



# Terror in Kashmir

*Rex Maurice Oppenheimer*

The clouds looked like the white beards of wise old men as they hung around the Himalayan peaks that surrounded the Vale of Kashmir. Pathways that animals and humans had trod for centuries descended the green foothills, past glinting slate roofs and stone buildings, as they funneled down to Nagin Lake.

Sitting in her shikara Nikki began to row, watching the current swirling around the oar as though hoping to read her fortune in the color and movement of the water, her own reflection wavering on the surface. Her image dissolved as

she stroked, and sent the canoe gliding past the floating gardens of lotus and lily.

She pulled in the oar sat back and took a deep breath, inhaling a moment of peace. As evening approached and darkness fell, women in saris balanced vessels on their heads and trudged along the bank. Nikki wished she could stop everything and draw the whole world into this quiet. Yet she was also straining to move on, to put the oar back in the water and propel herself forward, across the lake, across the sea, to trudge her own path of meaning.

Nikki's search for meaning, which had begun as a schoolgirl's poems when she was 16, had somewhere along the line turned into a struggle for survival. Her dreams and desires, like hotheaded lovers who fight and fuck, had led her on and cut her off. Now, at 27, perhaps fate had finally given her a sign that everything had always been leading to this. It was going to be okay.

Rowing through the blue-green Kashmiri dusk, she entered the main body of the lake. Her shikara bounced on the wind-rippled water as she headed toward the far shore and the houseboat she shared with Anatol.

Anatol was the only man who had ever made Nikki feel protected. They had met when some vendors and touts had accosted her on the street in Srinagar. Young boys, who at first had just pestered her to buy some trinkets, but soon they had become dangerous. They cornered her and herded her into an alleyway. One had put his hand on her breast, while his friend pulled a knife from his belt. Nikki was about to scream, when another clasped her mouth with his hand, his hot breath close on her neck.

Suddenly, Anatol had appeared. The boys stopped and looked at him. He spoke to them quietly, in Kashmiri or Urdu, she wasn't sure which, but they had listened to every word. Then all of them ran in different directions.

Nikki still didn't know what Anatol had said to frighten them. She asked him, but he just said that he'd told them to leave

her alone or he'd tell their mothers on them. The memory made her smile. He was more than a decade older than her, and she'd only known him a month, but she had moved into the houseboat with him the same day they met and into his bed that night.

No longer alone, as she had been in the backwaters, Nikki maneuvered the shikara easily between the other boats traversing the large lake. When Nikki had first taken a shikara out by herself, she had trouble steering it. She copied the other rowers, sitting at the very front of the long, narrow canoe, like some native in a picture she'd seen in an old National Geographic, so far forward it looked as if the boat should just tip over.

At first, no matter what she tried, rowing on either side, fast or slow, she just went in circles. With further observation of the Kashmiri oarsmen, she'd gotten the hang of it, putting the oar in, twisting it as she stroked, and pulling it out with its blade parallel to the boat. Now she used the little boat every day to go across the lake to where there were a few local shops and to catch the bus into Srinagar, and for these pleasure cruises in the evening.

There was easiness to her life here, although life in India isn't easy. Running water, especially hot running water, is rare. Power fails often, and although there is an intelligentsia, and India has nuclear weapons, computers, scientists and a middle class, a majority of the population remains poor and illiterate; irrigation in village fields is often accomplished by hand, with women carrying little clay pots full of water to pour on the plants. Nikki used to see them when she traveled long distances by train. She'd look through the window and watch the women in their cotton saris and knobby bare feet carrying the pots of water as they moved through the fields.

India's sewage systems weren't the most modern either, and sometimes, when she'd looked out the window on those train trips, she also used to see people lined up in the fields in the early morning, all squatting and taking a shit. A little clay pot of water, called a lota, beside them. When they were finished, they'd hold the lota in their right hand and, still squatting, pour the water down the crack in their bottom, swishing themselves clean with the left hand and the flowing water.

She remembered in Bombay, when she walked down by Sagoon Docks, where, even just a short distance from the huge, luxury hotels, she'd seen early morning shitters squatting on the beach to defecate. The tide would flow in over their ankles and roll out with the feces.

