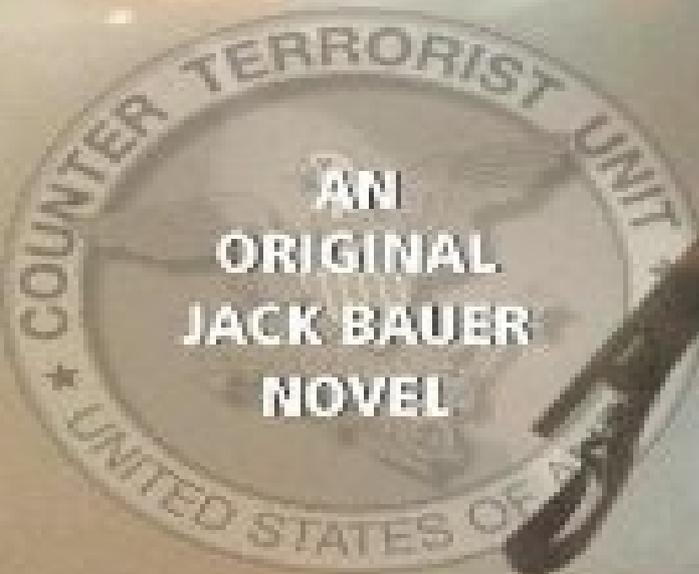


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24



AN
ORIGINAL
JACK BAUER
NOVEL

DECLASSIFIED

TRINITY

JOHN WHITMAN

Based on the hit FOX series created by Joel Surnow & Robert Cochran

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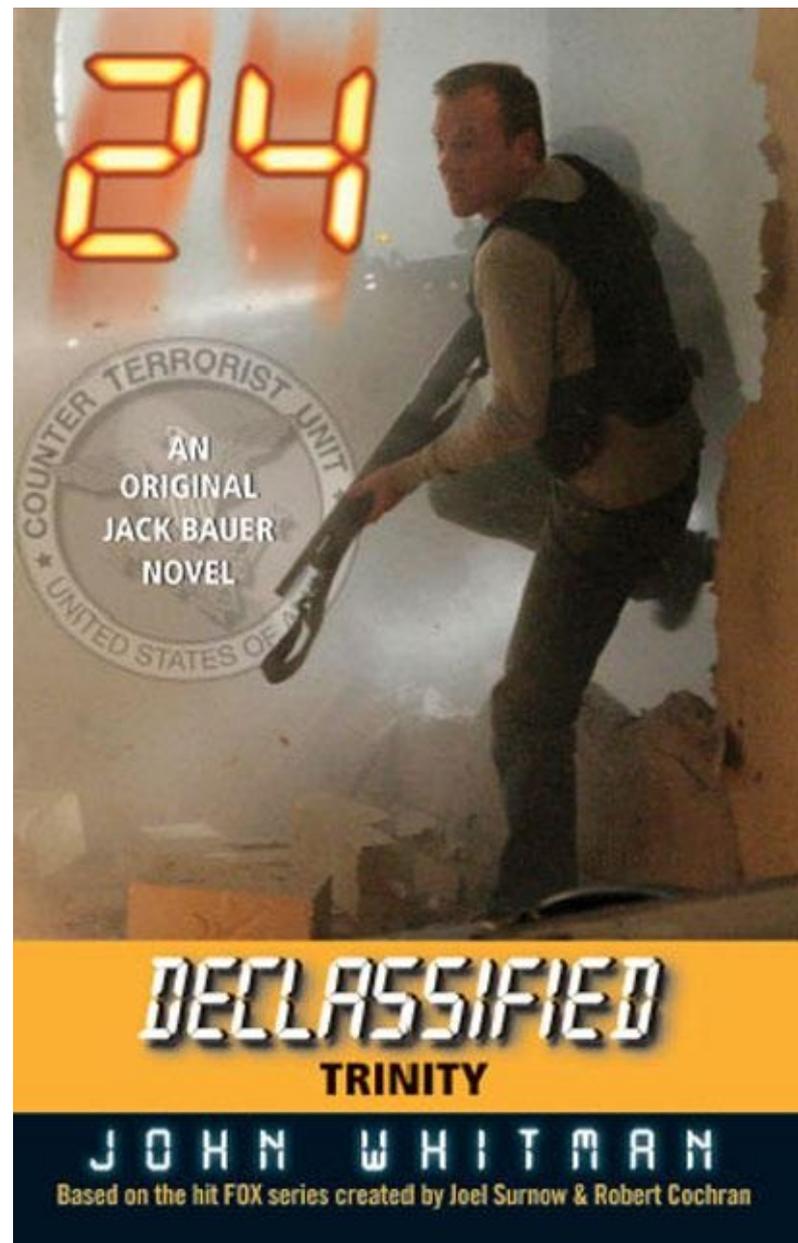
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24TM
DECLASSIFIED

JOHN WHITMAN

Based on the hit FOX series created by Joel Surnow & Robert Cochran

 HarperCollins e-books

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After the 1993 World Trade Center attack, a division of the Central Intelligence Agency established a domestic unit tasked with protecting America from the threat of terrorism. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the Counter Terrorist Unit established field offices in several American cities. From its inception, CTU faced hostility and skepticism from other Federal law enforcement agencies. Despite bureaucratic resistance, within a few years CTU had become a major force in the war against terror. After the events of 9/11, a number of early CTU missions were declassified. The following is one of them.

PROLOGUE

One month ago

It used to be easier, Claire told herself as she pushed the refreshment cart down the narrow aisle. The plane hit a pocket of turbulence and bucked like a horse. She didn't like horses. She liked planes, or at least she had for the first thirty years of her career. In her twenties, it had been fun to be a stewardess (she was old enough to have been called that once upon a time). Her thirties had been good, too, even her forties. But now, in her fifties, the rides had grown too hard on her feet, and the aisles had shrunk too narrow for her hips. The men didn't look at her anymore, either. They had stayed the same age, but she'd grown older. They liked her still—thirty years of dealing with grumpy travelers packed in like LEGOs had taught her how to survive on charm—but these days they smiled at her the way her grandson's friends smiled at her, and where was the fun in that?

