the reason we will succeed. Your friend is like most Americans, who will sell their mother for enough money.”

“I could never ask him.”

“We will pay several million dollars to you and any others that help. If you refuse, it could be difficult for your mother, brother, and sisters...*and* your father.”

“Could I get my father out of jail? Could I get my family out of Iran?”

Sherbani smiled. “It could be arranged. But remember, Hassan, you are one of us. Instead of your family leaving, you should come back to Iran. Come back to your Muslim roots. If you do this, you will be a hero.”

Sherbani’s offer to free his father stirred Deby’s guilt. He dreamed of helping them. As the eldest son, his father expected it. Now he had a chance. Although there was no way he could do something like building a nuclear weapon, he said, “I’ll think about it.”

“There is nothing to think about. You *will* do it.”

The day after Sherbani’s visit, Deby picked up the phone to hear his aunt in England, her Farsi words jumbled by deep sobs. “Auntie Goli? What is wrong?”

Uncle Behrouz came on the line. “I didn’t want her to call, but she insisted. Somebody set the restaurant on fire, but the damage was minor.”

“Who did it?” Deby asked, but he knew the answer.

“We had a visitor last week who said something bad would happen if we didn’t tell you to do what they wanted you to do. I told him to go to hell.”

“You should have told me.”

“Don’t do anything you don’t want to do. We are not in Iran anymore.”

Early the next morning, his mother called to tell of another visit from the police. They spoke of catastrophes that could befall his sisters, like the young Iranian women who are kidnapped and taken to France to act as prostitutes; they said his brother could be arrested for plotting against the government, just as his father had been; they talked about bad things that happen to people in jail. “They often commit suicide by hanging themselves. It’s the way it is.”

That night Sherbani appeared and assumed his seat on the couch. He ignored Deby’s pleas to leave his family alone and spoke of Dr. Austin, Deby’s U. S. government friend. Sherbani said he learned about him when they investigated Deby. “We know your friend Austin is a computer expert at the Department of Energy in Washington. Presumably, he would have helpful information on the nuclear material we want to acquire.”

“I’ll do what you want. Just leave my family alone.”

Sherbani smiled. “It is written in the Koran, ‘War is prescribed to you; but to this ye have repugnance.’ Hassan, my friend, you will be well rewarded by Allah.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Ian Deby watched Steve Austin push the empty pizza pan aside and asked, “What brings you to Princeton this time?”

“The usual administrative bullshit. The DOE, your U.S. *Department of Energy*, is a micro-management disaster area. I’m here to make sure the Princeton fusion program stays on course.”

Three months ago, Austin appeared in Deby’s Princeton office. He said he saw Deby’s name on the Princeton fusion staff list, and he knew Deby was a fellow UCLA alum because he remembered seeing him on campus. Deby did not remember Austin. Since that first meeting, Austin had shown up in his office twice. By coincidence, he called last night shortly after Sherbani left and invited Deby out for pizza.

Austin grabbed the pitcher of beer and filled their glasses. He was shorter than Deby, probably a little over five-foot eight, and in contrast to Deby’s dark-brown hair and eyes, Austin was blond with bright-blue eyes, and he wore the energetic good looks of many of the youthful UCLA undergrads that roamed the campus and populated the Westwood bars when Deby was there. Austin claimed not to have been like most UCLA students, saying he quickly got beyond surfing and sex, finished his PhD, and moved on.

“Why do you work for DOE?” Deby asked, remembering Sherbani’s statement that Americans were only interested in money and sex. “Isn’t money important to you?”

“You bet your ass it’s important. It’s freedom, escape from the bullshit. I went to DOE to learn how bureaucracies operate. Eventually, I intend to start my own software and consulting firm, so I can work on what *I* want to work on. The government makes a good customer—a *big* customer.”

At a previous dinner, Austin talked about some of his life and achievements, beginning when he was nine and his father ran off with his twenty-three-year-old secretary. His mother married a Stanford math professor, who tutored the young Austin. When he got to college, he was a math whiz and computer programming expert.

“Playing Grand Theft Auto soon became a bore,” he said. By the time he was seventeen, he’d sold two computer games to a video-game company. Besides that, he’d developed an interest in electronics and built himself an advanced computer. He completed B.S. degrees in electrical engineering *and* computer science by the time he turned twenty; he had his PhD in computer science by twenty-three. He was now twenty-five.

With that background, taking a job at DOE made little sense to Deby. An expert in computer hardware design and software engineering could write his own ticket. Deby knew

Austin would never take a chance on Sherbani's folly. There was no use asking.

A week ago, Deby was plagued with questions about his next job. Should he take an assistant professor's position at Wisconsin? Should he stay at Princeton after his post-graduate appointment ended? His UCLA professor e-mailed him about a job at MIT. Now, a job was the least of his worries. All he wanted was to convince Sherbani his idea for an atomic bomb was impossible. But with his father in jail and his mother and uncle at their mercy, he had no choice but to take the chance.

He fingered the cold mug. "How would you like to make a million dollars, Steve?"

"How many people do I have to kill?"

The question stunned Deby into momentary silence. It was something he'd thought about only in passing. The bombs would never be built. If they were, would they be used? Sherbani said they wouldn't ... not unless forced to "by their infidel enemies."

"What I'm about to say could get me sent to jail."

"I promise not to turn you in."

"You do know I'm Iranian?"

"*Iranian?* You with that perfect British accent?"

Was that a compliment? He considered himself British. "I am a British citizen, but because of my background, I've been approached by the Iranian government to build a nuclear weapon," Deby said and then waited and wondered. Would Austin leave? Would he go to the FBI or Homeland Security? Was this the end of his dream of a professorship at Wisconsin? MIT? Would he be in jail tomorrow?

