

CHAPTER 15



THE BONDS OF TRUST AND FRIENDSHIP

Moishe and I had become unlikely allies in a world where trust was scarce, and motives were hidden beneath layers of deceit. When we first met, the tension between us was palpable, a product of our training and our respective loyalties to different countries. He was Mossad, I was CIA—two agencies known to collaborate but also wary of one another’s interests. It was our missions that brought us together, time and time again, forcing us to shed our preconceived notions and discover the shared values beneath our professional exteriors.

Despite the strained beginnings, Moishe’s stoic nature became a source of stability. He never minced words yet always seemed to know what to say when the stakes were highest. I still remember the first time he confided in me, when we were cornered in an unfamiliar safe house. He talked about his family in Tel Aviv, his love of cooking, and how he never imagined himself in this line of work, much like me.

“You know, trust isn’t something we’re supposed to give easily,” he had said that night, looking at me with an expression that was equal parts suspicion and camaraderie. “But you—there’s something different about you.”

I had laughed it off then, but those words lingered. They meant something. Over the years, the walls we had built between us began to crumble, brick by brick, revealing a friendship that defied our roles as operatives.

Today was no different.

Moishe’s face was a canvas of emotions—concern, frustration, and that hint of protectiveness he’d never dare acknowledge. He stepped closer, his

eyes locked onto mine. “Listen, whatever Sheldon’s saying, you need to be careful. We’ve been in too deep before. This one—it just doesn’t feel right.”

His caution was warranted. A meeting with Hakeem always had the potential to turn lethal. But this time, Sheldon had assured me it would be different. He’d given me the go-ahead, knowing full well what that meant. I trusted Sheldon. And Moishe knew that trust wasn’t something I gave lightly.

“Maybe it’s a setup, maybe it isn’t,” I said, my tone firm but not dismissive. “But it’s a risk we have to take.”

“Why?” Moishe’s voice cracked slightly, betraying the usually unflappable composure he maintained. It was more than a professional inquiry; it was the voice of a friend, concerned with someone they valued. “Why are you so sure this isn’t just another trap?”

“I’m not,” I admitted softly, the words hanging between us like a fragile truth. “But if we don’t go, we lose our chance to stop the funding of terror.. The entire operation hinges on this.”

Moishe sighed, rubbing his temple. “You always did like playing the hero.”

I chuckled, a brief smile breaking through the tension. “And you’ve always been there to pull me out of the fire.”

His lips twitched, almost forming a smile. “Well, someone’s got to keep an eye on you.”

We stood there, in that dimly lit room, both aware of the danger yet unwilling to back down. For all the secrecy, lies, and hidden agendas that defined our world, this—our friendship—was the one thing that remained untainted.

“I’ll go with you,” he finally said, a resolve settling into his features.

“You don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t,” Moishe interrupted, his gaze unwavering. “But I will. Because friends don’t let friends walk into traps alone.”

In that moment, all the training, all the secrecy, and all the barriers we’d erected to protect ourselves from one another fell away. We weren’t CIA and Mossad, American and Israeli. We were just two friends, willing to put everything on the line—not for our countries, but for each other.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

Moishe nodded, a brief flash of something soft and unguarded crossing his face before he turned away.

“Don’t thank me yet,” he called over his shoulder. “We still have to make it through this alive.”

With a deep breath, I followed him out of the room, my mind focused, my heart steady. Whatever awaited us in the shadows, I knew we would face it together—because that’s what friends do.

In the end, it’s not about allegiance or duty. It’s about the bond that forms when two people see each other not as enemies or allies, but simply as human beings willing to stand by each other’s side, no matter what the cost.

Despite the undeniable risks highlighted by Moishe, and the looming threat to my own life, I was resolved. My team and I were fully aware of the dangers, yet we willingly volunteered for the task at hand.

While the CIA couldn’t officially mandate our involvement, we knew that if we didn’t step up, it could signify a lack of support for the mission, potentially jeopardizing the entire Crossroads USA initiative. Too much had been invested in this endeavor to simply turn back now. We were committed, no matter what obstacles lay ahead.

With Moishe’s reluctant agreement, we began to discuss the logistics of our plan. We needed a location that offered both concealment and visibility, a place where we could see any potential threats without being detected ourselves. In the intricate web of espionage and international intrigue, trust was a commodity in short supply—a rare gem amidst a sea of deception and betrayal. Yet amidst the shadows and uncertainty, there existed one individual whose loyalty and steadfastness stood as a beacon of hope in a world shrouded in darkness: Moishe.

As we embarked on our joint missions, Moishe played a leading role in their planning and execution, drawing upon his vast experience and deep-seated connections to navigate the murky waters of international diplomacy and covert operations. With a keen understanding of the intricacies of the political landscape and a network of contacts that spanned the globe, he proved to be an invaluable asset in our ongoing battle against terror.