"Something to drink?" she said, snapping down the brake and smiling at the boy in 29A. The young man wore an REI jacket and a leather thong choker with a wooden Inuit-carved pendant dangling from it. Claire had seen the boy a hundred times. Not the same boy, of course, but annual versions of him flying back home from Alaska after a season aboard a fishing boat. Sometimes they were rich people's sons "toughing it out" for the experience. Sometimes they came from the underside of middle class, really needing the money. They all came back looking the same. She liked to guess as much as she could about them. Thirty years of practice had made her pretty good at it. 29A took a Coke. She poured the fizzy soda into the plastic cup and handed it over.

29B and 29C were together, a couple in their late twenties, no wedding rings, coming back from a trip up to the Alaskan wilderness. She was a redhead with a bright smile. Schoolteacher, Claire thought. He had a smile, too, but he was thinner, like a sword. She wondered if he was an athlete. The way he said, "Thanks" reminded Claire of Chicago.

On the other side of the aisle, a young man sat alone in 29D. He had short black hair and a clean-shaven face. He smiled at her warmly and said, "Tomato juice" in answer to her question. He spoke with a bit of a lilt in his voice that didn't sound Hispanic, though he looked it. She poured tomato juice into a plastic cup. "Is L.A. home?" she asked pleasantly.

"For a while," the young man replied.

"Everyone says that at first." Claire laughed. She handed him the tomato juice.

Claire never heard him reply because the plane exploded.

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[THE FOLLOWING TAKES PLACE BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 6](#)

6:00 P.M. PST Panorama City, California

“I promise you, there will be no need for anything rough.”

Jack Bauer believed him and lowered his SigSauer. He motioned for Ed Burchanel to do the same. The FBI agent hesitated, not as sure as Jack. Finally, he lowered his Glock .40 but did not holster it.

The fat man on the wrong end of Burchanel’s gun chuckled nervously. “Your Agent Bauer knows when he’s won. I am not the type to give you trouble.”

Burchanel’s expression hadn’t changed since the moment they’d kicked in the door. “You gave us trouble back in ’93.”

Jack knew Burchanel was barking more than he planned to bite. Burchanel wasn’t even aware of the entire package. All he knew was that the fat man, Ramin, had been connected to terrorist activities. But Jack was CIA, and by law the CIA was not allowed to operate domestically. Burchanel’s presence made it legal.

“Not me, not me,” Ramin insisted. He lowered himself heavily into the armchair of his own living room, like a guest not sure the chair was permitted to him. There was already a deep indentation where he usually settled his wide ass. The chair creaked heavily and made a sound like one of the springs popping. He kept his hands on the armrests in plain view. He wore thick gold rings on most of his thick fingers. His nails appeared unnaturally neat and shiny. His mustached face smiled at them, a smile that was neither arrogant nor deceptive. It was the anxious smile of a man who had no desire except to please whoever might do him the most damage, and right now that honor belonged to Jack Bauer of the CIA and Ed Burchanel of the FBI. Ramin smiled again. “I wasn’t involved directly at all in the truck bombing.”

Jack motioned for Burchanel to stay with Ramin while he cleared the rest of the house. It was a small bungalow in Panorama City, in the dirty heart of the San Fernando Valley north of Los Angeles. Master bedroom, extra bedroom, bathroom, kitchen. He was done quickly and returned, nodding at Burchanel. Jack sat on the sofa that put his back to a wall and gave him full view of the front door and the hallway. Burchanel’s position blocked the door itself, although with Ramin’s size there was no way he could outrun them, even if he were the type.

The search had taken a few seconds, but Jack spoke as if no time had passed. “Not directly, but you used to go by the name of Mezriani, and you were friends with Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman.”

“Sheik Omar was the man behind the ’93 bombing,” Burchanel added. “You moved money around for him.”

Ramin sighed at Burchanel, then appealed to Jack. “Agent Bauer, look at me. I am an aging fat man with moderate resources. I am neither a patriot nor a zealot. I have one goal in life, and that is to make myself as comfortable as possible. I do not find interrogation or imprisonment comfortable, so I will tell you everything, everything I can.”

~~“Start by taking us through ’93,” Jack said. “Tell us what you know.”~~

Ramin obeyed. He talked freely, but ultimately he told Jack nothing the CIA agent didn't already know. Seven years ago, Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman, “the Blind Sheik,” had inspired several members of a Jersey City mosque to park a truck bomb in the parking structure of the World Trade Center. Most of those responsible had been caught, including the Sheik himself. One terrorist, Abdul Rahman Yasin, had been taken into custody and then mistakenly released. He'd slipped away to somewhere in the Middle East, probably Iraq. With most of the main culprits in jail, the media considered the case closed, but the World Trade Center bombing had been a wake-up call to a few entities inside the U.S. government, and they had started watching more carefully. Ramin hadn't been missed in the first rounds of investigation. He'd been brought into custody and interrogated—something, he repeated, he told Jack, that he did not find comfortable at all—but his only real connection to the World Trade Center bombing was an association with some of the Blind Sheik's zealous friends, and a knack for investing their money profitably. The FBI and Federal prosecutors had chosen not to pursue a case against him. Since 1993, Ramin had been interviewed several times by the Feds, and each time he insisted that 1993 had scared him into a much more cautious and upstanding circle of friends.

