



# The Unit

Where no one gets left behind



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'  
ON OCTOBER 16th 2021



# The Unit

written as a  
Novel-in-a-Day



## THE UNIT

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## **Time is no substitute for talent**

There is a well-known saying that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time then it will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare. In 2003, the staff at Paignton Zoo gave a computer to six crested macaques and categorically proved that what you actually get is five pages of the letter 'S' and a broken keyboard. Time, it seems, is no substitute for talent. But can talent substitute for time...?

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in October 2021. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we loved putting it together.

**Tim**

16 October 2021





# The Unit



## chapter one

*Amy E. Lilly*

“DOES THIS LOOK LIKE jungle rot?” Hanley shoved his bare foot at Williams. “I think it looks like rot.”

Jermaine smacked the foot of his face. “Man, get that shit out of my face. I will shoot your ass if you do that again. Lost your fuckin’ mind.”

“I’ll pay money to see you shoot him,” Glover sniffed the towel he held in his hand before shrugging. He opens a trunk at the end of his cot and pulls out a clean one. “You can’t get jungle rot in the desert, Hanley. We ain’t in Nam.”

Hanley looked down at his feet. “Something’s causing them to itch like crazy. If it ain’t jungle rot, maybe I got camel fleas.”

Dalton opened his eyes and said, “Or maybe you picked up some kind of dick rot from that little mama you were making time with at the chow hall last night.”

Hanley threw his boot and nailed Dalton on his shoulder. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was just being polite. My mama raised me right.”

Dalton snorted and sat up. “Anyone seen Toolan?”

“Nah. He said he had to go take a shit, and no one’s seen

him since,” Jermaine said. He pulled a clean shirt over his head. “I’m just glad they got water to knock the stink off your ass, Hanley. Man, go take a shower and scrub that shit off your feet. I don’t want it creeping off your pasty white flesh onto mine.”

Boykin strolled in with a towel wrapped around this waist. “The water’s hotter than a witch’s tit in hell, but there’s plenty of it. Better than the last FOB we were at.”

“You got that right. I got home from Tikrit, and my clothes stood up by themselves from all of the sweat and salt in them,” Grange said. He reached into his bag and pulled out a pack of cards. “You gentleman up for some poker while we’re sitting here killing time.”

“I’m in,” Emir said. “I’ll be happy to take your paycheck.”

Grange laughed. “In your dreams, Faisal. I’m not stupid enough to let you deal.” He tossed the deck of cards to Williams who caught them with ease. “We better get outside the wire soon or Boykin won’t have enough money left to buy a pack of gum.”

Williams grabbed the small folding table from the corner of the room and drags it over to their cluster of bunks. “I got a little something to make the game more interesting.” He pulled a bottle of mouthwash from his trunk and held it high. “My girl sent me off with a bang and a little treat.”

“You didn’t get that liquor confiscated?” Hanley grabbed the bottle from Williams.

“Pays to be a Black Mamba. They did take my pork rinds though.” Williams cracked open the bottle and took a swig. “Whoa. That’s some excellent Russian vodka, my friends. It will curl the hair on the end of that nasty ass foot of yours, Pete.”

Dalton grabbed the bottle from Jermaine’s hand and takes

a swig. “Cut the chatter and deal the cards.”

Williams shuffled the cards. “Five card draw. Twenty dollars opening bid.”

Boykin slid his stool over to the table. “Let’s get this party started.”

Grange lit a cigar. He leaned back and puffed out a ring of smoke that floated across the room. The small fan in the corner did little more than stir the dust. Thank God the temperatures dropped at night enough to make it bearable. “Anybody else think it’s odd that Toolan’s going on leave right after we get here?”

Jermaine flicked cards across the table to Boykin, Hanley, Grange, and Faisal before dealing himself in. “Maybe there’s something going on back home he doesn’t want to talk about.”

Grange shook his head. “I don’t think so. I asked him about it last night, and he was cagey. I’m telling you something’s going down. I’ve known the man for four years. Something’s off with him.”

Boykin stared over the top of his cards at Faisal before throwing a twenty-dollar bill into the center of the table. “I asked him if he was going to hit the waves at Myrtle Beach when he got stateside. Now that you brought it up, he didn’t answer me. Just kinda smiled and changed the subject.”

Faisal slides a fifty-dollar bill into the pot. “I’ll see your twenty and raise you thirty.”

Before Boykin can respond, the door opened and Toolan walked in. “Gentlemen, I see you’ve already cracked open Williams’ top shelf vodka.” He picked it up off the table and took a gulp. “Grey Goose? Not my usual, but it’ll do.”

“When are you heading stateside, Sarge?” Hanley asked. He arched his brow as he looked across the table at Grange.

Toolan eased down onto the trunk at the foot of Faisal’s

bunk. “I’ve got an announcement to make if you can tear yourself away from the cards. Boykin you may as well fold. Faisal’s got a royal flush.”

“Son of a bitch!” Boykin threw his cards down. “You’re either the luckiest man alive or you cheat.”

Faisal grinned and picked up the money on the table. “You’ll never know.”

“What’s up?” Grange asked.

Toolan looked around the room at his fellow members of the Black Mambas. His face gave away no secrets. “I’m not going on leave. I’ve decided to retire.”

