

# LAKE EFFECT SNOW

*by*  
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## CHAPTER ONE

Reporter Annie Booker and her driver drove slowly away from the military morgue into Baghdad's quiet, black night. Her exhausted body gave a slight jerk as she stared numbly at the passing landscape. She felt as dark as the air around her. They had killed Jack Keegan. He had stood beside her, white shirt gleaming under his body armor beneath the lone streetlight, when suddenly, a hole blossomed in his forehead. The crack of a gunshot reached her ears a second later. Instinctively, she had reached for him, and they fell to the ground together as gunfire crackled like lightning around them. She felt the stubble on his face as she ran her hands over him frantically looking for signs of life.

"Jack," she said and felt as if she had shouted, but then realized she had actually whispered. He had been dead weight, unmoving, until the Marines lifted him off her. She and her driver had followed them to the hospital at breakneck speeds, but Annie had not even hoped. She had held him, and her clothes were soaked with his blood.

The car stopped at her hotel, and she pounded up the stairs in the dark to change clothes and wash Jack's blood off. She would be on the air in a little under two hours, and no one cared about the condition of her heart or mind.

They still had thirty minutes until airtime when her driver made his usual stop for cigarettes at his uncle's food market. Annie stepped out into the gritty dawn and stretched. Three trees leaned against the building, catching her eye, and she reached back into the car for her sketchbook. She wanted to focus her mind on something else, on anything but Jack Keegan. Sitting on the sandbags with her back

against a cement wall, she zipped her jacket up and closed her eyes. God, she was tired. She crossed her legs, letting the sketchbook lay in her lap. It was the rainy, cool season, and she was glad for the coat she was wearing. The air was the usual combination of dust and gas fumes as traffic began to pick up behind her. She looked at the market again and studied two older ladies sitting on a bench, one holding a small handful of flowers.

She flipped the pages of her sketchbook, found a blank sheet of white paper, and quickly laid the building onto the paper, then the three trees that tipped tiredly against the shop. Leaning over to blow dirt off the paper, Annie pushed her mind again away from Jack. She had to get through this report without crying. She had called her New York producer from the morgue. This would be big news in the United States, but she had cried for a friend. Then she had called his wife and cried again.

Looking down again, she forced herself to draw steadily until children's voices broke her concentration. Two women, dressed in the traditional black abayas of Iraqi women, were leading a group of youngsters who were eight or nine years old. This was no place for a child to be, even under the protection of the teachers. One of the women caught Annie's eye, and a sudden look passed between the them, one Iraqi woman and one American. Annie wondered what the woman was thinking and smiled just as a bomb exploded. The world went silent, turned red with her own blood, and then black as Annie was blown into the street, unconscious.



The descent into New York City was bumpy, and the plane jolted Annie awake. She stared at the ceiling until the echoes of the nightmare faded. Finally, she pushed into an upright position and rolled her head slowly back and forth, easing the kinks in her neck.

Looking out the window, she saw snow, the first in a long time, and she wondered how much surrounded her Wisconsin home by now. She absently adjusted the sling on her left arm and straightened further, motioning to the flight attendant with her good arm. Annie tucked her headphones into her backpack and checked her watch. She'd slept over ten hours and had been on this airplane over fourteen.

She swallowed some aspirin and looked down at her boots. They were coated with Iraqi dust, and her last clean pair of pants weren't in much better shape. Or maybe it was dust from the Jordan airport where they'd sat over twenty hours, unsure if they'd ever get out of there. The worst three months of her life was over. She was home.

Forty minutes later she was jammed between other passengers, trying to get to her baggage. This noise would put a rock concert to shame, Annie thought, but was too tired to care. She stood, wondering how to get her luggage with one arm in a sling. A child screamed, and Annie swung around, heart pounding, back in Baghdad in a moment. A firm hand gripped her elbow, startling her, and she jerked away.

"Annie Booker?" a friendly male voice asked. She frowned at the young man smiling at her. "Welcome home," he continued, pulling an ID from his suit pocket. "I'm Special Agent Josh Palmer, FBI, and if you don't mind, I'll give you a ride to the network offices."

"Really?" Annie was surprised. What would the FBI want with her? "What's wrong?" she asked, reaching for a bag, but he beat her to it, not answering.

