

First Chapters

Chapter 1

AFRICA, NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

Ella Barnes lay on her stomach in the tall *desho* grass, the midday sun searing the savannah, the throbbing drone of cicadas hanging in the sweltering heat. Slick with sweat, she focused her telephoto lens on two girls tied together by a rope around their necks, walking in the midst of a band of Boko Haram fighters moving single file through the shimmering heat waves.

On either side of Ella, Nigerian troops lay hidden in the tall grass, nerves taut, rifles' sights already focused on the shaggy column of rebels.

As a photojournalist embedded with the government troops, Ella had learned from experience that as a general rule, Nigerian soldiers were far from expert marksmen. If their officer signaled them to fire on the Boko Haram, the girls were as likely to die as the rebels. Knowing this filled her with hopeless dread as she squeezed off a series of shots with her telephoto lens hoping, irrationally, that one of the girls would turn her face their way, and somehow save herself from the inevitable.

And at that moment, not one, but both girls did.

Simultaneously they turned their wide, frightened eyes toward Ella, betraying the intensity of their anxiety, as if in their frightened hearts they prayed for deliverance from the silent savannah.

Suddenly appalled by their identical, horror-stricken expressions, Ella almost lost her focus as she fought a sense of disembodiment in a silent, anguished shriek.

She snapped the picture.

The soldiers opened fire.

In seconds the Boko Haram were dead.

And so were the girls.

That afternoon Ella photographed the girls' bodies, and later the villagers where the dead girls had lived. She photographed the stoic, distraught faces of the girls' families as their daughters' bodies were returned to them. Only one family would consent to an interview, and she listened to their sorrowful, tragic stories, their despair twisting her gut, shredding her heart.

That night she lay sleepless on her cot in a bungalow, near the edge of Dikwa, eighteen miles from the incident at noon.

She couldn't take any more of it. Nine years was long enough to be writing and photographing stories about the brutish side of humanity in war zones. The naïve excitement she felt when she got her first assignment was extinguished in the first hours of actually being on the ground and witnessing mindless brutality. It was the pointless stupidity of that first death that had shocked her a decade earlier. That's what had burned into her memory in those first few hours of her career. And it had never left her alone since. She didn't know it then, but she had just witnessed not only the beginning of her career, but the end of it as well.

But youth, idealism, and yes, curiosity, propelled her on, photographing horrors and writing about them. Though the reasons changed as the years went by (to show the truth to the world; so that wrongs could be righted; to seek answers to unanswerable questions) the things she saw and wrote about and photographed were always the same. Death was grimly, shockingly monotonous, and most disheartening of all, ordinary.

The absurdity of the girls' deaths today was unspeakable. And yet it happened. As it did and would continue to do every day, all over the world with no exceptions, without respite, without end.

Her inability to comprehend this fatal human flaw had come full circle, and she was no closer to understanding it now than when she began. Maybe she had seen too much through the optics of the camera, and too little through the lens of the heart. Anyway, it was changing her, and she didn't like the ways it was happening.

Lying there, sweating in the heat of the Nigerian night, her stomach still knotted, still aching with the day's unbearable sadness, she had a quiet, solemn, epiphany: she was done with this. She was bailing out of war-zone photojournalism for good, and she was going home.

She never had been so sure of anything in her life.

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When Ella arrived in Austin a week later, she walked out of the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport pulling her roller bag into the furnace of the Texas summer. She overheard somebody in the crowd standing around the baggage carousel complain that the wicked-hot temperatures had hit the Hill Country early this year, but waiting for a taxi at curbside, she hardly noticed. It didn't feel any different from the African heat she'd just left.

She asked the driver to take the route through downtown instead of the faster 360 Loop. Every time she came home after a long assignment of several months, she asked her driver to take a route through downtown even though it was out of the way, so she could get a new feel for the way the city had changed in the time she'd been gone.

In recent years, the changes were so constant and so fast that sometimes she hardly recognized the city she'd left behind months earlier. Even now she counted over a dozen construction cranes still toiling away among the newly completed glass towers. And Brady had told her the zoning commission had just approved about twenty-five new towers projects for downtown that hadn't even broken ground yet.

Always the hip and liberal heart of a deeply red state, Austin was proud of its rebel reputation. The strongly conservative political power base that ran the state's business from the Capitol complex downtown resented and ridiculed the city's liberal vibe, while the University's educated millennial population celebrated it. Standing apart from it all, the freewheeling music scene provided a distracting artistic energy. It was a lively city that reveled in its contradictions.

Soon her driver was out of downtown, and they were cruising along Lake Austin Boulevard between the municipal golf course on one side, and the university graduate housing on the other next to the river. Turning left onto Redbud Trail, they crossed the verdant banks of the river at the Redbud Isle bridge and started climbing into the winding streets of West Lake Hills.

She hadn't seen Brady in nearly three months. They had talked, they had texted, but their marriage had left its ardent years behind, and her return wasn't as momentous an event as it had been in years past. He was busy. He was always busy. Barnes Realty, the business he'd founded just as Austin began booming, had grown expansively, swept along in the slipstream of the surging economy. He was never still, never satisfied, always on the move.

