

MARK AIR

A LEVI HART THRILLER

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RICHARD CRAIG ANDERSON

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT MARK AIR

“A masterful blend of fact and fiction. A brilliant adventure thriller with nail biting action scenes. I should know. I've been there and done that, but don't need the T-shirt.” —*Bob Tanenholz, BMCM SEAL (ret) and former counter-terrorist operative*

“*Mark Air* is a brilliant thriller. The author's expertise and knowledge of our government's surveillance and clandestine operations make the reader feel as if they're part of the team. *Mark Air* is a must-read for law enforcement as well as those who strive to remain vigilant to our country's terrorist threats.” —*Joseph B. Ross, Jr., best-selling author of Patapsco Station: Tragedy on the Rails and In the Shadow of the Flames: Baltimore's 1968 April Riots*

“Gators, guns, and guts. In another powerful and dark Levi Hart thriller, Rick Anderson shows again that he is a master of the genre. Both hunted and hunter, Levi Hart not only has to protect himself, he must also shield his family while stopping a catastrophic terrorist incident. The modern day realism will raise the hair on the back of the neck of anyone who reads the news today...and hopefully increase your situational awareness. Impossible to put down.”
—*Gary Ryman, author of Mayday! Firefighter Down, and his latest, Fire In His Bones*

“Anderson does it again with a book that literally starts out on fire and burns all the way. His colorful characters of hedonists and heroes paint a portrait of hope for humanity.” —*Lt. Jim Halvorsen (Ret. New York State Police)*

*This story is lovingly dedicated to Joyce Emge.
It's also for Kid. I hope I did your story justice.
I hope; I hope.*

Mark Air was conjoined to form the name *MarkAir* when it began flight service in Alaska in the 1940s. By the '90s it had expanded into operations along America's West Coast, and then into Central and South America. But according to a handful of former employees, the airline was a front for clandestine CIA operations. These employees also swore that some of its flights were false flag ops—covert operations designed to make it appear that an enemy is carrying out an aggressive act when in fact it is not. False flag ops aren't limited to war, however. They can be used during times of assumed peace.

The speculations circling around Mark Air were never proven, but they lent an aura of mystery and adventure to an otherwise everyday airline. At any rate Mark Air officially disbanded in 1996—although rumors persist that it simply flew into a cloud layer where it entered a holding pattern until emerging in the wake of 9/11. There is even speculation from reliable sources that more than a few of its former personnel are now engaged in a new round of clandestine activities.

PART I

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Hollywood Beach, Florida

Spotters Night Club

August 3

1:10 a.m.

CHAPTER ONE

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Day One

THE OLDER OF the two bearded men moved his mouth closer to his colleague's ear and said in Arabic, "Clearly she must die."

The colleague's mouth became a straight line as he regarded the young woman of their interest. She was blonde and blue with tanned legs that glistened below a stylishly short skirt, and when she tossed her head with a practiced motion, the ends of her hair whisked her lower back with a regal grace.

But it was her hip sway that had held the first man's attention, especially after the DJ's mix of samba and African drums increased in tempo before combining with strobes to contribute an electric vibe. She and her boyfriend caught the new beat at once, the lad matching her elegant moves skillfully. His fluid movements evidently pleased several of the other women, for they began smiling with pure pleasure as they watched. But it wasn't until he urged the girl on and her dancing became sexier that the older man had glanced at his companion and arched an eyebrow.

Swirling his soft drink while watching the couple, the man recalled praising the boyfriend earlier for his taste in lovers. The

boy had offered a very male grin in response, but quickly adding that he was very much in love with her. “We’re engaged.”

The older man had bobbed his head up and down. “Ah. Marriage. It is sacred.” Then he winked at the boy. “Although it is not so sacred that it prevents you from tasting the fruits of the marriage bed beforehand, yes?” But the remark was a flop, for the boy had turned out to be a gentleman, one who refused to divulge his sex life—although the glimmer of pride that lit his face had revealed the truth.