Jack had come to Ramin from the other end of operations. Jack was currently “on loan” to the CIA, although he couldn't explain even to his wife what “on loan” meant. In the early days, in the military and with LAPD, it had been easy. You were assigned to a unit and you worked in that unit. You reported to a commanding officer, and that was that. But over the years Jack had risen (or fallen? he wasn't sure which) into a murkier stratum of operations. It was as though the closer he got to the source of decision making, the more complex the network became. Communication channels crisscrossed. Organizational charts looked like Escher drawings. It was, to coin a phrase one of Jack's CIA colleagues had used, the “fog of deniability.”

But one thing did remain clear, even in that fog: the bad guys. They were out there, and if Jack couldn't pierce the heart of his own government's workings, he sure as hell could pierce the heart of the other guy's. So when the chance to be seconded to the CIA had come up, he'd taken it in a heartbeat. CIA meant overseas work, and that's where the enemy lived. Ironically, Jack's most recent task with the CIA had led him right back home.

“Farouk tells me you have been in bed with AlGama'a al-Islamiyya,” Jack said. Ramin winced at the term *in bed* and wiggled his bejeweled fingers.

“Farouk likes to sound more important than he is,” the fat man said. “Ask anyone in Cairo.”

“I did and you're right,” Jack said. “If I believed everything Farouk said, Burchanel here would be asking the questions, not me.” Burchanel smiled unpleasantly. “But I do believe that you've gotten cozy with some unsavory types again, Ramin. And I also believe that somewhere in all of Farouk's stories about terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, there's a little bit of truth. You're not the type to blow yourself up for the sake of Allah, and you're not the type to go to jail for someone else's sake. So tell me everything you know about Abdul Rahman Yasin trying to get back into this country.”

Ramin sighed. “If you know about Yasin, then you must know about tomorrow night.”

Jack reacted, startled, despite his training. Burchanel, too. “What's tomorrow night?”

Ramin looked equally surprised. “I thought you knew. I don’t know what it is, but I know that it tomorrow.”

Burchanel stood up and snarled. “Tell us what it is.”

The fat man leaned back in his chair. This time it didn’t creak or pop as before. Somewhere in his brain, that seemed wrong to Jack. “I don’t know what, I swear!” Ramin squealed. “I am not a terrorist.”

“You only handle their money,” the FBI agent snapped. He leaned down, gripping Ramin’s shirt in two clublike fists.

“But not their information!” Ramin clasped his sweaty, bejeweled hands over Burchanel’s. “I only know that Yasin will be leaving the next day, so it

must be tomorrow night! He would not stay longer.”

“What’s the target!” Burchanel demanded.

“Hold on . . .” Jack started to say.

Ramin squeaked again. “I don’t know! I only

know that with Yasin you must think in threes! I heard talk of three points of attack, three opportunities, three, three, three all the time!”

“This is bullshit,” Burchanel said. He braced with

his legs and heaved the fat man up and out of his seat.

Jack heard another pop. “Down!” he yelled.

The chair blew up, vanishing in a spray of light

and heat, wood and metal. Jack hit the floor while a thousand angry bees tore at his clothes, some his skin, trying to pull him in pieces away from the center of the blast.

6:14 P.M. PST Westwood, California

“Dare,” Kim Bauer chose.

Her best friend, Janet York, grinned mischievously. “Kiss Dean. French!” Everyone oohed and giggled.

There were six of them, three girls and three boys, sitting in the den of Lindsay Needham’s house. The housekeeper was supposed to be watching them while Lindsay’s mother was at a meeting, but housekeepers were easily gotten rid of, and the six thirteen-year-olds had gotten down to a very intense game of Truth or Dare.

Kim Bauer looked at Luke, hoping she wasn't blushing too badly. She was just glad Janet hadn't chosen Aaron. Aaron was cute, but he was brother material. Luke was a hunk. He was most of the reason Kim had been willing to play Truth or Dare in the first place. Kim had kissed boys before—she was thirteen, after all!—but she'd never French kissed. She didn't think Luke had, either. Their lips locked; something warm and wiggly, strange and uncomfortable, happened; and then it was over except for a lot of squealing and giggling.

"Okay, okay, my turn!" Kim said. Her heart was racing, but she felt no need to remain the center of all that attention. "Aaron!" she declared to a boy across the circle from her. "Truth or dare!"

Aaron had just recovered from laughing and applauding. "Truth," he chose.

Kim knew that Aaron and Janet had been going steady, and that they'd been caught behind the gym once. Janet denied anything was happening, but Kim wasn't so sure. "Has anyone ever touched you?" she asked.

Aaron's laughter thinned. "Touched me? Well, sure . . ."

"Uh-uh." Kim grinned. She glanced wickedly at Janet. "I mean, *touched* you. Down there."

"Kim!" Janet shrieked. The others shrieked, too. All except for Aaron. Kim had expected him to blush, but instead he'd gone ghostly white.

"Well, spill!" Dean demanded, oblivious.

"Spill!" repeated the others.

Aaron was not playing along. He fidgeted, the color gone from his face, his lip trembling. He looked at Kim with wet eyes, then looked down. All the laughter died.

"Aaron?" Kim asked quietly.

The boy got to his feet and hurried from the room.

6:19 P.M. PST Panorama City

Jack stumbled out of a cloud of dark smoke and into a sea of red and blue flashing lights set against black and white. He was vaguely aware of the police cars and uniformed officers. He knew someone was trying to talk to him, but the words came through as a muffled buzz, distorted by the ringing in his ears.

Booby trap, he said. Or at least that's what he meant to say. He couldn't hear his own words. *Bomb the chair. Pressure release, like a land mine. The fat man sat down and that triggered it. They're ahead of us.*

The uniformed officers asked him a few more questions, but he couldn't hear them yet. *They're ahead of us*, he kept thinking and saying. *They're ahead of us*. The uniforms didn't know what that meant, so they left him sitting on the curb and went back inside to search.

