

# Chapter 1

*Sunday, August 6, 2003*

Mustafa's callused hands tightly gripped the vibrating steering wheel of the semi truck as it crossed the Louisiana border into Mississippi. It was 7:30 a.m. The grey overcast sky threatened rain and Mustafa's bloodshot eyes battled sleep. He had been on interstate highway I-20 since leaving Texas shortly after midnight. Only the nagging fear of being stopped by state troopers, and the back of the truck searched, prodded him to stay awake.

Mustafa had reason to dread a search. Hidden inside crates marked FURNITURE: HANDLE WITH CARE in the back of the truck were AK-47 assault rifles, gas masks, police scanners, tear gas, camouflage netting, fake UN and Department of Defense identity cards, fake social security cards and birth certificates, and ten carefully sealed containers packed with ingredients for producing enough weapons of mass destruction to wipe out half the population of the United States. The cache of WMD included military grade cyanide and radioactive isotopes for making dirty bombs.

Mustafa, a member of a clandestine group known as al-Qaeda *in America*, had picked up the arsenal at a remote refinery located about 30 miles northeast of Midland, Texas, which belonged to the American subsidiary of Phoenix, Inc., a foreign-owned oil company with headquarters in Saudi Arabia and offices in more than 80

countries.

Al Qaeda in America's mission was to ignite *Operation Saladin*, the deadliest and most sophisticated terrorist plot ever launched against the United States since 9/11.

The financier of Operation Saladin, and owner of Phoenix, Inc., was one of the richest men in the world, and also one of the most reclusive. According to *Forbes* magazine, his net worth was estimated at \$30 billion. He had made most of his fortune in the oil business, including arranging ingenious ways for Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, following the first Gulf War, to siphon billions from the UN Oil-for-Food program. Known to his shadowy accomplices in al-Qaeda in America by the code name Aziz, he owned two private islands, one in the Caribbean and another in the Persian Gulf, a fleet of luxury jets and yachts, professional sports teams, a publishing and broadcasting empire, and more than two dozen palatial homes scattered across the globe.

Sporting a salt and pepper Van Dyke, and resplendently attired in the flowing, gold-trimmed robes and headdress of an Arab Sheik, the 73-year-old Aziz sat on a leather executive chair behind an antique mahogany desk inside his favorite plane, a custom-built 747 he had bought for \$250 million from Boeing and spent an additional \$20 million retrofitting to suit his extravagant taste. The jumbo jet – which had a dining area with a fully stocked bar, a movie theatre, a gold-plated bathroom with a Jacuzzi, a game room, and a 400 square-foot master bedroom with giant curtains mimicking the shifting sands of the Arabian desert – was cruising at an altitude of 37,000 feet over the Arabian Sea, headed for Aziz's heavily guarded Persian Gulf private island.

Twenty-four hours ago, Aziz had presided over a top-secret meeting held inside the ornate study of one of his sumptuous homes, a fortress-like, fifty-room, Mughal-Gothic mansion in Lahore, the second largest city in Pakistan. Attending the meeting were half a dozen emissaries from al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden.

Aziz grabbed a gold-plated cordless phone in the middle of the shiny desk and made an encrypted long distance call to North Carolina.

"This is Aziz speaking," he said in a thick foreign accent. "Last night I met with bin Laden's representatives. They are eager to know

the latest on Operation Saladin.”

“Tell them I’ve already recruited, vetted, and armed all the fifty cells we need,” came the excited reply from Aziz’s right-hand man, whose cryptonym was Ghazi. “And because of its proximity to Washington, DC, I’ve chosen the North Carolina cell to launch the military phase. A short while ago its leader Abdul informed me his driver Mustafa picked up the shipment of weapons from Texas early this morning.”

“Does it include ingredients for making WMD?”

“Yes. And the cell’s bunker is already equipped with a lab.”

“Excellent. What about the political phase?”

