

“Hate is bone deep, and we are deep into hate. We shall strike at the heart of the nonbelievers without rest until we have driven them from the face of the earth.”

Unknown

HEART STRIKE,

A LINDA DARBY AND RYAN TESTLER NOVEL

by: David M. Bishop

CHAPTER 1

Ryan Testler's cell phone rang. "Hello?"

The caller provided no identification or pleasantries. "Chocolate ice cream tastes best on?"

"Cherry pie," Ryan said without hesitation. The question suggested instructions would follow so he remained silent.

"Tomorrow morning at ten, come in through the entrance for deliveries. Do not provide your name or identification. To the Secret Service officer on duty, say only, "Odd numbers are really odd, but not to a mathematician. The officer will escort you."

The call ended.

~ . ~

Ryan went out the door into the backyard of Linda Darby's home in Caruthers, Kansas.

She looked up from a chaise lounge near the pool. She was sunbathing in a bikini, the sun bright overhead. A blue and white tree swallow sat on a branch about ten feet away. The entire scene was a contrast to what Ryan came out to tell Linda.

He went to her. "I thought you were inside watching the news."

"I couldn't watch anymore. The terrorist attack on the subway in London was horrible. So much destruction, so many injured people—useless violence. It's all so damn crazy."

"It's the world we live in, darlin'."

Linda scooted her legs to the side. Ryan sat beside her. "I hope it all ends soon. ... Let's change the subject."

"I take it Steffi got off to school okay?"

"Sure."

"How does she like the school here in Caruthers?"

"Fine, I think. She talks about how different Kansas is from Portland, Oregon. She likes it here, but I think she misses the boarding school, having breakfast with the other girls. She did her entire elementary school that way. It's really all she's known. Now she's in the seventh grade at a public school, going back and forth from home. It's a big change for her."

"The school year just started. So much of life is routines and familiarities. She'll get new friends and adjust."

"I expect so. ... She loves her honorary Aunt Vera and Uncle Dix, and, with encouragement from Mayor Caruthers, Steffi sometimes calls her grandma. It's just different for her. But, yes, we need to be patient. Give her time."

"Seems right."

"So, how's your morning going?"

"Not great. I need to leave pretty soon."

"Oh? What's up?"

"It's ... you know."

Linda squirmed and wiggled until she was more upright. One of the untied straps of her bathing suit top trailed down her arm; the other across the left cup of her suit top. "What can you tell me?"

"Nothing really, other than I've got to go."

"I thought you were going to try and avoid these occurrences whenever you could."

Ryan watched as Linda grabbed the strap striping her left breast and tossed it to the side.

“Key words: whenever I can. This one I can’t.”

“What makes this one so special?”

“The need for that better world you spoke of. It won’t get here from wishing.”

“There has to be more to it than that simple explanation.”

“There is, but that’s part of the ‘I can’t’. I’m sorry.”

“How long?”

“I’d only be guessing.”

“Is it something you might not come back from? ... I know. I know. You can’t say and you wouldn’t know anyway.”

“Well, actually on this point, I can say a little more.”

Linda sipped from her iced tea and offered the glass to Ryan. “Well?”

He took a drink. “I don’t know because I don’t know what it is.”

Linda placed her hands in her lap. The move plumped up her breasts. “You call that more?”

“Hey. Don’t make this harder than it needs to be. We talked this through before we tried cohabitation here in Kansas. In my line of work, this kinda shit happens.”

“That’s the crux of it all, isn’t it? Your line of work. Were you ever normal?”

“I don’t know the answer, or what normal is.”

“As certain as the sun will rise in the morning, your line of work is far from normal.”

He gave her back her glass of tea. “Don’t be naïve. Admittedly, what I do is far from an ordinary day in the town of Mayberry. Nonetheless, in the world as it is, what I do is integral to America’s needs.”

“But you could die?”

“Not important.”

“Damn it. It is to me.”

“Can you forgive me?”

“Yes, I can. I just don’t want to. At least not right now. Not yet.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. Right now, I’m thinking never. Oh, I don’t mean that. It’s just ... just—”

“Just what? Say whatever you want.”

“Before I met you. I thought people needing someone like you hunted in bars and brothels for men with mean faces, who broadcasted immorality ... I don’t know. You’re a good man, but your goodness is wrapped in so much ugly. ... I also know ... Oh, I don’t know.”

