

CHAPTER 1

THE DOCTOR

The man Usama Bin Laden knew as the Doctor stood unobtrusively at the edge of the compound, virtually unnoticeable, his hands folded prayerfully in front of him. He smiled as he watched Usama with his young converts. Usama's smooth and eloquent voice and gestures were inspiring the Americans who had come for training, and he wondered what the Americans' parents would do if they knew the true intent of their children's sabbatical to Afghanistan.

Usama is our best man at public relations, he thought. I was right to forge this alliance. We'll use his money and his charisma to bring us the supply of young men we need. He wondered if Usama had any idea how he really felt about him and what he planned for him. *I doubt it, he thought. He's brilliant at business, but blind to intrigue. He will be easy to control for now.*

"I wonder if it's wise to use the Americans in our forces," interrupted Muhammad Atef, Al Qaeda's military commander. The Doctor had not heard him approach and felt that uneasiness he often felt when Atef was near. Despite their collaboration of decades, the stealth ability of his partner unnerved him at times.

"Yes, it's fine—a few at least. They will serve us well in later propaganda. And I'm confident you'll make certain we have no infiltrators from American intelligence among them," he responded, hoping to placate Atef. "All is well. We are winning."

Atef cocked his head and looked with cautious skepticism at this odd remark. Odd, given they had been run out of every country they operated in and were wanted men everywhere. "Well, I came to tell you CNN is covering the China/America

situation. I thought you might want to see him. You know, see how his team handles this. It's time we got a measure of the man."

The Doctor laughed. "We can thank the Chinese military for providing this new President with his first crisis. Let's see what the Americans have put in office this time." And with that, the two slipped into a metal shed. They nodded to the guard inside, descended a primitive ladder and went into their underground fortress to assess their newest adversary.

When Usama excused himself from the eager protégés, he joined Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who was known as "The Doctor" in Al Qaeda circles, and his military commander, Muhammad Atef, in the communications center of their fortress. Both seemed unusually riveted to the reporting. The American spy plane was still on the ground, its crew in interrogation. Although the situation was days old now, the news had nothing to report from George W. Bush. Factions of the press that could be counted on to slant the reporting toward criticism of the new President were already skeptical about his silence. To the American press it seemed a sign of the longed-for weakness they hoped to see in this man. To the Doctor it was disturbing.

Zawahiri sat passively watching the National Security Advisor handle the situation, cloaking the intentions and disposition of her boss. *Very shrewd*, he admired. *He's staying in the shadows, letting subordinates handle it. Or is he?* That thought disturbed the Doctor. He had hoped to get a bead on his enemy by watching how he dealt with the Chinese and their unique brand of extortion. But this one was a pretty cool character who was not showing his hand. He sensed danger here; then shrugged it off. Surely 15 years of his psychological efforts had rendered the Americans' top leadership inept when it came to unusual and unexpected confrontations. His only worry actually was that the Chinese had been too overt in forcing the spy plane down.

Bin Laden, on the other hand, was for some reason very worried about this new man in the White House. He excused their aides and confronted his colleagues directly. “What do you make of it?”

The Doctor spoke first, wanting to forestall Atef’s take on it. The dynamics among the three of them had changed in recent months. The Doctor knew that to accomplish his master plan, he had to stay in charge. Bin Laden was easily manipulated, but Atef’s intransigence when he felt he was right was beginning to threaten their solidarity. The Doctor must remain in control. “We’ll have to lure him out—actually get him out in the open—to see what he’s made of.”

“And how do we do that?” Atef challenged.

“We attack. We need to see if he’ll follow the lead of his predecessor, or if he has something else in mind,” Zawahiri said matter-of-factly.

Bin Laden, who had been eyeing both men, turned to Atef and asked, “Which of your plans can be implemented?”

Atef knew exactly what was feasible and not feasible. There were literally dozens of plans they were developing regarding attacks in or upon the United States. But to remove something from the drawing board or pre-planning stages and move it to the front table would require thought and a cost/benefit analysis in both men and materiel. Bin Laden the businessman would want that. His response was terse. “I’ll get back to you.”

“Good. Be bold, my friend. This is a chance to bring down the Infidel and disrupt his influence.”

