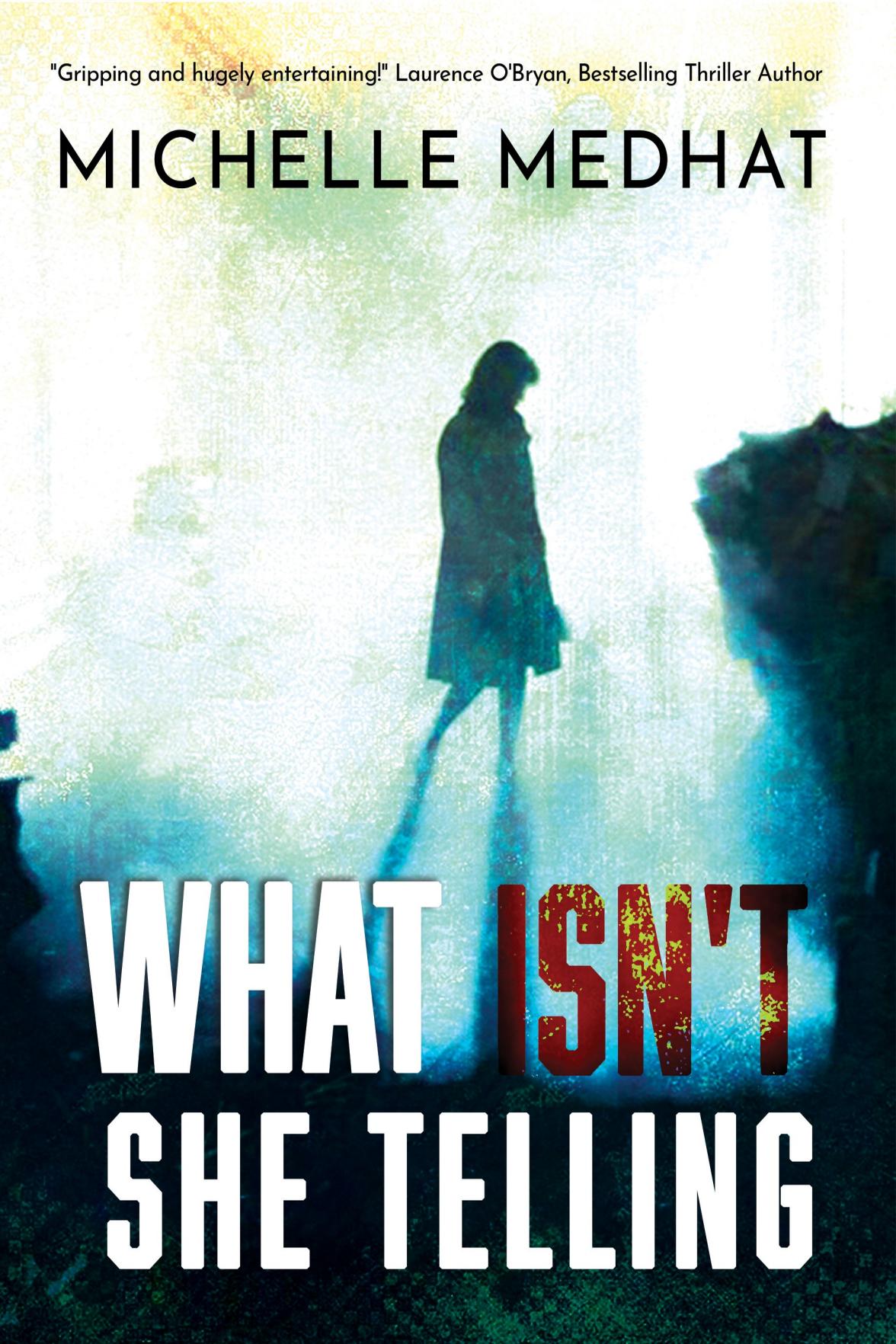


"Gripping and hugely entertaining!" Laurence O'Bryan, Bestselling Thriller Author

MICHELLE MEDHAT

A woman in a dark coat is walking away from the viewer in a misty, blue-tinted environment. The scene is atmospheric and mysterious, with a large, dark, indistinct shape in the foreground on the right.

WHAT ISN'T
SHE TELLING

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Book One: The Call

Chapter 1

London, 22 March, 5.45 a.m.

Vice-tight and squeezing hard, massive hands closed in. Ellie Noor gasped, her mouth opening and closing, taking great gulps like a guppy fish sucking greedily at food. Little oxygen she snatched, but his crushing tightness grew faster than she could grab air. Her throat burned raw. Scorched by lack of air, her lungs took flame.

I'm dying.

Ellie bricked up the thought. Relegated it to an impenetrable fortress where only the weak of mind remained. Her heart thundered in her chest. Her eyes closed. His face filled her. Memories across the years. And always his warm, gentle enveloping, a comfort of softness. His touch. Her Sam. A love of such power, it coursed through her veins. Embedded in her cells. A love for which there could be no surrender to this death that called. Her mind focused. Eyes that had seen so much, they sparkled in front of her mind. Leaving those eyes forever. Never to see. The thought blasted Ellie, shattered her to pieces, and then she surged within, scooping her fragments as one again. Clarity built inside her. Panic vanished. Hands pressed down on her windpipe. Signals seared deep into her brain.

It wasn't going to end here. Not like this...

Silver shone, catching the glare of the car headlights outside. She wrenched her head around. Her gun. It still sat to the right of her, where it had fallen. If only she could just reach out, maybe, just maybe, she could grab it. Ellie stretched her right arm, and ignored the volcano erupting in her chest. Tips touched cold metal. *So close.* She stretched farther, her fingers taut as bones pushed hard against her skin. *Almost there.* The gun was in her grasp. She lunged, he tightened. Ellie inhaled, but no air came, only overwhelming pain. She pitched forward and carried on, caught in a flat spin that seemed never-ending...

