

## CHAPTER 11



# MISSION GONE WRONG

### Preparing for Egypt

Christina had been relentless, and it showed. The profile of Michael Eastman, my alias, had been polished to a blinding shine. Every credential, every biographical detail, every piece of Michael's history had been scrutinized, revised, and perfected until even I almost believed I *was* him. Over the past year, I had spent countless nights immersed in online courses, sharpening my business acumen and real estate expertise under the watchful eyes of carefully selected experts — all orchestrated quietly by Langley. Every keystroke, every assignment, every late-night Zoom call had been another brick in the foundation of the life I was about to fully inhabit.

In the United States, its investment-backed activities operated like any other business—and were perfectly legal. But in the Middle East, where it was run by the CIA, Crossroads was anything but legal. That's what made it so tricky. My job was to convince our enemies to invest in Crossroads.

Fortunately, all my experience and training had prepared me for this moment. I was a spy, sanctioned by the U.S. government to carry out highly illegal financial operations designed to entrap our enemies. If I got caught, I would be killed—and the CIA would disavow any knowledge of me.

*Deny was the name of the game.*

Now, Crossroads USA was finally ready to step into the light.

The plan was ambitious: Crossroads would serve as the American gateway into markets hostile to direct U.S. interests. The operation was delicate, threading a needle between diplomacy and deep-cover intelligence. Our first

major foothold would be through an Egyptian investment bank that, according to Langley, had well-established — if unofficial — channels into Iran and Syria.

It was a critical move.

The Egyptians, while officially neutral, had their fingers in many places. Their bankers whispered into the ears of Iranian officials, Syrian businessmen, and even rogue elements in Lebanon. This wasn't just about business — it was about access, influence, and opening doors that Washington could not openly approach.

But despite all the careful work, despite all the hours Christina and I had put into sculpting Michael Eastman into a man the world would trust and admire, I felt strangely disconnected. It was like standing outside my own life, watching a story unfold that I was supposed to star in but hadn't yet fully entered. Langley was deliberately keeping me out of certain conversations, and while that wasn't unusual, it gnawed at me. It meant they were orchestrating something even bigger than I realized — and they needed me ready, not questioning.

My instructions were simple: pack for a two-day stay. Business attire, nothing flashy. Conservative but sophisticated. Blend in among international executives without calling attention to myself. There was no room for mistakes. Once inside, I would be introduced under Crossroads USA's banner, a respected American private investment vehicle looking for emerging market opportunities. The Egyptians would, in turn, arrange introductions to high-ranking Iranian and Syrian officials under the guise of strategic partnerships and capital infusions.

The stakes were sky-high.

If Crossroads succeeded, it would give the United States unprecedented visibility into enemy financial networks and political circles. If I failed — well, failure wasn't an option I allowed myself to consider.

### **The Professionals Behind Door Number Three**

“Stay tuned,” Jerry said with a half-smile, leaning back in his chair. The dimly lit room added weight to our conversation, and I knew this wasn't just small talk. When Jerry, a seasoned CIA operative, threw out that phrase, it always meant there was more coming.

I glanced around his office. The familiar feel of surveillance screens flickering, the soft hum of computers cru data, and the wall covered in maps and charts of the Middle East made this place a second home to me. But it also symbolized the battlefield of my new life. Since joining the CIA, enemies seemed to pop up like weeds, each more determined to stop me than the last.

“You know,” I said, my voice low, “it’s not just the amateurs that worry me anymore. Sure, they’re annoying people from my past, ex-friends, even family members who want to cover up their own bad behavior or settle old grudges. They’re pests, but predictable. It’s the pros, Jerry. It’s the ones inside our own system, the intelligence agencies, the ones who don’t want me focusing on the Middle East and Israel. They seem to know more about where I’m headed than I do.”

Jerry nodded, the corners of his mouth tightening. “You’re not wrong. The bureaucracy here? It’s a tangled mess of politics, greed, and hate. A lot of people have skin in the game, and they see you as a disruptor. Some are just trying to protect their own interests. And others...” He let out a breath, tapping his fingers on the table. “Well, others just don’t like anyone shaking up the status quo.”

“That’s what I can’t understand,” I said, leaning forward. “I’m not out here trying to dismantle anything. I’m trying to make things better. Safer. But they see me as a threat.”