Austin stared, her eyes wide open. "It seems to me," he said, "Iran has tried a bunch of ways to get a bomb the last few years." He smiled, his blue eyes sparkling. "All attempts bombed, if you'll pardon the pun. It always appeared they weren't too bright. So, what are they doing this time?"

"They want to steal nuclear material from the United States."

"From the DOE?" Austin laughed. "Never happen."

"It can be done." Deby described the literature Sherbani gave him.

"That's last-century stuff. Things are different now. If it could be done, it won't be done by somebody who's screwed up every time they tried something."

Deby knew he was right. "It'll be different this time."

"If I agree to join you, what would I do? What are you going to do?"

Sherbani hadn't provided details, just what he expected, and what he expected was impossible. "If you join up, you and I would run the show, everything from figuring out how to steal the nuclear material to building the bombs."

"No shit? How did they pick you?"

That was the same question Deby asked Sherbani every time they met. "Like you said, up until now the Iranians bugged everything they tried. That was the old guard, so somebody figured they'd let the next generation have a go." One of Sherbani's convoluted explanations went something like that.

“What do you know about building a nuclear weapon?”

Another question he had asked Sherbani. “I’m a reasonably intelligent nuclear engineer. The theory of atom bombs isn’t difficult. Iran’s nuclear scientists have studied it and have designs. All we need to do is get the nuclear material and build them.”

Austin laughed. “That’s all, huh?”

He told Austin about a report written by Iranian scientists that Sherbani gave him. It summarized bomb designs and information needed to build them. After reading it, Deby was as convinced as Sherbani that a computer expert would be needed—a bloody good computer expert—because computers would be needed in everything from bomb design to machining bomb parts. With an expert like Austin, they’d need only one or two other people once they got the nuclear material.

Austin drained half his beer, a smile spreading across his face. “A million dollars, right? I’d want to negotiate for more money, but first I’d like to see that literature.”

With Sherbani’s permission, Deby turned over the literature. Then he waited for the FBI, waited to be the latest looby Iranian caught with his trousers down. At least Sherbani would know he tried.

On the third day of waiting, he received a text message from Sherbani telling him to be in New York Saturday afternoon for a meeting at the Sheraton on Seventh Avenue near Madison Square Garden.

Sherbani answered Deby’s knock at room 712. Deby stepped around Sherbani into the room and stopped dead in his tracks to stare across two double beds at Steve Austin sitting at a small round table behind a laptop computer.

“How you doing, Ian, old chap?” he asked, mimicking Deby’s British accent.

Deby turned to Sherbani. “What is this?”

“We tested you, Hassan, to see if you were with us. Doctor Austin initiated this brilliant project and brought it to us. He needed a nuclear engineer. You were the logical choice.”

Smiling, Austin waved Deby to a seat at the table.

Austin ran the meeting. “When we talked, Ian, I got the idea you didn’t believe the plan would work. It’ll work, because I’m not in the DOE Fusion Sciences Division, like I told you. I’m in NNSA, the National Nuclear Security Administration, *the* division responsible for security and for transporting and accounting for bomb-grade nuclear material in the U. S. That’s where we’re getting our nuclear material.”

“You said you came to Princeton to meet with people on the fusion program.”

He smiled. “I came to see you. We played it safe to make sure you wouldn’t go to the police. We figured if you took a chance on recruiting me, you could be trusted.”

“That’s not all,” Sherbani said, his smile larger than Austin’s, “he knows where all the bomb-grade material is that will fit the criteria for our bombs.”

“That’s right. Like you said, Ian, you need computers to do anything these days. I’ve got

the skills, and I let the right people in DOE know about it. Now, whenever anybody has a computer problem, they call me.”

Austin spent the next two hours laying out their plan. He concluded, “This job won’t be easy and could take six months to a year. It’s already taken me two years, but I’ve achieved our first objective by gaining access to DOE computers containing information on how bomb-grade material is stored and shipped. I run the computers that keep NNSA operating. *I* keep it operating.”

“Access is one thing,” Deby said, “but your plan will work only if you can manipulate the system.”

“I agree. I’ve had experience hacking other people’s computers. In that case, I first had to get passwords. Here, I’ve got passwords. By the time we are ready to go, I intend to control the computers that will be compromised.”

Deby watched, amazed at Austin’s confidence and wishing he was as cocksure of himself. He also wished he was anywhere but here. Two days ago, he heard from Wisconsin. They set an interview date. With a little luck, he could reach his goal to be a British scientist teaching at an American university, maybe marry an American girl and raise a family.

Austin glanced at Deby, winked, and turned to Sherbani. “Before we go on, let’s set Ian’s mind straight. Tell him what you told me about what you intend to do with these bombs.”

“Iran is a peaceful nation. All we want is to deal with the United States on equal footing, not from our knees. They have no right to tell us what we can do in our own country. We will get weapons they will not take from us. We will then negotiate as equals. We are no more anxious to use such powerful weapons than is the United States. But someone must show them they cannot dictate what the rest of the world can and cannot do.”

Austin considered the reply, nodded, and glanced at Deby. “I understand, and I think Ian does too. Now that we’ve got the main part of our team assembled, the second thing we need to talk about is payment for services rendered if we are successful.”

Sherbani now wore a constant smile. “Talking about money is difficult, Doctor Austin, but I say to you what I said before and what I told Hassan. You will be well rewarded.”

Austin nodded, smile in place. “First, I want an immediate five-million dollars for bringing you this job. Then Ian, or Hassan, as you call him, and I want ten-million each to do the job. We want two million up front as a show of good faith. We want further payments as the project proceeds, say two million when we steal the bomb material and two-million more when the first bomb is completed. Then we get the remainder when all bombs are delivered.”