Ryan reached across and put his open hand on Linda’s cheek. She looked over. He smiled. “Got to be done.”

“Same old, same old. I get it. Whatever it takes defines you. The end justifies the means. Is that it?”

“How I do what I do is what kept you alive when we first met.”

“Which means what?”

“It means we’re here. It means Steffi isn’t growing up without her mother. So, yeah, the short answer is the end justifies the means.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I am as long as I’m on the side of what is best for our country and for those I love.”

Linda moved her towel to shield her legs from the sun. “What about the work you did for Webster?”

“I drifted. I admit it. But I got that straightened away. ... But, yeah, the end’s my game. I’ll leave others to wring their hands about the means. My experience is that their righteousness melts away when them and theirs is in someone’s crosshairs.”

“Okay, so much for Ryan Testler, modern philosopher. Let’s get back to you and me in the here and now. You leaving without explanation is unavoidable?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t refuse even though you don’t know what it’s about?”

“I know enough to know refusing isn’t an option.”

“I love you, Ryan Testler, although sometimes I wish I didn’t. I really do. ... Will you tell me more when you know more?”

Ryan leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “When I can. If I can.” He pulled down on both her bathing suit straps, lowering her top fully. “I got maybe an hour before I have to leave for the airport, if you’d like ta come in outta the sun.”

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CHAPTER 2

At the age of fifteen, Faraj Arafa, together with three other boys, was selected by his imam to be isolated and immersed in education and terrorist training. For the next three-and-a-half years he was mostly kept from his family. At nineteen, Faraj was brought to the American capital, Washington, D.C., where he was instructed to enroll in the College of International Business at Georgetown University. In addition, he was ordered to also carry as many pre-med courses as he could. These two fields of study, simultaneously, were a great challenge.

Upon arrival in America, Faraj was shocked by the way women used their bodies to titillate men. Men they didn't know and to whom they were not promised. And to do so in public was egregious. Libidinous behavior in public, in all its forms, was offensive and contrary to the teaching of Islam. Truth be known, he enjoyed looking at such women, but doing so made him feel unclean, which made him feel guilty.

After four years of living among Americans, observing them, and, despite his loathing of their obsessions with money and sex, Faraj concluded Americans were fundamentally good. In

America the choices about general behavior and specific indulgences were largely left to the individual. As long as one's choices did not violate the rights or property of others, it was each person's freewill to conduct his life pretty much as he preferred. While this seemed tolerant and inspirational, it violated the rigid dictates of his faith. He was conflicted more on some of the differences than on others, but he kept such reasoning to himself.

He didn't know just when, but he came to see many of the Western idiosyncrasies as nothing more than wrinkles in a different society. America benefitted from many outstanding women of commerce and government. In the quiet turnings of his own considered judgment, particularly after spending time on the Georgetown University campus, he could not avoid admitting Middle Eastern societies underutilized females. American women seemed to enjoy the role of sex symbol, while concurrently demanding, and increasingly accomplishing, intellectual and positional equality.

As his training dictated, he held to his routines. His life in America remained about staying prepared while learning all he could. His country needed more men educated in the intricacies of international commerce. The immersive training he received in Egypt dictated he obey all the rules in America and not draw attention to himself. As a one-man sleeper cell, he was to avoid the mosques of his faith and conduct his prayers in private. In short, encourage all the Americans with whom he came in contact to see him as a good Muslim, void of the fanatical allegiances feared and distrusted by Westerners. Live humbly and remain fit and ready.

His sworn duty was to serve as a soldier in the jihad of those he followed. Until he came to America, these men had been his primary source of knowledge since birth. He was fascinated by how available education was in America, without attached religious or political strings.

Quietly, he struggled with a basic question, one for which he dare not outwardly suppose an answer. Did he want to return to Egypt, or deny his heritage and stay in America? He missed his family, particularly his mother. He was allowed to see her twice during his years of training in Egypt. It had now been four years since he felt the warmth of her arms, the charm of her wrinkled eyes hovering over her caring smile.

His life was study, prayer, and waiting. Always, he waited. What scared him most was not the sanctity of waiting, but the fear of the call-to-action which would end his waiting.