Ellie woke. She breathed hard and fast. Imprinted on her skin, his hands still. Their heaviness a visceral pain, despite out of slumber. The crushing, burning ache. A furnace raging inside her lungs. Ellie swallowed. Muscles seized in her throat. She gagged. Her saliva, a poison that burned turning her mouth arid and raw.

The silk duvet wrapped cling-film tight around her. Ellie pushed at the hot, claustrophobic beddings. She needed air. She needed space. She stood. Shaky disorientation hit her. Like her brain had been starved of oxygen. How? She knew not by what means only that it had happened. The floor beneath slipped away and Ellie slid with it, colliding with the wall. She clung against it. Support provided not only for the building structure but now her frightened frame. Ellie gasped, inhaled and exhaled at length. Each breath, a luxury to be treasured.

Chapter 2

Washington DC, 22 March, 12.55 a.m.

Two men sat in a wood-paneled room. They stared at each other across an antique desk and slowly digested the news each had imparted.

A small, squatty man in his late fifties with piercing rat-like eyes and a cruel slit of a mouth leaned forward, his hands gripping the edge of the desk and shook his head.

“They’re getting better all the time: their success with Kinley, reversing the nano-bomb and now this. How did they get to Allan? You do know what this means?”

The other man, cast mostly in the shadow from a metal table lamp, nodded. His strong, angular face was immutable, as if it was carved in rock. Beneath his tailored, understated suit rippled the muscles of an athlete. He raised an eyebrow and glared through eyes of midnight black.

“It means we carry on.”

The small ratty man seemed taken aback by the dark man’s stoic determination.

“But they would have found out about the new cell,” His voice descended to a mutter, and he picked subconsciously at a piece of rough skin alongside his fingernail.

“And so, let them know. They’re helpless. Impotent. Let them rant and rave in their secret little meetings. It makes no difference. We will always be the stronger.”

The persuasive, powerful tone of the other man forced Ratman to nod. His head bobbing up and down in swift agreement. “Yes, yes, but Sam Noor, what do we do about him?”

A smile streaked across the other man’s face and then disappeared like the stardust after fireworks: “Wheels are in motion, my friend. Be patient.”

Ratman smiled and lifted his glass. In parallel, his associate in the shadows did the same.

“For the glory of Al Nadir.” Ratman tilted his head towards his dark associate.

What Isn't She Telling

The Shadowman repeated, "For the glory!"
But only he *knew* the glory to which he referred.

Chapter 3

London, 22 March, 5.50 a.m.

Ellie stumbled across the marble floor. She swallowed, caught her breath again and grimaced. Her throat burned. In sleep, the lining had been scoured by sandpaper. Her membranes stripped. Or such was her imaging, given the desiccated state of her mouth.

She hurried to the kitchen to quench her thirst. A bottle from the fridge served her need. She tipped the cool water down, and the furnace inside her quelled. She gulped the remainder, and took a long breath. *Why again?* Fuzzy thoughts plagued her. Water was no defense so early, and Ellie sought something stronger. The coffee pot, her destination to restore a semblance of order inside her chaotic mind. *Why again?* The thought stopped her mid-stride. Someone somewhere told her a reoccurring dream was a sign something was wrong with your life. The dream's a wakeup call. A notification for life evaluation. Perhaps, they were right. Maybe something *is* wrong with my life. I work all the time. Got no social life. Sam's always away. That's a mess for starters. Children: nil. Family: nil. Mum: who knows? Dad: never knew. With all that baggage, no wonder I'm having nightmares.

Only Ellie knew she was kidding herself. She was, in fact, very happy with her life. Okay, Sam wasn't always around, but when he was it was wonderful. They did everything together. They loved and lived forever in the honeymoon zone, and for her that made their togetherness, however fleeting, complete. True, she didn't have that many friends, but the handful she did have were loyal, lasting and helped whenever she needed them.

Granted, she was addicted to work, but unlike so many other addictions she could have had, this one was good for her. Her addiction brought her independence and, of course, financial freedom.

Not having kids or parents didn't come into her life equation, with neither a positive nor a negative effect. It was just a constant that she'd always lived with.

No more of old wives' tales, Ellie reasoned and turned her attention to making coffee.

Sam. He was her life. Even when they were apart, they were forever connected. Her favorite time was being in bed with him. Not just the sex. Although that was awesome, she also liked to look at Sam as he slept. During the day, staring at him would depict her as a sappy romantic type. Not her nature, and not the reason Sam had fell in love with her. She was pragmatic, down to earth, and didn't look for wine and roses. At night, she was free to indulge. He couldn't see her. Couldn't see the doe-eyed wonder taking her over each time his head sank into the pillow.

Her gaze took him in. His skin, golden brown. Tanned akin to those who toiled the land, and like those peasant farmers, he had the muscles to match. Strong and well defined were the contours that graced his face, alluding to a path to stardom, never followed. High cheekbones, powerful jaw and squared chin combined to give Sam a dramatic, commanding appearance.

Ellie often ran her fingers down his dark eyebrows. They framed his face and acted as a prelude to the feature Ellie loved the most: Sam's striking eyes. Asleep, they were shut, but she could see their sparkle as if open. It had been his eyes that first attracted her, the moment she had stepped into that interview room. She'd entered. Apprehension in her step. Around her, grey oppressive walls and non-descript furnishings. Ellie weighed up her panel of tormentors. A strange, somewhat motley crew from personnel.

Not bearing to hope for anything more than rejection, Ellie sat down.

Then she saw him. Despite inappropriate circumstances, his eyes sparkled almost seductively. They demanded attention, pulling her into him.

