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Hostage

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Interior design by Michelle Espinoza

Printed in the United States of America

*This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife of twenty years,
Rhonda W. Brown.*

*May the Lord bless her and keep her, may the Lord
make his face shine upon her, and give her peace,
this day, and forevermore.*

*With much love, this Ninth Day of August,
in the Year of our Lord, two thousand and five.*

CHAPTER 1

*In the hills near the Dean E. Smith Center
South Campus, University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

Lying on his belly in the thick underbrush, the gunman peered through the powerful magnifying scope. It was about two hundred yards down the hill, he estimated, from his position to the main entrance of the brick arena.

Close enough for a shot. Far enough for an escape.

Students flocked like massive herds of sheep through the building's glass doors, their heads and faces grandly visible through the crosshairs of the scope.

Dozens of infidels sacrificed to Allah's glory in an instant. His heart raced at the thought. His breathing quickened. He caressed the cold trigger with his finger, waiting to squeeze it. Longing to purify the sinful American ground with spilled blood.

Whistling wind whipped through the tops of the Carolina pines. A surge of excitement, like an electrical shock, shot through his body.

My destiny is with Allah the Merciful, who controls the wind.

He pulled his trigger finger from the cold steel. His glorious destiny would depend on patience. For a bit longer.

The blood of the redhead and her companion would ensure his place in Islamic Glory. He would await their emergence. Allah would bring them from those doors at the anointed moment. And when they appeared in the crosshairs, he would execute Allah's vengeance and justice.

All praise to Allah! Blessed be the prophet—peace be upon him.

Dean E. Smith Center
South Campus, University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, North Carolina
UNC Versus Duke: Halftime

Lieutenant Diane Colcernian tried in vain to protect her eardrums from the spontaneous, alternating chants of the boisterous crowd.

“TAAAAAR!”

“HEEEEEELS!”

“TAAAAAR!”

“HEEEEEELS!”

Diane’s date, Lieutenant Zack Brewer, pumped his fists into the air, contributing to the baby-blue cacophony now reaching ear-splitting levels.

His excitement mimicked that of a kid under the Christmas tree, a beaming kid handsomely decked out in his “Carolina Blue” T-shirt with the interlocking *NC* on the front. Hers, a gift from Zack, was identical to his and to twenty thousand others in the Dean Dome.

He screamed with exhilaration when one of the Carolina players, a Rashad somebody, dunked the ball. She smiled, shaking her head in bemused disbelief.

“Let’s just wear jeans and Carolina stuff,” Zack had said earlier. “This is the Duke game. The fans will be so pumped up we’ll never get spotted. I promise.”

She believed him. After all, basketball wasn’t that big of a deal when she was an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia.

Promises, promises.

They sat three rows behind the Carolina bench, so close to the court they could hear the famous Duke coach unleash a profanity-laced tirade, first at his players, then at the referees, and then, at halftime, at the crowd as he trotted off the court with his team. Zack, who had warned Diane earlier that the Duke coach was known for spewing such obscenities, not to mention appearing in tacky credit card commercials, cupped his hands and joined the thousands of UNC fans in a cascading chorus of boos aimed at the Blue Devils as they disappeared into the tunnel under the Dean Dome.

When the boos turned into a groundswell of applause, Diane sensed she was being watched. A man sitting behind them tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to the large electronic screen over center court.

There they were on the jumbo screen, displayed for everyone in the arena and anyone who happened to be watching on national television—the image of her flaming red hair and Zack’s cute dimple.

“So much for anonymity, Lieutenant,” she said. Then, sheepishly, she smiled and waved at the camera. Another surge of applause followed.

“You look great on the JumboTron,” Zack said as he waved at the camera.

“You said we weren’t going anyplace they have cameras.”

“You think they won’t have cameras at the White House?”

His comment brought a nervous quiver to her stomach. “Thanks for reminding me.” Their image faded from the screen, replaced by half-time statistics showing individual scoring totals for the Carolina and Duke teams.

A moment later, as the Carolina dance team moved and shook to the rhythm of Chicago’s “Twenty-five or Six to Four,” courtesy of the UNC pep band, a skinny young man bounded up the aisle from courtside. “Lieutenant Brewer, I’m Jason Silverstein with the Tar Heel Sports Network. Rick Blixon asked if you could come down for a halftime interview.”

“Who’s Rick Blixon?” Diane raised an eyebrow at Zack.

