

SECOND TERM by J.M. Adams

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

September 10, 2012

Mediterranean Sea, North Africa

A heavy breeze rolls off the Mediterranean Sea pushing away the stench of the city slowly dying around me. The deep salty air offers a snippet of comfort although I have no idea why. There are no childhood memories of the sea. I grew up in western Colorado and southwestern Virginia. Maybe it's the brief respite from the taint of chemicals and human waste that's embedded itself into the pores of this city. I feel like I'm constantly gagging on smoke from the unseen forest fires that raged in Colorado when I was a kid.

The buildings around me are pockmarked with bullet holes. Sandbags stand watch in front of every entrance with piles of rubble towering from thirty to fifty feet high. This place is a giant landfill waiting to fall into the sea. I walk another block and come across a building that looks like something took a mammoth crescent-shaped bite out of it. Rebar splinters off in several directions like webs constructed by a giant spider.

There's no way to underscore the toll of human suffering here. My line of sight follows another tower of rubble going up to the second floor where a little kitchen comes into view. On the left side of the room there's vibrant yellow wallpaper, a Roman numeral wall clock, and a table topped with a bright floral Persian table runner. On the right, the walls are stained with blood and black scorch marks. There are more weapons than food in this cursed city and the reminders are everywhere.

Western leaders continue to fool themselves into believing that the death of Muammar Gaddafi would have brought some semblance of sanity or stability to this region. The Brother Leader's forty-year reign of terror against his people might have ended, but death and chaos rule this city with an iron hand.

Libya is a slave to its violent history, and no one is looking for a way out. But what do I know? I'm just a covert foot soldier for the American Department of Defense. I can't begin to understand why Washington believes that with Gaddafi gone, it's nothing but butterscotch and ponies here in North Africa.

I have a wake-up call to deliver to my superiors that may realign some of that thinking, but only if I can make it to the CIA installation in one piece. I've been collecting intel for the past two months posing as an English teacher for a wealthy family living in a chateau in Derna.

Derna was the perfect place for undercover work. The charming Libyan port city is about 200 miles east of Benghazi and doesn't begin to fit in with the rest of Libya. It's one of the wealthiest areas in the country, a quaint little town nestled into beautiful green mountains rich with exotic sea cliffs and waterfalls. Two days ago, I obtained information that forced me to blow my cover and run. There was no way to securely transmit the sensitive information I've gathered without landing in a cell never to be seen again.

My pickup time is slated for the conclusion of the Muezzins' call to Fajr prayer. The Fajr is the first of five daily Muslim prayers broadcasted from speakers atop the mosques that are still standing around the city. They stick to strict schedule and this morning's devotional is set for 4:58am (the true dawn) although the sun won't rise until after 6:30 this morning.

I emerge from the shadows of the long-abandoned Benghazi Cathedral. It's ironic that one of the most prominent structures in this old Muslim city is a decaying Roman Catholic Church. I have little time to get to the parking lot at the 7th of October Hospital without drawing attention to myself. Good luck with that, I laugh out loud. Hopefully my baggy clothes, hat, and short haircut can fool anyone who doesn't get too close.

I pull the wide brim of my camouflage bucket hat lower to cover more of my face. My oversized camo jacket is untucked over a dark t-shirt hanging over black jeans. The street is still deserted as I execute what I like to call my husky "man-walk." I emit an audible sigh of relief rounding the corner by the burned-out Hamzawi Café. I'm less than a hundred yards away from the hospital and have a straight shot to my destination where I can hole up until my ride arrives. At the same time, two militiamen turn the corner and are coming my way. So much for a smooth escape. Why aren't they preparing for morning prayers?

I ease my Cressi finisher knife into my right hand spinning the blade backwards against my forearm to keep it out of sight. The sharp pinprick of the blade against my skin provides some small comfort. The knife is specifically designed for underwater hunting, but it's always done the

job for me. Five inches long with a deadly stiletto tip. I have zero interest in any confrontation, but that pipe dream is starting to evaporate.

“Asalaamu alaikum,” I say in my practiced husky “man-voice” trying to sound masculine friendly, but in a hurry.

Thankfully, both of their AK-47s remain slung to their backs.

The guy on the left is slightly built, with a camo hat that looks a little like mine. He’s not paying any attention, but the bigger man closer to me answers with a slight edge to his reply, “Wa alaikum salam.”

His eyes are alert and suspicious underneath bushy caterpillar eyebrows and a tangled mane of black facial hair.

