

(excerpt from Chapter Eight of *Layover in Dubai*, by Dan Fesperman)

A Bedouin stood watch over the body, knee-deep in a depression of sand some thirty yards off the empty highway. His face reminded Sam of one of those 19th-century lithographs of Apache warriors – weathered skin, perpetual squint, a latent fierceness held in abeyance by a taut frown. His hair was long and black, and covered by a traditional white headdress that he had looped into place with a black *egal*. A red Toyota Land Cruiser, presumably his, was parked on the shoulder.

Even with Sharaf pushing the Camry to the limit, it had taken nearly two hours to get there. As they braked to a halt, Sam saw that the body was barely visible from the road.

“How did he ever see it?”

“You or I wouldn’t have,” Sharaf said, his hand on the door latch. “The lazy people who dumped it wouldn’t have, either. That’s why they thought it was a suitable spot. But the Bedu always notice, and Daoud has an especially keen eye.”

“You know him?”

“Many years.”

Daoud approached the car. The two men greeted each other with a ritual of hugs and of hands placed on hearts. Daoud spoke while Sharaf listened. Sam didn’t understand a word.

Sharaf nodded and uttered a brief reply. Then Daoud led them to the body, where flies buzzed in a frenzy. Sam, bringing up the rear, saw immediately that it was the woman from the York.

She lay curled on her side, like she had gone to sleep, but there was a huge hole in the back of her head, gaping black and brown from dried blood and brain. The blue sequins of her dress shimmered in the late morning sun, except across the front, where they were stained by blood. The dress was hiked up high on her thighs. Her hose were torn, and the end of a gun barrel poked from beneath her waist.

Sharaf stooped for a closer look, focusing first on her legs. They were bent at the knees, and her ankles were bound tightly to her thighs by a stiff white cord.

“To keep her from kicking while they had her in the trunk,” he said. “They didn’t shoot her until they got here, so they wouldn’t make a mess in the vehicle.”

Sam kept his distance, nauseous at the sight of the flies coming and going from her mouth, her nostrils, and the ragged cavity at the base of her skull. Sharaf continued with his observations.

“After they shot her, they tossed the gun into the depression and dropped her on top. Wiped all the prints first, no doubt. A Makarov nine millimeter.”

“You can tell just from the barrel?”

“I saw the shells at the York. The rest is guesswork. We’ll soon know for sure.”

Daoud directed their attention to a nearby set of tire tracks. Sharaf straightened, watching carefully as the Bedouin crouched and ran his fingertips across the imprint. Daoud then gazed back toward the highway, scanning the vehicle’s looping path. He spoke for a few seconds.

“He says it was an SUV, a BMW X5. Two passengers besides the woman. They arrived a few hours before dawn, and they were in no particular hurry.”

“All that from the tire tracks? Do you believe him?”

“When Daoud was a boy, his father could look at a set of camel prints and tell you how many riders had passed, how recently, their tribes, what quarter of the desert they had come from, and whether any of the animals were stolen. The means of transportation have changed, but the Bedu can still read the signs of any passing traveler in the sand. Normally for even half that information you would need an entire crew from the crime lab, with markers and plaster casts. But why waste valuable resources when Daoud can offer an instant reading free of charge, simply out of friendship and honor.”

Sam looked at Daoud and nodded appreciatively.

“Salaam aleikum,” he offered, expending half his supply of Arabic in the process.

“Aleikum salaam” Daoud replied, nodding solemnly.