That was then. Now the man grunted and watched the girl’s lithe movements awhile longer before sauntering off. His colleague waited, the ice in his glass melting from the heat of his sweaty palm. Finally he set the glass aside and stepped outside into a night whose hot humid air was made pungent by a low tide’s sea smells. He found the older man standing quietly near the entrance, but he walked past without a word and got into a windowless van that was parked a short distance away. After settling into the driver’s seat, he waited yet again.

When the couple finally walked unsteadily out of the club, the older man abruptly stepped forward and blocked their path. “If you please,” he said, while holding up a map and tapping a finger on a spot circled with red ink. “Would you be so kind as to direct me to this place?”

The guy shrugged. “Sorry. I’m not from around here. Don’t you have like, GPS?”

“Ah, unfortunately I do not.” The bearded man placed a hand over his heart and tilted his head. “So. If you please?” As a warm ocean gust sent a tattered paper tumbling across the dark parking lot, he handed over the map and aimed a penlight at it.

The young man shrugged, glanced down, and after a brief examination he nodded rapidly and looked up, only to find

himself staring down the barrel of an automatic pistol. “Whoa! Dude! What’s with the gun?”

Shoving the large pistol into the boy’s ribcage, the man said in a low tone, “Shut up or you shall surely die. Here; now. The woman, too.”

The young man’s eyes darted about in search of help. Unfortunately, they were in a lonely spot. So he exhaled loudly and said resignedly, “My wallet’s in my back pocket. You’re welcome to my Omega, but it’s a knock-off.”

“Yes. I will take both. First though, you shall get inside.” He jutted his jaw toward the van that was now edging toward them with its lights out. As the couple climbed in, the man followed and surreptitiously stuck a syrette loaded with 150 mg of midazolam into the boy’s arms. His eyelids fluttered at once and he keeled over onto the floor. While the girl’s attention was diverted, he stuck her with another syrette. Midazolam is the same sedative given to condemned inmates once they’re strapped to the gurney. It leaves patients subdued and able to walk, but it wears off fast. As the man gagged the boy and girl, he spoke in Arabic to his associate. “We leave now. Drive north straight-away but not hurriedly. We have no wish to draw attention to ourselves.”

Ten minutes later the van entered a barren patch of Ocean Road, with the intra-coastal waterway to the west and the Atlantic to the east. In due course the driver turned into an empty strip of parking spaces used by daytime beachgoers. It was desolate now, the beach too dangerous at night even for casual visitors. Cruising slowly up the street, he turned onto North Surf Road and parked alongside a large dune.

Working quickly, the men slung small backpacks over their shoulders. Next, they got the couple out and hustled them across a short wooden bridge that spans the dune to provide access to the beach, where the ocean’s subtle surf sounds lent

reassurance of sorts. After calling a halt at the end of the bridge, the older man brought out a small night vision device and thumbed the switch. Night became day in the form of a green TV-like image in the eyepiece. After performing a thorough scan of the beach to make sure they were alone, he turned it off and urged the girl toward a large metal post that anchored one end of a volleyball net.

She struggled weakly, but he quickly secured her to it by using a flex-cable and industrial tape. He stepped back and pointed an accusing finger, but her eyes rolled wildly. “You wear no wedding band,” he began. “And yet no male relatives accompanied you to that den of Satan. There you danced with this man who is not your husband. Also, he has made it clear that you and he have been intimate.” She stiffened, and then her eyes rolled wildly while she made guttural noises against the gag.

Turning to his colleague, the man gave him a look before jabbing another syrette into the boyfriend’s arm. An instant later the man was brushing at the sand with broad sweeps until he uncovered a large wooden cross fashioned from rough-hewn four by fours. The wood smelled green and the cross itself resembled a life-sized crucifix without the Christ figure.

Next, the men muscled the boy atop the cross and lashed his wrists and ankles to it. Then they pulled a handful of five-inch construction nails from their bags. That’s when the boy went bug-eyed and began twisting and squirming. But he might have saved his strength, because in the next instant he was making animal sounds through his gag when the assailants began hammering the huge nails through his hands and into the wood.

