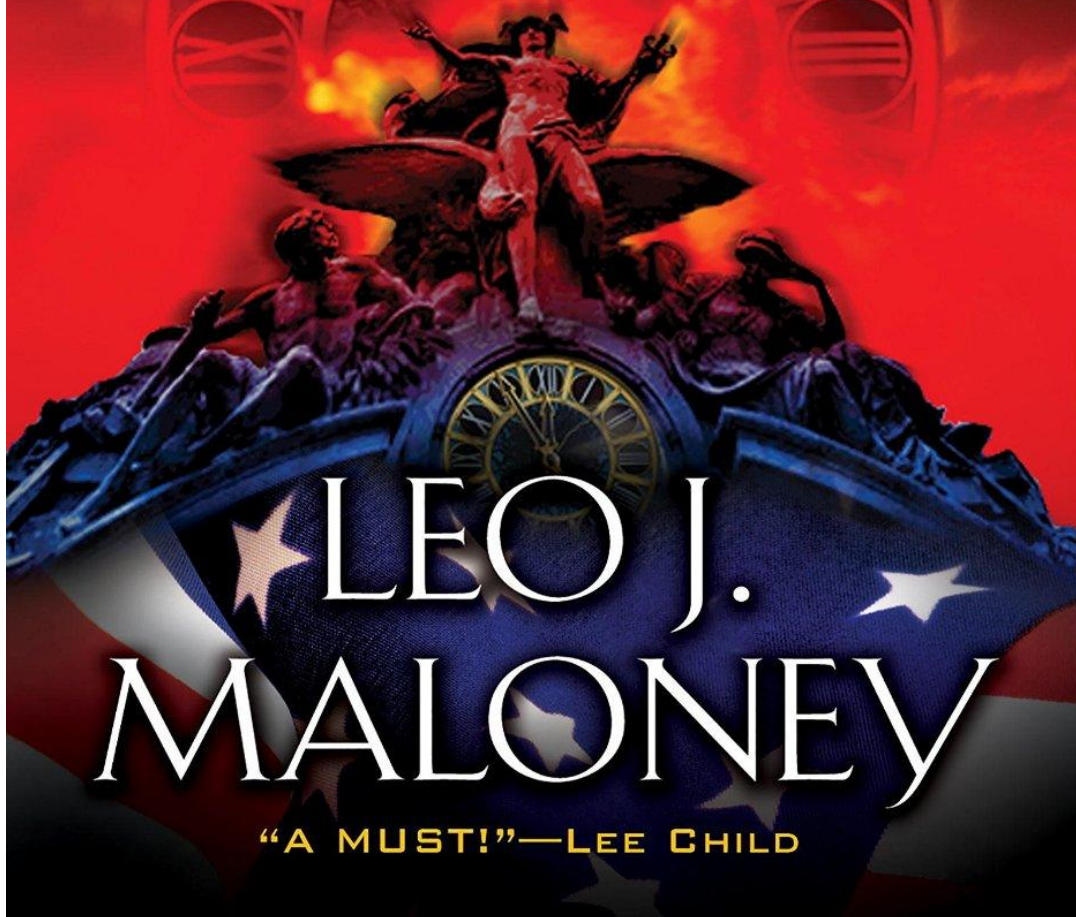


The countdown has begun...

# TWELVE HOURS

A DAN MORGAN THRILLER NOVELLA



"A MUST!"—LEE CHILD

Thanksgiving Day, 11:00 A.M.

The Bahrainis walked into the Park Avenue lobby of the Waldorf Astoria precisely at the appointed time, Acosta noted, looking down at his watch. Four of them, each in a sharp dark gray suit, tieless, all sporting facial hair in various styles. They walked with deliberate strides in a loose V formation, one man taking the lead. He had a trim black moustache on an angular face of light olive skin. His eyes were hidden behind dark gold-framed aviator sunglasses, but as he drew closer, Acosta saw an impassive expression—the face of a man who would be hard to please. Acosta adjusted his tie.

“That them?” asked Shane Rosso.

“I would believe so, Mr. Rosso.”

Rosso grunted in response. He was a simple man, an aging ex-cop of few words and, Acosta suspected, just as many thoughts. He was no good with guests, lacking the fine-tuned sense of politeness and propriety needed to work luxury hospitality. He was a fine head of security, though, and Acosta preferred him behind the scenes where he belonged.

But the newcomers had asked for him to be present at their arrival, so here he was.

Acosta drew a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the sweat on his brow. Then he slipped on a solicitous smile and walked a few paces to meet the new arrivals, hand extended for a shake.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” he said.

