

Piss Christ? Piss Koran!

by Matthew Bracken

Part One: Dark Till Dawn

Mike Dolan came out of the subway, hit the sidewalk and set out down the west side of 6th Avenue with a purposeful stride. Midtown Manhattan never truly sleeps, particularly just before a Monday morning, but compared to what it would be like in a couple of hours, it was geared way down. No tourists yet, mostly delivery trucks and vans. All lanes were northbound, because it was 6th Avenue.

Mike was showered and clean shaven, every item on him and in his possession carefully considered. The white hard hat on his head was the real deal. He wore a gray polo shirt with the embroidered black-and-yellow logo of a crane manufacturer above the pocket. Both items were gifts from old friends. The black cargo-pocket work pants over his Red Wing construction boots were practically new. An iPhone in an armored carrier was clipped to the black nylon rigger's belt on his right hip. A silver tape measure was next to a small black flashlight on his left. On his back was a compact but heavy pack, also black. In his right hand he carried a small black tool bag, and he held a folding aluminum clipboard case in his left. On the F-Train over from Queens, another early riser had gestured toward Mike's hard hat, and asked him if the strike was over. Mike just mumbled something about safety inspectors never getting a day off.

After a career spent pounding bolts hanging the high steel, it felt strange for him to be wearing a white hard hat for his trip into Manhattan. The white hard hat and the crane-logo polo shirt were just a disguise for his mission. Like his father before him, Mike was a union man, from the time he got out of the Army, until he'd retired a few years earlier. The New York Ironworkers Local Union 461 had carried him all the way through his family-raising years. Now, the kids were gone, and his wife had passed away.

Mike had always worn a scuffed-to-hell red hard hat with an American flag sticker on the front. Shiny white hard hats were for management pukes way down in the trailers, and for inspectors and reporters and a few other random assholes who would occasionally make an appearance at nose-bleed height. Well, maybe they weren't all assholes. Some of them were pretty cool, like the construction company honcho who had given him the white hard hat right off his head on the job site parking lot, and offered Mike a salaried position with his big and growing company. That was a line Mike Dolan couldn't cross—he'd be a union man until the day he died—but it was a welcome gesture. And now that white hard hat was on his head.

After walking a few city blocks south from the subway entrance, the black edge of the forty-story BCA building became visible across the avenue. The BCA building was one of Mike's two targets, but it was not his destination. The black granite tower was the

national headquarters of the BCA television network, including the studios of BCA World News. Another block down 6th, and Mike passed in front of another impressive skyscraper, the fifty-story Grand Hotel. Cabs were waiting under the portico; it was the usual scene remembered from a thousand pre-dawn trips into the city. Hustlers, pimps and low-lives of every stripe, who were just ending their nights, passed worker bees trudging the other way toward their daily grinds.

While he was approaching 53rd Street, Mike looked around and counted at least four cameras. It didn't matter. He knew he'd been on film from the time he'd gotten onto the subway. If his mission succeeded, his identity would probably be out anyway. The guy on the F-Train who had asked him about the strike would be giving TV interviews by the twelve o'clock news. So what? It wouldn't change anything.

Mike's destination was just across 53rd Street. The southwest corner of the intersection was the home of the forty-five story Bank of Europe building. The corner of the building was set far enough back from the street corner so that in normal times, there was enough space around its main street entrance for a plaza with a big statue, a fountain, and benches extending most of the way down 53rd. But not now. Now this extra space was blocked off from the public as a temporary construction site. Orange plastic barricades were set up along the 53rd Street side of the bank building, leaving only a narrow space near the curb for pedestrians. Just behind the line of orange barricades was a fence made of temporary chain-link sections covered with green fabric.

The barriers were there to keep people away from a tower crane that was being assembled on the 53rd street side of the bank building. Something big and heavy needed to be lifted 600 feet up to the roof, and the way they were going to get it up there was with a temporary crane. But the tower—and the horizontal hammerhead crane on top of it—were only halfway up the side of the bank building. The strike had stopped all Manhattan construction jobs last week. At this temporary work site, there would be no union members walking a picket line. The crane job was just shut down, and it would be forgotten until the dispute was settled, probably in a week or less.

After crossing 53rd, Mike turned right and walked along the line of orange barricades and fencing halfway to 7th Avenue, where they made a ninety-degree left turn and terminated against the side of the building. The dark fabric covering the fencing cast a shadow from the nearest street light across the plastic barricades. There was nobody in sight, so Mike casually swung his legs over the low barricade and went prone, disappearing in the gap between the orange plastic and the fencing. The fabric was just hanging loose at the bottom, easily pushed out of the way. Mike's black tool bag was already unzipped. Heavy-duty wire cutters clipped the temporary joint where the galvanized pipes of the last two fence sections were sloppily wired together. He only needed to push their bottoms apart to slip through, and he was inside.

Behind the fencing there was little need for security, because there was nothing small or light enough for a thief to steal. Whatever had to be lifted to the roof would not arrive until the tower crane was fully assembled and ready, and it was only halfway up. The

tower grew twelve feet at a time by pushing the top section up with the enormous hydraulic pumps in the jack-up climber unit up near the top, and then sticking in another tower section that had just been lifted up by the crane.

Most of the barricaded space along 53rd Street was taken up with the next half-dozen tower sections that would go up. Individually, they were giant yellow cubes made of four vertical load-bearing round pipes joined by a grid of horizontal and diagonal cross struts. Mike walked between these sections and the building, and went straight to the base of the tower. A steel hand ladder was welded to each section on the side nearest the building, which was twenty feet away. Crouching there the dark, Mike removed leather work gloves from his gym bag and put them on. The gym bag and his hinged aluminum clipboard went into his backpack, and when he slung it back on, this time he fastened the chest strap. His hard hat's liner suspension was already tight enough for climbing.

Mike had been out of the game for few years, and he'd lost much of his old strength, but climbing was still second nature to him. He rested and caught his breath after he passed each section. At an easy pace, it took him less than half an hour to climb the twenty stories up to where the horizontal hammerhead crane formed a giant T across the tower. Until the strike was over, this was as high as it was going to get. The load jib, the 150-foot cantilevered-boom end of the hammerhead, rested parallel to the twentieth floor of the bank building, aiming east toward 6th Avenue. The shorter counterweight jib aimed the other way from the tower, back toward 7th.

The standard square tower sections within the climber unit ended below the horizontal crane, and transitioned into a succession of moving structural elements, hydraulic lines, steel cables, conduits, and welded pipes and beams. It was a little tricky climbing the grab-irons around the slewing-ring machinery that would eventually allow the crane to turn in circles above the building, but it was nothing that an old steel-monkey like Mike couldn't navigate blindfolded in the dark. He wasn't blindfolded, but it was dark. The yellow paint helped him to find his hand and foot holds, reflecting what light was available.

Mike climbed past the glass-enclosed cubicle where the crane operator would sit. He had great respect for his union brothers, the Operating Engineers, and the hammerhead crane operators were at the very top of that game. Or, as the Ironheads kidded them, they were the only OEs allowed up that high—but only if they were safely tucked inside their little steel boxes with the windows all around. But the truth was, the entire show, down on the street and up in the sky, all ran at the speed of the individual Tonka jockey at the top of the tower.

Once he was above the operator's cab, Mike was finally at the level of the 150-foot horizontal jib, which was made of three primary load-bearing pipe sections. They were each about eight inches in diameter, with two on the bottom, and one on the top. These three main pipes were each about five feet apart from the other two, creating a stacked triangle that was held rigidly together by a succession of welded struts that were about five inches in diameter. The pair of pipes at the bottom supported the trolley that

brought the lifting hook in and out. The single load-bearing pipe at the top was supported by stout guy-wires that extended back to the “cat” at the very top of the tower, and then down again to the counterweight jib at the opposite end of the crane. Like the vertical tower sections, the whole crane was painted bright yellow. It was clean, too, because it had only been up for a short time.

There were no lights burning inside of the twentieth-floor offices, so Mike decided to travel out the jib on the building side. On the odd chance that some janitor or early-bird spotted him, they’d think nothing of it, not after noting his white hard hat and work clothes. He put both boots on the bottom pipe nearest the building, and leaned inward to place his gloved hands on the single top pipe. It was an easy side-stepping shuffle, just maneuvering his legs over the connecting struts as he passed them.

If he slipped, it was 250 feet straight down to the street, but he was used to that view between his toes from decades as an Ironworker. He soon found the rhythm, sliding his right boot out, then bringing his left over, and doing the same with his gloved hands on the top pipe. Nothing to it. The Ironheads would often say *easy money* to one another in circumstances like that. They’d hook, shackle, bolt or pin something to something else, and get paid damn good money for it. The only catch was, it was usually hundreds of feet up in the air. And today, money had nothing to do with it.

At the end, 150 feet out from the tower, the two bottom pipes had a panel of expanded metal decking welded horizontally between them. This grating was stiffened with stout angle iron at each end, also welded to the two bottom load-bearing pipes. This provided a stable working platform for men making repairs and adjustments to the trolley machinery and other gear that lived near the end of the jib, but mainly underneath it, out of Mike’s way. He had spotted this grating from the street with his binoculars, and he had guessed that it would make him a secure roost where he would have an eagle’s-eye view of both of his targets.

The top pipe was neck-high to Mike when he was standing straight up on the grated deck. The end of the jib extended a little way beyond the northeast corner of the bank building, so that Mike could see up and down 6th Avenue, with Central Park to the north, and the Empire State Building to the south. The metal grate gave him five feet by five feet of secure footing, with the connecting struts making good hand holds all around. It felt just like back in the old days, but without his buddies hollering their usual Monday-morning banter from beam to beam. The greatest guys in the world, bar none, doing the best jobs in the world. He’d just aged out of it. It was a young man’s game, and Mike Dolan was no longer young. Sixty wasn’t old, but it was too old for Ironworkers.

Anybody in the corner offices of the Bank of Europe building was going to have much too close of a view of him, but he’d planned for that. He took off his pack, crouching on the deck, and removed an old Army poncho that had bungee cords attached to the grommets at its corners, all of it stowed in its own plastic bag to prevent snags. Mike secured the green poncho to pipes and struts on the side of the crane toward the

building, but a little ways back from the grated platform at the end. Mike wanted to be able to see up and down 6th Avenue, but he didn't want the NYPD aiming lenses or anything else at him from fifteen yards behind his right shoulder. His poncho lean-to shanty blocked that exposed angle from view.

He stared at the BCA building, his secondary target. It was less than a football field away on the other side of 6th Avenue. The black slab blocked half of his view toward the east, and reminded him of the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. 53rd Street ran along its base on the north side. Just a few degrees to the left and twice the distance away, on the other side of 53rd, was Mike's primary target: the five-story Modern Art Museum. Both of his targets were in plain sight, and he had not been stopped or hassled even once, not counting the guy on the subway. Mike looked at his glowing digital watch: it was 5:17 in the morning, on Monday, the 22nd of August. He had less than an hour to wait before he made his first call.

Time to sit down, relax, and get ready. He removed the padded stadium seat cushion that had been in his pack against his back, and slid it under his butt. Expanded metal grating was painful to sit on, any old Ironhead knew that. Then he remembered his polo shirt and hard hat. His beef today had nothing to do with the construction trades, so he took off his brain bucket. He'd worn the crane company's logo polo shirt just for a disguise, in case he was questioned on his way, so he pulled that off too, and wrapped it around the white hard hat.

Underneath, Mike was wearing a white t-shirt with a big American flag across the front. The gray polo had been streaked with grime where he'd brushed against greasy wire cables on his way around the slewing ring, but the white t-shirt was still spotless.

While it grew light, he took out his compact 8X20 Zeiss binoculars. Binos had often saved him a long trip out on the beams just to verify one critical detail or another. Since Mike had retired, he'd made it a habit to bring his binos along when he was in the city. He was always scanning the skylines, watching for moving cranes, and for his brother Ironworkers who built the city. That's why he'd been carrying his binoculars last Friday, when he'd noticed the chance juxtaposition of the BCA building, the Modern Art Museum, and the half-erected tower crane across 6th Avenue from both of them. He'd been on this mission since that light bulb had switched on in his mind, and three days later, he was sitting on the end of the crane.

Even before full daylight, with his binos Mike could see that a line of police barricades were set up on the street in front of the glass front wall and doors of the Modern Art Museum. Police cars were already lined up in ranks on both sides of 53rd. There was even a horse trailer, for the mounted police, and a flatbed with more barricade sections. New York's Finest had crowd control at street demonstrations down to a science, and understood the importance of getting to the scene well before the expected angry mobs.

At ten minutes before six o'clock Monday morning, Mike removed a pre-paid flip-phone from a zip-lock bag that contained a half dozen more. He entered the memorized

number for the radio station office line of WNYR, New York Radio, FM 101.5, and 1070 on the AM dial. The number was also written in his notebook, but he didn't need to look it up. The phone rang and rang, but it was finally picked up on about the twentieth ring.

"What?" asked a male voice.

"Is this the radio station? WNYR?"

"Yeah, it is, but this isn't the call-in line. You'll have to call back on the other number."

"I need to speak to Jerry Conroy."

"That's why we have a call-in line, pal."

"It's urgent—tell him it's a newsmaker. Tell him he's got a big scoop, if he wants it."

"Yeah, sure. Take a hike, pal."

"Listen, *pal*, don't blow this deal. This is the biggest scoop that Jerry ever had. If you hang up, I'll call WABC and give them the story. Then, when this is all over, I'll tell Jerry that you hung up on me."

"Okay, that was pretty good. I'm listening. What do you got?"

"Jerry was talking about the Serrano exhibit last Friday. You know, 'Piss Christ,' and all that deal. It's supposed to open in four hours at the Modern Art Museum. Only it's not going to open. Tell Jerry that you have somebody on the horn who says that the Serrano exhibit is not going to open at ten. Just tell him that."

Mike had selected Jerry Conroy because his four-hour talk radio program began a few minutes after six, and Mike had surmised that the radio host would already be somewhere around the station, preparing for his show. The Jerry Conroy Show on WNYR didn't have top ratings, but they were decent, and its signal blanketed the New York metro area.

Conroy was younger than Mike, around fifty. According to the biography on his website, Conroy had been a Villanova graduate, a Marine Corps captain in Kuwait during Desert Storm, a sometimes lawyer and a sometimes politician, a commentator for BCA News, and finally, a talk radio host. Reading between the lines of what he had heard on his radio program, Mike deduced that Jerry Conroy was divorced, had grown kids somewhere, and was to one degree or another a lapsed Catholic like himself. And he had deduced that Conroy wasn't afraid to take a drink, or to raise his voice, or to swing a fist.

