

NEW YORK

The Last Resort

By Jeff Slade

He stared across the table with his cold, black eyes. It was not a look of merely disdain or even fear; it was a stare of pure hatred. Fakhir Nazari – soon the entire world would know his name. He had no desire for fame though; this was a mission – the holiest of missions. He focused his frozen gaze on the cement wall opposite, not moving his eyes or body in the slightest. He thought about the events about to transpire and, just for a moment, a smile came across his face. Having nearly accomplished his jihad, he knew his time was short; he would soon be in paradise.

...

“This is not up for debate,” the director said, “the answer is no.”

“MILLIONS OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DIE! WE HAVE NO OTHER CHOICE!”

“The answer is no.”

The roughly dozen people sat in a small conference room, stone faced and on edge, with the possible fate of the world in the balance. The two men arguing were on opposite sides of the table. The one yelling went by the alias of Brian Miller, a high-level CIA operative and on the lead of the current threat. He had just returned from a finally successful field mission, apprehending the leader of the terrorist cell known to be behind the attack, Fakhir Nazari.

Across from him was the newly appointed Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Theodore Price. By fate or merely bad luck, this was his first crisis as Director. But even he understood that this threat was different – closer to realization than any attack since September 11. He had taken the job on the platform of reforming the agency, doing rid of the evils of past administrations like illegal internment and enhanced interrogation techniques. To torture a prisoner would be going against everything he wanted so badly to change. When he accepted the

position, he promised himself he would uphold his basic ethical principles, not willing to compromise his morality. This was his first test and he knew he must pass.

The room sat silent for a moment before Tony Matthews, director of Homeland Security, cleared his throat and calmly said, “Something needs to be done here. This isn’t a matter of morality. Just look at who this guy is. Look at what he’s done.” He spoke as if fighting the urge to panic and continued, “He’s trying to murder millions of people. No matter where it goes from here, he’s pretty much assured the death penalty. So what the fuck is the god-damn problem here?” He was getting more worked up now and started to raise his voice, “Agent Miller said it best – we don’t have any other fucking choice!”

He sat back down and again the room held in stillness. Agent Miller twiddled his thumbs, contemplating his next move and the pure gravity of the moment. In his 22 years with the agency, he had seen just about everything. Three undercover stints, including one for 5 years in Iran, had earned him the highest accolades of the agency. His life was the epitome of clandestine. Recruited out of high school at the age of 17, his prior life at this point seemed exactly that – a prior life. His family believed him to be dead, he had gone by eight different names in a little over two decades, and was skilled in just about every combat area imaginable; he was the perfect soldier.

He had been called in a month prior to investigate this case – a “home-grown” terror threat that higher ups believed to be somewhat credible. The agency gets hundreds of threats a day, ranging from delusional schizophrenics believing America was doomed, to the paranoid conservative claiming their Arab next door neighbor to be planning the next 9/11.

However, this one was different. Recent intelligence had confirmed the existence of an underground Al Qaeda cell in the United States, consisting of American passport holders believing in the cause of jihad. In fact, agency experts had always said the next major attack would come not from abroad, but from within America’s own borders. It was not a matter of if, but simply when. The combined forces of the United States had remarkably not allowed a domestic terror attack since 9/11, but they knew it wouldn’t last forever – it couldn’t. It was beginning to appear this might at last be the “when”.

Finally, Director Price asked, “can someone please tell me how we got to this point? I know we’ve gone over it before, but I want a full situational breakdown to this point.”

“Sir, with all due respect,” Agent Miller said, “I don’t believe we have time – ”

“You will make the fucking time Agent. I want a full briefing. Now.”

“Yes, sir,” Agent Miller replied, sitting back in his chair, clearly not pleased with their course of action.

A woman appearing to be in about her early thirties stood up next to Agent Miller and began to speak, “Around two weeks ago we received solid intelligence that a home-grown cell of Al Qaeda, led by Mr. Nazari, was planning a major attack, most likely to occur here in Washington D.C.” She spoke quickly and to the point, as if trying to finish as soon as possible while still including all relevant information.