Ellie remembered his cold, arrogant interviewing technique. His demeanor of stoic professionalism, but throughout the interview his eyes happily undressed her.

Unnerved and incredibly aroused. Ellie had wanted him. She wanted him *at that* very moment. Self-restraint of the type that keeps one from talking loud in a library, kept Ellie from leaping out of her chair, grabbing Dr Noor, as he was known to her then, and devouring his glorious body on the interview room floor.

The memory brought her back to her happy place, and she sighed. Her hand slipped around the mug. With some caution, she sipped at the hot coffee and headed for the breakfast bar to sit down.

"Listen to me."

At first Ellie thought she was hearing things. She shook her head, and could almost feel the thoughts rattling around inside. She'd been thinking too much too early, and now it seemed her mind was playing games with her sanity. *It was definitely time to go back to bed.*

"Listen, Ellie!"

Ellie span round, expecting to see Sam standing there, ready to admonish her for getting up too early. But no one was there. *This is crazy. I must be imagining it.*

She lifted the coffee mug to her lips...

"LISTEN, ELLIE!"

Ellie froze. She heard that alright.

"I'm listening," responded Ellie, half in her mind, half out loud. As strange as it seemed, she wasn't scared, only curious.

Deep and strong, had been the voice, like the actor Morgan Freeman, only more resonant and powerful. The echo of his words stayed with her, ringing in her ears. Ellie smiled and waited to hear more. Her curiosity growing with each word.

"Tgonetafaragontootar...ga...bal...ted...sh...sh...ce...al...gof...ar."

What is this? What is he trying to say? From beautiful deep sounds of warmth, the booming voice spouted words Ellie couldn't discern.

She screwed up her face as she tried to figure out what was being said. She looked upward at the ceiling. Instinct telling her to look to Heaven. That somehow, by the grace of God, she would understand what was happening. But no revelation came forth. And still the deep voice droned on. Only now, not one word he said made any sense, coming out elongated in one burst or intermittent, as if spoken on a mobile with a weak signal.

"Forgatoogonfarg.

Ba...nc...ted...shi...la...go...ta...fa...ted...ce...faa."

Ellie couldn't explain it, but his voice gave her a sense of comfort. Not understanding him, recognizing communication had gone, a sadness infested her soul. She listened to the senseless words fade further from comprehension, and their departure left her vacant.

"Ba go...ted...fa...fa."

Chapter 4

Washington DC, 21 March, 10.00 p.m.

He stared at his desk. The papers of tomorrow's state business lay in front of him. But he had other thoughts on this mind. He pushed his leather captain's chair back. The chair's feet making deep groves into the carpet. He stood up, circled round the desk and walked with haste to the door. He locked it and pressed a button to close the drapes around the room. Once all external links to the outside world had been suspended, he walked with reverence to his hidden safe.

He took out a memory stick from his pocket, and stuck it into the underside of a console table beneath his own portrait. The front dropped down revealing a keypad. He punched in his code and waited. Above him the painting seemed to sink several inches into the wall, making room for a small shelf that rose up inside. On the shelf lay his treasure. Smiling, he took out the contents.

It was small in his large hand. It was cold, hard and seemed to resonate, although he'd never been able to establish how this happened. As his hands clasped round the object, his mind took him back...back...to when it first began.

He had been only ten when his parents had relocated to the Middle East. Both were chemical scientists working for a petroleum corporation engaged in oil exploration in Uruk, Iraq.

On that day, they left him with a local guide, while they undertook their geological tests. By midday the heat had sucked the energy out of everyone and his guide, being no different, had by 1.00 pm, fallen asleep.

Bored with his books, he'd wandered off, deciding to do a bit of exploration of his own. He'd gone but a short distance, when he found a stocky pyramid, its upper levels were in ruins, but the lower half was intact. He recognized the structure as a Sumerian ziggurat from ancient history books. He stumbled around and found a fissure between two massive blocks. Without a thought, he slid through the crack. His form was smaller than a boy of his age and he was thin enough to gain entry. The fissure led into a tunnel. Although small in diameter, he fitted in smoothly. He crawled.

Tentative and wary. The sand under his hands and knees, shifting for the first time in 6,000 years. He reached a chamber. The height of the chamber was far higher than the tunnel.

He scrambled to his feet and proceeded in. A flush of cold hit him. But he dismissed it and walked in. The farther he walked, the greater the flush of cold became. A sinister aura reached out but he was unafraid.

He held up his oil lamp to see the chamber, but the light went out. At first, he thought it was a draft causing the light to extinguish. But as he moved deeper into the chamber, he could see the flame didn't want to stay lit; it was as if it was going out deliberately.

His last attempt to shed light through the chamber lasted for a few short moments. In that instant, he noticed that an area on the far side of the wall appeared much darker than the rest.

Drawn inexplicably, he headed towards the strange dark area. Some may have said it was merely his boyhood curiosity. But that was not the case. He had a *physical attraction* to the place.

With his candle refusing to ignite as it did, he had no means of light, but he knew light was something he no longer needed. His own way, he could now see clearly. Darkness encircled him and he felt one with it. A unity in ebony.

Reaching the wall, the urge to touch the dark center was so great his hand lifted immediately as if magnetized. On his touch, the wall melted away, like it had never been there revealing a secret compartment.

He wasn't scared. He felt a strange comfort in the darkness. He edged his hand forward into the secret compartment and rested it on something. A small, rectangular and ice cold something. Dislodged from its ancient resting place, he eased it out and held it. At the same moment, the dark swirled. The air twinkled and oscillated and then solidified.

Over him towered a giant. The strange twinkling aura outlined his form. Overwhelmed by the omnipotence, he dropped to his knees and shut his eyes. He remained immobile until the dark god spoke.

"Rise, child, and look upon me." The dark god's voice reverberated round the chamber. As he listened, the dark god's tone stirred in him strange feelings. Displacement he sensed. And he knew the chamber's stand stone walls didn't surround him anymore.