The quality of their marriage fared inversely. The little things, which were the important things, faded away. They were little more than roommates now. But, still, she imagined it could be better, and now that she was making a sea-change in her own career, maybe they could work on getting back to the Ella and Brady of their early, better years.

Their home on Summit Ridge, a little street off Redbud Trail that twisted through the wooded, hilly neighborhoods across the river from downtown, was one of the brilliant things Brady had done for her shortly after they married. With characteristic swagger he told her she could have her pick of any house in his company's real estate portfolio, but the moment she saw the Spanish colonial house on Summit Ridge, she stopped looking.

He was disappointed. He wanted more . . . flash, bigger. The Summit Ridge house with its palms and courtyards and garden walls perched on the brow of a ridge overlooking a valley, was too quiet, even though it was only ten minutes from Congress Avenue downtown. And it was too "artsy-fartsy," he said. That one puzzled her, but when she asked him about it, he just shrugged it off with a self-conscious laugh. But he relented, and they got the house. And she was grateful for that.

Chapter 2

LONDON

Annalise Steiner landed at London's Heathrow airport and went directly to her hotel in Mayfair where she had reservations. After leaving her things in her room, she went directly to a prearranged late lunch at Benares Restaurant in Berkeley Square. The stylishly dressed young woman she met there had been meticulously selected by her because she had a striking resemblance to Annalise herself. By the time Annalise left after lunch, the young woman had a driver's license, passport, and two credit cards in Annalise's name. She also had photos and a detailed list of the clothes she was to buy for Annalise and the stores where she was to buy them in London and Paris. An account had been opened in every store. The look-alike needed to buy all the clothes during the next two days and have them delivered to Annalise's hotel.

By 4:35 p.m. Annalise was on a flight to Lyon using a passport under the name of Manette Nerval. At 8:30 p.m. she walked into the front door of Restaurant *Pierre Orsi* in Lyon's chic 6th *Arrondissement*, gave her name, and was taken to a table in a small private room discreetly apart from the main room where a man, waiting alone, stood as she came in.

"Felipe Matta," he said with a soft smile, extending his hand. He was tall and thin, with dark hair, handsomely graying temples, and a thin, trim moustache.

"Manette Nerval."

They chatted about her trip, the beauty of the 6th *Arrondissement*, the ways in which the city was changing. They dined. When their waiter left their after-dinner drinks and walked away, closing the door behind him, Matta leaned on his forearms on the table, smiled, and spoke quietly.

"Tell me what you have."

"Anti-counterfeiting packaging software for Kepler-Schön's next series of new pharmaceuticals coming online in six months. All in bestseller categories."

She waited, relishing the look on his face, the blank stare that was meant to convey nothing. But in fact, that affectless gaze was the tell Manette was waiting for. It told her that Matta felt he had to hide his real reaction, which was a shock. It also told her that numbers were exploding through his mind as he added up the potential profits. What she was offering him was awesome. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and Matta's blank expression acknowledged it.

“You said *all* bestsellers. That includes their new COVID-19 patents? The mutation adapters, the therapeutics?”

She nodded. “Yes. It does.”

She knew that for her to get this meeting with him he had already put her through a rigorous vetting. Her reputation preceded her, which was why the name Manette Nerval didn’t faze him. She had many names. It was what she did that distinguished her.

Just as Felipe Matta’s name distinguished him: one of the world’s largest distributors of illicit pharmaceuticals. His home was in Mexico City, but he spent much of his time in Europe. He was an international businessman. It just happened that the commodities he traded in were primarily counterfeit pharmaceuticals, which had grown to be far more profitable for transnational crime magnates than the old-school illicit drug trade.

“U.S. domestic only?” he asked.

“The next four largest established markets are included, Europe, Japan, Canada, and Australia .”

“That . . . that’s a big offer,” he said, his tone barely masking his incredulity.

“Once in a lifetime.”

“What do you have for me to evaluate?”

She reached down beside her chair and took a manila envelope out of her bag.

Matta took the envelope, looked at her, opened it, and slid out five die cut pharmaceutical packaging flats, fresh off the printing presses, and ready to be folded into boxes.

Realizing what he was seeing, Matta raised his eyebrows, leaned forward, and studied each flat long and silently.

“Erectile dysfunction. Antibiotics. Pain killers. Cancer medicines, COVID-19,” he nodded, acknowledging her bestseller claim. As he took a pair of reading glasses from his suit coat pocket, she handed him a photographer’s loupe from her purse. He took it, nodding, and began looking more closely at each flat.

“The holograms,” he said. “Quite remarkable.”

“Yes.”

“The color shifting is . . . excellent,” he said, impressed. “Your people are,” he looked down at the sheets again, “. . . exceptional.”

He handed the loupe back to her, took off his glasses, sat back in his chair.

“But, you know, this isn’t exactly my line, the production end of things,” he said, still looking at the printed flats. “I focus on distribution.”

“I know,” Manette said, “but I thought because this opportunity is unusual, you might be interested.”

“Well,” he shrugged one shoulder, “this work is . . . perhaps, the best I’ve ever seen. Your people have taken the counterfeiting craft—”

“This isn’t counterfeiting.”