“What?” Williams pushed away from the table. “What the fuck, Toolan? We’re getting ready to crack open a can of whoop ass on the Ghaf Yohmar, and you decide to bug out?” He snatched the bottle of vodka from Toolan and chugged it. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Where’s this coming from?”

“It’s time.” Toolan stood up and paced around the room. “I’m tired of busting my hump and not making shit. I’m going private.”

“What do you mean, private?” Hanley asked.

Toolan turned his back to his team and gazed out the grimy window. “I’m going to do private security. It pays more than twice what I’m pulling down now. I’m tired of dodging bullets for peanuts.”

Faisal nodded his head. “I can’t fault you for wanting more money. Who’s going to run the next op?”

“Harris. He’s up for promotion and this will give him a chance to prove his stripes,” Toolan said. “I just told him I was leaving. He’ll do a briefing with the team in the morning.”

Behind Toolan’s back, the men looked at each other. Grange scowled and said, “Who are you going to work for?”

Please tell me not that asshole Chet Jones.”

Toolan turned around. “No. Not going to work for Chet. He couldn’t pay me enough to come work for him. I’d rather not say who it is right now.”

“Playing it close to the vest,” Boykin picked up his losing hand of cards and stared at them before throwing them down again in disgust. “Fuckin’ Faisal. I swear you cheat at cards.”

Faisal smirked at Boykin and held up the cash from the pot. “Don’t be such a crybaby. You just suck at cards.”

A sad smile crossed Toolan’s face as he looked around the room. He opened his mouth to speak but shut it before he could say anything that made him sound like a hormonal teenage girl on a bad TikTok video.

Hanley stood up and held his hand out to Toolan. “Guess that’s it then. Can’t say I’m happy about it, Sarge. You’ve been a good leader.”

Toolan shook Hanley’s hand. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

Grange stood up and clapped Toolan on the back. “You’ll miss seeing my pretty face every morning, old man.”

Toolan laughed. “Pretty as a donkey’s ass, Grange.” Toolan nodded his head and looked around the room. A flicker of sadness flitted across his face before he grinned at them. “I gotta go shower, then pack my bags.”

The men sat in silence after Toolan left. The air filled with smoke as Grange puffed furiously on the cigar clenched between his teeth. The bottle of vodka slowly circulated around the room. Each man lost in his own thoughts at Toolan’s announcement.

Hanley breaks the silence. “Well, I’m not going to sit around here sobbing in my cornflakes over Toolan. Anyone want to hit the chow hall with me? That little honey I met last

night told me they got beef and noodles tonight on the menu.”

Williams stood and stretched. “If that gristle I ate last night was meat, I’ll lick your jungle rotted foot, Hanley. I swear the more I chewed the bigger that meat got in my mouth.”

“That’s what she said,” Hanley snorted and slapped Williams on the back.

Outside, Toolan stood in the darkness listening to the laughs of the team. They had taken the news of his departure well. Black Mamba hadn’t lost its venomous bite with his announcement. Instead, like their namesake, they had swiftly recovered and continued their deadly mission without him.



## chapter two

*Michael Roberts*

FIREBASE CONNELLY WAS SPINNING down from the weekends' ops.

Half the Pave lows and Blackhawks had been re-tasked to insert across the border and had left throughout the day.

Meaning the noise was now just a series of gunfire from the range and backfires from the vehicle depot rather than the constant low grade cacophony it had been when the helos were still here.

Harris was just coming out of the crapper when he ran into Faisal.

“Just the guy I was looking for,” Faisal said to him.

“Hey man, you been ten minutes earlier, we could have sat and chatted.”

Faisal looked at the bathroom.

Even from this far away, you wouldn't want to be downwind of it.

“An opportunity lost, I'm sure,” he said.

“So, you have something?”

Faisal shrugged.

“Don’t hold out on me, Fayz.”

“I hear they made a decision?”

“Well, from the look on your face, I’d think it might not be good.”

Faisal sighed.

“Oh fuck off with the dramatics, Fayz...”

“OK....talk is they went with Cole...”

“Fuck, seriously?”

“Like I said...”

“Yeah, “ Harris said, “Just talk...but since when have you not had the right Intel?”

“Hardly ever.”

“So, it’s Cole...”

Harris looked around.

“Any idea where Grange might be hiding?”

“Same place he always is....trying to out-dick that supply tech out in the weight yard.”

“Fuck, it’s almost noon, I don’t want to have to walk that far in this heat.”

“Well, just telling you where he is....Beyond that is on you.”

“Fair enough.”

The base was set up fairly efficiently, as was the Army’s ways of doing things.

Everything in its place and a place for everything.

However, the threat from the bad guys had forced a few concessions to safety.

The previous force out here had been mostly Rangers and a QRF team.

Back then the weight yard had been by the Vehicle Depot.

Then, one of the Mechanics had taken a round while while exercising and they realized that they had had been zeroed in

from the hills about a kilometre away.

They'd swept the area several times and it had been thought that they'd eliminated or intimidated anyone who was thinking of taking pot shots at them to find greener pastures.

Then, after a couple months of relative peace, there had been another attack, this one seeming far more co-ordinated.