He rose and looked upon the dark god as he was told: "I see of you great destiny. A man of strength, wielding a power unsurpassed."

The dark god reached out and touched him. From that point on his life would never be the same.

Back in the present, alone, he looked at the small, rectangular and ice-cold object in his hand. He regarded it as if he was looking at it for the first time: just an innocent-looking stone tablet with ancient writing, similar but

smaller to the Rosetta stone. A piece that would not look out of place in a museum, but this tablet was not a museum relic; it was the center of his very success. It was the embodiment of all his successes - past, present and future. And *only he* knew of its existence.

He could hear footsteps approaching. He returned the tablet back into his safe, replaced the painting, drew back the curtains and unlocked the door. By his desk, he positioned in a posture of command as decreed by the office he carried, and waited for the owner of the footsteps to arrive.

Chapter 5

London, 22 March, 5.52 a.m.

Determined to understand, Ellie locked out all distant sounds around her. Ambient city noises she wouldn't have noticed normally now seemed loud and interruptive. Gradually, she shut out everything and welcomed isolation.

Come back to me she thought, but why on earth she wanted to hear a disembodied voice she didn't know. By all accounts, it should have terrified her, but it didn't. There was a warm resonance about the voice, like a mother's heartbeat, it encapsulated feelings of safety and security.

The voice unrelenting, kept on its broadcast and Ellie, as if trying to find a radio station, tuned in to the incoherent jumble of words, and tried to get a fix on their meaning.

"Too...too...far...far...too..."

It's working.

With her mind focused, she strained to hear the rest. Her hand was the first affected. A slight shiver. The rest of her body followed. The shiver mutated to a stronger vibration; a tremble on a track to signify a train was coming. But what was coming...

"TOO FAR GONE!"

The voice no longer soft and comforting came through strong, clear and distinct.

"BALANCE SHIFTED."

The words burst through with clarity. The bodiless voice vented its open anger at Ellie. The force of its attack, surging. A truck hurtling headlong into her. Louder and louder the voice grew as he screamed the words over and over: "Too far gone—balance shifted, too far gone—balance shifted..."

Ellie in desperation and, now with great fear, for this was not the fatherly voice she'd heard earlier, screamed, "Tell me what you want!" to the open space in her kitchen.

"It's all too far gone..." The voice although still angry was tinged with sadness.

“What is too far gone?” asked Ellie detecting the desolation in his voice, but the only answer she received was piercing cold and sudden darkness. The morning sun extinguished. No outline or edge could be seen. Without observation, for all Ellie knew her kitchen could be dispersed across the universe. Ellie looked into the solid black nothingness, an existence-eroding ebony that infiltrated her soul.

She breathed. The sound of air as it slipped through her slightly parted lips was her only recognition. The only indication that she was still there, that she was still alive.

Chapter 6

Dubai, 22 March, 10.00 a.m.

A woman, svelte and stunning with long dark hair blowing in the wind, joined an equally handsome and tall man. Both were in their early-forties. They smiled, linked arms and walked together. The man flashed a smile to his partner that showed perfect white teeth shining from a chiseled face bursting with wholesome goodness. She returned the smile with a traffic-stopping ruby red grin of her own.

They could have been new lovers wrapped in the radiance of each other's love. They could have been actors from a rom-com film set. They could have been top models promoting the latest fashion or fragrance. What they couldn't possibly be were international terrorists. At least, that's what a casual onlooker glancing their way would say. But they'd be wrong.

The man was Dr Salim Al Douri, leader of Al Nadir. The woman, Dr Sabena Sanantoni, his second-in-command, although beautiful was colder than an Antarctic glacier. Known within the Al Nadir collective as The Slayer, her reputation afforded her the right to stand by the side of the man who was soon to be the most powerful force on Earth.

Chapter 7

London, 22 March, 5.54 a.m.

When the voice screamed Ellie knew she should've gotten the hell out of the kitchen, but with absolute dark surrounding her she couldn't even see where the door was. She strained to peer through the darkness. Her eyes, she hoped would somehow accustom to their surroundings, but they didn't. It was as if someone had literally daubed out her kitchen with black paint. She held her hand out in front of her but couldn't see even the faintest outline. Reason seemed gone. She breathed heavy. Panic built fast. Ellie looked around, searching for understanding as to what she was seeing, or rather not seeing.

I must be going mad. This just can't be happening. Ellie attempted to step forward. She pulled at her foot but it wouldn't move at all. Frozen to the spot, Ellie stared. The darkness absorbed her desperation. With reluctance, she took in the tricks her mind was turning. Reality, it seemed, like an unwelcome relative, was shut out and left hanging on the corner of her consciousness.

Her skin rippled with goose bumps, as her senses heightened.

“CHANGE IT!”

Through the darkness the voice came again. It reverberated around and inside her, and took on a cruel insistence, repeating “change it” as if the words were on a loop.

Ellie shook. Each word whipped into her, like lashes from a leather cord and her body spun, caught in a vortex of thrashing pain.

The darkness that filled her kitchen lifted suddenly, and Ellie found herself on a sheer cliff. Below her the sea churned ferocious and wild. She looked down and shivered. *Oh my God.* She breathed in. *Shit! That's a long way down. How on earth?* Ellie breathed in staccato bursts. *Gotta focus, all this isn't real. I'm still in my kitchen. All this...it's overwork. And the curry last night. Indigestion and stress, that's all. It'll pass.*

But as much as she tried to convince herself, her mind had other ideas. Heavy and confused, it refused to cooperate. She could smell the ozone,

almost taste the salt on her lips. Any notion she was anywhere else but a sea cliff was rejected.

Ellie glanced down again, and air hit the back of her neck. Her skin tingled.