Once they’d nailed the hands in place, they ripped the boy’s shoes off and drove nails through both feet until they were also pinned. Still working quickly, they heaved the cross into

a previously dug hole and shoveled sand in. Next, they piled large rocks at its base to hold it upright. Then while the salt-tinged ocean breeze swept their hair and the surf gently rolled back and forth, the men stepped back to check their work.

Once the older man was satisfied, he spoke to the boy. "Allah does not wish death upon you. He wishes only that you seek forgiveness of your sins by converting to our faith. For only then can you find true love." He pressed his lips together and slowly shook his head. "Sadly, Allah's benevolence does not extend to this harlot with whom you've had relations. A man may be excused for such a sin and pay a lesser price. But a woman can never be paroled from the fate that is dictated. So. We shall carry out Sharia law, which in this matter is as unequivocal as it is certain."

The gag over the boy's mouth ballooned in and out as he began hyperventilating, while the whites of the girl's eyes showed at the men's approach.

Stroking his beard, the older man turned to his colleague. "Yes. We must make an example of this infidel."

The younger man pressed his lips together before bobbing his head up and down. Then he scurried to the thick vegetation along the dunes, and returned with a five-gallon fuel can. As the girl strained at her bonds and made muffled noises, he poured the can's contents over her until the air reeked from gasoline.

The leader waited until she stopped struggling before addressing her. "Accept Allah into your heart. Do it quickly." When the boy on the cross began sobbing, the man turned angry eyes on him. "Stop it! Be grateful. For you shall pay a lesser price for your sins, by living to tell others why she had to die."

The boy fired a deadly look at him, then redoubled his efforts to get free. But he could only groan and shake his head repeatedly

as the man pulled a disposable lighter from a pocket and held it up for the girl to see. “Perhaps I shall let you live if you make a plea for mercy. Well?” He arched an eyebrow, and waited.

He didn’t have to wait long. Her eyes turned hard and her reply was clear despite the gag: “Go fuck yourself.”

He glared and squared his shoulders. “If I heard correctly, you said, ‘praise be to ISIS’.” Then his mouth formed a tight-lipped smile as he flicked the lighter to life and touched its flame to her gas-soaked clothing as casually as if lighting birthday candles.

A whoosh filled the night air. Then the smell of charring flesh fouled the off-shore breeze. Her neck arched involuntarily, sending her head against the cruel metal pole. But it was her gut-wrenching cries, stifled though they were, that overrode the nauseating stench. Then the gag burned away, revealing glistening white teeth that were clenched tight in the primal agonal response of paroxysm distress.

“Enough,” the younger of the two men cried. Rushing to the girl, he pulled a pistol from beneath his shirt and shot her in the forehead. “It is all about mercy,” he said.

The older one simply turned and walked away. Meanwhile, the breeze whipped the flames with a fury that was turning night into day.

Twelve hours later. Miami International Airport

HOURS AFTER THE flames died and darkness had succumbed to sunlight, Levi Hart stepped onto the Airbus for a two hour flight to D.C.’s Reagan National. He was so bone-tired that he ambled rather than marched down the aisle, all the while drawing closer to where Michael and Monica were already seated.

Michael Bailey was fortyish and blessed with heart stopping looks that were outdone only by his good heartedness. The

thirtysomething Monica Mastronardi was an evocative, skillfully made woman of great beauty, and the two of them were seated in an exit row which offered extra room for Michael's long legs. The added space also served as a blessing to Monica, now eight months along with Michael's baby. Unfortunately, a malfunctioning armrest along with another issue remained as a barrier between them.

Levi passed by them without so much as a howdy-do. But when he glanced at the clean-shaven guy with olive skin and piercing eyes in 22-D, he felt a visceral tug and went into poker-playing mode, discreetly watching the passenger for tells. Levi also noted how the guy sat hunched forward while craning his neck at the rear lavs, and he thought, *Those aren't call-of-nature looks. No way. This guy's holding a hot hand.*

Hot or not, Levi shuffled on as any ordinary passenger would, despite being anything but. Although he was slender and angular with a pleasant lean face and heavy auburn hair brushed straight back, the shy grin beneath knowing eyes provided subtle clues to his chameleon-like ability to blend with a variety of social strata. Equally comfortable in tuxedo or motorcycle leathers, he had on an impeccably tailored navy blue sport coat over a crisp white shirt with the top two buttons left fashionably undone. His khaki trousers were of fine materials, the Bally loafers were polished to a high gleam, and he'd added a hint of cologne to the base of his throat.