Jack breathed in the cleaner air and worked his jaw as though that would open up channels and let the ringing sound leave his head. The muffled voices became a little more distinct as he watched figures in firemen's jackets carry two people out of the house on stretchers—the fat man covered by a sheet and Burchanel. Jack couldn't see much of the FBI agent with the emergency personnel around him, but what little he saw looked bad.

They're ahead of us, Jack told himself. *They knew we'd talk to Ramin and they tried to put him out of service. They're ahead of us.* It occurred to him that he kept repeating that same phrase. It was not a good sign.

Someone knelt behind him, tearing the back of his shirt open. The someone—a paramedic—daubed his back with soft, wet gauze. The wetness felt cool at first, then it stung. Jack gritted his teeth but said nothing. This was easier to deal with than the ringing in his head. He could focus on pain. Sound came into his head now as separate and distinct stimuli. Soon enough he was able to focus on two people standing in front of him. One was a paramedic— maybe the same one who had treated his back. The other was a tall man with steel-blue eyes. It occurred to Jack that he knew that man.

“. . . got to be a concussion,” the paramedic was saying. “And his back is torn up a little from charring fragments, but there's nothing serious. Not like the other guys. I can't believe he survived it, that close.”

“That's Jack,” said Christopher Henderson. Henderson stooped in front of Jack to look him in the eyes. “You okay, buddy?”

Jack was. Henderson's voice came from farther away than it should have, but otherwise, Jack's head was clearing. “I'm pissed,” he said. “How are they?”

Henderson shook his head. “The fat guy's dead. Your FBI man would be, too, but the fat guy shielded a lot of the blast. Still, they're taking him to ICU.”

Jack nodded. Every passing moment brought him a little more clarity. Still, he'd had concussions before, and he knew that clarity came in layers—at each stage you felt fine, until the next layer came and you realized how groggy you'd still been a moment before.

“Was the fat guy Ramin Ahmadi?” Henderson asked.

Jack nodded again, and this time he smiled wryly. “This unit of yours is coming along, eh?”

Henderson managed to nod proudly and dismissively at the same time, the way a man takes a compliment on a golf swing he knows is good. “We're on the distribution list, now. I still think you should come over. Speaking of which . . .” He spun on his heels and sat down on the curb next to Jack. “What's a CIA agent doing operating domestically?”

Jack rubbed his eyes and pointed down the road, where an ambulance had just taken Ed Burchanel. “It was just along for the ride. It was Ed's investigation.”

Henderson snorted. “If you joined the Counter Terrorist Unit, you wouldn't have to tell tall tales.”

“Like I told Richard Walsh, you guys seem set up to deal with things on this side of the ocean. The

real action is overseas.”

Henderson looked over his shoulder at the smoldering house. “Is that so?”

It occurred to Jack that the evidence was against him.

“Well, at least let me give you a ride,” Henderson said.

Jack shook his head. “Can’t. I’ve got to clean this mess up,” he said, referring to the information debris, not the damage to the house.

“No, you don’t,” Henderson said. “It’s our mess now. CTU’s mess, I mean.”

Jack bristled, but then put his hackles down. He could see it. CIA recruits the FBI to pursue a domestic investigation. The shit hits the fan, and CTU, eager to make its bones, steps in as the new agency in charge of a terrorist case.

“It’s my case,” Jack said. “I want in.”

Henderson winked. “Like I said, let me give you a ride.”

6:28 P.M. PST Westwood

Kim found Aaron sitting on the curb outside the Needham house. She knew boys didn’t like to be caught crying, so she pretended not to notice as he wiped his eyes. When he was done, she sat down next to him.

“I didn’t mean to freak you out,” she said. “I mean, it was just a game—”

“It’s cool, it’s cool,” he said, still sniffing. “You didn’t freak me out. I kinda did that myself.”

“It wasn’t . . . it wasn’t because you and Janet—”

“No!”

“—because I was just joking—”

“No, it’s not.” His breath caught in his throat, making her stop, too. “It’s not Janet or anything. It’s . . .”

He adjusted himself in a way Kim couldn’t really explain. It wasn’t like he fidgeted or anything. But she could tell that some machinery in his body or his head, a cog or a wheel she couldn’t see, had shifted, like when you clicked a button on a computer and could sort of sense it gearing up to perform its appointed task.

“I’ve never told anyone before.”

She didn’t say, *You can tell me*. Thirteen though she was, she was old enough to understand that prompts of that kind were reserved for gossip and rumors in the girls’ room and e-mail. This was mo

important. She didn't have to tell Aaron he could trust her. He would know, or he wouldn't.

"It's weird no matter what, but it's especially weird because it's, it's the priest at my church." She nodded, still not sure what he meant or what "it" was, just knowing that somehow all the air had been sucked away from both of them. "He's been one of the priests there for my whole life, and when he asked me, I didn't know what to say. I mean, I didn't know how to say no or whatever."

"No to what?"

Aaron shivered. "He . . . did that. What you asked about inside. He did it a lot."

6:31 P.M. PST Los Angeles, California

Michael dialed the number and waited. The phone rang three times before it was picked up. No one spoke on the other end. "Hello?" Michael said in mock confusion. "Hello? Is Michael there?" When no one spoke, he hung up.

His cell phone rang a moment later. "Is this Mi

chael?" said a voice on the far end.

"Speaking," Michael replied.

"This is Gabriel." Gabriel, of course, was not his real

name, but that hardly mattered. "What happened?"

"Ramin is dead."

"What a tragedy. Before the authorities got to

him, no doubt?"

"Well, no. During."

The voice on the far end hissed, somehow sucking all the warmth out of Michael. "Did he pass on any information? Anything that could cause a problem?"

"I don't see how," Michael said. "He knew almost nothing. If he told them everything, it would be more than they might have guessed on their own."

"Probably you are right," Gabriel said. "We should meet. We need to move forward. Write down this address."

Michael wrote.