Despite the hardships and unpleasantness, Nikki had come to love India. She relished the slower pace and didn't miss the modern conveniences, except maybe hot water for a shower once in a while. Although the basic chores of sustaining herself took a lot of time, she seemed to have more time. Her moments were filled with the reality of the world right up against her. No constant bombardment of news from beyond the borders of her daily life.

When she walked through Srinagar, Delhi, or Calcutta, among the people wound in saris, dhotis, lungis and turbans, enmeshed in the flow of modern life through ancient lanes, she'd see an elegance of existence, imbuing everyday things with beauty and meaning. The slanting brightness of sunlight on a mound of spices, flowers in a garland, appeared as visual poems.

Here every image seemed to coexist with its history; the past lived visibly within the present, and the continuity of survival made her feel secure. Negative thoughts and imagined fears about the future paled against the vividness of the moment.

Anatol sometimes teased her about her romantic idealism. "Shit is shit," he would say, "you can romanticize about the spirituality of primitive conditions and escape from your fears and responsibilities through fantasy, but the reality here is cholera."

Evening light poured into the houseboat, warming the carved mahogany and cherry wood furniture, shadows deepening the textures of brocade and lace. The sheets on the unmade bed were rumpled, and Nikki's clothes lay piled on the floor. She and Anatol sat at the small teak table. Naked and nonchalant, Nikki watched Anatol. He was shirtless, with fine black hair on his chest, a slim stomach and a lungi wrapped around his hips, as he tapped the end of his unfiltered cigarette



against a matchbox, tamping down the tobacco.

"He may be a great writer, ma cherie, but he is barely a decent human being," he said, raising his head and looking into Nikki's jade-bright eyes. His own were smiling, as he obviously took pleasure in her loveliness. Her eyes sparkled like hidden treasure and her full lips looked like nectar filled fruit. Her skin was soft to the touch, but smoothly muscled.

She could feel Anatol's eyes on her. The lines of her breasts, drawn with an easy grace, raised as she straightened her spine and extended her long, slim neck, "I know about separating the artist from the art, but the way he sees the world, it...it gives me hope."

"You are young," said Anatol.

Nikki watched him as he tried to strike a match to light his cigarette. The head of the first match broke off. The second sort of smeared, as if the sulphur tip hadn't yet hardened. The third lit. This was common with Indian matches. The quality was abysmal. She thought of stories she had heard of how the match factories were enormous exploiters of child labor; children's tiny fingers hastily making matches all day and night, like something out of Dickens.

Pleasure lit a smile in Anatol's face as he exhaled smoke gently from his nose and mouth. She studied his dark, tousled hair and smooth olive skin, and told him, "Young has nothing to do with it. I know what's real and what's good."

She thought Anatol was good, that at the center of his being was kindness. Sure, he was handsome; she liked the large, comfortable houseboat, the money, but she liked him most of all. She wouldn't stay with him and let him play his little perverted games, sucking her toes, and burying his face in her pussy and ass, if she didn't like his soul.

Anatol's smile intensified, "Literature is not life. He has seduced you with his talent. He has a facility with words, but all that means is that the chemicals are arranged that way in his brain. Art, ironically, is chemical and mechanical, as is all human endeavor."

"Art is an expression of the soul!" Nikki thundered. Jumping to her feet to rearrange the flowers in the vase on the little carved table. She looked out the houseboat's window, her nakedness hidden behind the lace curtains.

The Kashmiri family on the boat next door was yelling at each other. The family always seemed to be arguing. Yet their bonds were strong, passed down through centuries of tradition and now shouted between generations as they went about their daily tasks.

The boats rocked on the water as the wind swept down from the hills that lined Himalayan passes, where Moguls had ridden with sabers flashing many years ago, and now, Tibetan refugees leave little piles of rocks and other signs of prayer.

"Goodness is the only expression of the soul," Anatol said quietly. "Being alive means more than breathing, more than having the use of your senses. More than thinking or even dreaming. It means doing the right thing. Otherwise, you are only a zombie, or an asshole."