The Meeting with Hakeem

Captain Hardy burst into the room, sweating as if he’d just run a mile, his face flushed with urgency. Without pausing, he barked, “Sir, we have confirmed the meeting with Hakeem in Iraq.” He glanced around the room, clearly agitated by the interruption he was causing but undeterred. “We need

to get to the plane now—the meeting is tomorrow morning. Factoring in flight time and the time change, we'll only have a few hours to get the team in place and ready." The tension in the room shifted immediately, the weight of the moment settled over everyone as the reality of the mission's timeline sank in.

The hum of the jet engines was a low, persistent sound, blending with the quiet murmurs inside the plane cabin. Everyone was on edge, but the feeling wasn't panic—it was anticipation. My team, handpicked and vetted through every channel I had available, sat around me, mentally preparing for the high stakes meeting ahead. We were headed to Iraq to meet Hakeem, a key figure whose cooperation could tip the balance in our favor—or blow everything to pieces.

John and Roy, my Marine security detail, sat closest to me. Their gazes were sharp, scanning the space with the practiced vigilance of combat veterans. They were solid and reliable, but my gut told me we'd need more than just a few Marines this time. Roy, the taller and quieter of the two, glanced at me with a raised eyebrow.

"You look like you've got something on your mind, boss," he said.

"I do," I replied evenly. "This isn't like the usual ops. There's a lot more at stake here. We're not just protecting assets; we're protecting a fragile opportunity."

John leaned forward. "You think we're light? Should've brought more guys?"

I nodded slowly. "We'll have a little more support than you think. Once we land, there'll be a helicopter gunship, waiting to take us to the meet. It's not just for show. If something goes sideways, that bird's going to be our lifeline."

That got their attention. Ron let out a low whistle. "Gunship, huh? What else are you not telling us?"

Before I could respond, Randy, the CEO of our financial operations, turned in his seat. He'd been reviewing documents for the past hour, his brow furrowed in concentration. Randy was a civilian through and through, but he'd proven time and again that he could handle himself under pressure.

"Just want to make sure everyone's clear on the financials," he said, his voice measured. "When we get to Hakeem, we'll be discussing how the money flows to his people. It's got to be transparent, or he'll sniff out any inconsistencies and think we're trying to screw him over."

Peter, my stalwart friend and linguist who spoke fluent Farsi, nodded. “Hakeem’s not stupid. He knows how these things work. What he wants is assurance that his people are taken care of. It’s less about the numbers and more about showing him we’re serious.”

I met Peter’s eyes. “That’s why you’re here. You’ll handle the nuances in language and culture that we might miss. He has to believe we’re not just another foreign operation swooping in to make promises we won’t keep.”

Michelle, our security expert and IT specialist, leaned in, her tone serious. “I’ve been reviewing the coordination, and I don’t like how exposed we’ll be on the ground. The village is about seven miles from Baghdad, and while they have a decent relationship with the Kurds, it’s still too close to several hot zones. Any signs of trouble, and we’re in deep.”

“That’s why I arranged the gunship,” I said. “Once we land, we’ll have air support on standby. Moishe, seated at the far end, flashed a quick smile. “Leverage is an understatement. Hakeem trusts me. That’s why he agreed to meet. But don’t think for a second that he won’t test us. He’s smart, shrewd, and cautious. He needs to see we’re sincere.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of responsibility settling in. “This team was meticulously assembled because each of you brings something critical to the table. This isn’t just about money or influence. It’s about trust. We’re walking into a hornet’s nest, and one wrong move will not only compromise us, but it could destabilize the entire region.”

Everyone fell silent, absorbing the gravity of the situation. I took a breath, stealing myself.

“When we touch down, I’ll notify the military of our final destination. We’ve got two sites prepped, but we’ll decide which one to use once we get a lay of the land. Hakeem’s been burned before, so I don’t want to risk tipping him off. Once we’re on the ground, it’s showtime.”

Randy shifted in his seat. “The money, though—how exactly are we going to present it?”

“Peter will handle that,” I said, glancing at my friend. “You’ll present it to Hakeem and outline how it’ll flow through local channels. We’ve ensured it’s squeaky clean. Hakeem’s going to want to know every detail.”

Peter nodded. “Got it. But what about contingencies? What if he doesn’t like the terms?”

Michelle cut in. “If he doesn’t like the terms, we’ll have bigger problems than just money. Hakeem’s people don’t play nicely when they feel betrayed.

That's why I've set up a remote feed to our overwatch team. We'll have eyes in the sky and on the ground, just in case."

I turned to Moishe. "You'll introduce me. He trusts you, but I need to know how far that trust goes. If he decides to play hardball, how do you see it playing out?"

Moishe hesitated, then spoke carefully. "He's going to test you. Maybe throw a curveball or two. Just keep your cool and stick to the plan. Don't promise anything you can't deliver, and don't let him see you sweat.

"Understood," I said. "Ron, John—you'll handle close security. Michelle, you're on coms and IT. Randy, you're there to provide financial assurances. Peter, you're the negotiator. Moishe, you're the link. And I'm there to seal the deal."

