

The background of the cover is a blue-tinted microscopic image. It features several circular, textured structures, likely cells or spores, with a prominent one in the lower center that has a bright, glowing white ring around its dark interior. The overall texture is grainy and organic.

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A Novel

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Searching for biotech solutions to environmental problems, a senior researcher at Cumulus Biologicals creates a microbe that doesn't just break down oil spills but turns sweet crude into a tar-like solid. Applied to an oil-laden beach, it would cake the sand into asphalt and make removal impossible.

The bacterial culture is a wrong turn for the company and is marked for disposal. However, a beautiful industrial spy and a ruthless arms dealer plot to divert the sample to an Arab buyer, who is under orders to discourage competition in the oil patch and raise the volume of petrodollars flowing into his country. He sees immediately that the bacterial byproduct would freeze oil fields, block wellheads, and clog pipelines—if it ever got near them. Only one thing stands in the way of their deal: a determined young economist named William Clive. He recently joined a consulting firm that covers for a national agency battling foreign theft of American industrial secrets, and he takes his job *very* seriously.

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Prologue
Ali Sahir
ONE BY ONE

The world was black outside the Plexiglas dome—and none too bright beneath it. Gamal Shahid had practiced with the miniature submarine in the bright sunshine of a distant Mexican lagoon. Now, under cover of darkness in San Francisco Bay, he handled the controls of this rich man's toy by touch and memory.

Despite the cold, murky water swirling under his chin, Shahid was comfortable inside his brand-new wetsuit. Because his training had been in warmer water, the suit was a recent addition to his equipment. However, his old belt weights did not quite balance the neoprene's natural buoyancy. Shahid kept bobbing out of the web seat, his feet drifting off the rudder pedals. Finally, to hold himself in place, he buckled the belt around one of the fuselage's internal struts.

Darkness and water in the unsealed cabin prevented his using a map. So Shahid carried his reference points in his head, like the experienced guerrilla he was.

Straight ahead, five hundred meters away, a string of bright sodium work lights lined the wharf, broken in one place by a dark bulk. The near end of the shadow was a superstructure lit by a constellation of portholes; its length disappeared into gloom. The rest of the night around Shahid's head at water level was a confused jostle of winking buoy lights, red and green markers on passing boats, and car headlights flashing along the waterfront. Shahid kept his attention fixed on the shadowed bulk, his target.

"Praise be to Allah," he intoned.

He reached forward and touched the shoulder of his partner, Muhammad Kebir. The other man turned, his face mask already in place. Shahid pointed at the shadowed bulk. Kebir glanced around and nodded to confirm their target.

Shahid adjusted his own mask and worked the valves and motor switches that submerged the submarine and drove it forward. A modest bow wave rose against the front of his dome. The water closed over Shahid's head.

Now came the hard part.

In the practice runs through that Mexican lagoon, Shahid could steer a straight course over three times the distance he now had to cross. But those had been calm waters. Here in San Francisco he must contend with vicious tides and the currents generated by the Sacramento and San Joaquin river systems, which drained all of California. As his commando leader had explained, the combined outflow swept around a rocky point just north of the wharf where his target was moored. Under these conditions, driving straight in was nearly impossible.

The vertical distance between the target's laden hull and the Bay's rocky bottom was no more than five meters over high tide. The river currents

raced through this confined space. Shahid had to approach his objective from astern, increasing power to his vessel's drive motors, releasing more air, and pushing down on the bow planes to sink lower. His tiny submarine came into position and settled on the bottom with a groaning scrape and a final thud. The two men were cloaked in utter darkness.

He tapped Kebir's shoulder twice this time—the go signal. His partner reached back and caught Shahid's wrist briefly, giving it a squeeze—acknowledgment, with a blessing upon them both.

Shahid sensed rather than saw when Kebir popped the latch on his own dome. The still water in the fuselage came alive with eddies from the current outside. He adjusted the motors to compensate for increased drag from the open dome.

Kebir snapped a chemical tube, bathing his face and hands with cold green light. He raised the tube above his head and the light disappeared into a curtain of dark seaweed. Shahid glimpsed the orange point of a starfish and a scuttling crab, both creatures living in the blanket on the ship's bottom.

His partner floated free of the hull, braced his knees against the turret ring, and began scraping at this curtain. As Kebir hacked, long shadows twisted and fled backward over his head. After ten minutes of this work, Shahid heard a shallow boom as the scraper struck bare metal. No one on deck would notice that sound, not through the tons of liquid cargo which muffled the spaces between source and hearer.

Kebir rattled around for another two minutes by Shahid's watch. Time was an important consideration—the state of the tide, the air supply in their tanks, and one other factor—but the situation was not yet critical. When Kebir was satisfied with the spot he had made, he ducked back into the fuselage and emerged with a flat disk cradled in his forearms. He lifted the thing over his head. The current caught at it and pushed him backward, but Kebir was strong, chosen particularly for this task. He guided the disk upward until it leapt out of his hands.