The Doctor flinched inside as he listened to this sophomoric rhetoric. He excused it by assigning it to the fact his friend had just been propagandizing some American youth and had carried the verbiage over. Lord, how he despised these privileged young. And he knew he was a gift from Allah to Bin Laden, who would have been just like them had it not been for the Doctor.

Confident that Muhammad Atef would recommend an attack upon American assets, private or military, he began to envision the new American President having to come out in the open and threaten revenge. By what that President did next, the Doctor would know which one of his own games would ensure his

ultimate victory. And with that to look forward to, he politely excused himself and went to prayers.

The battle plan had received final approval from the Council in March 2001. Zawahiri had expected the attack to be a replication of his brilliant embassy bombings, or the USS Cole, but Atef had surprised him with their most aggressive and far-reaching plot to date. Although the Doctor had strong misgivings about an attack of this magnitude on American soil, he had decided to “pick his fights.” What he had needed was a merging of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda. As the leader of the anemic Egyptian group his entire plan required that his own group survive. And that required an infusion of capital. He needed Bin Laden’s money, and now he had it. Even better was the fact that Bin Laden was now completely surrounded by the Doctor’s own men. Still resentful of his betrayal by his friend, Ali Mohamed, who had turned out to be a double agent working for the Americans, the Doctor was confident he could avoid a repeat of that fiasco. *Trust no one*, he concluded. *Let no one know how self-correcting I am.* What had been done to him was now being done by him.

He remembered with pride how he had precipitated the split between Sheik Abdullah Azzam and his protégé, Bin Laden. It seemed to Zawahiri that Azzam was siphoning off money and attention from Bin Laden that was needed by the Jihad. He felt no remorse whatsoever about planting the rumor that Azzam was working for the Americans. The man was weak and resisted attacking other Muslims. It pleased him greatly that Azzam and his sons had been blown up in a car bomb the very next night. Bin Laden had killed his own mentor. The speed of that response had convinced the Doctor that Bin Laden was his man—decisive and ruthless.

And so, one by one, all rivals for Usama Bin Laden’s money and loyalty had been neutralized. The merger was done. On this unexpected near-freezing night in June 2001, as he watched the

sun setting, he breathed in the cold air, enjoying the pain it caused his lungs. The date was set. It would happen in September. While his colleagues gloated in the planning of their surprise attack, he stood alone outside, confident that not one of them knew his true plan. And if his closest colleagues had no inkling of it, he was supremely confident that none of the imbeciles in the international intelligence agencies anywhere would ever guess it, least of all Israel's Mossad.

CHAPTER 2

THE AGENT

Everyone was still on high-alert. It seemed he hadn't slept in weeks, but it had only been three days. September 14, 2001. The President had just finished his heart-felt, supportive message to everyone at Langley. But something was haunting James Mikolas as he made a break for the men's room. Like an itch you can't locate, something was pestering his mind and stimulating his emotions. Sure, everyone was tired and distraught over what had happened. Everyone in America was in grief and exploring their own culpability. But these emotions went beyond that. James was experiencing the sheer terror that he somehow had caused this. *Thirty years as an operative or analyst and I missed it*, he thought as he popped a Pepcid. *But what? What did I do?*

The computer of James' mind was searching his files. It had located an incident. An incident so innocuous that his own mind had discounted it and shunted it to the dust bins of his memory. As it came forward, it was screaming for analysis. "It was just a conversation," he explained to himself, "a simple exchange of information between me and the Israeli intelligence officer." Then he saw it, like a flashbulb going off. There was the information. But there was something else. There had been an added, despondent conclusion drawn by the officer. James had dismissed it as the whining that intelligence people sometimes get into when they're behind in the game. But he saw now that it was that last remark which bore analysis. A germ of a theory was now developing.

He splashed water on his face, as if to help him see more clearly. He had been with the Central Intelligence Agency for 30 years. As he looked at his face, it still had that broad, tanned

Mediterranean look that came from his Greek grandfather. Although James himself was wholly American, his name and his genes had enabled him to pass easily throughout the Mediterranean, Mid-East and points in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Bloc where the swarthy complexion blended in. *Just a little more gray is all*, he mused. *I'm still the same fighting weight I was in college.* He laughed as he realized, though, that the weight wasn't muscle anymore.