They'd called in A-10s and had the obvious vantage points blasted into sand but that hadn't stopped the problem entirely.

So, they simply moved the yard inside the building perimeter.

The weight yard was now in a twenty by twenty foot gap between the Ops House and the TV House.

It was primitive in comparison to the facilities the group had at their disposal back in Georgia but there was a certain Jail-yard charm to it that Grange and the others liked and cultivated.

There were no machines or fancy equipment—those could be found at the other end of the compound in the Rec Hall — just old school benches and iron weights.

In a camp full of Alpha males, this was the epicentre, the Alpha Arena.

There were maybe half a dozen guys who could lift the amount of iron that was on the bars here.

Grange was one of them.

Back home he wouldn't have been able to become this jacked but out here?

No-one cared really.

Harris waited until Grange had finished his set before calling out to him.

“Yo, Christo...”

Grange looked up and then over at him.

“Waddup?”

“A word?”

Grange stepped out from the squat bar.

“What’s up?”

“Just trying to suss things out about something Fayz said,” Harris said.

He looked over at the squat bar.

“Shit,” he said, “looks like you’re going to run out of bar.....What you squatting now?”

“Six Twenty.”

“Jesus,” Harris said, “That’s barely human anymore....”

“Yeah,” Grange said, walking over to where his water and towel was.

“I suspect you didn’t trudge over here to inquire about my weight regimen,” Grange said, “This about Toolan leaving, by any chance....?”

“More or less,” Harris said.

Grange sighed and pressed the towel to his sweaty neck and forehead.

“This isn’t a loyalty check, is it?”

“Not really,” Harris said, although he felt that wasn’t exactly the truth.

“Whatever the big boys decide.”

“Out of my hands,” Harris agreed.

Grange nodded.

“However, since I’m here and you’re here..Fayz thinks they went with Cole.”

“What the actual fuck?”

Harris gave him a shrug.

“Not confirmed but...”

“If Fayz said it....”

“Yeah,” Harris said, “Looks like...”

The Colonel was in his office when Harris arrived.

“Tom,” he said, “Guess you know what this is about.”

“I guess I do, Colonel.”

“Fayz’s grapevine?”

Harris nodded.

“Unfortunately, it’s true. They picked Cole.”

“Fuck,” Harris said.

“Needless to say, they overrode my recommendation, cited the fact that you are potentially cycling out at the end of your tour...”

“That wasn’t supposed to be public...” Harris began before the the Colonel held up a hand.

“Grapevines go both ways, Tom, you know that. I don’t know what to tell you. It’s FUBAR but what about this mission hasn’t been since the get go? We were supposed to be out of here long ago but here we all are. Still here. I was a Captain when this started. My kid was in pre-school then, now he’s a fucking Marine over here, for God’s sake. You should be glad you’re getting out of this.”

“ I would have liked to have gone out with a command in my jacket, frankly.”

“You were the Team Boss...Everyone knows it... Everyone whose opinion counts around here...”

“Fuck...OK,” Harris said.

“Again,” the Colonel said, “Sorry.”

He stood up, waited until Harris did as well, then reached across and shook his hand.

“Dismissed, I guess.”

The team was sitting around the collection of old couches and chairs, watching a DVD of “Die Hard” when Drews, the logistics support tech came in.

“Old man’s holding a briefing in the TacCen, “ he said, “...Says it’s mandatory attendance.”

“Think he’s announcing the new Team Boss?” Grange said to him.

“Should be Harris.”

“His tour’s too short....They won’t make him Team Boss with a month left on deployment and less than a year left before he has to re-up...and you and I both know he probably won’t.”

“ We had this conversation last time he was short, remember?”

“This time I think he means it.”

“You mean, this time his wife REALLY means it, don’t you?”

He shrugged.

“Same same, I guess.”

They all stood when the Colonel walked in, more as a show of respect, rather than a formality.

“Sit,” he said and took a seat on the edge of the table up front.

“OK,” he said, “ I’ll get to it.”

He looked around, trying to read the group in front of him.

He wasn’t stupid; you don’t get to command in The Unit by being unaware of how your boys were feeling.

They knew.

“OK,” he said again, “ As of 2400 hours, first October , Staff Sergeant Cole will assume the rank of Master Sergeant and as such, will be the new Team Commander of Team 1, 2nd Troop, C Squadron.”

As expected, there wasn’t much of a happy response.

Luckily, Harris was ever the diplomat and reached over to shake Cole’s hand, who took it reluctantly.

“That’s it.”

“Permission to speak freely, Colonel?” Grange asked.

“Nope,” the Colonel said, making his way out.

After he left, there was the general low key congratulations, but nothing like it would have been otherwise, then they stood up and drifted off in various directions.

“I don’t know what to say,” Williams said, afterwards, when he and Faisal were on their way back to the Rec Centre.

“Odds were he would have turned it down anyway.”

“One thing to choose, another to have someone one choose for you,” Grange said.

“He’ll shake it off.”

“Will he, though? I’d be looking to move on if it were me, get some support gig back at Bragg and then cycle out.”

“Might just do that.”

Cole caught up to Harris by the yard.

“Well, this is pretty fucking awkward,” he said.

