

Chapter 11

I-75 Near Lexington, KY, Sunday, June 20

The GPS had indicated 954 miles to their destination when they'd left Pastor at about 3:00 PM, and it had clicked off the miles as regularly as a metronome until it read 783 left when they decided to exit for fuel and some food. The sign had shown four gas stations at Exit 113 off of I-75, and it seemed as good a time as any to refill the van and themselves. They had been up and going since 5 AM, and some coffee and food would help get them past the doldrums they were experiencing thirteen hours later.

The four trucks they had brought with them and were now using to get to their targets were all heavy-duty panel vans, different from the pick-up trucks in almost all ways. Different trucks, different drivers, different plans. Same cargo. This particular load was heading for Minneapolis and the Mall of America. Sajid was driving and would be the videographer, recording the event for display on al Jazeera television news. Rasul would wear the vest of C-4 and Cesium, and he would be the event. They were driving a van instead of a pick-up truck because the Cesium would have to be shielded right up until the event, and the Rasul would need to load the vest and put it on under the cover of the panels. Because of the strength of the Cesium, he would have to do it alone while Sajid stayed safely away, and then Rasul would have only minutes to get to his assigned location and detonate before he would succumb to the intense radiation.

The gas station was on their left at the T-intersection at the end of the exit ramp. Sajid waited, first in line to turn left at the red light. When it turned green, he looked left to be sure the intersection was clear, and then drove across the two southbound lanes of the divided highway.

He had just started to turn left into the northbound lanes when a black Toyota pick-up truck in the far northbound lane burst from behind the U-Haul truck that had stopped dutifully at the red light. Sajid jerked the steering wheel hard to the left to avoid a collision. The Toyota driver seemed unaware, and at first turned left itself, forcing Sajid into the median before swerving hard to the right, leaving the road and hitting the steel barrier at the base of the overhead traffic signs that straddled all four lanes like a bridge.

Rasul was thrown into the passenger-side door and as he struggled to recover, he noticed that the heavy drum, tied down in the back, had shifted slightly to the right, but he had no time to consider that. The van slid into the grassy median dividing the lanes and came to an abrupt stop. Both men looked around quickly, trying to orient themselves and absorb the sudden events and process these into their plans. Rasul recovered first and said, "Go." Sajid glanced at him, and then ahead to be sure the way was clear, and jammed the accelerator to the floor, spinning the wheels on the grass and fishtailing back onto the northbound pavement.

Rasul grabbed the GPS while it recalculated their route and said, "Turn left in 2.4 miles." Sajid had the van up to seventy-five before Rasul told him the turn was half a mile ahead and he started to slow down. After the turn, Rasul said, "In seven miles, take the entrance onto I-75. And slow down. We don't want to attract any more attention."

The two straps they had used to tie down their very heavy drum were arranged in an X pattern across the top of the drum, hooked to the floor at four points, but not to the drum itself. After Sajid got them back on I-75 aimed toward Cincinnati, one exit north of their accident, Rasul climbed into the cargo area to inspect the drum. It had shifted only a couple of inches, and the straps were all tight. It was too heavy to move themselves, so all he could do was keep the straps tight and hope for the best.

“Rasul,” Sajid called, his voice urgent, “there is a police car following us.”

There were no windows in the cargo area and Rasul climbed back into his seat and looked in the mirror, seeing the flashing red and blue lights closing fast from behind.

“It came from the rest area back there,” Sajid explained. “They were watching for us! What do I do?”

“There is nothing we can do now, my brother. We cannot escape the police on this highway. Our mission is to avoid capture and release the weapon. Drive. Keep us ahead for a few minutes. I will open the container. *Allahu Akbar.*”

Sajid didn't reply, he just pushed the accelerator all the way to the floor and concentrated on keeping the van on the road. Rasul scrambled back into the cargo area and opened the small tool box they had for emergencies. Using his pliers, he opened the bung hole in the side of the drum to drain the oil below the top of the pipe so he could remove the lead plug and get the Cesium jar. As soon as he did that, he realized his mistake – the oil on the floor made it impossible to get any footing to open the drum lid. *Fool*, he thought, and tried anyway.

