

# THE INFIDELS

## *PROLOGUE*

To the west, the simmering pink glow that tinged the Arabian horizon was an eerie backlight for the dark rock formations brooding like gargoyles over the Dhahran housing compound. With sunset, the infernal desert wind had died and the rocks ceased their whistling, but searing, unmerciful heat radiated from sand and rock in waves of roasted dissipation. Desert air submerged the company houses. It was ancient air, thick with secret meanings and difficult to breathe.

Shrill sounds approached from the southeast where the lights of the main company compound dulled the darkening desert night. A dusky-blond ten-year-old was ready. He had climbed to the thin uppermost branches of a huge banyan tree and scouted. From his precipitous aerie his head nearly bumped the moonless and shimmering sky. He strained to watch. Eastward in the Arabian Gulf, a pale thunderhead brightened with sudden electric blue. “Cooooool!”

Screaming a defiance that reverberated from the ancient hills, a company ambulance topped a rise a mile away and entered the Dhahran Hills housing area.

A mother’s voice filtered up through the thick foliage. “Scott Alexander! Get down here!”

With a last glance at the approaching vehicle, the boy reluctantly climbed down.

The ambulance sped north toward the Dhahran Hills housing complex. To the immediate east was a reinforced chainlink compound fence, topped with razor wire,

beyond which lay a wilderness of rocks and sand dotted sparsely with company facilities. To the west lay the company golf course, a rugged, grassless, and unforgiving patch of desert rock and dust where, even on the hottest days, hard-packed sand 'greens' were raked smooth by Pakistani attendants.

A confused Saudi Arab driver paused at the first intersection. Blocks of California-style two-story, tan stucco houses nestled in tight clumps ahead and to the west. Low scraggily trees and spreading banyans lined the streets, but an occasional Emperor palm thrust skyward like a dark tattered umbrella.

With raised eyebrows the driver questioned his attendant. The attendant shrugged. Screaming Arabic, the angry driver turned left along the edge of a recreational field. A child's soccer game paused, and a sea of young faces watched silently while the vehicle passed.

As sparse traffic pulled to the side, the ambulance raced west under the intermittent glow of the blue-white streetlights. The driver paused at each corner to read the smaller Arabic writing printed under the English street names. At the sixth street intersection the driver yelled in triumph and turned right, striking the curb. As he broached the dark corner, sleeping doves panicked in nearby trees and burst skyward with a tumult that rivaled the siren.

Three single story tan stucco houses on either side of the Abqaiq Street cul-de-sac led to a larger two-story home. Tires squealing, the ambulance passed the first of the houses, then slowed. The siren ceased, but alternating red and white brilliance burned the narrow street in the canopy under the trees and illuminated the Red Crescent moons painted on every surface of the vehicle. On each of the doors, the name *Saudi Arabian*

*Petroleum Company* stood out in black script lettering. Below this, the thick block letters *SAPCO* filled both door widths.

A silent clutch of Western men and women had gathered on a single lawn near the large house. Most were Americans. A few toddling children stood beside their parents, silent, arms gripping pants legs and loose house dresses.

A six-foot high concrete wall surrounded the house at the end of the cul-de-sac. It had once been a two-home duplex, but had been converted into a single home to accommodate extended Saudi families and their servants. In the long driveway, two white company police cars blazed white-blue-white-blue urgency. The ambulance pulled into the driveway almost to the entryway, and the driver and his burly attendant exited.

Hands still on doors, they paused. Muffled cries of anguish escaped the house. Many voices joined the wailing. The driver and attendant exchanged glances, then rushed to the rear doors, muscled a metal gurney to the ground, and hurried inside the house.

In the street, a safe distance from the house and the Westerners, sat a large, white, late model Chevrolet sedan. Two Arabic men stood by the passenger door facing the house. The older of the two spoke first. He wore dark western slacks and a white open-necked dress shirt, but a red and white checkered guitra headdress hung to his waist and ancient leather sandals wrapped his feet. His thick but-trimmed white beard diffused the red, blue, and white flashes. When he spoke, his words were Arabic, the harsh, guttural sounds difficult to whisper.

“A terrible thing has happened this night, Mohammed. When news of this reaches the palace, the King will not be pleased. There could be trouble! It could upset our plans!”

The other man smiled. He was much younger, taller, and very handsome in a dark, almost Mediterranean way. His teeth were perfect, his face smooth, and he wore an immaculate white thobe robe and gutra. In one hand he carried an expensive leather briefcase. His voice was calming and well educated.

“You worry too much, Ibrahim, *sadiq*. You are a vice president. Concern yourself with the oil production. My security people will solve this small problem. You will see. We will pray for Allah’s guidance, and it will soon be over.”

“But Mohammed,” the older man implored. “The father knows too much. And he is related to the king. Already the Americans are suspicious. If he talks...”

Mohammed laughed and touched Ibrahim’s shoulder. “It is said the king has more relatives than grains of sand. Besides, I believe we may find he did not do this thing.”

