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The Camel Club

David Baldacci

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PROLOGUE

THE CHEVY SUBURBAN SPED DOWN the road, enveloped by the hushed darkness of the Virginia countryside. Forty-one-year-old Adnan al-Rimi was hunched over the wheel as he concentrated on the windy road coming up. Deer were plentiful here, and Adnan had no desire to see the bloodied antlers of one slashing through the windshield. Indeed, the man was tired of things attacking him. He lifted a gloved hand from the steering wheel and felt for the gun in the holster under his jacket; a weapon was not just a comfort for Adnan, it was a necessity.

He suddenly glanced out the window as he heard the sound overhead.

There were two passengers in the backseat. The man talking animatedly in Farsi on a cell phone was Muhammad al-Zawahiri, an Iranian who had entered the country shortly before the terrorist attacks on 9/11. The man next to him was an Afghan named Gul Khan, who'd been in the States only a few months. Khan was large and muscular with a shaved head. He wore a hunter's camouflage jacket and was checking his machine gun with nimble fingers. He clicked the mag back in place and put the firing switch on two-shot bursts. A few drops of rain fell against the window, and Khan idly watched them trickle down.

"This is nice countryside," Khan said in Pashto, a dialect Muhammad spoke but one Adnan had little familiarity with. "My country is filled with the metal carcasses of Soviet tanks. The farmers just plow around them." He paused and added with a deeply satisfied look, "And some American carcasses too, we have."

Adnan kept glancing in the rearview mirror. He didn't like a man with a machine gun sitting behind him, fellow Muslim or not. And neither was he overly trusting of the Iranian. Adnan had been born in Saudi Arabia but migrated to Iraq as a young boy. He fought for Iraq

in the horrific war between the two countries, and his enmity toward Iran still ran very deep. Ethnically, Muhammad al-Zawahiri was Persian, not Arab, like al-Rimi. It was another difference between the two men that caused al-Rimi not to trust him.

Muhammad finished his phone call, wiped a smudge of dirt off one of his American-made cowboy boots, checked the time on his very expensive watch and lay back against the seat and smiled as he lit a cigarette. He said something in Farsi and Khan laughed. The big Afghan's breath smelled strongly of onions.

Adnan gripped the steering wheel tighter. He had never been a careless man, and Adnan didn't like the Iranian's flippancy about serious matters. Seconds later Adnan looked out the window again.

Muhammad had clearly heard it too. He rolled down his window and poked his head out, looking up at the cloudy sky. When he saw the wink of red lights overhead he barked to Adnan, who nodded and hit the gas; both men in the back strapped on their seatbelts.

The Chevy flew along the snaking country road, banking so hard around some curves that the men in the rear held on to the hand straps with all ten fingers. Yet even the fastest car in the world couldn't outrun a helicopter on a serpentine track.

Speaking again in Farsi, Muhammad ordered Adnan to pull off under some trees and wait, to see if the chopper kept going. Continuing in Farsi he said, "Car accident, Adnan? Medical evacuation helicopter perhaps?"

Adnan shrugged. He didn't speak Farsi very well, and oftentimes nuances in that language escaped him. One didn't need to be a linguist, however, to sense the urgency in his colleague's voice. He drove under a cluster of trees, and all three men got out and crouched down by the vehicle. Khan pointed his machine gun at the sky and Adnan slid his pistol out as well. Muhammad just gripped his cell phone and looked nervously overhead. For a moment it appeared that the chopper had left, but then a searchlight beam cut through the tree canopies directly overhead.

The next word Muhammad spoke was in English: "Shit!" He nodded at Adnan, instructing him to go for a better look.

The Iraqi ran in a crouch until he reached the edge of the tree line

and cautiously gazed up. The chopper was hovering sixty feet overhead. Adnan returned to his companions, reporting what he'd seen.

"They may be looking for a place to land," he added.

"Do we have an RPG in the truck?" asked Muhammad, his voice slightly trembling. He was used to being the brains behind these sorts of operations rather than one of the foot soldiers who actually did the killing—and often died in the process.