Someone was behind her.

She tried to turn, but couldn't move. Whatever changed her kitchen had left her the same. She was still frozen. Hands were fast upon her...

Please God let me get away!

“*REVERSE THE BALANCE SHIFT!*” the voice exploded behind her, and reality shattered around her.

Instinctively, Ellie blinked and in that lid-dropping moment her kitchen reverted back to normal. She stood rooted to the floor, shaking as another hideous noise whacked into her. Shrieking, painful tortured shrieking. Hardly human at all, a creature being eviscerated alive. Ellie's ears hurt and she felt dizzy and nauseous.

Trying to get a sense of where the noise was coming from, Ellie reached up to wipe the sweat away and realized her mouth was open. That hideous noise was coming from *her*. She looked down and knew why.

The hot coffee she had nestled in her palms, now washed over her hand. The mug rested on its side on the breakfast bar. Her screams stopped as if the volume had been muted. The kitchen resumed its graveyard silence.

What the hell had happened?

She looked down at her hand and frowned. Thick, shiny red welts had risen across her knuckles.

Fuck! This hurts.

She headed for the sink, but her movements in haste, were clumsy and chaotic. Disoriented by shock, Ellie collided with the kitchen stool. It teetered back and then gave way to gravity. Chrome hit marble, shattering the quiet.

Chapter 8

London, 22 March, 5.55 a.m.

Sam's eyes sprung open, alert and focused. Ellie's scream and the stool crashing signaled danger. His training came to the fore. Shooting out of bed, Sam grabbed his Sig Sauer from its concealed compartment in his bag, released the safety catch and ran toward the noise. His senses were acute and primed. Every step, analyzing, reflecting and deciding. Someone was in the apartment. He felt it. Her scream confirmed it. And that someone had Ellie.

He approached the side of the wall. On the other side was the kitchen. He listened: running water, shuffling against the marble floor and heavy, fragmented breathing. Cold thoughts rushed through him. His hand tensed. Instinct tightened his finger on the trigger. He strained to hear. No voices came. Whoever they were, they were professional. And very, very quiet.

Sam inhaled, slid around the corner and ran in, his gun ready to fire.

As Sam charged in, Ellie screamed thoroughly startled, "What the fuck's happening!"

Her eyes stared with rigid fascination at the gun Sam brandished.

"What the hell are you doing with that?"

Her incredulous eyes searched his for explanation, but Sam held his voice and averted Ellie's inspection. What had he been thinking? Charging in there like some maniac. But Sam knew why he had done it. *Instinct*. That deep, raw feeling that told him danger lurked nearby. Hearing Ellie scream, that bone-chilling, gut-wrenching scream, only reinforced his initial thought: someone had Ellie and they were hurting her.

He'd felt her pain with tangible certainty and had turned on his training to save her.

How could he have been so damn stupid? How could he have misread the signals? Sam realized that if he'd fired...that brutal realization made his blood freeze. His heart thumped as if it was breaking through his body, and he felt sick to the core.

"Have you joined the Territorial's or something?"

The grip on the situation Ellie failed to master. Her voice tinged with sarcasm, but her eyes stared. Blank understanding radiated from her orbs.

Sam shook his head. He engaged the gun's safety and laid it down on the worktop. A mug on its side dripped coffee to the floor. Sam noticed it and nodded to himself.

Ellie watched his actions. He didn't seem fazed or alarmed by the weapon. Sam handled the gun with such self-assurance his confidence made her shudder. All at once she was alone.

"Sam what's going on?" Ellie's voice had lost its usually ebullient tone.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you..."

"Didn't tell me what?"

Sam sighed, and then told her something she struggled to believe.

Chapter 9

Washington DC, 22 March, 1.00 a.m.

Ratman watched as Shadowman slipped out of the door. He was by far the tallest man he had ever seen. Although given his own diminutive state most men were taller than him. That's why he found great comfort in his allegiance to Al Nadir.

And that's why he'd joined them - they made him *feel* tall. Each meeting he had with Shadowman made him feel that much taller. Of course, mused Ratman as the door closed quietly, access to money and power was also a major attraction. He wouldn't have been with them otherwise. They had approached him. Naturally, being in his position afforded him considerable opportunity to help them, and they had seen him well rewarded, both financially and in-kind.

The in-kind assistance often more beneficial. Ratman recalled a recent case. He'd been hounded for his nocturnal activities by slimy politicians and heat-seeking journos. The situation intolerable, he requested his "friends" in Al Nadir to handle it. They wasted no time in nipping that problem in the bud.

He leaned back and rested his head on the wing of the high-backed armchair and sipped slowly at the single malt. Al Nadir had solved all his problems, bar one: Sam Noor.

What had Shadowman said: "*Wheels are in motion, my friend. Be patient.*"

But patience had never been a virtue with him. Truth be told, he had no virtues to speak of. Perhaps this was one problem he'd have to deal with himself...

Chapter 10

London, 22 March, 5.57 a.m.

After Sam had run in like Rambo, Ellie realized that either she was dreaming, or Sam had taken a lot self-defense lessons in secret. She didn't however expect to hear the reason behind his somewhat crazy actions.

Ellie listened, and then laughed. There was no happiness in the tone. Hysteria creeped in. By definition, her husband's confession was absurd.

"You can't be working for MI6, you're a diplomat."

Her husband shook his head. "It's only a cover, Ellie. That's all it's ever been."

Ellie's laughing halted. Her voice shaky.

"I, I don't understand. You've been at the Foreign Office for ten years. Haven't you?"

"No, Ellie, I've been in Counter Terrorism Special Operations."

"What?"

"I should've told you sooner. I'm sorry."

"Hang on, let me get this, you're telling me you're a *spy!*"

"That's the wrong term nowadays, we're field operatives."

