

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO:

WERNER'S INFERNO

A blitzkrieg of TV floodlights and paparazzi flashes at the entrance to the Sunset Grand Hotel transformed the California night into daylight brilliance. Fifty camera crews and a hundred photographers recorded Oscar-winners arriving with their golden statuettes.

Superbly gowned invitation checkers crossed names off their official *Fabulous Living* guest lists as celebrities and Hollywood power brokers entered the party. Bouncers stood ready to eject interlopers.

On Academy Awards night, it was the hottest ticket in town for 850 guests. No one entered without the haughty editor Ralph McKenzie's coveted personal invitation.

Mike Delano and Dave Fuller, both old hands at crashing parties, knew better than to try breaching the event head-on. They slipped in through the kitchen, disguised as uniformed waiters, beating security by passing themselves off as paid help.

A \$1,000 bribe to a catering company clerk put their phony names on an exactingly inspected wait-staff list. Once inside, the catering manager set them to work carrying champagne flutes on silver trays into the ballroom.

"Don't slop the wine on the trays," the manager cautioned before they circulated among hundreds of VIP guests to serve their cargo of vintage bubbly.

Inside was a pageant of beautiful people: acres of white teeth, superbly toned flesh, and flowing manes of costly hair extensions. In an industry based on the relentless pursuit of fame, a flawless image was vital – especially with the world watching.

Stars wore gorgeous gowns they didn't own. Fashion houses paid fortunes to celebrities for promoting their exorbitant labels for a few globally seen hours. Magnificent necklaces sparkling around famous throats were on loan for the night, too.

Paragon Pictures' set designers had given the ballroom a 1920s nightclub atmosphere, complete with backlit translucent bars, overstuffed couches, and dim lighting. A jazz trio provided background music. Large glass panels on the ballroom's south wall opened out to airy, torchlit gardens, parts of which were tented. Guests wandered out, away from the press of the crowd inside.

Looking around, Delano saw no sign of Werner or his accomplices. Yet he sensed they were nearby, predators ready to pounce. Helped by the dim lighting, he moved toward the first of the planters, recognized from his surveillance at the flower shop. It was at the north end of the room.

He had come prepared for the job, with a slim metal rod and wire cutters hidden beneath his waiter's jacket. With the ballroom lights low, he was in the shadows and hard to see as he probed the planter's dark soil until he struck metal.

Digging down with his hands, he found the bomb. He pulled gently until it came free. With the canister top exposed, he unscrewed the cap. A penlight held with his teeth showed red and green wires between a wireless receiver and a detonator. Holding his breath, Delano cut first the green and then the red wire – completing the job.

Bomb disposal wasn't altogether new to him. While working in the Middle East, he had watched experts disarm roadside bombs that relied on pressure plates to detonate. A similar weapon had wounded him.

He could see these bombs were different – set off by a wireless signal. Immobilizing the internal receiver disarmed them. He rendered the first of the three Semtex-laden canisters inert.

Looking at an actual bomb, he had guilty second thoughts about not alerting the authorities to the danger much earlier – plus, with a bomb in hand, he now had evidence proving his warning was no exploitive tabloid scare tactic. He phoned Dave Fuller at the other end of the ballroom to call the police.

Guests were still arriving. Presumably, the jihadists were waiting for the room to fill before exploding their weapons to achieve maximum carnage.

During their hurried phone communication, Delano told Dave to give police a description of the attackers disguised as security men. Now he prayed the cops arrived in time to make arrests before any killing began.

Meanwhile, Delano would continue his mission to disarm the other two bombs – while hoping they didn't explode before he got to them.

Picking up his tray of glasses again, Delano saw *Fabulous Living* editor Stewart McKenzie mounting a stage at the room's south end. He tapped a microphone for attention, but the room's hive-like buzz drowned him out.

Show business sycophants were busily fawning over Oscar winners and consoling losers. In this town, it paid to be friends with everyone – even those you detested.

Delano's sharp eyes combed the crowd as he moved towards the second planter. Fifty feet away, it was near the entrance that he got his first glimpse of Quinton Werner – now dressed like his co-conspirators, as a security guard.

Nearby stood the two men Delano had seen Werner with that morning. All three peered intently through the open double doors leading into the ballroom.

HONEY TRAP

The journalist's heart lurched at seeing Werner begin punching numbers into his phone. With seconds to save himself, Delano flung aside his tray of champagne flutes, bursting into a desperate sprint, shouting as he went: "Get down...bomb, bomb! Get down!" Only Dave Fuller heeded the warning, flinging himself flat.

Party guests stood bemused, questioning this bizarre behavior, watching a crazed waiter dive behind one of the small cocktail bars set up around the room.

The answer to their puzzlement came in an ear-shattering roar as the planter Delano had been heading for exploded. It sucked the oxygen out of Delano's lungs, deafening him, and rocked his refuge.

Jagged chunks of metal scythed through bodies. Delano heard piercing screams and groans of pain rising all around from dozens of injured men and women.

