

**S**omething cold touched his right ear. Deep asleep, his unconscious mind registered the annoyance and lifted his hand to brush it away. His wrist was grabbed in a viselike grip. Tom Lynch's eyes shot open in the darkness of his penthouse bedroom.

Confusion and fear gripped his brain as he struggled to clear the fog of sleep and to focus his mind. "Sit up. Sit up!" commanded a man's voice in a quiet, menacing tone. Tom Lynch attempted to turn his head to the right, toward the source of the voice, but as he did, the cold object was pressed firmly and painfully against his ear. The bedside lamp was switched on. The sudden brightness forced Tom to blink several times while his eyes adjusted. While all these confusing conflicts struggled to resolve themselves, he watched a second man walk from the bedside table to stand at the foot of his bed. Tom's orderly, lawyer's mind began to record the details. The man was tall, perhaps six feet. He wore a tan colored trench coat; on his head, a brown fedora, which struck Tom as odd in this day and age of hatless men. On his hands, he wore skin-tight, black leather gloves. His right hand held a semi-automatic pistol, a silencer screwed into the gun's barrel gleamed blue-black in the light. Even without his glasses, Tom could see the gun was aimed squarely at his chest.

"I said, sit up!" repeated the voice on his right. Tom's arm, still held in a crushing grip, was suddenly jerked upward forcing him to a sitting position. The object, still pressed tightly to his ear, followed in place as he sat up. The covers fell from his bare chest. The object pressing against his ear was withdrawn and his wrist released. The man stepped into view and took up a position about a yard from the head of the bed. Tom watched the man's movements and went on mentally recording. This man was dressed in nearly identical fashion

except that his coat was the much more expensive English Burberry. It nearly matched one Tom had in his own hall closet. Now, there were two semi-automatic pistols aimed at Tom's vulnerable chest.

Tom's thoroughly terrorized mind raced; his heart hammered in his chest. As his mind began to clear a bit, his breathing, which had come in short, adrenaline-influenced puffs, began to settle down. He opened his mouth to ask the terrifying questions racing through his mind, but before he could speak, the man at the left side of the bed raised his hand in a commanding gesture of silence. "I will ask the questions, and you will answer, Mister Lynch." The speaker was foreign. The spoken English was excellent but too formal, too correct, stilted, and touched by a vague accent. Tom estimated the man was perhaps an inch over six feet tall. He was definitely not European. His slightly dark complexion led Tom to feel the man might be Semitic. He wore a full black mustache and golden rimmed eye glasses, the frame design distinctly foreign. Beneath the hat, dark, nearly jet black hair was visible. Age? He estimated the man to be somewhere in his mid-twenties to early thirties. It was obvious he was in command of his partner who continued his silent vigil at the foot of the bed but slightly apart from the speaker.

After a pause to frame his interrogation, the man continued. "Three years ago, a man came to you with documents and other materials, which he left with you for safekeeping. We are here to collect everything he left with you." It was a flat statement of fact.

Tom attempted to place the speaker's origins. Middle East perhaps. "Sorry. What was that?" he asked. His interrogator repeated his statement. Tom listened more attentively to the accent. To his ear, the pronunciation marked

the man as having definitely received the benefits of an English public school education. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tom answered, his voice, a dry croak.

“Come now, don’t take me for a fool! Years of tracking and meticulous investigation led me to your door. And now you have a choice. You will either turn over the materials or you shall die— and be assured, your death will be agonizingly slow.” The quiet voice was coldly menacing.

“I don’t think you’re a fool. Look— you obviously know I’m a lawyer. I’ve been in practice for almost forty years! Every year, I handle the private affairs of hundreds of people. Thousands of clients have given me documents to be maintained in secrecy and safety. You’ll have to be more specific. What man? Who? His name? What kind of materials?”

“Allow me to refresh your memory. This man came to you with documents he’d stolen from my masters in al-Qaida. He used the name Albert Braun. His real identity was Khalid El-Hoorie. I say ‘was’ because, sadly, he was a traitor to his masters. Khalid stole several highly sensitive, most secret files along with several other very important documents and went to ground. I, we,” he said— gesturing toward his companion— “have been dispatched to return these documents to their rightful owner. You will now turn them over to me.”

“If you’re talking about Arabic documents, I don’t have any. I’d remember if I did.”

“You don’t remember Albert Braun?”

“No. Look, this is very interesting, but, I repeat, I don’t recall any Albert Braun or any Arab documents. You’ve made a terrible mistake,” Tom said, hoping his eyes and voice didn’t reveal his surprise at the accuracy of the man’s information.

“Fool! Hasn’t it occurred to you El-Hoorie told us he gave you the documents? Up! Out of the bed!” As he spoke, he gestured with his gun, indicating that Lynch get out of the bed.

“But, I’m naked.”

“Do you think that matters? Up! Take us to your study!”

“Why my study?”

“Earlier tonight, we searched your legal offices. Not finding what we sought there, we are left with seeking it here. If the documents are not here, you will tell us where you have hidden them.”

Tom slid his legs over the side of the bed and stood naked before his inquisitors. “May I at least put on a robe?”

“Where is it?”

“In the closet, there, behind you.”

The man gestured to his silent partner with his gloved left hand while the gun in his right stayed steadily aimed in the center of Lynch’s chest. The subordinate retrieved the robe from a hook on the back of the closet door and threw it with some force at their naked prey. The robe hit Lynch in the chest and fell to the floor at his feet. With as much dignity as he could muster, Lynch retrieved the robe and put it on. Once the robe had been secured by the waist cinch, Tom Lynch led the way to his study.