"Never mind the terms, that's what you are, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And you've never actually worked at the Foreign Office at all?"

"No."

"Fuck!"

Ellie's world spun. Questions circled in her mind, caught in the riptide of her thoughts. She remembered how his Foreign Office assignments had been constant and never-ending. How saying "hello and goodbye" in the same breath had been her life for such a long time. But she'd never suspected anything.

"I don't believe this. I'm in a dream. I'm still asleep and dreaming," she started to laugh again, but in between the nervous bouts of hollow sound, her eyes clouded with tears. She turned her head away from the reality that faced her. She quivered, not wanting to acknowledge his words. In truth, what she didn't want to believe was the betrayal he'd

made of their life together. She didn't want to listen anymore. This was just another nightmare and now she wanted to wake up. She wanted to feel Sam's body next to hers, and know that he was good and real and true.

"You're not dreaming. What I've told you is real," Sam's harsh cold voice brought her back to her senses.

Ellie rubbed away the tears that had started to build up at the corners of her eyes and stared at her husband. Her face was stone and her words came out flint sharp, "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"I wanted to tell you at first, but as time went on your work kept you so busy, you virtually ignored my work life. You accepted me naturally as a diplomat. It was easier for you not to know."

"But you're my husband. How could you keep this from me? Did you think you couldn't trust me? Is your world so screwed up you couldn't even trust your own wife?"

"Sweetness, of course, I trusted you."

"Then why the *hell* did you wait ten years to tell me?"

"They thought it better if you didn't know."

"Who thought that?"

"My superiors."

"And you went along with the lies?"

"I didn't have a choice."

"Everyone has a choice, Sam, and you chose not to make yours."

Sam didn't respond. He felt embarrassed and ashamed by his past actions. He hadn't chosen. He'd done nothing. Just accepted the route his superiors had laid.

For Ellie, the gun had an inherent magnetism and drew her back to look at it. She replayed how Sam burst in minutes before. Barely anything about him resembled her husband. Although he kept himself in good shape, violence was anathema to him, and he was a self-proclaimed pacifist. And yet, he charged in half-naked, muscles hardened, and ready to fire at anyone unfortunate enough to be in the bullet's line. His eyes flickered with the coldness of a killer's. It was a look she had never seen before. It scared her. For an instant, the man she had known almost half her life was a dangerous stranger.

"Where does the truth end and the lie begin? Am I part of your cover too?"

"Ellie, you're just being stupid. You know how much I love you."

"I don't know anything anymore," snapped Ellie.

"Yes, you do. Look at me. I love you, Ellie. You know I'm not lying."

Sam walked over to embrace his wife, but the message in her blue-grey orbs told him to stay back.

“I can’t take all of this in. I’m trying to, but up here—” she tapped on the side of her head, “It’s just not happening.”

Ellie’s face, always so pretty and bubbly was now ghost white and showed shock and confusion. Her eyes were crammed full of tears. The tall, statuesque figure he loved had turned small, as if her body had caved in. The neckline of her sloppy T-shirt had slipped down her shoulder, exposing a sculptured collarbone and smooth neck.

Sam looked at her. He wanted to kiss that smooth neck and love her and shield her, and make her forget what she’d just seen.

“Why do you do it?”

Ellie struggled to understand Sam’s rationale for his double-life.

“It’s just a job,”

His flippant dismissal of the importance of his position, fired Ellie, and she snapped back.

“Don’t insult *my* intelligence. It’s much more than that.”

“It’s not, don’t believe the hype.”

With great skill, Sam manoeuvred Ellie away from her questioning completely without her realizing what he’d done. “There was a time when I was ready to give it all up. Return to the Department of Defense, or even become a diplomat. I’d learnt a lot during my cover time and I genuinely liked the job.”

“So, why didn’t you? What changed your mind?”

“Al Nadir. I couldn’t leave knowing those fuckers would be calling the shots.”

Chapter 11

London, 22 March, 6.05 a.m.

Eyes fixed to the table, as the man walked in. He could see the file. The man was 6'2", very fit and in his late fifties. He carried a deep golden tan, and his features were attractive, if slightly effeminate. He pushed his fingers nervously through his dark blond hair as he realized to whom the file belonged.

Another man was seated at the top of the table reading papers. Nearing sixty, tall and slim, with dark hair greying in all the right places, his Romanesque features that made him handsome in his younger days now made him look noble. Age had not dulled his superior intellect. His sharp, piercing dark brown eyes were constantly alert. He looked up and greeted the blond man.

“Good morning, Prime Minister.”

“Morning, Sir Justin. I hope you have something good to tell us.”

Richard Ashton, British PM knew the moment he said the words they had been but wishful thinking.

“I am sorry, sir, but this isn't good news.” Sir Justin Maide, Head of MI6 British Intelligence looked grave. Richard glanced back down at the file.

“It's Kinley, isn't it?” Justin nodded.

“Intel says they know. We've got to take him today.”

The PM thought deeply. Matthew Kinley was a double agent, an MI6 man on the Al Nadir inside track. He had created smokescreens and misinformation and kept their people safe for four years. But now the secrets were out. Kinley was a hot mark.

“Are we absolutely sure they know?” Richard was reticent about taking action that was pre-emptive. He had to have substantial proof.

“It's conclusive, sir, we have to remove him today,” Richard understood Justin's anxiety. Al Nadir getting even a sniff of Kinley's double agent status meant Kinley was now a liability.

“You want my authority on this, don't you?”

Richard looked back down at the file. Scattered pictures showed Kinley with his wife and young daughter. Such pictures of innocence and happiness. Could he risk one more day with Kinley out there?

“What if your intel is wrong? We would be pulling out a perfectly good agent for no reason. Think of what we’ve achieved. How close we are to taking down Salim Al Douri. Not to mention the knowledge we’ve built up, the plans we’ve foiled. Think about it, Justin, the lives we’ve saved just by having Kinley in there.”