Small wonder, he reflected. *I've been inside now since Kosovo.* Although he felt his intelligence had greatly helped the Clinton administration, he was brought inside shortly after the air strikes. Made an inside man, an analyst. He never did know who he'd pissed off. They camouflaged it so well behind their "need for someone of his experience to analyze data, keep a perspective..." It was all part of the CIA bullshit at management levels he had dodged for 24 years. But finally it was his turn.

Oddly enough though, he didn't mind being an analyst. As luck would have it, he was good at it. Turns out the bastards were right to move him in. He could think outside the box, stretch. He could see things others couldn't. That didn't make him popular, but it did make him needed. He knew he had a job until he was ready to hang it up.

He squared off in the mirror. Then he went outside into the smoking area of the garden, found an open bench and sat. The memory of that conversation was now totally forward. He could see it as if it were yesterday.

"I'm glad to see you, friend." Colonel Ari Ben Gurion smiled as he offered a seat to James.

"Likewise. I was surprised to get your call. Is this business or pleasure?" James asked, never one to delay getting to the point. He had learned that much after years of dealing with Aman, the Israeli intelligence service. These guys were hard-core and didn't like to stay out in the open long. And they were precise.

“Well, it’s always a pleasure to see an old colleague, but I’m afraid it’s business. A drink?”

James motioned to the waiter closest to their table. “Coffee and a croissant, please. And another of whatever my friend is having.” He could tell by Ari’s waistline that he hadn’t lost his appreciation of great pastry. James, too, was happy to see him. The waiter nodded and disappeared out of the sun.

“Do you miss being in the field, James?” Ari asked.

“No,” he added, “what I miss is the clarity. When you and I were coming up, the enemy was always on the surface. You knew where he was. And usually who he was. Now we’re boxing with shadows. Like there are two worlds. The one that good decent people live in, and the subterranean one full of demons who surface, do some evil, and vanish again. It’s shit. We don’t even know their names, let alone their motives.”

Ari looked at him without speaking as the waiter set down the pastry plate and poured James’s coffee. When he was certain no one was in earshot he quietly said, “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Two men who scare me, more than any I’ve ever pursued.”

That statement rocked James for he never considered Ari to fear anything, let alone the rats he chased through the Middle East.

“And what scares me the most,” Ari added, “is they’re not even on your radar screen.”

“Who, me personally?”

“No, your bosses, your government! They’re not taking our warnings as seriously as they need to,” he bellowed. “You’re old-school. You’ll understand. I’m here to give you information about Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Muhammad Atef.”

James recognized the names. He knew the Israelis in particular would be interested in these two, given what had happened in Egypt. They were important to President Mubarak, and Mubarak was important to Israel. He knew well how important Egypt today was to Israel’s security. But he had no idea relevant to the United States why these two warranted such emotion from Ari.

“Ari, I’m not sure why you are so vehement on this. But I trust you. If you have something to tell me, say it. I’ll do my best with whatever information you give me. I promise.”

“Okay.”

James waited, enjoying the croissant as it dissolved in his mouth. After a moment Ari spoke.

“We’ve been chasing them for years. They’re mixed up with Hezbollah. Zawahiri’s been merciless since his imprisonment. We think he’s joining Bin Laden, looking for a merger.” James, of course, knew of Bin Laden and what a nightmare that situation had been for the U.S., especially with the Bin Laden family living in the United States. And the Saudi connection, too. It was a real mess.

James could see that Ari was struggling with something. He probed, “What about Zawahiri?”

Ari looked at him with eyes of steel. “He’s brilliant—a genius. He’s refined terrorism into an art. And he’s a psychopath. Our guys have given up trying to understand him.”

James said nothing. Ari continued, “You know you’ve lost when the ‘mind guys’ come and tell you the absurd. They have concluded he’s a clinical psychopath driven by uncontrollable psychological reasons, inflamed by his imprisonment and torture in Egypt! James, in my business, that’s psychobabble for ‘we’re not even in the game!’”

“And why does this scare you, Ari?”