The tension in the air thickened as we began our final descent. Everyone ran through their mental checklists, making sure no detail was overlooked. We touched down at the military base outside Baghdad without incident, but I could see the anxiety simmering just beneath the surface of my team's calm exteriors.

The moment we stepped off the plane, a Black Hawk helicopter was waiting, its rotor blades chopping through the air. Painted in matte black, it was a beast of a machine, equipped with M134 Miniguns on each side. It was a show of force and a reminder that we weren't walking into this meeting alone.

"Mount up!" I called out.

We boarded quickly, the interior cramped and noisy. As the helicopter lifted off, the pilot's voice crackled over the comms.

"We've got eyes on the village. No unusual activity, but it's quiet—too quiet."

Michelle's voice cut through the noise. "Stay alert. Quiet can mean a lot of things."

Peter glanced at me, his expression tense. "What if this is a trap?"

"Then we'll adapt and overcome," I said. "We're not here to fight. We're here to talk. But if it comes down to it, we've got options."

The helicopter ride was tense and short. As we approached the village, I saw the familiar sight of a dusty cluster of buildings surrounded by parched fields. People moved about slowly, going through the motions of their day. It looked peaceful enough, but the atmosphere was charged with a silent undercurrent of tension.

We landed outside the village, the helicopter kicking up a cloud of dust as we disembarked. The pilot kept the rotors running, ready for a quick extraction. Dale led the way, his posture relaxed but alert.

Walking the Tightrope

Hakeem was waiting for us near the entrance of a low, unassuming building. Dressed in traditional robes, his eyes narrowed as he sized us up. He stepped forward, his movements deliberate and nodded at Moishe.

It had taken months to arrange it. Dozens of intermediaries, coded messages, dead drops, and backchannel assurances. But, finally we were here.

The room was modest—just four chairs, one table, thick carpets to mute any sound. No windows. It smelled like old tobacco and distrust. One door in, no obvious way out. The kind of place where either trust was born, or something else died.

Moishe sat across from me, sweat glistening at his temples. He had arranged the meet but would say nothing unless prompted. That was the agreement. This wasn't about him.

It was about Hakeem.

He entered without a word, two men behind him with cold, blank eyes that had long since stopped blinking at blood. He moved like a general but dressed like a businessman—dark slacks, linen shirt, no jewelry. Just a small silver pen clipped to his pocket. He didn't sit at first. Just studied me.

I stood.

"Mr. Hakeem," I said in smooth, almost bored tones. "Michael Eastman. I appreciate you making the time."

Still nothing. He glanced at me. Then slowly took a seat.

I followed.

"You understand why I'm here?" I asked.

His voice was deeper than I expected. "Many claim to want peace. Few mean it. Fewer still offer anything of value."

I smiled. Cool. Patient. "I'm not here for peace."

He raised an eyebrow. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Good," he said.

"I'm here for profit," I continued. "You move things. I move money. I'm not interested in causes. I don't ask about flags or martyrs. My clients buy

weapons, medicine, oil, data whatever keeps their empires intact. I don't care where the funds come from. Only that they flow."

He studied me now. Not just my words—my posture, my rhythm. He was trained, too. Not just in war, but in survival. He'd sniffed out agents before. Probably ordered the deaths of a dozen men who thought they could fool him.

"I don't like Americans," he said. "But I hate liars more."

I leaned in, just slightly. "I hate both."

He almost laughed. Almost.

"I've read your file," he said. "Private school. Wharton Business School MBA. Moved billions through shell corps in Nigeria, Macau, Baku. No arrests. No headlines. Either you're the best... or a ghost."

I shrugged. "A little of both."

He narrowed his eyes. "Where are you from, Michael?"

I felt the heat rise behind my neck. This was it. The line between fiction and death. I met his gaze.

"Does it matter?"

"I think it does."

I exhaled slowly. Deliberately. "I grew up in the Northeast. Private estate, cold winters. Big trees. Long shadows. My people taught me one thing: early, money is the only thing that moves in every language. It's the only God that doesn't care where you pray."

We locked eyes.

In that second, I saw it flicker—doubt, suspicion... then curiosity.

He nodded once.

"You came far to say something I already know. Why?"

"Because I want to make it easy for you," I said. "Your movement needs American capital. Not through donors or drug lords or anonymous crypto. Real money. Clean, fast, layered so deeply Interpol couldn't find it with a thousand warrants. That's what I offer."

"Why help us?"

"Because I help everyone," I said, voice low now. "Russia. Iran. Israeli defense contractors. Colombian militias. My business is built on one belief, nation-states are failing. The future belongs to networks. You have a network. I can make it unstoppable."

The silence was heavy.

He tapped the silver pen against his fingers.

“You speak like a man without a soul.”

“I sold mine,” I replied. “It wasn’t worth much anyway.”

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Hakeem smiled.

It wasn’t warm. It wasn’t friendly. But it was real.

“I will give you a test,” he said. “Move twenty million for me. Clean. Quiet. If it works... we talk again.”

I nodded. “Done.”

He stood. His men followed.