Adnan shook his head. "We didn't think we'd have need of a rocket-propelled grenade tonight."

"Shit," said Muhammad again. "Listen," he hissed. "I think they're landing." The tree canopies were starting to shake from the chopper's rotor wash.

Adnan nodded at his companions. "It is only a two-person helicopter. There are *three* of us," he added firmly. He stared at his leader. "Take out your gun, Muhammad, and be ready to use it. We will not go quietly. We will take some Americans with us."

"You fool," Muhammad snapped. "Do you think they haven't already called for others? They will simply keep us pinned down until help arrives."

"Our cover papers are in order," Adnan countered. "The best money can buy."

The Iranian looked at him as though he were insane. "We are *armed Arabs* in the middle of pig farmers in Virginia. They will fingerprint me and know in seconds who I really am. We are trapped," he added in another hiss. "How could this be? How?"

Adnan pointed at the man's hand. "Perhaps that cell phone you're always on. They can track these things. I've warned you before about that."

"Allah's will be done," Gul Khan said as he put the gun's firing selector on full auto, apparently in accordance with God's wishes.

Muhammad stared at him incredulously. "If we are stopped now, our plans will not succeed. Do you think God wants that? Do you!" He paused and took a deep, steadying breath. "Here is what I want you two to do. What you *must* do!" He pointed a shaky finger at the vibrating tree canopies and said in a firm voice, "I want you to hold them off, while I make a run for it. There is another road a half-mile

through these trees to the west. I can call Marwan to come and pick me up in the other truck at that location. But you must hold them off. You must do this!"

Adnan stared sullenly at his leader. By his expression, if there were a literal translation for "chickenshit" in his native tongue, Adnan would've certainly used it.

"Go, now, draw them off, it is your sacrifice for the cause," Muhammad cried as he started backing away.

"If we are to die while you escape, then give me your gun," Adnan said bitterly. "*You* will have no need of it."

The Iranian pulled out his pistol and tossed it to Adnan.

The burly Khan turned toward the chopper and smiled. "How about this plan, Adnan?" he said over his shoulder. "Firing into their tail prop before they can land worked very well against the Americans in my country. Their spines snap like twigs when they hit the ground."

The bullet hit him in the back of the neck, ironically snapping Khan's own spine like a twig, and the big Afghani fell dead.

Adnan swiveled his pistol away from his first victim and pointed it at Muhammad, who, seeing this traitorous attack, had started to run. He was not fleet of foot, however, and the cowboy boots he favored were not built for running. Adnan caught up to him when Muhammad fell over a rotting tree trunk.

Muhammad looked up at his colleague as Adnan pointed Muhammad's own pistol at him. The stream of invectives in Farsi from Muhammad was followed by pleas in halting Arabic and then finally in English: "Adnan, please. Why? Why?"

In Arabic Adnan answered, "You deal drugs, you say, to make money to support the effort. Yet you spend more time shopping for your precious cowboy boots and your fancy jewelry than you do on the work of Islam, Muhammad. You have lost the way. You are American now. But that is not why I do this."

"Tell me why then!" the Iranian shouted.

"It is *your* sacrifice for a greater end." Adnan didn't smile, but the triumph was very clear in his eyes. He fired a contact shot into the man's left temple, and no more pleas in any language flowed from the Iranian. Adnan pressed Muhammad's hand around the gun, then set it down and made his way quickly back to the clearing, where the

chopper had landed and the passenger door was now opening. Adnan had lied. It was actually a four-person chopper. Two men got out. They were Westerners wearing grim features, and carrying something between them. Adnan led them back to Muhammad's body after stopping to retrieve a shotgun from the Suburban.