“Yes, Prime Minister, think again about the lives that have been lost just to keep the lie alive. Remember Piccadilly.”

Richard closed his eyes, the two words transporting him back. It had been a Monday morning in late June. Tourist season. People swarmed to London. Piccadilly Circus, the ever-popular meeting point was at bursting point. Sweaty bodies crammed in like sardines. The train arrived at the station, and waited for the doors to open. But the doors never opened. The explosion ripped through the train before the Tannoy announced, “Please mind the gap.”

No one stood a chance. Glass and shrapnel blast out in all directions. The ceiling caved. Those who weren’t blown to bits or burnt to death were buried alive. Emergency services were quick to respond, but this was the nightmare they’d feared: an explosion in a confined space underground. The death toll had been in thousands.

Richard straightened and suppressed the urge to remember. “No matter, lives will always be lost. We are at war, Justin. Don’t ever forget that. As long as our body count is less than theirs, we’re winning.”

The coldness of Richard’s delivery chilled Justin. He knew the Prime Minister was unscrupulous in politics but the ruthless streak he now displayed caused Justin great concern.

“That’s one way to look at it,”

“It’s the *only* way to look at it,” repeated Richard.

“So, what you’re saying is you want Kinley to remain in the field?”

“Yes,” Richard’s adamant tone struck hard in the single word he uttered.

Justin was too well schooled. He knew when a conversation had ended.

Chapter 12

London, 22 March, 6.10 a.m.

Ellie had no idea who Sam fought against, but logically, in retrospect, it had to be Al Nadir. They were a new breed of evil known as a terrorist collective. Initially, their power had been driven by their openness to work and collaborate with other terrorist groups, although the term “collaborative” could not now be used to describe their current activities.

Highly dictatorial, their approach was one of hostile takeover, and whether they wanted to or not, terrorist groups, crime syndicates and even entire rogue states were taken over with rapid and brutally smooth efficiency.

Many years ago, the security agencies had not taken Al Nadir seriously. They saw them as a group of cranks headed by a guy with too much money and his brain fried on too much coke. Then 9/11 hit and all eyes around the world turned to Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. The second Gulf War in Iraq and the ensuing battle with the Taliban in Afghanistan kept the intelligence services, the US and the allied troops all occupied.

Everyone ignored Salim Al Douri. Assessed by intelligence analysts as not a present threat, Salim and Al Nadir were passed over. Whatever intelligence had been assessed to come to this conclusion had been severely misjudged.

Gradually, the networks Al Nadir had created whilst the world’s best looked the other way, started to appear. Rapidly, their reach and capability grew, and in parallel so did their power. But they were like a building site underneath a tarpaulin cover. The massiveness of the construction couldn’t be visualized until the cover was pulled away. One day, early May, four years ago, Al Nadir removed their tarpaulin, and the world was redefined.

Ellie remembered the news: the bloodied faces, the horrific wounds, the global confusion and the calls to blame the security agencies that had failed to protect their people. Concurrent bombing in thirty major cities.

An unprecedented act of terrorism that escalated Al Nadir’s position to number one and made Al Qaeda look like playground bullies. Globally

connected, Al Nadir's aim was simple: to undermine the economic and social stability of every major country across the world. Ellie could not begin to comprehend, let alone deal with the fact that her husband faced such a danger.

Ellie stared hard at Sam and in a small, soft voice whispered, "They'd kill you if they caught you."

"Eventually, they would."

From Ellie's face, the words had been a step too far for his wife.

Ellie listened to his unusually cold, matter-of-fact tone, and contemplated the meaning behind his words. Her face drained. The sheer thought of *that* happening to the man she loved made her heart hammer hard and bile rise in her throat forcing her to gag. Sudden stress snapped her head in a vice-like grip and pain sailed through her body. He had risked his life and their future for ten years, and that was unforgivable. At that point, she didn't know whether to love Sam or hate him.

"I'm good, Ellie. I've been trained really well. You have no reason to worry about me. I can take care of myself."

Recalling his impromptu burst of action, she couldn't deny Sam probably could look after himself. But that didn't mean she didn't have reason to worry.

Sam read the anguish in her face and walked over to cuddle her close. This time she didn't signal "back off" in her beautiful eyes. Under his touch, her skin was cold and trembling.

"You know I could lose you?"

As she said it, all she could see in her mind was black. Black clothes she would wear to his funeral. Black she would feel in her heart, knowing she had lost the love that once was there. Black would be her future without Sam...

Sam stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. "You're not going to lose me. I'm here." He tilted her chin up to him and kissed her slowly.

"For how long?" Ellie asked, returning his kiss with growing passion.

"Forever!"

"Nobody lives forever."

Ellie kissed him with a fervor he had never seen before.

Sam took her hand and led her gently back to bed to show her just how much he really loved her. To eliminate any shred of doubt that still lingered in her confused mind.

Chapter 13

Dubai, 22 March, 11.20 a.m.

Salim leaned back casually in his chair. He looked at Sabena and smiled broadly. It was all in his grasp. Control of the world. The goal of countless super-villains from the movies always thwarted at the last minute by a superhero coming seemingly from nowhere. But this wasn't the movies. There was no white knight on his faithful charger, nor even some dumb prick wearing his pants on the outside of his clothes. No one was going to save the world. It was his for the taking.

Sabena, as if reading his mind, twitched her nose with excitement: "We're just moments away, darling."

Salim nodded, a sexy twinkle in his eye, "Fancy consummating our success?"

Sabena picked up her spoon, skimmed the froth off her cappuccino, brought the spoon to her mouth, and licked down the froth. Salim watched as the tip of her pink tongue licked the last bubble from the cold metal.