These things, coupled with the fact that at forty-two he easily passed for thirty, helped him pass as just another agreeable young man—except that in addition to nice clothes, he was packing a SIG Sauer P229 .357 pistol in a shoulder holster beneath the jacket. He also wore a fresh scar on the left side of his neck—though some might argue that the scar added a raffish quality to his undeniably good looks.

While still drawing closer to his seat, he noted a small man of

Congolese descent settling in alongside the aisle. Hacksaw Jones yawned but otherwise ignored Levi, whom he'd seen only a short time ago after he, Levi, Michael and Monica boarded the aircraft from the tarmac in the company of a plainclothes security agent. The agent had walked the armed team through labyrinth corridors to secretly board the aircraft before other passengers were allowed on. This procedure let them comply with an FAA requirement that armed personnel must meet with flight crews and other armed passengers on a flight. In this way they can eyeball each other while showing their badges without revealing their identities to regular passengers and potential terrorists alike.

Levi and his team had been sworn in as Special Deputy U.S. Marshals because of their activities as counter-terrorist operatives, and in the post 9/11 world they and certain other personnel were encouraged to fly armed. It's why they'd done the meet-and-greet earlier, after which Michael and Monica took their seats while Hack ducked into a lav. As for Levi, with the FAA rule taken care of, he'd de-planed the same way he got on, and went inside the terminal to board with the "regular" passengers.

It's why he was only now reaching his aisle seat, where he stowed his carry-on and looked down in time to catch the dazzling woman in the center seat staring at him with her mouth frozen in a silent *Oh*.

He knew the source of her concern, and while touching the scar on his neck he offered a disarming smile. "My cat. I fell while carrying her. Poor thing scratched me during her most desperate leap to safety." He winked. "It's okay. I still love her."

Her shoulders slumped. "*Gawd*. I thought you'd been attacked." She touched long tapering fingers to her heart. "Anyway, it's sweet that you're so devoted to her."

Levi thought to himself, *That cat-scratch story sure does melt the ladies' hearts. Nice, but damn . . . what I wouldn't give to be back with Sophia.*

He'd recently enjoyed six romantic months with the stunning helicopter pilot, and had even begun thinking of marriage and a new family. His hopes plummeted however when she admitted her inability to handle the long work-related absences he'd warned her about. They parted—but as dear friends.

As if the woman had been reading his thoughts, he saw her stare pointedly at his wedding band. When she pouted, he winked. "Not everything's as it appears."

No, they were not. Nor had the henchman who'd sliced Levi's neck with a razor-sharp knife been what he'd appeared to be. The faded scar testified to Levi's last mission, one so classified that it'd been marked TOP SECRET/SCI. The Sensitive Compartmented Information add-on—the SCI—was so strict that the team could not discuss it even among themselves without an official reason.

And Levi saw no reason to talk about it—not to anyone. Nor did he care to openly discuss his feelings about the news of last night's horrific attack. But he'd heard the sole survivor's account of what had taken place. That alone left him thinking about how so many sad events are built upon sexual dysfunction, which in turn creates uptight people who vent their frustrations on others by using sex as a weapon, until what should be a superbly natural aspect of life ends up distorting and often ruining the lives of innocents. He truly believed things might have been different if only Hitler had gotten laid more often. *Sex is like food. It's healthy and there's nothing like being a stud in the kitchen and a chef in bed. Yep, it's all good.* But he knew that food can turn people into gluttons, and his gut told him that the Hollywood beach incident would turn out to be the end-result of a similar sickness.