“That’s also proceeding according to plan. The marriage between Alison Ramsey and Eliot Whitaker III, without which Operation Saladin cannot succeed, will take place at precisely 1:30 P.M. EST. I’m personally attending to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“Enjoy yourself.”

“Don’t forget to watch it,” said Ghazi. “It’s live on CNN.”

“I sure will,” said Aziz, then hung up. His large face, bloated by years of a hedonistic lifestyle, broke into a Cheshire grin. He lit a Havana cigar. After several puffs, he grabbed a bottle of his favorite brandy, a Rémy Martin Louis XIII Diamond Cognac worth \$6900, in a silver cooler on the desk next to leather-bound copies of his two favorite books, the *Kama Sutra* and *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*.

Aziz carefully uncorked the bottle and slowly poured its contents into a pear-shaped crystal snifter. He cradled the cognac in his neatly manicured hands for about a minute or so to release its delicious bouquet, then rang a bell. Instantly, from behind the giant silk curtains, appeared six gorgeously attired belly dancers.

“You called, master?” the tallest of the six, a blonde, asked demurely.

“Yes,” said Aziz. “Omar Khayyam says the bird of life has but a little way to flutter, my slaves, and the bird is already on the wing. So let’s have fun.”

As erotic music filtered through the plane’s hi-fi speakers, the women danced. Afterwards, they stripped and pleased each other and then Aziz on a king-size bed whose carved headboard was decorated with images of frolicking nymphs and satyrs.

Shortly before 1:30 p.m., EST, a satiated Aziz dismissed his

harem, grabbed a gold-plated remote control, and turned on the 42-inch plasma TV in the center of the mahogany entertainment unit. He settled into a comfortable position on the damasked chaise lounge and, between sips of cognac, watched as the wedding on which hinged the success of Operation Saladin unfolded live before millions of CNN viewers worldwide.

Alison Ramsey couldn't have chosen a more perfect day on which to get married – except that it was to the wrong man. The cloudless autumn sky above the Piedmont was a soft robin's egg blue, a chorus of birds sang among the dappled leaves of the towering oak and elm trees surrounding Duke University Chapel and, after a torrid summer capped by Hurricane Isabel, temperatures frolicked in the upper 60s and a gentle breeze blew.

*Oh my God, what have I done?* Alison, her heart pounding a mile a minute, moaned in silence as she and her bridesmaids bustled about one of the Chapel's backrooms, making last minute checks of their looks and pinning on their delicate corsages. *What was I thinking when I agreed to marry Eliot when the man I really love is Myron?*

It was too late for Alison to back out of a wedding that had cost a million dollars, and had been paid for by her wealthy godfather, Reginald Hunter, or Uncle Reggie as she fondly called him. Already, inside the cavernous Gothic chapel, reminiscent of Britain's Canterbury Cathedral and whose seventy-two exquisitely detailed stained glass windows depicted the life of Christ and Old Testament stories, the choir sang the processional by Frederick Handel, her favorite composer, to the sonorous accompaniment of the Flentrop organ mounted above the entrance doors. Three hundred spiffily dressed invitees – including scores of celebrities – packed the ornately carved mahogany pews.

Journalists from the nation's top TV networks, newspapers, and magazines jostled each other outside the chapel's majestic entrance, eagerly awaiting the appearance of the wedding party. The intense media spotlight – there were even representatives from *People*, *Southern Bride*, and the *National Enquirer* – only increased Alison's jitters. Her small hands trembled as she tried fastening the clasp of

her necklace of white pearls.

*How did I get myself into such a fucking mess?* Anxiously, Alison watched her four bridesmaids scurry about the cool room, oblivious to her secret torment: Chanel Moore, her best friend from their days at Wellington Academy, a prestigious North Carolina boarding school, was an anchor for News 8, the top-rated news program in the Piedmont Triad; Karen Briggs Meriwether, a born-again Christian she had befriended during Outward Bound her junior year in high school, was vice-president for a major Southern bank; Vicky Thompson, her buddy from the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, was CEO of a dot-com based in Research Triangle Park; and Linda Mitchell, her roommate at UNC Chapel Hill, was an environmental lawyer in Washington, DC. All of Alison's bridesmaids, who ranged in age from twenty-five to twenty-eight, looked absolutely gorgeous in matching lavender House of Bianchi bridesmaid dresses.

