

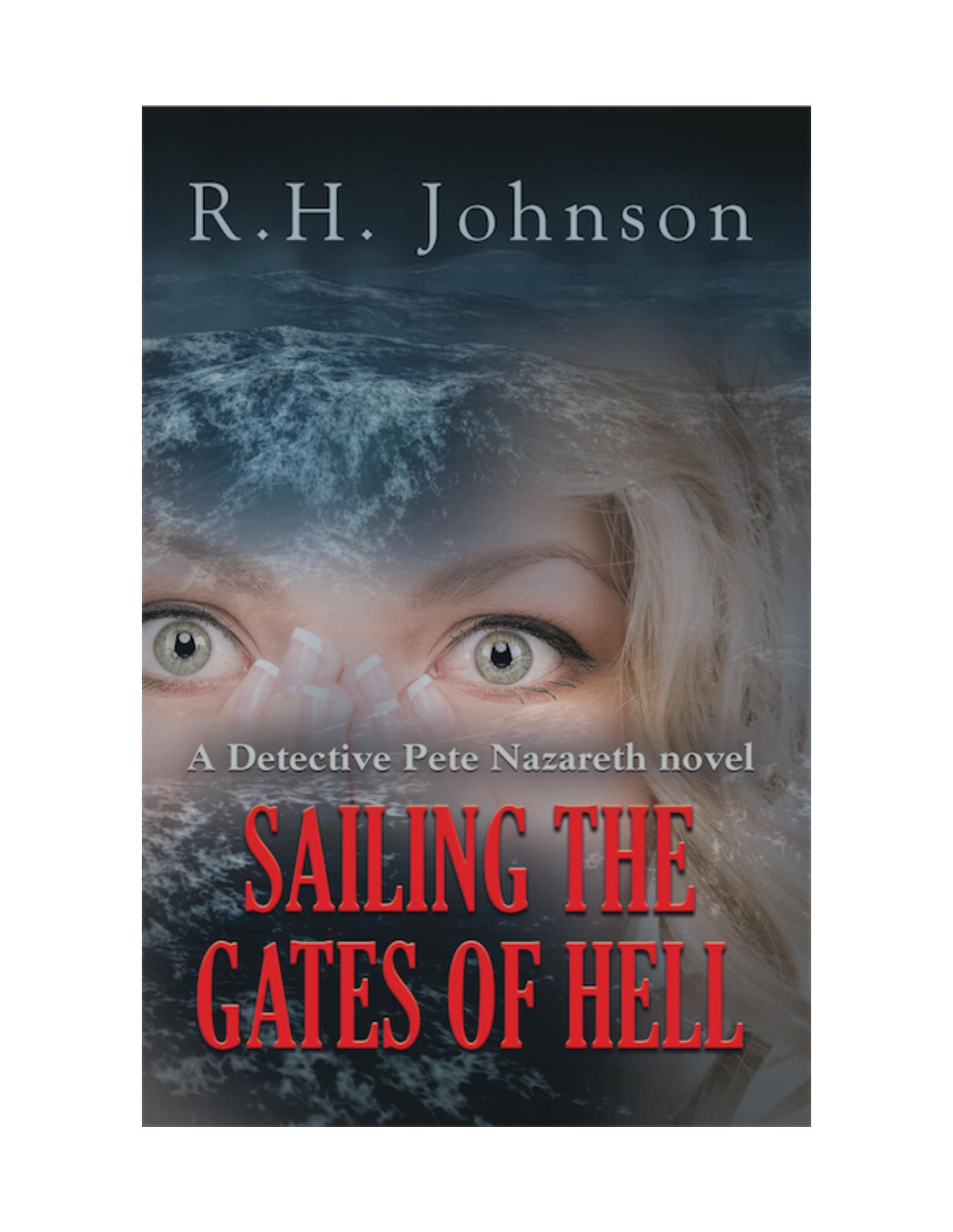
A young American woman is kidnapped from a luxury cruise ship while sailing Alaska's Inside Passage. She's now at the mercy of ruthless human traffickers, and the odds of rescuing her grow worse by the minute. Agents Pete Nazareth and Tara Gimble are on the case.