He shot her an incredulous look. “He’s *just* the color guy for the Tar Heel sports broadcast. That’s all.”

“Oh, *that* Rick Blixon. Well, why didn’t you just say so?” She gave him a sarcastic smile.

“Do you mind?” His eyes still sparkled.

“It won’t take long, Lieutenant Colcernian,” Silverstein said. “Rick’s right down there at courtside.” He gestured toward a table just to the left of the now-empty Carolina bench where Rick Blixon was motioning them to come down.

“He sees us!” Zack said, grinning.

My date has ice water in his veins in front of a jury, handles press conferences like a pro on national television, but acts like some giddy kid when some sports guy I’ve never heard of wants to talk to him.

“Look, he wants you too.” Zack pointed to Blixon, who now held up two fingers as he waved them down. “Come on. It’ll be a blast.”

Diane met Jason Silverstein’s gaze, and when he nodded, she said, “Oh, all right.”

“Thanks.” Zack gave her a quick peck on the cheek, then stood, and following Silverstein’s lead, escorted her down the center aisle to the court.

Rick Blixon extended his hand first to Diane, then to Zack. “Welcome back to Chapel Hill,” he said, still shaking Zack’s hand.

“Good to be back,” Zack said.

“We’re on a commercial break right now, but I’d love to do a quick interview if you’re up to it.” The question was directed at Zack.

That was fine with Diane. She’d gotten enough publicity to last a lifetime and hoped that after their upcoming visit with the president, she could return to being just a normal naval officer.

“Y’all just have a seat on either side of me.” Blixon handed them each a headset.

Diane settled into her chair. “You’re not going to interview me too, are you?”

“He’s the Carolina grad,” Blixon said, “but maybe just a couple of comments?” He gave her a puppy-dog smile. “After all, you’re part of the package.”

She leaned forward, looked around Blixon, and shot Zack another raised eyebrow.

“She doesn’t like publicity,” Zack said, chuckling.

“Tell you what,” Blixon said as the Carolina dance team wrapped up their routine. “How about if I ask him most of the questions but just get a hello or something from you. Our listeners would appreciate it.”

Before she could answer, an unidentified voice came through her headset. “Three, two, one, live.”

“And welcome back to the Smith Center,” Blixon said into his microphone, “where the Tar Heels, shooting a blistering 65 percent from the floor, go into the locker room leading the Duke Blue Devils by a score of 45 to 35. And we have two very special surprise halftime guests joining us today. UNC grad Zack Brewer—*Lieutenant* Zack Brewer, I should say—the most famous JAG officer in the navy, and his much better-looking partner, who isn’t a UNC grad but is also a product of the Atlantic Coast Conference. Today we also have with us University of Virginia graduate Lieutenant Diane Colcernian.

“Good to have you both here, Lieutenants.”

“Hi, Rick,” Zack said. “Go, Heels!”

“Hi,” Diane said.

“So what brings you to Chapel Hill?” This question was directed at Zack.

“Carolina versus Duke, Rickie,” Zack said. “There’s no greater rivalry in sports.”

"I hear through the grapevine you've got an appointment in Washington."

"Yes, that's true. We've been invited to the White House."

"To see the president?"

Zack nodded. "Yes, we're scheduled to meet with President Williams day after tomorrow. Then we're headed back to California or wherever the navy wants to send us."

"I'm sure the president will congratulate the two of you on your stellar performance at the Olajuwon court-martial. So let me add my congratulations too."

"Thanks, Rick. We believe justice was done."

Blixon turned to Diane. "Tell me, Diane, what was it like facing Wells Levinson in court?"

So much for the simple hello. "A formidable challenge," she said, frowning. "Wells Levinson is the most famous lawyer in the world."

Blixon turned again to Zack. "The whole world followed this court-martial on television, in the papers, and over the Internet. Your closing argument has been called spellbinding by many legal commentators. You compared Levinson to Harry Houdini and accused him of trying a sleight-of-hand trick to fool the jury."

"Thanks, Rick. The Heels have been spellbinding in the first half."

Diane was becoming more uncomfortable by the moment. Because of the death threats they received after the trial, she and Zack had been trying to keep a low profile. She hoped Blixon would take the hint from Zack and change the subject.

He didn't.