And they were both Micks, there was that...

After a minute of watching the morning shadows shifting and lifting far down 53rd Street to the east, a familiar voice came out of Mike's flip phone. "Conroy here. What about the Serrano exhibit? Make it quick, I'm in a hurry."

"The Serrano exhibit is not going to open at ten."

"And why is it not going to open at ten?"

"Because I'm going to stop it."

A pause. "And just how are you going to stop it?"

"Jerry, do you know where the Modern Art Museum is? The MAM?" Mike pronounced it so that it rhymed with ham.

"Of course I do."

"Then you know that the MAM is down the block and across the street from the BCA building, where you used to work. So here's the deal, Jerry: if you still have any contacts at BCA, you'll want to call them right now. Tell them to look out any window on the twentieth floor that faces west. The twentieth floor. Tell them to look at the yellow crane that's set up on the north side of the Bank of Europe building. Ask them what they see on the end of the crane. I'll wait. I'm not going anywhere."

"You're joking, right? This is a hoax, right?"

"No hoax, Jerry. I promise you, it's no hoax. So if you want to get back on television, here's your big chance."

"Don't go anywhere."

As if he could. This time, Mike had to wait for almost four minutes before he heard Jerry's voice again. By then, it was two minutes after six, nearly air time for the Jerry Conroy Show. Conroy said, "Are you out of your mind? What are you going to do, jump?"

"No, Jerry, I'm not going to jump. At least, not without help, and so far, I'm all by my lonesome. Now, here's the situation. From where I'm sitting, I have a perfect view of the front of the MAM, and if the MAM opens up at ten for the Serrano exhibit, then I'm going to do something that will make everybody wish that they hadn't."

Pause. "You're going to do what, exactly?"

"I'm going to stop the Serrano exhibit from opening, that's what. Now, you tell your old friends at BCA that they have a head start, and for sure they have the best camera shot, but it won't take long for the other networks to get crews up on the other buildings

around here, like the Grand Hotel I'm looking at right across 53rd. So if BCA wants to scoop the competition, they'll have to get moving. Just tell them that."

"They won't go for it. It's against their policy to film jumpers."

"Jerry, I already told you, I'm *not* a jumper, and yes, they *will* go for it. They're not called media whores for nothing, right? You used to work there, didn't you? So you tell them that there's going to be a big news story right across 6th Avenue, and they'll want to get a camera crew up on the twentieth floor ASAP. That is, if they want the scoop. Otherwise, I'm hanging up, and calling WABC. It's all the same to me."

"Okay, okay—just wait a minute."

While he waited, Mike grabbed the smart phone from his belt and brought up BCA national news. The lead story at the top of the hour was a hurricane hitting Mexico. He set the iPhone on the grating, didn't like the angle, then he placed the hard hat wrapped in the gray shirt just past his left knee, and leaned the iPhone against it. With the screen tilted just right, it was easy to watch, yet it would be invisible to the cameras across the avenue.

Mike had a stack of ball caps in his pack, and sunglasses. He didn't want to make it too easy for the BCA cameramen (or anybody else) to read his face. 9-11 was embroidered in white across the front of his first cap, which was Navy blue, but the 11 was made to resemble the two World Trade Center towers. Below the 9-11, the cap said NEVER FORGET.

When Jerry came back on the line he said, "Just tell me that you're not going to do anything crazy. You don't have a gun, or a bomb, or anything like that, do you?"

"No gun, and no bomb, and I'm not going to jump. I promise, I really do. It's nothing like that. But what I do have, Jerry, is a special weapon that will stop the Serrano exhibit from opening. Just let me know when BCA has a camera ready to roll, and we're going to make news together."

The radio host seemed distracted by then, half listening, carrying on multiple background conversations at once. Finally Conroy asked Mike, "Do you want to talk to somebody at BCA? Charlie Thorn is standing by to speak to you. I'm talking to his production team right now. They're switching their lineup around because of you—the Serrano exhibit just moved to the top. You can call them, or they can call you. I have their numbers, if you want to call them. Or, I can patch you through, but the sound won't be as good."

"No, Jerry, I don't want to talk to Charlie Thorn. I don't want to talk to *anybody* at BCA. I just want to talk to you, so please, don't hang up. And if I get disconnected, keep this line open, okay? I'll call right back, but probably from another number."

“Y-you don’t want to talk to *Charlie Thorn*?” Jerry Conroy sounded disbelieving, as if Mike had declined a private audience with the president, or the Pope.

“No, I don’t want to talk to Charlie Thorn. I just want to talk to you, Jerry.”

“All right, well, I’m here. What do you want to say?”

Mike Dolan knew that every word he spoke from that point on would be recorded for playback and careful study. “You know, Jerry, I’ve never called a talk show before, but I listen to yours a lot. And last week, on Friday, you asked why Christians never did anything about sacrilegious art, you know, when Muslims get so riled up by it. You were talking about the Serrano exhibit, and his ‘Piss Christ,’ and the ‘Dung Madonna,’ and all the other anti-religious art that the liberals seem to love so much. Then, it’s our sacred right to free expression, right? You asked why Christians just take it like sheep, when people get murdered over cartoons of Mohammed. And then everybody just goes on like that’s perfectly normal, like that’s just what everybody expects.

“You were talking about how we’re not allowed to say anything negative about Islam, not one single word, or bombs will explode, but anybody can say anything about Christians and the Jews, and we’re supposed to just turn the other cheek and suck it up. But the Muslims—oh, no! They’ll chop the heads off of little kids over a stupid cartoon of Mohammed, that’s what you said. They’ll chop the heads off of little kids. Well, that got me thinking, and one thing led to another, and, well...here I am.” Mike paused to clear his throat. “So here’s the deal, Jerry: if the Serrano exhibit opens at ten o’clock, then I’m going to create another art masterpiece on live television, right here. Performance art, or you might—”

Conroy cut in. “They say they have a camera rolling. Can you see it?”

“No, I can’t see it.” In the early light, the heavily-tinted west-facing windows of the black BCA tower were totally opaque, except where random offices were already open for business and lit inside, giving the side of the building the appearance of an enormous cross-word puzzle. The BCA news crew would want it dark inside the office they’d chosen for the camera work, to avoid reflections off their windows.

“Well, they can see you,” said Jerry. “Hey, what’s your name, anyway?”

“My name is Mike. Brooklyn Mike. You said the camera was rolling?”

“That’s what they tell me, but I’m not there.”

Mike removed a gray cylinder the size of a spray paint can from his pack. It had a hinged handle on the side, and a transverse pin like a hand grenade’s on top. There was just a lazy breeze wafting up 6th Avenue toward Central Park. He yanked the ring, let the handle fly, and scarlet smoke erupted and billowed furiously and streamed across the intersection over toward the Grand Hotel. He set the smoke grenade on the

left side of the platform, downwind. Mike had wrapped it in gray duct tape, so that the telephoto lenses would not be able to determine its origins. Like a lot of stuff, it had come off a construction site. The smoke sputtered out in half a minute, the pink cloud disappearing up the avenue.

He kept an eye on his iPhone, and in a moment, the Mexican hurricane was replaced with BREAKING NEWS. Charlie Thorn came on as the BCA morning anchor, and then the screen changed, and Mike saw himself in tight close-up, framed by the three yellow pipe girders and connecting struts of the crane around him. From the end-on, it looked like he was sitting inside a floating pyramid made of yellow pipes. Red smoke curled away toward the north. Red smoke, yellow crane, a guy in a white t-shirt with an American flag, wearing a 9-11 ball cap on his head, and sunglasses over his eyes. Even on his smart phone screen, Mike could see that it was beautiful composition. BCA News had beaten their competition to the punch, so come what may, they owned the story, and they would *never* avert their treasured front-row camera gaze.

Mike turned his head downward, then counted the seconds until he saw the matching movement on his iPhone. He was on at least a ten-second network delay, so that they could cut away in case he unexpectedly blew himself up, or hanged himself, or jumped. Which, of course, he had absolutely no intention of doing.

To Mike, the red smoke was just eye candy, something irresistible for the BCA News producers and directors. On his smart phone, he could see that BCA had gone to a split screen, with a talking Charlie Thorn sharing space with the mystery lunatic perched on the end of a crane, straight across the avenue from their Manhattan corporate headquarters. Mike had a set of ear buds in case he decided to use them later, but for now, he didn't care what Thorn was saying. He was just hijacking their network cameras for the video portion of his mission. The Jerry Conroy Show would provide the soundtrack. The BCA television and WNYR radio engineers could work out the synchronization between them. Everybody else could share their feeds.

Glancing down at his iPhone in order to be sure that he was still airing on BCA, Mike pulled a clear plastic two-liter bottle full of a pale amber liquid from his pack, and set it to his right side in front of his pack. To save space at the bottom of his pack, the juice bottle had been nested into a square one-gallon ice cream container. Mike set the translucent bucket on the grating between his knees. His legs were spread, and the soles of his work boots were pointed straight at his target audience. Then he withdrew a green hard-covered book from his pack, held it up quite steady for a few seconds, and then he set it into the empty ice cream bucket. An inch of it was still visible above the top edge of the plastic tub. Another glance down at his iPhone showed Mike that he was still live on BCA.

Then Mike pulled a spiral-bound notebook from his gym bag. He had bought the thickest black Sharpie marker that he could find, the kind with a wide, square tip. If they jammed his phones, if they took him off the radio, Mike wasn't going to quit his mission.

In that case, he would create visual text messages for the cameras. There would *always* be cameras. In fifteen minutes, there would be a dozen. In an hour, a hundred.

Back on his kitchen table in Brooklyn, Mike had already hand-printed a few messages. He opened the notebook toward the BCA building, and held it up with his left hand. Then, with his right hand, he raised the unlabeled bottle full of an amber liquid above the bucket, and the green book.

In block letters across both pages it read:

Piss Christ?

Piss Koran!

Part Two: Morning Light

At seven minutes after six, Mike closed his notebook and put the bottle of apple juice behind his pack and near the bottom of his poncho shanty. Then he took a Sony portable AM/FM radio the size of a cigarette pack from a cargo pocket of his trousers. It already had a wire for a single ear bud wrapped around it. He switched it on: it was preset for WNYR-FM.

Jerry Conroy was talking over his show's lead-in bumper music. "Folks, if you're just tuning in, we have a major situation happening near 6th Avenue and 53rd, right across from the BCA television network building in Manhattan. If you were listening to this show last Friday, then you already know about the Serrano exhibit that's opening today at the Modern Art Museum. If you're not up to speed, Andres Serrano is the artist who created the infamous Piss Christ. Well, today there's a man sitting up on a construction crane across 6th Avenue from the BCA building, and, he's threatening to create some new art of his own if the Serrano exhibit opens up this morning. Brooklyn Mike, are you still there?"

Mike Dolan removed the ear bud, and picked up his flip phone. "I'm here, Jerry." He looked down at the screen of his iPhone. Charlie Thorn was staring intently, saying nothing, and then the BCA camera cut back to its shot of him up on the crane. Then a still picture of Jerry Conroy appeared with the caption, "WNYR talk radio host Jerry Conroy."

"Mike, can you explain to our listening audience what you're doing up there?"

"Well, Jerry, like you just said, it's about the Serrano exhibit."

"Folks, if you didn't already see it on BCA a few minutes ago, Brooklyn Mike is threatening to douse a copy of the Koran in urine if the Serrano exhibit opens up. Do we understand that correctly, Mike?"

“You got it, Jerry. If they show the *Piss Christ* at the MAM, then I’m going to create the *Piss Koran* up here.”

“Mike, if you do that, you have to know that millions of Muslims around the world are going to be very, very upset.”

“Then that’s their problem. Almost nobody seems to object to the *Piss Christ*, so why should the Koran be out of bounds? I mean, if we all have the freedom of expression, why shouldn’t I be free to create my own art? The mayor said that we had to respect Serrano’s artistic vision and his right to free expression, so why should the Koran be off-limits?”

“That may all be true, but let’s be practical. Let’s be realistic. You have to know there’s going to be a terrible reaction to your stunt. And the responsibility will lie with you.”

“With me? Jerry, last Friday you asked why Christians and Jews were just expected to take this kind of abuse like sheep, but we couldn’t say one word about Islam, or bombs would go off. So *you* gave me the idea, Jerry, *you* did. So why don’t *you* have to share some of the responsibility? How far back does this responsibility thing go? I mean, is there still free speech in America, or not?”

“But if you go through with this stunt, come on, Mike, you know that a lot of people are going to be hurt. A *lot* of people.”

“Why is that? I’m not threatening to hurt anybody. I’m just going to create a new work of art — just like Serrano.” Mike checked his smart phone again. The still picture of Jerry Conroy was across from him in the corner of the screen.

“Do you understand all of the ramifications of what you’re doing today, Mike?”

After a pause, he said, “Yes, I believe that I do.”

Conroy sighed. “Well, Mike, are you willing to take some questions from callers?”

“Why not?”

“Okay, folks, first up is Reverend Samuel L. Peterson, pastor of the Faith Tabernacle Mission. Reverend Peterson is also on the board of the New York Interfaith Council. Reverend Peterson, go ahead.”

The reverend sounded old and frail, and he looked about the same way when BCA put a photo of him up in the corner of the broadcast television screen. “Mike, oh, Mike, are you really going to do this terrible thing? If you do, you are going to cause an unimaginable outbreak of rage across the Muslim world! I fear that many people are going to be hurt! Do you really want to do that? Do you want that on your conscience?”

“Why would it be on my conscience? I wouldn’t hurt a fly. I’m just creating a new work of art, just like Serrano. Nothing more, and nothing less. I can see the Modern Art Museum from here, down 53rd. It was in the news all last week, pastor. Were you planning to come down to protest against it?”

“Uh, Mike, well, I’m, you see, I’m not much of an expert on art — ”

“And you’re just *so busy*, I know. Too busy to worry about the *Piss Christ*, or what Christians think about it. But you’re Johnny-on-the-spot today, aren’t you?”

“Michael, may I call you Michael? Michael, two wrongs don’t make a right.”

Mike snorted. “What? Is that the best you can do? Seriously? Reverend Peterson, tell me something. Do you know what a *dhimmi* is? In English, it’s spelled d-h-i-m-m-i. *Dhimmi*. It’s an Arabic word. Do you know what it means? Ever hear of it?”