“It is what it is, Dee. The Army giveth and the Army taketh away. Nothing personal.”

“I could refuse.”

”Why would you do that?,” Harris said, “ This is my last tour... They figured that out and decided to go with you. That’s what I’m going with, anyway.”

“You could ask for command of another unit.”

“ And at best, bump someone else or at worst get told no again? Screw that....When we get back stateside, I’m probably going to do what they figure and request a transfer to a support unit, like you guys have been speculating.... Ease off the throttle a bit to get a bit more used to non-Ops stuff....You know, start transitioning towards being a civilian again. Go work for Meghan’s Dad...Make a shit ton of money...Go live the rest of my life.”

“You unleashed on the civilian world...That’d be

interesting to see.”

“Well, Meghan would like to still be married to me in thirty years so I thought it might be a favour to her if I didn’t come back still in Caveman Spartan Mode.”

“But you still got eight weeks here with us...With me...”

Harris patted him on the arm.

“ You got my support, Dee...You don’t have to question that. You’ll be a great Team Leader...”

“With some help...”

“With a lot of fucking help,” Harris said, laughing.

They were gathered in the Rec Centre.

“So,” Harris said, “we need to do this right.”

“Fucking right,” Grange said.

“Now, as you know, we are a simple tribe, bound by a simple creed: Travel to interesting places, meet interesting people...and fuck their shit up.”

“Amen.”

“Now, the powers that be have decided, in their mysterious and perverse wisdom, to anoint young Master Sergeant Cole with the leadership of this fine group of upstanding young gentlemen.”

“Hey, watch who you’re calling gentlemen.”

“OK, this filthy swarm of rabble.”

“That’s better.”

“Regardless, “ Harris continued, “In a group such as ours, egalitarian as we are,as well as in the heat of armed struggle against our foe, we are sometimes forgetful of who our leader is.”

“Oh shit, “ Cole said, smiling.

“So, as has been since in olden times, we have devised a method to differentiate between the leaders and the.....rest..”

He pulled a Sharpie from his pocket.



“Mister Cole, if you would, please.”

Cole sighed and pulled off his shirt.

“Turn please.”

Cole turned in his seat.

Harris uncapped the pen and pressed it against the skin just to the left of Cole’s left shoulder blade.

“Hmm, he said, “This needs a more prodigious marking to commemorate the occasion. Christo...The Big Sharpie, if you would.”

“My pleasure,” Grange said, pulling what looked like a highway flare from his pocket and handing it to Harris.

Harris uncapped it, revealing a black tip the size of a small matchbox.

“Far more appropriate.”

“Aw, fuck ME,” Cole said with a smirk.

“Hold still, Colesy...This might tickle a bit.”

Harris pressed the tip against Cole’s shoulder and, in long but slightly deliberately crooked lines, as if it was being drawn by a three-year-old, inscribed the words “OWR LEEDUR” across Cole’s back, just above the shoulder blades, then stepped back.

“That’s pretty,” he said.

Coles sighed and turned to let the other see what Harris had written.

“Aw, that’s fucking poetry,”

“Shakespeare would be proud of that.”

“Now, onward and upwards to the salute...,” Harris said.

Grange filled a variety of mugs and plastic glasses from a bottle of Georgia bourbon and handed them out to the members of the team.

“To our new Team Boss.” he said, lifting his glass in Cole’s direction.

“FUCK YOU,” the rest of them shouted in unison and lifted their drinks.

“Assholes.” Cole said, grinning.

They drank.

## chapter three

*Sherida Deeprose*

RICHARD KEATING KNEW WHEN he was being punished. His last diplomatic assignment had been a step down, and he'd brushed off the implied insult with the "everyone gets a turn in the crap locations" rationale. The only good thing about this god-forsaken hell-hole was the hardship pay.

The plane approached one of those dangerous runways he'd always heard about -- too short, and surrounded by hills and rocks. His stomach lurched, but he gripped the armrest as they careened in, keeping his face neutral. Looking cool and contained while a volcano of emotions wracked his insides was one of his best skills as a diplomat. He wondered if his body would eventually spontaneously combust with the contradiction of outward facade and inward turmoil. Or perhaps he should put the skills to better use in the theatre.

The wing of the plane tilted up to the sky, then corrected abruptly. He was sure the pilot was a novice.

Breathe, he told himself. A calm demeanour was the first impression the Black Mambos should see.

He glanced over at Margo. She seemed unaffected by the

joyriding pilot's landing tactics. Richard tried not to notice her skirt riding up as she stretched her long legs into the aisle. She held a document which she appeared to be engrossed in--no doubt the briefing of their assignment here. He'd only skimmed it, intending to be more thorough when he was on solid ground. His nausea was increasing, as it always did just before landing, and he almost reached for the sick bag, saliva overflowing his mouth, his head spinning. The anti-nausea travel pills were stuck in the bottom of his suitcase, stored in the baggage hold, but it was much too late to think of them.

Hold it together. But he couldn't.. He grabbed the bag, fumbling to open it and just in time he let loose the garlic-infused lamb curry, a delightful medley of bright yellow, with tiny cauliflower florets adorning the mess. Tears in his eyes, he desperately needed a tissue to blow out the rest of the vomit from his nasal passages.