"Here, lemme help you," said Chanel, her maid of honor, grabbing the necklace.

"Thanks," Alison sighed as she absently stroked the folds of white satin flowing around her. She looked stunning in a Shantung gown with an illusion neckline and sleeves covered in delicate Alençon lace. A mock satin overskirt lent a petal effect to the full skirt underneath. The chapel train had lace appliqués and bow detailing. Her shiny dark hair was piled and sprayed into a flawless chignon and a twenty-five foot veil was carefully pinned around it. Chanel remarked that she resembled a princess in a fairy tale.

Alison thought otherwise. *This is no fairytale. It's a fucking nightmare. And there's no way I'm going to marry a man I know in my heart I don't love.*

Suddenly, Alison heard the heavy wooden door creak open. Her mother peered in. At fifty-two Darlene, an award-winning furniture designer, was in terrific shape, thanks to playing tennis at the local Country Club and doing Pilates several times a week. Five foot eight, she was elegance and sophistication personified in a meadow pink silk dress with matching pearl earrings. Her thick chestnut hair was swept up in a loose bun, and her soft brown eyes were enhanced by naturally arching eyebrows.

"Five more minutes, girls!" Smiling radiantly at Alison, Darlene added, "You look absolutely lovely, darling." She blew her a kiss

then disappeared again.

“Oh my God, why can’t I stop shaking?” Alison groaned. “My nerves are shot. Look – even my bouquet is vibrating!” The yellow, red, orange, and pink roses, cradled in wispy baby’s breath, were indeed jiggling wildly in her white-gloved right hand.

“It’s normal,” Karen said in a reassuring tone. “I had the jitters so bad before my wedding people thought I was an epileptic. I almost had to be carried down the aisle strapped on a stretcher.” After saying this, the petite Karen hurried off to the other side of the room to help Linda and Vicky with their corsages. Chanel and Alison were left alone.

Alison looked pleadingly into the glittering brown eyes of the statuesque African-American woman who was as close to her as a twin sister, and who was privy to the secrets of her love life. “Chanel, am I crazy?” she said in a desperate whisper. “I’m about to walk down the aisle and marry Eliot, yet all I can think about is Myron.”

“Shit, I knew this would happen. You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I mean, no. Oh, I don’t know,” Alison said, frustrated. “Chanel, I trust your judgment. Please tell me the truth. Am I making a mistake by marrying Eliot?”

Chanel hesitated, and then slowly nodded. Alison grew pale.

“Like I told you before, girl,” Chanel said, “I think you’ve rushed into this whole thing without thinking things through. It’s bizarre, to say the least, to marry someone you clearly don’t love a month after breaking up with someone you were madly in love with.”

“You forget that Myron jilted me.”

“But that’s no reason for you to act crazy. If you think you can bury the pain of what Myron has done by rushing into a marriage with Eliot, you’re making a big, big mistake. This marriage is for real, girl, not make believe.”

Alison reflected for a while. Yes, Chanel was right. It had been her fury at Myron that had propelled her into a rebound marriage with Eliot when he had proposed. The fact that she and Eliot had briefly dated in high school wasn’t enough reason for marrying. She should have taken time to heal, to reflect. Why had she acted so impetuously?

Before she could answer her own question, the door flew open and Darlene rushed in. “Okay, girls,” she said excitedly. “This is it.

Remember to walk slowly, just like you did last night at rehearsal.” Karen, Vicky, and Linda headed for the door.

“Well, come on, dear,” Darlene said, looking at Alison, who lingered behind in a sunlit corner of the low-ceilinged room, Chanel by her side. “What are you waiting for?”