**Sailing the Gates of Hell:
A Detective Pete Nazareth Novel**

by R.H. Johnson

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R.H. Johnson

A Detective Pete Nazareth novel

**SAILING THE
GATES OF HELL**

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First Edition

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The Kirov Wolf

Eyes in the Cave

Prelude

Alone on her stateroom's private balcony, Elissa poured a second flute of champagne and took a sip, allowing the delicate bubbles to play on her tongue. Then she sank into the lounge chair, pulled the cotton throw to her chest, and savored the Alaskan sunset.

The distant mountains of Admiralty Island rose jagged and black against brilliant bands of color that began as deep yellow nearest the horizon, then exploded upward into flaming orange, warm red, deep crimson, and blue-violet. The sky's reflection had turned the ocean lavender as far as the eye could see from north to south. A pair of seabirds wheeled overhead, calling to each other in the waning light.

Elissa had never experienced anything quite approaching the grandeur of this evening's spectacle. It was everything she had imagined and much more.

On the first two nights of the seven-day cruise she had left her aft penthouse to mingle with nearly two thousand other passengers aboard the Mythic Venture, Seaward Cruise Line's newest luxury ship. During that time she had lost fifty dollars to the casino's slot machines, enjoyed the theater's musical revue in the company of three young women she had met at dinner, and allowed a nervous young guy from Minneapolis to buy her a margarita in the nightclub before heading back to her cabin unaccompanied.

But tonight would be a quiet interlude, time spent reflecting on how much her life had recently changed for the better. A month ago she was a flat-broke grad student. Now she was flush with cash, courtesy of the signing bonus that came with the job she would begin in two weeks. Miracles, she reminded herself, do indeed happen.

By the time the sky finally darkened shortly after 10:00 p.m., the temperature had dropped to a chilly forty-three degrees. Elissa slipped back into her cabin, set the half-empty champagne

bottle on the coffee table, and laughed out loud when she saw herself in the decorative mirror that graced the far wall. Her long blonde hair was in wild disarray from the North Atlantic wind, and her face had more color than usual. She was twenty-four, a bit drunk, and unimaginably happy.

At that moment, in fact, she could not remember having been happier.

She was lost in Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* when someone rang the doorbell shortly after 10:30. She was surprised but not alarmed. This was, after all, a cruise ship, where things didn't really get going until midnight for most people her age. A quick look through the peephole revealed an attractive dark-haired man of perhaps thirty-five clad in the distinctive uniform of the Mythic Venture's security staff: gold-striped epaulets on the shoulders of a trim white shirt and an oval name tag she couldn't quite read. He held a gray toolbox in his left hand and a clipboard thick with computer printouts in his right.

The uniform and the security officer's warm smile dispelled whatever doubts Elissa may have had about opening the door.

"Good evening, Miss Bancroft," he began softly. "I apologize for the late call, but we're having problems with the smoke alarm system on your deck. May I have sixty seconds to check the device in your stateroom?"

"Sure, no problem," she answered. His eyes were light brown, and he spoke with an exotic and deliciously appealing accent. Was it Spanish? Italian?

"Thank you so much. This will take only a moment."

He moved to the center of the room, studied the alarm on the ceiling, and shook his head as though perplexed. "This is very odd. The light is blinking green, as it should, but I hear a faint beeping. Has the sound been bothering you?"

"No, I haven't heard a thing, and I've been here all night." She walked over to listen, allowing the stateroom door to swing shut.

"Ah, there it is again." He pointed upward. "Do you hear it?"

As Elissa looked to the ceiling, the man placed his powerful left hand over her mouth, pulled her close, and jammed the needle into her neck. The midazolam worked swiftly in the presence of alcohol. It always did.

He lowered her gently to the floor and paused to admire his precious cargo.

She was the catch of a lifetime.

1.

Faint moonlight revealed the mine entrance, black and gaping like the doorway to hell. In a nearby tree a great horned owl furiously beat its powerful wings as it settled onto a dead branch, a writhing kingsnake in its sharp beak. And in the distance coyotes screamed at the dark sky like a legion of tormented demons.

Agent Pete Nazareth suddenly remembered a late night long ago, when as a nine-year-old he had nearly wet his pants while watching The Wolf Man on the downstairs TV after his parents went up to bed. Once again he could almost feel Lon Chaney watching him in the dark. But what he had on his hands at the moment was no childhood fantasy.

