

ONE

Sayed Zaeef, one of the few members of al Qaeda still unaccounted for and—for the moment—alive, shuffled along with the other passengers towards the boarding gate. The woman at his side, whose name he had come to learn was Aleida, was still talking. She'd been going nonstop for nearly a half hour. He didn't mind a bit. She spoke in her native Dutch; the official language here in the Netherlands. He'd learned it over the last three years, along with another native tongue, Frisian, but hadn't mastered either. All the better that she was dominating the conversation.

Zaeef had picked her out of the crowd shortly after arriving. She was among about two-dozen passengers who had come early and were hanging around, waiting. Some watched the giant airliners out the windows while others tried in vain to catch some rest on the torturously uncomfortable contour chairs. She was one of the plane-watchers. She stood with her arms folded and spoke to an elderly woman sitting nearby whom she obviously did not know. She was the type who would talk to any stranger. Perfect. He set his shoulder bag down and moved alongside her, saying nothing. He adopted a look of almost childlike fascination as the planes came and went, mimicking hers. Eventually, as he expected, she peered over and found him there. When she did, he returned the glance and smiled. She remarked how amazing modern technology was, and he agreed. Their conversation soon moved from airplanes to other matters—the weather, current events, and, ultimately, personal issues. She found him attractive, he could tell. And he *was* attractive. A handsome Syrian in his early thirties. His smile could charm a dying man out of his last heartbeat. The women were particularly easy, he thought, and this appeared to be a prime example.

As the line moved along, she started offering cutesy little anecdotes about her husband. He nodded and laughed in all the right places. She was probing him now, he knew, gauging his reaction to the fact that she was married. On the outside she was the good and faithful wife, but if the right, discreet opportunity came along, she'd stray. He cultivated the flirtation. For the other passengers, to see him with this woman would create an aura of acceptability. How could you of someone who was so friendly with one of your own?

The little American flag-pin on his lapel sealed it. He'd figured this out quickly enough after September 11, 2001—Americans were far less likely to pay you any mind if you had a flag of some kind on your clothes, flying from your car, or hanging outside your home. He found the gullibility amazing.

They reached the counter and handed over their tickets. The uniformed woman greeted him with a smile, which he returned. A man in a matching uniform stood behind her. Zaeef avoided eye contact. It was important to appear casual. The woman removed something from the envelope, then handed it back and said, "Have a nice flight, Mr. Qari." He nodded and thanked her. Aleida was still talking. Something about her flowerbeds.

They went down the rectangular tunnel and reached the door of the plane. Five more employees stood waiting—two stewardesses and three pilots. They were all smiling, very happy to see everyone this morning. They locked on Zaeef as soon as he appeared, but he pretended not to notice. When he reached the threshold, he laughed out loud and said something in Dutch to his new friend. He appraised the crew with a single, fleeting glance and made his evaluation. The stewardesses were of no concern. Aging

wannabe-models with too much makeup, nail polish, and unjustified arrogance—about as dangerous as houseflies. The pilots had an ex-military scent about them. They kept their hair short and their faces smooth. They would've been equally at home in business suits and ties, sitting in a boardroom with their briefcases on the floor beside them. Two were small, a little paunchy and out of shape. They'd be no problem, if it came to that.

It was the third man—the captain—that made Zaaef nervous; as nervous as he was capable of being. He was older, with a bronze tan and thin, steely eyes. They were watchful, intelligent. This was a man who was not easily fooled. His motto could have been, “Earn my trust *first*.” And in spite of his age, he looked fit and able. He stood akimbo, his hands ready. A deep, primal instinct that had saved Zaaef's hide before told him this man could be trouble. As they started down the aisle, Zaaef felt his eyes boring into him, studying him.

Aleida found her seat first. Checking Zaaef's ticket for him, she realized he would be more than ten rows back.

“Maybe I can come back and see you once we are in the air,” she said in Dutch.

“That would be nice.”

He moved on, inwardly thankful to be away from her for awhile. He made a point of looking carefully at every number on every row, hoping to appear a little helpless and vulnerable. He found his seat and scanned the area. A heavyset white-haired woman was in the seat on the opposite side of the aisle, reading a copy of *People*. She looked at Zaaef the way most people look at snakes in a zoo. *This is an American*, he thought. “Hello,” he said with a quick nod.

As he expected, she did not reply. Instead, she shrank back slightly and brought the magazine a little higher, as if using it as a shield.

Ignoring the slight, he opened the overhead compartment and stuffed in his green shoulder bag. Then, in another calculated move, he took off his suit jacket and set it carefully in the adjoining seat. He wanted the people around him to see that he was concealing nothing—no knives, no boxcutters, no plastic explosives. They were all appraising him, he knew, even if they were trying to appear as though they weren't.

He took his seat. The plane was almost full now and would be in the air in a matter of minutes. It would take nearly nine hours to reach Washington. He glanced at his watch; it was just after seven-thirty. A personal thought crept in—*I'll never see another seven-thirty in my life*. He pondered this for only a moment before the years of training and mental discipline kicked in and erased it.

The plane shuddered as it pulled away from the dock and began a slow taxi towards the runway. A single electronic note rang through the overhead speakers, and a disembodied voice reminded everyone to buckle up and turn off their cellphones and laptops. People around him began chatting with their neighbors. Idle talk, useless talk, the talk of the small-minded.

As soon as they were in the air, he set the seat back, closed his eyes, and folded his hands across his stomach. Then another personal thought crept in, and it surprised him—he remembered the time he had spent a Sunday helping his mother make bread. Back in those days in Damascus, it was not uncommon for a mother to make bread for her family, but it was unusual for a son to help. Young boys in Syria were not supposed to busy themselves with domestic chores. But for some reason he had wanted to help her

that day, and what was strange was the fact that his mother hadn't seemed the least bit puzzled or surprised. She rarely showed any emotion, but he had hoped he would see something then. Less than a month later she was gone, the victim of an American bomb meant for an ammunitions warehouse that had gone astray.

Surely she would approve of what he was doing now.