The object the men toted was a body bag. They unzipped it. Inside was a man, a man who looked remarkably like Adnan and was dressed identically to him. The man was unconscious but still breathing. They set him up against a tree near where the dead Iranian lay. Adnan handed his wallet to one of the men and he placed it in the unconscious man's jacket pocket. Then the other man took the shotgun from Adnan, pressed Muhammad's dead hands around it, pointed it at the unconscious man, and fired a blast into his head, instantly wiping away part of his face. A living human to a corpse, in seconds. Adnan was an expert in such things, and not by his choosing. *Who would select that vocation, except a madman?*

A minute later Adnan and the two men were racing to the helicopter, and they climbed in; it immediately lifted into the air. There were no insignias on the chopper's sides or tail, and neither of the men in the front seats wore uniforms. Indeed, they barely looked at Adnan as he settled himself in one of the backseats and pulled on his safety harness. It was as though they were trying to forget he was even there.

Adnan was no longer thinking about his dead companions. His thoughts had pushed on, to a far greater glory that awaited him. If they succeeded, humanity would speak of it for generations to come in awed tones. Adnan al-Rimi was now officially a dead man. Yet he would never be more valuable.

The chopper took a northerly route, on its way to western Pennsylvania. To a town called Brennan. A minute later the rural Virginia sky was quiet once more except for the fall of a gentle rain that took its time washing away all the blood.

CHAPTER 1

HE WAS RUNNING HARD, BULLETS *embedding in things all around him. He couldn't see who was shooting, and he had no weapon to return fire. The woman next to him was his wife. The young girl next to her was their daughter. A bullet sliced through his wife's wrist, and he heard her scream. Then a second bullet found its target and his wife's eyes widened slightly. It was the split-second bulge of the pupils that signaled death before one's brain could even register it. As his wife fell, he raced to his little girl's side to shield her. His fingers reached for hers but missed. They always missed.*

He awoke and sat straight up, the sweat trickling down his cheeks before finally creeping onto his long, bushy beard. He poured a bit of water from a bottle over his face, letting the cool drops push away the heat-filled pain of his recurrent nightmare.

As he got up from the bed, his leg brushed against the old box he kept there. He hesitated and then lifted the top off. Inside was a ragged photo album. One by one he looked at the few pictures of the woman who'd been his wife. Then he turned to the photos of his daughter; of the baby and toddler she'd been. He had no more pictures of her after that. He would have given his life to have seen her, even for a moment, as a young woman. Never a day went by that he didn't wonder what might have been.

He looked around the cottage's sparsely furnished interior. Looking back at him were dusty shelves crammed with books covering an array of subjects. Next to the large window that overlooked the darkened grounds was an old desk stacked with journals filled with his precise handwriting. A blackened stone fireplace provided much of his heat,

and there was a small kitchen where he prepared his simple meals. A minuscule bathroom completed his modest living arrangements.

He checked his watch, took a pair of binoculars from the rickety wooden table next to his bed and grabbed a frayed cloth knapsack off his desk. He stuffed the binoculars and a few journals in the knapsack and headed outside.

The old grave markers loomed before him, the moonlight glancing off the weathered, mossy stone. As he stepped from the front porch to the grass, the brisk air helped carry away the burning sensation in his head from his nightmare, but not the one in his heart. Thankfully, he had somewhere to go tonight, yet with some time to spare. And when he had extra time, he invariably headed to one place.

He walked through the large wrought-iron gates where the scrollwork announced that this was Mt. Zion Cemetery, located in northwest Washington, D.C., and owned by the nearby Mt. Zion United Methodist Church. The church was the oldest black congregation in the city, having been organized in 1816 by folks who didn't enjoy practicing their faith at a segregated house of worship that had somehow missed the concept of equality in the Scriptures. The three-acre parcel had been an important stop along the underground railroad, shepherding slaves from the South to freedom in the North during the Civil War.

The graveyard was bracketed on one side by the massive Dumbarton House, headquarters of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, and on the other side by a low-rise brick residential building. For decades the historic cemetary had suffered from neglect, with toppled tombstones and waist-high weeds. Then the church had enclosed the graveyard with the fence and built the small caretaker's cottage.

Nearby was the far larger and far better know Oak Hill Cemetary, the final resting place of many notable people. However, Stone preferred Mt. Zion and its place in history as a gateway to freedom.