The hail of nuts, bolts, and nails had slashed through unprotected flesh, leaving gaping wounds. People known and worshiped globally were dead or bloody, grievously injured.

The biting smell of spent explosives enveloped the smoldering room. Behind the bar, Delano shook in terror; later, he would weep. He blamed himself: he had failed to prevent this bloodbath.

He felt weak with shame. He should have sounded a persistent, early warning to the authorities. He realized his silence, motivated by a craving for another exclusive headline, had been an enormous mistake.

But there was nothing he could do to correct it now. More and more, he knew he must leave this form of journalism. But for the moment, he was determined to disarm the last bomb before more people died.

The shocking sight when he crawled out from behind the bar and struggled to his feet heightened his anguish.

Party gowns hung ragged, revealing lacerated bodies. A superstar and her husband lay crushed by the weight of a crystal chandelier crashing down.

Dazed men in gashed tuxedos frantically sought the exits. Gashed corpses lay all around as survivors staggered about, pawing in disbelief at their wounds.

Eyes shone weirdly out of faces covered in white powder from blasted roofing plaster. The floors were slippery with blood. Couches nearest the explosion were ablaze, adding thick smoke to the nightmare scene.

Moving towards the last bomb, Delano saw Fuller. He was alive, bloodied with cuts to his face and the back of his head. His partner looked shaken but alive, ready to help with the third bomb. Together, they crept along the wall towards the remaining unexploded planter.

It was then Werner and his men locked the room's double doors behind them. They immediately opened fire with automatic weapons on any partygoers unlucky enough to be near the doors. Bullet-riddled bodies piled up in front of the locked doors.

Delano knew Werner was seconds away from detonating his final bomb. His activating phone was out of his pocket, the number keyed in. But he delayed pressing the button, providing the time needed to allow his fellow jihadists to leave through the garden exit, away from the blast area.

While his partners in terror hurried outside, Werner rampaged. He delighted in reducing Hollywood power players to whimpering curs. It fulfilled him knowing his final blast would kill and maim many more.

Delano, creeping along in the shadows, saw people clustered around the small stage. There, battered and bloody, Ralph McKenzie had regained the microphone and bravely sought to calm the wailing crowd.

Furious at the unintimidated editor, Werner marched towards him, firing his gun into the ceiling for attention, sending down more

showers of white plaster. McKenzie represented everything he hated: power, wealth, success.

Ignoring the gunshots, the editor instructed his surviving guests: “Be calm, help is on the way. Get out through the garden doors at the end of the ballroom, if you can.”

An imposing man, McKenzie surveyed Werner contemptuously, urging a few of the uninjured men: “Stop this madman. He’s a cowardly terrorist. Bring him down.”

His words went unheeded as those male guests still standing backed away, too frightened to tackle the gunman.

The “cowardly terrorist” epithet pricked Werner’s inferiority feelings. How dare this artsy-fartsy fool try to belittle him. Glowering menacingly, he reached the foot of the stage.

McKenzie’s china-blue eyes blazed down at him defiantly. Werner could have killed him instantly. Instead he stared back, his face contorted by anger as he spat out retaliatory insults:

“You and your kind are parasites, degenerates. The whole industry’s run by Jews who don’t pay us what we’re worth. We’re the victims of their greed. They exploit the entire world, and you’re just one of their lackeys. You think you rule. But soon, you’re history. Tonight’s a taste of what’s coming on a massive scale.”

McKenzie’s microphone picked up this manic outburst. Werner’s tsunami of hate flowed from the loudspeakers. More bedraggled celebrities edged towards the doors, discovering them locked.

Others tried fleeing through the gardens – but Abisha and Basheer, waiting with guns leveled, shot them as they approached.

“You – ‘victims’ – what a laugh,” McKenzie responded fearlessly. “You’re loathsome killers—disgusting losers with guns. We’re not responsible for your evil. You’re cheap, murderous thugs who...”

He never finished.

Werner shot him through the right temple. The editor stood for a moment, contempt still written large on his bloody aristocratic features. Then he toppled down onto people crouched below the foot of the stage.

Werner clambered up to take his place, grabbing up the microphone from the floor.

“Look at you cowardly rats searching for bolt holes. You won’t escape, none of you bastards,” he screeched, his hysterics producing hideous feedback.

“There’s no hiding place here,” Quinton roared.

For emphasis, he callously fired into the whimpering crowd hugging the floor face down. Satisfied, Werner surveyed an ocean of trembling tuxedoed backs, bejeweled female partners in the rubble with them.

Delano had by now crept to the third unexploded planter. His steel rod probed until it hit metal. If Werner pushed the button now, it was over for him. With shaking hands, he pulled the bomb up. Like the first bomb, two leads led to the detonator.

He sighed with relief after cutting both wires – now he’d deal with Werner. If he died doing so, he didn’t care. It would be justice for his failure to bring in the authorities earlier.

It would be his punishment, also, for setting up a situation that would remain on his conscience for the rest of his days.