He knew what was expected of him. It had been drummed into him from the first day he received wisdom as to who and what constituted good and evil in the world. On the first day,

when he was selected and taken from his home, he was so happy. He anticipated he would ride the mythical magic carpet to learn at the feet of those who knew all he did not. Now, he felt like Atlas with the weight of the world upon his shoulders. His imam and trainers were dedicated to cleansing the world of infidels. He was told his was a great honor to be honed into one of their swords for this task.

The roots of Faraj's family stretched back to the ancient order of Kharijism, formed during the time of the third Caliph. In the late 1920s, his grandfather joined with Hasan al-Banna and others who still followed the ways of the Kharijites to form the Muslim Brotherhood.

As the sun moved deeper into the afternoon sky, Faraj headed back to his rental. It was time for his *Salat al-'asr* prayer. This prayer was the third he was required to do each day. The two remaining prayers closely followed sunset, ending with the *Salat al-'isha* which must be performed before midnight.

This actual prayer took no more than five minutes; preparation for the prayer took longer. He locked the door of his one-bedroom unit and began with *bismillah*—in the name of Allah. Next, came the steps of wudu: He washed his right hand up to the wrist and between the fingers three times, then did the same to his left hand. He took water into his mouth, rinsed, and spit it out, three times. He inhaled over the water, taking the moisture into his nose. He washed his arms from his wrists to his elbows, leaving no part fully dry. The next step was to wash his head and wipe his ears inside and out. Lastly, he rubbed his teeth with a *miswak*, a twig from the *arak* tree, used as an alternative to the toothbrush. As was true for nearly everything in America, the *miswak* was available from online retailers.

Faraj was drifting in his personal department, and he knew it. His proclamations of *tawbah*, required for having engaged in acts prohibited by Allah were becoming too frequent.

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CHAPTER 3

At nine-fifteen the next morning, Ryan Testler was weaving his rental car through downtown Washington, D.C. His destination was 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. His concern for not being late had him running early. He needed to kill about ten minutes.

He passed through an intersection and pulled to the curb. The weather was mild. He lowered the driver's side window. Studying people not engaged in nefarious activities helped Ryan sharpen his skills at spotting those whose small movements suggested a purpose apart from their bigger movements. The stream of pedestrians steadily flowed in and out of shops and past storefront windows.

Those walkers with an impatient manner at intersections waiting for lights to change, along with frequent looks at watches, betrayed themselves as on-the-way-to jobs or appointments. Other workers shoe-skated through every opening like roller derby contestants in search of a winning point. These people contrasted sharply from the meandering pace of the casual walkers gawking at storefront window displays.

A heavysset man with baggy pants and black tennis shoes darted out of the stream of people to enter a Starbucks coffee shop. He failed to hold the door for two women coming out. The lead woman repositioned the shoulder strap of her purse while studying the pace of walkers. With the next break in the human wave, she tugged on the arm of the other and they were off,

instantly filling the available space and moving with the sea of people. In general, the shoppers held to a casual gait, while workers shoe-skated around them like roller derby contestants in search of a tie-breaking point.

Most of the women wore some sort of pants outfit or skirts of varying lengths above heels or flats. The eyes of several of the men picked out a particular woman to scrutinize more closely, while other men employed a more smorgasbord approach.

Standing on a corner watching all the girls go by

Brother, you don't know a nicer occupation

The ladies who garnered the more dedicated attention, received it not merely for more appealing physical attributes, but because they'd mastered the blending of sexy and classy. Ryan had read somewhere that pursuit and seduction are the essence of sexuality. He accepted its wisdom.

One change he noticed, over the years women now more openly ogled men, certainly those who could be thought of as a thoroughly liberated woman.

Despite what grandmothers tell the young ladies in their charge, the way to a man's heart is no longer through his stomach. Not in today's world with a restaurant in every block offering eat-in and takeout meals, not to mention endless choices for home delivery. Today, the path to a man's innards is through his eyes. Chefs speak of gourmet food beginning with presentation. This point finds agreement among both the hungry and the lustful.

With his excess ten minutes absorbed, Ryan eased away from the curb and back into traffic. He steered into one long turn, followed by two quicker ones, stopping twice while intersections gorged on the human current flooding past him. At the next corner he turned onto a short street that started across from the U.S. Treasury Building and headed toward the White House. Not long ago, East Executive Avenue closed permanently except for deliveries to the White House. In addition to its routine use, this route contributed to the occasional clandestine user, such as Ryan Testler.