“Michael, I’m not sure what that has to do with — ”

“It has everything to do with everything! *Dhimmi!* Do you know the word, or not?”

“I must say that I’m not familiar with it. I don’t speak Arabic, and I don’t see — ”

“Well, I suggest that you look it up, you old fool! Lenin would have called you a useful idiot. You’re not leading your flock to verdant pastures, you’re leading them straight to a pack of hungry wolves! You’re a *dhimmi*, and you don’t even know it.”

After a moment, Jerry Conroy came back on and said, “Ah, Reverend Peterson seems to have dropped off the line. Mike, we’re not going to get very far if you treat our callers this way.”

“I’m sorry the reverend is gone, because I had some more to tell him. ‘Interfaith’ preachers like Peterson are nothing more than Judas goats, leading their flocks straight into the slaughterhouse. He’s doing the work of the jihadists, and he’s too stupid to even understand it.”

“So, what does this *dhimmi* thing mean, anyway?”

“You don’t know either?”

“No, should I?”

“Yeah, you should. Look it up sometime.”

“Okay, I will. But now we have more callers waiting. If you can keep your temper, maybe we can work this out. Imam Sayyid Qutb of the Al-Hijra Mosque in Brooklyn is on the

line. I'm told that Imam Qutb is one of the foremost authorities on Islamic jurisprudence in America. Imam Qutb, you're on the air. Am I pronouncing your name correctly?"

An elderly male voice, with a strong Middle Eastern accent. "Yes, that's fine. And am I also speaking to the man up on the crane, the man who is causing all of the worry and consternation today?"

Mike felt a chill of recognition at the name of the imam, and his mosque. "If you say that I am, then I guess I am." He had purchased his Koran and his other Islamic holy books in the Al-Hijra Mosque's bookstore. Then he had done some more research into the mosque, and he even read a few short on-line biographies of the well-known imam. Mike scanned his iPhone: BCA news had a still shot of the imam on the screen, with a telephone symbol next to it. Below his photo, the caption read "Imam Sayyid Qutb, National Islamic-American Council." In the photo Qutb had a long gray chin beard without a mustache, wire-rimmed glasses, and a white Muslim skull cap on his head.

The imam said, "Oh, Mike, don't do it — I implore you. *Please* don't do it."

"Why not? Last week the mayor said that multicultural diversity is New York's greatest strength, and he said that we all have to respect diverse views about what constitutes art, so I'm pretty sure that he'll love the *Piss Koran* — "

"Please, don't say that! I implore you, Mike, don't say that again."

"What's the problem with saying *Piss Koran*? It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Because you must know that the violent extremists will be provoked. What you have discussed doing will be taken as an *extreme* provocation by Muslims around the world. I can hardly imagine a worse provocation. I fear that great violence will be the result of such a great act of blasphemy."

"Nobody cares about the *Piss Christ* except for a handful of intolerant Christian bigots, that's what the mayor said. So why should anybody care about the *Piss Koran*?"

"Mike, it's a sad reality that there are Muslim extremists who misunderstand the underlying peaceful message of the Holy Koran. If you commit this act of provocation, many people will be hurt, that is my great fear. I don't want to see that happen, and I'm sure that you don't want to see it happen either."

"Imam Qutb, are Muslims really that close to committing violence, that they'll commit violence over a simple work of art?"

"Mike, Muslims are very peaceful people. The Holy Koran says that anyone who kills another human, it is as if he had killed all mankind."

“Yes, it does say that. In fact, I have a bookmark on that page, so I can read it right now.” Mike took the Koran from the bucket, and opened it across his lap.

“Here it is: Sura 5:32. I even highlighted it. But you only read a little bit of it, here’s the rest. *‘For that cause, we decreed for the children of Israel—that means the Jews—that whoever kills a human being for other than murder or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind. And who saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.’* There are a couple of problems with that verse. It’s an order put on the Jews, not on Muslims. In fact, the nice-sounding part of it was lifted right out of the Torah. And the other problem with that verse is the part about ‘or corruption in the earth.’ In context, that refers to unbelievers who resist the spread of Islam after they have heard the message. Now, I’m not an Islamic scholar, but that ‘corruption in the earth’ seems like a pretty big loophole to me. It sounds to me like that means it’s fair game for Muslims to kill any infidels who resist the spread of Islam. When it was written, it was referring to the Jews in Arabia, and pretty soon after that, they were all slaughtered for resisting Islam. I guess they were all corrupt of the earth.”

“Where did you ever hear such a thing, Mike?”

“It’s in the Koran, and the Hadiths of Mohammed. And *Reliance of the Traveller*, and some other Islamic holy books that I’ve been studying.”

“Did you read them yourself, or did somebody tell you that? I fear that you have been very badly misinformed. Islam is first and foremost a religion of peace.”

“Then why did you have to cherry-pick that little part out of Sura 5:32 to find a peaceful-sounding sentence to lay on me? And what about Sura 9:5, the Verse of the Sword?” Mike flipped to another bookmark. *“Fight and slay the unbelievers wherever you find them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem of war. But if they repent and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them; for Allah is forgiving and most merciful.”*

“The Christian Bible also contains violent passages, would you like to hear some of them as well? You see, there are many differing interpretations of Islam, and there are unfortunately a small percentage of extremists who prefer to choose among the more violent verses. Just as there are violent Christian extremists, who choose among the violent verses of the Bible.”

“But there are over a hundred verses in the Koran that tell Muslims to wage jihad against the infidels until they submit to Islam, so I don’t think that you can compare the Koran to the Bible. And there’s something even more important than the number of times that the Koran tells Muslims to slay the unbelievers — I’m talking about the Islamic principle of abrogation. Tell me if I’m wrong, but abrogation means that the verses from the later chapters cancel out the earlier verses if there’s any contradiction. Sura 9 was the last chapter that Allah gave to Mohammed, so it abrogates any earlier

verses that contradict it. It erases them. The peaceful verses were written when Mohammed was in Mecca, and his new religion was only just beginning.”

Mike continued, “But in Mecca, Mohammed’s new religion wasn’t pulling in many converts, at most, maybe one or two hundred, and that was after a few years of trying, so he left. It wasn’t until after Mohammed’s *hijra* migration to Medina that he started to pull in thousands of new converts. You know, *hijra* — like the name of your mosque. And the big reason that they were suddenly attracted to Mohammed’s new religion was because after he got to Medina, Allah told Mohammed that his followers could kill anybody who opposed the spread of Islam, and take their property, and take their women as slaves. The Verse of the Sword cancels out the peaceful verses from the Meccan period, isn’t that true? Isn’t that the meaning of abrogation?”

“I don’t know where you have learned your understanding of Islam, but I fear that you have come under the influence of the Islamophobes.”

“Imam, you’re one of the leading Islamic scholars in America, so I’m sure that you understand the principle of abrogation. I thought it might be important, so I wrote it down on another bookmark. Here it is: abrogation is ‘*naskh*’ in Arabic. At least, that’s how they spell it in English. You never heard of it?”

“I’ve heard of it, but I’m afraid that you have only learned one meaning of *naskh* from among many. A true understanding of these concepts would take many years of careful study at an Islamic university. There are differing ways to interpret the meaning of the holy books, and Muslims understand their faith in differing ways. Thankfully, most Muslims are quite moderate in their beliefs, just as most Christians are.”

“Moderate Muslims...that reminds me. I wrote down something about that. Here it is. President Erdogan of Turkey said that ‘*There is no moderate or immoderate Islam. Islam is Islam and that’s it. These descriptions are very ugly, it is offensive and an insult to our religion.*’ So, was he wrong to say that?”

“President Erdogan speaks only for himself. I don’t know what was in his mind, or even if that is a true quotation of what he said.”

“Well what about you, Imam Qutb? Do you think it’s insulting to suggest that there is moderate and immoderate Islam? Since you live in America now, do you consider yourself to be a moderate Muslim? I mean, you’re not one of those radical extremists, are you?”

“I consider myself to be a faithful and principled Muslim. But why are *you* questioning *me*? That which you are planning to do will lead to a great catastrophe! My question to you is, why are you doing it? What is your hidden agenda?”

“Why? I told you already: I want to create another great work of art like Serrano’s *Piss Christ*. Maybe even better. Then, someday I can have an exhibit in the Modern Art Museum, too.”

“The unnecessary deaths of many people will be upon your name if you go ahead with this great blasphemy! Are you willing to accept that terrible responsibility?”

“Any murder is the responsibility of the murderer and nobody else. Imam, you’re from Egypt, and Arabic is your first language, isn’t that right?”

“Yes, that is correct. And I must say that if you have been reading the Koran in English, then you can’t really understand the many subtle nuances that are lost in translation.”

“But Imam Qutb, I bought my Koran at an Islamic bookstore, and it says right here that the translation is fully certified by the Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo, and it’s recommended for teaching non-Muslims about your faith.” Mike held the inside cover of the Koran up for the camera. “See, it has English on one side, and Arabic on the other. And most of the Muslims in the world don’t speak Arabic, so they *have* to use a translation of the Koran, otherwise, they can’t read it. So what about the people that can’t read Arabic? Are you saying that only Arabic speakers are able to fully comprehend Islam? Why wouldn’t Allah make Islam comprehensible to *all* people in *all* languages?”

“You are speaking in riddles, Mike, and I don’t know why. I’m afraid that a complete understanding of Allah’s divine intentions for mankind are much more complicated than can be conveyed with a brief explanation over the telephone.”

“Well, in that case, can you explain just one more Arabic word to me, with all of its subtle nuances? I think it’s an important word for all Americans to understand.”

“What word is that?”

“*Taqiyya*. Can you tell us the meaning of *taqiyya*, and how it relates to *dawah*, which is the spreading of the faith of Islam among the unbelievers? Like, during a hijra migration, say?”

“Oh, Mike, I can see that I am wasting my time with you today, and I am very sorry for that. Clearly, your mind has been poisoned by the professional Islamophobes.”

“So, you won’t tell everybody what *taqiyya* means?”

“Mike, I’m very sorry that your mind is closed to the truth of the message of Allah. And again, I urge you in the very strongest terms *not* to conduct your act of blasphemy.”

“Can you please explain why blasphemy against one religion is acceptable, but not against another?”

“I would never say that *any* blasphemy is acceptable, ever. Faithful Muslims are against *all* forms of blasphemy. If it was my decision, no such blasphemy would be permitted.”

“But in our country, we have the freedom of expression under the First Amendment of the Constitution, and the Constitution is still the supreme law of our country.”

“Free expression is not an excuse for the incitement of violence. One may not shout fire in a crowded theater, to use a famous example.”

“I’m am doing no such thing. I’m all by myself.”

“Mike, I equally condemn the blasphemous Serrano exhibit as I condemn what you are planning. And I would call on Muslims who honor *all* of our prophets to come to the place where this blasphemous Serrano exhibit will held, to protest against it.” Imam Qutb then spoke a few sentences in Arabic, which, of course, Mike could not understand.

Jerry Conroy said, “I’m sorry, but what does that mean? What did you just say?”

“I said that faithful Muslims should come to the place of the blasphemy, to pray for peace among all people of faith.”

“Oh, all right. We can certainly all agree on that. Thank you, Imam Qutb. Thank you for your unique perspective.”

“You’re welcome.” Then the imam spoke few more words in Arabic, and he was gone.

Conroy said, “Folks, I know this is an unusual situation, but we’ve blown right through our scheduled break. We’ll be right back after these messages from our sponsors.”

Up on the crane, Mike looked at his smart phone. BCA had also cut to a commercial. He reached into his pack, took out a half-liter water bottle, and sipped from it. He’d been drinking only sparingly since the night before, and had eaten nothing, so that he would not be interrupted by a call of nature. He was much too wired to feel hunger or to need a cup of coffee or any other stimulant. He put the pocket radio’s ear bud back in, and listened to the commercials on WNYR, so that he would know when the break was over.

Then he pushed the preset button for National Public Radio. A panel was discussing the dramatic situation in Midtown Manhattan. Voices were shouting over one another about how to avert the great calamity that was going to befall New York, and indeed, the entire world, if the “standoff” on the crane was allowed to proceed any further. One of the female panelists even suggested that it would be better for the police to shoot Brooklyn Mike dead where he sat, rather than to allow his desecration of the Holy Koran to occur! As the lesser of evils! To save lives! On NPR, no less! Then Mike went back to WNYR, so that he wouldn’t miss the next segment.

He looked down 53rd toward the MAM while he was waiting. It was full morning light, and even though the street was still mostly in shadow, he didn't need his binoculars to see what was happening. The flatbed with the extra police barricades was now parked at the 6th Avenue end of 53rd in the shadow of the BCA tower. City workers in orange vests were setting up a police line across 53rd where it intersected 6th Avenue. Then he heard the Jerry Conroy Show bumper music, and picked his phone back up.

Conroy was saying, "We're back live, folks, and all I can say, is — wow! Did anybody see this coming? Brooklyn Mike, are you still there?"

"I'm here, Jerry."

"Next, we have a special guest who would like to speak with you. In the studio with me is Victor Del Rio, a special assistant to the mayor for public safety. Victor, you're on."

"Mike, this is Victor Del Rio, but you can call me Vic, everybody does. So how are feeling up there, buddy? Me, I can't stand heights. So what are you thinking, big Mike? Anything you need? I'm sure that we can work something out. I'm sure we can settle this problem without anybody getting hurt."

Mike hesitated before he spoke. "I haven't said a single word about hurting anybody, Vic. So now I'm guessing that you're some kind of police negotiator, is that right?"

"Mike, um, no, I, uh, no, uh... No."

"Vic, I don't have any weapons. I don't have a bomb. And I'm not going to jump. You have nothing to worry about from my end. So why don't you put Jerry back on?"

"Well, gee, Mike, it looks like Jerry has stepped out for a minute, but I'm sure he'll be back in a while. In the meantime, why don't you and I talk?"

Mike looked at his iPhone. The shot of him at the end of the crane occupied the entire screen. There was no photo of "Victor Del Rio." If he was really one of the mayor's "special assistants," then BCA News would have a picture of him ready to show the world. They'd had no trouble finding a photo of Imam Qutb, or Reverend Peterson.

