

## Chapter One

ANGUS AWOKE to a foul smell. He rolled onto his stomach and burrowed his head in the pillow, trying to convince himself that whatever reeked could not be in his room. The stench had to be oozing under the door or filtering through the supposedly sealed window.

From the day he checked in, Angus had noticed a funky odor haunting the Dhahran Palace Hotel. After years of excessive air-conditioning and few guests, mildew permeated the wall-to-wall carpeting in the dimly lit corridors—little gray diamonds on a midnight blue background. Stepping into a corridor was like opening a refrigerator kept shut for too long.

Three of the hotel's four wings had been completely shuttered when the press suddenly descended to cover the war from Saudi Arabia. The reporters changed the place nearly overnight, of course, transforming the Dhahran Palace into their own peculiar ant colony.

Still in bed, Angus flipped onto his back. He was wearing a dun-colored army issue T-shirt and olive boxer shorts, unwashed since the abrupt, hundred-hour land war had ended earlier that week. He had been assigned to cover the U.S. Army sweep across southern Iraq through those last days of February. He raised his arms over his head and smelled

both armpits. Strong but not foul. He stretched and then brought his arms down, running his hands over his chest and stomach.

At thirty-five, he was no longer the sinewy soccer player he had been in high school, but months of living on coffee and mostly inedible army rations had almost returned his five-foot, eleven-inch frame to its youthful leanness. Muscles ridged his stomach again.

Angus listened for some noise, but the hotel was oddly still now that the press corps had decamped north to newly liberated Kuwait. The caravan has moved so far away that not even the dogs are barking anymore, he thought.

Any war hotel needed one of two essential attributes—it either had to be near the action or had to offer an unusual level of service, like a general manager who didn't blink at billing a hand-woven silk carpet from the lobby store as telephone charges. War hotels tended to be dumps that enjoyed a fleeting glamour while the press corps was in residence, like a faded dancer asked to perform one final, breathtaking leap.

The Dhahran Palace, built smack in the middle of a dismal airport parking lot, enjoyed a rare location. Across a six-lane highway sat King Abdel Aziz Air Base, the main staging area for the hundreds of thousands of American troops who poured into the country ahead of the battle to liberate Kuwait.

The U.S. military's Public Affairs Office, which controlled all press access to the troops, set up shop in the hotel. That's all it took for reporters to besiege the place like land-hungry homesteaders. The three-story Dhahran Palace was far too small to contain the throng—more than 1,000 journalists jockeying for 190 rooms—and skirmishing for space started early. World Press, Angus's employer, had been quick to set up its bureau in the hotel's Royal Suite. A few weeks after Iraq invaded Kuwait, as he sat on a butterscotch leather sectional couch, Angus watched a phalanx of senior news producers from one of television's big three U.S. networks, WBC, march in and start unpacking their computers and other gear.

“ABC already has a suite, so I guess we’ll use this one,” said the oldest, a swarthy man wearing a crisp white shirt under his khaki safari jacket, looking pointedly at Angus. That had been his introduction to Aaron Black, damn the guy.

“I think perhaps you need an empty suite,” Angus answered mildly, but Black and the others pretended not to hear, assuming that even the world’s largest news agency would, without question, do the network’s bidding.

When Angus told them point-blank that World Press would not move, the chagrined network men summoned the general manager and tried explaining that a famous American television anchor expected the kind of suite designed for the king of Saudi Arabia, if not better. Without it, they hinted, the entire allied war effort might suffer.

Wolfgang Brandt, the hotel manager, was a thickset German with thinning blond hair who always wore dark wool suits, even in August. He was sympathetic but unmoved. In the interest of keeping the peace, Herr Brandt doled out rooms on a first come, first served basis, politely declining thousands of dollars in bribes. Once everyone was firmly ensconced, he quadrupled the rates.

In bed Angus yawned, remembering how the story had erupted with about as much warning as a flash flood when Saddam Hussein jolted the world awake on August 2, just seven months ago, by rolling Iraqi tanks into downtown Kuwait City. Angus felt resentment when he was not included in the first wave of reporters, fearful of missing the action.

A Middle East correspondent stationed in Cairo, he was not among the small band of Pentagon-approved reporters whom Washington jammed down the throat of the Saudi government ten days after the invasion.

With Saddam’s tanks pawing Kuwait’s southern border and menacing Arabia’s oilfields, the aging Saudi royals suddenly faced the nightmare of losing the main source of their bottomless wealth. Despite the religious fundamentalists who became apoplectic at the very idea of infidel soldiers defiling Islam’s birthplace, the doddering princes bowed to the

need for American troops. As part of the package, the Pentagon dispatched seventeen journalists called the Department of Defense National Media Pool, one of those expansive government titles which sounded like the group would be all the press ever needed to cover the war.

Its members certainly felt that way. They treated Angus and the other foreign correspondents who started showing up soon afterward like a side dish they hadn't ordered.