She continued, “After more investigation, it was learned that they in fact had in possession a low-grade nuclear weapon, most likely in the form of a “suitcase” nuke. We were able to locate the base of the cell three days ago, by which time they had fled and separated across the city. From nuclear residue ascertained at the scene, we have deduced the device is set to detonate between 2 and 3 PM local time today, roughly 45 minutes from now. After a local businessman claimed to have recognized Mr. Nazari from pictures on television, we apprehended him and two associates roughly one hour ago at an apartment complex on the corner of Connecticut and N, near the Farragut North Metro stop. Full-scale sweeps were run three times on the apartment complex and surrounding area, however there were no signs of the bomb or any other suspects. We believe Mr. Nazari to have been a decoy, perhaps even intentionally getting caught to serve as a distraction. We have no current leads on the location of the device, but from intelligence on the inner-workings of the group we are 87 percent confident that Nazari does in fact know its location.”

She barely sat back down before Agent Miller stated, “Sir – if I may – we are running very short on time here. With such a short window, the quickest and most effective way to – ”

“Absolutely not,” the Director interjected again, “This is the United States of America. We do not torture and we will never torture.”

“Sir – ”

“That’s an order Miller. I want you to interrogate him *without* the use of any physical harm. Try to reason with him, offer him immunity, hell I don’t care give him a fucking condo on South Beach, try to figure out where this god-damn bomb is before half of D.C. gets blown to pieces. We’ll reconvene in twenty minutes. This is our chance. Let’s not waste it.”

Special Agent Brian Miller walked out of the conference room attempting to keep his cool. His views on torture were simple and less political: torture should be avoided but when it needs to be done, it needs to be done. When the stakes are this high, by far the largest terror attack ever to take place in the world – the consequences should justify the means. He thought about torturing the Director to let him torture Nazari, but as always decided to follow orders. He walked towards the interrogation room where Nazari was being held, ticking clock in his mind.

...

Special Agent Miller walked into the room and watched over Nazari, who stared directly at the back of the wall, refusing to make eye contact. Miller stood in the corner of the room for about a minute before taking a seat directly across from Nazari. He glared directly into his eyes, but received no reaction.

“I know you know where this bomb is,” Miller started. “So, the way I see it you have two options here, Fakhir. Option A – you tell me what I want to know. We’ll give you some money, you get asylum wherever the fuck you want to go, you live happily the fuck ever after and nobody dies. I like option A – I like option A very much. Then we have option B. I don’t think you’ll like option B. It involves pain – a lot of it. I’ll start by ripping off your fingernails. I’ll then put your hands in salt water for the most excruciating manicure you’ve ever had. Then I’ll cut off your toes one by one. Then, now this is where it gets fun, I’ll keep moving up your body until there’s no more Fakhir left. So there’s option B – more fun for me, much less fun for you. Either way, I find out what I want to know. Your call.”

Nazari for the first time looked up. Agent Miller stared into his eyes and at once saw what he had always known deep down – this guy would not talk voluntarily.

“*Neek hallak*,” Nazari spoke softly in Arabic, the first words coming out of his mouth since being captured.

“I don’t speak camel you moron. Talk in English.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Nazari said in a perfect American accent, a slight smile even appearing. “You are too late. Even if I told you everything, you wouldn’t get there in time. You and all your filthy American friends will soon be burning in hell.”

“Option B I guess,” Miller said, standing up and moving closer to Nazari.

Nazari replied, “You don't have the balls. Your pussy President and your pussy Director don't have what it takes. I look forward to personally watch you all burn.”

Nazari then swiftly lifted his head up and spit into the face of his interrogator.

“WHERE IS THE BOMB?” Miller screamed at the top of his lungs.

Nazari attempted to spit into Agent Miller's face once more, but was surprised to see Agent Miller quickly move to the side. He went behind the chair where Nazari was chained and slammed his head into the table in front of him.