“I am Makram Safar,” said the man, offering no sign that he’d seen Acosta’s hand. His accent was mostly BBC, with only a hint of the hardness of the Middle Eastern speech.

“Head of security for Mr. Rasif Maloof.”

“Welcome to the Waldorf Astoria, Mr. Safar,” Acosta said, drawing back his hand, and, not knowing what else to do, bowing. “My name is Angelo Acosta, assistant manager. I’m here to help you with anything you might need in preparation for Mr. Maloof’s visit.”

Safar met Acosta’s gaze for the first time through dark lenses. “I was told that the general manager would be here.”

He looked at Mr. Rosso, the fish-eyed, thin-haired grunt in the rumpled suit. “I take it this is not him.”

“I’m afraid Mr. Floyd will not be here today, sir,” said Acosta. “I guarantee that he will be here tomorrow for Mr. Maloof’s arrival. This is Mr. Rosso, our head of security.”

Safar raised an eyebrow. “But he is not here today?”

“My apologies, sir. I could certainly call him for you, sir, if you—”

“There will be no need,” said Safar, waving his hand.

“You will do. We will need access to your security station— exclusive access—for the duration of Mr. Maloof’s stay.”

“Yes, that had been discussed,” said Acosta. This was completely against protocol, and exposed them to significant liability. But Maloof was paying them a not-so-small fortune to rent the Presidential Suite, and their general manager, Jerry Floyd, would brook no argument on this guest doing exactly as he pleased.

“Is there a problem?”

“No problem at all, sir,” Acosta reassured him. “You’ll have full access to our security capabilities. Mr. Rosso here will make sure that you have everything you need.”

“Good,” said Safar. “We require three members of the cleaning staff on call at all times, but no one is to come into Mr. Maloof’s suite without being sent for. I cannot emphasize this point enough. Do you understand?”

“Of course, sir, we—”

“We will also need access to a secure and exclusive Internet connection, and you are to have a personal halal chef and laundry service on short order. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly, sir. All that has already been arranged, as per your advance instructions.”

“Good,” said Safar. “We have more men who will arrive with Mr. Maloof’s luggage shortly.”

“I’ll have the porters waiting for them.”

“Nobody is to handle Mr. Maloof’s luggage but us,” said Safar with unexpected sharpness. “Just have the keys to the suite prepared and we will take care of the rest.”

“Certainly, sir. Now, while your key cards are prepared, I can personally take you on a guided tour of our amenities.

We boast a twenty-four-hour fitness center conveniently adjacent to our—”

“We have read the website,” said Safar. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Very well,” said Acosta, masking his chagrin as he gestured toward the chairs in the lobby. “If you gentlemen would like to take a seat as we get your key cards squared away.”

Rosso followed as Acosta made his way to the reception desk.

“I do not get paid enough for this shit,” Rosso grumbled.

“Babysitting a bunch of . . .” his voice trailed off into a mumble.

“Screw this up and neither of us is going to be paid at all,” said Acosta. “Because we’re going to be out on our asses.”

“You know they’re going to wreck that room, don’t you?” said Rosso. “It’s always the same with these guys.”

“They are paying us enough to do whatever they want,” said Acosta. Then he turned to the girl at reception. “You, uh . . .”

“Debra,” she offered.

“Debra,” he said, “is the suite ready for our special guests?”

“Housekeeping is just about done, Mr. Acosta.” He looked down at his watch and considered that he might just get off work on time. Things seemed to be running smoothly, and suddenly Thanksgiving at home seemed like a real possibility.

All he had to do was to get organized and keep everything humming.

Acosta took the express elevator upstairs and did a quick check of the multiroom suite—he had gone through it much more thoroughly earlier—and then returned to the lobby, where Safar and the others sat in stiff silence.

“Gentlemen, please follow me.”

It was a silent ride up. Upon arriving at the floor, Acosta opened the door marked THE PRESIDENTIAL SUITE. He gestured at the sprawling three-bedroom, 2,245-square-foot apartment appointed with Georgian furniture. “Would you like me to give you a tour? We have some exclusive items donated by past US presidents, which are themselves—”

“We will manage from here,” Safar cut him off. “My men will be coming down to confer with Mr. Rosso on security.

Please tell your staff to stay clear from this floor unless summoned. Is that clear?”

“Of course,” said Acosta. He stood, expecting further directions. Instead, Safar just said, “Go.”

Acosta bowed and took his leave. Just three days, he told himself as he got into the elevator and hit the button for the lobby. And just another ninety minutes before he could leave, if all went well.