He had spent the better part of two months tracking the movements of Saleh Al-Ramahi, a mild-mannered businessman whose small medical software company in Bethesda employed twenty-five people and kept them all busy six days a week. The forty-two-year-old Al-Ramahi had left Saudi Arabia for the U.S. ten years earlier and had attained citizenship within six years. He paid his taxes on time, was an active member of the Maryland Chamber of Commerce, and played in a local soccer league whenever his busy work schedule allowed.

He was also plotting to kill millions of Americans.

According to an Iraqi brigadier general Nazareth had served with in the Middle East, Al-Ramahi was the lead player of a highly active ISIS cell operating between Boston and Washington. That represented a huge chunk of U.S. turf and included major targets running all along the East Coast. It wasn't difficult to imagine how much damage the wrong people could do with the right weapon.

But for weeks on end Nazareth had found nothing suspicious in Al-Ramahi's actions. The guy arrived at his office building by 7:00 each morning, rarely went out for lunch, and left almost

precisely at 7:00 each evening to have dinner with his wife and two small children in their modest three-bedroom home.

Nazareth had almost thrown in the towel, suspecting the intel from Iraq was bad, when the tracking device he had planted on Al-Ramahi's Audi Q7 SUV registered unusual activity. It was 4:30 on a Thursday afternoon, and the vehicle was headed east on I-495.

By the time Nazareth left his D.C. office and reached the Beltway, Al-Ramahi had turned onto I-95 and was powering north at a steady sixty-five miles per hour. Nazareth had eyes on the large SUV before reaching Baltimore, then settled in six car lengths back to follow the trail wherever it led.

Five hours later he was crouched in a rhododendron thicket facing an abandoned copper mine in Northwest New Jersey near the banks of the Delaware River. He had kept a half mile between him and the suspect once they had left the Interstate and had begun driving the area's winding country roads. But as soon as Al-Ramahi had stopped moving, Nazareth had pulled his black sedan into the woods and hiked four hundred yards to the abandoned mine.

The Q7 was parked by itself to the left of the mine's entrance. Nazareth could see a faint light coming from deep within the tunnel and assumed Al-Ramahi was the cause.

But there was only one way to know for sure.

Now more than ever he missed having partner Tara Gimble at his side. Together they had brought down a long list of crazies -- assassins, spies, and terrorists among them -- but tonight he was on his own. Agent Gimble doubled as his wife, and right now she was home caring for their four-month-old baby. Whether she would return to duty was still anyone's guess. He had his doubts. But he would have given anything to have her alongside him at this moment.

If Al-Ramahi was actually an ISIS leader, tonight's action could spell life or death for millions of people in Boston, New

York, Baltimore, D.C., or any number of other important cities the terrorists craved to destroy.

After all these years Nazareth still couldn't quite grasp the logic of killing innocent people in God's name, but that was the perverse ISIS way. So tonight he would obey the one simple rule of engagement he always carried into battle: give at least twice as good as you get.

He pulled the SIG P226 from its waistband holster as he crept toward Al-Ramahi's SUV. After confirming that the vehicle was empty, he moved to the mine's entrance and stood quietly for several minutes, listening for sounds of human activity. But the loud chorus of crickets, tree frogs, and other local wildlife made that impossible. If he wanted to know what Al-Ramahi was up to, he would have to go inside.

"Watch your six!" That's the last thing Gimble had told her husband when he called her from the road two hours earlier. Normally she'd be the one watching his back, but tonight he was flying solo. He hadn't been able to arrange for backup earlier since he had no idea where he was going. And now he was far too deep in the boonies to call for an assist.

He wasn't especially worried though. It looked as though Al-Ramahi was also on his own, and a lone combatant never stood much of a chance against Nazareth. Even if there were two or three men inside, he held the advantage since they had no place to run.

If they wanted to leave the mine, they'd have to get past him and a twenty-round magazine.

Nazareth's eyes had adjusted to the darkness of the woods, but that didn't help him inside the pitch-black tunnel, where he couldn't even see his left hand on the jagged rock wall as he felt his way along the corridor. He shuffled rather than walked, constantly stepping around or over the chunks of stone that littered the passageway, and did his best not to make any noise as he went.

Sailing the Gates of Hell

The place was darker than he had expected, and for a moment he considered how things would turn out if Al-Ramahi were wearing night vision goggles. But he immediately told himself to stop thinking about that. He was already fully committed to the mission and would need to deal with threats if or when they materialized. Business as usual.