The smell in his hotel room suddenly became more rank than the memory of the Pentagon press pool. "What the hell is it?" Angus muttered, scrambling to his feet. He jerked open the heavy blue velvet curtains and peered out between the strips of duct tape that one of his jittery WP colleagues had stretched across the glass in case it shattered during a Scud attack. The swimming pool and rear terrace edged by tall palm trees were diced into little squares between the horizontal and vertical bands. It was as if someone had snapped dozens of Polaroids and then stuck them up in rows; the view reborn as collage.

His third-floor room looked out over the six sapphire domes of various sizes that the networks used as their backdrop for most live broadcasts. The domes seemed so exotic, so perfectly Middle Eastern that the television producers hadn't reverted to their usual practice of paying someone with a headdress and a flock of sheep to amble into the background, providing the visual cue that the reporter was in the Arab world. The domes suggested a mosque or the opulent lair of a desert prince. They actually formed the roof of the hotel gym and changing rooms.

Two tennis courts lay just beyond the domes, and beyond that the flat desert sands stretched away. When Angus was a boy, his father, a small-town New England doctor with unfulfilled wanderlust, fired his only son's imagination by reading him to sleep every night from the exotic tales of Rudyard Kipling, Antoine de Saint Exupéry and a host of other adventurers. Even now, surveying the sand sea, Angus remembered a line from Saint Exupéry about the nomads defending their great store of sand as if it were gold dust.

After checking into the hotel for the first time, Angus had stared out at the desert with a similar spirit, seeing in it a Klondike of untapped scoops, of major battles and bold front-page headlines. There had been some, but certainly not the endless string he first envisioned. He had spent far more time inside the walls of the Dhahran Palace than out there. My hotel room, my combat zone, he thought to himself with a wry grin.

THINKING about his room reminded him of the terrible smell sluicing through his nostrils. He couldn't see anything outside that would account for the odor, so he turned from the window. It's got to be coming from someplace in the room.

Dingy veneered furniture crowded every room in the hotel, all of them numbingly alike. The standard issue included twin beds covered with shiny padded bedspreads in a sky blue and mustard paisley pattern. Angus slept in the bed closest to the window. The second one had nearly disappeared under his debris. The chunky table between the beds held a telephone and a lamp with a white, square shade. The front of the table was faced with brushed aluminum sporting a row of defunct black buttons that should have controlled a built-in radio, an alarm clock and assorted other functions.

Clothes—some dirty, some clean and folded neatly in their cardboard boxes from the hotel laundry—were piled high on a squat armchair. Splotched yellow fabric, sagging and slightly threadbare on the armrests, covered its scant padding. The small, six-sided wooden table next to it held a basket of fruit, a weekly gift from the hotel, inevitably sweating inside its cellophane wrapping.

Sheets of papers filled with Angus's scrawl—mostly notes from telephone interviews—were stacked in vague piles across the top of the desk, which also had a television set on one end, a telephone, a reading light and a faux maroon leather blotter holding hotel stationery. An inverted Iraqi helmet sat on the desk, filled with oranges. Beyond the

desk, a built-in closet holding the minibar took up one side of the short hallway leading to the door, opposite the entrance to the bathroom.

The room could have been in any U.S. budget hotel were it not for a few Oriental touches. Each headboard curved up in an ogee arch, a favorite motif in Islamic architecture, twin S shapes that met at a point. The arches were made of pale wood and the area underneath them upholstered in the same padded fabric as the bedspreads. A similar arch topped the full-length mirror next to the bathroom door. Finally, a small print above the beds depicted an idealized Arab village, dense black palm trees surrounding little yellow huts. A yellow crescent moon hung suspended in the white sky.

Looking around, Angus paused at the oranges stacked inside the helmet. Maybe they had gone bad. He picked through them, but none were moldy. He lifted the hotel fruit basket. It smelled waxy.

His military clothing and the various contents of his backpack lay strewn across the unused bed and the floor, where he had dumped them when he returned from the Iraqi–Saudi border late the previous night.

The jumble on the carpet included a wrinkled pair of lacy, peach-colored women’s underpants. He picked them up and sat on the second bed, staring at them. Soldiers considered lingerie a prized possession and tucked their girlfriend’s panties into the webbing of their Kevlar helmets as a good luck charm.

Angus discovered the tradition months earlier, before the war began, when he had been out on desert maneuvers for a few nights with four women journalists who tried to minimize undue attention from the soldiers by waiting until dark to use the crude plywood cubicles that served as desert showers. The showers sat on the edge of the camp not far from a low ridge, which allowed anybody atop the ridge to peek over the doorway. That was one reason the women waited for nightfall. But they failed to anticipate night vision equipment.

About twenty Marines and a couple of male reporters filed noiselessly to the top of the ridge with night goggles strapped to their helmets. The women stood soaping themselves under a sporadic trickle of

chilly water in their individual cubicles, not suspecting that directly above them in the black night a line of men stared down. With their skinny night vision tubes swiveled in front of their eyes, Angus thought the men resembled some strange insect species.