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CHAPTER 4

The man opened the top left drawer of his desk and lifted out the ringing black phone. “Yes,” he said into the speaker. “Are you on a secure line?”

“Certainly, as are you.”

“Your report.”

“The package has left Cyprus. Arrival in Maryland is anticipated at twelve to fourteen days.”

“Why the variance?”

“Cargo ships make stops. Clearances, strikes, a lack of a payoff, and other bullshit can cause delays in some ports.”

“Is the shipping company aware of our package?”

“No.”

“Do we have a contact onboard?”

“Yes. One high enough to effect offloading without the approval of another. Do you want

that information?”

“No. You are responsible for delivery to the stipulated onshore destination. That information is for you to know. Is that person reliable?”

“Half paid. Half due on delivery to the shore. Like us, he is a contractor, not a follower. Greed fathers his obedience as well as ours.”

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CHAPTER 5

Ryan drove around some shielding shrubbery and came to a stop at a guard gate. His car was immediately approached by a well-muscled secret service officer, the stately White House in partial view behind him. Ryan lowered his driver's side window and squinted into the morning sun.

The Secret Service Officer saluted sharply. "May I help you, sir?"

Here goes.

Ryan locked in on the officer's eyes. "Odd numbers are really odd, but not to a mathematician."

The officer repeated the question from last night's phone call. "Chocolate ice cream tastes best on?"

Ryan reran his answer. "Cherry pie."

The officer smiled, apparently relieved not to have said something nonsensical to the wrong person. "Yes, sir. I've been told that it does."

So far so good.

“Please pull your car to the other side of the guard shack.” The officer pointed, circling his arm a bit to indicate less than a full turn. “My relief is on the way. I’ll escort you to entrance.”

Ryan moved his car to the position the officer indicated. And, after a few minutes, watched a second officer approach. After their brief talk and nods, the officer returned to Ryan. “Your car will be taken care of. I’ll run interference for you and escort you back to your car when you’re ready to leave.”

You mean when I’m cleared to leave.

Ryan got out of his car, leaving the key in the ignition.

Before moving, the officer addressed Ryan. “We won’t be stopped. Do not speak to anyone until we reach our destination.”

“Understood.”

I’m here to see Bobby. That’s the only part I really understand, but not why.

“Please follow me, sir.”

More than a decade ago, Ryan had been the CIA station chief in Saudi Arabia. For two of those years, Bobby Wellington had been the U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom. At least once a week, late at night, Ryan and Bobby met in the embassy kitchen to have cherry pie ala mode with chocolate ice cream. They often lingered for hours talking about the crosscurrents and undertows of politics and religion in the Middle East.

Today’s use of the White House delivery entrance, and the question Ryan had been asked, confirmed who he was here to see. It was also obvious that whatever the president had in mind, he wanted it kept from the media, and that was fine with Ryan. Had he given an answer other than cherry pie, the secret service would be escorting him to a detention center for interrogation.

Ryan fell in step with the officer as they moved across the paved area and up the sidewalk toward the official residence of the leader of the free world. Every U.S. President has lived in the White House since March 1797, when President John Adams and his wife, Abigail, moved in.

Guess I shouldn’t call him Bobby anymore.

The officer led Ryan toward an entrance into the East Wing. Twenty yards ahead, to his

left, walked two women. Except for not having enough time to get here on foot, they could have been two of the ladies from town, part of the pedestrian stream along the sidewalks he had observed. The door into the East Wing, the domain of the First Lady, was opened by one of the officers assigned to duty at the White House. Selection of this side entrance undoubtedly avoided the prying eyes of the media which monitored the comings and goings from the West Wing.

Inside, the officer led Ryan down a respectably painted corridor. Before leaving to come here, Ryan studied a schematic of the White House. He recognized the sunlit East Colonnade. Windows to the left showed the manicured South lawn. Photos of the president and first family lined the opposite wall, including one taken during a visit of the Canadian prime minister.

Ryan pulled up short and knocked lightly on the sidewall of the corridor. The officer stopped and looked back.

Two men known to Ryan were a distance ahead. They worked security, at least that's what they always said they did. Names for such men were never relevant. They changed identities like other men changed shirts, new names being accessorized with the necessary documents. The bigger of the two men was tough, a real mauler, but a halfwit. The smaller man, still large, was only half as smart. Ryan smiled at the thought this could make the second man a quarter-wit.