The drum lid was sealed by a locking ring – a circumferential hoop that was held together by a single bolt. Removal was just a matter of undoing the bolt. In a moving van with a slick floor, it became almost impossible. After repeatedly sliding away, Rasul braced himself between the drum and the wall of the van and succeeded in getting the bolt off. He then used the box cutter to cut both nylon straps freeing the lid and exposing the lead plug. He grabbed it with both hands and started rocking and twisting it, like he was trying to uncork a very large champagne bottle.

“Hold on,” Sajid called as the van swerved to the right, the now loose drum sliding left in reaction, violently throwing off the balance of the van. Sajid jerked the steering wheel left to

compensate, and the drum, skating on a fully-lubricated floor, slid back to the right. Rasul didn't even have time to repeat his entreaty to Allah before it slammed into him, crushing him against the wall.

The 1,500 pounds hitting the wall of the already-teetering van was all that was necessary to topple it over, and it landed on its right side, sliding and spinning for over 80 feet before coming to a stop facing mostly forward and straddling the right lane and shoulder. The air bag had discharged at the impact of the rollover, and the noise deafened Sajid, but left him alive and conscious, held in place by his seat belt and shoulder harness. He looked behind and saw Rasul's upper body protruding from under the drum, now laying on its side, open. *Good*, he thought. *We have done what we could. The Cesium is released. The infidels will suffer.*

With that thought, he released his seat belt and fell into the passenger door and seat. Reaching behind, he recovered their duffel bag and then kicked out the shattered windshield. Once outside, he could see the police car stopped some fifty or sixty feet behind, and several other cars off the road or in the median, no doubt because of his accident. In front of the van, he was out of the police vision while he opened the bag and took out both AK47's and the first of four doubled banana clips, two regular clips taped together for easy reloading. 240 bullets, he knew. *Let me take that many with me*, he prayed as he stood and looked over the van at the single trooper, approaching slowly with his pistol drawn. He was saying something – Sajid could see his mouth moving – but his hearing was gone, and he didn't care to listen anyway.

He brought the assault rifle to his shoulder and fired a disciplined three rounds, and Allah answered his prayer as the policeman died without firing a shot. With no immediate threats to him, Sajid emerged from behind the van and went to the closest vehicle, an SUV in the median. The lone occupant, a young man, just stared as Sajid shot him in the head. He started toward a

Japanese sedan behind it and two people jumped out and started to run away. Sajid aimed carefully and dropped them both with three shots.

By now, the other car occupants realized what was happening and were running away. The northbound lanes were stopped, cars abandoned as people ran south. The southbound lanes were backing up as drivers gawked and then sped away. At a minivan, he found a woman driver clutching a small child to her breast, crying and imploring him with words he couldn't hear and wouldn't care about anyway. He shot the child in the back, the bullet passing through and hitting the woman in her heart. *Two-for-one*, he thought.

Most targets were out of range and Sajid turned west, setting up for more carnage. The highway was divided by a low concrete wall, low enough that he had a good field of fire across the road. Establishing his firing stance, he put a three-shot burst into a southbound car, and it immediately swerved off the road, uncontrolled by the dead driver. There was no barrier on that side, and it continued across the grassy area and into a wide ditch that separated the road from some houses nearby. He repeated the shot with the next car, and it crashed into the center barrier and skidded to a stop several car lengths past him.

There was chaos now – cars trying to avoid the wreckage and still escape once they understood the cause. He shot and halted three more vehicles while several others escaped, using up the 30 rounds in the first clip. As he released it and turned it over to insert the one taped to it, he saw flashing blue and red lights coming toward him on his side of the road. It was time to seek cover back at the van where the remainder of his ammunition was still in the duffel bag.

He jogged back, pausing to fire at several more southbound cars that had been foolish enough to try to negotiate the wreckage he'd caused there. Traffic was stopped on both sides now, and his targets would come harder, he knew. And there would be police and returned fire.