“Better and safer to you is a threat to them.” Jerry’s voice was matter of fact, like he’d seen this play out a thousand times before. “You’re targeting the Middle East. Israel. That’s a delicate area—more delicate than you realize. People have been playing chess with those pieces for decades. You’re coming in with fresh eyes? They think you’re gonna flip the board.”

“And those people?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “The ones who are really pulling the strings?”

“They’re behind door number three,” Jerry replied with a smirk, but there was no humor in it. “The professionals. They’ve been doing this a long time, and they don’t play by the same rules as the knuckleheads you’ve dealt with before. They’ll throw up hurdles, try to derail you before you even get started. You won’t see them coming, but they’ll know your every move.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “I’ve already felt that. Roadblocks. False leads. It’s like someone’s always one step ahead, but I can’t figure out who.”

“That’s their game,” Jerry said, his tone darkening. “They know how to make you doubt yourself. They’ve got connections, resources, and the

experience to stay invisible. Your enemies have grown exponentially since you joined the Agency, and these are the ones you really need to worry about. Without your friends, your allies, you'd be dead or worse by now.”

“How do I stay ahead of them?” I asked, my voice betraying a hint of desperation. I hated asking that question, hated feeling like I didn't have control.

Jerry gave me a long look before answering. “You don't. Not entirely. Not all the time. But you keep moving. You stay sharp. You lean on the people you can trust, and you don't let the bastards see you sweat. They want you to feel isolated; to make you think the walls are closing in. But remember this one wins this game alone. You've got allies. You've got skills. And most of all, you've got guts.”

I nodded, feeling the weight of his words sink in. It wasn't just about surviving anymore. It was about navigating a system that was set up to make me fail, to make me second-guess every step I took. The people behind door number three weren't just bureaucrats. They were predators, and they played a long game.

But so, would I.

“Stay tuned,” I repeated with a smirk of my own. Jerry grinned, this time with a glint in his eye. He knew I was in for the long haul, and so did I.

“Good,” he said, standing up and offering his hand. “You're going to need that attitude. Because of this ride? It's just getting started.”

As I shook his hand, I knew he was right. The professionals, the knuckleheads, the system—it was all coming for me. But with friends like Jerry and the ones who stood by me, I had more than just a fighting chance. I had a future.

I closed my laptop that night after my last security briefing and stared out the window, the Texas evening sky still warm with the dying light. Smokey, my Dalmatian, was curled up by the door, sensing the shift. Dogs know when something is coming. So did I.

In just a few days, I would be stepping into the heart of a chess game where one wrong move could mean not just mission failure, but headlines — or worse, graves.

Michael Eastman was ready.

Now I just had to be too. The moment I stepped onto the plane, something felt wrong. My instincts, honed by years watching Don and sharpened by my recent training with the CIA and rise to CEO of Crossroads, screamed

at me that this mission wasn't what it seemed. The team had been handpicked by the CIA bureaucracy—long-term agents and specialists, all with hundreds of hours of desk training but little field experience. We were bound for Egypt, set to meet high-level contacts in a covert operation that should have been routine. But I knew deep down that it was anything but.

I had been briefed extensively, the kind of dry, methodical briefings that don't raise immediate red flags. But as the details piled up, it became clear that someone had woven together an intricate plan, one that ensured I would never return. The unsettling feeling gnawed at me from the inside, a mix of intuition and the knowledge that not everyone in the agency wanted me to succeed. This was a trap.

They didn't care about my team. To whoever was pulling the strings, the agents under my command were just acceptable losses—pawns in a larger game. I was supposed to lead them into an operation that was already compromised, and their deaths would cover up whatever was meant to go wrong. The thought sickened me, but I had learned long ago to temper my emotions in situations like this.

The Egyptian investment firm was a polished front, but beneath the surface it served as a financial pipeline for Hamas, Hezbollah, and powerful figures within the Iranian government. The Egyptians had agreed to set the meeting because the Iranians were desperate—they needed a way to quietly launder vast sums of money into American banks. That's where Crossroads came in. And me. We were standing by, perfectly positioned to offer exactly what they needed, all under the guise of high-return, low-risk investment strategies. What they didn't know was that every wire transfer, every shell company, every handshake was a step deeper into our trap.

Settling into the back of the plane, I opened my laptop and activated the Secure Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF), blocking out all external signals so I could set up alternative plans. I had contacts among the agency—friends who thought I was walking into a trap and were willing to help me get out. We'd arranged several contingency options, including a Marine helicopter extraction, if the meeting in Cairo turned sour. I had no intention of letting my team become sacrificial lambs. We were going out, one way or another.