“Michael Eastman,” he said, offering his hand. “You may be a devil. But perhaps you are the devil I need.”

We shook hands.

And for just a moment, I wondered if he could feel the truth under my skin. That I was a Jewish kid from Oyster Bay, raised on bagels and beach towns, trained to be the lie he just believed.

But he didn’t see that.

He saw only money.

And that, for now, was all I needed.

Fortunately, Hakeem agreed to our terms, albeit begrudgingly. And as we shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, I felt a sense of relief washing over me. But deep down, I knew that the hardest part was yet to come. We had to support the facade, to keep up the charade of being nothing more than innocent businessmen conducting legitimate business dealings. It was a daunting task, one that would require nerves of steel and unwavering commitment.

With that, we stood, the tension easing slightly. We’d cleared the first hurdle, but I knew this was just the beginning. As we left the building and headed back to the waiting helicopter, I caught Randy’s eye.

“That went... better than expected,” he said quietly.

The Final Exit

Hakeem met us in a remote village more than a hundred miles from his home, a precaution we both agreed on given the rising threats in the region. I had arranged for a private helicopter to bring him to the meeting site—an expensive but necessary gesture. As he lifted off, I noticed the subtle nods and quiet awe from Hakeem and his team; they clearly appreciated the ride,

both for its comfort and the message it sent. Still, a part of me felt uneasy. Moische had warned us of hostile elements operating nearby, the kind that wouldn't hesitate to kill us all if they had the chance. Getting Hakeem safely out of that village wasn't just about logistics—it was about survival.

The interior of the helicopter buzzed with the faint hum of machinery coming to life. I glanced at my team, each one poised and alert, aware that we were now in a race against time. I had bid Hakeem and his squad farewell, exchanging a firm handshake and nods of mutual respect before we ascended into the pale morning sky.

That's when it happened—my secure communication device blinked and buzzed, displaying a message that sent a cold shiver down my spine. Iranian militants in Iraq had been tipped off. They were on the move—trucks armed with RPGs and heavy machine guns barreling toward us. The dust they kicked up would soon be visible on the horizon, just twenty minutes away. No time to spare.

Without missing a beat, I pivoted and sprinted back toward our waiting helicopter. The pilot, a seasoned veteran with graying hair and eyes that missed nothing, watched as I approached. His name was Captain Reed, a man who had seen and done things in the air that most could only imagine. He knew something was up even before I spoke.

“What's the situation, sir?” Reed asked, voice low but filled with urgency. His hands moved instinctively over the control panel, fingers dancing across switches and dials as the engines roared louder, blades slicing through the air above us.

“Trucks incoming—about a dozen,” I replied, strapping myself into the seat beside him. “Heavily armed. They know we're here.”

Reed's eyes narrowed, his face a mask of concentration. “How far out?”

“Twenty minutes at most. They'll have RPGs aimed at us if we don't get airborne now.”

“Understood,” he murmured. “But if they're that close, we might not be able to clear the zone fast enough. If they get into range...”

“They won't,” I cut him off. “I'm authorizing full defensive action. Engage, as necessary. We can't let them get a shot off.”

Reed nodded, his jaw setting in a hard line. “Roger that, sir.” With a flick of his thumb, he activated the weapons systems. The hum of power surged through the cabin as the mounted guns locked into position, their metallic frames gleaming menacingly in the harsh sunlight.

The rotor blades increased their speed, the helicopter lurching slightly as Reed pulled back on the cyclist, lifting us off the ground. My heart pounded in rhythm with the vibrating floor beneath my dress shoes. It was one thing to fly out of a hot zone; it was another to do so while evading direct fire.

The landscape below shrank rapidly as we gained altitude. Dust clouds on the horizon caught my eye—no doubt the militants' trucks hurtling toward us.

"Visual confirmation," Reed said grimly, glancing down. "We've got movement. I count... eight, ten, no—twelve trucks. This is gonna be tight."

"Bring us around," I ordered. "We're not leaving until those trucks are neutralized. If they get close enough to launch a missile, we're toast."

"Copy that, sir." Reed pulled the stick to the right, and the helicopter banked sharply, the nose angling toward the convoy below. I could see them clearly now—figures scrambling in the back of the trucks, dark silhouettes against the sandy terrain.

"Fire when ready," I said, my voice steady despite the adrenaline pumping through my veins. This was no ordinary extraction; this was a stand-off, and we were making sure the enemy didn't have a chance to engage.

Reed's hand moved to the trigger, and the air was filled with the deafening roar of gunfire as the helicopter's guns spat streams of hot lead. The first few rounds hit the ground in front of the trucks, sending clouds of dirt and debris skyward. Then, he adjusted his aim, and the rounds found their marks.

The effect was instantaneous. The lead truck exploded in a burst of flame and shrapnel, flipping onto its side and skidding to a halt. The vehicles behind it swerved wildly, some crashing into each other in their frantic attempts to avoid the wreckage.

"Good hits!" I shouted over the din. "Keep it up!"