Nikki squinted her eyes and scrunched her nose with the defiant look of a child who has caught her parent in a lie, "How can you talk about doing the right thing when you are dealing with scum like Feydor?" She asked.

"Feydor won't be around for long, but right now I have business with him."

"What kind of business? He's a drug dealer. I knew it as soon as I saw him."

"Well, I'm not," he said.

She stood looking down at him, like a prosecutor pressing a witness, her nakedness both comical and enticing. "Yeah, so what are you?"

He stubbed out his cigarette and rose from his chair, standing next to her. "I'm not your father or your teacher."

Although she knew him well, in a very basic sense she hardly knew him at all. His name was Russian, his accent and his nationality, French. She didn't really know how he earned his living. He had published poetry, but that could hardly account for the money he seemed to have. He said his family had money, and she accepted that, but he never really spoke of them; she didn't know who they were or what they did.

Nikki would have usually been more skeptical. She'd been let down so many times and was always suspicious, if not cynical, but for some reason she trusted Anatol more than she'd ever trusted anyone, except her grandmother.

His face grew serious. "I have to leave India," he said, looking quickly into her eyes and then down at her beautiful bare feet.

Her mouth fell open, and breath caught in her throat. She looked up, her eyes widening. I'll go with you, she thought. But he didn't ask. Doesn't he feel what she feels? He must —

"I can't take you," he said, tamping another cigarette.

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The sun had disappeared behind the forbidding mountains. Darkness brought quiet, but tension slithered through the shadows.

A single light bulb hung from the ceiling in the front room of a stone house on the other side of the lake. Feydor sat across from a dark-skinned man, who called out in Arabic to someone in another room. A woman, probably 40, but looking 60, wearing a simple sari, her head covered by a black shawl, entered. Her flat brown feet took short, quick steps. She poured sweet, milky tea into two cups and placed them before the men, retreating as rapidly as she'd entered.

Feydor held a chunk of hash and cut off a piece about the size of a large raisin. Holding the greenish black lump in the tweezers from his Swiss Army knife, he struck a match and warmed the little glob until it began to smoke. Blowing out the flame, he crumbled the charras into a fine, warm powder and sprinkled it over some cigarette tobacco.

The other man, dressed in dark, polyester trousers and a long sleeve cotton shirt, his heavily oiled hair neatly combed, handed Feydor a chillum. As Feydor dropped a stone into the ceramic cone, and poured the hash/tobacco mixture in on top of it, the man, speaking English with a Pakistani accent, asked him, "The heroin is in Srinagar?"

Feydor's face was round as a snowman's, eyes like small points of coal. He glanced at the two men standing beside the door, their heads wrapped in kaffiyeh, and each holding an AK-47. He smiled.

A flame flared from the match in the Russian's pudgy fingers; light shined across the dark-skinned man's sweaty face. The top of the chillum glowed bright red, as Feydor drew deeply through his hands, gripping the cone's tip. His chest swelled before he exhaled huge clouds of smoke. He passed the chillum across the table, "your turn," he said.

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Nikki, still naked, was making the bed; her concentration seemed far too deep for the task at hand. Emotions of fear, anger and confusion passed over her face as fast as shadows. Anatol stepped up behind her, kissing her softly on the back of her neck. She tensed. But he wrapped his arms around her and turned her to face him.

The boat shook. They could feel it dip down as someone stepped onto the deck.

Anatol mouthed the words, "don't worry," but Nikki stared with lightless eyes, then quickly turned and stepped into some faded blue jeans. Slipping a white cotton blouse over her smooth breasts.

Feydor smiled as he entered the cabin. The big, bearded Russian shifted the large backpack hanging from his shoulder as he embraced Anatol in a bear hug. Ignoring Nikki, who stood in the soft light as sensual and singular as a cloud, he glanced at his Rolex.

"Comrade, we must talk. But first, I have to pee."

Nikki watched Feydor as he strode to the bathroom and closed the door. He made her feel unsafe. He was mean. Beneath his joviality there was an intense hunger, and deeper still was a core of cruelty. She looked at Anatol, her eyes dripping tears.