A subtle, puzzled frown softly shadowed his brow.

She shook her head slowly, unable to resist a soft, satisfied look, and she saw on his face that he understood.

“You may keep those,” she said. “Have your best people look at them. I’m not worried, you won’t be able to duplicate it.

She put a flash drive on the table.

“There’s enough information on this to confirm everything I just told you, and everything you need to contact me securely if you’re interested in doing business?”

He picked up the flash drive.

“You have a window of opportunity,” she said, “not a huge one, but one large enough to flood the market with enough of your counterfeits to make an indecent fortune before the year is up. And even more as the long tail of this generation of Kepler-Schön meds are absorbed in the marketplace before all the inventory is gone.” She smiled. “I doubt if you can calculate the return on this investment without the help of several accountants.

He knew she was right. On all counts. If he was going to play in this hand, he knew he had to decide, fast, or walk away from the table.

“I’m not interested in bidding,” he said.

“No, of course not. This is exclusive to you—for ten days.”

He studied her again. “Two weeks.”

She smiled. “I can do that.”

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The driver Annalise had hired picked her up at *Pierre Orsi* and headed south out of Lyon. He didn’t work for a driving service. A former French intelligence officer with the DGSI, the General Directorate for Internal Security, he was now a self-employed contractor. His unique skills made him her go-to chauffeur whenever she had business in France.

By 3:00 a.m., she was in Marseille. After six hours of sleep, using new identification, passport, and burner, in the name of Lina Kästner, she boarded a charter flight to Costa Smeralda on the Eastern shore of Sardinia. There, in a villa on a cliff in a private cove that looked across the Tyrrhenian Sea toward Rome, Annalise met on the terrace with the villa’s owner, Hari Rao.

Although she was approaching him after Felipe Matta, it was Hari Rao who was Annalise’s primary target. It was nearly two years earlier when she first

heard rumors that the Indian underworld was looking for a more secure doorway into the global market's pharmaceutical supply chain. It took her several months to confirm the rumors and to narrow down her search for the potential buyer to three possibilities. A few weeks after that, she was confident enough to move Rao's name to the top of the list. And shortly after that, they began communicating via a Dark Web portal. Soon she knew what she needed to do and set about getting it done.

That had become Annalise's true skill after working her way up through the ranks of con artists to the status of a true Dark Broker: determining who was just the right person to pursue, how to pursue them, and how to close the deal.

Rao listened impassively as she gave the same presentation she had given to Felipe Matta the night before. But this time, there was no tell. Rao's demeanor was always a low-lidded tabula rasa, a studied indifference.

"Exclusive," he confirmed after she had finished her presentation.

"Yes."

"How long do I have?"

"Two weeks."

"I need longer."

She hesitated. This was a test. He wanted to see if he could move the boundaries, whatever they were, however small.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's impossible."

Rao looked away to the sea. The dossier on Rao she purchased from her information broker was thicker and contained far more ambiguities and qualifications than the one on Felipe Matta. His mother was American, and he had lived his entire life traveling back and forth between his family homes in the luxurious Bandra district in Mumbai and the exclusive Pacific Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. He had been educated in both countries. His father was an importer, originally from Mumbai, but educated at the University of Chicago. Rao himself went to Stanford. He spoke both English and Hindi with no trace of an accent in either language. He was introverted, uncongenial, and often surly.

"Why?"

"I know," she said, "that you understand this is an . . . extraordinary opportunity. And there's a production element, a distribution element, and an expiration window. I know that in the past you've focused on production. That means you'll have to arrange distribution, a plan to work the product into the pharma supply chain. That creates a timeframe consideration that drives the pacing of these requirements."

She paused for him to respond. He didn't.

He looked at the sample packaging flats on the table in front of him, the hologram morays glinting in the late morning sun. His hand rested near his teacup while his fingers pensively touched the flash drive on the table beside the flats.

She waited. Then he looked up, and they regarded each other.

This attitude was no surprise to her. She had anticipated it and already had considered how to deal with it.

“I see,” she said in a tone of finality, still looking at him over the top of her cup. “I’m sorry.” She put down the cup without taking the sip. “I do thank you, though, for taking the time to listen to my offer.”

She started to stand.

“What if I need more than two weeks,” he said. “I have to reach my people, give them time with . . . this information,” he gestured to the flats, the flash drive. “And I have to consider my distribution options.”

This was a test too. If there was one thing Lina knew, it was men. She had spent her life figuring them out, at first it was a matter of survival, but as the years went by, she came to view them as obstacles, and then as little more than objects that she could manipulate to do her bidding. Rao needed this win to make up for the one he had just lost. If he didn’t get it, he might be unreasonable.

She hesitated, then stood. Rao had a startled look on his face as if she had grossly overstepped a cultural protocol by making the first move that signaled the end to their conversation. That should’ve been his call.

“It’s exclusive to you for two weeks,” she repeated matter-of-factly, ignoring everything she’d learned.

“After that,” she added, “if you’re interested, if it’s still available, you’re welcome to participate in the bidding.”