Bong! The magnets on its upper surface had found the patch of naked steel. Kebir's work was done. The package was already prepared, down to the timing of the fuse.

Shahid could only pray that his commando leader had been right, that the ship above their heads was indeed of the older single-hull construction, not one of the newer double-walled models. Tonight's mission would go for naught if their intelligence had been wrong on that point. But now the matter was in God's hands.

Kebir entered his turret, secured and latched the dome. Shahid raised the submarine off the bottom and drove forward against the current, turning slowly out of the danger zone under the tanker's hull. Once in clear water he fed full power to the motors to put as much distance between them and the target as possible. He also began angling upward on the bow planes.

Five minutes later, his dome broke the choppy surface of the Bay. Shahid looked around to get his bearings for the run back to their mothership. The sodium work lights and the long black shadow were now seven hundred

meters astern. To the north was the lighthouse on Three Brothers, yes. To the west were the distant floodlamps of San Quentin Prison, yes. Around to the south was the great lump of Angel Island, backed by San Francisco's bright skyline. Shahid knew exactly where he was . . .

Or thought he did. An instant later Three Brothers disappeared under a blot that arose in the north. Had a fog bank come up? Moving so quickly? It ate up half the horizon. Only a single light, bright like a star, shone on top of this creeping void.

Shahid studied it. As his eyes focused he saw a curling white wave, creamy with bioluminescence, riding the forward edge of the black mass. Through the submarine's thin hull he sensed a surge of pressure pushing through the water, bearing down on them. He opened his mouth to cry out.

The shallowly angled bow of the oil-transport barge rode over the submarine's turrets at a speed of only six miles an hour. But the weight was enough to shatter both domes, turning the Plexiglas bubbles into rings of jagged knives and crumpling the hinges that held them in place around the heads of the two divers.

The transport's wide belly rolled the tiny vessel over and over, stripping off the dive planes and drive motors. The pummeling jarred loose air tanks, lines, and cables inside the hull. It battered the two men senseless. Because the barge was more than four hundred feet long, this helpless rolling continued until the air inside their lungs gave out.

At last the barge passed on. The tugboat driving it gave the submarine's hull a last, flicking *ting!* with its bronze propeller. The ruined vessel hung upside down, five feet below the surface, riding out toward the Golden Gate on the ebbing tide.

* * *

Ali Sahir checked into the Hyatt Regency on San Francisco's Embarcadero at four o'clock in the afternoon, early enough that he could specify and get a bayside view. He had chosen this hotel because of its peculiar shape and orientation, and because rooms facing east and north were plentiful.

He registered under the name "Peter Bogosian." Over the years Sahir had found that most Americans felt a vestigial sympathy for the Armenians as a people—maybe it was the legacy of Turkish massacre, maybe the writings of one William Saroyan. But he had also found that they could not distinguish an Armenian face or accent from those of a Turk or Syrian. So in casual contacts the identity would pass an agent from almost anywhere in the Middle East. An agent like Ali Sahir.

It was a mark of his careful preparations that Sahir actually carried documents—a Nebraska driver's license and two credit cards—that matched the name. The cards would actually ring up charges in the computer, too.

Although he registered at four o'clock, Sahir did not go up to the room until eleven that night, and then he went without luggage. Neither did he touch the bed. Instead, he called room service for a light meal and a carafe of coffee and took them out onto the private terrace, which was another feature influencing his choice of hotel.

When he had eaten, Sahir pulled a chair around until he could see past the angled wall separating his space from the room and terrace next door. Then he settled in for the long wait. He took a small pair of Zeiss binoculars out of his jacket pocket, unfolded them, and focused on the far reaches of the Bay. As he had planned, his view stretched past the winking light of Alcatraz and the dark lump of Angel Island, to the string of beads that was the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. To the right of this was his quarry: a long wharf lit with floodlamps and, behind it, shelving hillsides dotted with squat brown tanks. Each tank had its crown of red aircraft-warning lights.

The refinery at Point Richmond was not a purchaser of crude oil from Ali Sahir's country. True, the company that owned this facility did sufficient business with his sponsors—but that was neither here nor there. This particular refinery brought its crude down the coast from Valdez in Alaska, or across the Pacific from the Indonesian oil fields. True, Indonesia was a member of the OPEC cartel, the same as Sahir's country—but that, too, was neither here nor there.

In a marketplace where the price of sweet light crude had, with a few brief exceptions, been hanging in the neighborhood of seventy dollars a barrel for the past decade, such niceties no longer mattered. Sahir's masters wanted certain results. They wanted their petrodollars flowing in at the old rate, and they wanted them now.