Anatol took her in his arms, whispering intently, "I'm not leaving you. We'll be together again, soon. I'll give you some money and we will meet in Paris in one month's time."

His eyes were as truthful as anything Nikki knew. She threw her arms around his neck and was covering his face in kisses, when the bathroom door opened. Feydor came back into the room and sat at the teak table, turning to Nikki, he said, "We will only be a minute, my dear."

Anatol pried her arms from his neck and gestured for her to leave them. Without looking at either of them, she walked out onto the deck at the back of the boat.

Her mind was churning. Fear still gripped her, but he'd said they'd be together in a month. Why did he have to go, and why was he still so secretive? What was he doing with Feydor? It troubled her and she knew she had to press him, make him tell her everything. She needed a relationship that was based on reality, and honesty.

Silver moonlight burnished the dark water. The Himalayas looked like stairways to another world. "In Paris. Together," she thought.

A boat full of armed soldiers spun around the lake, checking out the houseboats. On shore and in town there were military patrols everywhere. Acts of terror and insurrection came in waves. Sometimes an army jeep exploded, or was caught in an ambush. Temples were torched and mosques blown up.

The constant friction between the Muslims and Hindus reminded her of when she had stayed at the Petra hotel, just inside the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem. Palestinians owned it, and Nikki had listened sympathetically to their tales of oppression. Nikki got along with everyone. She had told them she was a writer, and they had loaned her a typewriter to keep in her room.

Grandma Naomi had given Nikki the trip to Israel. Nikki had gotten into some trouble in Manhattan. Her grandmother thought a trip to Israel might help turn her life around and maybe spark the girl's feelings about being Jewish.

Nikki hadn't grown up in a religious household. Her mother, Rachel, was a hippie, or at least a free spirit. When Nikki was born, Rachel had been living in a faux commune near Santa Barbara, which was really just a mix of musicians, poets, pretty girls, drugs, the I-Ching, Tarot cards and gossamer costumes, a strange blend of hedonism, spiritualism, decadence and derelict dreams of grandeur that had marked much of the era known as the sixties and was mistaken by many to be a portent of revolutionary or evolutionary change.



Grandma had tried to save Nikki's mom, too. But that wasn't going to happen.

Nikki's father was a young Israeli who couldn't get out of Israel fast enough. He was handsome and charming, a hip, charismatic manipulator, who had convinced Nikki's mom to come to New York with him. He was full of great ideas, but once he and Rachel had arrived in the Big Apple, he'd fallen in with the Israeli mafia. Why he'd ever been on that commune was a mystery. After they got to the city, all he ever tried to do was make money. Quick money. Shady money. Blood money. It had gotten Rachel killed and sent Nikki's father running, forever. She never saw or heard from him again.

Grandma Naomi, who had taken Nikki in to live with her, wasn't religious at all. She never went to synagogue; she didn't know much about the religion when it came down to the law or ritual. Nikki wasn't sure her grandmother really believed in God. But the old woman was absolutely pro-Israeli.

Nikki thought it was because she was a first-generation American of a certain era. Grandma had that lower eastside, New York City attitude. Work your way out of the tenements, scholarships to Columbia, or street-savvy success of one kind or another. Whether it was valedictorian or Vaudeville, it was struggling to forge an American identity while evading anti-Semitism.

Grandma would lecture Nikki about the Palestinian issue, explaining how the so-called Palestinians never controlled the land they now claim is occupied by Israel. "They say give the occupied land back to the Palestinians, but they never had the land. It was part of Jordan that Israel took in a war they didn't start. The Jordanians never gave it to the Palestinians," she'd spit out. "All the years Arabs controlled the region the so-called Palestinians never had or were given land. They were nomads."

Then she'd give Nikki a history lesson, again. "People think modern Israel was created for the Jews among all these ancient Arab lands. Almost all of the Middle East was part of the Ottoman Empire. After the Turks were defeated the British gave some land to the Arabs and created the countries of Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq.