He guessed he'd killed fourteen people so far, and he hoped he could kill a few more before he died. There were no houses on his side of the road, just open land and a large, two-story building in the distance. Too far to run. Getting across the street to the houses on the other side would be his best option, providing some cover and possible targets before the police inevitably cornered and killed him.

Grabbing the duffel, he ran across the road and vaulted the concrete divider, crossed the southbound lanes, heading for a group of one-story brick houses about 400 feet away. A few people had gathered in their back yards to see what was causing the noise and commotion, and he stopped behind a large evergreen and opened fire. They were well within the range of the AK47, and he hit two before the others scattered back into their houses. Picking up the duffel, he ran toward the nearest house and crashed through the rear door.

He heard noises in the room to his right and started there, kicking open doors and finding an empty den and bathroom. At the first bedroom, he kicked the door open and was surprised when three shots were fired, bullets passing close and hitting the wall behind him. He fired three shots into the room to harass whoever was shooting and ran out the front door, looking for less dangerous targets.

He ran across the street to the house there, figuring the further he got from the scene, the less aware people would be and therefore less cautious. The front door was locked, but he solved that with a single shot to the latch and a good kick. He heard the back door slam closed and followed the sound out onto a cement patio where he saw two adults and two children running away. Knowing that he would run out of targets and time before he ran out of ammunition, he fired four three-shot bursts and hit all of them. None moved and he decided to grant himself four more kills.

The yards of these houses were very large, and he had over 300 feet to cross to get to the back of another row of houses. His hearing still impaired, he didn't hear the helicopter so much as feel the shock waves from the rotating blades and looked up. It was a news chopper, the WLEX Channel 18 logo prominent on the undercarriage. He let it hover unmolested, not caring that the police would have an excellent view of his location if they were smart enough to turn on their TV. News attention, and hopefully some good video for his brother jihadists to see and rejoice at, were all that was left to him. That, and as many more dead infidels as he could manage.

He was tiring, and walked across the lawn. There was no one in sight, and at the next house, he found the back door open and unlocked. He entered and walked through a small kitchen into a large room with a dining area and a living area. On the couch, a surprised woman of about 40 looked up from the television and started to say something just before he shot her.

Not stopping to search further, he exited the front door and was crossing a narrow street when the police car came roaring from an intersection to his right. He dropped the bag and emptied the remaining seventeen rounds in the clip into it. The car immediately slowed and drove across the lawn to his right, coming to a halt when it hit the side of the house he'd just vacated. Sijad had lost count, but guessed that was about number twenty.

After inserting a fresh clip, he started down the middle of the road in the direction the police car had come from, figuring that was the most likely area for more traffic and targets. The street signs told him he was at the corner of Mariner Drive and Agena Road, and that was where he died, the bullet from the police marksman at the north end of Mariner Drive, about 700 feet away, entering his head just above his left eye, about an inch higher than the shooter had intended, but instantly lethal just the same.

*

“Shooter is down. I say again – the shooter is down.”

Lt. Alan Slocumb exhaled. As far as he could remember, for the first time since he'd arrived and directed pursuit of the gunman.

“Roger, Sniper 1. Send your SWAT team in to secure.”

Slocumb clipped the radio back on his belt and turned to the SWAT team commander. They were in the Mobile Command Vehicle, a twenty-four foot Class A RV equipped with communications equipment and computers and space to work. It was parked on the northbound side of I-75, along with dozens of State Police and Scott County Sheriff vehicles, and many more abandoned private vehicles. The only thing Slocumb had ever seen to match the chaos was in a movie.

“Witnesses said there were two people in the van. We'll send the robot in to see if the other one is holed up or what.”

The radio-controlled Talon robot sped up I-75 at 5.2 mph, easily the fastest moving vehicle on the seven-mile stretch between Exits 129 and 136, where traffic was at a standstill while police tried to gain control and understanding of the situation. The operator had moved to a stopped vehicle about 500 yards from the overturned van, well within the operating range of his handheld controller and the wireless signal from the optical and thermal cameras mounted on the articulated arm. That arm could extend up or sideways to fifty-two inches, and even extend below grade twenty-four inches if it was at a ledge. It was unlikely that anything could be hiding where the Talon couldn't find it.

