

Chapter 3

The Middle of Fucking Nowhere

Things seem a tad off.

Can it be the hash?

So, I'd gotten dressed and followed the Khaleed Brothers' henchmen out of my suite and into the service elevators at the far end of my hotel floor. The whole time they appeared to be looking over their shoulders, without trying to appear to be looking over their shoulders.

Seemed a little strange, but I didn't object.

They hustled me through the kitchen and out the back emergency exit of the hotel. Again, not so crazy enough for me to speak up. A white Range Rover was waiting, motor running. Two more flunkies were standing there with the doors open. Before I had the time to express my

concerns, I was wedged in the back seat between the Middle East's version of Hobbs and Shaw. Now, it's too late. There are more pressing issues to be concerned about.

Like trying to make it out of this vehicle alive.

If you've never driven in the Middle East...don't.

There are no set rules, only mere suggestions. This guy behind the wheel's got the speedometer pegged, and he's more interested in blabbing away to his buddies than keeping his eyes on the road. The four of them haven't shut up since we left the hotel. The conversation seems normal enough, but Arabic is not one of my four languages, so....

We left the city limits of Dubai a while ago. It's now down to two lanes. Every ten or twenty kilometers, we pass another hovel with penned-up goats, camels, and sand. Spades in all three. I've rung Mikale, over and over, right up to the point of losing reception. Of course, he didn't pick up. And it's not like I could really speak freely. His text messages are now full of caps and f-bombs. In so many words, if I end up on a milk carton, he'd better hope no one ever finds me.

I told you, Mikale and I have known each other forever. He was my first friend in Brussels. When I was fourteen, my parents sold our home in Yonkers, New York, and we moved there. Mikale's family's estate was a couple of miles up the road. When he'd come home from boarding school for holidays and summer vacation, we'd hang out.

We were total opposites.

Heads and tails.

Still are.

Mikale was born into money. He's stuffy at dinner parties, where he consumes no more than two glasses of wine, wearing starched shirts and creased pants. Home and in bed by 10:00 p.m. To work every day, he's Dapper Dan with his custom suits and strait-laced wingtips.

Not me.

I'm at a craps table in Monaco, a hundred grand on the line, blow in my pocket, and a dime on my arm who cost me four racks for the evening. And to work...forget about it. I'm usually late, rushing through the door in sweaty gym clothes or still dressed from the night before.

Mikale says I'm undignified.

He came looking for me, so...

Six years ago, I was bouncing back and forth between Wall Street and the Intercontinental Exchange in London. I'd been working the trade desk for one of these venture capital firms. Due to my work ethic and because I am honest to a fault, I'd made my bones early on in the business and already had a mountain of success and money underneath me. In walks Mikale with a business proposal. Now, he's always been a bit shady, but a good friend nonetheless, so I listened to his pitch.

At the time, he was Senior Vice President of Development for the Four Seasons Hotel chain. But he wasn't getting along with upper management and wanted to branch out on his own. He needed a wheeler and dealer. Someone slick with the lingo. That's me.

I came with a list of demands—the least of which was that the home office needed to be in Zurich so I could ski. Three months later, with views of the mountains in Uetliberg off in the distance, we were putting together deals.

Been doin' it ever since.

Holy shit, it seems like we've been driving forever.

We're finally exiting the highway in the middle of fucking nowhere. There's a man at the corner of the off-ramp, wearing the Muslim costume. The sheet looks like it's been slept in. The

Turban's seen better days. He's leaning against a camel, smoking a cigarette, scrolling through his smartphone. Doesn't even bother to look up.

Fucking guy's probably on TikTok.

I'm basically being held hostage, and I can't get a signal to save my life.

We're now headed in the opposite direction of the paved highway...across sand. Kilometers and kilometers of the shit. Doesn't keep Ali Baba from continuing to drive like a bat out of hell, though. And he's still blabbing away. It's another twenty-five minutes and an end doesn't seem forthcoming.

And just so you know, phone-totting camel jockeys aren't even an anomaly over here.

They're fucking everywhere.

We finally come over the top of another dune and, off in the distance, something's reflecting the sun. This must be where we're headed. Up and down more dunes and we run into four armed men, standing in front of an old Land Cruiser. All of 'em smoking. All of 'em wearing the sheets and turbans. We stop. The windows go down. Turns out they're all buddies.

Hehe-ing and *haha-ing*...for like ten minutes already.

You believe this shit?

I lean forward and smack the back of the driver's arm. "Hey! You think you and Makmood here can talk about blowing something up later? I need to be somewhere this afternoon...back there in civilization." I say, pointing over my shoulder.

I'm not sure how many of them understand English, but everyone goes silent for a second...then picks right back up where they were. Like I'm not even here.

I'm contemplating saying something a little more offensive, but I'm not sure exactly how far I can push the envelope with these types. You think Mikale's going to be mad about the hookers on the credit card, try returning home two hundred million dollars short.

I'd never hear the end of it.

We're moving again.

Two more crests of sand and there's a huge purple-and-gold tent set up in a valley. Think Old Testament, only the tent's much bigger and a helluva lot nicer. I'm positive the biblical camels are close by, but I'm betting the Khaleed Brothers arrived in one of the four Range Rovers parked out front.