6:35 P.M. PST CTU Headquarters, Los Angeles

The Los Angeles headquarters of the Counter Terrorist Unit looked like a technological garden ru

amok. Phone lines and optical cables sprouted out of the ground. More cables draped themselves vinely from the ceiling. A few desks sat, steady and alone, as certain and determined as rocks in a Zen garden.

There was a picnic going on in this garden—about a half-dozen staffers were camped out on the floor sitting around a blanket of paper napkins, sharing cheddar cheese and Wheat Thins and sucking bottles of Sam Adams beer.

“This looks cozy,” Jack said as he and Henderson entered the room. “You guys make a great first impression.”

A muscle in Henderson’s jaw pulsed.

“Hey, sir, did you hear the good news!” one of the picnickers said. She stood up and walked toward Henderson with an unopened bottle in her hand. “We made our first bust!”

Henderson did not lighten up. “And it’s big enough so that you’re already drinking on the job?”

The young woman, in her late twenties, glanced at Jack and realized that she didn’t know him. She hesitated, then clearly decided that there was no backtracking. “Well, just to baptize the place, you know? None of us are on call anyway.”

Jack didn’t think she was an operator. None of them looked like operators to him. Even the most by-the-book operator toeing the line for a superior had a certain don’t-fuck-with-me quality about him and would lean on you the way your dog leaned its weight against you, just to test you, even though he knew you were the alpha. None of these people had it.

“Tell me about the bust,” Henderson said.

The woman glanced at Jack. “He’s all right,” Henderson said, waving away any concern about classification. “Bauer, this is Jamey Farrell, one of our analysts. Jamey, Jack Bauer, CIA.”

She nodded, then said excitedly, “We’re pulling together field reports for the formal summary, but basically we nailed those three guys from the Hollywood mosque.”

“What three guys?” Jack asked.

Jamey said three names he didn’t recognize. “They were leads we were working out of here,” Jamey said, taking obvious pride in the half-assembled office. Or, rather, taking pride in her accomplishments despite her surroundings. “We caught them using Internet café computers and Skype technology to contact members of al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya . . . um, you know what—”

“I know who they are,” Jack said.

“Right. We couldn’t get anything definitive, and the conversations we recorded weren’t incriminating. It took us a while to convince the judge to let us go in.”

Henderson grunted. “Damned warrants. It’s a pain in the ass to get them. It oughta be easier.”

Jamey continued undeterred. “Finally, we got evidence that one of these three had tried to call the Blind Sheik’s number, and the judge decided we had probable cause.”

“Are they booked?” Henderson asked.

“Will be. We found plastic explosives in their house.”

“Who is this?”

The voice that spoke was thin and tight as a wire. All three of them turned to see a narrow-faced man with a balding head staring at them. He wasn’t particularly small, but, oddly, Jack got the impression that he thought of himself as small. His shoulders seemed to cave in, but his chest puffed out, though he was at once collapsing under, and resisting, his own self-image.

“Jack Bauer, CIA,” Henderson said quickly. “Jack, this is Ryan Chappelle, Division Director of CTU.”

Jack reached out to shake Chappelle’s hand, but Chappelle only looked at it and raised an eyebrow. Jack realized what he was waiting for, withdrew the hand, and produced his identification. Chappelle read it like he was studying a driver’s test, then nodded. “Welcome,” he said finally. “Excuse me a moment.” Chappelle turned to berate the carpet picnickers.

Jack took that opportunity to turn to Henderson. “I thought George Mason was Division Director,” he whispered.

Henderson shook his head. “Mason is District Director.”

Jack rolled his eyes. Henderson shrugged. “We’re new. We’re a little confused about titles, but it all works out.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

Under Chappelle’s scolding, the picnickers had vanished as if they’d never been. The room successfully cleared of any joy, Chappelle returned to Henderson and Bauer. “Bauer, Richard Walsby tells me you’re considering coming on board with us.”

Jack bit his lip to avoid scowling. “It’s a discussion we’ve had, but I’m not sure I’m right for it. I’m pretty happy over at the CIA. But I am interested in what you’re going to do with Ramin Ahmadi. I thought I—I mean, the CIA—had turned this over to the FBI.”

“It should have come to us,” Chappelle sniffed.

“That sort of case is our jurisdiction now.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Now you do.”

Jack smiled thinly. He was reminded suddenly of a

story of Abraham Lincoln, who was overheard talking about another guest at a reception. "I don't much like that man," Lincoln was heard to say. "I'll have to get to know him better." Jack suspected that such efforts would not pay off with Ryan Chappelle.

"I'd like to continue with the case," Jack said. "It started with some of the work we did in Cairo."

Chappelle tipped his chin. "My people will tell you it started with our work in Los Angeles, but whatever. You're welcome to read the reports. But I can't have CIA working a domestic case for obvious reasons."

"The FBI didn't have a problem."

Chappelle's laugh was derisive. "Oh, well, if the FBI didn't have a problem!" He shook his head. "Aren't they the ones who let Abdul Raman Yasin walk out the front door?"

Jack decided he'd had enough. "It's easy to pick on the other guys when you don't have any track record at all."

"We're one for one," Chappelle replied.

"Impressive," Jack sneered. "Three wannabe terrorists talking on the Internet. You saved the planet."

"Jack," Henderson soothed. "There's coffee down that hall. Why don't you get some."

Jack glared at Chappelle a moment longer, then turned away. Chappelle watched him go. "That's the guy you want to bring in here?"

"Richard Walsh says he's the best," Henderson said. "We need him."

"I need him like a hole in the head," Chappelle replied.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24

THE FOLLOWING TAKES PLACE BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 7 P.M. AND 8 P.M. PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

7:00 P.M. PST CTU Headquarters, Los Angeles

Jack found the break room. There was a woman pouring herself a mug of coffee. She was thin, with sharp features and a wry look, but somehow it all came together in a nice-looking package.