Sherbani’s smile faded. “That is much money.” His smile reignited, somewhat dimmed. “I need to talk to some people, but you will get your price.”

“We also need access to cash, so we want you to arrange for us to get two-hundred-thousand in cash in the United States,” Austin said. “I assume you can do that because you will have to get more cash for expenses for the project.”

Sherbani indicated that would be possible.

Deby knew it was time to speak up. Act confident, he told himself. Be like Austin.

“You promised me something else,” he said to Sherbani. “My family. I want my father out of prison, and then I want my family flown out of Iran *before* I agree to work for you.”

“Do not be unreasonable, Hassan. It will take time, but we will work something out.”

Deby stood, feeling Austin’s gaze on him. “Either that, or I walk out right now.”

“You know we can make it unpleasant for your father, *and* your mother. *And* you.”

“That’s my price.”

Deby followed Austin through the revolving door of the hotel, onto the crowded New York sidewalk and around the corner into an almost-deserted bar. “We did it, Ian. We did it.”

Deby felt as if he were in a daze. “*Why? Why* are you doing this?”

Austin laughed. “As you would say, my *British* friend, fifteen bloody-million reasons.”

“But you’re planning to give them a bloody atomic bomb. What will they do with it?”

Austin led him to a booth in the corner. “As our friend Sherbani says: they have as much right to one as anyone else. Where does the U.S. get the right to crash into their country and take their toys away?” Austin turned to the approaching waitress and told her to bring a bottle of Dom Pérignon. He turned back to Deby, laughing. “You talked me into this, remember? And now, I find out you don’t think they should have a bomb.”

“You better bloody-well believe I don’t.”

“Maybe they should, maybe they shouldn’t. But they *are* getting one. *We* are giving it to them and getting our ten-million. After that, who knows what might happen to the bombs?”

“What does that mean? You’re going to double-cross them? They’ll kill you.”

Austin laughed. “You didn’t hear me say anything about sabotaging the project. I intend to live up to our contract and give them the bomb. Enough of that, let’s get down to the celebration of getting rich. I got the impression in our meetings over the last few months that you’re still an up-tight Muslim and you’ve never gotten laid.” He burst out laughing. “We’re going to remedy that tonight.”

### CHAPTER THREE

Ian now had a bank account in Switzerland with two-million dollars minus the two-hundred thousand in cash that Sherbani arranged for him and Austin in the United States. His cash rested in a safety deposit box in a branch of the PNC Bank in Princeton, New Jersey.

Despite Deby’s insistence that his parents be out of Iran before he began work on the bomb, Sherbani insisted that would take time. In the meantime, he arranged for Deby to visit Iran. Deby considered taking BahAmin, his older sister who emigrated with him and now lived outside of London with her British husband, Malcolm Wilson, and their three children. Sherbani mentioned Uncle Behrouz, but not BahAmin. Why draw Sherbani’s attention to her? Deby worried about not being trusted by Sherbani and therefore being watched or having his phone bugged, so he called her from a pay phone and told her what was happening. To keep from

compromising her safety, he had her set up an anonymous e-mail account on Yahoo, and he did the same. They would use those accounts only to communicate with each other.

When he left for Iran, he told his Princeton colleagues he was going to England for a visit. Sherbani made arrangements under his Iranian name with an Iranian passport for an Iran Air flight from Amsterdam to Tehran.

The parents he found only vaguely resembled those pictured in his mind all these years, mental scenes enhanced by the few photographs Auntie Goli brought out of Iran. Streaks of gray pushed his forty-eight-year-old mother's appearance to that of a sixty-plus grandmother, a change hastened by twelve-hour days spent cleaning government office buildings. On his first visit with his father, he discovered a completely gray prisoner with deep facial wrinkles that pushed his appearance well past his fifty-four years.

During his visit, Sherbani arranged for him to consult with the Iranian scientists who had produced the report on atomic bombs that he had been given. These were older men, most of them older than Sherbani. Deby wondered if they would not rather be spending their time on other technical tasks.

When he returned to Amsterdam, he rented a car for a side trip to Zurich to check his new bank account and set up other accounts for later use. He spent a day looking for a place to settle his family when they arrived, but he then changed his mind about having them relocate there. Since they would come out of Iran on an Iran Air flight, and since Iran Air had no flights to Switzerland, he decided to tell Sherbani to fly them to Amsterdam. Before his return to the U.S., he contacted an Amsterdam real-estate agent and used some of his new-found wealth for a six-month lease on a three-bedroom apartment in the Kinkerstraat district.

Back in the U.S., he e-mailed BahAmin with a tentative plan for when his parents were released. He included numbers for Swiss bank accounts for BahAmin and Uncle Behrouz, who was part of the plan.

He spent his last two months at Princeton interviewing for jobs at Ohio State, MIT, Drexel, and Wisconsin. All but Ohio State offered jobs, which he turned down. When his postdoctoral appointment at Princeton ended, he announced he had a job with Conrad Engineering Consultants in Salt Lake City. Conrad Engineering's website described a virtual 90-person firm with e-mail addresses for the ninety phantom employees, thanks to Steve Austin. Ian Deby's new e-mail address, [debyi@conradeng.com](mailto:debyi@conradeng.com), would be used to communicate with friends and colleagues at Princeton and elsewhere. According to Austin, this would allow him to resume his former life once the bombs were built. At that time, he would return from a long-term consulting trip from somewhere on the other side of the world—Korea, China, or South Africa—and announce that he was looking for an academic position.

Three months after the New York meeting and a week after Deby left Princeton, they again met at the Sheraton. As before, Austin ran the meeting and with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation on his laptop computer, he laid out a bomb program that included preparation of facilities, bomb design, acquisition of nuclear material, and building and delivering the bombs.