“WHERE IS THE BOMB?” he yelled once more, slamming his head into the table again, this time as hard as he absolutely could.

He then turned Nazari's head towards him and punched him ferociously in the nose, likely breaking it. Blood was coming everywhere from Nazari's face, as he moaned in pain and struggled to even breathe.

“Okay...okay...” Nazari barely whispered while still getting punched repeatedly in the face.

“TELL ME WHERE THE – ”

In a matter of seconds, four guards rushed into the room to pull Agent Miller away, who remained screaming as he confronted the guards, trying to explain that the barely-conscious Nazari was about to break. Upon being carried out of the room, Agent Miller turned to get one final look at his suspect, who sat there, face covered in blood, laughing.

...

Fakhir Nazari sat in the interrogation room, thinking back on his life and how he had gotten to this point. He was not born a terrorist, but made one. His father, a Conservative Imam in rural Virginia, raised his son to be a man of extreme faith, but not one of violence.

“We must change the world with our words,” his father would say, “not with violence.”

His father was loved, truly respected by the members of the small Muslim community. Though they neighbored several mostly white towns, they for the most part co-existed peacefully. There were a couple of small confrontations, but nothing ever more than that.

Nazari, home-schooled by his father, spent his days learning the words of the Qur'an and the ways of his people. He never understood the hatred that existed in other parts of the Muslim world. How, he wondered, could people be driven to kill others in the name of God? Then, everything changed.

On September 11, 2001, the United States of America changed forever; Fakhir Nazari's life would never be the same. Everywhere he and his family went they received dirty looks. People yelled insults, refused to serve them, and sometimes in the most extreme cases threatened their lives. His father received a multitude of death threats every week, proclaiming their town would be burned down before they'd carry out another attack. Nazari and his family no longer left the neighborhood; they stopped going out to dinner and going on vacations.

Fakhir remembered one especially terrifying night in particular, where a burning rock was hurled through their living room window, with a note attached to it reading, "Get the fuck out of our country. We will kill you all." Fakhir remembered sleeping under his bed for a month after that night, living constantly in fear.

"Dad," Fakhir had once asked to his father, "why do all these people hate us so much? What did we do to them?"

"They are just angry, son," his father replied. "*We* did not do anything to them. Always remember that. They make us out to be the same simply because we share the same religion and the same color skin. The wound is still fresh, though. Give it some time."

Things did not get better however, only worse. He was 17 when American Special Forces raided the Mosque. American intelligence had gathered false information leading them to believe the Mosque was a base for radical Islam, breeding young soldiers to combat America. His father in seconds was captured and taken away, likely to a covert prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba or to one of the many similar locations across the world. Nazari would never see his father again, but he promised to avenge him, to avenge everyone. From that point on his life would have one purpose and one purpose only – to defeat America.

Barely able to open his eyes, Nazari nearly came to tears realizing he was on the verge of completing his life's mission. He sat there enveloped in blood, thinking back to the memory of his father, and was for a brief moment at peace.

...

“**W**hat the hell were you thinking in there?” Director Price yelled in the small office, angry at Miller’s use of force on Nazari. “What part of the words *without the use of physical harm* did you not understand? This is the United States. Have you read the Geneva Conventions? Once we start cutting toes off and slamming peoples heads into tables we’re no god-damn better than they are!”

Director Price, a long-time liberal judge, had earned his reputation as a true moral man. Although he was considered himself to be independent of partisan politics, his basic views were liberal in nature. He abhorred the use of torture and murder without the due process of the courtroom. The newly elected President, under pressure to keep his promises of reform, appointed Price in hopes that voters would recognize his drive for change.

Finally, Miller replied, “Sir, if I may ask, what part of the words *nuclear bomb* do **you** not understand? We are looking at a casualty projection between 1.5 and 2 million people, not even including those killed by after-effects of radiation. It’s possible the National Mall will be destroyed; the pressure to respond will be immense. We’ll be forced to retaliate; we’ll be at war. Millions more will die. *These* are the stakes, sir. Who gives a shit if one guilty terrorist experiences some pain for a couple of minutes? We’re trying to save millions of innocent lives here!”

