

CHAPTER 1 (Note: this is 2 months before 9/11)

July 16, 2001

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

“Sell American stocks,” the Arab said.

Lionel Hunt stared into the black eyes of King Saud’s great-grandson. The usually suave prince appeared giddy from the whiskey, with a fixed grin on his face. *One of the few Arabs who can match me drink for drink*, thought Lionel.

Hunt glanced at the other three Saudis and the Englishman, Henry Singleton. The Arabs were in the early stages of drunkenness, two with their heads drooped, one wallowing on the carpeted floor, moaning. Singleton sat looking silently into the coals. Lionel felt the effects himself — tingling lips, a slight stumble when he went to relieve himself. Prince Naif, the mayor of Riyadh, had introduced him to his nephew, Prince Mohammad al Rashid. That’s how he’d ended up here tonight in a tent behind al Rashid’s palace, sitting on fine Persian carpets before a fire pit. He and Henry were the honored guests at a Bedouin feast.

Lionel finally said, “I’ve been studying the markets recently and thought the U.S. market appeared frothy, like it’s ready for another significant sell-off.”

“Sell all your stocks. Clean out your retirement funds, too.” The Arab rolled his gaze toward Hunt from under his red-and-white checkered *ghutra* as he spoke, one eye not quite tracking.

That really got Lionel’s attention. He knew that the prince had a PhD. in Finance from the London School of Economics. Hunt nodded and mumbled, “Sell everything?”

Early last year another Arab had told him to clear out of stocks too and buy treasury bonds. That was painful because Lionel had racked up huge gains during the 1990s Bull Market. Because of the enormous tax consideration, he’d hedged his bets and followed the Arab’s advice, but half-heartedly. He ended up with some minor losses in the ensuing fifteen-month stock market swoon. The lesson made a major impression on him. *Listen to the Arabs when it comes to the markets.*

Lionel watched al Rashid take another swig of whiskey. The handsome Arab with a neatly trimmed Van Dyke beard was the Texan’s latest client. Three-hundred-sixty-seven Saudis, all related to King Saud in one way or another, were now buying his homemade whiskey. Who could have known he’d be getting richer selling whiskey to Arabs than from superintending oil facilities contracts? He even used their municipal water supply in a country where water is scarcer than oil. This was a source of great humor to the few friends who knew what he was up to and a serious worry for his wife, who knew few of the details and didn’t want to know more. If he sold his stock now, they’d have enough money to retire, pay cash for that farm south of Austin they’d talked about.

He poked the glowing coals in the fire pit. “What should I buy? What are the alternatives?”

“Treasury Bonds or stock options. Yeah, options. Puts on American Airlines and insurance companies,” the Arab replied, his eyes fully crossed now.

“Puts?” *Damn! He’s expecting a serious crash.* Al Rashid gave one big nod, then his head rolled to the side. Hunt narrowed his eyes and worked his jaw. *Uh-huh.*

He glanced at the Englishman. Singleton had a stout build and a tanned, leathery face. The man hunched more by the minute and appeared ready to fall into the remnants of the feast. A few minutes ago he had mumbled, “Damn powerful whiskey, Mate.”

He shifted his gaze to the Arab derisively called “the Rat” by the American expatriates or “ex-pat” community, as they called themselves in Riyadh. The Saudi had a sloped forehead, one of the biggest protruding noses Hunt had ever seen, and absolutely no chin. He looked at others through tiny round eyes from under his black-and-white checkered *ghutra*. To make matters worse, he wore a thin mustache with so few hairs in it that it resembled rodent whiskers. The other two Arabs, brothers, were Rat’s cousins. Hunt could see they carried the same genes, but their features were not as pronounced. He smiled to himself: *Rat One, Rat Two, Rat Three*. They were all related to al Rashid.

Over the next ten minutes, Rat Two fell to the Persian carpet and vomited loudly. Rat Three was in an agonizing half-sleep, pulling his knees toward his chest, his head lolling around while he groaned. Rat One finally passed out, spread eagle. A half-hour passed in silence. Hunt stirred the fire, which had fallen to a darker red with tiny green and yellow flames jutting out of the now crumbling coals. Al Rashid tried to stand, but caved to the carpet. He pushed himself up again, managed to get to his feet, and stumbled from the tent toward the palace. Hunt heard him mumble as he staggered away.

In the silence, staring into the coals, Hunt reflected. He sometimes wondered why he stayed in Saudi Arabia, even with the easy road to wealth it offered. In fact, he thought of going home every day. Of course, he didn’t tell Terri. His wife worried that he was going to get into serious trouble.

“Selling whiskey to Muslims! What if they find out you’ve tapped into the city’s water supply?”

“Not to worry. The mayor’s taking my stuff, too.” Lionel smiled.

After the mayor introduced him to al Rashid, the prince started buying his product. The Saudi wanted his cousins to try the whiskey, too. They ended up inviting Lionel and the Englishman to be their honored guests at the feast. The Englishman was a geologist for Aramco, the Arabian American Oil Company. Rat Two was training under him as the Saudis continued to educate local Arabs so as to control their own oil production. Rat One had insisted they participate in the feast in Bedouin fashion, hence the tent, Persian carpet, and the meal spread out before them. More than that, Lionel and Henry were to find out exactly what Bedouin meant.

Couscous with specks of flavorings, vegetables and spices, bowls of olives, dates, and figs, and roast chicken were laid out before them. Then a manservant brought out a skinned goat. The gutted, but completely intact carcass fascinated the two Westerners. The Arabs cooked it on a spit, head and all, rotating it slowly by hand. There were the eyeballs, staring at Lionel while the body sizzled and turned. Everything was served on round silver dishes, accompanied with *chai*, Arab tea. They ate with their fingers. Drippings ran down the Arabs’ arms as they devoured the spread.

Then came the crowning moment. The goat was served on a large silver tray, spread out, head intact. The Saudis looked on intently as al Rashid plucked the eyes out and placed them on Hunt’s tray. The suave Arab explained that it was a tradition that the guest of honor got the eyeballs. The Arabs watched closely as Lionel hesitated, frowned at al Rashid, then popped the first one into his mouth. The three Rats grunted approvingly, then turned to their own feasts.

Hunt got the orb between his molars and bit down. It squeezed then popped back into shape. He tried several times to break the thing, biting first with his back teeth, then with his front, squeaky noises resounding from within his mouth, but without success. The eyeball kept popping back into shape. He had finally managed to split it and chew one of the pieces enough to gag it down. It was like swallowing chunks of very firm hard-boiled eggs.

When the Englishman returned from the restroom in the palace and spotted the other eyeball on his plate, his mouth dropped open. “My God, Mate! Is that an eyeball?”

“Yeah, you want one?” Lionel deftly dumped it on Henry’s plate. “It’s an insult to turn it down.”

Hunt watched from the corner of his eye, grinning, as the Englishman struggled with the orb, working it with his jaw, a scowl on his face. It finally popped in his mouth and the man almost gagged. He quickly gulped another shot of whiskey.

After the feast, they poured more whiskey rounds . . . toasted several times . . . laughed. The Arabs held their glasses high blaring, “*Fy’sahatk* (cheers).” They mocked the way the two white men had eaten the goat’s eyeballs, shouting and grinning their approval.

An hour later, Lionel was feeling the effects of the liquor. The others were well on their way to total inebriation, including Henry. Al Rashid was doing a good job of keeping up with Hunt, round for round. Lionel paused, then turned to the prince. “The stock market looks like it’s topping out.”

“Sell American stocks,” the Arab replied.