According to Austin, when the project was completed, he and Deby would return to normal society. Deby had a difficult time believing it; he wondered if Austin felt the same way

After Austin laid out his ambitious program, Deby spoke up. “You sort of skipped over how you expect to steal the nuclear material. You said yourself that this isn’t the 1970s when the *Curve of Binding Energy* was written, saying nuclear material could be stolen easily.”

“Twenty-first century technology—cyberspace—makes it a piece of cake. I’ll take care of it.”

“You’ll need other people to help with different parts of the project,” Deby said. “It’ll leak out. Nine-eleven changed everything in this country. Security has been upgraded considerably the last nine years.”

“I agree. The more people involved, the greater the chance somebody will leak it. That’s why we’re minimizing the number of people involved, at least those involved voluntarily.”

“What do you mean: *voluntarily*?”

“Don’t worry about it. Only you, Mr. Sherbani, and I will know the whole plan. Everybody else will know only what they need to know. They won’t know the other people involved. Those doing the hijacking won’t know what’s being hijacked. Only a few people besides us will know you’re involved, and they won’t know your real name. Everybody will be well paid to keep their mouth shut.”

A week after that meeting, Ian Deby was reborn as Brian Applenu, and Steven Austin was reborn as Derek Hearn. The idea according to Austin was to keep their real names clean, so they could resume them when the job was completed. They had the required papers—birth certificates, social security numbers, credit cards, credit histories—everything a twenty-first century man needed to lead a respectable life in the USA, all thanks to Steve Austin—computer hacker extraordinaire—and a forgery expert Austin knew. Austin also gave Deby two other sets of identification papers should Applenu be compromised.

They would use their new names whenever working on the project, which for Ian, a.k.a. Brian, was now a full-time job. Since he was still a full-time NNSA employee, Steve didn’t have the luxury, and would sometimes forget to respond when Ian called him Derek.

Austin had Deby buy two laptop computers, one for his communications as Ian Deby, the other for his communications as Brian Applenu. On this one, Austin installed an encryption program. When the job was complete, he could destroy the latter computer if necessary. He also bought a second cell phone, a Siemens S65, from which untraceable calls could be made by Brian Applenu.

Deby moved from Princeton to Washington, and as Applenu, he began designing a facility to safely turn nuclear material into atomic explosives. Actually, Austin had begun the process before Applenu arrived. After searching the country—the internet mainly—posing as Derek Hearn, he found and leased a new hot-cell facility down south that had been built but abandoned by a bankrupt nuclear fuel-element manufacturer before any nuclear material had been put into the facility. It was up to Applenu to modify the facility for their job and have it ready when they acquired the plutonium and uranium bomb material.

Applenu also helped Hearn design bombs. The ones in the Iranian report were not suitable for the nuclear material available for stealing. They would either have to be modified or new ones designed. As they struggled to estimate critical masses for uranium and plutonium, Applenu found it hard to believe they would ever build workable bombs. They lacked data to determine how explosive efficiency depended on mass and energy generation rates. They needed equations of state for bomb materials, which they finally obtained when Austin acquired the Rare Metals Handbook and Glasstone's *Sourcebook of Atomic Energy*.

The struggle eased considerably once Austin gained access to the DOE classified library and carted home copies of everything from designs for advanced weapons to critical mass summaries for fissionable materials. In reality, he didn't have to cart it home. He scanned the literature—actually, he had a librarian scan it—and carried it out of the library in his pocket on a tiny flash drive. In addition to information on designing atomic bombs, they assembled all the information they needed to process plutonium hexafluoride and uranium hexafluoride into plutonium metal and uranium metal, respectively.

While searching the DOE library files, Austin discovered that in the early 1950s before the hydrogen bomb—code named SUPER—became a reality, Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) scientists developed numerous atom-bomb designs with the objective of maximizing explosive yields while minimizing size. Bombs with names like Mike, Viper, and S.O.B.—Super Oralloy Bomb—were just three of the projects detailed in the classified reports he scanned.

With that information and computer-aided design programs, they developed new bomb designs. Austin somehow acquired access to one of the world's fastest computers, a new CRAY supercomputer at Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, a computer used by DOE weapons scientists for their calculations. For good measure, he also acquired access to a second supercomputer at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. Tasks that took the Manhattan Project thousands of man hours to complete, took them but a fortnight. In some AEC reports, computational procedures had been worked out, and all they had to do was translate them into codes for the CRAY.

Hearn developed a computer code for simulated explosions he called EXPLOVIEW. With it, they could change bomb parameters and determine explosive yields (kilotons). They designed bombs that approached a megaton, all of them vast improvements on the old AEC designs. To maximize the number of nuclear bombs they could build from material they intended to acquire, they decided on bombs averaging 40 kilotons, over three times the yield of the two dropped on Japan—and with much less weight.

The other part of the plan involved DOE, where six months earlier Austin submitted a massive report to redesign NNSA's nuclear transportation and security system. Everything was to be computerized, and the process coordinated on a classified website. This included hiring and assigning drivers and guards to trucks that transported nuclear material, organizing and approving the schedule for transporting nuclear material, automating inventory of nuclear

material, etc. The report was immediately approved and funded. Austin was in charge of implementing the plan, and by now, the redesign of the system was nearing completion.

In conjunction with his work in Washington with Hearn, Applenu commuted from Washington to the bomb-making facility he was setting up down south. The plan was for Applenu to manage the factory where they would process the hijacked nuclear material that was liquid into powder and the powder into a solid that could be machined into a nuclear explosive for the bomb. Hijacked solid material would be machined directly.

To make it official, Hearn/Austin built a website for the factory, which they called Margine Nuclear Technology, a fuel-rod manufacturing facility, complete with e-mail accounts for dummy names that worked at marginenuclear.com. He said the site was for recruiting purposes.