As I worked on securing our escape routes, I received an encrypted message from Chris, the CIA mission planner who had quietly aligned

himself with me. He had been instrumental in helping set up the backup plan and was one of the few people I trusted in Langley.

**Chris:** “You sure about this? They’re already watching you.”

His words flashed across the secure terminal. I paused before typing back.

**Me:** “No choice. The mission’s setup, and you know it.”

**Chris:** “You need to be careful. They’ll be expecting everything, even backup plans.”

**Me:** “I’ve already set up the alternatives. But what I need is real-time intel when I hit the ground. Can you get me that?”

There was a delay, and I imagined Chris weighing his options on the other side. He was risking a lot by helping me. But he’d been in the game long enough to know that the agency wasn’t always on the side of its own agents.

**Chris:** “I’ll try. Just remember, you’ll be in deep, and I won’t be able to cover for you if it goes south.”

**Me:** “I understand. Make sure the team has their extraction points ready.”

The message came back almost instantly: **“Already done. But if this meeting goes bad, you’ll have minutes, maybe less.”**

I closed the chat and leaned back in my seat. Outside the window, the sun was beginning to rise, casting a golden hue over the clouds below. It was the kind of serene moment that belied the chaos I knew was waiting for us on the ground. I couldn’t shake the feeling that someone within the agency had set all this in motion—someone who wanted me gone. Maybe it was my new position at Crossroads, maybe it was something else. But the truth no longer mattered. What mattered was keeping my team alive and figuring out how to expose whoever was behind this.

When we landed in Cairo, the city was already teeming with the frenetic energy of the Middle East. We were met by local contacts, but I kept a close eye on everyone, knowing that trust was a luxury I couldn’t afford. My team—ten in all—had been briefed on the mission, but not the real danger that loomed over us. They trusted me to lead them, and I couldn’t let them down.

If this was a setup—as I feared—it wouldn’t be the Egyptian bankers we’d have to worry about. It would be the armed militias backing them,

most likely from Hamas, waiting in the shadows for the signal to strike. The moment they suspected a double-cross; the meeting could turn into a bloodbath. They didn't just protect their assets—they eliminated threats. And in their eyes, an American offering too-good-to-be-true access might just be exactly that. If things went sideways, they wouldn't hesitate. They'd kill us all without blinking.

As we made our way to the designated meeting point, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck rise. Something was off. I motioned to John, my second-in-command, who had been with me on several missions before I took the helm at Crossroads.

**Me:** "John, make sure everyone's ready for immediate extraction. This doesn't feel right."

He nodded, his expression tense but focused. "Got it. You think we're walking into something?"

I didn't respond, but the look in my eyes told him enough. He started quietly relaying the message to the others, ensuring that our contingency plans were in place.

We arrived at an old, abandoned building on the outskirts of the city, our supposed meeting point. The intel we had received was that this was a safe location, a place where we could meet our contacts without prying eyes. But as we entered, I could feel the trap closing in around us.

Inside, there was nothing but dust and the faint sound of wind whistling through broken windows. The contacts were late—if they were ever coming at all. My gut twisted. This was it.

I signaled to the team to fall back, my hand resting on the radio transmitter that would signal the Marines for extraction. Suddenly, a voice crackled over the comms, the unmistakable sound of Chris's voice cutting through the static.

**Chris:** "Get out. Now. You've been burned."

My blood ran cold.

**Me:** "What do you mean, burned? How bad?"

**Chris:** "They're on to you. Locals are already moving in. I've lost most of the feeds, but what I can see... It's bad."

I looked at John, who was already ushering the team back toward the exit.

**Me:** "Chris, where's our extraction?"

**Chris:** "Two minutes out. You need to hold until then."

Gunfire echoed through the empty building as we scrambled for cover. The locals arrived heavily armed and moving with military precision. Someone had tipped them off. Bullets ricocheted off the walls as we returned fire, trying to hold our position until the extraction team arrived.

I activated the beacon for the Marines, signaling our location. Time slowed as we fought to keep the advancing forces at bay. My team moved with practiced precision, but the numbers weren't in our favor. They were closing in, and I knew we wouldn't last much longer.

Then, the familiar sound of helicopter blades filled the air. The extraction team had arrived. A black Marine chopper appeared over the horizon, swooping in low as it prepared to extract us.

**Me:** "Go, go, go!"

The air hung heavily with smoke and adrenaline, blending into a surreal haze as we tried to hold our ground. But it was clear—we were being overwhelmed. My voice cut through the chaos, directing the team.