So after another quick-peek at Mr. 22-D, Levi plopped into his seat and held up his ring finger for the woman to see. "It's only for show. I fly often enough to know that flight attendants provide better service to married guys. Don't ask me why."

She smiled. “Well you certainly know how to dress for the ladies. *Nice* sport jacket.” Leaning closer, she closed her eyes and sniffed. “What’s that you’re wearing? Something woody; Oriental.”

“Mont Blanc. *Individuel*. Spelled accordingly. It’s one of their premier scents.”

“It’s divine.” She gestured at his watch. “You’re also wearing a Patek Philippe. And yet you’re in coach.”

“Last minute flight. Couldn’t get anything up front.”

“That explains it. Same here.” She crossed shapely legs and looked at him.

Buckling up, he said, “I’m Levi.”

She squinted. “Does a surname attach?”

“Hart,” he said without hesitation. “Levi Hart.”

“Ah, what a nice Jewish name.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I get that all the time.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s a fine name for men who show their hearts—pun intended.” She peered at his open collar. “It also goes well with that Star of David.”

He touched it and smiled. Left unsaid was that an intimate physical examination would show that he was not Jewish—and yet a Star of David did indeed hang from his neck. It had belonged to President Mark Cohen’s murdered son, and Cohen had given it to Levi two years earlier after they’d forged a deep friendship. But his job forced him to dance around questions about scars and religions, so he tucked the necklace out of sight before asking out of politeness, “Are you of the faith?”

“Protestant.” She touched his forearm. “You remind me of a Jewish boy I dated in college. He was quite lovely.” She smiled at a distant memory before asking, “Do you live in D.C.?”

“Georgetown.”

“Really? How wonderful. Old Town Alexandria. We’re practically neighbors.” With a casual flip of the head that sent

her chestnut hair brushing her shoulders, she lifted the armrest and pushed it back. Now free of its confines, she opened a Coach handbag and pulled out a business card. Then she scooted closer before offering it. “My personal number.”

Levi took the card, and after reading the name and title he glanced at her with a new appraisal. “Physician. And yet so young.”

“Hmm. I see you know how to flatter the ladies. And with such sangfroid. By the way, have I mentioned your innocent yet dazzling blue eyes?”

He returned her serve with a boyish look. “Ah, darn. You beat me to it. I was about to say the same about your eyes. But you already knew that. Didn’t you?”

“You’re very direct. One more reason why we should get together.” She patted his thigh and rested her hand on it. “I would also like to see this naughty kitty of yours. Or do you prefer *pussy*?”

A bemused Levi said, “And here I thought this would be a hum-drum flight.” He already knew it was destined to be a memorable flight—but not one built upon flirting, although he loved bold women. As fortune would have it, she was unwittingly providing a perfect cover because he had to assume that Mr. 22-D might be evaluating him as a possible threat. As for Michael and Monica, they were bullet-proof as a couple about to have a child. Nor would anybody bother suspecting Hacksaw, because he was black and people would avoid looking at him. So Levi decided to exploit the back and forth with this gregarious woman to his advantage, even as the nagging feeling about Mr. 22-D began to peak.

Segueing into proactive mode, he made a point of offering his phone number and casually steering their conversation in another direction. “Say, isn’t the news from Hollywood Beach terrible?”

She shuddered. “It’s positively dreadful.” She looked around,

the fear in her eyes a living thing. “The news reporters are saying ISIS was behind it.”

“ISIS hasn’t claimed responsibility,” he said at once.

“No?” She frowned. “The boy said they were bearded Middle Easterners.” She trembled again. “Naturally I feel bad for him. But that poor girl. What a horrible, horrible way to die.” She winced. “I still don’t understand this Sharia Law.”

“Islam has two principal factions. Sharia embraces a literal interpretation of the Quran.”

“Well it’s all so confusing and far too close to home if you ask me.”

“Yes. Too close.” Then it hit him. The guy in 22-D matched the suspect in the police artist sketches that had been released only hours ago, since as luck would have it, detectives had been able to interview the boy soon after he came out of surgery; after orthopedic surgeons realigned the bones in his hands and feet; after his grief-induced sobbing turned to anger and revenge for what they’d done to his fiancée. But the suspects in the sketches had beards. This guy didn’t. Fortunately, the sketch artist made a version without beards. And Mr. 22-D was a match.