“Because none of us can crack him. We don’t know how he thinks; we can’t penetrate him. He’s so far out in front we have no idea what he’ll do next, or why. We don’t know where he is. We think his military mastermind, Atef, is with him. But we don’t know. We don’t know what he looks like now.” Ari leaned in, his eyes wild. “We don’t even know if the DNA the Egyptians have is Zawahiri’s DNA. He’s a phantom. He could be sitting right next to us for all I know.”

“Jesus, what a thought,” James exhaled. “You really don’t know?”

Ari was ashamed. He lowered his voice and was barely audible. “No.” Then he seemed to get a second wind and added, “That’s why I wanted to meet: to tell you that if you ever get him in your cross-hairs, take him out. Don’t hesitate. Aman regards

him as the most dangerous man on the planet. Bin Laden's a school-boy next to him. And we've lost him. If you get him, kill him."

"All right, I got it," James reassured him as he reached into his pocket to pay the bill.

Suddenly Ari's hand grabbed James' wrist. "I mean it, James. We don't know how to go where he is. He's always several moves out in front of the best we've got. And he's going to kill a lot of people."

With that, their meeting ended. They shook hands and went their separate ways at Dupont Circle. The only thing James really thought about their talk was that it was probably time for Ari to retire. Ari had dealt with deadly guys his whole career. And he seemed to have lost his edge.

James stood up. There it was, the thing that was nagging at him. The phrase, "he's always several moves out in front of us..." Looking at it all, from 1993 to Tuesday morning, was it possible? Was that what Zawahiri was doing? Did Bin Laden even know?

A theory was forming. It had been 40 years since he'd played chess. And he wasn't that good when he did. *I've got to do some boning up. And I need to talk to someone.*

He thought of the President's words a few hours ago and, for the first time in three days, he smiled.

CHAPTER 3

THE PLAYER

It had taken him some time to find this kid. But looking at him now, entering the huddle to call the play, James recognized Andrew Weir from the picture in the leading chess magazine, *New in Chess*, he'd been carrying around. The pages were worn ragged from two months of searching for this chess champion who was renowned for beating Big Blue and any other computer he played chess with.

James had to admit the last place he expected to find him was at an Arlington High football game, let alone as their star quarterback. He had always enjoyed a good paradox, so he took a seat in the stands and watched the game.

Andrew was physically not what James expected to find in a world-class chess player. James had fallen victim to the clichés of bookish, nerdish, shy intellectuals, reading in the shadows of their bedrooms. But not this kid. When he first saw the picture, he thought the magazine had done a misprint, or photographed the champion's brother with him or something. But no, the tag-line was very specific. It was Andrew Weir.

As he watched him throw a completed pass before being knocked down, he admired Andrew's poise. They weren't able to get that first down though, and the punt team came on. As defense took the field, Andrew approached the bench and took off his helmet.

Handsome, James thought. *He looks like a soap-opera star!* It was true. Andrew would turn heads. Six feet tall and muscular, his black curly hair emphasized green eyes and a winning smile. James watched as Andrew encouraged the player who had come

up a yard short on the last drive. The player smiled as Andrew patted his back, letting him know there was still time.

And there was. Arlington High won the game. James had observed something about Andrew in that last quarter. He was smart. You want a smart quarterback, and Andrew was that. He guessed that most defenses would have problems with an opponent this smart. That pleased James. He felt confident that this kid could help him with the theory. The only problem now was how to approach an 18-year-old football-playing chess champion and persuade him to come help the CIA. Even in Washington that might seem a bit over-reaching. Having watched Andrew though, James decided to be direct. He followed Andrew and a woman whom he guessed to be his mother to a local hamburger joint that boasted it had the best fat-burgers in the United States.

When the boy's mother went to the restroom, James made his move. "Great game today, Andrew," he opened.

"Thanks," Andrew responded automatically. As Andrew looked up to see who had addressed him, James chuckled at the mayonnaise running down his chin. Looked like a good burger after all.

"Do you mind if I talk to you about something?" James admonished himself that he may have been too sudden here. He saw Andrew straighten up a bit and wipe his mouth with his already-messy napkin.

"No, sir, I don't want to talk about chess." Pointing to the magazine in James' right pocket, he said, "I see you've got that article. But I'd rather not."