"Fall back to the helicopter!" I yelled, motioning for them to retreat.

John, ever the experienced Marine, took charge. He nodded at me, his face grim beneath his helmet. "Go!" he barked at the others, grabbing his rifle as he turned toward the oncoming locals.

We both laid down suppressing fire, our weapons kicking in rhythm, taking out a few of the attackers as they surged toward us. I counted each enemy that dropped, but it wasn't enough. They kept coming, relentless, and there was no time to admire the marksmanship. John had been in more fire-fights than I could count, his movements precise, but then—

"John!" I shouted as I saw him stagger. A bullet had ripped into his leg. He dropped to one knee, clutching his thigh, but kept firing, eyes still locked on the advancing enemies.

Ira, eyes wide with fear and determination, sprinted toward John, dropping to his side in a rush. "I got you, brother," Ira muttered, his voice low as he pulled out a tourniquet from his pack. John grimaced, his teeth clenched against the pain as Ira worked quickly, tightening the strap around John's leg.

I didn't have time to see how bad the wound was, my only focus was keeping the advancing attackers at bay. I pressed the trigger repeatedly, my breath coming in short, shallow bursts, heart pounding in my ears. A teammate grabbed John's rifle and fired beside me, but the locals were closing in fast.

“Almost done, John. Just hold on,” Ira grunted. But just as he started to rise after tying off the tourniquet, there was a sharp, sickening crack—a bullet slammed into Ira’s arm. He recoiled from the hit, but before he could even react, another round found its mark—this time in his chest.

“Ira!” I screamed, watching him collapse backward, gasping for air. My body moved on instinct, diving toward him as I covered his body with mine. The team continued to fire, but all I could hear was Ira’s ragged breathing, his chest heaving beneath me, each gasp more desperate than the last.

I could feel his blood soaking into my gear, warm and sticky. His hand grasped weakly at my arm, his grip fading.

“Amy... take care of Amy...” Ira whispered, his voice barely a rasp as he fought for breath.

“I will. I promise,” I choked out, fighting back tears as his body trembled under mine. I could see life fading from his eyes, the strength leaving him in slow, painful waves. His hand dropped limply, and his last breath escaped in a shallow gasp. Ira was gone.

“John!” I shouted, looking toward him. He was dragging himself toward us, firing through the pain, his face twisted in anguish.

Together, we lifted Ira’s body, each of us limping, struggling under his weight. We moved toward the helicopter, barely aware of the gunfire still cracking around us. The enemy was retreating now, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except Ira.

We heaved him into the helicopter, his body limp, lifeless. I collapsed next to him, my hands slick with his blood, already reaching for his chest. I started CPR, my hands pressing down hard and fast, fighting against the impossible. “Come on, Ira! Stay with me!” I shouted, even though I knew. I knew he was gone.

John collapsed beside me, his leg soaked in blood, his face pale from the pain. “We did all we could,” he said, his voice thick. But I wasn’t listening. My hands kept moving, pressing on Ira’s chest again and again.

“Come on, Ira, don’t do this!” I begged, tears streaming down my face, mixing with the blood on my hands. But there was no response. His chest was still, his eyes empty.

The helicopter lifted off the ground, but I barely noticed. I was covered in Ira’s blood, broken, hollow, as the sound of the rotors drowned out the last remnants of the firefight. The city grew distant, but the loss of Ira, the weight of his last words, hung over me like a shadow that would never lift.

As we lifted off, I looked back at the carnage below. We had lost Ira, and the mission had been a setup from the start. But we were alive, and now I had the information I needed to find out who was behind this.

Chris's voice crackled over the comms one last time as we flew out of Cairo.

**Chris:** "You made it. Barely."

I leaned back, exhausted but alive. "This isn't over, Chris. Not by a long shot."

**Chris:** "I know. But you'll need to move fast. Whoever's behind this—they won't stop."

I stared out at the darkening horizon, my mind racing. They had tried to take me down, and they had failed. Now it was my turn to make a move.

**Me:** "Next time, we set the trap."

## The Weight of Responsibility

The door to my office creaked open, and John stepped inside with the same look of burden I'd seen far too often lately. He shut the door behind him quietly, leaning his back against it for a moment, as if contemplating the weight of the conversation we were about to have. We both knew this day was coming, but neither of us had wanted to face it.

"Have you heard anything from the Agency yet?" he asked, moving toward the chair across from my desk.