Sneaking back, he climbed onto the stage behind the raging gunman. His only weapon was the steel probe.

Lifting it high, he brought it down like a spear with all his strength into the back of Werner’s bull neck.

The metal lance missed the killer’s spine by a fraction. The force of the blow snapped off the probe’s top, leaving several inches of metal in Werner’s flesh.

Agonized and surprised, Quinton Werner swung around, eyes blazing. Who dared attack him?

Fists raised, Delano jumped in close to hit Werner. Recognition dawned on Quinton as he tried to dodge.

“You’re that fucking dirtbag reporter,” he snarled, bringing up his pistol for a shot to the head.

Mike’s fist smashed into Werner’s gut at precisely the moment he pulled the trigger.

A bullet creased the top of the journalist’s skull. Velocity spun him, knocking him flat, bleeding profusely seemingly from a lethal head wound.

The brawl on the stage emboldened people to start rising from the floor and crawling out from under tables. They hoped a rescue effort had started.

Believing Delano dead, Werner focused on potential attackers. If they rushed him, they’d tear him limb from limb.

“Stay down, or die!” he bellowed. Two shots into a burly director who’d gotten to his feet underlined the order.

On hearing loud banging against the ballroom’s locked double doors, Werner knew he must escape. A SWAT team was breaking in – time to get out.

No matter what the future, he felt exultant. He’d murdered and injured dozens of the Hollywood glitterati – and he’d killed Mike Delano, a celebrated journalist.

He leaped from the stage, running for the gardens. The wound in his back throbbed as he lurched awkwardly towards palm trees at the gate. There was no sign of his partners.

They’d fled in the Toyota to their agreed meeting place. Werner had a fast and maneuverable motorcycle parked for his escape.

Now to detonate the final bomb, to destroy the remaining bigwigs and most of their rescuers, too.

Quinton quivered in anticipation, his cell phone at the ready. Hearing doors caving to battering rams, he smirked at the babble of relieved voices

as medics and police swarmed among the injured. Many would die. Fiendishly gratified, he pressed the button.

Nothing.

Desperate, he punched in the number a second time, making sure he got it right. No explosion. He entered the number yet again. Still no explosion.

“What the fuck?” he growled.

An intolerable answer came quickly. The ballroom speakers crackled back to life. He heard a calm British voice, more intense than the dead McKenzie’s, speaking slowly.

“It’s OK, everyone. We’ll get you out of here and take you to hospitals. I’m Mike Delano. The remaining bombs have been disarmed. The attackers have gone. Thank God, we’re safe now. Help the injured...”

Shaking with rage, Werner flung the useless phone to the ground as he headed for the rear gate. Police were coming through with guns drawn. They looked at him suspiciously, but seeing his bloodstained security guard uniform, they offered medical aid.

“No, I’m OK, officers, thanks. I can get myself to the hospital,” he replied politely.

And he added helpfully, “One terrorist’s still in there. Hurry, before he kills more of those unfortunate souls...”

Werner started his motorcycle and, with a roar, headed for the North Hollywood safe house, where the Basheer twins would be waiting.

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Delano filed yet another scoop: “Inside the Oscars Horror,” first-person accounts of how he and Dave Fuller tracked the terrorists, disarmed bombs, and tackled the jihadist leader.

HONEY TRAP

The superstar journalist and his partner became instant talk show darlings; popular media anointed them the heroes of Hollywood's darkest night.

But Delano knew the truth. Again, he'd placed money and ego above integrity. Beating everyone to the story had become an addiction, but dozens of lives were lost or ruined this time.

This behavior would have been unthinkable in his past life as a respected and trusted foreign correspondent when he'd done everything conscientiously – and denounced ethical failures in others.

Under Rothenberg's tuition, he'd abandoned honor and gone for the jugular in landing stories that promised to be global media sensations. Selling their souls became a way of life for Max's employees until it was too late to stop. Delano recognized it had happened to him, too.

He vowed it was the last time he'd compromise his integrity. This latest success piled more shame on a conscience silenced since the day he drove the Rev. Francis Morley to fling himself in the Thames and drown. Then there'd been the murder of his source, Carmelita Sanchez, and the overdose of Suzanne Francis as part of the honey trap he'd set.

The number of deaths he felt responsible for was mounting. He carried little guilt about Carlos Bomba's demise. But as much as Delano detested Morgan Masterson, the actor hadn't deserved to end as shark bait. Now he'd played into the hands of terrorists and had innocent deaths to torment his already troubled psyche.

As media chronicled the misery suffered by Tinseltown's most renowned men and women, Delano and Fuller got maudlin drunk at the King's Head in Santa Monica.

Both knew they should have sounded a strident warning about what was coming well before the jihadists had a chance to plant bombs in the ballroom.

Tony Brenna

Slopping down their drinks, they agreed they'd joined the gaudy tabloid circus, marching behind the ragtag band of noisy sensationalists, tumbling with the corrupt clowns of pop journalism – and they must change their ways or be damned.