Alison didn’t budge. Instead, her marine-blue eyes filled with tears. She turned away from the door and stared out the window. “I’m not coming,” she mumbled.

“What did you say?” Darlene asked, moving closer.

Alison turned and faced her mother. “I’m not coming,” she repeated.

Darlene gasped. Her face turned snow white. In an instant she was at Alison’s side. “What the hell do you mean you’re not coming?” She grabbed and shook her.

Alison looked at her mother through tear-filled eyes. “I still love Myron, Mom. And I’m convinced that if I walk out of here and marry Eliot I’ll never be happy.”

As she spoke, tears rolled down Alison’s cheeks, leaving black mascara trails. Chanel crumpled a Kleenex and handed it to Alison.

“Now what should we do?” Darlene asked, a helpless look on her face.

Alison heard the processional song, Handel’s *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, soar toward its soul-stirring crescendo. She pondered the consequences of not walking down that aisle and marrying the man she didn’t love. Eliot’s father, Theodore Whitaker, III, was one of the most powerful and influential conservatives in American politics. His backing was crucial to her father’s efforts to cast himself as a conservative Democrat in his bid to win North Carolina’s open gubernatorial seat at a time when, with President Bush’s approval rating above 75 percent following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, running openly as a liberal, especially in the South, was considered by the pundits to be political suicide.

With his temper, stubborn pride, and jealously guarded pedigree, Theodore would be absolutely livid at seeing his only child humiliated in front of the world. There was no telling what such a man, whose ruthless business and political tactics were legendary, might do to exact his revenge. What was supposed to be the wedding of the decade would turn into the scandal of the century – especially if word leaked out that Myron, the man she truly loved, was black.

Knowing the South's racial history, and the role race had played in recent elections across the region, Alison had no doubt that her father's candidacy, on which rested the hopes of millions, would be utterly ruined.

Alison was torn. *I'm damned if I do and I'm damned if don't.*

While Alison was wrestling with the biggest crisis of her life, the man who had precipitated that crisis by unexpectedly calling off their wedding less than two months ago was leaving an important meeting of a newly founded liberal political action committee called Let's Unite for a Progressive America or LUPA. The meeting was held in the paneled conference room of LUPA's two-story offices on K Street, the major thoroughfare in Washington, DC dubbed "the Wall Street of influence peddling," that was home to numerous think tanks, advocacy groups, and lobbyists who shaped America's destiny.

The agenda for the meeting was finding ways to combat conservative propaganda about liberalism, and to invigorate it as a political force, at a time when the Democratic and Republican Parties were waging a titanic battle to see whose ideology would shape American society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was a battle the Democratic Party was clearly, and badly, losing. This was shown by the fact that the GOP now controlled the presidency and both Houses of Congress, and had adroitly succeeded in transforming the word "liberal," one of the most resplendent in the lexicon of American democracy, into a politically toxic shibboleth, almost akin to being called a child molester.

Participants at the closed-door meeting, which lasted three hours and included several wealthy liberal donors who were fed up with the cowardice of many leaders of the Democratic Party and their willingness to prostitute the party's core principles for ephemeral political gain, had agreed that LUPA should adopt a two-pronged approach if liberalism was to stage a political comeback. First, LUPA should devise strategies for effectively branding what the Democratic Party stood for, and for reminding the American people that most of the priceless freedoms and rights they enjoyed as citizens, and which were now under siege by conservative ideologues, had been achieved under liberal administrations. Second, LUPA should comb the country seeking candidates with the courage to defend

liberalism's sterling record in public service with as much conviction and passion as conservatives were crowing over the paltry and specious achievements of their bankrupt and effete ideology.

These proud liberals would be given all the help they needed – political, financial, and strategic – to wage effective and savvy campaigns. And Myron, as LUPA's chief strategist, was charged with finding such candidates and convincing them to run. Myron was ideal for the job. Aside from having worked on the campaigns of various liberals, among them Edward Kennedy and Howard Dean, he had recently published a bestselling book called *One Nation: How Liberalism Can Unite America*. But given how dreaded the liberal label was by politicians, Myron knew that his quest was more difficult than that of Jason's for the Golden Fleece. He also knew the stakes – for the future of American Democracy – if liberalism were to become extinct as a political force.