I shook my head, already feeling the knots tightening in my stomach. "No, not a word. They're not going to take responsibility for what happened. They've made that clear."

John slumped into the chair and ran his hands over his face. "Ira was one of ours. Hell, he was one of the best. They owe him more than just silence. He gave everything for them, for us."

"I know," I replied, my voice lower than I intended. The anger simmered just beneath the surface, but more than that was the overwhelming sense of duty—both to Ira and to the family he'd left behind. "They're washing their hands of it. I'm expected to take care of Amy and the kids. They won't even reach out to them, John. It's all on me."

John leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees and eyes hard. "That's not right, and you know it."

“Of course, it’s not right,” I shot back. “But when has the Agency ever been about what’s right? They care about what’s necessary, what’s expedient. Ira’s gone, and they’ve already moved on. For them, he’s just another casualty, another name on a list they’ll never acknowledge.”

Silence fell between us for a moment; the reality of the situation settled like a heavy cloud in the room. I felt John’s frustration as if it were my own. We had both seen too much, done too much to let something like this feel like just another operation gone wrong.

“I spoke with Amy this morning,” I said, breaking the stillness. “She’s trying to hold it together, for the kids mostly. But you can tell she’s shattered. She asked me about Ira’s last moments...wanted to know what his final thoughts were.”

John raised his eyebrows slightly. “What did you tell her?”

I sighed. “I told her the truth. Ira was thinking of her and the kids right up until the end. His last words...he was worried about them, about their future. He knew the Agency wouldn’t be there to support them.”

John closed his eyes for a moment, the weight of it hitting him as if it had hit me when Ira whispered those words with his dying breath. “Damn,” he muttered. “He always put them first, even when we were in the middle of chaos.”

“He died thinking about them, John,” I said, my voice breaking for a moment before I caught it. “Not about the mission, not about the Agency. Just his family.”

“I can’t believe they’re going to make you carry the burden of telling them everything,” John said after a long pause. “That’s not your job.”

“No, it’s not,” I agreed. “But it is now. Amy’s looking for answers for me. She’s looking to me to make sure everything’s taken care of.”

John nodded slowly, his jaw tightening. “What about the benefits? They’re not going to screw his family out of that, are they?”

I leaned back in my chair, feeling the fatigue in my bones. “That part, at least, they can’t ignore. The benefits will come through, but no one from the Agency is going to contact Amy. They’re too worried about plausible deniability. I’m supposed to be the go-between.”

“So, you’re supposed to play liaison between Amy and the faceless machine that sent her husband to his death?”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Pretty much.”

John shook his head. “Ira deserved better. He was more than just an asset. He was family to us.”

I nodded in agreement, the familiar ache of grief gnawing at me again. Ira had been more than just a colleague. He’d been a brother; a man I could rely on no matter how dire the situation. We had gone through hell together, and now I was left to pick up the pieces of his life.

“Do you think Amy suspects anything?” John asked cautiously.

“She’s too smart not to,” I admitted. “She knows there’s more to this than what I’ve told her. But I can’t say anything else, John. You know that.”

John’s eyes hardened again. “I hate this part of the job. The lies, the half-truths. She deserves to know everything.”

“But she won’t,” I said flatly. “We can’t compromise the mission or the Agency. She’ll get the official story—what little of it they’re willing to release—and that’s it.”

“And what about you? You’re just supposed to stand there and take the heat?”

“Ira was my responsibility,” I said, my voice steady. “And now his family is, too. I’ll do what needs to be done.”

John stared at me for a long moment, and I could see the conflict in his eyes. He wanted to fight back, to scream at the injustice of it all, but he knew as well as I did that this was the way things worked in our world.

“What did you tell Amy?” he asked quietly.

“I told her that Ira was a hero,” I replied. “That he was brave, right until the end. And I told her that someone from the Agency would be in touch with the benefits. I didn’t sugarcoat it. She knows it’ll be a slow process, but I promised her that I would make sure she was taken care of.”

John nodded. “Good. At least she has you to lean on.”

“That’s the least I can do for her. I owe it to Ira.”

We sat in silence again, the gravity of the situation heavy between us. The world kept moving, missions kept running, but for Amy and the kids, time had stopped the moment Ira didn’t come home.

“Do you think they’ll ever get any closure?” John asked after a while.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “I hope so. But closure’s a luxury we rarely get in this line of work.”