Hearn recruited a young chemist, Eric Drafton to work on processing the liquid and powder. Drafton visited Washington for three weeks to confer about the project. Hearn, who was vague on how he met him, turned over a large amount of classified literature to him and Applenu on procedures for processing the plutonium and uranium from liquid through powders to metal. Drafton spent most of his time at the factory getting it ready, thus allowing Applenu to spend most of his time in Washington.

Applenu figured Hearn worked fifteen-to-twenty hours a day—some as Austin on his DOE job, but most as Hearn on the project. Although Applenu's own twelve-hour days had him exhausted, Austin and/or Hearn never faltered. He even squeezed in time to party and spend some of his new-found wealth on a red Porsche Cayman. He knew how to party, and thanks to him, the former Ian Deby was no longer a virgin. That status changed in New York after their first meeting with Sherbani. After that, Austin introduced him to Patricia Hunter, a nice bit of stuff he had begun sleeping with on a semi-regular basis.

Simultaneously with designing the bombs, Hearn worked to acquire the bomb material. For that, Sherbani and Hearn brought in Bill Lormes, who Hearn described as a Russian ex-KGB officer who now “managed various enterprises,” one of which was truck hijacking.

Applenu participated in the meetings to devise hijacking plans. The first part of the plan involved getting men hired as drivers and guards for NNSA's Transportation Division. Again, Hearn's computer skills greased the skids, as he was able to devise appropriate backgrounds for each man to ensure they got the jobs. As part of the redesign of the Transportation Division, Hearn made sure he was on the hiring committee. In essence, he was the committee—he and the human-resources computer.

Lormes—undoubtedly not his real name—was a burly, craggy-faced man in his late fifties, always in an expensive suit and tie. He spoke with a strong Russian accent. Meetings generally began with Lormes objecting to various aspects of Hearn's plans and then listening to Hearn convince him it was the best way to proceed.

Fifteen months after Deby became Applenu, Hearn decided they should celebrate the successful completion of phase one of the project—bomb design, acquisition of manufacturing facilities, and planning for the hijacking. They sat across from each other at Morton's

Steakhouse in Arlington, Hearn cutting a slice of “double-cut” filet mignon, Applenu chewing a mouthful of porterhouse. Between bites, Hearn quietly brought him up to date and then surprised him. “Lormes has everything in place for the heist of the century. You’ll be manufacturing bombs in less-than a month.”

As they finished their meal, a young black man stopped at the table and spoke to Austin. “Steve, did you get hit yesterday? We were down all day.”

“We weren’t affected,” Austin said. “We’ve worked hard on upgrading security.”

“Maybe I’ll come over to your place and get a rundown on your procedures.”

“Sure,” Austin said. “Call me next week.”

After the man left, Austin turned to Applenu. “He’s head of computer security—system administrator—for all mainframe computers on Capitol Hill. I keep in touch with him and other system administrators around town. Did you hear about the cyber attack, as the media termed it? Computers crashed all over Washington.” He chuckled. “Ours didn’t. I had a call this afternoon from the system administrator over at FBI headquarters. He thanked me for the help I gave him on security programs for his system. It didn’t crash either. But then that was the plan.”

“You were responsible for the cyber attack?”

He laughed. “I made the plan, and Sherbani provided funds to subcontract the job to some people I know, some very smart people. Between us we figured out how to shut systems down all over the world. Last week we confined ourselves to Washington.”

“Hackers? What’s this got to do with stealing the material?”

“Only everything.” Another laugh. “It all goes down next week.”

Five days after the celebration, Applenu was at the bomb factory when he got a text message from Hearn telling him to check CNN shortly after 7:00 pm. He turned on the TV a few minutes before seven. At seven, “The Blitzer Report” began with a gray-bearded chap interviewing a senator about an energy bill being debated in the Senate. Three minutes later, Blitzer was interrupted by a graphic announcing a “breaking-news story,” and a wide-eyed blonde bit of fluff appeared on screen, speaking in an excited tone.

“We’ve just been informed there’s been a massive internet interruption that is affecting computers and communications over a wide area of the United States. The first indication something was wrong appeared about ten minutes ago.” She paused, evidently listening to someone talking in her earphone. She resumed, “I’ve just been informed that some of CNN’s computers in our Washington, New York, and Atlanta studios have been affected, and....”

Fascinated, Applenu watched for the next hour as Blitzer spoke with reporters in Washington, New York, and Atlanta about what was happening at their locations.

The Washington reporter said, “We just learned that communications in Europe are also affected. As I said earlier, we are having difficulty communicating with our reporters, but we were able to get to our Pentagon correspondent by telephone, and she reports that many government computers were hit. Although not yet confirmed, a Pentagon employee, who wished to remain anonymous, said several of the government’s super-security computers were hit.”

Blitzer came back on: “I have on the phone Professor Dudley Anderson, a computer-security expert from Georgetown University. Professor Anderson has been...”

It was clear to Applenu that this part of Hearn’s elaborate plan worked to perfection. The objective was to disrupt communications between NNSA’s Transportation Control Center in Albuquerque and the trucks carrying the nuclear materials. Everything needed to proceed in a precise fashion. Two minutes before communications were knocked out, the command car leading the truck convoy would receive a “Change in Route” notification originating from Hearn. A “Change in Route” notification requires the convoy commander to confirm the order, but before that could be done, communications would be interrupted. In addition to a loss of voice and computer communication, Albuquerque would also lose the GPS signals.

The original plan was to have the convoy commander be one of Lormes’s recruits. However, since Austin was unable to make that happen, it would be necessary for Lormes’s men to subdue the men not in on the hijacking. The commander’s assistant riding in the truck with him was one of Lormes’s men. Once they took over, the trucks would be taken off on a side road, where the nuclear material would be transferred to other trucks, eventually winding up at Applenu’s factory. All GPS units on the trucks would be disabled, so Albuquerque would not be able to locate them when communications were restored.