The British carved Jordan out of Palestine in the early 20th century. They brought King Abdullah, a Hashemite and the Sherif of Mecca, over from Saudi Arabia to rule Jordan. Jordan is 80 percent of Palestine! It has a majority Palestinian population, for god sakes!"

Grandma would be shouting by this point.

When Nikki had gone to Israel, she'd been unconcerned about Middle-east politics. She had feelings, her grandmother's lectures hadn't gone totally unheard, and her own cursory analysis of the situation showed her many areas where the Arabs had a lot to answer for. But Nikki wasn't going to argue the point.

Besides, despite her grandmother's political reasoning, there were a lot of innocent Palestinians who were living as second-class citizens. Whether that was the fault of the Israelis or their own Arab brothers mattered little. Suffering is revolution's womb.

Nikki thought about how analogous the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was to the one between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. The parallels between the two disputes were striking. They are both framed as religious conflicts, as struggles over land, nationality and a people's self-determination.

Anatol knew a lot about the local history. His knowledge was expansive, and his experience gave it weight. He felt for the people, yet, he was often disgusted with them. He was an idealist; he was a cynic; he was an enigma.

She was drawn to him from that first look into his eyes, yet as soon as she heard his French accent the thought that he might be anti-Semitic jumped into her head. That was strange, considering the crazy sexual liaisons in her life, all with

non-Jewish men. Why should she care?

When he had brought her to the houseboat, she'd noticed the little statues of Buddha and Krishna, the incense burner and the menorah. "You have a Hanukkah," she'd said. "But I'm Jewish," he'd answered with that smoky French accent. She had never been with a Jewish man before, but now it seemed important. Not because of religion, but kinship, acceptance, safety.

Anatol had penetrated the walls that had both protected and blocked her off from the world. More than breaking through barriers, more than reaching her or touching her, he had started to become part of her. Even in this short time. Through shared experiences and examples of trust and giving, it was as if thread-by-thread their souls were being woven together. She began to cry. "Paris, in a month," she said again to herself.

Anatol's strength gave her comfort. It made her feel good, and for some reason, proud. She remembered when she'd seen that old movie, Exodus, where Paul Newman was fighting for Israel's independence, and he said, "I can feel the blood of King David flowing through my veins." When Newman had said that, it made her whole body tingle.

God, she wanted to feel that way, too. She needed to feel good about who she really was. Anatol made her believe that she could. His involvement with Feydor disturbed her. It didn't make any sense, didn't at all seem like who he really was. But did her life reveal who she really was?

Pushing her hands into her pockets, Nikki felt the little Star of David she carried there. Her grandmother had given it to her, and that was the only reason it was precious to her. She'd never worn it. She didn't deny her Judaism. She just didn't advertise it.

Deep down inside her, there was that inherited fear of the next Hitler, when another wave of anti-Semitism would wash over the land. Whenever she'd see Jews wearing yarmulkes in public, it would send a chill down her spine. "They're targets," she'd think, if not for a bullet, at least for hatred and derision. She always remembered the kids at school who'd yelled, "Kike!" and called her Jew girl.

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She looked at the forested hills surrounding the lake. Snow draped the high passes. The small branches on the trees waited for leaves to grow and fall and grow again. Women beat laundry against the rocks at the lake's edge, singing songs full of the strange blend of sorrow and gratitude sung by slaves.

Nikki was startled by Feydor's hand on her ass. Turning, she looked at him as he walked past. His beard bristled gray and black in the murky light; his breath smelled of smoke, whiskey and spice. Nikki's green eyes shot anger like machine-gun bullets, but what Feydor saw was her fear. He laughed.

"Goodbye, handsome," she snarled, as he walked away, balancing on the narrow planks connecting to the landlord's boat. Feydor made the air stiffen. It felt as though a storm were about to strike.

Nikki's dreams were scattered like debris after a hurricane. All she had wanted to make of her life now seemed out of reach. She'd made too many wrong turns. Could she ever get back on the path? Did Anatol know the way?

