

## Chapter 15

Tinker's call with Clements had ended badly. What if Clements told Mutton he was plagiarizing cables? Or taking shortcuts in the clearance process, going around Vanna, who anyway read nothing he wrote? He called Clements again, his urgent voice low and harried.

"What is it now, Tinker?" Clements asked.

"Look, I just wanted to apologize. I wanted to make sure everything's ok."

"Is that all?"

"Well, no. Actually, I have a question for you."

"Fine."

"Actually, I have two."

"Don't push it."

"The first is about a visa for Sheikh Mohamed al Bafarti."

"And the second?"

"Well, the second is about. Uh, the second is about No-lips."

"Never heard of him."

After a silence on Tinker's end of the line he asked, "What was that?"

“What was what?”

“That noise.”

“Did you hear it, too?”

“Is there somebody there with you? I thought I heard...”

“Just a minute, Mart-... -ink we have a prob-... -is line... You still there, Mart-... I think... Not quite... -ing you... -it better now? -be -should come over here....”

Clements hung up and shook his head.

“Do you think he’ll come over here?” Pudge asked.

“No way he calls again.” Clements turned to his computer. “Look busy. If we work this right we can fix it so he never comes to this office again.”

They heard him before they saw him. Tinker moved awkwardly, with lots of knocking of heels and swinging of arms and swishing of clothes, dark expensive suits, some with pinstripes, and ties Tinker thought made him a Club Man. Tinker punched a code on the consular door, turned the knob, then bounced past Belvedere’s office and turned quickly into the office where Clements and Pudge stared intently at their screens in an effort to ignore him.

Tinker began in a wild harangue: “All right, this place is...” He had a hand in the air as he built himself up to a shout, but Clements and Pudge continued to type. Tinker, flustered, started to shout. “First of all we’ve got these problems with our telephones, which is why I’m over here to begin with. I mean I, I, I...”

Clements and Pudge continued typing. Tinker cleared his throat. He quieted slightly and said, “What’s up, you guys?” After a pause filled with the sound of rapid typing Tinker tried, humbler still, “Uh, Clements...”

Clements continued typing.

“Clements, uh-”

“-Just a minute, Martin. Here, have a seat.” Clements motioned toward a stool.

“Sure. Sure,” said Tinker. He continued standing by the door, looking important but uncertain in his navy pinstriped suit. Thin navy stripes crossed his red tie, a diamond crest embroidered at the center. Tinker closed the door and sat daintily on the uneven stool next to the corkboard.

“Leave that open,” Pudge said without turning around.

“I don’t want any of the local staff to hear what I have to say,” Tinker whispered. He crossed a leg tightly over his knee and clasped his fingers around his top leg. He scanned the office, repulsed by the disorder. *Doonesbury* comic strips taped to the walls mocked the invasion of Iraq. Papers hung crooked on the tilted corkboard. Sliding piles of applications, cables, travel orders, and dozens of other documents covered both desks. The top drawer of the Mosler safe stood open. A bottle of Johnnie Walker, half empty, stood in plain sight on a bookshelf stuffed with leaning, leaking binders, pamphlets, portfolios, and dictionaries. Tinker considered the mess beneath the dignity of the office, beneath the dignity of the U.S. Government, beneath the dignity of a diplomat serving on the front line of the war on terror.

Clements felt differently. Among the acts of dignity he performed as a diplomat on the front line of the WOT was to answer e-mails from applicants wanting to know when their visas would be issued. He copied and pasted the following message into his response: *Dear \_\_, The U.S. Government is engaged in a great war on terror. While we fight to spread freedom and democracy to lands governed by fear and tyranny, our efforts to adjudicate visas and safeguard the Homeland have slowed. We regret that the unfortunate actions of a few terrorists may cause you to miss your \_\_.* In conclusion Clements inserted a variety of reasons for travel, most

frequently adding *Business trip, semester of college, grandchild's birth, visit to Disney Land*, or, when he felt especially surly, *efforts to immigrate*.

Clements finished sending one such message before turning to Tinker. He leaned over and opened the door. "Stuffy in here."

"If you don't mind," Tinker said, using his covert ops voice, "let's keep it shut for now."

"Suit yourself," Clements said. His voice grew softer until it became a whisper. "But keep in mind. This office isn't secure. Everything that goes on here is... unclassified."

"Careful what you say," Pudge said.

"Well, that's why I wanted to shut the door..."

"Speak softly," said Clements.

Pudge pointed at the florescent lights in the ceiling.

Tinker leaned forward and whispered hoarsely. "This is the reason I'm here in the first place. I don't think we can have this conversation over the phone. We shouldn't be having it here..." Worry gripped his face. He looked at Pudge and Clements with wide eyes.

"You think Interior is listening to our phones?" asked Pudge.

"I'm not sure we should talk about that in this office," said Clements.

"Why don't the two of you come over to my office?"

"You have an office?" asked Pudge, eyebrows raised. "They finally got you an office?"

"My cubby."

"And you think it's safe to talk in your... your cubby?"

"Well, it's certainly safer than talking here."

"What makes you think our phones are tapped?" asked Clements.

"I didn't say that," Tinker said quickly. "But it seems they are listening."

“Who?”

“I can’t say.”

“Then how do you know they’re listening?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Tell me what?”

“Tell you why I can’t say how I know they’re listening.”

“Who?”

“The government.”

“The Saudi Government?” Clements asked.

“*Our* Government?” asked Pudge. “Fourth Branch?”

“Don’t say that,” Tinker said. He stood suddenly, backpedaled, kicked the stool with his heel and nearly fell over. “I never said that. Look, why don’t you guys come over to my off- my cubby, and we’ll talk about it there?”