"Now, Wells Levinson, as we all know," Blixon said, "had never lost a case—until he faced you guys in court. We all saw his public reaction on TV. But what about his private reaction? Did he shake your hand and congratulate you on a case well tried? Or do famous lawyers just not do that?"

"I'm just a naval officer trying to do my duty. I think Diane would say the same thing. I'd never met a famous lawyer before I met Mr. Levinson," Zack said. "So I don't know how famous lawyers react. But let me put it this way: Mr. Levinson wasn't a happy camper when the jury came back."

"Diane"—Blixon turned back to her—"ever go to any basketball games at UVA?"

"A few."

“Which ones?”

She sighed. *At least this was a better topic than the trial. But not by much.*

“Whenever Carolina came to town, there was always a hoopla. Our other big rival was Virginia Tech.”

“What was it like, going to those games?”

Diane never fully understood this fascination with college basketball. Sure, she was a Virginia graduate, and UVA was in the basketball-crazy ACC with Carolina. But she’d never seen this kind of fanaticism at the few games she attended at University Hall. Of course, she wasn’t about to tell Rick Blixon that.

“I always went with a group of girls from my sorority. At UVA, sporting events are more like social outings. We always lost to Carolina and always beat Tech. But aside from those two games, basketball wasn’t that big of a deal in Charlottesville. Certainly nothing like this.”

Rick turned back to Zack. “These three Muslim chaplains, all U.S. Navy officers, were convicted of murder, conspiracy to commit murder, and treason. What’s next for them?”

Zack looked annoyed. “The defendants received the death penalty. They are scheduled to be executed in two weeks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, unless the U.S. Supreme Court blocks that execution. We’re waiting for word on that, and that word could come at any time.”

“Carolina grad Lieutenant Zack Brewer, and UVA grad Lieutenant Diane Colcernian, both Navy JAG officers serving our country in some very difficult times. Thank you for joining us on the Tar Heel Sports Network.”

Diane heard another round of applause, although not quite as sustained as the first. She looked up and realized that a large contingency of fans in the arena were listening to the broadcast on their radios.

“Thank you, Rick.” Zack took off the headphones and shook Blixon’s hand. Diane did the same. They got up from the table at courtside and turned around. Two uniformed Chapel Hill police officers were waiting.

A worried-looking officer came toward them, adjusting his tie. He furrowed his brow, and when he spoke, his voice was serious. “Lieutenants, I’m Captain Rogers, Chapel Hill PD.”

“Everything okay, Officer?” Zack asked.

“I think so, Lieutenant, but if you two could follow me, we’d appreciate it.”

Diane met Zack’s eyes and nodded. “Sure.”

As they followed the officer back up the stadium steps, the pep band struck up the music to “Fame.” Two other uniformed officers stepped in behind them. Now that their anonymity was compromised, fans shouted their names as they walked by. Some reached into the aisle, trying to get a handshake or pat them on the back. The police officers moved in as if they were personal bodyguards.

When the party reached the top of the steps to the main-level concourse area, the officers turned them to the right and then escorted them into an elevator. A moment later, the doors opened into a large conference room somewhere under the stadium.

A silver-haired man in a light blue sports coat stepped forward. He smiled and extended his hand. “I’m Ralph Meekins, Lieutenant. Director of operations for the Smith Center.”

“Zack Brewer, Mr. Meekins.” Zack extended his hand. “And this is Diane Colcernian.”

“Yes, I recognize you both.” Meekins shook Diane’s hand. “I apologize for this, but there’s been a bit of a problem.”

“What kind of a problem?” Diane’s heart skipped a beat.

“To be honest, just after the network cameras showed you two in the stands, we got some telephone calls.”

Diane exchanged a worried glance with Zack.

“Let me guess,” Zack said to Meekins. “Threats?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Death threats?”

Meekins nodded, and Zack reached for Diane’s hand.

“From callers with Arabic accents?”

“Sounds like you’re already familiar with the problem,” Meekins said.

“It was bad the first few days after the trial ended,” Zack said. “The FBI has a few leads, but that’s it. Over the last few months, they’ve subsided—none in the last sixty days.” Zack paused, frowning. “I shouldn’t have agreed to that radio interview. But when Rickie asked, I’m such a big fan I couldn’t resist.”

“The radio interview wasn’t the problem. I don’t think too many terrorists tune in to Willie and Rick,” he said, referring to two of the radio broadcasters for the Tar Heel basketball games. “The problem was the brief head shot when the camera panned to you before halftime. The calls came in almost instantly, *before* you went on the radio.”