"It's barely worth drinking," she said, stepping out of his way and leaning against a counter, sipping.

"That's okay. I just had a conversation barely worth having. The coffee will go great." He found a mug in the cabinet and poured it full.

"Nina Myers," she said.

He lifted his cup at her. “Jack Bauer. You’re part of all this?”

She nodded. “Yep. Are you the new kid?”

Jack shook his head. “You guys are the new kids. And the teacher’s pets. You just pulled jurisdiction and took over my case.”

“Yep, there’s a new sheriff in town,” she said with mock pride. “Sorry you get stripped of the ball. Her eyes lingered on Jack over the rim of her coffee mug. “Was it something to do with these three guys we’ve got in storage?”

“Maybe,” Jack said. “I was working a case that may lead to a terrorist attack in L.A. You guys seem to have found three Muslims with plastic explosives. I’m sure they’re connected.”

“You want to ask my three young Turks?”

“Your three—?”

“I collared them. I’m going down to interrogate them in a few.” She let her eyes rest on him again. “Come on, watch the tape with me first.”

She led him down the hall to a room that wanted to be a technical bay, but wasn’t yet. There was a large console, but only one screen, surrounded by empty cubbyholes with a few wires poking out like snakes. A computer had been set up. Nina woke it up and clicked a few times. The large inset monitor came to life. Jack began to watch the shaky, high-definition video footage of the backs of Federal agents wearing blue Windbreakers with “ATF” and “FBI” written across the back in yellow block letters. Jack watched with interest, but most of it was routine footage recording the interior of a house in the mid-Wilshire area. The house was totally unremarkable until the police videographer arrived at the detached garage at the back of the property. The garage was lit by only a single bare bulb sticking out of a cobwebbed socket high up on the wall. A very old, rickety, homemade workstation had been built along one wall. But next to it stood a brand new white cabinet, the kind that could be purchased at a big box store and assembled at home. An agent opened the cabinet to reveal a crate, which two agents pulled out and placed on the floor. It was long and low—the voice narrating the description said it was four feet long by three wide by three feet high. The agents popped the lid off the top and removed it to reveal the contents.

The plastic explosives had been molded into gray-blue bricks, stacked five high and six across in the case. There were two gaps in the top layer.

“What do you think?” Nina asked. Jack had the impression she’d been watching him the whole time.

“I think there are more than two bricks missing,” Jack said. “Freeze it.”

She didn't jump to it, so he reached for the mouse and stopped the video, running it back to a close-up shot of the crate. He pointed. “There's room for another layer. There's discoloration—”

“Along the edge. I think so, too.” She waved her coffee mug at the screen. “Our boys denied it, of course. They say that's all there is.”

“Oh, we should definitely ask them again,” Jack said. “You have them here?”

Nina shook her head. “We're not set up for it yet. They're over at the county jail. Want to go for a visit?”

Jack smiled.

7:11 P.M. PST CTU Headquarters, Los Angeles

Diana Christie sat in her X-Terra, her fingers gripping the steering wheel. “I won't take no for an answer,” she said out loud. “They are going to listen this time.”

She jerked on the door handle and pushed the door open. A moment later she marched determinedly toward the doors. The glass was dark, and she saw the reflection of a thin woman with dirty-blond hair, in a blue pantsuit, moving double-time. As she reached the glass doors, her image morphed into that of a tall blond man. He was on the far side of the door and he pushed it open, exiting just in front of a thin, short-haired woman with a determined look on her face. He held the door open long enough for Diana to pass through. She smiled and nodded her thanks, then she was inside.

The offices had improved since her last visit. The phones worked now. There was some furniture. There was still no receptionist or security, so she walked into the main room and looked around until she spotted the ferret-faced man in charge.

“Director Chappelle,” she said firmly. “Diana Christie, National Transportation Safety Board.”

Chappelle looked away from his conversation with a square-jawed man. “National Transportation Safety Board—right, Agent Christie. Was that today?”

She nodded and held up a manila folder. Chappelle shrugged and led her into the conference room. There was a table in it surrounded by chairs. The chairs themselves were covered in plastic. Chappelle tore the plastic off two of them and offered one to Diana. “Okay, Ms. Christie, I assume this is still about the Alaska flight?”

She opened the folder and spread out several reports and diagrams. “Yes. I'm still convinced it was bombed.”

Chappelle pointed at one of the reports in Diana's folder. “The official FAA reports decided that it was a malfunction in the fuel tank. Some kind of faulty wiring. You were on the team that wrote that report.”

“I didn’t write it,” she reminded him. “I didn’t agree with it. The fuel tank explosion was secondary. ~~The first blast was in the cabin. The rest of my team thought the tank blew first, and sent a fire-line up~~ into the cabin. One of the oxygen tanks then blew up. I think it went the opposite way. I think something inside the cabin blew up, igniting the tank, and sending a line down to the fuel supply.”

She handed a sheaf of papers to Chappelle, who tried to make sense of them. There were several columns of numbers—something about pounds of pressure per square centimeter, and comparisons of the expanding volume of several gases based on several temperatures. There was also a diagram of the Boeing 737 that had flown from Alaska on its way to Los Angeles, but had burst into flames over the Pacific.

“Isn’t this the same data as before?” Chappelle queried impatiently.

“No, no it’s not. Look at the schematic of the wiring system. It’s—”

“To be honest, it’s outside my field of expertise. I don’t know enough about avionics and airplane design to know—”

“I do. I do, and I’m telling you that plane was brought down by an explosion inside the cabin, and that means someone set off a bomb.”

“And the rest of the Federal Aviation Administration disagrees with you—”

“I’m with the NTSB, Director Chappelle. We have autonomy.”