We pull to a stop, and everyone gets out.

In this corner of the globe, individuals continue to reside under the control of figures not unlike these brothers. It's still slaves and masters. And I'm sure when the slaves are delivering their captives to their masters, certain protocols are expected to be followed. Like walking the kidnapped through the front doors, possibly even forcing them to their knees to bow to the master.

Not today, fellas.

I'm not following anyone...especially out here!

Plus, I've vowed to only kneel to God and pussy.

I run around the back of the Rovers and come out in front of the tent...unescorted. Like I said, the tent's big. The two panels at the front are being held open with thick burgundy ropes, with two six-foot stone flowerpots flanking each side, probably weighing close to a metric ton each.

It's sheer Muslim audacity.

The good thing is the place looks too nice to behead anyone.

I step out of my loafers and leave them outside in the sand. When I walk through the open panels, it's dim. Doesn't keep me from noticing the two guards right inside. They're wearing matching sheets with expensive jewels in their turbans and in the hilts of the *smictars* on their sides.

Two of my kidnappers tried following me in but were dismissed in harsh Arabic.

They'll probably lose some fingers and shit shortly.

C'est la vie.

A carpet covers the sand from one end of the tent to the other, and there are a handful of servants moving around. The brothers are at the back, sitting on giant pillows, smoking from hookahs. They stare me down as I cross the tent, finally standing when I stop in front of their little picnic.

The older of the two, Mohammed, reaches out his hand first. "David," he says, with a slight bow. "We are sorry to have kept you waiting. We hope your stay in Dubai has been pleasant."

"What the fuck, Mohammed? Why the kidnapping?"

"We've had some recent threats. Until they are settled, we are staying outside of the city and taking precautions. Please, let us sit. We have much to discuss."

As Mohammed shouts several commands in his native tongue, Akmed, the other brother, bows and says, "Good afternoon, Mr. Liecht."

From thin air, two extremely gorgeous women appear, dressed as Disney's bad Jasmine. One has a large pillow, which she sets down. The other one is carrying a hookah. Everyone waits for me to sit.

"Hashish, I hope," I say, half joking as I pull from the water bong.

Neither of them responds like they're suddenly the pope.

It's not hash, by the way. It's flavored tobacco. Tastes like bad goat. Hookahs are part of a long tradition over here, so...

Truth be told, hash is the way to go. If you're going. I take one more pull, pretending I give a shit about their customs. Getting down to business is really all I'm interested in. If we hurry, I can still catch the late flight out to Mykonos. A few zzz's on the plane...hit the party runnin'.

"Let me just say, on behalf of both Mikale and me, we are looking forward to a long and prosperous relationship with you here in the Middle East."

"Ah, well...yes, let us talk," Mohammed says, all serious.

Meirda.

Here it comes. It's always something. Can't ever just hand over the fucking check and sit back. They must think I'm going to sit here and listen to some sob story or reassure them they're making the right decision. Not today. These boys have the wrong partner. Mikale stresses over shit like this. Not me. I know from past experiences, the deal wagon will come around again tomorrow. They can hand over the check or don't. I don't care. I've been kidnapped, crammed between five hundred pounds of smelly hummus, and brought all the way out to the middle of fucking nowhere. I don't have the patience to deal with it today.

"Gentleman, if I may speak frankly," I begin. "I'm not going to sell you on this deal again. It's take it or leave it. I can have a backup for the money by this evening. And we can certainly find another piece of sand to build on. We've only kept the door open for this long as a courtesy to Mikale's contact here."

Mohammed does the slight-bow thing again. "We are most grateful for the opportunity. We are not looking to back out of the deal. In fact, quite the opposite. We have brought the money with us," he says, happily.

There's something more coming, I can see it on Akmed's face.

"Please follow me outside," Mohammed says.

I follow him out of the tent and over to the Range Rovers. Mohammed walks around to the driver's side and opens the door. He motions for me to look inside. I do. Stacked on the passenger's seat and floorboard are black duffel bags. He gives me a nudge and says, "Look all the way inside."

I do. It's a wall of bags that goes all the way to the back. "What's in them?" I ask, praying he's not going to say what I think he's going to say.

"Two hundred and thirty million dollars."

Thought so.

"Can't be mine. This is not what we discussed. The funds have to be wired to our business account in Switzerland. Plus, there's an extra thirty million here."

"The extra thirty is for your troubles, David. You can figure out how to get it wherever you need," Mohammed says. There's something in his voice like I don't have a choice in the matter.

"Maybe before 9/11, but not today. It'd be easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle."

"It is possible. My contacts tell me you and Mikale are the guys to get it done. The thirty million dollars is a great incentive."

I can't spend it from a jail cell, you daft cunt!

By now, some of the brothers' muscle have moved in closer, and Akmed's whispering to their two private guards at the entrance to the tent.

Alright, alright, I get the point. Everyone just keep their hands where I can see 'em.

I take another second to consider my options. Fine! Yes, I can probably get it done. And the extra thirty million dollars does help.

“I will do my best to make it work,” I tell Mohammed.

“*Inshallah*,” he says. “God willing.”

Yeah, all of a sudden, there’s no undercurrent threat, and he’s Allah’s man again. It’s fucking bullshit.

So much for Greece.