"Just point out your luggage, and I'll get it," he said, stacking the cart. "I'll talk to you in the car."

"That's all," Annie said, pointing to the last piece of luggage. He took the handle, maneuvering it through the crowd. She had no choice but to follow.

They drove through the crowded New York City streets, and Annie watched the snow, falling like lace from the gray sky. Almost two weeks ago, she had dreamed of snow in Baghdad while lying on the bed, mind drifting with painkillers for her arm.

Annie looked at the streets, enjoying being in her own country. New York City traffic was hectic, but she relished it, leaning back into the comfortable sedan. Even the car smelled American, smelled like freedom. Josh swore as a taxi cut in front of him and then he apologized.

She grinned at him. "Stop it. You make me feel like your mother. I'm only thirty-eight years old."

"You're not old, but sorry. I just know you're beat. How's your arm?"

"Fine," she answered firmly. "Just hit with some concrete."

"A car bomb is something."

Annie turned away, looking out the window, and her stomach knotted again. "I'm fine," she repeated softly, thinking of Jack Keegan. Jack's death, that was "something."

"What's it like over there? I've never been out of the country."

"Dirty, usually hot, dangerous. In the last three years I've watched a city almost disappear." As the houses, roads, and businesses disappeared, so had society. Annie forced her thoughts back to the here and now, wondering again why an FBI agent was talking to her. "The car bomb, is that why you want to talk with me? Or is it Jack Keegan?"

They pulled into the parking ramp and he said, "Actually, I'd rather show you. That way your producer can talk with you at the same time."

They got off the elevator, and as Annie brushed by a group of women who were probably on their way to lunch, she wished for a shower. She settled for a quick scrub of her hands and face in the washroom, enjoying the hot water and clean bathroom. Running her hands over the immaculate counter, Annie glanced at herself in the mirror. Her tanned skin looked out of place in the New York winter.

Bill Simpson, producer and friend, was waiting, leaning against the wall when she came out. Good, now she'd get answers. She smiled at his wrinkled shirt and undone tie.

"Time for a treadmill?" She tapped his tummy, teasing.

"Smart-ass," he muttered, steering her into a conference room close to his office. "Welcome home, girl. This one had me worried."

"Why? I escaped. And don't get too close. I haven't bathed in a while." Annie grinned at him as they walked into the room. "Do you have anything to eat? I'm starving."

Bill ducked out and was back in a moment with bagels. Annie grabbed one and was busy with the cream cheese, listening to her stomach grumble. She looked at both men. "I don't suppose I'm here for good news, so let's have it."

Josh pushed the monitor in front of her.

"This just came up," Bill began. "Josh, why don't you show her what you folks found and then we'll talk? Thought maybe we could get this done this afternoon, but we really need to look at more of your reports, so you're not going to get out of here until tomorrow."

Annie sipped her coffee and then reached for another bagel,

watching the screen as Josh flipped to a Web site she had seen before. She caught her breath, stunned, as she read her name.

“My God, is this for real? Jaish al-Basca scares me to death. That group beheads people.” She was quiet for a moment, then she turned and looked again. “This is a mistake. I’m not important enough to be on this list.” They were all quiet, reading the religious rhetoric and radical political goals on the site, militant Muslims urging action to oust the invaders. It was the main post for the Islamic Jihad.

“I knew you’d say that.” Bill looked at her. “That’s why I wanted you to see it with Josh. When they brought this to us, especially after the car bombing, I thought we’d better bring you in for a talk.”

Annie started to say something, but his tired face stopped her. She looked out the office window instead and watched a pigeon make its way along the window ledge in the snow. She thought back to a time in Kosovo. She and Bill had been huddled together near part of a wall in the snow, trying to stay warm, and Bill had been shot. After he recovered, he’d taken himself out of the field, saying he just didn’t have the heart for it anymore. His eyes were asking her the same thing—was she ready to stay home? And she knew he was thinking of Jack, just as she was. Annie sighed. She just might be ready.

“Does this have anything to do with the bomb?” she asked.