Using his peripheral vision, Levi glanced at Hacksaw and saw him worrying the end of his nose to signify that he’d also made the connection. Levi then raised his alert level to DEFCON Three and began sensing things with greater clarity, such as passengers still stuffing carry-ons into overheads before plopping into seats, and the trace odors emanating from the lavs. He could even taste the foul chemical smells, and to combat them he adjusted the overhead vent as any passenger would until its air flow created a positive-pressure cocoon around him.

At the same time he got his smart phone and went online and was checking the police sketches anew when he caught 22-D staring at an older, olive-skinned man seated nearby.

Levi examined the sketches: it was the other suspect. But if bad news was about to break then he was one composed character, because his eyes were calmly moving back and forth as he turned the pages of an airline magazine.

Levi waited until Hacksaw executed a quick-look in his direction before flicking his eyes at the other suspicious passenger. When Hack acknowledged with a cavernous yawn, Levi sent a text to Michael and Monica alerting them to the suspects. Then he got up and went to the lone attendant guarding the rear galley.

The trim, old-school attendant asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am." He leaned closer. "There's a problem." He didn't bother telling her who he was; they'd met during the meet-and-greet. "22-D," he began. "And the guy two rows behind him. They're perfect matches of the suspects in last night's beachside homicide."

She faked a friendly smile for the sake of onlookers. "Interesting. See, I already noticed the younger one. Antsy as hell, isn't he?"

Levi tossed his head back and laughed as if they'd traded a joke, then said in a low voice, "Have the captain request immediate police assistance." When she picked up her intercom phone, he sent a text to Hacksaw telling him to stand by. Then he waited until all the passengers were seated before texting Michael and Monica. Seconds later they got up and pulled their bags from the overhead compartment and began searching through them to mask their reason for being up and ready to spring into action.

While watching the men, Levi said to the attendant, "I'll stand here until the police arrive." After she winked he stepped back into the galley's shadows.

But too late. 22-D abruptly looked over his shoulder at him, then caught his partner's attention. A message must have

passed, because the young man got up and came to the galley, where he gave Levi a curious once-over.

“How’re you doing?” Levi began easily.

“Why do you look at me?” The Arab accent was obvious and his voice remained steady. But his white shirt, although open at the neck and neatly tucked inside his dark slacks, bore damp stains at the armpits. He tapped a thumb against his own chest. “I ask you question. Now answer me.”

“Hey, pal. Relax. I’m here to use the lav.” He tilted his head at the closed door.

“Then why do you not use it?”

Levi winked. “Because you’re right. I am staring at you. See, the thing is, I find you to be quite attractive.”

“Attractive?” He glared. “Now I see. You are homosexual. Bah!”

Thinking he’d satisfied the suspect’s curiosity, Levi hoped he’d sit back down and remain quiet until officers arrived. But it was not to be.

“You are wicked,” the young man said.

“Wicked in bed,” Levi fired back. “Say, why don’t we get together for a drink?”

“*Drink?*” He pointed a finger at Levi’s chest like a pistol. “I should kill you.”

“No,” Levi said evenly. “You should not. And you will not. Now go sit down.”

The guy licked his lips. He stared at a bank of coffee pots—then lunged.

Levi was ready. He captured the suspect’s wrist in a vice grip, then jerked him forward, using the momentum as leverage to swing him around. While pinning the arm behind his opponent’s back, Levi said in a firm tone, “Police. Don’t move.” Then he pulled out a set of handcuffs and slapped them on.

Levi was easing his prisoner against the counter to frisk him when his peripheral vision detected a blur.

The older suspect was charging around the corner.

Levi spun and faced him.

The assailant clenched his hands.

Levi's eyes glazed over with street-fighter intensity. "Don't even think about it."

All at once Hacksaw materialized behind the older one and said in a clipped voice, "Police. Back away. Do it now."