"I'll take that as a yes then," Salim stood up, yanked her head back and kissed her with rough intensity. Sabena breathed heavily, slipped her hands through his hair, softly at first, but then she wound strands round her fingers and tugged him hard towards her.

Another couple seated on a table nearby in the chichi, expensive café they were in on Jumeriah Palm, watched their display disgusted but secretly jealous. Salim, knowing he had an audience, stuck his hand down Sabena's low-cut top, and she in turn groped him with unashamed enthusiasm.

It was only Sabena's mobile ringing that disturbed what would otherwise have been a blatant show of exhibitionism. Disentangling from Salim, Sabena answered with her usual curt, snobby tone, "What?" She always made the caller feel uncomfortable, that they had no right to call her, and that she was doing them the utmost honor in answering at all. The fact that the call now determined her status as the most powerful woman on Earth was neither here nor there. All callers were a nuisance. Especially those who called when she had a gorgeous man in her paws.

“It’s done. We have access.” Her lack of emotion was countered by Salim’s ebullience. He clapped his hands together, smiled and then laughed. A deep throaty laugh, with almost theatrical overtones, as if he was hamming up a part on stage. A few more people turned to stare, but Salim didn’t give a shit. If he wanted to be loud, he could. If he wanted to shag Sabena senseless on the table, he could. If he wanted to kill everyone in earshot, he could. He could do anything. And no one could touch him. That’s what was all so wonderful.

Of course, the world was looking for him. But his foot soldiers, the millions he’d help rise from the mega-slums around the world were his eyes and ears. He’d given them life and in return they protected him. They served him. They died for him. He was their God. What he asked of them, they did without question.

And if they couldn’t do what he wanted he just bought those that could. He’d never met an intelligence agent from any country who hadn’t taken a bite of the cake he’d offered them. Oh, yes, they’d pledged their allegiance, their loyalty to their flag, to their country, but offer them ten million dollars, and that loyalty got lost in the rush to type the password to their blind account in the Cayman Islands.

Salim knew how to be invisible whilst being as visibly vulgar as possible. It was all down to being connected.

Right now, he was surrounded by his minions, watching, waiting; ready and equipped to make a move if they had to. They were his perpetual audience and he was playing the lead man. A role he had honed to perfection.

Sabena moved forward, rubbing his thigh, “Weren’t we in the middle of consummating our success?”

Chapter 14

London, 22 March, 9.00 a.m.

Ellie awoke, looked at the clock and panicked.

“Shit! I’m late!”

“Hey, hey...what’s happening?” Sam yawned lazily and made a grab towards Ellie, and fell into the empty space she made as she vacated the bed at speed.

“Why are you up? It’s Saturday, come back to bed.”

“Saturday!” Ellie bit her bottom lip, and looked sheepishly at Sam. “Oh bloody hell! I don’t know where I am. I thought it was Monday. My head’s still not in the right place.”

“Get back over here,” called Sam, as he beckoned her in to bed.

Ellie stared at him, her eyes like daggers, as she realized why she was still so confused. “After what you told me this morning, I shouldn’t stand being anywhere near you!”

Sam’s eyes flashed with darkness for a second, and then he reached out, grabbed her and kissed her hungrily. “I doubt I’ll be able to stand if we carry on like this.”

“Well then, let’s build up that stamina of yours,” giggled Ellie, and her bright eyes sparkled with naughty playfulness.

Chapter 15

Alexandria, 22 March, 8.00 a.m.

Alexandria, a town of bureaucrats, politicians and servants of the flag, where red brick nineteenth-century town houses grace the streets and the Potomac River winds through making its way up to Arlington. Just eight miles out of Washington, DC, Alexandria is a place where deals go down and lips stay quiet. Where a walk through the park to the river can be so quiet, even the birds feel inhibited to chirp. A place of unearthly silence, as if Mother Nature herself was afraid to talk. Alexandria, a town where secrets are kept and truths are buried.

That morning, someone was intent on burying a certain secret that had got out of hand.

Matthew Kinley, Director of Science, Technology, Energy and the Environment (STEE) at the British Embassy in Washington, DC had risen early. His wife continued to sleep peacefully, while he slipped out and got dressed for his morning run. Kinley was heading towards forty-five, but his strong, fit physique and face devoid of lines belonged to a man at least a decade younger.

“My elixir,” Kinley told envious middle-aged, stressed out friends, “is loving myself and loving life! Shit happens. You deal with it and move on.”

His pragmatic, no-nonsense approach to life was one of the traits most admired in him by others. Of course, had these others known, it is highly likely they would have held his ability to maintain a deep cover double-agent identity whilst in the process saving so many lives in equal regard.

Kinley opened the front door. There was a faint chill drifting in amongst the morning heat. He pulled up his jersey and zipped it tight up to his neck. Unlike other joggers, he didn't carry an iPod. Kinley didn't like distraction. He liked to know what was going on around him. Cocooned in a bubble of music would make him vulnerable. Never in his life had he shown vulnerability and the ultimate leisure accessory wasn't going to make him change his rule: be aware at all times.

Being an agent, Kinley had learnt the power of fear. How fear heightens the senses. How everything around you shifts into sharper focus

and anything out of sync stands out with clarity. For instance, a person who walks slightly slower, a glint of something metallic and an arm raising, could mean someone's answering a mobile or getting ready to fire .45. Having awareness heightened by fear afforded Kinley vital seconds to determine the difference. Kinley knew to be afraid was to be aware. And to be aware was to be safe.

With this in mind, Kinley picked up a steady jog and breathed in the morning air. He knew he'd soon be leaving. Changes were already happening around him. Invisible wheels were turning and all that he knew to be his life would change in an instant. But for now, he had the morning, free and welcoming, like a lost love, he basked in her warm, soft glow.

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