When those two moved out of sight, Ryan nodded at his escort. After passing within view of the white marble walls and vaulted ceiling of the White House's ground floor, the sergeant guided Ryan into a side hallway that led directly to the West Wing.

Near the end of that passage, the officer held up his hand, stopped, and leaned into the doorway to the office of the president's secretary. She was a meaty woman with the poise and presence to command respect. Her above-the-desktop look was finished off by a pair of horn-rim glasses which, at the moment, dangled on the end of a black lanyard around her neck. Her office was located between the Oval Office and the room the president used for gatherings with his cabinet. She glanced over to the Secret Service man and nodded without speaking. Her attention returned to her desktop.

The escort led Ryan a few more steps to where the roundness of the Oval Office clashed with the straight lines designed into the rest of the West Wing. His escort opened the door, stood back, and nodded.

As Ryan entered, the president's mess steward left through one of three interior doors.

The printout Ryan had perused the night before identified that door as leading to the president's small study and, beyond that, into the president's dining room.

Ryan stood alone in the Oval Office of the West Wing on the first floor of the White House. He recalled a line from *The Wizard of Oz*. "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

His eyes settled on an old oak desk that backed up toward the windows.

The voice of President Robert Wellington took the point as he entered the room through the doorway the steward had used to leave. "Hello, Ryan. God, it's been forever."

"Yes, sir, Mr. President."

"Oh, come on. I get that all day. Can't I still be Bobby? Like the old days. At least when we're alone."

"Hi, Bobby." Ryan smiled and they shook hands warmly, the president's other hand on Ryan's shoulder.

The president motioned Ryan toward the seating area near the center of the room. "Damn fine of you to respond to my invite so promptly. When I walked in I noticed you looking at my desk."

Ryan sat after the president did. "Yes, sir. It's obviously old and made by a true craftsman."

"You know the story behind that thing?"

"No, sir."

"The way it was told to me, I hope I've got this half right, back around 1850 we freed an English ship, the *HMS Resolute*, from the ice, and returned her to England's Queen Victoria. Some years later, the queen had this desk made from the timbers of the *Resolute*. Most of our presidents since have used it. I've been told that Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, LBJ, Nixon and Ford did not, at least not within the Oval Office. Ronnie Reagan had it made a bit taller, which was a good thing. In the early days, our presidents were generally shorter fellas."

"Lot of history, sir."

Damn, it's good to see ya. I shoulda had you here long ago. Sorry about having to bring you in through the backdoor. Routinely, visitors to the White House get booked in and the media pays attention. That'd put you in that limelight you strive to avoid. The way I see it, this is my home. I oughta be able to invite someone in without having to announce it to the world. I get that

done with the cooperation of a few carefully chosen members of the White House team.”

“You found a way, sir.”

“Necessity is the mother of invention. Fortunately, you remembered our pie a’ la mode nights in the embassy kitchen. I figured nobody else in the world would instinctively reply that chocolate ice cream goes with cherry pie.”

Ryan grinned and lowered his head. “The simplest snare is often the surest.”

The president raised his eyebrows. “You turned down my offer of a job here, preferring the shadows over some highfaluting desk that comes preloaded with public scrutiny.”

Ryan made a concessionary hand gesture. “A man can often be more productive when his actions are not grist for the mills of politics and the media. Until I got the call last night, I thought you were angry after I turned down your very flattering offer.”

“These last few years I’ve just respected your wish to keep out of the limelight that comes with policy positions. I admit, working out in the open can be a real pain in-the-you-know-where.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“In the end, a president is not remembered for the ideals he holds, but for the public’s perception of those ideals.”

“As I see it, sir, members of the media have their own political bents. I imagine they always have. But, nowadays, they don’t bother disguising them. The line between news reporting and news commentary has been erased for many casual viewers. Thus, the public’s perception of all officeholders grow distorted. That’s part of why I like operating below the level the newshounds observe.”

“That part about anytime I absolutely need you. That still in play?”

Ryan nodded. “I’m here, sir.”

“I have a mission and it’s got your name on it. I hope we can pull it off without putting you in the limelight. I won’t try to fool you, not that I could. This mission has that risk. I can also tell you the risk is worth it.”

The president motioned toward the two facing gold couches in the center of the room. “Help yourself to coffee and Danish, then sit and we’ll dig into it.”