

# Raoul

**WHEN HE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS**, the man called Ismail found that he could not move his limbs. Head covered in black fabric, a grimy piece of cloth taped in his mouth, he strained against the ropes, checking at the same time that his legs and arms were still attached and working. His ears roared, and then—suddenly—everything was quiet. He lifted his head a bit, trying to hear something, anything, but only caught the creak of a floorboard. No one else seemed to be in the room. Once he calmed his quaking heart and slowed the blood pulsing against his eardrums, Ismail could tell there was no one nearby—but muted voices carried into the room through the heating vents.

More tugging, and then the distinct sound of a door opening. Window shades dropping. His two captors wore hair grease that he could identify by its distinct smell, a favorite of some of the local Arab men. He pulled away when he felt cold metal touch his leg, and he clenched his muscles against the expected pain. He was naked, he felt the chill of a breeze across his body. A hand removed the ropes from his ankles, and Ismail prepared to scissor his legs and fight for release. A loud laugh erupted from the other side of the room, then a gruff voice—did he recognize it?—grunted, “Are you going to let this little man get the best of you?” There was a quick flash of light, the sting of a needle, and Ismail fell into darkness again.

When he awakened later, the room appeared silent and dark again. He was chilled, dizzy from whatever they’d shot him up with, and tied down at all four points again. The air conditioner blew a soft coolness across the room, and goose bumps dimpled his bare chest. The door creaked open.

There was a scuffle of fabric against the floor—they were in stocking feet—and then Ismail’s blindfold was abruptly removed. The three men surrounding the bed looked familiar to him—but his brain was not functioning at its peak and he found it necessary to stay focused on breathing. The thinnest man, possibly the youngest, stepped forward when another pushed his arm. He was wearing a long plastic apron and a welder’s mask, which Ismail noted with interest rather than alarm.

The youngster looked back over his shoulder, hesitating. There was another glint of metal, and then the rubber-covered hand pulled the exposed penis taut. The boy grunted when he sawed the scalpel through the flesh, moving aside when a spurt of blood obscured his work. Ismail’s body, a bit slow to react to the assault, arched upwards in distress. He felt no pain, not yet, just the throbbing warmth of the blood flowing across his legs and pelvis. The kid held up the prize.

Sweat flowed into Ismail’s eyes—perhaps mixed with tears—as the third man held his hair and roughly removed the tape and cloth from his mouth. Before he

could swallow properly, however, the man roughly stuffed the flaccid member between Ismail's gasping lips and slapped the tape back on. Ismail heaved and bucked and fought against the taste of blood and then vomit, the three men standing cross-armed around the bed as if witnessing an ordinary and somewhat boring event. The young one, without his bloody apron and mask, looked greenish as he worked his face muscles into a stolid pose.

"*Calm yourself,*" Ismail thought as he tried to focus. "*Calm, calm, calm.*" He frowned, concentrated hard on the word, calling upon his military training to push down the rising tide of panic. Struggling to breathe through the nose, Ismail could sense the slowing beat of his heart—not because of his efforts to calm it, but apparently because there was a rapidly decreasing amount of blood left to pump out.

Sparkling white streamers danced across his field of vision, and at first he was afraid of another slash of the silver blade. There was no more cutting, however. In a moment, he relaxed into the cool blackness that lapped at the edges of his consciousness.

"Take it off," the Leader instructed, and duct tape stripped the dry skin from Ismail's lips. He wanted to spit but there was nothing left, just the slow inhalation of one last breath. The severed penis flopped in his mouth like an extra tongue, lolling out the corner. He had neither the strength nor even the will to spit it out.

Ismail was able to turn his head an inch and caught the older man's smile as he turned away. Who was he? The question fluttered across the last synapses of Ismail's brain. He was familiar—The Leader.

"Everything clean? Roll up that prayer rug; he won't need it anymore," the Leader said, slapping his gloved hands together. It was cold in the room, the air conditioning humming in the corner. "Let's go."

He winked at the body splayed on the bed, the pallid skin against the crimson mess of the sheets. Ismail's eye fluttered one last time, just at the edge of the clean white shimmer overtaking his vision.

"See you in hell, Ra-oul." The door closed. It was September 8, 2001, and the men had work to do.