He was two hundred feet inside the tunnel when he was forced to work his way around a massive timber support that held the roof in place. He had barely stepped behind it when gunfire exploded at the mine's entrance. Bullets ripped into the wooden support and ricocheted off the rock walls around him.

By his count Nazareth had cheated death by less than three seconds.

Returning fire made no sense at all since he couldn't see anything but the bright flashes of two, possibly three handguns behind him. Besides, at that moment he was more concerned about Al-Ramahi up ahead of him. If the guy was armed, Nazareth would shortly find himself caught between the crossfire. He'd been in that situation two or three times in Afghanistan, and he didn't need a repeat performance to jog his memory.

After nearly five minutes of non-stop shooting, the guns fell silent. Someone at the entrance began yelling threats in Arabic. Nazareth understood only a few words, but the message was clear.

He was a dead man.

Suddenly from somewhere up ahead of him came the loud, high-pitched voice of Al-Ramahi, who seemed to be assuring the other men that he was safe. At that point Nazareth concluded there was an eighty percent chance Al-Ramahi was unarmed. Either he didn't have a weapon, or he didn't have the guts to pull the trigger.

That was often the way with ISIS leaders. They had no trouble sending their so-called martyrs to some mythological paradise, but they chose to remain living right here on Earth themselves. It was the coward's way.

Nazareth figured his best option was to move forward, grab Al-Ramahi, and use him as a hostage. It was an okay plan as long as Al-Ramahi was actually unarmed. But there were two major impediments: the blackness ahead of him and the guns behind. Could he actually cover the distance without getting shot in the back?

Before he could take the first step in Al-Ramahi's direction, the gunfire began once again behind him. The attackers were spraying bullets high and low, side to side, hoping to hit something.

Then silence again.

One of the shooters called to Al-Ramahi, apparently to confirm that he was still okay. That's when the flashlight clicked on and three armed terrorists began walking toward Nazareth. He pulled himself back behind the thick timber support and listened as the footsteps grew closer.

He could hear the men muttering to each other, seemingly convinced they had killed the infidel since he had never fired back. Yet they were concerned they had not yet come across his body. When they were no more than twenty feet away, the guy working the flashlight turned it on the wooden support where Nazareth was hiding and barked something to the others.

Then things got crazy.

Nazareth popped from behind the timber in a low crouch and got off three rounds before the others could respond. The first two rounds ripped into the gut of the guy who had been foolish enough to walk out in front of the flashlight. His silhouette looked exactly like a training course target, and Nazareth blew it away.

The third round went heart-high above the flashlight beam. The flashlight and the attacker hit the ground at nearly the same time. One was still working, the other was DOA.

Nazareth was back behind the timber before the lone remaining attacker charged toward him, the fallen flashlight providing barely enough light for a desperate suicide run. From

the depths of the mine Al-Ramahi began yelling to his comrade just as the guy opened fire on Nazareth's position.

When he was only two strides away from Nazareth, the gunman heard the sickening click of an empty chamber as he pulled the trigger one final time. The last thing he saw was the bright flash of a SIG at eye level. The explosion of light, noise, and infinite chaos inside his skull lasted a fraction of a second. Then he was history.

"You're all alone now!" Nazareth called out to Al-Ramahi. "Three dead. You'll be number four if you don't surrender immediately."

Nothing but blackness and silence ahead. Was Al-Ramahi cowering behind a rock, praying for a miracle? Or did he have his finger on a trigger? The flashlight on the ground was still shining in Nazareth's direction and would no doubt give him away as soon as he stepped into the corridor.

"Last chance, Al-Ramahi. Live or die. Your choice."

No reply. If the mine entrance was, in fact, the only escape route, then all Nazareth had to do was call for backup and wait for Al-Ramahi to surrender. Game over.

But if the mine had a rear escape passage, Al-Ramahi could already be running toward a boat stashed alongside the river, in which case he might be lost forever.

Even worse, Al-Ramahi might at this very moment be rigging a weapon of mass destruction. Detonating a weapon inside the mine would reduce its impact but could still cause thousands of deaths. Without knowing what sort of attack the terrorists had been planning, Nazareth couldn't risk an explosion.

The decision made itself, and Nazareth's feet were moving before his brain had told him what needed to be done. This was always what it came down to. When the battle begins, one experienced doer is worth infinitely more than a dozen brilliant thinkers.