"All right, Vic, we can talk. But first, I want to show you something, and then we can talk about it." Mike took out his aluminum clipboard case, slid out a sheet of paper, and held it up for the camera. "I printed this right off the BCA website over the weekend. See? It's Serrano's *Piss Christ*, right on their website. The web page had links to a couple of their old news stories about it, and I watched some of them. BCA News had no problem at all showing *Piss Christ* on national television at least five different times."

A glance at his smart phone showed that BCA was indeed broadcasting the printed screen capture of their web page, complete with a large, well focused rendition of *Piss Christ* in bright orange and yellow. "See that, Victor? They had no problem at all

showing anti-Christian art. The web page was still up yesterday, and it's probably still up right now."

Then Mike took another sheet of paper from the aluminum case and held it up for the camera. "But here's a picture from a much bigger news story. People got killed over pictures like this, but BCA *never* showed them, not even one single time."

Mike held a full-page copy of a cartoon next to the copy of the BCA News *Piss Christ* web page. It was a hand-drawn caricature of a bearded, glaring man wearing a turban. The turban had a lit fuse, making it into a bomb. Mike held the two pictures as steady as he could in his left hand, side by side, because he had to hold the phone in his right. The breeze was coming up, and he had to hold the two pages against his chest to keep them from blowing around. The picture on his smart phone cut away to Charlie Thorn, who appeared completely startled, but no words were formed by his gaping mouth. Then the screen returned to the live crane shot, but this time, both pages on Mike's chest were pixilated. Mike held the two pages up for a few more seconds, and then he put them away.

"Now, isn't that interesting, Vic? All these years, and BCA News never had a problem with showing a photograph of Jesus Christ on the cross, submerged in piss. If Christians didn't like it, that was their problem. But when I put the *Piss Christ* next to a cartoon of Mohammed, all of the sudden it gets blurred out. Now, why do you think that is?"

Victor Del Rio said, "Mike, I agree with you, man. One hundred percent. And I'm glad that BCA is finally coming around and showing some respect for our Christian values and sensibilities, and we all have *you* to thank for that. You've done a great service today, Mike, you really have. Now, if we can talk about how we're going to resolve this other situation, I think that — "

"Vic, I think that you're an hostage negotiator, but I don't see any hostages, do you? So why don't you put Jerry Conroy back on the phone?"

"Mike, I can't do that right now. Jerry's, uh, Jerry's on his way over to the BCA News studio, and, uh — "

"Vic, I know it's just your job, but if you don't put Jerry back on in the next sixty seconds, I'm not waiting until ten o'clock when the Serrano exhibit opens. I'm not a complete fool, Victor. Fifty seconds." Mike pinched the phone between his left shoulder and cheek, wishing he had brought some kind of a headset to keep both hands free. He reached behind him and dragged over the bottle of amber liquid, set in on the deck in front of the Koran in the bucket, and unscrewed the cap one-handed.

Then Jerry Conroy's voice returned. "I'm still here, Mike. Please, put the bottle away. I'm still here."

"I'm glad you are, Jerry. But I don't want to hear from any more psychologists or police negotiators. If the mayor wants to talk to me, then put on the mayor. If the police commissioner wants to talk to me, then put him on. But no more stooges, okay? No more. Don't sandbag me like that again. Don't insult my intelligence."

"I'm sorry, Mike, I'm really sorry. You have to understand, I'm under a lot of pressure here."

"You? Under pressure?" Mike snickered. "Tell me about it."

Jerry Conroy laughed too. "Yeah, I can see your point. You want to take another call?"

"Only if it's legit. No more stooges."

"It's legit, I promise."

"Then put him on."

"Okay, Mike. Here's Joseph. He says he's a Christian Arab from Lebanon. Okay, Joseph, you're on the Jerry Conroy Show with Brooklyn Mike."

"I'm on? Okay. Mike, like Jerry said, I'm a Christian, a Maronite Catholic. Most of my family was wiped out, and the rest of us were driven out of Lebanon by the Muslims thirty years ago, when I was a young man. Now it's happening again in Syria, in Iraq, everywhere in the Middle East. Ethnic cleansing, religious cleansing, right in the lands where Jesus walked. And I understand why you're doing what you're doing. I understand your feelings, I understand your anger. But Mike, if you go through with it, it's going to be a slaughter. You understand that? A complete slaughter! Innocents will die. The Muslims are going to go absolutely out-of-their-minds bat-shit crazy if you do it."

"What they do is up to them, Joseph. Are they human beings, with reason, and free will, or are they just robots that look like humans, but are programmed to kill on command?"

"I hear you, Mike, and I know what you're saying. I really do. But I also wanted to warn you, to warn everybody, that what the imam said that he said in Arabic wasn't what he really said. This is what he really said." The caller spoke in Arabic, and then in English again. "He called all the Muslims in the city to come down and stop the great blasphemy, no matter what the price. So I'm very afraid for your safety, Mike. I'm afraid for everybody down there. That's all I wanted to say. And good luck. But don't do it."

"I appreciate that, Joseph, but I'm not changing my mind. If the Serrano exhibit opens, I'm going to create my own work of art. Nothing will change my mind."

Conroy said, "All right, next caller, but please, keep it in English, so that everybody can understand. Mike, are you ready for another caller?"

“Go ahead, Jerry.”

“All right, next up is Ghazi from Queens. Go ahead, Ghazi.”

“Mike, you are out of your mind, my kafir friend. Out of your mind! Do you know what is going to happen if you go through with this great blasphemy? Do you know? You are not only going to wish that you were dead, you are going to *pray* for death!” Then the caller launched into a stream of blistering invective in Arabic before he was cut off. With the ten-second delay, Mike guessed that nobody listening would have heard his threats, or what he said in Arabic at the end.

Conroy said, “Real sweet, Ghazi. Real sweet. Listen, folks, we won’t get anywhere like that. If we can’t have a civil conversation, we’re going to clear the lines and start all over again with new callers. Next up, Mohammed is calling from Maryland. Go ahead, Mohammed.”

Another male voice with a thick Middle Eastern accent. “Mike, you are making a very terrible mistake, a very terrible mistake. Already millions of Muslims around the world are watching what you are doing. The whole world is trembling for what you are about to do! The Holy Koran is the received truth of Allah, and Muslims take it *very* seriously. Please, don’t do this thing to our Holy Koran!”

“Listen, Mohammed, you came to my country, I didn’t go to yours. If you don’t like it, then why don’t you — ”

Conroy cut in. “Mike, *the mayor* is on the line.”

“Great. Put him on.”

Hizzoner’s deep, gruff voice. “Mike, do you have any idea what kind of hornet’s nest you’ve whipped up? Do you? And not only in New York.”

“I have a pretty good idea, Mr. Mayor. So, are you going to cancel the exhibit, or not?”

“We don’t give in to extortion, Mike. We can’t. Not under duress, not with a gun pointed at our heads. You come on down, and we’ll discuss it like mature adults, I promise. We’ll work something out, we’ll reach a compromise.”

“I don’t have a gun, mayor. But I’m glad you called, because I have a bone to pick with you. Last week, you said that right-wing Christian bigots had to learn to show tolerance for the views of others. That was when you announced that the Serrano exhibit was going ahead no matter how much anger it was creating. Don’t you think that it’s time you gave the same tolerance lecture to the Muslims?”

“How can you *possibly* equate the two situations?”

“How can you not?”

“Nobody is threatening violence over the Serrano exhibit.”

“And I’m not threatening violence either, so what’s your point?”

“Mike, I’m sure that we can discuss this like mature adults.”

“I’m sure that we can. So call off the Serrano exhibit, Mr. Mayor. Box it up and get it out of the city. After that, we’ll talk about me coming down.”

“I can’t do that, Mike. That would be surrendering to extortion.”

“Well, then I don’t think that we have — ”

Then a blue and white helicopter dropped out of the sky, lurching to a stop fifty feet in front of Mike’s perch, facing him like a science-fiction super insect. It must have been hovering on top of the building to arrive so suddenly and without warning. The rotors and engine were barely audible, but then a wall of sound blasted from the chopper louder than the front row of a death-metal rock concert. Driven by animal reflex he turned away just in time to see another helicopter swerve in from behind the bank building and pull up over the crane’s jib.

Blinding, pulsing light hit Mike’s platform from behind him, so bright that he could barely see, even though he wasn’t looking toward it. It was only a matter of luck that he hadn’t been staring at the first police helicopter when the light started flashing, but even while looking away from it he was half blinded by its relentless strobing. The continuous whooping acoustic roar was head-splitting, louder than standing directly behind a jet engine at takeoff, but the sound was uneven, up and down in tone, coming in erratic waves that were synchronized with the blinding light. Waves of nausea rolled through him, his hands clamped over his ears, feeling as if his skull was going to explode.

The helicopter that appeared from behind the building had a pair of SWAT commandos dressed in black leaning out on both sides, their feet on its skids. The helicopter’s whirling rotors were only a foot or two from the window walls of the bank building, but the chopper was bobbing up and down erratically above the crane’s jib. Two SWAT cops on the building side of the helicopter kicked away and dropped, descending on ropes.

Part Three: Crisis

As the two SWAT commandos slid down their ropes, the chopper lifted for a moment, and one of them was dragged against the crane’s guy wire. He was flicked from his descent line, but he managed to grab hold of the thick steel cable. The helicopter dropped again, its rotors nearly intersecting the cable, but it banked away, dipped its

nose, shot forward and corkscrewed downward, the other commando swinging out below its belly on the carnival ride of his life.

The unlucky commando was hanging onto the guy wire halfway out to the end of the jib, his feet more than a yard above the top pipe. He was trying to swing a foot up onto the lower end of the slanting wire, but he was too weighted down with tactical gear. If he tried to go hand-over-hand down the greasy wire, he'd slip and risk bouncing off the crane and falling twenty stories. Instead, the best he could do was to hook an elbow over the wire, and lock his forearm with his other hand.

Mike was angry that the SWAT team had tried a sneak attack during the mayor's phone call, but that didn't change the fact that the officer hanging from the wire was facing the imminent threat of death. He left his secure platform at the end of the jib, and worked his way back toward the tower on the bank building side, his boots on the lower pipe, his bare ungloved hands on the top.

As he moved he yelled, "Hang on, buddy, I'm coming! Stop swinging, save your strength—just hang on!" The first helicopter had switched off its powerful strobe lights and its acoustic weapon, and followed Mike's progress and the fate of their stranded SWAT team member from a hundred feet out.

In half a minute Mike was beneath the cop, the knobby soles of his black boots dangling more than a yard above the top pipe. The welded struts between the three main pipes were joined at sixty-degree angles, forming alternating triangles along the length of the cantilevered jib. Where two of the struts joined at the top pipe was where Mike could make his move. He blessed himself with a quick sign of the cross, crouched, and then sprang up and inward, getting one leg and then the other around the two diagonally opposed struts halfway up to the top pipe where they met.

He clenched both struts behind his knees, squeezing together with all of his lower body and leg strength while pulling himself up with his hands and arms, then got an elbow and a shoulder over the top pipe. With sheer determination he scissored his legs together and forced himself further up, until he could push one foot over the top pipe, and then work his chest and belly onto it, balancing himself there. He found a matching diagonal strut on the other side with his foot, and then he was at least fairly secure on top, panting and wheezing, but for the moment at no risk of falling. He hooked his ankles around the opposing struts, and pushed his chest away from the top pipe until he was sitting directly below the SWAT commando's black boots.

Mike said, "Okay, buddy, we can do this, but don't move. I'm going to grab your feet, okay? Don't move. I'm going to grab your feet, but don't move. All right?"

"All right."

"You've got about four feet to the top pipe, okay? Don't let go yet."

“Don’t worry, I won’t. But I’m hurt, and I can’t stay up here all day.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get her done. Hey, what’s your name?” The cop was facing back down the slanting wire toward the end of the crane, the toes of his boots toward Mike. Mike was facing the other way, toward the crane’s tower.

“Frank. My name is Frank.”

“Okay, Frank, we can do this. I have to get a good hold of your feet, but don’t let go yet. Not till I say. When I say, drop down to your hands, and then you’ll only have about three feet to go. You understand? You got that? You want to come down slow.”

“Yeah, I got it, Mike, but I got a hurt arm, so I don’t know how long I can hang on.”

So Frank the SWAT cop already knew his name. Frank wasn’t an Ironworker, but if he was an NYPD SWAT cop, a member of the elite Emergency Service Unit, Mike thought that he’d have to be a damned good all-around athlete. And if he wasn’t, well, then they were both probably going to fall to the street, and that would be that. Even if Frank did everything just right, they *still* might fall. Mike had never done this trick with another Ironworker; he was purely winging it, operating on adrenaline and instinct. “Okay Frank, I got your feet. Now, when I say, let go from your elbow, and hang by your hands, okay?” Mike’s hand around each of his boots, behind his ankles.

“Okay, but I can’t hang for long.”

“All right, let go from your elbow, and hang.”

Mike clenched the struts on both sides of the top pipe with his feet as hard as he could. Frank’s black boots slid down until the toes were against Mike’s throat, with Mike’s hands around the back of the cop’s knees, which were bulked up with pads. “Okay, Frank, here’s the tricky part. Wait till I say ‘let go.’ Don’t try to balance on top, just keep going until you’re sitting on the pipe like me. Okay? You understand?”

“I got it, I understand. I’m going to straddle the pipe and grab you.”

The guy was cool, Mike had to give him that. “That’s right, you’re going to straddle the pipe, and it’s going to hurt, but you’re a tough guy, right? I’m ready, so when you’re ready, let go, one hand at a time. You ready?”

“I’m ready.”

“Then let go.” Mike had to loosen his grasp and grab again as the SWAT cop fell straight down. Frank spread his feet as he came down to trap the pipe, and grabbed Mike in a bear hug as he stopped short, and just like that, they were face to face, with Mike straining to keep his balance as Frank’s momentum carried his torso over toward the bank building. Mike had to haul him back upright, levering his feet against the struts,

and then they were face to face, embracing in a double bear hug, almost nose to nose. Mike said, "Feel behind you with your feet, you'll hit a pair of struts. Hook them with your ankles."

"I already got 'em, Mike. I already got 'em." Frank was wearing a black helmet and dark goggles. Robo-cop in black, from the nose up, but his mouth and lips were alternating between relief and terror.

"I'm good here, Frank, I'm solid, so you climb down first, okay? The struts are on an angle, right? You're going to slide your foot down a strut toward the building until you reach the bottom pipe. So you got to push away from me a little, and get a leg over, and slide down. I'll hold you steady. Okay?"