It was after ten when Hearn called Applenu’s cell phone. “We did it, Brian! I just talked to Lormes. Phase two, the acquisition, went as planned, like clockwork.”

“It’s over?”

“It’s just beginning, old chap. Lormes and friends plan to have the product to you tomorrow. You got everything ready to begin manufacturing?”

He hesitated; he had hoped it would never come to this, hoped that Austin would not be able to pull it off, thus getting him out of this quandary. “The facilities are ready,” he said.

“For phase three, you are the man, old chap. You’re in charge of getting the stuff processed, machined, and shipped to the customer.”

Three days after Lormes delivered the material to the factory, Applenu, on Hearn’s orders, was at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami’s South Beach for the American Society of Mechanical Engineers Meeting when Hearn called Applenu’s cell phone. “Did you see our man?” Hearn asked.

“He gave an interesting talk on computerized machining, and he’s giving another paper tomorrow morning entitled, ‘Micro/Meso Mechanical Applications for Improved Precision Machining at the Microscale Level.’”

“Is he our man?”

“The chap’s quite sharp, but he won’t work for us when we tell him what we’re doing. I can take care of the machining, and you can take care of the computer part of it, so we really don’t need him.”

“We need him and Surling for insurance. Maybe you can take care of the machining, but we’ve got to be sure. Reedan and Surling are experts. So it’s up to you and Lormes to recruit him.” He laughed. “Lormes can be persuasive.”

“There are a bloody lot of things that could go wrong, and this is one of them.”

“There were a *bloody* lot of things that could have gone wrong up to now, but they didn’t. And they won’t in the future. By the way, I sent our last product design off to our boss. It’s the best design yet.”

Hearn was referring to Sherbani, who showed all bomb designs to “his scientists at home,” as he called them. Although Hearn referred to Sherbani as the boss, Applenu knew Hearn considered himself the boss. Applenu marveled at the pride Hearn expressed in his designs. Everything he did was done with excellence.

Hearn said, “I don’t know if and when I’ll be able to come down to the factory. I need to stay here to keep suspicion off me. Actually, I don’t ever need to be down there, do I? You are the *man* at the factory. It’s in your hands now. That’s the way I planned it.”

“What’s happening with the investigation of the other guy?” Applenu asked Hearn, referring to Austin.

“DOE in-house security and DOD security is investigating. They somehow kept the FBI out of it up to now, but I know they are discussing when to bring them in.”

“Have any investigators been to see the other guy?”

“They are concentrating the investigation in Tennessee and New Mexico, but two of them came to see him. They wanted to know how the computerized system works. One of them asked what happened to our super-secure system. I told them DOE computers were just one of many throughout the world that were hit. Although the computer that controls the transportation system in New Mexico failed, ours here at Washington didn’t. I said we are looking into why the New Mexico computer failed. Of course, I didn’t tell them I designed the entire system.”

“So what happens if they zero in on you?”

“I’ve got plans for that. I’ve got explanations for everything. Eventually, when the time is right, I’ll resign, saying I’m partly to blame because my computerized system failed. Oh, I’ve got plans. Don’t worry about me.”

“We succeeded with the hardest part of this project, Applenu said. “Maybe we should just end it here and walk away, just disappear.”

“No way. Besides, you know you can’t do that. You’ve got family involved. Buck up, old chap. Hey, I wish you were here, because I’m going out and celebrate. If you were here, you could call Patty and get laid.” He laughed. “You miss getting laid regularly, now that you know what it’s all about? We’ve got a lot to celebrate. And much *bigger* things are coming.”

The morning after Hearn’s celebration, Sherbani made one of his rare phone calls to Applenu in his hotel room in Miami. “Our colleague, Doctor Hearn is dead,” he said solemnly.

“*Dead?* I talked to him last night.”

“It was an automobile accident in his new Porsche. He was going too fast and lost control. The car exploded. His body was burned beyond recognition.”

Applenu dropped into the chair behind the table he was standing at, his mind assessing the meaning of the news and its effect on the project. Maybe this was the break he needed. He said, “We’ve got to cancel the project. We can’t do it without him.”

“We carry on just as before. Doctor Hearn served us well. He gave us some magnificent designs in phase one, engineered phase two most ingeniously, and now phase three, the manufacture of the product is up to you.”

“He was our computer expert,” Applenu protested. “We needed him to write programs for precision machining the product. He also made himself the chemistry expert on processing the fluoride solution to a solid.”

“Why did Doctor Hearn send you and Lormes to Miami?” Sherbani asked and then answered his own question. “To recruit backup for the computerized machining, correct?”

“Yes, but—”

“And Doctor Hearn gave Mr. Lormes instructions on recruiting a backup chemist, correct? Doctor Hearn planned for all contingencies. He prepared documents on the chemistry and machining and gave them to you and Dr. Drafton. His plan all along was to have you run phase three without significant input from him. So, we are right on schedule.”

Applenu sighed with resignation as Sherbani continued in a soft voice. “When you make a long journey, your vehicle can break down. That does not mean you abandon your journey. There are other vehicles, some not as good as the one you started with and some better. Regardless, you continue the journey. You are now our vehicle, a better vehicle. I know you will not fail us.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Lori Reedan smiled as she threw open her front door, expecting to find Linda Bell. Instead, a squat, gray-haired man with a white walrus mustache squinted at her through purple-tinted glasses.

“Mrs. Reedan, I’ve got a message about your husband,” he said in accented English, as he shoved his light-blue shirt into rumpled navy pants, his enormous stomach protruding over his belt.

