

Raoul

HE KNEW THIS TOWN, its hidey-holes and back trails, like the roadmap of lines on the palm of his hand. Even after being away for years, the familiar feeling of the gravel and sand, the scrubby woods and the poorly maintained neighborhoods, came back to him with ease. Raoul had been in Jerome for several months now, no one the wiser about his nightly comings and goings. Certainly no one in his family knew he was in town, and only the man he reported to was certain where he was.

The day had been warm, a clear and crisp fall day that made a person remember all the Septembers past when school meant a new beginning and the opportunity to make money—and fun—raking leaves all over town. It was too early for the foliage, but with nightfall coming earlier, Raoul's meanderings around town were easier to accomplish. A brilliant half moon lit up the sky as he slipped onto a pier and clambered aboard an old boat that he'd equipped with a powerful, strong, and well-camouflaged engine.

Once the anchor was up and the boat was safely out of sight, Raoul pulled off his 'rican boy uniform—slouchy jeans, bad-ass tee, and black Puma cap. Rolling the clothes into a garbage bag for use on the return trip, he slipped back into the all-black ensemble of the new urban terrorist. With the addition of a woolen pakol, a smudge of kohl under each eye, his Ismail persona was back in business. He pulled the boat close to the shore on the outskirts of town, where a buoy had been placed to hold a rubber raft. With night vision glasses, Raoul scanned to make sure the coast was clear, slipped into the raft and paddled quietly to the dark side of a hulking warehouse on the water. The final run-through meeting was scheduled: in it he hoped to gather enough details to make a report that would stop whatever was being planned here. After months of lying low, training in hand-to-hand maneuvers, the group was approaching D-Day.

Several new faces were among the familiar gathering. Apparently many separate cells had been training in other locations, and some had now come together for the last briefing. The men had been selected for their nerves and dedication to the mission—expressed as “teaching a lesson” to the American devil. Raoul kept his eyes low and grunted when someone pushed against his arm.

“Ismail, hey.” Mohammed smiled.

“No names,” Ismail said quietly. “Remember? No names.”

“Oh, yes, yes. I keep forgetting.” Mohammed chuckled. “But we're among friends here, right? I mean, in public, yes, but here? No problem.”

Ismail grunted again and slid away from his talkative friend, trying to blend in the background and watch the crowd. His dark eyes flashed, and he hunched against the wall when the Leader called for quiet.

“Check with your team leader to get your directions for later. We have one more training exercise, and then we move into place. Any questions, ask your group leader. Time is of the essence now, and Inshallah, we will meet again in heaven.” With that, the man turned away and gestured with his left hand. In the right, he held a stubby pistol.

“One more thing—a lesson.” He gestured again. “Bring him here.”

Mohammed was escorted to the front, his feet hardly touching the ground. He had a stupid smile on his face, as if he was expecting some kind of commendation—and that was the expression he took into the afterlife as the Leader dispatched him with a single shot to the forehead.

“Anyone else need a lesson? We are in a battle here, and we cannot allow the weakness of one to affect the strength of our mission. Now, go.” He raised the gun and fired a single shot into the roof as the group scattered, looking for others in their squad while avoiding eye contact with anyone in the room. Raoul felt his bowels tighten, as they did whenever he was ready for action.