“And the NTSB isn’t backing you,” he pointed out. “You’re off the reservation on this one. We’re the Counter Terrorist Unit, Ms. Christie. We’re professionals. We don’t act on the impulse of one maverick agent.”

7:17 P.M. PST Pacific Coast Highway, North of Los Angeles

Sheik Abdul al-Hassan stood at the wide restaurant window, watching the waves curl and crash on the shore. Light from the restaurant cast a huge rhomboid of light out onto the ocean. Beyond its border all was pitch-black.

“Beautiful,” said the man next to him.

Abdul glanced over at Father Collins. He hadn’t realized the priest was standing there. That was how much of an impression Collins made.

“I was just thinking,” Abdul said, more to himself than to the priest, “that this frame of light is a metaphor for our work.”

“How do you mean?”

“The tide keeps rolling, never changing, like generations and generations of people. We are the light, casting ourselves out over them, trying to illuminate.”

Father Collins smiled. He had a round, almost obese face under a shock of red hair that stood out starkly from his black shirt. “I have to say I always took you for kind of a cynic. I didn’t know you were a poet.”

Abdul shrugged. “I meant to be cynical. The light only reaches a tiny patch of the ocean. And the water never changes anyway.”

Father Collins frowned at this. Abdul was afraid he would say something, but instead the priest lifted his frown up to a weak smile and turned away. Abdul watched him waddle gingerly through the crowd of clerics, protecting his left arm, which was in a sling.

“There goes the face of the interfaith Unity Conference,” said a new arrival. Rabbi Dan Bender moved his considerable girth into the spot vacated by Father Collins. Bender was a big man, certainly overweight, and yet somehow able to move with a nimbleness that eluded thinner men. Abdul knew him to have run marathons.

“You are speaking metaphorically,” said Abdul, who was no Father Collins. “He is a gentle, harmless man without teeth. Without toughness. I suppose that is a good summation of the conference as a whole.”

Bender dabbed a kerchief on his cheek and neck, then dabbed around the rim of the yarmulke that somehow managed to keep its place on his bald head. “The conference will never have muscle as long as Collins is running it. I don’t care that it has the backing of the Pope. It is a local event, and that means Cardinal Mulrooney is in charge. He is no great fan of his Pope’s policy.”

Abdul raised an eyebrow. “You sound like you disapprove of Mulrooney. But isn’t he more like you and me?”

Bender looked offended. “You don’t believe that, Sheik. You and I are realists. We know that the problems that divide us aren’t just about making religions coexist. But we can respect one another. Mulrooney is cut from a different cloth. Pardon the pun.”

Abdul said wryly, “Well, I’m in a whimsical mood now, so I guess I’ll suggest that maybe it is the Pope’s way that is the best. In the face of our cynicism and Mulrooney’s isolationism, maybe hope and prayer are the best third option.”

Bender shook his head. “What’s the old Arab saying? Trust God, but tether your camel.”

A dark cloud settled over Abdul’s face. His cheeks seemed to sink under the line of his black beard.

“I said something?” Bender said, noting the change.

“No. No, it’s just . . . the last person to use that expression with me was my brother.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you had—”

“A twin, actually,” Abdul said. “He used that same phrase with me the last time I saw him.”

“I get the feeling you two are not close.”

“He’s a fundamentalist,” Abdul said.

Bender looked around the restaurant at the collection of clerics from so many faiths. “fundamentalist? What would he think of this, then? What would he call it?”

Abdul considered. “An opportunity for martyrdom.”

7:24 *P.M. PST*

L.A. County “Twin Towers” Detention Center

A phone call and the words *Federal anti-terrorist unit* had oiled the machinery of the jail system, and Jack and Nina were inside in no time. Sheriff’s deputies brought the three suspects to three separate holding cells at the bottom level of the Twin Towers on Bauchet Street.

It also helped that Jack knew the watch commander, Mark Brodell, from his days with the LAPD.

“Hey, Mark,” he said, shaking the man’s hand as he entered the detention center. “Thanks for letting us in.”

Brodell rolled his eyes at Jack and Nina. “Are you kidding? You’re the Feds now, aren’t you? We rolled out the red carpet for the Federal government.”

“That’s not what it was like in my day,” Jack replied.

Brodell winked. “Still isn’t. But your partner’s cute.” Nina did not return his smile with anything like a thank-you.

“We lined ’em up for you. Three holding cells right this way.”

Take away the existence of the plastic explosives, and the three suspects were completely unremarkable. They were Abu Mousa, a marketing coordinator at an advertising agency on Wilshire Boulevard; Omar Abu Risha, a small-time electronics wholesaler; and Sabah Fakhri, a clerk at Nordstrom’s. None had a criminal record in the United States. Mousa and Fakhri had been born in their country. Risha was a naturalized citizen, but had no flags or warnings in his file.

“It was grunt work, really,” Nina had explained on the way over. “We did what the FBI had done back in ’93 to get the Blind Sheik. We just looked at the names at the center of the web and started following strands outward. It was really supposed to be a practice run to test our procedures. We didn’t expect to find anything.”

“But you found—?”

“Abu Mousa’s brother was a member at the New Jersey mosque. He changed his name and someone missed it. Mousa wasn’t a recorded member, but he had lived with his brother in Jersey. We found him here in Los Angeles and knocked on his door. Lo and behold, he and his housemates are sitting on a crate full of plastic explosives.”

Jack nodded. “You mind if I—?”

“Go ahead and take the lead,” Nina allowed. “But just this once.”

Jack opened the door to the holding room. *Holding room* was a much more politically correct term than *interrogation room*, although the latter was more appropriate. The room was barely ten feet by ten feet, with a metal table and an uncomfortable chair for the subject to sit in. A single light hung down from the ceiling. The bulb wasn't bare, but it might as well have been from the light greenish pall it cast over the room.