The operator also set up a repeater to transmit the signal back to the Command Vehicle, another 500 yards behind him. In the vehicle, Lt. Slocumb and his team watched the road slide

by and the van expand on their screen as the camera got closer. When it was about twenty yards away, it slowed and the camera rose as the operator extended the arm up. All that was visible was back doors and the undercarriage of the van, sitting on its side in a puddle of dark liquid.

The operator kept up a description of what he was doing, pausing frequently to hear if Slocumb wanted any particular visual angle. The robot turned slightly left when it got closer, paralleling the van while the camera swiveled to watch it, especially the front and rear corners where any trouble would appear. It reached the front and saw the kicked-out windshield hanging by one edge, looking like a flap on the entrance to a tent. The Talon slowed further, approaching the front carefully for a look inside.

The front seats of the van were clearly visible and empty. The cargo area behind was harder to see without any windows. The operator turned on the LED light and guided the Talon closer, finally extending the arm into the cockpit through the hole left by the dangling windshield to peer between the front seats. Slocumb could now see a drum tipped over on its side with someone pinned underneath in a several-inch deep pool of the dark liquid, concealing most of the body.

“See if you can get a response from him,” Slocumb said to the operator.

Through the speaker on the Talon, the operator said, “You there! Can you hear me?” There was no response or movement, even after the command was repeated several times.

“OK. Continue around the van and then we’ll decide what to do,” Slocumb said.

The operator withdrew the arm and backed away from the van, swiveled left, and continued the clockwise circumnavigation. Other than the liquid on the ground with an AK-47 in it, there was nothing unusual. The manipulator on the Talon arm was unable to open the rear cargo door, probably because it was either locked, or jammed from the accident.

“Set up in front where you can see both inside the van and the far side. I’m sending SWAT in to check it out.”

When the Talon was positioned some four feet from the windshield, a three-man team, fully armed and armored, spread out and moved in from three different angles while the operator and Slocumb’s team watched for any movement from the person in the van. When the SWAT team reached the van, one moved to the front where he could keep the body under surveillance, and the other two approached the cargo doors in the rear, one positioned to open them, and the other further back to provide cover.

Lying on its right side, only the right-hand door would open easily, assisted by gravity. This meant a very low angle of fire from the rear, so the cover man knelt on one knee while his partner crouched at the door handle. When everyone was in position, he opened the door and stepped back to the shoulder of the road, out of sight from inside the van. The door slammed into the pavement, and nothing moved inside. Again, the operator hailed the body with no response.

Using hand signals, the SWAT team set up so the front man would provide cover while one at the rear opened the other cargo door and held it up so the third could crouch inside to examine the body. With very little time and effort, he concluded the man was dead, mostly relying on the fact that he seemed about a quarter-inch thick where the drum lay on top of him.

“We’re clear here,” he said, climbing out. “He’s dead, looks like he got crushed in the accident.”

With the threat of armed resistance gone, and with two dead perpetrators and a lot of victims, the crime scene became a scramble between the police trying to preserve evidence and medical personnel performing triage. A perimeter was set up and one of the cops stationed just off the shoulder of the road, about eight feet from the top of the van. He had been standing there

for several minutes when a medical technicians walked toward him, intending to get to one of the vehicles further ahead to look for victims. As he passed by, a small pager-like device on his belt suddenly squealed, and both men jumped, startled by the abrasive sound.

“What the hell is that,” the cop asked.

But the EMT's attention was on his device, and then on the van, a look of shock on his face.

“Oh, shit. Get out of there,” he waved frantically and shouted at the cop as he started running back toward the command vehicle. “Everybody get back,” he yelled as he ran. “There's a nuclear device in the van. Get back. Now.”

A police sergeant grabbed him as he ran and said, “What are you talking about?”

“My pager went off. There's a shit load of radiation coming out the top of the van. You need to get everyone out of here. Now.” And with that he took off.