An avid cyclist, Myron rode his K-2 bike to his one-bedroom apartment at the Kennedy Warren on 3133 Connecticut Avenue, where he had been living since relocating from Harlem in early August to work for LUPA. Despite having landed a liberal's dream job, Myron felt utterly miserable. The painful breakup with Alison, his best friend and political soul mate, had left him depressed and riddled with guilt.

*I shouldn't have let Mama pressure me not to marry the woman I truly love simply because of her skin color*, he thought as he stopped at a red light and glanced up at a news helicopter flying low across the blue sky. *I was being a hypocrite and a coward.*

Only immersion in his work kept Myron sane, and the furies of depression at bay.

*I wonder how Alison's wedding went*, he thought ruefully as he biked past the National Zoo, whose entrance teemed with visitors, many of them lured there by the presence of two celebrity giant pandas from China, Mei Xiang and Tian Tian.

After locking up his bike, Myron hurriedly made his way to the elevator across the Kennedy Warren's 20-foot-high lobby with its painted Aztec beamed ceiling, aluminum balustrades, staircase railings, and fluted and rounded marble-faced pilasters. Reaching his apartment on the fifth floor, he tossed his fat backpack on a futon couch crowded with books, newspapers, and magazines. He walked over to the rattan accent table and pressed the blinking message light

on his digital answering machine.

There were three messages. The first was from the alumni office at his alma mater, Columbia University, soliciting a donation to the annual fund. The second was from his mother, saying she was back home in New York City after visiting relatives in Greensboro, North Carolina. The third was from Isaac Driessen, his roommate from Yale Law School. “Congratulations,” Isaac said in the message. “I just read in *The Times* that you’ve been hired to lead a liberal PAC. I’m now back home and have a job with the Southern Poverty Law Center. I specialize in representing death row inmates. I hope we can catch up next time I’m in DC, or you are in Montgomery.”

Myron smiled. He recalled how Isaac, a proud liberal like himself, had, after Al Gore’s controversial loss in the 2000 presidential election, become so disillusioned with American politics that he had decided to travel abroad, first to South America and later to South Africa and Egypt, to work as a human rights lawyer for Amnesty International. Myron jotted down in his BlackBerry the cell phone number and e-mail address Isaac had left on the answering machine. “I too should have gone abroad,” he thought, stepping into the brightly lit kitchen with maple cabinets and a marble countertop. Myron had had an opportunity to go work for an AIDS non-profit in South Africa, but had declined the offer because his mother had just undergone ovarian cancer surgery.

After brewing a mug of Tension Tamer herbal tea, Myron, a former collegiate tennis player who had won the NCAA double championship, kicked off his size eleven Stan Smith tennis shoes, which he wore even with business suits because they felt comfortable. He then sank into a navy-blue leather recliner, flicked on the 27-inch color TV perched atop an oak stand with tempered glass doors, to catch up on the day’s news.

Myron couldn’t believe what he saw on CNN. There were Alison and Eliot being declared man and wife by a pudgy white-robed Baptist minister inside the Duke University Chapel. The camera zoomed in on Alison’s oval face with its prominent cheekbones. For some unknown reason Myron suddenly recalled what a fortune teller had told Alison three months ago after studying her face. Myron and Alison had just become engaged and were strolling down a busy street in New York City’s Chinatown following lunch at their favorite restaurant. “You have a fire face which is typical

of outdoorsy, fast-paced, and adventurous people who sometimes take crazy risks,” the wizened fortune teller had said. “When you’re happy, there’s a glitter in your eyes.”

Myron noticed that the glitter in Alison’s marine blue eyes, into which he had gazed with affection countless times, was gone. It had been replaced by a melancholy sadness, for which he blamed himself. Myron could no longer hold back the emotions he had kept bottled up since their painful breakup.

