

Chapter 3

At the moment he was Roger Shultz. It was one of a long list of aliases he'd had and it wouldn't be his last. He sat stoically in the booth in the Hard Rock Café Cleveland, glancing around, checking for surveillance cameras. He didn't see any. Nervously he adjusted his CAVS cap hoping to blend in with the crowd of basketball fans going to tonight's game. The loud music would make talking a chore but it would also mask the ensuing discussion from prying ears or microphones.

Watching the people in the crowded restaurant turned his stomach. Heathens, godless people, everyone of them. Women dressed as sluts, heads exposed for all to see and much more. Indulgent, men, women and children, blatantly violating Allah's laws. They would all be punished one day, some maybe sooner if he could complete his next mission. And they deserved exactly what they were going to get. For now Roger would play his part, appear to be one of them, but in his heart he hated them all.

The waiter arrived with Roger's coke, interrupting Roger's thoughts. The twenty-something man with tattoos and a clunky earring set the drink in front of Roger and asked, "Are you still waiting for someone."

Roger noticed his contact entering through the door to West 2nd Street. He turned back to the waiter and said, "He's here now. Give us a minute."

“Sure. Just wave when you need me,” and the waiter moved off.

Roger watched the man come up the stairs that separated the bar area from the dining room. He had long dark hair, matted and sticky, and dark eyes full of mischief. He wore a CAVS jacket. Roger knew him from previous assignments. He didn’t know the man’s real name; no one knew real names. What he did know was the man professed no particular religion, and certainly was not Muslim. That bothered Roger. He knew he was Allah’s instrument, knew that the heathens needed punished, destroyed. Only true Muslims deserved to live. This man didn’t do what the rest of the team did for Allah, for revenge, or any of the usual reasons. Roger guessed that the man just like killing; probably would have been a serial killer if he hadn’t joined the cause.

The newcomer slipped between tables and settled into the booth.

“Hi,” he said, seating himself across from Roger. “I made it.”

“What do I call you?” asked Roger.

“Buck Marshal.”

“I’m Roger Shultz.” Roger sipped his coke, set it back down and said, “How’d you get here?”

“Drove. Paid cash. Nothing traceable. What are we doing in Cleveland?”

“Next mission,” said Roger and then stopped as the waiter returned.

Buck ordered a coke. They agreed on an appetizer and had the waiter put that in too. As soon as he'd gone, Roger took up the conversation.

"We're going to make the Ashtabula River Railroad Disaster look like a picnic."

"The what?"

"Ashtabula Railroad Disaster. Look it up. In 1876 a railroad bridge that was built on a lousy design collapsed and dumped everyone into the river. Typical infidels, money is more important than people. That mistake killed a lot of people. We're going to do better."

"We're going to blow up a railroad bridge?"

"That is the general plan. We're going to blow a bridge over the Ashtabula River and drop a train into the river. Unfortunately, it'll be a freight train so no passengers. Not sure what the train will be hauling. I hope tank cars carrying toxic chemicals. I don't have details yet."

Buck took a sip of his coke. "Different than Montana," he muttered. "Why us? We're not explosives experts."

Roger leaned closer and said, "We'll have help. Someone new. He's supposed to know what he's doing. We'll be security."

"A newbie? Not an FBI sting like those fools that got caught?"

"Nope. He's done work for us before."

"Then you know him."

"No. I don't but those higher up do."

“Who actually is giving the orders?”

“Doesn’t matter. All you need to know is we meet with the team in Austinburg next Tuesday.”

“Same bunch as Montana?”

“As far as I know. Plus the new guy. You do have your contact?”

“Of course.”

“Then get the word to them. By the time we meet I hope to have enough details so we can start planning.”

“When is this going to happen?”

“I don’t know. Soon, I suspect.”

Before Roger could reply the waiter returned with the appetizer, placed it in the middle of the table and said, “Are you ready to order?”

“Not yet,” said Roger. “Give us a few minutes.”

“Sure,” and the waiter retreated.

The two of them sat quietly for a few minutes, nibbled the appetizer, sipped their cokes and studied the people in the restaurant. Roger saw nothing to alarm him and settled into his character.

The waiter returned and they ordered entrees, talking basketball for the waiter’s benefit.

The waiter left with their orders and Roger said, “We’ll have to do a lot of recon beforehand. I don’t know what the bridge looks like, what it’s made of or anything.”

“What’s Ashtabula like? I never heard of it.”

“Quiet town. Nothing happening. Perfect spot for us. Nobody will be looking for us there.”

“Are we going to be able to watch this time? I like being able to watch.” A sinister smile spread across Buck’s lips. “I wish there had been more coverage in Montana. Clean job, wouldn’t you say?”

“It’s not about us,” said Roger. “It is the will of Allah.”

“Sure, sure,” said Buck, the smile vanishing. “Where exactly do we meet next and when?”

“Be at the Corner Bar in Austinburg next Tuesday at one-thirty in the afternoon.”

“Where’s Austinburg?”

“South of I-90 on route forty-five. The Corner Bar is on the corner of route forty-five and three-oh-seven. Be there on time and don’t get into trouble.”

“Got it,” said Buck.

They finished their meals, Roger paid and the two men got up.

“Austinburg, Tuesday, one-thirty. Be there and make sure the word gets passed on.”

Buck nodded and they shook hands. “I’ll be there. And don’t worry, the message will be delivered.”

Buck turned and headed toward the exit he’d come in through. Roger watched him until he was outside the restaurant. He knew Buck would pass the rendezvous message to his contact. That person would

forward it to the next man, and so on until the entire team knew about the meeting. There was nothing else for Roger to do as far as bringing the team together. Nobody was ever told too much too soon in case one of them got caught. Roger just had to wait until he heard from his superior. There were mission details he still didn't have and would need for the meeting.