Josh walked around the table and sat, facing her. “I’d like to say we know exactly what’s going on here, but honestly, we’re right at the beginning. Usually they target our politicians, businesspeople, or the military, but now, here you are. You’re not the first woman, but you are the first American reporter to appear on their enemy list.”

“Let’s hope that bomb wasn’t theirs. I’d hate to think those children died because of me.” Annie pushed her chair back a bit. “The only thing I can think of is that piece on honor killings that I did last month. I heard from a number of people about that, but nothing as extreme as this.”

She watched the young agent, wondering if he’d ever been in danger, breathing hard, frightened beyond words. His face certainly didn’t show it if he had been. Annie looked him in the eye. What did she see? Youth, innocence. Did he really know what he was doing, or was he just a desk jockey?

Josh dropped his eyes first. “Truthfully, we don’t know why

you're on this list. Please look at the rest of the women's names. Have you worked with them? Is there anything that would connect you?"

Annie leaned forward and looked. *No need to be rude just because the boy is young. I was young. Once.* She felt his lack of experience and remembered the feeling. Both men looked expectantly at her, but she just shook her head. "I know all seven of them, but I can't see what we have in common other than we're all correspondents, in the same place at the same time. I've worked beside most of them for quite a while." She stood. "Honestly, I'm tired, hungry, and I need a bath. God, do I need a bath. Can we pick this up tomorrow?"

Bill nodded. "Josh, do you think this warrants someone being assigned to her for a while?"

"Yes, we do. At least until we understand why these women are being targeted."

"No." Annie raised her voice. "I'm the only American, right? I don't like seeing my name, or my fellow reporters, listed as an *enemy*. It's scary. But wouldn't they have done something over there, not here? Why wait until I left the country to make a move? I don't think we need the FBI."

"Annie—" Bill started to say, but she interrupted him.

"No. Bill, I don't need someone with me. Yes, this is a well-organized group of zealots, and I'm afraid of them. Still, I know what I'm talking about. They won't pursue me here."

"That's true, but I have to think about three years ago, Annie. We're still not sure about the car bomb, and then Jack Keegan was standing next to you. Maybe they did try to do something over there, as you said."

Annie stared at him. "Surely you don't think Jack was killed because he was standing next to me?"

"We just don't know. That's the problem."

She turned away, swallowing tears. "Okay, we'll do it your way. Let me know what you want me to do and I'll do it, but I'd like to go to the hotel now." She took one more look at the young FBI agent. *If they assigned someone like Josh Palmer, who was too untried to know what the hell he's doing, I'd be better off alone,* she thought as she opened the door.

Later that night, lying in bed after a bath and dinner plus more than several drinks, Annie ran the meeting through her mind. Was this really

serious? If she had known about it in Iraq, she would have just ignored it because everything was dangerous there, and now that they had started targeting journalists, who knows? The car bomb was probably random anyway. And Jack? She refused to let her mind consider that possibility. *Actually, Annie corrected herself, I'd probably have contacted several of the other women on the list, and we would have ignored it together.* She had seen Kerry's name on the list, her English friend, and she worried that Kerry might not know about this. Kerry would be there for at least another month. Annie made a mental note to e-mail her in the morning. She could hear Josh in the living room of the suite, talking on the phone, and she hoped he'd get some sleep.

The restaurant had felt good tonight, jazz playing in the background, candlelight on the table, good food and better drinks, all in her own language. Annie had watched Bill across the table, noting the extra lines on his face and the additional gray hair. They'd talked about what was going on in the political world in the United States, their families, the mess in Iraq, and, after more drinks, the things they wished they'd never seen. Finally, they'd talked about Jack, the man who had broken them into this business, their mentor, and someone they loved. Annie told Bill the things no one else would ever hear, and she wanted to tell it just once, then never again. She needed to talk to Nancy, Jack's wife, one more time and would call her tomorrow. The mention of Jack's wife had stopped their conversation, and they knew it was time for the night to be over. They'd meet again tomorrow, go over the film, and perhaps find a clue in there, but she doubted it.

Still, she was home. She'd left two messages on her home phone, but Mary hadn't called her back. She turned over, trying to put her aching arm in a more comfortable position, thinking about tomorrow instead. *Nothing like watching several hours of yourself.* Annie groaned. She turned the light off, curled into a ball, and was asleep instantly.