I try to politely pass them on the right when the hairy man lashes out seizing my shoulder and reaching for a compact revolver from his belt. I wonder what prompted him to grab me at the same time I plunge the length of my blade deep into his armpit underneath an outstretched arm. His eyes pop wide open in horror. He grunts in confusion as I turn my blade twice before yanking it out of his body and jabbing two explosive thrusts deep into his throat.

Blood erupts from the neck wound covering my hands as I step forward to his companion who is in the clumsy process of unslinging his rifle. I dispatch him quickly with a sweeping arc of my blade and survey the area for witnesses. I’m lucky that this unfortunate incident took place in the cover of darkness. We are the only people on the street, and our encounter made very little noise.

The entire altercation took less than ten seconds. My arms are covered in bright red arterial blood with one of the men gurgling bubbles from his open neck wound at my feet. I lean down and try to leave as much of the mess as I can on his jacket. I switch jackets with my second victim as the loudspeakers crackle to life around the city signaling the start of the morning prayers. Any sane person would want to sprint from the scene, but my training forces me to walk casually away from the dead men lying in the street. I walk into the hospital parking lot. There’s a black Mercedes. The plate matches the numbers I’m expecting as I throw open the passenger door and slam it behind me.

“That’s a good way to get shot,” says the smiling driver in place of a greeting, his hand resting on the Glock 19 in his lap. He studies me with open curiosity.

“If you don’t want company, you should probably keep your doors locked in a neighborhood like this,” I answer.

“Jesus,” he asks, voice rising in concern as he stares at the blood-soaked jacket on my lap. “You hit?”

“It’s not mine. I had a run-in with a couple of locals around the block,” I say quietly.

“A run-in? You’re covered in blood,” he says. I nod.

“Those two militia dudes? Big shaggy guy?” I nod my head again.

“We need to get out of here,” he says.

“Better wait until prayers are over,” I answer. “We shouldn’t be on the streets during prayers.”

“Muhammad will have to see his way past our sins,” he says slamming the car into gear and pulling out onto the empty street. “I’m Deckard by the way. Welcome to Benghazi.”

I nod, scanning the streets for anything out of place.

“There’s wipes in the glove box. You should clean up the best you can. We should be back at the ranch in fifteen to thirty depending on roadblocks. You sure you’re OK?”

I reach for the wipes as a violent cough escapes my lips. The worst thing about Benghazi isn’t the people waving guns; it’s the never-ending cloud of macabre dust that dominates the air here. North Africa is hot, the air is thick, and it’s only rained once since I got here two months ago.

A bottle of water appears in front of my face, and I suck it down in two gulps.

“The station chief told me to look for a seasoned operative. You don’t look old enough to drink. Are you Langley? Everyone else here is.”

Langley is shorthand for CIA. I wonder if he’s going to prattle on all the way to the station.

“Something like that,” I say.

“So what should I call you?” he asks with a twinkle in his eye. “Jane the Ripper?”

“Jack is fine,” I chirp back. “Got another water?”

“You don’t look like any Jack I’ve ever met. Anyway, the station chief has a hard-on for you already,” he says handing me another water. “Says you’re compromising the Agency’s mission in Benghazi and you shouldn’t be coming in at all.”

I lean my head back and close my eyes. The last thing I need now is some sad little station chief crying to me about his little slice of turf in the desert. I need to talk to Washington and get the American ambassador out of Libya or at least stop him from coming to Benghazi.

CHAPTER 2

I have to admit, the driver is quite competent, and that's high praise coming from me. He's avoiding the main roads and driving around in haphazard circles. The last thing he needs in life is to be caught up in one of the impromptu militiaman roadblocks with an armed woman scrubbing blood off of her skin. There is no rule of law here. It's survival of the fittest and open season on Westerners.

People are shot dead in the street every day. Benghazi is inundated by a tsunami of guns, rocket launchers, and grenades, courtesy of the raided Gadaffi stockpiles around the city. Once Gadaffi was dead, the grand prize was a leaderless country where everyone suddenly had access to military-grade weapons.

"You got a change of clothes?" I ask.

"In the duffle behind the seat."

I climb into the back and start rummaging through his bag. "Please," Deckard says dryly. "Help yourself."

I pull off my jacket and shirt, happy to see my sports bra didn't catch any blood. I only have one more in my possession. I pull on his shirt, about two sizes too big, and tie it up at the bottom. I ball up my blood-covered jacket and hand it up to him. "Get rid of this, please."

"Pockets empty?" he asks.

"No, just a blueprint for the U.S. Consulate, signed confession, and the bloody knife."

He chuckles at my amazing wit and tosses it out the window.