Geez, this kid is fast—and observant, James thought. That was good. He hoped this boy was as smart as everyone thought. He couldn't afford to blow it, and he knew trying to slide in gradually would arouse Andrew's resistance. He noticed an American flag decal on Andrew's notebook. That gave James some hope. *Here goes what they taught me never to do in recruiting.*

"Actually, Andrew, I wanted to talk to you about 9/11." As he said that he presumptuously sat down opposite the boy.

"I beg your pardon?" Andrew queried.

“September 11th, son.” He quickly added, “I’m James Mikolas and I work for the federal government. And I need your help on something.”

Before Andrew could even answer, his mother returned to the table, a little startled to find someone already sitting there. She had gotten used to some of the autograph hounds that came up after Andrew won his last tournament. And she certainly was used to pretty girls and jocks wanting some time with him. But somehow, this picture seemed odd to her. She slid into her seat as James rose to greet her.

“Hi. I’m Andrew’s mom, Kelly,” she said, not extending her hand.

James noted that she was a pretty woman, although he wondered if that red hair was really hers or an attempt to look as she had when she was Andrew’s age. She had those same green eyes, though, and was self-confident enough it seemed. Before he could do a polite greeting, Andrew made the introduction.

“Mom, meet James Mikolas. He works for the federal government.”

Kelly smiled. The import of that went over her head. After all, Andrew had fans in many professions.

So Andrew drove the point home, “He wants to talk to me about 9/11.”

Kelly looked at Andrew blankly, then at James blankly, then back to Andrew. “I don’t understand.”

“Me either, Mom.”

Kelly had the typical reaction people have when confronted with the IRS. They feel guilty, even if there’s nothing to feel guilty about. She hoped that, with all the paranoia following the attacks, they didn’t somehow think her son was mixed up with the Irish Republican Army or some such thing. But for now, she couldn’t quite form up what questions might be appropriate.

James seized the opportunity. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Weir. I didn’t mean to startle you two, but it is a matter of some urgency.”

If someone were watching through the window, they would have seen an extraordinary conversation unfold. Andrew and Kelly sat, arms folded, listening without saying a word. James talked, using salt and pepper shakers to illustrate something. At

which point, Andrew's arms came uncrossed and he appeared relaxed. Shortly after that Kelly, too, relaxed and nodded to James. The conversation ended quickly when James pulled out his pocket calendar and made an entry. He handed Kelly and Andrew each his card, shook hands with them and left. He was smiling. He had guessed right.

Two days later a Jeep Cherokee in need of a paint job pulled up at the gate to Langley. Andrew was alone in his car. Taking Andrew's ID, the guard checked his clip-board, made a quick call, and then searched Andrew's rear seat area. His partner outside swept the undercarriage with the mirror stick, looking for any explosives while the K-9 unit also checked for bombs. Once the all-clear was given, the guard waved Andrew in and directed him to a visitor parking area.

Shortly after, James came down to reception to pick up his guest and get a badge issued for him. At this point Andrew was still officially a "guest." James had no idea whether more would be needed. It depended on whether his theory proved out or not.

Andrew was taken immediately into what looked like a conference room with pictures on one wall and a mirror on the other. Behind the mirror was Whitney, James' boss. Although he was deeply skeptical about this hypothesis, he knew James' reputation well enough to give him a little wiggle room—just a little. James left the conference room on the pretext of getting a sports drink for Andrew and came into the viewing room.

"So that's the kid," Whitney said with some skepticism. "Sure doesn't look like a chess player."

"Amazing, isn't it! What a great undercover guy he'd make. A real-life 007." He tried to get Whitney to laugh, unsuccessfully. "All right. I'm going to lay it out for him, omitting the actual names and dates, and see what he concludes. If he's the right one, and I believe he is, whatever he concludes will be correct."

"Okay. Let's give it a shot."

James reentered with the drink and set it down. As Andrew took a quick couple of swigs James removed a stack of cards from his pocket. Although they actually had a sequence, he obliterated it by shuffling the deck several times while Andrew watched closely. The last card in the series, however, was not in the deck. James had secreted it in his right side pocket to further test Andrew.

Having thoroughly mixed them up, he spread them out all over the table face down. “Andrew, the only thing I’m going to tell you is that each card has an event on it, some piece of data. This all happened before you can remember, so it won’t mean anything to you. I just want you to look at the raw data and let me know if you see anything. Okay?”