“My God, what have I done to the woman I love?” he wailed, burying his head in his hands. “Why did I force her to marry Eliot?”

Twenty-six-year-old Eliot beamed and felt as if he had just won the lottery. While standing in the middle of the upper nave, gazing into Alison’s eyes and pledging to love her forever, in sickness and in health, he still couldn’t believe that she was about to become his lawfully wedded wife. Eliot was convinced that such a miracle couldn’t have occurred had it not been for the intervention of a man he called his “guardian angel.”

After the pudgy-faced and silver-haired minister finished pronouncing Eliot and Alison man and wife, and Eliot had kissed the bride, he cast a furtive glance in the direction where his guardian angel was sitting in the middle of a row of wooden chairs reserved for honored guests. The chairs had replaced the original front pews that were destroyed by a fire in the nave during the 1970s. When their eyes met, Eliot’s guardian angel – a short man with a slight limp in his left foot, a broad forehead and pomaded gray hair slightly parted in the middle – smiled broadly and winked.

Eliot’s guardian Angel was none other than Ghazi.

Mustafa didn’t see the roadblock until it was too late. Several police cars were ranged across the four-lane highway. At first Mustafa was under the impression that there had been an accident, but to his horror, he noticed that the state troopers were searching vehicles, and that they seemed to be focusing their search on trucks like his.

Mustafa began sweating bullets. Had the police been tipped off about the cargo he was transporting? In a panic, he thought of fleeing, but he knew that would be folly. He would be instantly shot. As he eyed a serious-looking state trooper with a holstered gun dangling by his side coming toward him, Mustafa anxiously awaited his fate.

“Your driver’s license please?” said the state trooper.

“Sure,” Mustafa said, trying hard to prevent his hand from shaking as he gave the state trooper his driver’s license. “Here it is, sir.”

“Your name is Buck McGuire?” asked the state trooper, looking carefully at the face on the driver’s license and then back at Mustafa.

“Yes, sir,” said Mustafa.

“And you live in High Point, North Carolina?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you work for New South Fine Furniture Gallery?”

“Yes, sir. May I ask what the roadblock is about?”

“Sure,” said the state trooper. “We are looking for a group of five men of Middle Eastern descent. A waitress at a diner along the highway reported that she overheard them cracking jokes about 9/11 and President Bush. They then made suspicious comments in a strange language. She said the men were driving a semi.”

Mustafa breathed a big sigh of relief. He couldn’t believe his luck. “I’m a patriotic American,” he said with eagerness. “I fought in Operation Desert Storm as a Green Beret and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.” He pulled out from behind his denim shirt a gold star surrounded by a wreath, topped by an eagle on a bar inscribed with the word “Valor.” He showed the gleaming medal to the state trooper.

“I’m honored to make the acquaintance of a real American hero,” the state trooper said deferentially, admiring the medal. “Truly honored, sir.”

“Thank you,” said Mustafa. “I hope you catch them terrorists.”

“Don’t worry, sir, we will. We know what they look like. Drive safely now.”

The state trooper handed Mustafa his driver’s license and returned to his colleagues. Soon thereafter, Mustafa’s semi, packed with WMD destined for al-Qaeda in America’s cell in Asheville, North Carolina, was waved through the road block.

Following the wedding ceremony, Alison and Eliot rode in a silver Rolls Royce to a private reception at the historic Carolina Inn on the campus of UNC Chapel Hill. On the way there, Eliot kept babbling about what a wonderful honeymoon awaited them in Bermuda. Pretending to be listening and happy, Alison was pondering how to undo the biggest mistake of her life: marrying the man she

didn't love for political reasons.

As the Rolls pulled into the crowded parking lot of the Carolina Inn, the solution finally occurred to her. *I'll sue for divorce as soon as dad's campaign is over. In the meantime, I must do everything to avoid becoming pregnant with Eliot's baby.*"