This assignment was already kicking his ass, and he hadn't even read the brief.

Margo handed Richard a napkin, producing a handkerchief and soaking it with her water bottle. Honestly, he was worse than her kids when they were little. She'd had to schlep extra clothes for herself and them, for the inevitable spilled body fluid. Nose bleeds, sick, pee, and on one horrible food-poisoned trip, diarrhoea.

But not this time. Now she was a foreign service officer. Serving her country, out for adventure and travel, love affairs with foreign diplomats, always a possibility. She was not as young and naive as most of the people in her position, but she'd joined the diplomatic service later in life, finished with motherhood. She'd peaceably divorced their father, her skills at negotiation and mediation leaving the family intact. Why not

use her degrees in international relations to help build cultural bridges in exotic locations. It had more pizzazz than being a professor at the local college.

"Rough landing," she said. The smell of vomit drifted across the aisle.

His skin still green-tinged, he nodded. "Sorry. Won't forget to take my tablets again."

She looked out at the landscape, all shades of dust and sand. "Not the most glamorous first assignment for me."

He blew his nose on the napkin. She flicked a finger next to her own lips. "You have a chunk..." What had she been thinking, expecting the diplomatic service to be glamorous? She'd better get over herself and quick.

Looking out the window, she saw a jeep arriving in a cloud of exhaust. The whole scene looked like one of her son's video games, dreary, empty landscape, ramshackle buildings, random vehicles. Locals dressed like nomads.

She swung herself out of the seat, regretting her choice of business attire already. Stockinged legs, pumps, tight skirt. She'd modelled herself after a character in an 80s spy movie. Clearly, she needed a fresh look in this wasteland.

All Richard wanted to do was brush his damn teeth.

The jeep had transported him and Margo to the base near Kanabad. A nondescript man guided them to their quarters, and said that MSG Cole would be ready to meet them at 1600 hours.

Richard grabbed the summarised brief of the assignment, reading the details as he scoured his mouth. He was to meet with an organisation wanting to be recognised by the current regime, but who most people, his own government included, considered bandits. Accusations of violent thievery, training

camps in the hills and kidnappings had shadowed the Kundi, who were partly vigilantes protecting their own, and partly regional bullies. He read through the stories, cases, anecdotes. No doubt they would promise collaboration and information about the terrorist groups hidden in the caves and hills in return for some kind of diplomatic recognition. If he played his game right, he could arrange a supply of valuable intel for their own fighting forces. But he'd need the help of Master Sergeant Cole and his delta operators.

Answering a knock on his door, he found Margo standing there. She'd changed into what looked like some sort of safari get-up, khaki pants tucked into fashionable boots, a flowing white shirt, that for all its looseness did not hide her figure. She could have been the romantic heroine in an adventure movie. Why did he have to contend with a complete rookie on this kind of assignment? And a woman. In this maniacal male-dominated environment he shuddered to think what mistakes she would make. Because everyone made mistakes when they started, no matter how many degrees they had in international gobbledygook and cultural what-not.

"You look, um ..."An image of Margo, bound to a pole with leather straps, snakes writhing at her feet, her red lips open wide in a scream of horror popped into his head "... you had time to change?"

She held out a document. "This just arrived, I've managed to print it out. New info about the Kundi clan."

"A quick-change artist AND efficient," he said, taking the paper and skimming the contents. This entire job was like doing improvisation theatre, where the audience could just yell out instructions and change the course of the sketch. Latest recommendation: No strong-arm tactics, no shows of might and power, just regular conversation between chieftains. The

new instructions were more specific, with key phrases and words to use, attitudes to take. His script with director's notes. His original instructions were to intimidate and make demands. Now he had to take the role of benevolent tribal leader.

And his parents thought taking drama had been a waste of time.

MSG Cole greeted them tersely in a makeshift office near the entrance of the main building. He looked like everyone and no one. Could have been a native of the region, could have been a New Yorker, a sheik in the desert, a refugee on a boat.

"What are your instructions?" he asked, no preamble, no small talk. He addressed Richard, hardly acknowledging Margo's presence.

"A clandestine meeting has been arranged between myself, Ms Poole, and three of the leaders of the Kundi." Richard waved the latest protocol. "Apparently they don't want a crowd."

Cole narrowed his eyes. "There'll be a crowd, don't you doubt it."

Richard shuffled his feet. "We should stick to the agreement, from a diplomatic view, show we're to be trusted in this at least."

Margo cleared her throat. "We should give the appearance of sticking to the agreement, you mean."

Cole glanced at her, then back at Richard. "Do the Kundi know you have a woman with you?"

"Yes, they have been informed."

"So we'll replace her with one of our female sergeants."

Margo's mouth fell open. Not quite a scream of horror, but Richard could almost hear her cries of indignation.

Her voice was calm. "I'm trained, I'm qualified, I've studied these people groups." She shrugged. "I'm going."

"Ma'am," Cole interjected. "My orders are to keep you both alive."

"So heroic," she muttered under her breath. "But my orders are to support Mr Keating in the field. As I said, we should look like we are arriving alone, but I suppose you lot," she waved her hand, "can blend into the background, like no doubt the rest of the Kundi clan will be doing."