Abu Mousa sat in the chair, his wrists shackled together and attached to a chain that had been bolted into the floor. He looked short sitting in the chair, and although his face was young, his hair was already thinning. He wore a frail mustache and a short beard. His eyes were brown and muddy, staring out over huge black bags that, by the looks of them, were permanent.

Jack walked over to the chair on the far side of the metal table and sat down, staring at the prisoner. Nina stayed behind Mousa, not moving, but she was adept at emitting malice. Jack stared at Mousa for a while, silent, until the prisoner began to fidget.

“I would like to see my lawyer,” Mousa said finally.

“I haven't even asked you anything,” Jack said. He continued to study the prisoner as though he were a zoo exhibit. Mousa caught on to his game and tried to return his gaze. It worked for a while, but Jack was patient, and it was easier to feel that you had the upper hand when you weren't shackled to the floor. Finally, Mousa gave in. “Come on, man, what is it you want?”

Jack said, “We want to know what you were planning on doing with that plastic explosive. And we want to know who has the rest of it.”

Mousa clenched his shackled fists. “Man, I told you guys already, I wasn't going to do anything with it. Guy I know asked me to hold on to the crate for him. He said it was modeling clay, but expensive, so I shouldn't mess with it. I didn't even open the thing, so I don't know if any of it is missing.”

“Who gave it to you?”

“A friend.”

Jack lunged across the table and grabbed Mousa by the front of his prison jumpsuit.

7:35 *P.M. PST*

L.A. County “Twin Towers” Detention Center

Mark Brodell watched the man in the suit approach, walking like he had a flagpole up his ass, flag and all. When Brodell said the word *Fed*, this was who he had in mind.

The man gave Brodell's hand a perfunctory shake and showed his identification. It read: “Ryan Chappelle, Division Director, Counter Terrorist Unit.” “Is there a Jack Bauer here interrogating one of

our prisoners?”

7:36 P.M. PST Holding Cell, L.A. County “Twin Towers” Detention Center

Jack had pulled Mousa up across the table. Because the shackles held his arms back, Mousa was bent over the table with his arms pinned painfully beneath him.

“You don’t have any friends,” Jack was saying. “All you have are the names you’re going to give me and the names I’m going to beat out of you. Understood?”

Mousa looked genuinely terrified, which was very informative. It told Jack that Mousa wasn’t professional, and that he had no real training. To Jack’s way of thinking, that ruled out Syrian or Iranian intelligence, and probably Hezbollah as well. No trained intelligence officer would be afraid of a beating—not because he could take the punishment, but because a beating rarely gathered any significant information. The real tools of interrogation were sleep deprivation, drugs, and psychological duress. Only an amateur afraid for his own skin balked at physical punishment.

“Please,” Mousa whimpered. “My arms . . .”

“Stop complaining, they’re still attached,” Jack said.

“What the hell is this!”

Ryan Chappelle walked into the room, flanked by

a couple of suits Jack didn’t know.

“Get your hands off that man. Now!” Chappelle barked.

Despite the order, Jack didn’t let go immediately. He kept his eyes on Mousa and thought he saw, as Chappelle shouted again, the faintest hint of a smile on the man’s face. Maybe he was wrong about Mousa’s training.

“Let him go!” Chappelle practically shrieked.

Jack released Mousa. The man slumped forward over the table edge with a yelp, then slid backward onto the floor. He winced as he stood up and took his seat in the chair again. His wrists around the manacles were red and raw. The fact created in Jack no sense of pity.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!” Chappelle was in his face. “This isn’t even your case. This is not your prisoner. And you are not allowed to use force in interrogations.”

Jack weathered Chappelle’s shrill storm with antipathy. When the Director paused for breath, Jack said calmly, “Someone is going to blow up something with a bunch of plastic explosives tomorrow night. We need to find out who they are and what they are planning, and we need to find out now.”

Chappelle flapped his hands in the air. “Not this way!”

Jack's tone was like ice. "Then what way? Show me." He looked at Mousa. "Should we just ask you where Abdul Rahman Yasin is hiding?"

He had asked facetiously, but he kept his eyes on Mousa, searching for any signs of recognition. He was disappointed. If Mousa knew the name of the World Trade Center bomber, he hid the fact like an expert.

". . . drummed out of the CIA when the Director of Operations hears about this," Chappelle was saying.

"Sir," Jack said, bringing his attention back to Chappelle. "It probably isn't good to be arguing in front of the prisoner."

Chappelle's neck turned purple, but he realized that Jack was right. He spun around and stormed out gesturing for Bauer to follow. Jack did, casting a wry look at Nina Myers, who seemed to be enjoying herself.

Outside, in the hallway, Chappelle fumed. "You had no right to be here. You are not part of this unit, you are not authorized to perform operations on U.S. soil. You are not even on this case!"

Jack had no idea how much authority Chappelle really had. Even if he was the big dick in this County Terrorist Unit, the political influence of these agencies waxed and waned with their budgets and their successes. Unless CTU had some heavy hitters backing it in Congress, it was doubtful Chappelle could pull many strings. Domestic terrorism just wasn't that big an issue, even after '93.

"Take it up with the Director." Jack shrugged.

"I'll do better than that," Chappelle said. "You, Brodell!"

Several sheriff's deputies, including watch commander Brodell, had gathered around to watch the pissing contest. Chappelle had spotted the watch commander and called him out. "I want you to arrest this man. Jail him here, and call the Central Intelligence Agency."

Brodell's brow furrowed deeply. "Arrest him? Him? For what?"

Chappelle waved dismissively. "Excessive force. Assault. Violation of the Executive Order 12033 banning domestic surveillance. Trespassing, for all I care. Just lock him up and let the CIA come finish him."

The watch commander looked perplexed, but then

said, "Uh, no, sir."

Chappelle's neck reddened again. "What!"

"Well, sir, we didn't see any harm being done. We can't arrest him for nothing."

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