"I can clip a carabiner around the pipe—a snap-link."

"Perfect, Frank, perfect! That's the ticket. You do that." Since he'd left the street, Mike had been climbing without any safety gear at all, but it made sense that the SWAT cop would be ready to hook in. A climbing harness was integrated into his body armor and tactical vest.

The cop said, "I got to let go with one hand, all right? So I can hook my snap-link around the pipe."

"Do it, I'm ready." Mike looked at the front of his partner, a black and gray patch said ESU. That was for the Emergency Service Unit, New York's elite SWAT team.

Frank felt for a carabiner that clipped to his tactical vest; it was connected by a short length of rope to his climbing harness. He deftly flipped it around the top pipe, and then clipped it to its own rope. Once his safety line was attached, relief showed plainly on the half of his face that was visible to Mike. "I thought I was a goner. I tore my bicep when I hit the wire, and it was all I could do to hang on by my elbow."

"I couldn't just watch you fall. I couldn't do that."

"I have a wife and three kids. And they still got a daddy."

"Hey, you're not going to arrest me, are you?"

"Hell no! I'm sorry Mike, this operation wasn't my idea. It was the mayor, and the commissioner. It was just orders, and I was pulling duty."

"I understand. Will you get in trouble if you don't arrest me?"

"I'll tell them I was hurt. I *am* hurt. How could I force you to do anything, up here? I'm going to slide off, now. Once I'm standing on the bottom pipe, I'll hold you steady while you come down."

“Okay, you first, then me.”

Frank nodded, pushed backward on the top pipe, put a leg over toward the bank building, slid down the strut, and found his footing on the bottom. Then Mike did the same, while the SWAT cop steadied him. During the entire process, from Mike first grabbing Frank’s boots, until they were both safely down, they’d been in close physical contact.

“Frank—thanks for not arresting me.”

“Don’t worry about it. Thanks for saving my life. I think I got the better deal.”

Mike laughed. “Yeah, I guess so. Hey, do you think the mayor will try something like that again?”

“Not with my team, he won’t. I’m sorry, Mike. It was just a job, it was just orders.”

“I understand. It’s your job.” And most of the time, the job involved saving innocent hostages from violent criminal maniacs. They sure had enough of them in the city, and Mike never had any doubts about the absolute need for a team of professionals like the NYPD Emergency Service Unit. If the mayor sent them out for the wrong reason, the ESU guys couldn’t be blamed for that. “So Frank, what happened with the helicopter?”

“That idiot almost killed me, that’s what. Washout Washburn, he’s a councilman’s nephew. He wasn’t in the military, like us. I mean, he wasn’t a military pilot first. You were in the Army, right?”

“Right. In the seventies. Peacetime.”

“Well, Washout wanted to be a helicopter pilot, so they gave him three tries at the academy.”

“You’re kidding!?”

“The mayor owed the councilman a favor, and we got Washout for a pilot. I don’t know why they didn’t have him flying the distraction chopper. I think it was just his turn, and he wanted to prove himself. Look, Mike, if you get out of this, I mean, *when* you get out of this, look me up. Frank Salerno. I got the first round. Hell, I got all the rounds. I’m sure my wife will want to meet you too. And my kids.”

“I’ll do that.” There were standing on one pipe while leaning against another, twenty stories above the pavement, having a conversation like they were across the backyard fence while their barbeque grills were firing up. Mike thought nothing of this, not after decades as an Ironworker.

Frank said, “I think I understand what you’re trying to do up here.”

“That’s all I’m asking for, a little understanding. I’m not going to do anything to hurt anybody. I’ve got no weapons or bombs, and I won’t jump.”

“Look, Mike, I gotta tell you—I think the mayor wants you dead, man. I don’t like saying that, but I got that feeling.”

“Frank, when I get down, I’m going to find you, and get that beer.” They shook hands, and then the SWAT officer let go and started back along the jib toward the tower. The “distraction helicopter” was still hovering a hundred feet away, taking it all in. As he passed the connecting struts, Frank unclipped his carabiner, refastened it around the top pipe, and continued toward the tower, unclipping and clipping. But he was a family man, with young kids.

Mike stayed where he was, his winded exhaustion catching up to his sixty years. He looked at the diagonal struts. There was no way he could do that again, not for a million dollars, not if his life depended on it. But somehow, he’d done it. For five minutes, since the distraction helicopter had first dropped in front of him, he had no age, just a lifetime of experience, and a life-or-death mission to accomplish.

He heard a clacking and rapping noise behind him, a banging, and he twisted around. Twenty feet behind him, along the twentieth floor of the Bank of Europe building, the window wall was now as transparent as air. There were people standing shoulder-to-shoulder across the wide office, and more people were standing behind them. Men in jackets and ties, women in dresses, and cops and firefighters in uniforms. And they were clapping, waving, mouthing hurrahs, smiling, cheering, giving him exuberant thumbs-ups, and holding up smart phones to record it all.

A woman was pressing a tan file folder against the window. She’d scrawled a message on it with a marker that read, “We’re with you, Mike!” He was stunned, not expecting anything like that reception, so he just stared at them. Then he took a hand off the top pipe, twisted halfway around, and waved to them all a little sheepishly. This wasn’t why he’d climbed the tower, and he didn’t know how to respond to their attention. Then he started side-shuffling back out the crane’s jib, toward his little platform at the end.

The distraction helicopter moved away, following the progress of ESU officer Frank Salerno down the twenty steel ladders of the tower. Mike looked around for the other police helicopter, and found it on the ground across 6th Avenue. Ambulances were pulling away from it, with lights and sirens. Traffic had been stopped on the long block in front of the Modern Art Museum, so there was plenty of open space for a helicopter to land. He looked straight down between his feet, there was a new line of police cars on 53rd Street near the base of the tower, blue lights flashing. They were there to pick up Officer Frank Salerno, he guessed.

Mike reached his expanded metal grating platform again, and sat down heavily. If he was still alive tomorrow, he was going to be sore as hell, one giant bruise from his neck to his ankles. He just sat, staring across 6th Avenue at the BCA tower, and down West

53rd toward the MAM, and after a while he regrouped and took stock. His padded stadium seat had caught under his poncho shanty, he recovered it and slid it beneath him again.

His flip phone was still on the grating deck, and so were his binoculars, and his smart phone. The gray shirt and the hardhat were gone, he must have knocked them over in the recent excitement. The plastic bucket was gone, but the Koran was still there, open, pages fluttering in the breeze. The bottle of amber liquid was where he'd left it, under his poncho shanty on the building side. His pack was where he'd left it. He found the water bottle that he'd already opened, and drained it in one go. Then picked up his little radio, and pushed its single ear bud back in.

Jerry Conroy was arguing with a female about just exactly who was responsible for the crisis in Manhattan, which had escalated, step-by-step, until a police officer had been gravely injured. There had been a semi-crash landing of an NYPD helicopter while the other ESU officer was still hanging from it by a rope. Was this Brooklyn Mike's fault, or the mayor's, or the police commissioner's, or the ESU commander's, or the pilot's? *Somebody* had to be held responsible for his injuries, but who?

Both the WNYR radio host and the caller agreed that without Mike's intervention, at least one NYPD cop would probably be dead. The other helicopter had been unable to get close enough to the building to retrieve the lost officer, because it had been mission-configured to carry its specialized acoustic and visual "distraction devices," and not to conduct a high-risk rescue so close to a building. The helicopter didn't have the correct equipment or the right ESU personnel on board, so, naturally, no rescue attempt could be made. More lives would have been put at risk, so the decision had been taken for it to simply observe the events. It was just lucky for the ESU officer dangling from the wire above the crane that Brooklyn Mike had gone out and hauled him down to safety.

Mike noticed that his 9-11 ball cap had been lost somewhere along the way, so he looked into his pack, and found a black one that had NYPD across the front. After meeting Frank Salerno, he knew that needed those guys on his side if he was going to get off the crane in one piece.

Mike picked up the flip phone, it was still on. "Jerry, you still there? Jerry?" He expected that the line had been disconnected, but almost at once he heard a familiar voice. It was the guy who had first answered the phone at the radio station just before dawn.

"Brooklyn Mike, is that you?"

"I'm still here."

"Great work up there, man! Great work! I'll tell Jerry you're on."

Then he heard Conroy again. "Mike! Holy Jesus, man! Are you okay?"

“I’m fine, Jerry.”

“The whole world is watching you, Mike. The whole world is watching! That was amazing, how you grabbed that cop. Nobody would have blamed you if you’d just sat tight, but you just went right out there and got him.”

“Frank Salerno. That’s his name. Frank Salerno of the ESU. We’re good now, we’re tight. It wasn’t his fault. It was the goddamn mayor. Frank was just doing his job.”

“Hey, are you ready to take another caller?”

Mike exhaled, and stretched his shoulders. “Sure, why not?”

“Okay, next up is Lenny from Queens. Lenny, you’re on.”

“Mikey! Mikey Dolan! Goddamn, buddy, holy hell! What the hell, Mikey?”

“Lenny, the Hebrew turn-screw?”

“Mikey, I knew it was you as soon as I heard you on the radio, even before I saw you on TV. Goddamn Mikey Dolan, up on a crane with a Koran and a jug of piss. Mikey, I always knew you were a crazy sonofabitch, but this beats it all.”

“Geez, Lenny, what’s it been, five, six years?”

“Seven. The Port Authority job. Coldest winter in twenty years, and we’re up there bangin’ bolts in the snow. *Easy money*, right, Mikey? But I thought it was the end for you today. I thought it was the end for you and that cop. We worked a lot higher, you and me, but twenty stories is high enough. Hey, the safety snitches catch you up there without a harness, they’re going to dock your pay, right?” Lenny laughed, but then his voice cracked. “Mikey, you made me proud to be an Ironworker today. You made us all proud. Brothers to the end. Nobody else could have done that — nobody. Only an Ironworker would be that goddamn crazy. Nobody else.”

“I guess everybody knows who I am now, huh, Lenny? Thanks for blowing my cover, you dumb Jew bastard. Why didn’t you go to medical school, like your brother?”

“I know, black sheep of the family. But I didn’t blow your cover. Everybody knows already, Mikey. Everybody. Look, I don’t want to hold you up, I know you got your hands full. But I wanted to tell you that everybody on the picket line is tuned in, and nobody’s talking about nothing else. Haven’t you heard? The whole world is watching, and they already got about five embassies under attack. The one in Islamabad is on fire, and they’re pulling our people out with helicopters. So *mazeltov* and *behatsla’cha*, and watch your *tuchas* you dumb Mick, ’cause in case you didn’t know it, you got all the goat-humpers in the world pissed-off enough to chew rebar and spit bullets.”

“Don’t I know it? Good to hear from you, Lenny. Really good.” His old friend’s voice brought Mike back to life, and put some new steel into his sore old back. Then, Lenny was gone.

Conroy said, “How about that, Mike? An old friend, eh?”

“More than a friend. A union brother.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

“No, you don’t. But that’s okay. Nobody could. Not unless they been where we been, and done what we done.”

“Okay, okay, fair enough. Are you ready for another caller?”

“Sure, why not?”

“This guy just calls himself Ex-Muslim. So go ahead, Ex-Muslim.”

The caller had a barely perceptible foreign accent. “Mike, you were asking the imam the meaning of the word *taqiyya*. I’m assuming you already know what it means, but for everybody else, it means holy lying for the purpose of spreading Islam. Lying to a non-believer isn’t a sin for Muslims, it’s just clever. It shows how smart you are to put one over on the stupid *kafirs*. And that other guy who called himself *Ghazi*, well that means a holy warrior who is doing *jihād* against the *kafirs*. Somebody has to tell you people these things! Americans are so naive when it comes to Islam. I was raised as a Muslim, but when I came to America, I left it all behind. But even now I have to be careful, because if Muslims find out that I left Islam, my life would be in danger. How can you live with people who will kill you for leaving their cult? And that’s what it is: a cult. A death cult, where you get rewarded for killing infidels.”

Conroy said, “That sounds like just a *bit* of an exaggeration there, Ex-Muslim. Maybe you have a chip on your shoulder. Maybe a few fanatics might feel that way, but—”

“No, Jerry, it’s not an exaggeration. I was born in Egypt, just like Imam Qutb. Believe me, most Egyptians support killing apostate Muslims. They support Sharia Law all the way. Devout Muslims believe that the Koran is the literal word of Allah, dictated word-by-word to Mohammed. That’s why Islam can’t be reformed. Any Muslim who even *suggested* that one single word of the Koran was a mistake, well, he would be risking a death *fatwah*.”

“So, you’re saying Islam can’t be reformed?”

“That’s what I’m saying, Jerry. Because any Muslim who said that one single word in the Koran was wrong would be insulting the Prophet. They would be saying that Allah had made a mistake. And that’s enough to get your head chopped off by a fanatic.”

Conroy said, "But what about that abrogation thing? Can't Muslims see that the abrogated verses were mistakes?"

"Not mistakes. It doesn't work that way. Each sura of the Koran was correct for its time, that's what Muslims are taught. When Mohammed was in Mecca, he preached peaceful Islam, because it was correct for that time. It was what worked in Mecca. When Mohammed went to Medina, Allah gave him new revelations, so Mohammed started preaching violent jihad, but both are still the word of Allah."

"That doesn't make sense to me. Not if they contradict each other."

"That's the point, Jerry, it doesn't *have* to make sense. There's a famous *sura* about fighting jihad; it's about killing non-believers. Sura 2:216, I just looked it up. It says that Muslims have to fight jihad, even if they don't like it. Let me read it: *Fighting has been enjoined upon you while it is hateful to you. But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah Knows, while you know not.* That's one of the reasons why I left Islam when I came to America: I wanted to think for myself, and not be a programmed robot, like Mike said."

"So how can Muslims reform their religion, if the Koran can't be changed?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that question, Jerry. But I do know this: the more that Muslims study the Koran, the *more* dangerous they become, not the *less* dangerous. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi is the Caliph of the Islamic State, and he has a PhD in Islamic Studies from the Islamic University of Baghdad. So when American politicians say that the Islamic State doesn't represent Islam, well, that's like a bad joke to Muslims, because those ISIS guys are actually super-Muslims. The ones that your politicians call the 'moderate Muslims' are the ones who don't read the Koran and hardly know what's in it. They're just cultural Muslims, that's all. They can't win a single argument against the fanatics who have memorized every *sura* and *hadith*. How could they? So when your politicians urge Muslims to study 'true Islam,' they're only helping to create more fanatics."