"Appreciate the idea, ma'am," Cole said, deadpan. "Perhaps you can plan the operation for 'us lot'."

Margo laughed, and Richard was almost scared on her behalf. These Black Mambos were cutthroat in their own way. You didn't joke at their expense.

As a diplomat, he was used to younger service officers who would kowtow to his greater experience. It didn't help that Margo was a couple years older than him, (yes, he had looked at her birthdate on her personnel file, as well as her marital status) and that he had a habit of developing irrational crushes on women like her. Those ridiculous costumes just fanned the flames of his juvenile yearnings.

"Get a grip." Had he said that out loud? He put on his officious face and said, "Let's be serious now. We don't have time for banter."

Cole snorted. He called out and several men entered the room. Some obviously muscular, some wiry but strong. They could have been a random group of anybodies, but there was a sense of power if you looked closer. And as Richard looked closer, he realised one man was, in fact, female.

"This is our mission?" a tall well-built man asked, looking them up and down.

"Yes Harris, you got a problem with that?" Cole said.



Richard didn't need his diplomatic training to see the alpha posturing between the two men.

"No, SIR!" Harris's tone belied the words.

"Tell the team your directive," Cole said to Richard.

Margo had yielded to pressure that she cover herself in the clothes provided, a traditional robe and headscarf. It was simply cultural awareness she told herself, rather than submission to misogynistic directives. The female Mambo could wear men's clothing and look like a man, so she wasn't burdened with reams of extra material and decreased peripheral vision like Margo was.

They were driven in a rusty old car to the cafe that had been agreed upon as a meeting place. It was dark by the time they arrived, but there were people milling everywhere on the streets of the city.

The atmosphere was dull, dingy and rundown, a post-apocalyptic atmosphere for video-gaming.

"Pick us up at 10," Richard said to the driver, paying him as if he were a mere taxi driver. He watched Margo struggling out of the back seat without offering a hand. He'd taken on the big chief persona, going a bit too far, in Margo's opinion.

She followed him into the cafe, emptied for their meeting. Three turbaned men sat on cushions on the floor. One man with a heavy moustache sat between the others, and it was clear he was the leader. Margo waited for Richard to sit, before she knelt beside him.

She could hardly believe Richard was the same man who'd needed his face wiped on the plane. Tonight he radiated authority and began the discussions with complete confidence, using the phrases he'd learned only hours earlier. The men responded with respect, or so it seemed to Margo. They spoke

reasonable English and wanted diplomatic recognition, after centuries of displacement and being treated as nomads and squatters. She could understand their point of view, but she thought they were asking too little. She had to stop herself from negotiating on their behalf for food and protection, not just diplomatic recognition by a foreign power who was a long way away.

Within two hours, the deal had been forged. Hopefully, this would buy a small amount of peace in the district. Richard leaned down to get a pen out of his bag on the floor.

One of the Kundi suddenly leant back, banging his head against the wall. The chieftain stared at his comrade, and Margo saw the hole in his forehead. The chieftain shouted, turning to Richard and pointing. "You betray us!"

"No" Richard said. "No, not us."

People were running into the room, yelling accusations. Had their special ops team done this? It was clearly a sniper; the gunshot silenced. But if Richard hadn't been leaning down, it would have been his head shot through.

"We are not your enemy!" Richard said, standing. "You have many enemies who would do this, but we are not them." He did not break eye contact with the chief. Even in the chaos, Richard kept his persona. Margo meanwhile was frantically looking for an escape route, and wanted to rip her headpiece off to see better. Where were their delta force bodyguards? All that machismo and "we know better than you idiots" wasn't helping now, was it? Black Mambo-Schmambos.

She began crawling towards the door, but her robe was too long and heavy. Ripping it off wasn't an option, because she'd gone for realism, having heard rumours that some Saudi women wore nothing but expensive lingerie under their burkas. Not that this was a burka and no, she wasn't in Saudi

either. Her chances of sneaking away wearing only Victoria's Secret were pretty much nil. Unless she was a female character in a violent video game.

The lights flickered and went out. She froze on her hands and knees, keeping low, hearing gunshots outside, and what sounded like fireworks.

A force hit her in the ribs, ripping the air from her lungs.

Richard heard Margo scream in the dark. All his fantasies of rescuing her in some comic book plot dissipated and he couldn't move. A voice spoke in his ear "Mr Keating we're getting you and Ms Poole out."

It was over so fast he couldn't even put the pieces together afterwards. Guided through the back rooms, down a tunnel they ran, two of the operatives carrying a moaning Margo.

"Put her out", one whispered, and there was a quick rustle, and her moans stopped abruptly. Was she dead?

Richard protested, but someone clamped a hand on his mouth.

"Keep walking."

They came out into the streets and he could see the men who had led them here to the middle of nowhere. Kundi! He and Margo had been kidnapped, good as dead.

But looking closer, he could see the faces of the Black Mambos in Kundi attire. Sergeant Harris, the disgruntled one. And three other men who had been at the briefing.

"What have you done to her?" Richard cried at the men carrying a lifeless Margo.

"Just administered a sedative. To stop the pain, keep her quiet. We need to get her to the helicopter, to a hospital."