“Curt isn’t here. He’s on a business trip.” Nothing new there, she thought. Either away on business or isolated in his office, parked behind his computer. “I handle his business when he’s gone.” Curt’s sop to her: he made her vice-president of *their* company.

“I’ve got a message *about* him, not *for* him,” he growled as he flipped off his glasses revealing watery blue eyes perched above purple pouches as wrinkled as his shirt. He scanned her bare legs.

Suddenly conscious of her brief shorts, she pushed the door forward and shuffled the lower half of her body behind it. “What do you mean, about him? Is something wrong?”

“Is Daddy home?” Beth suddenly squealed from behind Lori. In her pajamas, she danced merrily on tiptoes at the top of the steps that led down into the foyer.

“Beth, please get back to bed,” Lori said, thinking again how good it would be to get her into kindergarten in the fall. Every day it got harder to get her to take a nap.

When Lori turned back to the man, he had the screen door open. She grabbed the door to slam it in his face, but she couldn’t budge his massive bulk. “You can’t come in here!”

He shoved her backward with the door, the soles of her leather sandals sliding on the slate floor.

“Mommy? What’s the man doing?”

“Just take it easy, lady, and everything will be okay.”

Head down, she leaned her weight against the door, her gaze falling on the chain lock Curt kept after her to use. She remembered the paper last week, where some guy on the other side of town came to this woman’s door, forced his way into her house, and raped her. But that was three-thirty in the morning, not in the middle of the day.

“Mommy! Mommy!”

His steel-gray head now protruded into the house, his puffed cheeks and thick gray mustache less than a foot away from her face. Sweat beaded his forehead.

She strained against the door, but her feet glided backward. When she skipped forward to keep from falling, his momentum caught her mid-stride and shoved her farther back, the door now open wide enough for him to squeeze in. He grabbed her arms with damp hands, twisted her right hand from the doorknob and kicked the door shut. He jerked her toward him, his unbuttoned shirt flapping open to reveal a thick mat of gray chest hair, the air between them now filled with the odor of sweat—no deodorant. Up close, his body heat enveloped her as though she had just stepped outside; his breath reeked of liquor and onions.

Lori started to scream and remembered Beth, who stood at the top of the stairs, eyes wide open. Can’t scare Beth, she thought, got to protect her from this madman. She flung herself backwards, but her arms were pinned as if in a strait jacket. She remembered the gun Dad wanted to give her ever since she left home.

Standing next to him, she realized he was short, about her height. His bulk dominated. She skipped forward and aimed a knee at his groin. “Get out of here, or I’ll call the police.”

With a twitch of his huge waist, he bowed slightly, causing her knee to barely graze his thigh. Reestablishing his grip, he held her at arm’s length, a leering smile on his lips.

“No police, lady.” He grabbed her shoulders and spun her around so she faced Beth at the top of the steps. Beth stared down, her mouth wide open.

“Just get the hell up them steps, lady.”

Lori twisted and squirmed in his grip, then threw her body to the floor, wrenching her shoulders free. She jumped up, but before she could turn and face him, he had both hands on her buttocks, his fingers probing as he boosted her toward the steps.

Lori screamed. She scampered up two steps toward Beth, whose eyes were mostly white.  
“Mommy! Stop him, Mommy!”

Lori turned to face him.

“Lady, it’s all up to you. You can calm down and not give me any trouble, and you and the kid won’t get hurt. And neither will your husband.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

When Bill Lormes said the job was his, Curt Reedan smiled and reached for his wine glass. He sipped merlot, savoring the flavor of his private toast to success, a toast to the completion of another stage of his career plan. “I’m looking forward to the job,” he said as Brian Applenu refilled his wine glass, although it was still three-quarters full.

Sold at last, Curt thought. Now they could get down to the details of the job. Selling, there was always too much selling, although he felt himself getting better at it.

Curt shoved his chair back from the dining table, unfolded his long legs, and heard the familiar pop in the left knee. He glanced at the plush surroundings: a fourteenth-floor Miami-Beach hotel suite overlooking the Atlantic, the dining area set back in a corner away from the living-room area. He looked at Bill Lormes, who sat to his left, then glanced at Brian Applenu at the other end of the dining table from Lormes.

He spoke to Lormes, who had introduced himself as the president of Margine Nuclear Technology. “From what you’ve told me, I shouldn’t have any trouble computerizing the machining operations. But we haven’t really talked about what your company does. What’s your product line?”

Lormes studied Curt’s face. Curt had sensed Lormes’s eyes on him throughout the meal, gray, penetrating eyes, watching him like a suspicious boss. “Our product line, as you put it, is atomic bombs,” Lormes said, his voice, a heavily accented rumble suddenly stripped of its businessman-to-businessman joviality of their earlier conversation.

Words started to form, then froze on Curt’s parted lips. He pumped out a too-loud laugh. “Oh, you’re joking,” he said, emitting more of his salesman’s laughter.

Lormes’s steel-gray eyes flashed above the white napkin he used to wipe at the wrinkles around his mouth. “It’s no joke.”

“What are you, government? I think my security clearance is still active.”

“We’re not government.”

Curt sucked a deep breath to counter the alarm that pressured his chest and squeezed air from his lungs, leaving him partially winded. His head snapped from Lormes to Applenu, then back to Lormes. Who was this guy? Lormes’s craggy face labeled him in his sixties, but his slick brown hair and the tailor-fitted gray pinstripe draped across his bulky shoulders probably knocked off ten years. Up ‘till now, they hadn’t discussed specifics of the job, but that wasn’t unusual.