“Okay. But can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, sure,” James responded.

“Why do you keep calling me Andrew?”

James must have looked puzzled. “I go by Andy.” Then Andy flashed that celebrity smile and reached for the cards.

“Okay, Andy, have at it. When you’re done signal me through the mirror.”

Taking all the cloak and dagger in stride, Andy began. And James could hardly breathe as he exited the room.

James and Whitney observed the boy through the mirror. He had taken off his letter jacket and neatly placed it on the chair closest to them. Was that a smile on his face as he looked into the mirror? Yeah, it was. He winked at them! “Teenagers!” Whitney scoffed.

Andy first turned over all the cards and looked quickly at each one. Very quickly, so quickly they could hardly keep up with his hand movements, he ordered them in a sequence on the table. Then, mysteriously, he picked up each card and pinched it between his fingers. After that, he looked under the table quickly, on his seat, and then toward the door. Not finding what he was looking for, he shook his head and walked over to the mirror.

“Can you hear me in there James? ‘Cause if you can, there’s a card missing.”

“Holy shit!” James exclaimed, rocked by the speed of the confirmation.

“What?” Whitney asked, not seeming to know what to make of it. “Is that good?”

“Yes it is,” James answered, trying to get his heart to stop racing.

James entered the conference room eager to hear what Andy had to tell him. “Do you have something?”

“I thought so, but something’s missing.”

“Tell me what you’ve got.” James had not told his theory to Andy. As far as the Kid knew, he was here because he was smart and could think strategically, nothing else.

“These cards, these incidents and pictures...they’re a chess game. You gave me a chess game.”

“Go on.”

“Well, frankly sir, it was pretty simple. It was obvious at a glance what the sequence was. I’ve seen this game before. I think the match was in one of my beginning books when I started playing chess. Except for the end. I don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

“There’s a card missing. That’s why I called for you. The last card is missing. The checkmate move. I don’t mean to sound perverse sir, but I call it the ‘Kill the King’ move. But it’s not here, so maybe I’m wrong.” Andy looked as if he’d failed. “Sorry to disappoint you. I thought I had it. But without that card, this is all just a bunch of pictures and headlines.”

James reached into his right side pocket and placed a card face up on the table. “Is this it?”

Andrew swallowed hard and nodded as he looked at a picture of the assassination of Anwar Sadat on October 6, 1981. James said nothing. After a long moment Andy said in a soft voice, “I remember reading about this in my Modern History class.” Then he demurred, “I wasn’t very good in history.”

The two sat for a moment, then Andy asked, “These seeming unrelated incidents and headlines—the ‘chess moves’—are these factual too?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know who did this?”

“Yes. We know who actually emptied his machine gun.”

“That’s not what I’m asking,” Andy asserted. “Do you know who we are playing? The shooter was only the Knight. Whose game is this?”

And with that question, posed by one of the world’s best chess players, James knew that we stood a chance. He answered calmly, knowing now that the Kid would have to stay. “Yes, one at least. His name is Ayman Al-Zawahiri.”

“I’ve heard of him. The one on the FBI list on the Internet?”

“The same.”

“And your theory?”

“My theory is that he is not just a brilliant mind, but also a master strategist who plays chess. Most military men play chess. It develops their mind, helps them to solve problems, and think strategically. I think he is actually playing chess now.”

Andy pondered this for a minute. He seemed to be looking at something in the distance.

“And you think 9/11 was part of a chess game?”

“I do, Andy, diabolical as that sounds. I’ve been praying it was their checkmate move—you know, after the first attack in 1993, the Marine barracks, the USS Cole bombing—their ‘Kill the King’ move. And that it failed.”

Suddenly Andy sat up straight, looked Mikolas in the eye and said like a soldier reporting to his senior officer, “I regret to tell you, sir, 9/11 was not the checkmate move.”

“What was it then?”

“It was the first move of the Black King’s Knight.”

James looked down for a moment and stood silent.

Andrew knew in his gut what James would ask next. He knew the sacrifice it meant. And he also knew how he had felt that beautiful September morning. He wondered what his father would have done. But he knew the answer to that too. Without looking at James, he calmly volunteered, “I’d better go tell my mom.”