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WASHINGTON, D.C.

AFTER MEETING WITH WINSTON SMITH, Hoag and Kinlaw walked up the hallway to the elevator. As they stood there waiting, a woman appeared from around the corner. Her sudden appearance startled Hoag.

“David,” she smiled.

Hoag responded with a tense smile. “Jenny. Good to see you.” His eyes darted away. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach. His hands were damp and clammy.

She turned to Kinlaw, “Dennis.” Her tone was polite but disinterested. “How is Debby?”

“She’s fine.” Kinlaw smiled and nodded. “You’re looking well.”

“Thanks.” She turned back to Hoag. “Thought you might be out here today.”

“Ahh, yeah. You know,” Hoag shrugged. “Always something going on.”

“Right.” She looked him in the eye. “That was our problem, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Hoag nodded. “Among other things.”

“Well...” Her countenance dropped, but she quickly recovered and put on a good smile. “You guys want to get lunch? I was on my way to the cafeteria.”

“Can’t today,” Hoag replied. “We’re in the middle of something and... it just...” A bell rang. The elevator doors opened. Kinlaw brushed past him and stepped inside. Hoag smiled at Jenny as he stepped backward into the elevator. “I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

The doors closed. The elevator started up. “Don’t say a word,” Hoag growled.

Kinlaw stared up at the floor numbers above the door. “She’s a nice girl,” he chuckled.

“I said, don’t say a word.”

Kinlaw ignored him. “You know, of all the things that happened in college, I never quite understood what happened with her. Why’d the two of you break up, anyway?”

“Gregg what’s-his-name,” Hoag sighed.

“Gregg?” A frown wrinkled Kinlaw’s forehead. He glanced over at Hoag. “The football player?”

“Yeah.”

Kinlaw looked up at the lights above the door once more. “She never seemed that superficial.”

“You didn’t know her that well.”

“People change.”

“She was interested in who she thought could do something for her. His father was some big-time Wall Street guy. That’s what she thought she wanted.”

“And?”

“His daddy’s firm went belly up. Gregg turned out to be interested in other things besides her. By then college was over. Everyone else had moved on.”

The elevator doors opened to the lobby on the first floor. Kinlaw and Hoag stepped out.

“You know,” Kinlaw continued, “people have a way of changing.”

“Not that much.”

“I don’t know. She seems okay to me.” Kinlaw gestured toward their surroundings. “She got a job here.” Sarcasm dripped from his voice. “Must be something right about her.”

“I don’t know.”

“You should call her,” Kinlaw urged.

“Maybe.” Hoag was ready to change the subject. “By the way, thanks for taking my back in that meeting,” he smirked.

“You’re welcome.”

“Everyone in the room ignored what I was saying.” They reached the exit. Hoag pushed open the door. “I’m only thirty-five, and I felt like the oldest guy in the room.”

“You probably were.” Kinlaw followed him outside. “But it does us no good for them to know what we’re both thinking. One of us has to remain detached.”

“Does us no good if they don’t think,” Hoag retorted.

“Winston knows what’s going on. Jones is pretty sharp.”

“They should have put Jones in Clandestine Operations. He knows the region, and he’s great with people. They could have made a great field agent out of him, if they still made field agents. But as an analyst, he never pushes his conclusions.”

They reached the Suburban and Kinlaw pressed a button on the remote to unlock the doors. Hoag got in on the passenger side. Kinlaw slid in behind the steering wheel. “They were right about the Saudis. They’ll want the bomb.”

“Yes,” Hoag replied. “I’m sure they will. They always have. But that’s a few years away. It isn’t what we face right now.”

Kinlaw put the key in the ignition and started the engine. “I noticed nobody in that meeting got to ‘why.’”

“Why?”

“Why today?” Kinlaw glanced over his shoulder as he backed the Suburban from the parking space. “No one asked whether it was a coincidence that the Iranians exploded their first nuclear device today.”

“And you have an answer?”

“November 4.”

“So,” Hoag shrugged. “What’s special about November 4?”

“It’s the day they took our embassy staff hostage in Tehran. November 4, 1979.”

Hoag was silent for a moment. Then he looked over at Kinlaw. “You sure about that?”

“Positive.”

“We better get back to the office.”