The sergeant keyed his radio and said, “Lieutenant, one of the med techs reports a nuclear device in the van. Says his radiation pager went off. We need to pull everyone back.”

The call went out on all the radios and several loudspeakers, some mounted on police vehicles and some handheld. The scene, already chaotic, turned pandemoniac, with the approximately eighty police, fire and rescue and medical responders moving away from the van in whichever direction got them the furthest, fastest. As they reached the scene perimeter, they had to in turn move the civilians, stacked up in jammed vehicles on both sides of the highway, and approaching on foot from the nearby community of Moon Lake Estates. The police ordered the vehicles to be abandoned, but some drivers resisted, trying to turn their SUV's and pickup trucks around on the shoulder and adding to the bedlam. If one was successful, people tried to get in the truck bed or even the passenger compartment, and several fights broke out.

In the middle of all this, Lt. Slocumb and his team tried to get an understanding of just what had happened so they could figure out what to do next. The HazMat team, owners of a Talon robot of their own, this one equipped with chemical, biological, and radiological detectors, was called in to investigate, and soon had their robot at the van. The police robot stood back, aimed at the fire department robot like it was providing cover, and the fire department operator provided commentary on the readings he was getting at his control station.

“There’s nothing so far, maybe just a little above background,” he said as the robot moved around the open rear doors of the van and started along the shoulder next to the roof.

“Wait, I’m getting something. Still less than 1 millirem, about twice background, nothing really serious.”

The monitor from the police video showed the fire department robot moving along the roof line of the van, maybe one foot away and still at the rear corner. As it moved slowly toward the front, the operator read off the readings.

“I’ve got about two, two-an-a-half millirem now. Definitely something here but no biggie. OK, it’s climbing, at about six now. Climbing faster, up to over 20. Wow, up to almost 1,000 here, and still increasing. Shit! Wait, is that right? It just pegged. This thing reads up to 350 rem per hour. That’s 350,000 millirem, and it just pegged!”

Slocumb understood something bad was happening but he had no frame of reference.

“Tell me what that means. In English.”

“Well, if that was you standing there in a 350 rem field, you’d be dead in maybe three hours, and dying long before that. But the reading must be much higher because my meter is in overflow, there’s too much radiation and it won’t go any higher. Best I can do is back off and find a place where I can get a reading and then use inverse square to estimate a dose rate.”

“I don't know what you're talking about, but if you can, give me some numbers. Then I can call RAP and get some support here.”

While the operator relocated his robot, Slocumb went to his computer and pulled up his RAP contacts and procedures. RAP stood for Radiological Assistance Program and was run by the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Program. RAP teams, working out of nine regional offices, were on-call 24/7/365 to assist local authorities in any radiological emergency, from an accidental spill in a laboratory to a nuclear weapon detonation. They had the best technology available to monitor, analyze, and manage any event involving radioactive materials, and the best professionals to use it. The closest RAP team was based in Oak Ridge, and normal procedures would have them on the way within four hours of notification.

“Lieutenant? I think I've got the best estimate I'll be able to come up with. I'm about two feet from the roof, and I'm getting just under the max reading on my meter, about 350 rem per hour. I'm no expert, and these things depend a lot on the size and shape and configuration of the source of the radiation and any shielding, but if it's in that drum, then there's a lot of lead or something around it except for this one hole, so we're getting a beam of radiation, like a flashlight. That's why we didn't notice it until the tech walked into the beam. Given the location of the drum and the total distance from my meter, I'd say you've got something in there that reads three, maybe 4,000 rem per hour on contact. In your terms, you wouldn't last 10 minutes next to it. We've got us a situation here. Oh, and we need to know if it's leaking. I haven't got that kind of equipment.”

“Leaking? Leaking what? Aren't you monitoring the leak?”

“Radioactive material. Look, it's like dog shit – I'm just monitoring the smell. I don't know what the shit looks like. If this is a solid piece of cobalt or something, then that's one

problem. You just can't go near it. But if it's a powder or liquid, well then you need air samplers and soil samples 'cause it's gonna be coming out of there and spreading all over. You know, like Chernobyl."