John leaned back in his chair and exhaled slowly. “Ira knew the risks. We all do. But it doesn’t make this any easier.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Ira had been a good man, a brave man, and now he was gone. The hole he left in our lives and in the lives of his family would never truly heal. But at least I could give Amy and the kids a measure of comfort, a promise that I would be there for them, even when the Agency turned its back.

“I’ll help however I can,” John said, his voice firm.

“Thanks, John,” I said. “I might need it. I’m not sure how Amy’s going to handle all of this in the long run.”

“She’s strong,” John said. “She’ll get through it, but it’s going to take time.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “It always does.”

We sat there for a while longer, neither of us speaking, just letting the silence speak for itself. The unspoken truth hung between us—Ira wasn’t coming back, and we would have to carry the weight of his loss for the rest of our lives.

The Agency had moved on, but we couldn’t. Ira wasn’t just another operative to us. He was a friend, a father, a husband—a man who deserved better than to be forgotten by the very people he had sacrificed everything for.

“I’ll reach out to Amy again tomorrow,” I said, breaking the silence. “Make sure she knows I’m here for whatever she needs.”

John nodded, standing up and placing a hand on my shoulder. “You’re doing the right thing.”

“I hope so,” I replied. “Because it’s all I can do.”

John lingered for a moment before heading toward the door. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.”

As he walked out, I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes. I could still see Ira’s face, still hear his voice. His last words echoed in my mind; a reminder of the price we paid for the lives we led.

For Ira, for Amy, and for the kids, I would carry that burden. It was the least I could do for a man who had given everything.

## **The Fall Out**

The downtown office had the sterile, nondescript feel that one might expect from a CIA safe house. From the outside, it looked like any other financial institution nestled into the high-rise buildings of Dallas. But on the

inside, the clean lines and minimalist decor belied the weight of the decisions made within those walls.

Jerry's office was tucked away in the corner of the building, hidden behind layers of security measures. The window gave a view of the bustling city, but the room felt disconnected from the world below, as though it was in its own universe. The kind of place where life could be upended with a single phone call.

I stepped inside, and Jerry looked up at his desk. His face, lined with years of operations and intelligence work, softened when he saw me. He motioned for me to sit down, leaning back in his chair with a faint smile. There was something reassuring about Jerry's presence; he was the kind of mentor who had seen it all and still remained grounded.

"I'm going to be honest with you," Jerry began, his voice low and calm. "You're being reassigned here. From now on, you're going to office somewhere out of this safe house."

I raised an eyebrow, leaning back in my chair. "Here? In Dallas? Why now?"

Jerry folded his hands on his desk, leaning forward slightly. "After Egypt... well, things have changed. You've made it clear you're not going to play by their rules anymore. And honestly, I think they respect that—at least, certain people do. Others? They'd rather you disappear quietly."

I shifted in my seat, thinking about the Egypt mission—one that had fallen apart due to bad intelligence and bureaucratic mismanagement. We'd lost good people. It wasn't just the loss of the mission that stung; it was the complete lack of accountability from the higher-ups. They sent us in blind and washed their hands of the consequences.

"I'm done trusting the bureaucracy," I said, my voice hardening. "They sent us into that mess, and they didn't even have the decency to own up to their mistakes. I won't let them pick my team anymore, Jerry. I'm going to choose the people I trust. If I'm going to risk my life and the lives of others, it's going to be on my terms."

Jerry didn't flinch. He knew exactly where I was coming from. He'd been in the game long enough to understand that the agency's bureaucratic machine didn't always look out for its own.

"I don't blame you," he said, his voice steady. "Honestly, I think it's the right call. But don't think for a second that the agency is going to admit that

officially. You go outside their lines, and they'll pretend they didn't give you permission. Even if they're silently rooting for you."

A bitter laugh escaped me. "So, I'm supposed to do this in the shadows, with no official backing, no support if things go wrong? Just like Egypt?"

"Not quite," Jerry said, leaning back again, his eyes narrowing in thought. "Look, there are important people—both inside and outside the agency—who are watching your back. They won't come out and say it, but they believe in what you're doing. They believe in you. They know Egypt wasn't your failure; it was theirs."

He paused, gauging my reaction. "These people... they want you to succeed. They've seen you fight for your team, fight for what's right. They're not going to let you hang out to dry. You've got allies in places you wouldn't expect."

"Who?" I asked, skepticism lacing my words. "And why haven't they stepped up before?"

