

Saudi Match  
Point

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**BLACKSMITH BOOKS**

# Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf



## *Prologue*

CHRIST! WAS SOMEONE FOLLOWING him? Errol Hart's trembling hand adjusted the rearview mirror. He peered as long as he dared into the reflected scene unfolding behind his speeding vehicle. His own car was kicking up plumes of desert sand and stone, but weren't those flashes some kind of signal from the distance? He couldn't swivel his neck to look directly, but back on the horizon, what seemed like separate funnels of smoke or sand were rising into the desolate sky. Were they getting closer?

Hart was driving directly into the glare of the morning sun. Maybe those glints of light were the sun reflecting off car chrome. He wasn't about to slow down to find out. Hart's temples were starting to throb, and his mouth was parched. To steady his nerves and calm the morning shakes, he reached for a small bottle of Johnnie Walker balanced precariously in a bouncing, plastic car holster. He twisted off the cap with a free hand and gulped a mouthful. Diplomatic immunity had its privileges, he thought, and smiled at the recollection of all the smuggled alcohol he had brought in. Just for personal use, of course.

Did anyone see him last night, staking out the camp perimeter? But that was impossible. He'd taken all the proper evasive procedures. Was his cover blown? He glanced at his cell phone, but couldn't risk a call. They'd pinpoint his location. By the time anyone responded to a coded message for help, he might be dead, or hidden away

in some prison. Diplomatic immunity didn't mean much if they caught him with evidence of spying.

As the alcohol took effect, Hart remembered that uppity bitch at the club a few nights before, implying he had a drinking problem. Hah! If she knew the stress he was under, she'd have one too. Just a few more months and he'd be ready for retirement. Hart still marveled at the thought. As soon as he reached the tender age of thirty-five, the CIA would put him out to pasture, or at least take him from the field and assign a cushy desk job in Langley. Time to settle down. Maybe he'd laugh about all this someday.

The plumes rising behind him like pillars in the desert were getting larger. They were gaining on him. If they were in cars, he might have a chance to outrun them. But only low-flying helicopters could be kicking up that much dust. He didn't have much time. In his white SUV he was easy prey from the sky. Better to ditch it, he thought. Head for the rough cover and go on foot. He'd be harder to spot, easier to hide. Hart was confident that, drunk or sober, he could outrun any of their foot soldiers. Time and again, he'd out-hustled guys ten years younger, over any distance. Better not take any water. He wouldn't go far and could circle back to the car after they passed by. Still driving, Hart slipped the two small bottles of Johnnie Walker into his pockets, just in case. Best not to leave any incriminating evidence, and the weight wouldn't slow him down—not like carrying a jug of water. Besides it was still relatively cool out. The killing heat of the desert summer was a long way off.

Hart skidded the SUV to a stop in the hard sand behind an outcropping of rock and climbed out. Shit! Was that gunfire? Or thunderclaps? But there were no

clouds overhead. He didn't think anyone would be in this godforsaken place, but maybe there were people camped out. Could there be an oasis among the low-lying shrubs that he would be running into? It wouldn't be the first time he had needlessly ducked for cover after mistaking a Bedouin shooting celebration for something more sinister.

Regardless of the threat, Hart's desert-colored fatigues would be perfect camouflage in the brush. He knew how to cover his tracks and throw a search party off his trail.

The pillars of sand on the horizon were now a solid wall rising up into the pale sky. Jesus! Did they have the camp's entire fleet of helicopters after him? He paused to listen for the familiar whir of chopper blades, but heard only a distant roar, gathering in intensity. Was it just the wind, blowing hard from the north? He slammed the car door and set off at a sprint for the cover of rocks and desert shrubs. His pulse beat in his ears, and the wind howled. Grains of sand like tiny pinpricks hit the back of his exposed neck, his hands, and his wrists as he pumped his arms hard. Hart needed to get as far from the car as possible before they arrived. The noise was louder now. He glanced quickly up and back, seeing nothing but a rapidly darkening sky. They must be almost overhead. Had he been running for five minutes? That meant well over half a mile. He scrambled for the nearest bush, cutting his hands and khaki clothes on its sharp thorns, as he crouched down beneath it. The whirl of wind and sand was deafening now, the sky almost completely black.

Errol Hart had been in tight spots before and was not a religious man. Nevertheless, he began to pray.