Maybe Anatol was manipulating Feydor. Maybe he was just being a good salesman. She had tried sales. Nikki had sold clothes, jewelry, insurance, stocks and bonds. She was good at it, especially the insurance and equities. She'd made quite a bit of money, which had all gone up in smoke, or up her nose. That had ended in hell, and that's when grandma had sent her to Israel.

Her eyes followed the burly Russian's footsteps on the wooden boards. She looked at the Kashmiris, who, with the addition of a watch here and a calculator there, wore the same clothes, beards and jewelry their ancestors had worn for generations, then her gaze melted into the color of the earth along the shore, the green hills and snow-clad Himalayas, the centuries of time and space and matter, settled into this moment in a corner of Asia.

People haven't been long on earth, she thought. Before the rocks, plants, water, animals, there was nothing. No world. Yet other people-less planets revolved according to mathematical certainty, with spinning heavenly bodies, explosions of gas fireballs and black holes sucking solar systems into little dark boxes. Nobody watching.

Nikki was watching Fedor as he reached the shore. The heavy Russian climbed the bank towards the road. Nikki caught sight of a Kingfisher, iridescent as a polished bright blue jewel; it plunged, striking the water with an ungainly plop as it snared a silver fish in its sharp beak.

A sudden, blinding flash lit the periphery of her vision. The roar of the explosion and her screams pulsed through her like shock waves. Tossed like a rag doll through a torrent of smoke and shrapnel, her body plunged into the lake. Her head pounded. Water rushed into her mouth and nose. Breaking the surface she could feel the heat. The boat was aflame. No sign of Anatol. The Kashmiris were shouting and running, trying to extinguish the fire. Nikki saw one of the children, a little nine-year-old boy named Samid, lying on the deck, a piece of wood piercing his neck.

Staring at the boy's blood-covered face, Nikki felt her own flesh starting to burn with pain. Her arms were weak; she could barely tread water. Cold weeds clutched at her legs. The black smoke obliterated everything. She heard Anatol's voice. It sounded like it was coming from the bottom of the lake. Or was she on the bottom? Was that the murky surface above her? Everything was going dim.

Thoughts that had been soaring through her mind at the speed of light slowed and stopped. She heard Anatol's voice again. But she couldn't recognize the man looking down at her.

Doctor Singh could have been a wingless angel with bushy eyebrows. He was dressed completely in white, including his large turban and the mask netting his overflowing beard. Nikki could hear his voice, but the words were unclear. She couldn't tell where she was but assumed it was a hospital. There were bright lights and medical equipment; she could hear



the beeping of a monitor displaying the even bounce of her vital signs. The room wasn't really dirty, but it wasn't clean either. She didn't know whether to laugh or cringe when she noticed a rat running along the distant wall.

When Nikki awoke later, she was in a room somewhere. A breeze billowed the green and yellow gauze curtains. She lay under a sheet and coarse woolen blanket. A man in uniform stood with his back to her. He turned, with an official smile.

"I'm inspector Gupta." His neat, well-groomed mustache pointed out from below a prominent nose. His mouth was tightly drawn, but his dark gray eyes emitted a gentle twinkle. "I hope you are feeling well," he added.

Nikki felt better, but not well, and everything seemed very strange.

"Who is Anatol Atlan?" Asked the inspector.

"Is he okay? Where is he?" She blurted out.

The inspector walked to the window and looked out, then turned back to her. His Indian English was clipped and officious. It shot out in a military cadence, "I know all about him. You better come clean with me young lady." Gupta took three steps toward her and stopped, "Indian jails are not the nicest place to spend one's youth."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Nikki.

Far to the north, in the rugged region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, Feydor exited the Land Cruiser and stood resting his right palm on the handle of his holstered 9mm pistol. He was sure this was the place, but there was nobody there. The mountain walls whispered secrets of smugglers, outlaws and invading armies. Many of them died in these passes, and the red earth looked like old, dried blood.

Inspector Gupta remained serious, although softening just a little. He wanted Nikki to feel his concern. "Look, Kashmir is a very dangerous place. Terrorists are willing to do anything to attack India's sovereignty. Pakistan is funding them, arming them and supporting their murderous ways. The only thing we can do, short of declaring another war against Pakistan, is to rein them in. Let them know that to engage in terror here will mean certain capture and likely death, and that their campaign to oust India is as doomed as they are."