"So, what do you think is going to happen today on 53rd Street?"

"I don't know, but Joseph, the guy from Lebanon who called before, he was correct. Imam Qutb asked all the faithful Muslims to come and stop the two blasphemies. I'm looking at some websites, and some local Islamist groups say that there will be morning prayers on 53rd Street near the museum, and all faithful Muslims should come. After that, I don't know what will happen, but I think it's going to be very dangerous. I think that Mike should leave the crane now, while he still can."

Conroy asked him, "What do you think about what Mike is doing?"

After a pause, Ex-Muslim said, "I don't know. Of course, it will lead to days of rage around the Muslim world, the *ummah*, even worse than after the cartoons, or the Life of

Mohammed video. Already, embassies are being attacked. But on the other side, maybe it will give Muslims a chance to show that they're capable of self-control. Or if they're just killer robots, like Mike said. I just don't know. Anyway, thank you for allowing me to speak."

"Thank you, Ex-Muslim." Jerry let the silence hang for a moment. "So, Mike, you just heard him. Embassies are already being attacked. And you don't feel responsible?"

"Not at all. I'm not responsible for what other people do. Human beings have free will. Are they programmed killer robots, or not?"

"Any chance you'll come down before ten o'clock, when the museum opens?"

"None that I can see. But Ex-Muslim gave me a new idea. If every verse in the Koran is the sacred word of Allah, then I guess that Islam really is unreformable. So maybe we can test it out, right here." Mike picked up the green Koran. His numerous bookmarks were orange sticky notes, so they hadn't blown away when the book had gone tumbling in the confusion of the helicopter assault. He pinched his flip-phone against this shoulder, he was getting pretty good at it, and said, "Okay, I'm going back to the Verse of the Sword. Sura 9:5. That was in the last chapter that Allah gave to Mohammed, so it erases all the peaceful stuff that came before it."

Mike opened his Koran to that page. "Muslims always say how peaceful they are, and how Islam is a religion of peace. So, why do they need the Verse of the Sword? How can normal human beings coexist with Muslims, if that sword is always pointing at them? Right? So if Islam is peaceful, then I think peaceful Muslims should be able to do without the Verse of the Sword. Am I making sense?" The retired Ironworker held the Koran toward the cameras, and glanced at his iPhone. The image of the book against his chest was pixilated and blurred. It didn't matter. They'd get the point. He held the open Koran in one hand, tore the page out, and held it up for the camera. Then he set the book to the side, so that he could hold his flip phone properly.

"Let me read it again. Remember, Allah gave it to Mohammed last, so it erases any peaceful stuff that came before it. That's called abrogation." Mike cleared his throat, and began. "*Fight and slay the unbelievers wherever you find them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem of war.*" He looked up at the cameras. "The *unbelievers* is us, everybody who's not a Muslim. So I think that we can all agree that the Verse of the Sword has no place in the modern, civilized world. I think that peaceful, moderate Muslims can agree that the Koran would be better off without it. I think that everybody will agree that if Muslims are going to rejoin the civilized world, then they have to be ready to toss out the Verse of the Sword. Am I right? And if they can't let go of it, well, then I guess everybody will know what *that* means, too."

Mike tore the page in half, then quarters, and kept tearing it until it was in tiny pieces, and then he threw the handful of confetti from the end of the crane. The scraps rolled and blinked as they caught the morning light, widening into a cloud on their descent to

the street. The wind was up now, from the east, so the shredded Verse of the Sword was heading back toward 7th Avenue. The line of police cars that had been along 53rd near the base of the crane was gone, so Frank Salerno must have been picked up and taken away to rejoin his Emergency Service Unit team.

Instead of police cars, the flatbed truck loaded with police barricades was parked in the middle of the block. City workers quickly erected a police line across 53rd, beginning where the temporary fencing around the base of the tower crane ended. This was the place where he had snuck into the construction site in dark. Something bright caught Mike's eye further to the west toward 7th Avenue. At the end of the long block, there were at least twenty yellow cabs parked haphazardly across 53rd where it ran into 7th Avenue. The cabs had to have come eastbound onto 53rd, the wrong way, since 53rd was one-way westbound. There were already barricades across 53rd on both sides of 6th Avenue, so the block should have been clear of traffic. He picked up his compact binoculars to study the situation.

Along with the cabs, there were hundreds of pedestrians, nearly all of them men, and many of them wearing Middle Eastern man-dresses and Muslim skull caps, and most of them sporting beards. All of them were carrying thick tubes under their arms. Some of these men had walked up to the newly erected police line across the middle of the block, and were unrolling prayer rugs and laying them down in a row across the street. The intersection of 7th and 53rd was quickly choking with even more cabs and cars and vans, and hundreds of pedestrians who must have been pouring out of the subway stations or leaving their places of employment.

Mike grabbed his phone. "Jerry, are you there?"

"Yes, but we're not on the air."

"We're on a break?"

"Um, yeah, a break."

"Is Victor Del Rio there?"

"Um...yes...he is. Do you want to speak to him?"

"No. Just ask him what's happening on 53rd, down at the 7th Avenue end."

"Um... All right."

When Jerry Conroy came back, he said, "According to Mr. Del Rio, the Muslim community is going to hold their morning call to prayer on West 53rd, to pray for a peaceful resolution to the crisis."

"What crisis is that, Jerry?"

“Mr. Del Rio says the crisis that you created, Mike. With the Koran.”

“Jerry, there’s a single line of police barricades across 53rd, but it’s pretty close to the crane. There’s hundreds of men with prayer rugs, and more are coming, but there’s no police. Just a line of barricades. It’s got me kind of worried.”

There was a pause, and Conroy said, “Mr. Del Rio thinks it would be a good idea for you to come down right away. For your own safety.”

“Jerry, there are hundreds of Muslim men down there already, and hundreds more are coming.”

“Mr. Del Rio says that you need to make a decision very fast. If you come down, some police officers will meet you at the bottom of the tower and escort you to safety. That’s the best he can do. They’re afraid of provoking an incident with a heavy police presence.”

“But there’s no police down there at all, just a line of steel barricades across the street.” Mike looked at his iPhone. BCA was no longer showing the “standoff” on the crane, but a panel discussion. The evening anchor had joined the morning news crew.

Jerry said, “They’re going to hold their morning prayers at nine o’clock. I don’t know what’s going to happen after that. Mr. Del Rio says that you should come down while you have the chance.”

By then, there were several hundred men and their prayer rugs lined up in ranks and files across 53rd from the unmanned police barricade and extending back to west. The taxi cabs forming an ad-hoc blockade at the 7th Avenue end indicated that the cab drivers, and not the police, were controlling access to the street from the west. At the 6th Avenue end, there was another line of steel barricades, but no police. The only police officers that Mike could see were on the other side of 6th Avenue.

Then Mike heard Vic Del Rio’s voice again. “Last chance, Brooklyn Mike. Come down while you can, smart guy. The Jerry Conroy Show is over for the day, and BCA isn’t covering the standoff any more. It was creating a threat to public safety, and we can’t allow that. Public safety always comes first, that’s in the law. So you’re up there all by yourself, smart guy.”

“No more callers, Vic?”

“No more callers, Brooklyn Mike. Show’s over. So, are you coming down? Morning prayers are going to start at nine. After that, who knows what’s going to happen? So, are you coming down, or not?”

With every minute that passed, more men wearing Middle-Eastern garb were arriving from 7th Avenue, and walking in groups down the middle of 53rd toward the crane, with just the unguarded line of police barricades holding them back.

Jerry Conroy said, "You have to come down, Mike. For your own safety."

Mike Dolan scanned up and down 53rd Street. To the east across 6th Avenue, there was a small crowd of protesters carrying signs gathered in front of the Modern Art Museum, facing an even greater number of police officers across several protective rings of steel barricades. The helicopters were gone, but there were dozens of police cars, a dozen mounted police on horseback, and a half-dozen television trucks with their microwave antennas jabbing skyward. In the other direction, his direction, there were hundreds of Muslims unrolling prayer rugs, and nary a police officer or television camera crew to be seen.

"So, smart guy, are you coming down?" asked Victor Del Rio, the mayor's special assistant for public safety.

After swallowing hard, and thinking about his options, Mike replied:

"No. I always liked the view up here. I think I'll stay."

Part Four: Resolution

"Your call, smart guy." The phone connection made a click and the line went dead.

Mike wasn't a kid. He knew that he wouldn't live forever. He'd had enough brushes with death to understand that a healthy old age was not guaranteed in the contract. He'd been standing next to men who had stepped the wrong way, and fallen. He'd helped pull a man's body off a concrete footer where he'd been impaled on an uncapped rebar stake. Just two stories down, and dead as a nail. Laughing and joking the minute before. A paragraph in the back of the paper, if that. There but by the grace of God.

Before he'd climbed the tower, Mike hadn't planned out how the stunt would finish up. He figured that at the very least, he'd be arrested for trespassing. In fact, he didn't even have a bottle of piss. It was apple juice, in case he spent the whole day up there and ran out of bottled water. He just wanted BCA News to be forced to publicly account for how casually they accepted Serrano's *Piss Christ* as "art," showing it on their website for years, when they were too cowardly to ever show a single peep of an unpixelated Mohammed cartoon. But finishing the morning by crawling down the twenty ladders, and hoping that some police officers would arrive to protect him from the gathering crowd of enraged Muslims?

No way. Not even if he had believed Vic Del Rio about the police escort, and he didn't believe that lying weasel for a second. Not after Del Rio set him up for the mayor's

phone call, and the coordinated SWAT helicopter assault. Now there was only a single thin line of police barricades across the middle of 53rd Street, but there were no police officers standing behind it. Frank Salerno had said that the mayor wanted him dead. *That*, he believed. Some kind of a deal had been struck, but it wasn't with him. It was between the mayor and the leaders of the local Muslim community.

So even if he wanted to go, to slip away quietly, the mob now unrolling their prayer rugs on 53rd — already angry enough to chew rebar and spit bullets — would see him coming before he was halfway down the twenty ladders. In their minds, he had already desecrated their Holy Koran by tearing up Sura 9:5, the Verse of the Sword.

So the die was cast. Well, nothing lasts forever. It had been a great life, and he'd had a wonderful wife. At least it was a gorgeous August morning in Midtown Manhattan, the rising sun casting beams and shadows down the length of 53rd. If this was his day to go, he thought he might as well make the best of it. He looked at his watch. It was 8:33, so he had just under a half hour. That is, if the mob was going to wait until after their morning prayers to stop the two blasphemies.

He picked up his iPhone to see what they were covering on BCA. A reporter was standing in front of a wave-pounded marina in Cabo San Lucas while Hurricane Eliza swept through. He selected his other television network preset buttons, and saw that none of them were covering the events around 6th Avenue and 53rd Street in Midtown Manhattan. Vic Del Rio had been right. The plug had been pulled on his stunt. He put the ear bud from his little Sony radio back in. On WNYR, he was surprised to hear Jerry Conroy's voice, but it only took him a moment to understand that it was a pre-recorded "best of" show.

Meanwhile, beyond the puny little barricade just to the west of the crane, 53rd Street was rapidly filling up with devout Muslims who had heard the imam's call to action. While he watched, he saw something glint in the sunlight. A man in a tan robe unrolled his prayer rug, revealing a sword, which he waved in circles over his head. Then the sword went against the pavement, his prayer rug concealing it.

Mike tried calling the WNYR studio office line again, but got a busy signal. He knew it would be useless to call the other radio and television stations on his list. But he also knew that there must still be cameras on him, even from across 53rd in the Grand Hotel. He found his spiral notebook and his Sharpie, and was considering which sticky-noted verse advocating the murder, plunder and rape of the infidels to tear out of the Koran next, when he heard an insistent rapping behind him. He looked around his poncho lean-to shanty toward the corner office of the bank building, and saw a crowd of people, at least half of them in police uniforms.

The woman from the other office was there again, holding another file folder message against the window. It read >call this number< followed by nine digits. He didn't recognize the area code; it wasn't from New York. It was hard to see around the shanty, so he unclipped the bungee cords from the corners, rolled it up, and put it away in his

pack. With the BCA cameras a hundred yards across 6th Avenue turned off, it no longer made sense to hide from the eyewitnesses who were nearest to him, police or not.

He still had a zip-lock bag with unused prepaid flip phones, so he used a fresh one to call the number. It was picked up and answered on the second ring. He heard “Hello?” It was a woman this time.

“Do you know who this is?” asked Mike.

“Of course, silly, the whole world knows! I’m glad you called. The show must go on, right?” She had a hillbilly accent. Middle-aged and gravelly, like she was a smoker.

“How? BCA is back to showing the hurricane.”

“Oh, we don’t care about BCA. If you’ll take another caller, we’ll make sure it gets on the radio. And it’ll get on the internet too.”

“How?”

“To tell the truth, I don’t rightly know how. Somebody else is handling that side of it. But they seem pretty sure that they can keep you on the air, if you want to be. So, do you want to be?”

“Of course I do. That’s why I’m up here.”

“That’s the spirit, Mike! Well, I just got the high-sign, and they say we’re live on a Ko-rean radio station in Newark, New Jersey right now, if you can believe it. Ko-rean!”

“Korean? But that means —”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be in English today. We just put out the station information by text message. All the union guys in New York City are getting them as we speak, at least, that’s what I’m told. And it’s going on the internet, too, somehow. Audios and videos; it’s being filmed from every which way, that’s what I’m told. I don’t really understand how it all works, but they say that if that creepy mayor of yours takes that Ko-rean radio station off the air, they have more stations lined up right behind it. All right?”

“I guess so.” If it was over her head, it was *way* over Mike’s. But he could see that on the other side of the window walls of the corner office, several people were holding up smart phones, so for sure, he was on video.

The Southern lady said, “Now, you look for another number, and use another phone. You have a very special caller. Good luck, and God bless.”

“Wait a minute —” But the line had gone dead.

He looked back to the building. The woman with the file folder was showing another number. He chose a new flip phone, and called it. It rang once and was picked up.

“Is this Brooklyn Mike?” It was a girl’s voice, or a young lady’s, speaking in unaccented American English.

“Yes, it’s me, who is this?”

“For today, my name is Amina. Some people that I trust said that I can talk to you, and that everybody will hear my story.”