Their adversary's eyes darted about until he made a show of relaxing. "My friends. There is no need for this. I am called Kalil. This is my colleague. We work together. I only came to see why he is distressed. There is nothing to worry about." The man smiled but his eyes shouted that he was anything but friendly. "Now if you do not mind, I respectfully demand that you release my friend. I . . ."

"No," Levi said in a tone so hushed that it commanded obedience. He produced his credentials and held them up for Kalil.

A new smile crawled to Kalil's lips and curved itself like a snake. "Perhaps if I offer identification of my own, yes?" He reached into a back pocket and began sliding a wallet out.

"No you don't," Hacksaw said. "Hands behind your back. *Now.*"

"As you wish." Kalil stood in stoic silence while Hacksaw cuffed him.

Meanwhile, Levi turned toward the attendant and saw that she was already on the intercom phone. "Well?"

"Cops are en route. ETA of five."

"Thanks." Hacksaw pulled Kalil's wallet out and handed it to Levi. His practiced fingers immediately went to three credit cards neatly aligned in special holders. Pulling the first one out, he saw that its bottom edge had been honed razor-sharp. It was an old street-fighter's trick for getting around laws against carrying straight razors. A sharpened credit card

appears innocuous to the untrained or uninitiated—that is until it’s whisked from a wallet and held between strong fingers while being drawn across a victim’s throat.

The other cards were also razor sharp. Levi searched the younger suspect and found three similarly honed cards. He said to Kalil, “Turn around.” When Kalil squinted at him, Levi’s face became a mask as he regarded his adversary. *This guy’s super smart. But not smart enough to drop the bravado. A sharp operator would be acting as if he’s intimidated by me. But his ego won’t let him.*

Levi conducted a thorough search and found a Saudi Arabian passport which he tossed onto the galley’s stainless-steel counter. A clatter of loose change joined it. After inspecting even the shoes and finding no other weapons, he looked up to see that Michael and Monica were there.

Events moved rapidly. The police arrived and the passengers turned their heads to watch the ensemble march down the aisle—and Levi’s erstwhile seatmate was foremost in gawking at him. The team retrieved their carry-ons and accompanied their prisoners to the airport’s PD station. A police captain then notified the FBI, since the abduction and the girl’s immolation bore the earmarks of a terrorist attack.

Special Agent Roy White arrived soon after and introduced himself to Levi. The Bureau boy’s face was that of an aged fighter. He wore a dark blue polo shirt with an FBI logo and khaki BDU pants. A pistol and a badge were belted into place. This clearly wasn’t Toto’s suit-and-tie Kansas, but Levi talked shop with him anyway to break any ice before he and the team provided statements. Which they did. And then that was it. After White dismissed them, they went to the ticket counter to book another flight.

But the last flight to Reagan National had already departed, so Levi asked for a flight to nearby Dulles. When told that it

was also full, he asked about Baltimore. “I’m so sorry,” the agent said. “The last flight to BWI is also completely sold out.”

Levi thought it odd that there were so many full flights in the off-season, until he remembered the huge crowds at the international art extravaganza that he and the others had been to. So he booked tomorrow’s first available flight to Reagan, which wasn’t even scheduled to depart until 2:10 p.m.

AFTER A COURTESY shuttle dropped the team at an aging and musty-smelling Airport Embassy Suites, Levi stood in line with other travelers and listened to Hack’s back and forth with the desk clerk. Hack ended up with a room on the fifth floor. Michael asked for one on the fourth, and Levi requested a third floor suite.

Mumbling “Three sixteen” to the others as he walked past them, he headed for the elevators knowing that they would go to their own rooms at separate intervals in an effort to avoid drawing attention to the team as a whole—and after dumping their bags they would proceed to Room 316 for a debriefing.

Immediately upon stepping inside his room, Levi twisted the dead-bolt into place, kicked off his shoes and opened his carry-on. Tossing a small toilet kit to one side, he pulled out clean socks and underwear for tomorrow and zipped the bag closed. Later tonight he would iron the shirt and pants he currently had on and wear them again. The others would do likewise—a procedure that let them travel light, inasmuch as they didn’t care what either of them wore so long as they had fresh stuff on underneath. And since other people never saw them more than once anyway, they wouldn’t know what the team members had worn the day before.