Nikki shook her head, "What has any of this got to do with me?" she asked.

"I need to know what you know," said Gupta. "Sometimes foreigners get mixed up in things that are way beyond their control." The inspector studied Nikki, but she remained silent. He changed his tack, "Many times they are motivated by what they perceive as humanitarian concerns, but unfortunately their actions often only cause more pain and suffering. It's ironic. Tragic."

Nikki raised herself up onto her elbows, "Where is Anatol?" she asked. "Why are you telling me all of this? Anatol wasn't involved with terrorists. He loved India. He hated terror," she said.

Feydor walked back to the Toyota and peered at the package lying behind the seat. He was getting ten million in cash for the suitcase bomb. One of the smallest, most portable nuclear devices ever made, it was one of about 25 the former Soviet Union had had in its arsenal.

Even in bribe-hungry, post-Soviet Russia, the bomb had been hard to get. Feydor had killed two men and traded \$3 million in stolen heroin to get it. He didn't care that the terrorists he was meeting here would probably use it in New York City, Los Angeles, or Washington. And he wasn't afraid they'd kill him and steal it. They could see his vest and knew he could blow them all to bits by pushing the button on the device he held extended in his hand, and would, if they tried anything.

He'd come alone, but he felt safe. Nobody else knew about this. Who would suspect an Israeli of delivering a nuclear bomb to Muslim extremists?

Gupta started to speak, but Nikki interrupted him, "Why don't you ask Anatol these questions? He would help you if he could. I know he would." She tried to hold the black thoughts at bay. It was probably one of Gupta's ploys to keep her guessing. He thinks Anatol might be the enemy. That she might be the enemy.

The inspector looked at the gauze curtains floating softly on the breeze. "Preliminary investigation of the explosive device used on the houseboat you were occupying showed that it bore the signature of Hizbul Mujahideen," said Gupta. "You must have been targeted for a reason." His face grew intense, "Anatol is involved in espionage. You must tell me what you know."

Feydor had had a scare when he discovered that Anatol may have been suspicious. Feydor knew Anatol was an idealist. Even the money wouldn't have interested him. Anatol would be willing to suffer to stop suffering in the world. Feydor was more realistic than that. The world he lived in had taught him that goodness was often rewarded with death. Anatol was good, and Anatol was dead.

Nobody would figure that one Israeli agent would kill another; besides, he'd covered his tracks. The situation was too sensitive for Mossad to do anything overt, and Feydor had been pulling the wool over their eyes for more than a year. It was too bad about the girl, though. Feydor had really wanted to fuck her. But \$10 million would buy a lot of women, and anything else he might desire.

Feydor saw his contacts coming in the distance. Everything seemed to be in order. He reached into the Land Cruiser and grabbed the suitcase bomb by the handle, lifting it out through the door.

Nikki stared at Gupta. His eyes were moving around the room, unwilling to meet hers, and a horrible feeling was beginning to strangle her heart. Blackness spread through her mind like ink squirting from a squid.

Gupta's voice was softer, sympathetic. "We need your help to catch his killers," he said. "To bring them to justice."

The inspector had arranged for a hotel room for Nikki. She had a ticket for New York.

Buttoning her blouse in front of the mirror, she turned, gazing through the window. A group of Tibetan refugees huddled on the corner below, hand-woven blankets wrapped around their shoulders, turquoise stones adorning their earlobes, a thousand years of struggle and faith finding balance in their faces.

Nikki reached into her pocket and withdrew the six-pointed star. It felt both foreign and familiar in her hand.

The world is too big, thought Nikki. Forces set in motion can, like pristine drops of melting snow high in the Himalayas, become raging torrents miles below, inundating villages and annihilating lives.

The world is too small. It fits in one man's smile and can be destroyed in one woman's heart.

Nikki held the star in her hand, rubbing it gently as she stared into the mirror. She saw King David's eyes. They were looking for justice. They were looking at tears.