The militants in the remaining trucks weren't giving up. I saw them scrambling to the sides of their vehicles, hoisting RPG launchers onto their shoulders. Reed saw it too.

"RPGs!" he yelled, banking sharply to the left. The helicopter lurched, and I grabbed the seat beside me to steady myself. A split second later, a rocket streaked past us, missing the tail rotor by mere feet.

"They're not backing off," I muttered, scanning the ground below. More trucks were screeching to a halt, militants pouring out, setting up defensive positions.

“Sir, we can’t hover here,” Reed said, his voice tense. “They’re too spread out. They’ll flank us and bring us down.”

I made a quick decision. “Let’s get some altitude and circle back around. Make another pass. We need to scatter them, or we’ll never get out of here.”

“Roger that,” Reed replied, his hands steady on the controls. The helicopter surged upward, climbing higher, the wind buffeting against us. From this height, the trucks looked like toy models scattered across the desert.

“Coming back around,” Reed announced, pushing the nose of the helicopter down. We swooped back toward the convoy, the guns blazing again. This time, the rounds tore through the vehicles with deadly precision. Two more trucks exploded, their fiery wreckage lighting up the sandy landscape.

“They’re breaking off!” Reed shouted. “Some are retreating—looks like we’ve got them on the run!”

But not all of them. I saw two trucks peeling off from the main group, racing toward a rocky outcrop. From the corner of my eye, I caught a flash—another RPG launcher aimed straight at us.

“Evasive maneuvers!” I yelled.

Reed didn’t hesitate. The helicopter jerked violently to the right, the force of the turn slamming me against the side of my seat. The RPG streaked past us again, detonating harmlessly in mid-air. A close call, but not close enough to make us stop.

“Return fire!” I ordered.

Reed swung the helicopter around, the guns roaring once more. This time, he targeted the outcrop directly. The militants scattered, dropping their weapons and running for cover, but it was too late. The rounds struck home, and the entire rock face seemed to erupt in a cloud of dust and debris. When the dust settled, the two trucks lay in ruins, smoking wreckage strewn across the ground.

“Enemy neutralized,” Reed reported, his voice calm and controlled despite the chaos we’d just unleashed. “All threats eliminated.”

I exhaled slowly, the tension draining from my body. “Good work, Captain. Let’s get out of here.”

“Copy that,” Reed said, adjusting our course. The helicopter leveled out, and we began our ascent once more, climbing higher and higher until the ground below was nothing but a blur of colors.

As we soared toward safety, the adrenaline slowly ebbed away, replaced by a deep sense of relief and gratitude. Reed’s quick thinking and precise

execution had saved us from what could have been a disastrous ambush. I glanced at him, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

“Thanks for having my back up there, Captain.”

Reed’s lips twitched in a faint smile. “Just doing my job, sir. But I’ve got to admit, I don’t mind a little action now and then.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said with a chuckle. “Because something tells me this won’t be the last time, we’re in a situation like this.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Reed replied, his eyes fixed on the horizon. “Now, let’s get you home safe.”

Hakeem was a key figure we couldn’t afford to spook, at least not yet. After the fight was over, I ordered Captain Reed to have the area thoroughly cleaned, body, debris, anything that might draw attention. We needed to keep the engagement as quiet as possible; the last thing we wanted was Hakeem catching wind of the scale of the firefight. When I got back to the SCIF on the plane ride home, I planned to call him directly, casually mentioning we had some minor trouble with locals—just enough to cut off any rumors before they started spreading. Hakeem needed to believe everything was still under control.

With that, we flew on, leaving the smoldering wreckage of our encounter far behind us. The desert stretched out below like an endless sea, and for the first time since the mission began, I allowed myself to believe that we were truly clear.

Homeward Bound

The thud of the helicopter blades slicing through the air gradually faded as we touched down on the heliport near the military airport outside Baghdad. The adrenaline rush from our mission still pulsed through my veins, but now there was a sense of relief knowing that we were one step closer to home. As we disembarked from the helicopter, I felt a surge of gratitude for making it back safely.

We were swiftly escorted to a waiting truck, the urgency clear in every movement. There was no time to waste, no room for complacency. Our mission might have ended, but our journey was far from over. We piled into the truck, the engine roaring to life as we began our journey towards the next phase of our mission.

The dusty landscape of Baghdad blurred past us, the rhythmic hum of the engine providing a steady backdrop to our thoughts. Each bump in the road served as a reminder of the challenges we had faced and overcome. We were a team forged in the crucible of adversity, bound by a common purpose that transcended individual differences.

As we approached the military airport, I caught a glimpse of the familiar silhouette of the private jet waiting for us on the tarmac. It was a sight for sore eyes, a beacon of hope amidst the uncertainty that lay ahead. Boarding the jet felt like stepping into a sanctuary, a temporary respite from the chaos of the outside world.

The interior of the jet exuded an air of quiet efficiency, a stark contrast to the chaos we had left behind. We settled into our seats, the anticipation of the long journey home mingling with a sense of exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm us. But there was no time for rest, no time to dwell on the past.