"Because" Jerry said with a small, knowing smile, "that's how this world works. They're not going to show their hand until it's necessary. But make no mistake, they're there. People with power. Influence. People who see the bigger picture. You've rattled the cage, and they're paying attention."

I sat in silence for a moment, processing his words. I'd fought tooth and nail for my team in Egypt, argued for better intel, better resources, but the bureaucracy had failed us. Now, hearing that there were unseen forces rooting for me, it felt surreal. Part of me wanted to believe it, but another part remained cynical.

"And what about you, Jerry?" I asked, meeting his gaze. "Where do you stand in all of this?"

Jerry's face softened, and for a moment, I saw something in his expression I hadn't seen before: pride.

"I've always believed in you," he said quietly. "Since the day I recruited you. I saw something in you that I knew the agency needed. And over the years, you've proven me right. You've fought for your team, even when it wasn't easy. You didn't let the agency's failures crush you. You stood up, dusted yourself off, and kept going."

He paused, leaning forward, his voice steady but firm. "I'm proud of how you've fought, how you've stood your ground. And I know you're going to win this fight. You always do."

His words hit me harder than I expected. Jerry wasn't one for empty praise and hearing him say he believed in me—it meant more than I could express. The agency had a way of wearing you down, making you feel small, disposable. But at that moment, Jerry's belief in me cut through all of that.

"I appreciate that," I said, my voice a little rougher than I intended. "But you know as well as I do, this fight isn't over. Not by a long shot."

"No," Jerry agreed, a faint smile on his lips. "It's not. But you've got the advantage now. You've got the experience, the team, and—whether they'll admit it or not—the backing of people who matter. Use it. Choose your team. Take control. But keep it under the radar."

I nodded, feeling a sense of resolve to settle over me. I was done with blind obedience. Done trusting people who didn't have skin in the game. From now on, I was going to run on my terms.

"And the agency?" I asked. "What happens when they realize I'm not playing by their rules?"

Jerry's smile widened. "That's the beauty of it. They already know. They just don't want to admit it. And as long as you keep delivering results, they won't question it."

We sat in silence for a few moments, the weight of the conversation hanging between us. There was so much left unsaid, but in this line of work, which was often how it had to be.

Finally, Jerry stood up and extended his hand. "I've got your back. You know that. And so do the others. You're not in this alone."

I stood, gripping his hand firmly. "Thanks, Jerry. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't," he said, his eyes steady. "Now go out there and show them what you're made of."

As I left the office, the weight of the past—Egypt, the failures, the bureaucracy—lifted just slightly. For the first time in a long while, I felt like I was in control of my future, and I was ready to fight for it.

## **Shadows in the Desert**

It was time for a come-to-Jesus meeting, as Don used to call the kind of sit-downs where the truth was laid bare and no one left with clean hands. Sheldon and the Mossad were furious—furious at the blatant attempt to sabotage me and blow up our mission in Egypt. Sheldon Goldstein wasn't just

a high-rolling board member of Crossroads USA in Vegas; he was also my direct link to Mossad. Through their network of deep-cover operatives, they had arranged this meeting to confront the fallout and demand accountability. Someone had tried to burn me, and now the question on everyone's mind was simple: *who was going to pay for it?*

The afternoon sun dipped behind the tall, glass-covered skyscrapers of Cairo, casting long shadows over the bustling streets below. The headquarters of the Egyptian-based investment firm sat perched on the edge of the city, its polished facade gleaming, a stark contrast to the ancient ruins that whispered of past empires. The building was modern, efficient, but there was something about it that felt haunted—a place where the weight of history pressed down on every deal and every decision made within its walls.

I entered the grand lobby, the air-conditioned coolness battling the lingering heat of the desert sun. My contact, an executive from the firm, stood near the reception area. His name was Khaled, a sharp-dressed man with a neatly trimmed beard and an air of polished professionalism. But today, that calm veneer seemed thinner, the lines around his eyes deeper, his handshake just a fraction too firm.

We exchanged pleasantries as we walked toward the conference room where his team waited. Small talk felt irrelevant, but necessary, the calm before the storm. He led me down a hallway, our footsteps echoing in silence.

"I understand the meeting in Egypt didn't go as planned," Khaled finally said, his voice low, eyes avoiding mine.

"Didn't go as planned?" I scoffed. "It was sabotage. You know exactly what happened. You set us up."

Khaled hesitated for a moment, his expression hardening. "We had no idea what was going to unfold. Our role was to facilitate, not interfere."