Richard leant close as the sergeant ripped open Margo's robe to inspect her wound. There was a beat where they both

stared in astonishment at the elaborate garter belt and stockings, so ridiculously out of place in this hellhole. Richard wanted to laugh at her audacity. That woman would never need a costume designer.

Then Harris found the shrapnel lodged next to a rib. "We'll take her directly to the heliport. It's the best chance she has. And you," Harris grabbed his arms and shoved him towards a hulk of a man on a motorbike, "you're going back to base where we can keep you safe."

Richard watched them transfer Margo to a junky car. He swallowed his fear, his yearning to pick her up and run all the way to the nearest hospital, his tears. He just nodded, his face stone. "Let's get this show on the road." His voice was strong and sure, not a tremor. He mounted the back of the bike.

When this assignment was done, he was definitely going back to a life in the theatre.

## chapter four

*Lin Lune*

MASTER SERGEANT DALTON COLE was woken up at 4AM local time in his tent to receive a phone call.

"Good afternoon MSG Cole," said a business like male voice on the other end.

"Same to you, sir," Cole replied, splashing cold water on his face. He was told in a hurry that this was a CIA agent.

"I'm en route to the base," the agent said as a car engine could be heard in the background. "How are you taking the new leader role so far?"

"Very well, sir. The team was, uh, very tight knit during MSG Toolan's lead so not much has changed. No news is good news."

"Great to know. I'll be arriving in a bit, prepare for a mission brief in five hours."

"Acknowledged, safe travels." Cole signed off and went back to sleep. At 5AM in the pre-dawn light, Cole went on a run, circling the camp and shouting out good mornings. He was joined by Harris who ran alongside for a while but began to outpace him. Cole let Harris ahead and avoided his kicked

up dust.

At 9AM, the seven members of the Black Mambas filed into the meeting tent to find Cole adjusting eight neat piles of paper documents, and the CIA agent Morgan on the other end of the room setting up a digital presentation. Cole wiped his sweating face and under his cloth mask with a towel.

"We have intel on a drug smuggling operation near the city of Annratur," Morgan said from a seated position with a single small laptop to the side. He had a big watch on dark brown skin, and was wearing a well ironed white shirt, short sleeved for the weather.

"We'll stakeout this hotel complex by using several rooms of the hotel across the street. We also need undercover teams to fact check our tip-off, get confessions if possible. Local law enforcement are aware of this-" Morgan points to a satellite image of the six story hotels, "but not of the undercover part."

For the next two hours, punctuated by coffee breaks, plans and backup plans were set. The tables were increasingly littered with loose paper and empty plastic water bottles.

"Good luck, men," said Morgan, surrounded by seven open laptops and a mess of paper.

"Yes sir!" Cole replied as he stood up to salute, which made his mask fall off.

"Sir, yes SIR!" Said Harris, louder than Cole.

"YES SIR!" Said each member louder in succession as they filed out, knocking over a folding chair.

"Gain the trust of the Dehmar people and capture the smugglers!" Harris said in a chant the moment everyone was outside.

"Hoo-ah," several members cheered.

Cole put out a fistbump. "LIBERATE the civilians. ERADICATE the terrorists."

"HOOAH." "HOOAH!"

In the next tent, a techie put on headphones.

"HOOAH!"

The next day, the Black Mambas and a stakeout team left in several off road vehicles.

In the dead of night, a dozen or so people weighed down with black duffel bags and what looked to be like filming equipment entered a run down hotel's side entrance. Only three people came out, with not even a backpack between them.

The golden sun rose on a slope of sand coloured cubes and windows without glass, making the general cityscape of Annratur seem redder and hotter than it was in the dry mornings. The city grid was only clear where more colourful buildings of painted concrete and glass faces clustered at a shallow valley. A smaller cluster of highrises, the tourist hub, highlighted a straight road that lead to the valley. Plain domes of mosques and their courtyards were the few uniform open spaces when seen from air.

Cole stood in the corner of the mission hub, sipping bottled water. In the place of a bed and hotel furniture there were folding chairs and tables. Countless digital screens were connected by cables that had to be taped over, and the floor was thus more duct tape than carpet. Outside the hotel window, if the curtains were open, the other hotel across the street was a block of fading paint and window mounted AC units, mirroring their own.

"Sightseers good to go?" Cole said into a headset.

In a downstairs room, SSG Boykin and SSG Williams received the transmission through a camouflaged earpiece.

The pair looked like American tourists, and mini bottles of hand sanitizer dangled off their hiking backpacks.

"Ready," they replied, and went down to the lobby to canvass the city.

"Needleworkers, good to go?" Cole said.

"The find-the-needle-in-a-haystack team is ready," SFC Harris replied as SSG Faisal waited by the door of their hotel room. They would head to a nearby open air market to meet with an informant.

"Groundwork teams are off," Cole said mostly to himself, and approached Hanley who was elbow deep in unpacking crates.

"Need any help?"

"I'm good," Hanley said.

Cole left the door open as he headed to another room--the whole floor was theirs--and entered a bare space except for a camera on a tripod aimed out the window, and Glover assembling his rifle.

"Need any help?" Glover said from the floor.