“They tell me the same thing, Amina, so go ahead, I guess.” Mike looked at his watch. Twenty minutes to nine. It wasn’t his plan at this point to take another caller, but really, what plan did he have left?

“Thank you. I wanted to do this for a long time. Mike, have you ever heard of a lady named *Ayaan Hirsi Ali*?”

“Sure, I know about her. She’s from Somalia, and she wrote a book called *Infidel*, and another book called *Nomad*.” Both had come highly recommended, and Mike had read them while he was doing his own research on Islam. They were amazingly insightful. Brilliant, really.

In a soft voice, the girl said, “Ayaan Hirsi Ali is from Somalia, as you said, and she escaped from Islam. So today, she has to live in hiding, because she is an apostate Muslim. Well, I too have escaped from Islam, and I too am in hiding, but I was born in America. I was born in America, and I’m in hiding!” Amina paused to catch her breath, and gather her thoughts. “I was only allowed to go to a normal American high school for two years, tenth and eleventh grades. I had to wear the *hijab*, and I was watched for every minute I was out of our house. And the hijab had to be tight around my face, and I had to wear long clothes, almost like a *burka*, so that just my hands and my face would show.”

She said, “Maybe you have heard that some Muslim girls like to dress that way, but what about the girls who hate it? What about them? When I unwrapped my *hijab* and wore it loose like a scarf, and my hair would show, I was beaten for it by my father at home. No matter where I went, I was spied on, even by my own brothers. If I was seen talking to regular American kids, not Muslims, just talking, like friends, I was beaten. I was never allowed to make any friends on my own, never. No sports, no drama club, just straight home. My father checked my phone every night, and he told me that if I ever had an American boyfriend, he would kill me. Kill me! And I believed him, because he already beat me all the time. But never on my face, so the marks wouldn’t show. I tried to find just a little freedom in my life, and he found every little piece, and smashed it flat. He thought I was becoming Americanized — that’s what he called it — but I was born in America! Why shouldn’t I be Americanized? I was an American, but I was a slave.

“I tried to resist, but what could I do? He checked my phone, I was watched everywhere I went. When I should have been getting ready for my senior year, I was pulled out of school. He told me that I was going to be home-schooled, but only in Koranic studies. I had to become a better *Muslima*, and stop being Americanized. My soul was at risk of eternal hellfire, and I was putting our family honor at risk. So I was made a prisoner in our own house. I was literally locked inside, and guarded every minute. I was *too free*, that’s what he said! Too free! He was afraid I would be ‘ruined,’ and his family honor would be destroyed. That lasted for three months; our house was my prison.

“And then he announced that I was going to be married to a cousin from his old country, a man of thirty, a man who could speak almost no English. I had no say in the matter — none. My mother was terrified of my father, but my brothers supported him. I had no place to turn. I had no friends outside of our home. I was never *allowed* to make friends. So I had nobody. I was going to be married to a man twice my age — a first cousin! A man I had never met! My father said that he was a very pious Muslim, and he would teach me to be a good Muslim wife. But all I wanted was to be free, like the regular American girls.

“So I had to pretend to accept my fate, to become submissive to my father’s will. I was going to be sent to my father’s country, so then I knew I was out of time, and then I escaped. I was still only sixteen, and I took a little money from my mother, enough to take a bus to another city, and I found a shelter for battered women. I had no idea what I should do next. I had no money, and no friends. I had *nothing* outside of my family, *nothing!* I didn’t know anything, then. I was still a fool about those things. I believed anybody who said they would help me. So I was introduced to Family Protective Services by the ladies at the shelter.

“The social workers who came to the shelter convinced me to meet my mother at a restaurant. I was such a naïve fool! By then, I was dressing like a normal girl, blue jeans, like that, and no *hijab*. I swore I would *never* wear the *hijab* again, *never!* So when I arrived at the restaurant I looked for my mother, but instead, there were my brothers, lying in wait for me, and friends of my brothers from the mosque. They tried to catch me in the parking lot and push me into a car, but I screamed that I was being kidnapped, and an American, some old man like a cowboy, he had a big gun, and he pointed it at them, and I ran away again.

“After that, I had to hitchhike to another town. I was at the mercy of anybody, anybody, and then God sent me the first of my angels. The first car that picked me up was driven by an old couple. Through my tears, they heard my whole story, and they promised not to turn me in, not even to tell the Family Protective Services, and that was the first time in my life that I felt safe. I felt safe, but I was still not free. In America!”

“What about the FBI?” Mike asked her. “If they tried to kidnap you, that’s a federal offense. Even if it’s your family, I think.”

“The FBI? Oh, my God, the FBI? Yes, the old couple had the same idea. The people who sheltered me, the first people that picked me up. They said I should call the FBI, so I spoke with them on the phone, but I was too afraid to let them know where I was. I called them when I was in somebody else’s car, with somebody else’s phone. The FBI person I spoke to arranged to have a meeting with me, but this time, I chose the location. It was a Waffle House with glass walls. We had another girl wear a *hijab* and pretend to be me, a Christian girl, a friend, just to be sure. But instead of the FBI, it was my brothers and their friends, coming to catch me again! Somebody from the FBI had to have told my father about the meeting. The FBI! I saw my brothers coming to catch me again, but I was hiding in a car across the parking lot. So please, don’t tell me about the FBI.”

She had to pause and catch her breath. “You need to understand something, Brooklyn Mike. My father is not just some ordinary Muslim man. He is very important. He belongs to important Muslim associations. He has even been to the White House. I have seen him on television, but when he is on television, I don’t recognize the same man who would beat me with a cane for showing my hair. On television, he’s so *smooth* and *gentle*. Oh, on television, he’s a very peaceful man, a gentle *moderate Muslim*! The same man who beat me with a cane so hard that I would bleed. That’s why they want to catch me, and if they catch me, they will kill me. My story would be too much of an embarrassment, oh, the shame and the dishonor it would bring!”

Amina took a deep breath, and continued. “When I was in high school, we read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Everybody knows the story. Everybody in America talks about slavery, about how horrible it was, and how evil men like Simon Legree would try to catch the runaway slaves, to take them back to the South, to take them back to the slave plantation. Why? Because the black slaves were just another man’s property, and nothing more.

“But today, the FBI is helping the slave masters to catch the runaway slaves! What has happened? I can’t believe it! I was born in America, and I should be free, but I was born on a Sharia Law slave plantation. I was going to be sold by my father to be the property of another man, a stranger, a cousin, for him to rape me as he pleases, because that is his right under Sharia Law. I was just property, a slave, without a word to say about *my own life*. And I was told to accept my fate, to submit, because I am only the property of my father, and I must obey him. I was told to accept my fate, like any slave. To be sold to another man like a sheep or a goat.”

She paused, seething with fear and anger. “If my brothers find me again, they’ll kill me, and nobody will ever find my body. And my father will be proud of them, and they will be proud of themselves, and after I am dead, my father will go back to the White House, and he will pretend to be a gentle and wise *imam*, and stupid Americans will believe him. And I will be dead and forgotten, just a runaway slave that nobody ever heard of. And this is in America — under American Sharia. What happened to the America that stands for freedom? What happened to it? And now, after this phone call, I’ll have to move again, to another family of Christians who will hide me in another state. My bags

are already packed. I live in fear that the next time I see my brothers, there will be nobody around to save me, and I will be killed. But if I die, I tell this to my father: I have written everything down, *Baba*, and if anything happens to me, people will know who you *really* are. Brooklyn Mike, how can this happen in America? How?"

Mike was hushed by the passionate sadness of her tragic story, but he was also in awe of her hunger for freedom. "I don't know what happened to our country, Amina. I don't even recognize it anymore. I wish I could give you some hope, but I don't know what to say. Just that I'm sorry." Mike was sixty, and he'd lived every day of his life as a free man, free even to make crazy choices like climbing up the tower crane. But Amina's freedom, her American birthright, had been stolen from her before it had even begun.

She was weeping, and then she was gone. And Mike was weeping too. He looked away from the building, to wipe his tears with the back of his hand. His watch said that it was ten minutes before nine. West of the line of barricades, 53rd street was densely packed with more and more Muslims walking in from 7th Avenue. When he looked back at the corner office, the woman was holding up another number. He called it with his next phone. This time a man answered. Mike said, "I'm almost out of time, and I don't know what to do next."

The man said, "Don't quit, Mike. Help is on the way."

His voice sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. Mike asked, "Who is this?"

The voice said, "Look over here, Mike."

He turned back toward the corner office, then stood up on his platform, leaning against a strut. It took him a moment to recognize Frank Salerno, because he'd only seen the bottom half of his face before, but there he was, holding a phone. Frank was still wearing his black uniform, but without all of the tactical gear or the climbing harness. This was the first time that he had seen Frank's entire face, without the goggles or the helmet.

"I'm not telling you what to do, Mike, but time is getting a little short. Nine o'clock is the witching hour, that's what we're told."

"How did you — what are you doing up here, Frank?"

"Tactical command post. You're a popular man with the beat cops, a popular man, and *especially* with the ESU. Not so much with the brass, but we're keeping them out of the TCP. See the fancy RV down by the MAM? The brass-hats are all down there. Nice ball cap, by the way. Everybody thinks I slipped it to you on the crane. Doesn't matter. Let them think what they think. And if you want to dunk your Koran in piss, you go right ahead. Won't bother us a bit. The mayor told us to keep the hell out of 53rd between 6th and 7th Avenues. He ordered us to stand down, like San Jose. Well, that's what we're doing. We're standing down."

Mike looked straight below him again. There were hard hats and other civilians packing the sidewalks along 6th Avenue. At ten minutes before nine, the construction workers simply pushed over the police barricades blocking off the end of 53rd, and began to pour into the previously empty space beside the base of the tower crane. Within moments there were hundreds of hard hats on the street below him, red, yellow, blue and green dots seen from above. And on the other side of the mid-block barricades, not fifty yards past the base of the crane, there were thousands of Muslims lining up for prayer. And just a thin gray line of police barricades separating them.

A loudspeaker came on, tinny, with feedback. A small platform had been erected at the front of the crowd of Muslims, at the middle of the barricades, so Mike grabbed his binoculars. The platform was a small rolling dumpster that had been hauled into place and turned over to make a stage. Among the men at the very front was Imam Qutb, in the flesh, wearing a man-dress, and a Muslim skull cap. A speaker the size of a guitar amplifier was lifted onto the dumpster-stage, and Qutb was being helped onto the top, presumably to lead the call to prayer.

On the other side of the barricade from Qutb and the thousands of Muslims there were hundreds of hard hats, and more coming from up and down 6th Avenue. He looked at his watch. Nine minutes to go, but he wasn't sure exactly when the call to prayer would begin. Judging by the loud rumble of voices floating up from the street, the Muslims were already in a foul mood, and they would be in an even worse mood after Imam Sayyid Qutb whipped them into a frenzy to stop the two great blasphemies 'by any means necessary.'

Mike scanned the crowd, holding his binoculars in one hand, his phone in the other, leaning against a diagonal strut. The crowd of Muslims was separating as pairs of men were allowed through holding big two-handled baskets between them. He focused in and could see that these baskets were being dropped off at intervals through out the crowd. And the baskets and tubs were full of what looked like bricks or stones.

Stones, and swords: they were going medieval. And in the crowd, Mike saw a man waving a Kalashnikov rifle above his head. Time for the phone. "Frank, there's a guy down there with an AK."

There was a pause, while Frank Salerno conferred with some of the other officers in the corner office suite. Some were in tactical gear, some in regulation uniforms, and some in plain clothes. "We see him, Mike. Don't worry. We'll take care of that guy if he becomes a problem. We already have him dialed in."

"They're bringing in bushel baskets full of rocks, have you seen that?"

"We're tracking them too, Mike. But have you seen what's coming from the other way?"

"Yeah, I'm watching. It feels a lot better not being alone." The linked steel barricades at the end of 53rd had been pushed over or taken apart, but the only police to be seen

were still on the other side of 6th Avenue, guarding the Modern Art Museum. This could not have been what the mayor had been anticipating, when he had ordered his police force to stand down on the long city block east and west of the tower crane, and Brooklyn Mike.

A north-bound dump truck slowly turned left off 6th Avenue. When it stopped, it dumped the load in its bed, and then turned back onto 6th and continued north. Mike used his binoculars to check out the pile of debris, and he recognized it at once. It was a mountain of rebar cutoffs, the short pieces of iron that were left over when the long reinforcing rods were cut to length. The rod-busters produced mountains of the stuff at any good-sized construction site; it went into dumpsters for recycling. Somebody had used a front-end loader and filled the back of the dump truck with rebar, or maybe they had used a crane with an electromagnet. Either way would work.

A big white SUV like a Suburban pulled in next, and backed up toward the barricade in the middle of the block while the hard hats opened a lane for it. Some hard hats opened the rear cargo hatch and pulled out what looked like a pair of black refrigerators, but a closer look showed them to be concert-sized loudspeakers. And all the while, from north and south on 6th Avenue, a still-growing crowd of hard hats was arriving on foot, each man selecting a nice piece of rebar, averaging about a yard long.

Imam Qutb was standing on his dumpster stage, his back to the American hard hats. His own amplifier and speaker were being pushed too hard, and his voice was cracking and full of static as he exhorted his own crowd in what was presumably Arabic. Mike looked at his watch. Three minutes until nine. The Muslim crowd, numbering in the thousands now, extended from the mid-block barricade all the way back to 7th Avenue. Then suddenly, the disorderly mob lined up in neat ranks and files, one man for each of the thousands of prayer rugs. How many of the rugs had swords or Kalashnikovs beneath them, wondered Mike? They still outnumbered the hard hats on the shorter end of the block toward 6th Avenue by at least three to one. He wondered if there would be enough construction workers to hold the mob back from the tower, once they were sent forward *en masse* on their mission to stop the two great blasphemies by any means necessary.

One minute until nine.

Mike was still on his feet, nervously bouncing, watching the two crowds that were facing one another across the single line of police barricades, but without a single police officer between them. Then a long, clear note cut the morning air, it had to be the beginning of the call to prayer. It began with a prolonged *Allahu Akbar*, a slow yodeling, wavering up and down in tone. The Muslims all immediately put their heads down, the entire crowd aligning like electrically charged iron particles sharing a single connecting hive-mind. But then the slow, high-pitched yodeling call to prayer slowed, the voice lowering and growing distorted, and then it began, somehow, to play backwards! Then it stopped again, and played normally. Mike scanned the crowd with his binos, they seemed restive, looking about, unsure. Perhaps the Brother in charge of the sound system had

made a mistake, or the recording machinery was defective? The prayer began playing again normally, but this time it was accompanied by the sound of a man screaming, and of other men yelling out *Allahu Akbar*. Not yodeling it slowly, but barking it out excitedly, over another man's blood-curdling screams.