Acosta emerged into the lobby, walking as if he had purpose, but his step lost its spring when he reached the front desk. He was not actually needed anywhere at the moment, but he was still running on the nervous energy of attending to their exacting guest. He thought of calling the chef to confirm once more, but he had already done that not two hours before.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw two of the Bahrainis emerge from the elevator and started toward them before he noticed that they were moving toward Rosso, who escorted them into the back rooms. Acosta sighed and threw up his hands, then walked back to the front desk and called over a guest who was in line for checkout.

Before long, a town car arrived with the remaining two members of Mr. Maloof’s security team and the luggage. As instructed, Acosta directed them to the elevator and left them there to go up on their own to the correct floor. He glanced at his watch. Quarter of an hour to the end of his shift. Bob would be arriving to relieve him within minutes if he wasn’t late, and Bob was never late. He shifted his weight on his aching feet.

There was a lull in checkout, and it looked as though Acosta might actually be getting out of there when a man in a cheap black suit, clearly a livery driver, walked into the lobby. He looked around and identified Acosta as the one in charge, going straight for him.

“Hey, you know where those Arab dudes went?”

“Do you mean the Bahraini gentlemen?” asked Acosta.

“Arab, Bahraini, I don’t care,” said the driver, agitated. “I brought them all the way in from the airport, and I still haven’t been paid.”

“I’m sure it was just a misunderstanding,” said Acosta.

He picked up the hotel intercom and dialed their room.

“We’ll get this sorted out in a minute.” The phone returned a busy signal. He pressed down the hook and redialed. Busy again. “I’m sorry,” he told the driver. “I can’t get through.”

The driver leaned on the counter. “Listen, man, I gotta get going. If I don’t make it home in the next hour, the wife’s gonna have my head. Can’t you take care of it? Charge it to their room or something?”

“It’s against policy,” said Acosta. “I really can’t.”

“Hey, man, I gotta get out of here,” said the driver. “But I ain’t leaving until I get paid.”

Acosta cast a sidelong glance at the clock. If he didn’t make it out within the next ten minutes, he’d hit horrendous traffic.

“Let me see what I can do,” he said. He walked to the elevator with slight trepidation, reassuring himself with each step. Maloof wasn’t there yet. What harm could there be? They would appreciate the service he was providing in letting them know personally.

Acosta got into the elevator and hit the button for their floor. He planned out what he was going to say. The right level of deference and solicitousness would disarm their complaints, he was sure. It was just a matter of taking it far enough.

The elevator doors parted open and he walked to the Presidential Suite. The door was ajar and he heard talking inside. He approached the threshold.

“Gentlemen, pardon me for interrupting,” he said, knocking lightly and pushing the door open. “I’m afraid there is a situation—”

Acosta caught sight out of the corner of his eye of something black and heavy on the dining room table, which he could just see from the door. A second look told him it was several heavy black objects, and a third confirmed the suspicion that hovered at the edge of his consciousness.

Guns. Not just handguns, but those—what were those called? Submachine guns. Like Uzis, but not quite. Certainly something way beyond what this kind of security team would need—and wouldn’t they need permits for this kind of thing? What could be their—

His thoughts were interrupted as he saw that Safar was standing across the entry foyer, looking right at him. Acosta backed away as Safar moved forward.

“I truly, deeply apologize, sir,” began Acosta.

“Not at all,” said Safar with a vicious grin and a solicitude built on the most menacing undertones. “Please, Mr. Acosta, come in.”

He drew closer. Acosta could not hope to evade him without turning around. But he clung to the hope that, if he made no explicit sign of what he had seen, Safar would not stop him. “There really is no need,” he said. How far was the elevator?

He didn’t dare look back. He took tiny backward steps, the logic of cornered prey taking over his mind. “I’ll come back at a more opportune time.”

In three more strides, Safar reached him. Acosta froze. “Please,” he said, his face inches from Acosta’s, his breath hot like a lion’s. “Stay.”

Acosta turned to run away, but as his finger pressed the elevator button, he saw a flash of black cross in front of his eyes and felt a tug at his neck, so tight. He couldn’t breathe.

He was pulled back and his legs gave out. He fell on the carpeted floor, the wire tight around his neck—surely it would be cutting into his skin by now—as his lungs burned for air.

He heard a ding, and the last thing he saw before the world faded to black were the art deco doors sliding open to reveal an empty elevator paneled with rich mahogany.

[Purchase the Rest of the Book Here](#)