He'd been engaged as the cemetery's caretaker some years ago, and he took his work very seriously, making sure the grounds and grave sites were kept in good order. The cottage that came with the job was his first real home in a long time. The church paid him in cash with no bothersome paperwork; he didn't make nearly enough to pay income

taxes anyway. In fact, he made barely enough money to live. Yet it was still the best job he'd ever had.

He walked south on 27th Street, caught a Metro bus and was soon dropped a block or so from his "second home" of sorts. As he passed the small tent that at least technically belonged to him, he pulled the binoculars out of his knapsack and from the shadow of a tree used them to eye the building across the street. He had taken the government-issued binoculars with him after serving his country proudly before completely losing faith in its leaders. His real name he had not used in decades. He had been known for a long time now as Oliver Stone, a name he'd adopted in what could only be termed an act of cheeky defiance.

He related well to the irreverent film director's legendary work, which challenged the "official" perception of history, a history that often turned out to be more fiction than fact. Taking the man's name as his own seemed appropriate, since *this* Oliver Stone was also very interested in the "real" truth.

Through the binoculars he continued to study the comings and goings at the mansion that never ceased to fascinate him. Then Stone entered his small tent, and, using an old flashlight, he carefully noted down his observations in one of the journals he'd brought in his knapsack. He kept some of these at the caretaker's cottage and many more at hiding places he maintained elsewhere. He stored nothing at the tent because he knew it was regularly searched. In his wallet he always kept his official permit allowing him to have his tent here and the right to protest in front of the building across the street. He took that right very seriously.

Returning outside, he watched the guards who holstered semiautomatic pistols and held machine guns or occasionally spoke into walkie-talkies. They all knew him and were warily polite, as folks were with those who could suddenly turn on you. Stone always took great pains to show them respect. You were always deferential with people who carried machine guns. Oliver Stone, while not exactly in the mainstream, was hardly crazy.

He made eye contact with one of the guards, who called out, "Hey, Stone, I hear Humpty Dumpty was pushed, pass it on."

Some of the other men laughed at this remark, and even Stone's lips

curled into a smile. "Duly noted," he answered back. He had watched this very same sentry gun down someone a few feet from where he was standing. To be fair, the other fellow had been shooting at him.

He hitched his frayed pants up tighter around his slender waist, smoothed back his long grayish white hair and stopped for a moment to retie the string that was trying and failing to hold his right shoe together. He was a tall and very lean man, and his shirt was too big and his trousers too short. And the shoes, well, the shoes were always problematic.

"It is new clothes that you need," a female voice said in the darkness.

He looked up to see the speaker leaning against a statue of Major General Comte de Rochambeau, an American Revolutionary War hero. Rochambeau's stiff finger was pointing at something, Stone had never known what. Then there was a Prussian, Baron Steuben, to the northwest, and the Pole, General Kosciuszko, guarding the northeast flank of the seven-acre park that Stone was standing in. These statues always brought a smile to his face. Oliver Stone so loved being around revolutionaries.

"It really *is* the new clothes that you need, Oliver," the woman said again as she scratched her deeply tanned face. "And the hair cut too, yes. Oliver, it is a new everything that is needed."

"I'm sure that I do," he replied quietly. "Yet it's all in one's priorities, I suppose, and fortunately, vanity has never been one of mine."

This woman called herself Adelphia. She had an accent that he'd never been able to exactly place, although it was definitely European, probably Slavic. She was particularly unsympathetic to her verbs, wedging them into very awkward places in her speech. She was tall and spare with black hair shot through with gray that she wore long. Adelphia also had deeply set, brooding eyes and a mouth that was usually cast into a snarl, though Stone had sometimes found her to be kindhearted in a grudging sort of way. It was difficult to gauge her age, but she was certainly younger than he. The six-foot-long, freestanding banner outside her tent proclaimed:

A FETUS IS A LIFE. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IT,
YOU'RE GOING STRAIGHT TO HELL.

There was very little that was subtle about Adelphia. In life she only saw the rigid lines of black and white. To her, shades of gray were nonexistent, whereas this was a city that had seemingly invented the color. The small sign outside of Oliver Stone's tent read simply:

I WANT THE TRUTH

He had yet to find it after all these years. Indeed, was there ever a city created where the truth was more difficult to discover than the one he was standing in right now?