Mike had heard it before, not long after 9-11. It was the audio from the Nick Berg beheading tape, and he remembered forcing himself to watch the video as the American was slowly beheaded on camera with a knife. Mike remembered it well, because he'd felt a connection to Berg, a bold young man who had gone over to Iraq to put up cell phone towers. Berg wasn't an Ironworker, but he was something close, a tower erector. He'd gone over in the hopeful early days after the fall of the Saddam regime, and he'd been kidnapped and executed in a truly horrible fashion.

And now his final screams were playing over the call to prayer. Mike looked across the single thin barricade, the mob was growing agitated, turning to one another, literally seized by mass confusion. And then the first rocks began to fly over the barricade toward the American hard hats. Mike turned to the building, Frank Salerno was mouthing *phone* and holding his against the window. Mike put his phone to his ear and heard, "Mike, now's your chance to get out. We have some undercovers who are going to pop smoke for cover when you come down. Now's your best chance, buddy."

More stones began to fly over the barricade. Mike took the Koran, and threw it far off the platform onto the street, found his gloves in his pack and quickly put them on, then sidestepped back across the crane's jib toward the tower. A sound buzzed and snapped past him, shots ricocheted off the pipes around him, but they ceased as quickly as they had started. And then, improbably, amazingly, the call to prayer was replaced by, of all things, a big-band swing orchestra, and a female singer began to belt out *The Hokey Pokey Song* in high-fidelity sound at rock-concert decibels! Despite the danger of his literally precarious situation, Mike couldn't help but laugh.

*You put your right foot in,
You put your right foot out,
You put your right foot in,
And you shake it all about.
You do the Hokey Pokey
and you turn yourself around,
That's what it's all about.*

In a minute Mike was back at the tower, and climbing past the crane operator's box, and the slewing ring gear. No more shots had been fired at him after that first and only volley. Somewhere out there, an ESU sniper was his guardian angel, and that made him feel a lot better about his exposed position. He was able to speed his way down the tower using gravity, hooking his feet around the outsides of the ladder rails, grabbing them with his gloved hands, and sliding down each floor in just a second or two. By the time he reached the base of the tower his gloves were smoking hot, and a protective screen of yellow and red smoke was drifting around him.

A half-dozen hard hats surrounded him. In the cloud of smoke one of them said, "Here, put this on," and handed him a blue t-shirt with the logo of the Electrical Workers, and a yellow hard hat, a sun beater with the brim that went all the way around. Once he'd put these on, he effectively disappeared into the swirling crowd. Behind him, hundreds of construction workers swinging iron rebar cutoffs were engaging a much greater number of rock-throwing Muslims, but he had no sense of how the battle was going, only that a scrum of men was pulling and guiding him the other way, around the Bank of Europe building, and down 6th Avenue on the packed sidewalk. Men and some women were running in both directions, some heading to the fight, and others with bleeding wounds who were being helped or even carried in the other direction, away from it.

At some point the Hokey Pokey song had ended, and of all songs, the English punk classic *Rock the Casbah* by the Clash had taken its place. *By the order of the prophet, we ban that boogie sound, degenerate the faithful, with that crazy casbah sound!* The Mohammedan rock-throwers must not have overrun the hard hats at the end of 53rd Street, or the music would have been cut off. Otherwise, Mike had no sense for the battle, only for the mass confusion of it as a half-dozen strangers, young men in hard hats in tight formation around him, hands on his shoulders, guided him along through torrents of frenzied humanity. And through it all, there were no uniformed police to be seen on the west side of 6th Avenue, as the mayor's stand-down order was *scrupulously* obeyed.

In spite of himself, while being swept along through the crowds, Mike couldn't help but to laugh again. He was escaping from a riot, no, a street battle, a street battle with its own sound track. *The shareef don't like it — rockin' the casbah!* Around the next corner of the Bank of Europe building, he was led through a vehicle gate into a utility service area, then to a steel door that was opened with a key. Then down a cement staircase, and into a dimly-lit underground parking garage.

"Slow down, fellas, I'm an old man," said Mike.

One of them replied, "No, you're not an old man, you're Brooklyn Mike!"

"Where are we going?" he asked them.

"You're getting a ride out of here, that's all we know. Come on, just a little more."

Down another ramp, onto another level. A black Mercedes-Benz limousine was waiting. The back passenger door opened as they approached.

"Who are these guys?" Mike asked.

The oldest of the hard hats, who was maybe forty, said, "I don't have a clue, but they're your ride out. That's all we know."

So Mike got in the back seat of the big sedan, closed the door, took off the yellow hard hat, and put it on his lap. There were three guys already in the car, they were all dressed in dark pants and white dress shirts, open at the neck. They could have been bartenders or waiters, except that they were the size of professional wrestlers, or NFL linemen. The driver had enormous hands on the wheel, gold rings on his fingers, and tattoos on his knuckles. In Russian letters. *Cyrillic*. Oh, boy, thought Mike. The Russian mafia.

The car pulled forward, twisted up a pair of ramps, a garage door lifted, and they shot out into the daylight on 7th Avenue, southbound. Men in skullcaps were running on the sidewalks, the hems of their robes held up high for more speed. The other back seat passenger said, with a thick Russian accent, "Look at Arabs running, oh, is *so beautiful* thing to see. So, you are famous Brooklyn Mike? Is good to finally meet an American with *balls*. You can play with Russian friends anytime. Things not working out in USA, you are coming to Russia, everything be good for you there."

Mike was exhausted, drained, sinking into the creamy leather. "Thanks, I, uh, appreciate the offer. Where are we going?"

"Only short ride to New Jersey, not to Russia. Not this time. Then another ride for you. You have no cell phone, no radio?"

"No, I left them all back there."

"Good. This is very important thing, no radios."

In a minute they were coming out of the Holland Tunnel, and a few minutes after that they passed through a fenced gate that rolled aside for them, drove past containers and rail sidings and abandoned box cars and straight into a cavernous warehouse and across its empty cement floor.

"You go out, across tracks is red truck. Where you go after, I don't know. Good luck to you, big American hero. Am proud to being your taxi cab today."

The Russian in the front passenger seat spoke to the man in back in his language, then he picked something up from between his feet, and handed it to his compatriot in the rear. They exchanged a few more words, and the English speaker in the back said, "In box is good Russian lunch, like big Russian sandwich. You are getting out of car now, okay?" He handed the shoebox-sized package to Mike, it was inside of a brown paper grocery bag with the top folded down. "Now, you go. Red truck, across tracks. Okay?"

Mike reached across the backseat and shook the Russian's hand. Blue tattoos, the lettering in Cyrillic. He had no gift to give them in return, so he left the yellow hard hat as a keepsake. He opened the door and walked away from the black Mercedes, out of the warehouse into bright sunlight, across a loading dock and down rusty stairs. He crossed some old railroad tracks to a parking area where, indeed, a tractor trailer with a

gleaming red cab was idling. The passenger-side door opened as he approached, and a female voice beckoned him to climb up.

There was a woman in the passenger seat, and a big man who was leaning all the way across to greet him. They broke into grins and shook his hand hard as he climbed aboard, almost pulling him up and inside. The man said, "Brooklyn Mike, I knew it! Hey, there's a jump seat in the middle back there. Sit down, we need to haul ass."

Mike was scarcely seated when the truck lurched and rolled forward. The driver was at least as old as Mike, but thicker in the middle, the typical commercial driver spread. He said, "I'm Jordan, and this is my wife, Fran. Jesus Christ — Brooklyn Mike! But hey, don't worry, I know all about operational security. I'm not a jerk that's going to take selfies or blab his mouth."

"Where are we going?" In a minute, the eighteen-wheeler was pulling onto a highway and getting up to speed.

Jordan said, "*We're* going to Chattanooga; I just know that we're dropping you off at a truck stop this side of Knoxville. After that, I don't know where you're going, and I don't *want* to know."

"You look parched," said Fran. "There's a case of water on the floor behind Jordan."

"Thanks." Mike pulled a plastic bottle from the crate, opened it, and drank half right away. The package the Russians had given him was on his lap. "How did you know about this, I mean, how did you find out where to be?"

"I got a call this morning, the guy just said I should be in Union City at such and such place, and I should wait for an important passenger. That's all."

Fran said, "And we never pick up riders, never. But it wasn't just some guy that called."

"Yeah. An old friend called me this morning. He just said I needed to do it, that's all. And if I say I will, I will — put it in the bank. We go way back, me and him, and we owe each other too many favors to keep track of, so when we got a problem, we just help each other out. That's all. We were up in Connecticut, running south, so no problem. Like they say: things happen for a reason."

"What's happening back in Manhattan?"

Fran said, "You were just there, Mike, you tell us."

"No, I mean *now*. It was like a huge riot when I got out of there."

"What's happening," said Jordan, "Is *our* guys are beating the holy hell out of *their* guys, at least, that's what I'm hearing." He pointed to the blue-tooth attached to his left ear,

with a small microphone on a stick. “Beating them up and down 53rd Street, the ones who didn’t run away. For some reason, there’s no police around. Too dangerous, or something.” Jordan turned around and winked. “Apparently, a thousand hard hats swingin’ rebar can do a lot of damage when they’re royally pissed off. You want I should put on the radio, so you can hear it?”

“No, not yet. I like the quiet in here.”

“Turns out they have no sense of humor.” Jordan began to laugh. “The ragheads, I mean. We watched it on YouTube while we were waiting. YouTube, and that Korean radio station. The YouTube don’t work so good when we’re rolling, but Fran can check it for you if you want to watch.” He began to sing “*You do the Hokey Pokey, and you turn yourself around*. That really cracked us up. Thousands of them ragheads all lined up to shove their butts up in the air, and *The Hokey Pokey Song* playing. Whoever dreamed that up, that was inspired. Yep, they got *no* sense of humor at all. Dead serious, all the time. That’s their problem — no sense of humor. Well, *one* of their problems.”

Fran said, “Brooklyn Mike, in our cab, and we can’t even tell anybody.”

“Opsec, Franny, Opsec,” said Jordan, scanning the road ahead, two big hands on the wheel, keeping exactly to the speed limit in the right-hand lane. “Operational security. If he couldn’t trust us to keep our yaps shut, he wouldn’t have called us.”

Fran replied, “I know. I know. Hey, Mike, have you eaten? Of course not. We have lasagna in the fridge, you can zap it in the microwave there. Or, if you’re tired, you can catch some Z’s in the bunk behind you. But if you just want some snacks, we have some cookies, potato chips, anything you want.”

He was hungry, and that made Mike think of the box lunch that was still lying unopened on his lap. He unfolded the paper bag and pulled out a cardboard box, and opened its flaps. On top was a cigar box, and he lifted its lid. Inside was big pistol, it said Glock 21 — Austria — .45 Auto on the slide. Two spare magazines, loaded. He looked at the ends of the bullets on top, fat copper and lead hollow points. He remembered the Colt .45s from his Army days, same caliber of ammo. A very thoughtful gift from the Russians. They knew that he was far from being in the clear, and that he’d be on the run from the Muslim radicals, and probably the FBI too, so they’d provided him with a major-league blaster.

There was more below the cigar box, so he lifted it out and set it aside. Next in the bigger cardboard box was a fine white linen napkin, carefully folded up to fit neatly. He pulled it off, and saw four stacks of currency side by side, fifty dollar bills on top. Each stack was as thick as they were wide, with a brown rubber band around each. On top was a note that read, “Half for Brooklyn Mike, half for Amina. Good luck.”

Mike stared out at the highway ahead, between the two high-backed bucket seats. A little wooden cross on a string swung below the GPS unit in the middle of the

windshield. They were on I-95, southbound. Somewhere, he had a Russian godfather, or maybe it was a guardian angel, or maybe it was something else entirely, something that would always remain a mystery. He pulled up a corner of a stack of the bills and riffled it. It was all fifties, right through. Easier to spend than C-notes. Safer. Again, very thoughtful of the Russians.

Fran asked, "What do you got there, Mike?"

"A present from some friends."

"Oh, that's nice. Not food?"

"No, not food."

"Well, I can fix you something, or we can heat up some lasagna."

"Thanks. I will, in a little while. But maybe I'll take a nap first — it's been a long day. Say, Jordan, what time did you get the call to pick me up?"

"Geez, Mike, let me think. Right after six? Six-fifteen? Franny, check the phone log."

Six-fifteen? At six-fifteen, he had only just started taking calls with Jerry Conroy, so that wasn't possible. It had to be a mistake.

Fran said, "It's not in the phone, Jordan, it's not in here at all." She was scrolling through all of their incoming numbers. "There's nothing here. That's strange."

"Not to me," said Jordan. "Crazy shit like that has happened all my life. If I told stories, nobody would believe them, so I just keep my big yap shut. I been through some real shit, Mike, some real shit. Fran could tell you stories, but she don't tell stories neither, do you honey?"

"No way. Our lips are sealed, Mike. Opsec. It's better that way. We don't spend a lot of time looking in the rear view mirrors. We like the road ahead a lot better."

Jordan said, "But we come through it all, and here we are, free and alive, and pretty healthy for a couple of old farts. I never thought I'd see fifty, much less sixty-five. And now here we are, rolling down the highway with Brooklyn Mike, free as the wind, on our way back to Tennessee."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways," said Fran, without a trace of irony

He surely does, thought Brooklyn Mike Dolan. He surely does.

A POEM FROM AMINA SAID

grounded. Salt for my wounds is what the world
MY heart. An open wound.
I can only cry
Don't try to understand
Make me a bird... let me fly
I hate you... I hate your land
~~Make me an angel~~ Make me an angel
You've frozen my heart
Angel... let me die
~~Make me an angel~~ you never ~~know me~~ don't
Make me ^{an} angel... let me fly
Endless tyranny round and round
let me go
When can I be found?
MY pain you will never know
Make me a leaf
~~blow wind~~ let me fly... blow wind blow
You hang on, you think you want
~~to know~~ You don't want to know
You don't know me ^{and} here I stand

This story is dedicated to the memory of Amina and Sarah Said, who deserved much better in the Land of the Free.

<http://www.enemiesforeignanddomestic.com/>