Margine Nuclear Technology was a legitimate firm. It had to be. When he received the e-mail inviting him to lunch, Curt looked at their website that described nuclear-related work they did at their plant in Blacksburg, Virginia. He figured they were located there to be near AREVA, the French nuclear company. Also, Lormes said they had talked to two of Curt's clients, and said he came highly recommended. They wouldn't do that if they were not for real. Both Lormes and Applenu called him last week to get him to visit their Blacksburg plant as soon as possible. When they found out he couldn't visit for two weeks and that he was giving a talk at the ASME meeting in Miami Beach, they made plans to meet him here.

"I don't understand," Curt said. "*Atomic bombs?*"

"It's simple enough," Applenu said, his words precise, delivered with a British accent that seemed more pronounced than when they talked on the phone. "We're going to build some atomic bombs, and we need you to help us computerize some remote-machining operations."

Lormes had introduced Brian Applenu as the brains of Margine Nuclear Technology. Slim, a dark complexion, about Lormes's height, five-ten or so, and Curt's age, around thirty, his face was mostly black hair. Thick black curls on his head tumbled from his forehead to his eyebrows. A black mustache dribbled down the sides of his mouth into a short black beard that covered his chin and jaw like chocolate pudding around a messy kid's mouth.

"We're going to be machining uranium and plutonium," Applenu said. "Since you worked at the Y-12 weapons plant in Oak Ridge for three years, you're used to machining those metals. We'll also be machining non-radioactive components to extremely close tolerances. We need the computer techniques you described in your talk today."

"I haven't worked with uranium or plutonium for over two years."

Applenu cocked his head like a curious animal, studying Curt as if he didn't believe what he heard. "According to what you just told us and what you said in your talk today, you've made metal fabrication a science. You can develop a computer program to machine anything. If that's so, you won't have any more trouble with plutonium and uranium than you would with carbon steel."

Curt remembered his salesman's motto: show the client confidence; talk a good game, even if clouds of doubt threaten peace of mind. Maybe it worked too well this time. Lormes's earlier announcement completed his career package for the next step: an MIT professorship coupled with long-term consulting jobs with companies like Y-12 at Oak Ridge and Margine Nuclear Technology put him right where he wanted to be: Success. Right?

A private company building atomic bombs? It was like the college junior designing an atom bomb for a class project that you read about. Just talk, anti-science talk. It had to be a joke. Curt had read articles about how easy it was to build an atomic bomb, but it had to be more complicated than that. "If you're not government, why are you building atomic bombs?"

"Let's not worry about *why* we're building bombs," Applenu said. "We told you up front, so you wouldn't be surprised later on. We need your expertise, and we will pay for it. Say two-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars for about a month's work."

“A quarter of a million dollars?” That kind of money would accelerate his career plan by several years. “Are you kidding?” Are these guys al-Qaeda terrorists? Applenu, with the dark complexion: Is he Middle Eastern?

Applenu shook his head, smiling. “A quarter of a million dollars, cash ... tax free. Of course, we’re also buying your silence. We know all about you. We found out that one of the reasons you’re going to MIT is because you’re into developing robots and you want to start a company. That money will go a long way toward getting you started. Patent lawyers are expensive.”

Now he knew what was going on. It couldn’t be. “What are these bombs going to be used for? What kind of organization are you running?”

“The less you know,” Lormes growled, “the less you’ll have to keep quiet about.” Like rays from a bright light, the lines in Lormes’s face emanated from his mouth.

With the quarter-of-a-million-dollar figure still rattling around his brain, Curt decided he didn’t want to know anything more about the job. He glanced around the room, trying to comprehend. A few minutes earlier the luxury of his surroundings had him thinking he had arrived at last, his reward for hard work at the ripe old age of thirty-one.

Even before this, Lori kept telling him everything was moving too fast. On the plane down, he tried to reflect on the future: the move to MIT, his consulting business, Lori’s MBA degree and a possible job, and now, thrown in on top of it all, a new baby. Until he faced it on the plane, he hadn’t taken time to consider the baby beyond the hope that Lori would still have her period, though the probability of that was about nil. The idea of a son had appealed to him, but not now.

Lori pestered him to sit down and talk about their life and make plans for *their* life. He knew where his career was headed, and they never got around to discussing plans. And he didn’t waste any time on it on the plane. By the time the “Fasten Seat Belt” sign went off, his mind had wandered to the Vickers contract, and he reached into his briefcase for his laptop. Finish up Vickers and get back to the robot program. Vickers and Margine Nuclear Technology were tickets to the robot program, which was where he wanted to invest his attention, Now, Margine Technology needed to be deleted from that plan—immediately.

Lormes and Applenu stared at him as if expecting a momentous announcement.

Curt picked up his water glass, drained it, and stood. “Thanks for lunch, but I’m not your man. I’ve got to be in Cincinnati tomorrow, so—”

“You’re not leaving,” Lormes said, his accent heavier now and sounding Russian. In his haste to stand and throw his body in front of Curt, Lormes’s wine glass toppled, sending a crimson shower to the gray carpet, the globules glistening like drops of blood.

Curt started to squeeze by, but Lormes shifted his mass, standing immovable like a bolder, his bulky shoulders balanced on a thick waist.

His path blocked on the right by the dining table and on the left by a wall of balcony windows looking out at the Atlantic Ocean, Curt started to turn just as Applenu eased in behind him.

Getting mugged in a hotel room because you wouldn't take a quarter-of-a-million dollars, Curt thought. Only one thing to do: go straight ahead, over or through Lormes, and drag Applenu with him if need be. "Listen, Mr. Lormes—"

Lormes yelled over his shoulder, "Beecher, Markum, get in here."

Across the room, the bedroom door crashed open, and a Mutt-and-Jeff pair in business suits hustled into the room.

Curt froze. Although he might bull his way past Lormes and Applenu, he could not get by all four of them. ... ..

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