As the jet taxied down the runway, I reflected on the events that had brought us to this moment. Our mission had been a success, but at what cost? The sacrifices we had made, the risks we had taken – they all weighed heavily on my mind.

But amidst the uncertainty and the doubt, one thing remained constant – the unwavering resolve of a team united in purpose. As the jet soared into the sky, leaving behind the dust and the chaos of Baghdad, I knew that no matter what lay ahead, we would face it together.

A Call from Moishe

The low hum of the engines reverberated through the cabin of the Gulfstream, our jet cutting through the dark sky en route to Germany. We were cruising at 40,000 feet, the serene blackness of the night giving way to the slight twinkle of distant stars. Inside, the atmosphere was tense but focused. My team was scattered throughout the cabin, some reviewing intel, others engaged in hushed conversations. Each one of us was on edge—anxious but determined.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Moishe's name flashed across the screen.

"Moishe," I greeted, leaning back in my seat. I could picture him now, probably seated at his desk in Tel Aviv, his dark eyes flickering over computer

screens filled with real-time financial data. He was my counterpart at Mossad, a formidable ally and one of the brightest minds I'd ever worked with.

"Eastman," he replied, his voice carrying a hint of excitement. "I just heard from Hakeem. He's good with our deal. The first deposit, twenty million, will hit Crossroads in a few hours.

I glanced around the cabin. Peter was studying me intently. I nodded to him, letting him know things were going ahead as expected. "That's excellent news," I said. "Once the funds are in, we'll begin converting it into dollars and then move it into those construction projects we set up in Egypt. You think he's buying it?"

"He's cautious," he replied. "But he's also eager. He knows that this is a rare opportunity to multiply his wealth and strengthen his network's grip in the region. He's invested too much to back out now."

"Good. We're on the brink of something significant, Moishe. With the money flowing through Crossroads, we can trace it back to their source networks. If we play this right, we can unravel the whole damn thing."

He paused for a moment, and I could almost hear him smile through the line. "Eastman, this could be the one that changes everything. We've been tracking these terror networks for years, watching them grow more sophisticated, more daring. Hakeem has unwittingly provided us with the key to dismantle their operations from within."

The corners of my mouth curled up. "You always did love a good challenge."

"And you always did love getting your hands dirty," he shot back, but his tone quickly turned serious. "Listen, the second phase of the operation—where we start moving smaller sums back to our accounts in Cyprus and Zurich—Hakeem might get suspicious. He's got eyes everywhere. Even a single misstep could tip him off."

"Noted. We'll be careful. We've set up multiple layers of transactions using our systems here. We'll scrutinize every movement, and if he tries to pull anything, we'll know.

I glanced at Dale, who was now standing by my side. He had a laptop open, the screen displaying a complex web of financial data. "We've got our best analysts monitoring the flow," I told Moishe. "Every transaction, every wire transfer, will be scrutinized with unwavering precision. We'll convert the money, take our fee, and then trace it back. Clean it up and document everything."

“Good,” he murmured. “Very good. And Eastman, be careful. Hakeem isn’t just any player. He’s got connections that run deep. If he senses something’s off, it’s not just this op that’s at risk—it’s all of us.”

I nodded, though he couldn’t see me. “I know. But this time, we’re not just playing defense. We’re taking the fight to them. For too long, we’ve let them funnel money right under our noses. It’s time we show them we’re not just spectators.”

We ended the call, and I turned to face the team. “Alright, everyone. You heard it. The money’s on its way. I want eyes on every wire transfer, every dollar that moves through our accounts. We’ve got a short window to trace its path back to the source.” eyes were alight with the thrill of the chase. “We’ve set up the front companies like you wanted. Hakeem’s money will flow through shell corporations we control. We’ll document everything—names, dates, amounts—every piece of the puzzle.”

I nodded, feeling the adrenaline starting to kick in. “This is it. We’ve got one shot. Let’s make it count.”

Hours later, the news came through: the deposit had arrived.

My team had already hacked into multiple databases, pulling up data on the transactions. Screens flickered with complex diagrams—webs of companies, names of shadowy figures, and strings of numbers that would make a layman’s head spin.

“It’s all here,” Dale murmured, gesturing to the screens. “Hakeem’s money has moved through four different entities in the past thirty minutes. Look at this.” He pointed to a specific transaction that showed the funds being routed through a firm in Zurich, then to a construction company in Cairo.

“The same construction firm we set up,” I said, my eyes narrowing. “Good. The bait’s working.”

But there was something else. I could see it in the data—the way the money was being divided and then re-combined. It was a pattern; one I’d seen before.

“They’re using the same technique they used in Yemen,” I muttered, mostly to myself. “They’re trying to obfuscate the trail, but it’s too familiar.”

Dale glanced at me. “So, we’ve seen this before?”

I nodded. “Yeah. And if we’ve seen it before, it means they’re not as cautious as they want us to believe. They’re confident—too confident.”

“Moishe was right,” Peter said softly. “Hakeem might suspect something if we move too fast.”