"I go to get the café, Oliver. You would like some? I have money."

"No thank you, Adelphia. I have to go somewhere."

She scowled. "Another meeting is where you go? What good does it give you? It is not young you are no more and you should no be walking in the dark. This is dangerous place."

He glanced at the armed men. "Actually, I think it's fairly secure here."

"Many men with guns you say is safe? I say you crazy," she responded testily.

"Perhaps you're right and thank you for your concern," he said politely. Adelphia would much rather argue and looked for any opening to pounce on. He'd long since learned never to allow the woman such an opportunity.

Adelphia stared at him angrily for another moment and then stalked off. Meanwhile, Stone glanced at a sign next to his that read:

HAVE A NICE DOOMSDAY

Stone had not seen the gentleman who erected that sign for a long time.

"Yes, we will, won't we?" he muttered, and then his attention was caught by the sudden activity across the street. Policemen and marked cruisers were assembling in groups. Stone could also see lawmen taking up positions at the various intersections. Across the street the imposing black steel gates that could withstand the push of an M-1 tank opened, and a black Suburban shot out, its red and blue grille lights blazing.

Knowing instantly what was happening, Stone hurried down the street toward the nearest intersection. As he watched through his binoculars, the world's most elaborate motorcade streamed out onto 17th Street. In the middle of this imposing column was the most unique limousine ever built.

It was a Cadillac DTS model loaded with the latest in navigation and communication technology, and it could carry six passengers very comfortably in rich blue leather with wood trim accents. The limo boasted automatic-sensor reclining seats and a foldaway storable desktop and was fully airtight with its own internal air supply in case the outside oxygen wasn't up to par. The presidential seal was embroidered on the center of the rear seat, and presidential seals were also affixed on the inside and outside of the rear doors. On the right front fender rode the U.S. flag. The presidential standard flew from a post on the left front fender, signaling that America's chief executive was indeed inside.

The exterior of the vehicle was constructed of antiballistic-steel panels, and the windows were phone-book-thick polycarbonate glass that no bullet could penetrate. It ran on four self-healing tires and sported double-zero license plates. The car's gas mileage was lousy, but its price tag of $10 million did include a ten-disc CD changer with surround sound. Unfortunately, for those looking for a bargain, there was no dealer discount. It was known affectionately as the Beast. The limo had only two known weaknesses: It could neither fly nor float.

A light came on inside the Beast, and Stone saw the man perusing some papers, papers of enormous importance, no doubt. Another gentleman sat beside him. Stone had to smile. The agents must be furious over the light. Even with thick armor and bulletproof glass you didn't make yourself such an easy target.

The limo slowed as it passed through the intersection, and Stone tensed a bit as he saw the man glance his way. For a brief moment the president of the United States, James H. Brennan, and conspiracy-minded citizen Oliver Stone made direct eye contact. The president grimaced and said something. The man next to him immediately turned the light out. Stone smiled again. *Yes, I will always be here. Longer than both of you.*

The man seated beside President Brennan was also well known to

Stone. He was Carter Gray, the so-called intelligence czar, a recently created cabinet-level position that gave him ironfisted control of a $50-billion budget and 120,000 highly trained personnel in all fifteen American intelligence agencies. His empire included the spy satellite platform, the NSA's cryptologic expertise, the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, or DIA, and even the venerable CIA, an agency Gray had once headed. Apparently, the folks at Langley thought that Gray would show them preference and deference. He had done neither. Because Gray was also a former secretary of defense, it was assumed that he would show the Pentagon—which consumed eighty cents out of every intelligence dollar—loyalty. That assumption had also turned out to be completely erroneous. Gray obviously knew where all the bodies were buried and had used that to bend both agencies to his considerable will.

Stone did not believe that one man, one fallible human being, should have that much power, and certainly not someone like Carter Gray. Stone had known the man very well decades ago, though Gray certainly would not have recognized his old mate now. *Years ago it would've been a different story, right, Mr. Gray?*

The binoculars were suddenly ripped out of his hands, and Stone was staring at a uniformed guard toting a machine gun.