He pressed himself against the wall as much as he could, swept his weapon from side to side at chest level, and moved

cautiously forward. The world floated away as he attuned all of his senses to the mission at hand. He slowed his breathing, focused on lowering his heart rate, and moved as stealthily as a mountain cat toward his prey.

When he was close to the spot where he had heard Al-Ramahi calling to his comrades, Nazareth dropped down on all fours and began crawling ahead. The flashlight was far enough behind him now that it didn't represent much of a threat, but he knew Al-Ramahi still had the advantage. And when it comes to cave warfare, something he had experienced at the Tora Bora cave complex in Afghanistan, even a slight advantage can mark the difference between living and dying.

Something was wrong.

Al-Ramahi hadn't made a sound for more than ten minutes. Even a trained sniper couldn't maintain perfect silence and stillness for that long, and Al-Ramahi was no trained sniper. So Nazareth grudgingly confronted the likelihood that his enemy had escaped from a tunnel at the back of the mine.

Nearly two months of work down the drain! Three dead terrorists weren't enough to compensate for losing Al-Ramahi. If you want to kill the ISIS beast, you need to destroy its brain.

He was still crawling forward when his left hand felt something other than bare rock. Nazareth quickly rolled backward, raised his weapon, and moved his finger to the trigger. Then he waited.

No sound. No movement. But clearly he had touched someone's leg.

Convinced he was no longer at risk, Nazareth leaned forward and worked his left hand up the corpse. Wool slacks, cotton shirt, full beard. It was definitely Al-Ramahi, and a check of his carotid artery proved that he was already on his way to hell.

After retrieving the flashlight, Nazareth came back to check Al-Ramahi's body. He had taken a round to the right eye, most likely when the last of the three gunman had come running and

gunning for Nazareth. Next to Al-Ramahi was a small handgun that hadn't been fired. He had been a coward to the end.

What Nazareth found next was the grand payoff for weeks of patient waiting and a night mission that could easily have cost him his life. Al-Ramahi and his comrades had stockpiled steel canisters of powdered cesium-137, a powerful radioactive material they had planned to weaponize.

Detonating a dirty bomb of this sort in Manhattan would have dealt America a crippling blow. Thousands of people would have died, of course, but the impact would have extended far beyond those deaths. The radioactive residue would mean skyscrapers had to be demolished, homes abandoned, and the city's tourism industry rebuilt from scratch several decades down the road. The psychological and economic impact on the country would have been incalculable.

And ISIS had been less than twenty-four hours away from delivering its worst blow ever.

On his way home to D.C., Nazareth called his wife and confessed he was growing tired of playing whack-a-mole with ISIS.

"You get rid of four this week," he grouched, "and eight more pop up next week. Our approach to ISIS is badly broken."

"Unless you sit in the Oval Office," she replied, "you can't change the strategy."

"Agreed. So maybe it's time to tell the boss how I feel about this. I think he gets too much advice from think-tank geniuses who've never seen battle."

Nazareth and Gimble reported directly to U.S. President Roland Armstrong, who had practically begged them to leave the NYPD and help tackle "national-level" threats. He had also promised them ready access to his office if or when they needed his support.

"Here's my recommendation," Gimble told him. "Get home, think this all through, and then bounce the ideas off me before you bounce them off the president."

“I have plenty of drive time ahead of me, Tara. Why not call him right now while the topic is hot?”

“Because you’re also hot, Pete,” she replied. “And when you’re hot, you’re better at killing bad guys than playing politics.”

“This isn’t about politics.”

“When you’re talking to Armstrong, it’s always about politics. And, for the record,” she added, “I still think the jury is out on him.”

“Meaning you don’t completely trust him.”

“Meaning I don’t trust him at all. Please, Pete, don’t talk with him until you and I have kicked this around at home. Okay?”

He let out the breath he didn’t realize he had been holding. Gimble was more than a fellow agent, partner, and wife. She was the voice of reason whispering in his ear whenever the world ceased making sense.

“Fine. No phone call,” he promised. “But I’m having the conversation with him this week.”

“And I’ll help you get ready for it. Now focus on the driving. We’re waiting for you to get home.”

In the background he heard the gentle cooing of his new daughter, and for a few moments he forgot about the war that swirled around and within him.

His wife and daughter were the two things that made sense in this world.

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