I leaned back; my mind was racing. “We don’t have to move fast. We just have to be smart. Let’s keep analyzing.. For now, let’s sit back and watch.”

We meticulously tracked the flow of funds. Each transfer was logged, and every shell company scrutinized. The front companies Hakeem and his associates had crafted were serving as conduits for funneling money into terrorist networks. But this time, we were not merely reacting. We were in the game, gathering evidence that would be pivotal in our fight against terror.

Moishe called again. “We’re seeing the same patterns over here,” he said. “The money is being split, routed through charities, construction projects, and even educational institutions. They’re using every trick in the book to hide it.”

“Which means we’re getting closer,” I replied. “The more they try to hide, the more we know we’re onto something big. We’ll keep tracking and documenting. Every name, every shell company, every fake charity—they’re all pieces of the puzzle.”

“And when the time is right, we’ll pull the rug out from under them,” Moishe said. “But until then, we wait. We wait and watch.”

I looked around at my team, huddled around screens, eyes flickering with determination. “This is just the beginning,” I said softly. “We’re going to bring them down—not with guns or bombs, but with proof. Cold, hard proof that will expose them for the criminals they are.”

Reflections and Next Steps

I leaned back in my seat, allowing the weight of our success to sink in. We had achieved our mission, albeit with some unexpected challenges along the way. But now, with Iraq airspace behind us, it felt like a distant memory—a testament to our resilience and determination.

However, amidst the celebration of our safe departure, one thought lingered in my mind like a shadow: Don’s struggle for life. His face, etched with pain and determination, haunted my thoughts. I couldn’t shake the feeling of guilt that gnawed at me, knowing that while we were heading home, he was fighting for survival.

I made a mental note to call Karen as soon as we landed in Germany. I hoped my words would offer her some solace, some glimmer of hope amidst the darkness of uncertainty. But for now, as the hum of the jet engines filled the cabin, I allowed myself a moment of reflection. Our journey had been

fraught with danger and uncertainty, but we had appeared stronger for it. We faced our fears head-on, relying on each other for support and guidance. And now, as we headed towards the safety of home, I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride in what we had carried out.

As the pilot's voice crackled over the intercom, announcing our impending stop in Germany for refueling, I straightened in my seat, ready to face whatever came next. Our journey was far from over, but with each mile that passed beneath us, I knew that we were one step closer to the safety of home. And for now, that was enough.

Asserting Authority

We landed in Germany for a routine refueling stop, but little did we know that it would turn into a tense encounter. My team and I disembarked the airplane, only to be met by military police. It became clear that some individuals at the State Department were unhappy with my approach to dealing with Iranian terrorists. Led by the MPs, we were escorted into the flight holding area at Ramstein Air Base, a sprawling hub of military activity. Inside, I was immediately approached by Captain Gifford, who informed me that he had been instructed to detain me and my team for questioning.

As I stood face to face with Captain Gifford in the confines of Ramstein Air Base, I knew it was time to assert my authority. With determination in my voice, I began to speak. "Gifford," I started, locking eyes with him, "I am here on a critical national security mission with the CIA. I showed him my badge and mission letter from the CIA. Your jurisdiction, and that of your partners with the State Department, does not extend to me or my team." But Captain Gifford remained unmoved, his instructions clear and unwavering. It was clear that he was merely a cog in a much larger machine, following orders from higher authorities within the military hierarchy.

As the interrogation dragged on, frustration turned to simmering anger. It was maddening to think that our efforts to combat terrorism were being hindered by bureaucratic red tape and political agendas. But I knew that losing my temper would only worsen the situation. With a steely resolve, I continued to answer Captain Gifford's questions to the best of my ability, keeping my composure despite the mounting pressure. Every moment spent detained at Ramstein Air Base was a moment lost in our mission to protect innocent lives and safeguard national security. The captain's expression

faltered slightly, but he stayed steadfast. “Sir, I understand your position, but I am following orders,” he replied evenly.

I shook my head, refusing to back down. “I need the names of anyone who issued this order to you,” I insisted. “My security personnel at CIA headquarters will be in touch. This detainment is unwarranted and impedes our mission. “There was a moment of tense silence as Captain Gifford processed my words. Then, with a reluctant nod, he motioned to his subordinates to release us.

We were immediately escorted back to our plane, which had been refueled during our brief detention. As we boarded, I felt a sense of satisfaction. Despite the first setback, we were back on track. Once settled in our seats, I made a mental note to follow up on the incident with higher-ups at the CIA. It was clear that there were individuals within the government who were not aligned with our objectives, and I needed to ensure that our mission remained protected from internal interference.

As the engines roared to life and we prepared to leave Ramstein Air Base, I felt a renewed sense of determination.

Nellis Air Force Base, Las Vegas, Nevada – 1:00 AM, Sunday Morning

The hum of the plane engines slowed as we taxied down the runway at Nellis. It had been a long flight back from Germany, and the fatigue settled heavily on my shoulders. I glanced around at the team—each member, a reflection of quiet dedication and professionalism. This was our core unit, and now, as we landed in the States, our paths would diverge temporarily.