“Sure, Tinker. Why not?” After all, Clements decided, Tinker wasn’t the enemy. And while Clements had never really trusted the political officer, it was entirely possible that Tinker could be useful in digging up intel on al Bafarti that would make a refusal stick for good.

A visit to Tinker’s cubby was the lesser of two evils for Clements. In exchange for a frustrating, albeit harmless, conversation with the aggravating political officer, Clements stood to eliminate the even more frustrating—and frankly dangerous—questions from the CG about a visa for Sheikh al Bafarti. When Clements arrived Tinker rose from his chair, came around his desk, and rested his buttocks on the edge, arms folded across his chest. Clements refused to sit, hoping to make it quick. He got right to it.

“There was something you wanted to tell us,” Clements said.

With none of the usual stammering Tinker said, “I’m going under cover.”

“I guess that means we won’t be seeing you around?”

“This is serious.”

“It certainly is,” Clements said. Tinker’s delusions were worse than ever. “Have you talked to Dr. Meddler?”

“This op is highly classified. Can’t be discussed outside this secure environment. Strictly Need to Know.”

“Then why are you telling me?”

“I need you as an alibi.”

“What about your boss. Does DB know?”

“He’s nowhere to be seen.”

“What about Vanna?”

“She commissioned the op. And I need an alibi independent of her.”

“So what’s the op?”

“Vanna asked me to investigate links between No-lips and Fourth Branch.”

Clements waited. Nothing. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. You’ll keep it quiet?”

“Absolutely.” No way Clements wanted to be associated with what Tinker had said. “Of course.”

“And you’ll serve as my alibi. While I’m incommunicado? And help pull me back in if I go off-reservation?”

“Of course,” said Clements, though he had no idea what Tinker meant by ‘off-

reservation'. But he knew he'd have to act fast if Tinker was going to be useful to him. The man was slipping quickly. "Meanwhile, maybe there's something you can do for me."

"Name it."

"We have some information of our own to send back. But we can't do it through normal consular channels. We need to use your classified channels."

Tinker rocked nervously. "I don't know. I already circumvent the clearance process enough."

"What clearance process? Vanna doesn't read your cables, anyway. Just have this sent through the Embassy's political section. They won't ask Vanna, especially if it contains a really good scoop."

"What scoop?"

Clements looked around and leaned toward Tinker. He lowered his voice. "Well, for example, we've got strong indications that Sheikh al Bafarti's a terrorist financier."

"The Sheikh?"

"He sympathized with the Taliban when they fought the Russians."

"Vanna's Sheikh al Bafarti?"

Clements nodded. "He provided the cash to purchase their weapons—or, I should say, our weapons. Like another Charlie Wilson."

Skeptical, Tinker stood up straight. He circled back behind his desk, as if to protect himself from Clements' influence. "How do you know this?"

Clements shrugged. "Just have to get out and talk to people." Clements didn't mention that the people he talked to were the other Pierce Pierce and Thorner.

Tinker said, "It isn't much. It isn't financing terror against the U.S."

“It isn’t terrorism at all. At least, it wasn’t. But now that the Taliban are fighting the U.S. and supporting al Qaeda, they’re our enemy. That makes al Bafarti an enemy sympathizer. For all you know, those weapons purchased in Afghanistan were used against Amco over the weekend. They could turn their weapons on us, next.”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you need a second source?”

“Of course,” Tinker said, although he hadn’t thought of that. In fact he was thinking of the praise such a bombshell was going to get him when he cabled it to Washington.

“Pudge will tell you the same thing.”

“Any local sources?”

“Pudge is local. He’s right across the lobby.”

“I mean, can I get someone from the Kingdom to tell me?”

“I think you should cable it now and look for corroborating intel during your covert op. No-lips is sure to have something on this.”

“And you’ll have my back while I’m undercover?”

“Absolutely. Here. Take dictation.”

Tinker sat down and pulled up the cable template. He typed quickly as Clements spoke. When he finished he printed a draft and handed it to Clements:

TOP SECRET/TS  
PROG DATE: Z1300091103  
POL: MTINKER  
005122347

SARB  
PRIORITY: RUSH INTEL  
AMEMBSARB; GCCDL; BME; NEACOLLECTIVE



REDACTED PER SECSTATE 9, 991, 1011 AND ABOVE

SUBJECT: [REDACTED]

1. SUMMARY: THIS IS AN ACTION CABLE, SEE PARA SIX. LOCAL SOURCES CONFIRM ACCUSATIONS OF TERROR FINANCE ACTIVITIES BY [REDACTED] AND OFFER AS EVIDENCE THE FOLLOWING POINTS.
2. KNOWN ASSOCIATES [REDACTED] CLAIMED TO HAVE BEEN [REDACTED] STINGER MISSILES.
3. [REDACTED] TALIBAN AND [REDACTED] EXACT LOCATION OF THE SUBJECT.
4. [REDACTED] SUBJECT'S [REDACTED] HEROIN TRAFFICKING [REDACTED].
5. [REDACTED] FROM APPROXIMATELY 1982-1986 [REDACTED].
6. ACTION REQUESTED: UPGRADE [REDACTED], DOB [REDACTED] ON AMERICA'S CONSOLIDATED HOMELAND OBSERVATION OUTLET (ACHOO) AS 666 and 911 HITS, PERMANENTLY INELIGIBLE FOR TRAVEL, AS OF DATESTAMP RELEASE OF THIS MESSAGE.

"This is very good," Clements said. "Very convincing."

"You think so?"

"I think so. You might also want to add ' [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. That might get you a Meritorious Honor Award."

"What? Say that again."

“

[REDACTED]

”

“I don’t think you substantiated that.”

“I don’t have to.” Clements drew closer to Tinker and lowered his voice. “Take a closer look under cover. No-lips has this information. I’m certain we can hang him up on [REDACTED]

”