He discovered that the goggles turned everything green, with human forms a shadowy blur, like opening his eyes underwater at night in a half-lit swimming pool. He couldn't distinguish the shape of the women's breasts exactly, but the dark circles of their nipples stood out against their white flesh. Clean lingerie lay on top of one towel slung over a door.

"Damn, I wouldn't mind having that pair rubbing my head all day," moaned one soldier looking through his goggles. Angus misunderstood what he meant until another grunt doffed his helmet covered in desert camouflage cloth and pulled out a pair of skimpy black lace panties trimmed with pink satin ribbon. "I got me a pair. My girlfriend was kind of embarrassed, but after a couple months of me begging in every letter she sent some," he said, sniffing deeply as he crumpled them against his nose. "One whiff and you are sure to have great dreams." A few of the other soldiers groaned and attempted to sack the guy to grab the panties, but he quickly tucked them back inside his helmet and strapped it on, laughing.

In his hotel room, Angus scrunched the peach confection to his nose in the vain hope of squeezing out a vague whiff of flowery Chanel No. 5 perfume, just enough to conjure up a woman's presence. But it had long since evaporated. "Oh Thea," he sighed.

Again the stench in his room interrupted his reverie. The second bed sat nearer the bathroom. Angus could see its turquoise tile floor through the open door, the tiles such a vivid hue that they stung his eyes when he snapped the light on each morning. The odor seemed stronger there. He thought maybe he forgot to flush, although the smell seemed too putrid for that. Angus found the toilet bowl clear.

Instead he spotted his construction boots under the sink, the tan leather encrusted with a thin white layer of dirt from months of tramping through sand. It was the boots that stank. He reached down to pick

them up and when he flipped them over his throat squeezed shut in a spasm of disgust. Lodged in the Vibram sole was a human finger.

It was a dusky finger, slightly swollen, with strands of flesh and a little splinter of bone hanging off where it separated from the hand. On a quick trip with the military the day before, Angus had visited a now quiet battlefield inside Iraq where the U.S. Army was burying dozens of soldiers killed by its helicopter gunships. As he had watched bulldozers covering the neatly stacked bodies with sand, he had accidentally walked across a mass grave. Angus realized he must have stepped on a hand buried beneath the thin covering.

He picked up his Swiss Army knife from the sink, opened the blade and gingerly pried out the finger, grimacing when it splashed into the toilet. He went to flush but hesitated. One infamous World Press bureau chief in Saigon kept North Vietnamese ears in a bag nailed to the wall. The shriveled ears, which resembled dried apricots, served as a reminder to everyone that despite the decadent living in Saigon, despite the bars and the whores and the endless poker games, a gruesome war loomed just over the horizon.

The Gulf War wasn't anything like that. There had been few whores and little debauchery, at least among the press corps.

Angus knew that hotel affairs usually didn't last long enough to foster the kind of intimacy that might change his life. Story assignments were too short and an automatic "God be with you" was built into any romance before it started. Still, he wondered whether this time might be different, whether his liaison sparked in the Dhahran Palace might resume elsewhere despite its wrenching twists. As usual when he relaxed his intense focus on a story, he was forced to confront just how unsettled his life really was.

On his bedside table sat a hastily scrawled message from the Dhahran bureau chief of one of the most storied newspapers in the United States, confirming what the guy had suggested to Angus in passing. It was the direct telephone number of his foreign editor, the man with the passkey



to one of the few newspapers where Angus had always wanted to work. He had found the note shoved under his door when he came back from the border, and had lain in bed staring at it before going to sleep. The note included a brief, glowing reference to Angus's work as a war correspondent. He wasn't convinced he had earned that title.

What war? The overture had lasted nearly three times as long as the war itself. What had the British reporters called it? Oh yes. The Phony War. They were comparing it to World War II, which commenced with a strange lull as well. Not that there was any real similarity.

His initial excitement felt absurd now. War was always the big story, the mainline adrenaline rush that most reporters needed to experience at least once to make a career, to prompt the editors back in the States to sit up and take notice. Angus knew that for the soldiers' sake it would be wrong to wish that the war had been worse or had lasted longer. It had been bad enough for some people.

Angus slumped against the wall next to the toilet and closed his eyes. He didn't want to think about Black, to go over it all again, beating himself up over something that could have happened to any aggressive reporter.

For Angus, the battle of Khafji had been a perfect reporting moment, *his* moment, at least until Black appeared. Trust some TV parasite to always show up at the crucial juncture, like a cowbird planting its eggs in another bird's nest, outsourcing the hard work until the fledglings could fly. Given how it ended, he knew he would live with it forever, condemned eternally to wonder whether he would change anything if given the chance to do it all over. The answer was probably no, but Angus skittered away from that conclusion.

Still leaning against the bathroom wall and slowly opening his eyes, Angus reflected on how grim it was to be the only man left in a war hotel after the vital dateline shifted elsewhere. He could not staunch his sense of loss, his sense that the whole experience was already irrevocably fading.

Looking down again at the detached finger in the water, Angus knew he had no need for grisly souvenirs. He flushed.