"Facilitate? You arranged a meeting that almost cost us everything," I shot back. "You were supposed to be our allies in this."

We reached the large double doors of the conference room. Khaled paused before opening them, his hand resting on the sleek brass handle. He turned to me, his voice barely a whisper.

"Inside, they won't admit to anything. But understand this—there are forces at play much larger than either of us. We are pawns in a much bigger game."

His words rang with a hint of truth, but I wasn't buying it. There was a leak, and someone had tipped off our adversaries. I'd spent the last few days picking through the wreckage of our operation, trying to figure out who had betrayed us, and every sign pointed to this company.

As we entered the conference room, the atmosphere shifted. Five men in crisp suits sat around a large mahogany table, their faces impassive, but their eyes tracked me carefully. The weight of the room felt suffocating. This wasn't just another business meeting. This was a showdown.

I took my seat at the head of the table, Khaled, to my left. The tension was palpable as I met the eyes of each person in the room.

"I'm sure you all know why I'm here," I began, my voice steady, controlled. "We had a deal. You were supposed to help us facilitate our operation in Egypt, to ensure things ran smoothly."

"And we did exactly that," one of the men, a senior executive named Fathi, replied coolly. His voice was calm, measured.

"No," I leaned forward, my gaze sharp. "You let us walk into a trap. We were sabotaged. And I have every reason to believe that someone in this room is responsible."

Fathi's expression didn't change. "That's a serious accusation. What proof do you have?"

"The proof is in the outcome," I said, my tone clipped. "We're not fools. We had intel, backup plans, and contingencies. None of that mattered because someone on your end leaked our plans."

Khaled cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking. "We are not here to point fingers. We want the same outcome—success in Iran. There's no value in undermining each other."

"No value?" I shot back. "You've jeopardized the entire operation. Do you think Crossroads is going to just let this slide?"

The name hung in the air like a blade. Crossroads, our front company, had more pull than these men could understand. Backed by layers of CIA cover, it was a behemoth in development, investment, and subterfuge. But that cover was fragile, and the sabotage had nearly shattered it.

"You'll vouch for us," I said, my voice low and deadly serious. "Crossroads is taking over your accounts in Iran. You'll vouch for us or face the consequences."

Fathi exchanged a glance with the other executives. There was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes now, a subtle shift in power dynamics. He leaned

back in his chair, crossing his arms, but I could see the gears turning in his head.

“And if we don’t?” Fathi finally asked, his voice deceptively casual.

I smiled, but it didn’t reach my eyes. “If you don’t, things will unravel quickly for you. We have leverage—financial, political, and... other means. I suggest you don’t test us.”

There was a long, heavy silence. The men at the table were calculating, weighing their options. They weren’t fools. They knew that in the world of high finance and covert operations, alliances could shift in an instant, and refusing to cooperate with an entity like Crossroads would be a fatal mistake.

Khaled broke the silence, his voice tentative. “We understand the gravity of the situation. But we need assurances that moving forward, we will have your support as well.”

“You’ll have it,” I replied, my tone softer but still firm. “But only if you play by our rules. No more games. No more sabotage.”

Fathi leaned forward again, his eyes meeting mine. “Very well. We’ll cooperate. But we want this situation handled discreetly. No public fallout.”

“Discretion is our specialty,” I said. “But make no mistake—we’re watching every move you make.”

Another long silence settled over the room, the weight of the unspoken agreement hanging between us. They would vouch for us. They had no choice. And Crossroads would move into Iran with full backing from the firm. But trust? That was a currency we were no longer willing to trade in.

The meeting ended with little ceremony. As I stood to leave, Khaled walked me to the door, his face strained.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “About everything. We didn’t see it coming either.”

“I hope for your sake that’s true,” I replied, my voice cold. “Because if we find out you’re lying, there won’t be a second chance.”

I left the building, the dry desert air hitting me as I stepped outside. Cairo stretched out before me, a city that had seen empires rise and fall, kingdoms built on ambition and destroyed by betrayal. It was fitting, in a way, that our operation was playing out in this ancient land. The stakes were just as high, the players just as ruthless.

As I walked to my car, the words of one of the ancient Egyptian proverbs echoed in my mind: “The mouth of the righteous man is a well of life, but violence covers the mouth of the wicked.”

WRITTEN BY ROGER S. HOFFMAN

In this world of shadows and deceit, it was hard to tell who was righteous anymore.

And as the sun set on Cairo, I knew that the real game was just beginning.