Meekins worked his jaw, looking worried. “On behalf of the University of North Carolina, please accept our apologies for your inconvenience.

Unfortunately, after the television contract is signed, we don't have a lot of control over where the networks point the cameras."

"It's not your fault," Zack said. "It's mine." He looked at Diane. "I should have picked some other time to bring Diane to a game. I'm sorry."

He turned to Meekins again. "What specifically did the threats say?" Meekins hesitated. "You sure you want to hear?"

"We can take it," Diane said. "Go ahead."

Captain Rogers of the Chapel Hill PD stepped forward. "Well," he said, "one of the callers said, 'When the redhead walks outside of the stadium, we're going to blow her away.'"

Diane shivered. Zack put his arm around her shoulders.

"We had three or four other calls in a matter of a few seconds. One said, 'Allah will kill the godless infidels.' The other said, 'The pagan JAG officers will die.'" Rogers looked grim. "I'm sorry. For what it's worth, I'm ex-navy. Boiler tech on the USS *Valley Forge*," he said. "You guys did the navy proud."

Zack ignored the compliment. "Mr. Meekins, these might be crackpot calls, and I hate to miss the second half of the Duke game, but out of precaution and for the sake of the fans' safety, maybe we should leave now."

"That's up to you, Lieutenant," Rogers said.

Zack nodded to Diane. "Let's get out of here."



The gunman, still lying on his belly, brought the scope back to his eyes and squinted. The doors were open now, and through the cross-hairs, very small streams of infidels were trickling out.

From this distance, the high-powered thirty-aught-six bullet would do the job. Nailing one would be easy. Nailing both would be more problematic, but not impossible if that were the will of Allah.

May both deaths today be Allah's will.

Still, he might get only one shot. One shot—fired in a war that neither began today nor would end tomorrow.

The one shot *must* count.

Even a single kill would be a great symbol of victory. Especially if he could draw the blood of the infidel accusers before the Americans killed the three heroes of the faith they had convicted.

Now the task was Allah's.

Allah surely would bring them out these doors.

Allah surely would give him a clear line of sight.

Allah would steady his hand for the moment of glory.

He had been so patient. Would this, now, be his appointed moment of destiny?

Praise be to Allah for his beneficence, and blessed be the prophet Mohammed. Peace be upon him!

Ahmed Sadat brought the scope back to his left eye, closing his right. A young brunette woman came out the door. He put the crosshair on her temple and held it there as she walked from left to right.

Ready ...

Aim ...

Infidels streamed out the glass doors. His breathing quickened and deepened. His moment would come soon.

He worked the bolt action on his rifle, chambering a bullet. The distinctive, sharp clacking sound of the bolt action brought goose bumps. This was the final countdown of the mission that would forever mark his place in the history of holy jihad.

All glory to Allah for his beneficence.

More infidels filed out of the building. The thought of the loud *bang* echoing through the woods, causing the swine to scamper in a panic, electrified his soul.

A well-figured, redheaded woman, wearing a light blue T-shirt and blue jeans, walked out the door. Breathing deeply, he adjusted his high-powered scope for another look. It was her! Or was it? Surely it was. Such a beautiful woman. What a waste this would be.

And the infidel Brewer was by her side!

Allah had given him this moment.

The woman and her partner turned and walked up the hill away from him.

Now is the time to act. Praise be to Allah!

He brought the back of her red, wavy hair into the center of his crosshairs and rested his finger on the cold steel trigger.

Now!

The rifle jumped. Half a second later, there was commotion where his shot had landed. He looked through the crosshairs of the scope. Some of the infidels ran like stuck pigs. Others waved their arms frantically. The redhead had disappeared. So had her partner.

Praise be to Allah. His bullet has drawn the blood of the infidel.

The sound of the first siren confirmed that his window for escape was narrowing. He dropped the rifle in a ditch, then raced through the woods to a parking lot, where another operative was waiting.

“We must go, my brother,” Ahmed ordered. “Now!”

“Did you accomplish your mission?”

He waved the driver on, and the vehicle’s tires squealed as they headed from the parking lot.

“The infidel witch who called for the death of our Muslim brothers is dead.”

“Praise be to Allah!” the driver shouted.

“And blessed be the prophet—peace be upon him,” Ahmed said.