Next, he stared at the inviting shower and he was considering taking a long hot one following the debrief, when four knocks

at the door were followed by a pause, then two more. Although he expected the others, he still peered through the peephole before turning the dead-bolt and letting Hack inside. When Michael and Monica arrived a minute later, Michael plopped onto the sofa and Monica settled heavily into his open arms with a groan. Levi waited until she waggled a bit in search of a comfort zone before starting the debrief—a practice he'd begun as *Dragon Team's* leader.

They represented one half of Dragon Team, and they were a component of Vanguard International. Vanguard's several eight-person teams were contracted out as high-end protective details for major-players. The teams were also used in high-speed counter-terrorist ops when government officials needed something done without putting their necks on the line. The company also provided operatives to supplement the FBI's stressed resources, now that terrorist attacks throughout Europe were growing closer to home. The mass shootings in San Bernardino, the attack at the gay nightclub in Orlando, the slaughter at the Las Vegas outdoor concert, and the growing tide of pedestrians being mowed down with vehicles were seen as the rising winds of a gathering storm.

That's why when the Bureau asked Dragon Team to mingle among the throngs at the art show as extra eyes and ears, Levi took Hacksaw and the parents-to-be with him. Meanwhile, his assistant team leader and the rest of the team were taking a much-needed period of down time following the strain of their last mission. To be sure, Levi and this half would have joined them were it not for the Bureau's request. Once back home though, they would take their thirty days.

Levi watched Hacksaw grab a chair. His real name was Quenton Jones, but he'd been dubbed "Hacksaw" while working as a locksmith to put himself through William and Mary. Hack spoke in the relaxed rhythms of the Virginia Tidlands, and yet

he had a masters in English lit, was fluent in three languages, he'd been a crackerjack criminal investigator, and only Levi could outshoot him on the range—which said a lot, since the entire team ranked among the top 1% of the shooters in the world.

Looking at them, Levi said, “We did good in nabbing that pair.”

Hack fidgeted. “Yes, although I fear that we shall now be consigned to endless appearances at their trials—a prospect that makes me shudder, positively shudder.”

When Monica cleared her throat, Levi looked at her and waited. Her black hair framed high cheek bones and sea green eyes, and he thought her distended belly only added to the former Hollywood F/X expert's beauty.

Clenching her hands, she bit off her words. “I'll travel here a hundred times if that's what it takes to convict them.” After taking a deep breath and releasing it, she lay her head on Michael's shoulder and planted a familiar hand on his knee.

Levi knew that the lean and lanky retired police captain's heart had few limits, despite the horrible childhood he'd endured. Levi now flicked his eyes at him.

Michael caressed Monica's shoulder with long fingers and shifted gears. “I called Nadia. Told her we're stuck here. She sends her regards to you and Hack.”

Levi nodded, knowing that Nadia would have sent her regards, and had probably chatted it up with Monica—this insight the result of an impassioned love affair that he and Nadia had enjoyed long before she met Michael and became his wife.

As Michael pulled Monica closer, he told Levi, “I gave her our room number in case of emergency. Yours, too—if she needs to talk.”

“Of course.” Levi met his friends' eyes and pressed his lips tight, then said briskly, “If there's nothing else, our OTD is 1100 hours.”

“Got it,” the others chorused, and rose to leave. OTD—Out-The-Door time—meant just that: be in the lobby with bags packed and ready to go, or get left behind. Get left behind once, shame on you. Miss a second Out-The-Door time? Start looking for another job, because you’re history.

After turning the deadbolt behind them, he considered going downstairs to the bar for a shot of bourbon, but opted instead for that hot shower followed by a sit-down in front of the TV.

With the shower done, he flipped through the channels. But after finding no breaking news of the arrests, he watched a new PBS program on 9/11. Levi held a graduate degree in history, and so he naturally had a keen interest in tonight’s topic.