The action tonight would disrupt the refinery's operations by tying up its main offloading wharf. Sahir had given the matter much thought and study. He knew this approach was better than other attacks he might have launched.

He might, for example, have sent in a surface raid: his men climbing over barbed wire fences, carrying dynamite and grenades, targeting isolated manufacturing units laid out over a hundred acres of open ground. Each of those units was enclosed in a runoff berm and protected with foam-spreading equipment. The damage such a raid might do—at the nearly certain cost of his men being captured or killed—would be measured in the mere hundreds of thousands of dollars. It would be repaired in a week or two at most.

By contrast, sinking a tanker at the wharf would block the flow of crude oil in and refined product out for months. It would have the added benefit of creating an environmental stink. It might even force the politically sensitive Americans to shut down this major production facility. And all without reducing the sale of crude from Sahir's part of the Middle East by one drop.

For Ali Sahir, these tactical considerations were no more important than the emotional one. He was attacking the decadent West where it lived, in its energy supplies. As one of the faithful, he believed the international oil trade had been purposely designed to suck his country nearly dry. It had made a few sheiks at the top obscenely wealthy while increasing the poverty of the people. Such wealth, pouring so easily from the ground, had the effect of making his countrymen lazy, unscrupulous, and secular.

Tonight's action would not reverse that, he knew. But it was good to punish the Great Satan nonetheless, and to have his masters' blessing and support while he did it.

Sahir set the binoculars down and pulled his jacket tighter across his chest. Being so occupied, he missed the initial flare. It was just a smudge of light at the extreme range of his unaided vision. He checked his watch. Yes, right on time.

Through the glasses, Sahir saw a pillar of flame rising from the tanker's broken deck. In the gap at the fire's base, he could see the edges of the hull split apart, peeling back sheets of steel like the rind of an orange. Already the stern was settling in the water. The bow, being farther from the point of explosion, would take longer to sink.

Even the powerful glasses could not actually show him the crewmen running around on deck or scurrying off down the long wharf. But he knew they were there. He tasted their fear and panic and was made glad.

Finally Sahir broke away from the spectacle long enough to take care of his remaining duties on this mission. It would proceed without him, of course, but he wanted to maintain his authority, his aura of leadership. He rose from the chair, shaking the tingles out of his legs, and went back into the room. Through the hotel switchboard he placed a ship-to-shore call to the vessel playing mothership on this mission.

It was a sleek yacht, eighty feet long with an aluminum hull, painted midnight blue like the tiles of his neighborhood mosque. That dark color had much to do with the selection, plus the fact that the roof of the aft salon had been reinforced—originally to take the weight of a tiny, two-man helicopter. The yacht had been built in Hong Kong, registered out of Portland, leased at Long Beach, and had spent the past three weeks somewhere north of Cabo San Lucas. For the last two days it had been berthed in the marina at Pier 39, a mile or so from this hotel. Tonight, it was standing out in the middle of the Bay, somewhere to the east of Alcatraz, with its running lights turned off.

The captain answered immediately.

"Have our guests arrived aboard?" Sahir asked pleasantly.

"Not yet," the captain replied.

"That's—" The message sank in, overriding the encouragement Sahir was about to voice. "Oh well, it is early yet."

"Yes." The captain's tone said he wanted to handle this himself.

"Call me as soon as they arrive."

Sahir went back to his chair. The pillar of fire was taller now. Its upper edges were blurred with coils of black smoke, underlit by the orange glare. He watched until the sky paled in the east—the true east, not the false dawn he had made in Richmond—and a gray haze rose over the Bay.

He went to call again.

"Are they aboard?"

"No sir," the captain said. "And, frankly, I fear the worst."

"Could the Coast Guard have intercepted them?" The activities of this agency, primarily concerned with marine safety, had always been an unknown element in Sahir's plans.

"No, we've been watching all night. Their cutters are distinctive, big and white. We would have seen any that crossed the path of . . . our guests."

“After so long, would our people still have—” Sahir had to word this carefully, over an open radio frequency, speaking in the clear. “—the necessary *provisions* to reach you?”

“That is doubtful, sir.”

“Very well then.” Time for a command decision. “Proceed to the second rendezvous position. I will meet you there.”

As he hung up, Sahir regretted the loss of his team. He hoped that, if they still lived and remained uncaptured, they would have the sense to scuttle their midget submarine and swim for shore. They were trained for survival in hostile territory. They were supplied with dollars and documents. And they knew how to signal for fallback and retrieval. They were in God’s hands.

Still, he was frustrated. There had to be a faster way to cripple his country’s competitors and bring down the arrogant, wealth-sucking Westerners. Working one by one against individual targets like this was too slow, too tedious.