The older man narrowed his vision. “What you say does not seem possible.”

Mohammed laughed. “Trust in Allah, my friend. He will show us a way to profit from this setback.”

The wide door of the house opened and faceted rainbows from a crystal chandelier spilled onto the tiled entryway. The ambulance attendants emerged, pushing the gurney. A tall dark-haired Western doctor and several Arabic policemen followed. No one spoke. In the upper windows of the house a multitude of small dark-faced Arab children stared wide-eyed at the gurney and the small body it carried. The body was

covered, but stains of darkness seeped through the white sheet. Afraid to avert his eyes from the gurney, the wide-eyed attendant paused and made a sweeping right-handed splay-fingered motion across his own face and body followed by a similar hand sign over the gurney. Open hand pressed to face, the other Saudi mumbled an incantation as he nodded his head in sharp jerks.

“*Allah! Djini! Allah! Djini!*” His mumbling whimper drifted to the two Arabs.

“Superstitious fools!” Mohammed huffed. “Allah protects those of faith, even from the evil spirits.”

“But this is murder!” Ibrahim reminded him. “The spirits are angry! I will close all the windows in the villa this evening. Better to be forgiven by a merciful Allah for a momentary lapse of faith, than to risk the wrath of the desert spirits.”

Near the entryway of the house a light-haired company police detective whispered in English to a tiny Filipino maid. His accent was Texan. She spoke slowly and nervously, her own English confused by the burble of her Tagalog native tongue. Her two small callused hands covered her mouth, and her wide brown eyes shifted from gurney to policeman. When the gurney passed, she began a sign-of-the-cross. Midway through the motions, she panicked and stopped. An Arab policeman had seen her. He glared, raised his fist, and moved toward her as he barked. “*Waqafa!*”

At first she thought he would strike her. Terrified, she gasped and retreated painfully against the stucco outside wall. Watching the policeman, she whimpered, pressed her hands to her face, and began to cry. The guard continued to glare.

The detective touched her arm and spoke soothingly as he motioned the guard away. “He said stop! Don’t make any religious motions. It insults their faith and the poor girl’s family.”

Eyes downcast, she nodded meekly. The guard had not retreated and the dark fist remained poised.

The doctor intervened. Taking the policeman by the arm, he led him after the gurney. The Arab began a protest, but relented.

The doctor spoke. “Escort the ambulance to the Hospital.”

The guard nodded and moved to his car.

The doctor noticed the two Arab men and their official vehicle. He spoke to the ambulance attendants. “Wait here!”

He approached the Arabs. His soft accent was also Texan. “Doctor John Francis Gladden,” he said.

Mohammed extended his hand. “Mohammed Al-Ghazal. Chief of Security.”

The doctor eyed Mohammed for a moment before beginning. “The girl’s been dead about two hours, sir. The apparent cause of death is multiple stab wounds. One cut severed her right carotid artery. Even if we had gotten here in minutes, I don’t think we could have saved her.” He took a breath, intending to continue, but Mohammed raised his free hand.

“Thank you doctor.” Mohammed smiled. “Please see that her body is treated with respect. The family will take her for burial tomorrow.”

Doctor Gladden paused for several seconds. His deep blue eyes studied the two faces before him. “Don’t you think we should do an autopsy? She may have been raped!”

“Doctor,” Mohammed said. “As you mentioned, the cause of death is obvious. We should not interfere with religious tradition for something so unnecessary. Please, do not violate the young girl any further. Release the body tomorrow. My Security people will begin an immediate and thorough investigation.”

The doctor hesitated, nodded, then walked away. Mohammed watched him closely. At the ambulance, he whispered to the attendants. The burly Saudi repeated the elaborate hand sign before loading the gurney into the ambulance, and the doctor climbed in after the gurney. Flashing lights off and sirens silent, the ambulance and a police sedan departed. As it passed the crowd, excited conversation began.

In the cab of the ambulance, the driver mumbled prayers loudly. His whitened hands gripped the steering wheel, and despite the chill of the roaring air-conditioning, beads of sweat glimmered on his forehead.

Foregoing the seatbelt, the attendant twisted in his seat until he faced the rear compartment. Cowering and terrified, he waved his two big hands in patterns and stared at the tiny hidden body. “*Allah Achbar*,” he murmured, his eyes rolling upward until they were nearly hidden his head. “*Allah Achbar, Allah Achbar!*”

When the ambulance turned the corner, Ibrahim turned to Mohammed. “I am very worried about this.”

Mohammed laughed. “Promote the father and move him to Udhailiyah. Tell him it is to separate him from his grief. He will be happy and he will be quiet.”

Ibrahim’s face reflected deep apprehension. “The father may be the easiest thing to handle. What about the Americans? If they...”

Mohammed cut him off with a wave of a manicured hand. His words were sharp. “They suspect, but they do not know and will not act. They believe we are their allies. But they are our lap dogs, nothing more.”