Director Price sat on this for a moment.

He asked, “*What* do you plan to do Agent Miller? Are you going to waterboard him? Are you going to chain him up and cut off his fingers until he starts to talk? Are you going to threaten to kill his family unless he gives us solid information? Torture is an insult to human dignity. Those means cannot be justified no matter the ends.”

“Is blowing up millions of people not an insult to human dignity?” Miller asked. “Nazari sacrificed his human rights when he planned to blow up Washington D.C.”

“Everyone has rights, Agent Miller.”

“Well do the men, women, and children of this city not have human rights? Forget their right not to be tortured, how about their right to live! The very right that son-of-a-bitch in there is about to take away!”

The director thought on this for a moment and said, “If we decide to interrogate him...through more aggressive means...you don’t even know if he’ll give you solid information,

do you? How do you know he won't give us misinformation and send you out on some wild goose-chase across the city?"

"We have the facial recognition tech to know if he's lying – you know that. I'm not saying torture is the best option, I'm saying it's the *only* option. There's nothing left; we've tried everything else we logistically have time for. And, I'll be goddamned sure I don't just sit on my ass while the entire world goes to shit. We've got to at least try."

As a matter of fact, Agent Miller in nearly every case did not agree with the strategy of torture. After spending years at a covert facility outside of Pakistan, he fully understood the brutality and disgrace torture carried with it. He had seen suspects been waterboarded, starved, mentally debilitated until all that existed was a shell of the human being that existed before; torture was an immensely cruel undertaking.

Furthermore, he knew the Director's point of misinformation all too well. He had once led a mission outside of Islamabad to capture a high-ranking Al Qaeda leader, whose location they had gotten after torturing a prisoner for intel. What they didn't know is that they had been led directly into a trap. They ended up losing 14 of the 18 men on the mission – one of the largest Agency failures in history.

But, Agent Miller also recognized that torture also sometimes works. Although they did not like to admit it, many of their victories in the War on Terror came from those very "enhanced interrogation techniques" that everyone seemed so much to deplore.

"More than that," the Director continued after a brief silence, "we'd be breaking every International law out there saying you can't torture a suspect." He read a brief excerpt from the Geneva Conventions and proclaimed, "we can't be known as a nation that tortures people."

"Fuck the Geneva Conventions," Miller said with authority, "Do you want to be known as the man that let a nuclear bomb go off in Washington D.C.? Do you want to be the man that let two million people die in order to stand up for morals? This isn't a fucking fairy tale here. This is real life. There's no perfect outcome. I'm not saying that I can stop this bomb but there's no way in hell I won't do everything in my power to try."

The Director looked up at the clock. It was 2:07 PM; this bomb was going off and going off soon. Though he was portraying an attitude of confidence, he was in reality deeply conflicted himself about how to proceed. He had always stood up for human rights and couldn't bring himself to sacrifice that stance easily.

But, even he understood the possible consequences of inaction. There is nothing humane about millions of innocent civilians burning to death; there is nothing humane about women and children with chemical burns and radiation so terrible that a painful death is all but inevitable. He also knew how this would change the world. The United States, dead fast on revenge, would not relent until much of the Islamic world was destroyed – it would be the only way to defeat the enemy once and for all. That could be millions if not hundreds of millions more lives lost.

And, what was that truly against? Possible reprimand from the international community? It was the brief pain of a known terrorist in order to possibly save millions of lives. Though the act of torture was unethical, he at last relented, the consequences were simply too great to ignore. Agent Miller was right – there was no ethical option here – just the *least unethical* one.

“Fine,” Director Price finally consented, “do what you – ”

The sound and feeling of a nuclear bomb going off is unlike anything else in the world. The entirety of the building shook with an unrecognizable fury; everyone was thrown off their feet into the air and screams radiated through the room for just a short moment; then simply darkness.

...