I exchanged nods with Dale, my deputy, before turning my attention to Randy, our CFO. “Randy, get the funds allocated as soon as you land,” I instructed. “Hakeem’s wire transfer arrived. Let’s ensure it’s distributed into the new investment accounts.”

Randy nodded with the practiced ease of a man who had navigated such high-stakes transactions countless times. “I’ll coordinate with our investment team in New York. They’re on standby,” he assured.

Michelle, my security and IT expert, stood off to the side, eyes focused on her tablet. She caught my gaze and motioned towards me. “We’ll need to discuss server capacity and security enhancements. If Crossroads is expanding, we’ll be a bigger target.”

I gestured for her to follow as we descended the stairs of the plane onto the tarmac. The desert air was a cool reprieve from the stale cabin atmosphere. “We’ll get to that in a minute,” I said, glancing at the time. “Let’s make sure everyone’s squared away first.”

After a brief farewell to the team, Michelle and I boarded a separate jet destined for Dallas. As we lifted off, leaving the bright lights of Las Vegas behind, the familiar hum of the engines lulled me into a state of reflective silence. I knew there were a thousand details to complete, but my mind kept drifting back to Don—my old friend.

In-Flight, en route to Dallas, Texas – 3:30 AM

The cabin lights were dimmed, casting soft shadows across the plush seats. Michelle sat across from me, her fingers deftly scrolling through the latest security reports on her tablet. I leaned back, letting the silence stretch for a moment before I spoke.

“Karen called me earlier,” I said quietly, breaking the stillness. Michelle’s gaze lifted from the screen, her sharp eyes locking onto mine. “Don’s wife?”

Michelle’s expression softened slightly. “How is she holding up?”

“She’s strong, but you can tell it’s taking a toll.” I ran a hand through my hair, trying to shake off the lingering weight of grief. Michelle nodded thoughtfully. The hum of the jet engines filled the silence that followed. My gaze drifted to the window, I thought of Karen’s voice on the phone, tinged with both sorrow and determination.

“Don wanted us to keep pushing forward,” I murmured, almost to myself.

Michelle leaned forward slightly, her voice low. “And we will. I’ll make sure our security posture is strengthened at the Vegas office. New servers, enhanced encryption, and physical security overhaul. We can’t afford any vulnerabilities now, not with the expansion underway.”

I nodded, a sense of resolve settling in. “Peter’s going to reevaluate the personnel at Crossroads. We need to bring in new talent—people who can handle the increased workload and pressure.”

“Good idea. I’ll coordinate with him on background checks and clearance levels. If we’re scaling up, we need to be selective.”

The conversation shifted seamlessly into technical details—server clusters, firewalls, secure access points—but my thoughts kept straying back to the emotional aftermath of Don’s stroke.

The Return

Disembarking from the long flight, I was more than just physically tired—I was drained, every muscle in my body aching from the stress and pressure of the past week. The CIA had arranged for a car to pick me up from the airport, and as I settled into the backseat, I felt the weight of everything begin to crash down on me. The city lights of Dallas blurred past the window, the familiar sights seeming almost surreal after the intensity of Baghdad.

All I wanted was to get home, to take a hot shower and collapse into bed, but I knew sleep would have to wait. Don’s surgery was in the morning, his brain had swollen and the doctor needed to remove part of his skull to relieve the pressure, and I needed to be there for him. That thought was the only thing keeping me from succumbing to the fatigue that seemed to pull at me like a heavy anchor.

On the way back to Eastman’s condo I started sifting through a week’s worth of missed calls and messages from work. The work was piling up and my mind struggled to focus. One crisis at a time, I told myself. One crisis at a time.

I made a mental note to stop by the office later in the day and I quickly replied to a few urgent emails. Somewhere along the way, I asked to stop at a convenience store, where I grabbed a Monster and some chips—anything to keep me awake and alert. The routine was comforting, providing a semblance of normalcy amidst the chaos.

By the time I reached my uptown condo, it was almost 6am. The exhaustion hit me like a freight train as I trudged up the stairs, the world around me spinning slightly from the long hours without rest. I fumbled with my keys, finally managing to unlock the door and step inside.

The silence of my uptown condo was almost deafening. Dropping my bags by the door, I headed straight for the bathroom, shedding my travel-worn clothes and stepping under the hot shower. The water cascaded over me, washing away the grime of the journey, but it did little to alleviate the heaviness in my chest.

Don. The thought of him lying on the operating table the tomorrow morning tore at me. He was more than just a colleague, more than just a friend. He was a mentor, a confidant, someone who had believed in me when no one else did.

After the shower, I stumbled to bed, collapsing onto the mattress with a long, weary sigh. My eyes felt like lead, my body surrendering to the pull of sleep almost instantly. But even as I drifted off, Don's face lingered in my mind, his voice echoing softly in the quiet darkness.

"Stay strong, Roger," he would say. "You've got a fire in you. Don't let anything extinguish it."