"You pull these out again to look at the man, Stone, they're gone; you got it? And if we didn't know you were okay, they'd be gone right now." The man thrust the vintage field glasses back into Stone's hands and marched off.

"Simply exercising my constitutional rights, Officer," Stone replied in a low voice that he knew the guard couldn't hear. He quickly put his binoculars away and stepped back into the shadows. Again, one should not argue with humorless men carrying automatic weapons. Stone let out a long breath. His life was a precarious balance every day.

He went back inside his tent, opened his knapsack and, using his flashlight, read over a series of stories he'd clipped from newspapers and magazines and pasted into his journals. They documented the doings of Carter Gray and President Brennan: "Intelligence Czar Strikes Again," claimed one headline; "Brennan and Gray Make Dynamic Duo," said another.

It had all come about very quickly. After several fits and starts

Congress had dramatically reorganized the U.S. intelligence community and essentially put its complete faith in Carter Gray. As secretary of intelligence, Gray headed the National Intelligence Center, or NIC. The center's statutory mandate was to keep the country safe from attacks within or without its borders. Safe by any means necessary was perhaps the chief unwritten part of this mandate.

However, the beginning of Gray's tenure had hardly matched his impressive résumé: a series of suicide bombers in metropolitan areas with enormous casualties, two assassinations of visiting foreign dignitaries and then a direct but fortunately unsuccessful attack on the White House. Despite many in Congress calling for his resignation and the dismantling of the secretary's authority, Gray had kept the support of his president. And if power slots in Washington were compared to natural disasters, the president was a hurricane *and* an earthquake all rolled into one.

Then slowly, the tide had begun to turn. A dozen planned terrorist attacks on American soil had been thwarted. And terrorists were being killed and captured at an increasingly high rate. Long unable to crack the inner rings of these organizations, the American intelligence community was finally starting to attack the enemy from within its own circles and damaging its ability to hit the United States and its allies. Gray had understandably received the lion's share of the credit for these outcomes.

Stone checked his watch. The meeting would be starting soon. However, it was a long walk, and his legs, his usual mode of getting around, were tired today. He left the tent and checked his wallet. There was no money in it.

That's when he spotted the pedestrian. Stone immediately headed after this gentleman as he raised his hand and a taxi pulled up to the curb. Stone increased his pace, reaching the man as he climbed into the cab. His eyes downcast, his hand out, Stone said, "Can you spare some change, sir? Just a few dollars." This was said in a practiced, deferential tone, allowing the other man to adopt a magnanimous posture if he so chose. *Adopt one,* Stone thought. *For it's a long walk.*

The man hesitated and then took the bait. He smiled and reached for his wallet. Stone's eyes widened as a crisp twenty-dollar bill was placed in his palm.

"God bless you," Stone said as he clutched the money tightly.

Stone walked as quickly as he could to a nearby hotel's taxi stand. Normally, he'd have taken a bus, but with twenty dollars he'd ride by himself for a change. After smoothing down his long, disheveled hair and prodding his equally stubborn beard into place, Stone walked up to the first cab in line.

On seeing him the cabby hit the door lock and yelled, "Get the hell outta here!"

Stone held up the twenty-dollar bill and said through the half-opened window, "The regulations under which you operate do not allow you to discriminate on any basis."

It was clear from the cabby's expression that he would discriminate on any basis he wanted to and yet he eyed the cash greedily. "You speak pretty good for some homeless bum." He added suspiciously, "I thought all you people was nuts."

"I am hardly a nut and I'm not homeless," Stone replied. "But I am, well, I am just a bit down on my luck."

"Ain't we all?" He unlocked the doors and Stone quickly climbed in and told the man where he wanted to go.

"Saw the president on the move tonight," the cabby said. "Pretty cool."

"Yes, pretty cool," Stone agreed without much enthusiasm. He glanced out the rear window of the cab in the direction of the White House and then sat back against the seat and closed his eyes. *What an interesting neighborhood to call home.*