"Just dropping by," Cole said, did a visual sweep, and left, leaving the door open. Glover nudged the door closed with another tripod.

A block from the hotel, Williams confidently walked up to a cluster of rickshaw drivers and asked, "do you know where tourists go to have a good time?"

The male drivers started advertising popular destinations in accented English, most wearing masks and standing a meter away.

"No, not restaurants. Like, uh, secret restaurants. Serving... brown sugar?"

Boykin finished inspecting his DSLR camera and walked



up beside his teammate.

One driver raised his eyebrows and mumbled something, walking into a nearby building.

"Okay," Boykin said in Persian, trying to stand two meters away from everyone. "We are not afraid to have fun. Big parties. You know?"

A driver standing a bit away burst into laughter.

Eventually a young driver offered to take the job, but was vague about where exactly the destination lay.

The sergeants shrugged at each other and hopped in the rickshaw.

Harris poked at his civilian model cellphone, which had no signal. He stood in a dirt paved alley with an overhang of some tent-cloth material.

"Should we..." Faisal made the hand signal for radio.

"Got it," Harris said quickly and headed forward then left in a fork in the path. They emerged in a courtyard where two kids stopped bouncing a ball to stare at the Americans.

"Mama!" A kid yelled, and before the sergeants could react, a heavysset woman with a green khimar and holding a kitchen spoon strode towards them.

"This no shortcut to bazaar," she said in an infantilizing singsong, and mentioned for the men to follow her. "Bazaar here." She pointed at an entrance that seemed to lead into someone's house.

"Bazaaaar. Heeere." She said and led the way, opening a door at the other end that let in the sound of motorbikes and people.

She shoed them through with the spoon. "Enjoy you stay in Dehmar."

"Okay. We've got 24/7 infrared, visual, sonic lasers, and MAPs at every entrance. Cloud cover's bit thick for now but the balloon works better at night." Hanley leaned back in his chair. "Don't you think it's a bit much, all this?" He gestured at the room stocked like a hardware store.

"There's no kill like overkill," Cole replied, nodding in approval at himself. "Keep me posted if you see anything."

"Yes sir. And by the way, do you have water?"

Cole looked at a twelve pack of bottles in a corner questioningly.

"It's just that since we're staying here all week, that's used for everything not just drinking."

"I'll get you some more," Cole said, and left to knock on other doors.

"You need water?"

"Yes," said Grange, pausing his communication with the CIA.

"You need water?"

"Yeah, just in case," said Glover, without looking up from his phone.

Cole looked through the stockroom, but only found dehydrated food and military equipment. He boiled some water from a bathroom sink and it tasted okay, but he made a call to resupply.

The sightseeing duo failed to get their driver to explain the exact location of the 'secret', so they made their way, with many backtracks, to a patio'd cafe. It was a possible location for a clandestine meeting the next day.

Boykin stood with his back to an intricately carved wooden door, put on sunglasses and removed his mask.

Williams aimed the camera and began the reconnaissance.

They switched cameras and angles multiple times, trying to cover all angles of view. Williams kept looking around to avoid carts and trucks blocking storefront windows where someone could keep a watch on the cafe tables.

Then in the viewfinder Boykin stopped his tourist smiling and looked off to the side. Williams straightened and saw a fashionable young woman with a translucent headscarf waving for his attention.

"Would you like both of you in the photo?" She said in English with big gestures.

"Uh, yeah, I mean-" Williams began to say, but she took that as agreement and got a hold of his camera.

Williams laughed nervously and went to stand beside his teammate.

"Smile!" The new photographer called out, took some shots, then motioned them to stand closer.

The two men touched shoulders.

"The door is in the way," said the woman, motioning them to move closer yet again.

The two men stood on an angle, shoulders overlapping.

"Enjoy the city, God be with you." She said after that pose, and ran off to meet with a female friend, both giggling and shyly waving goodbye.

"That was weird," Williams said. "Next spot?"

The audio from a few of Hanley's bugs, combined with visual proof of nighttime shipments that no hotel would ever order, was enough proof to organize a raid.

The Black Mambas regrouped at the end of the week and on a Friday evening donned their bulletproof vests and unpacked the weapon boxes.

Cole would keep tactical watch from his command center,

assisted by Glover with his rifle in case anything went wrong. Everyone else would storm the hotel.

"All teams checked in," Cole said, his voice bearing something of an echo like bathroom tiles.

"Cut the power."

The lights across the street went dark, and everyone switched on their night vision.

"Blow the doors."

Two side entrances of the offending hotel were rigged with microexplosives at the hinges, and simultaneously glowed white and fell inwards. Two teams of three Black Mambas, identical in their combat gear, ran into the hallway.

"GO GO GO GO!" Harris yelled, weapon held in front of him.

Even though past analysis determined the hotel was no longer in operation and so had no tourists or even staff, raid protocol meant that everyone was screaming at the top of their lungs to "DROP ON THE FLOOR" and "PUT YOUR HANDS UP", in English. Boykin tried screaming in Persian but it sounded weird, so he went back to "FREEZE, RAID RAID FREEZE" instead.

A few police offers trickled into the lobby, guns still holstered.

Calls of "DON'T MOVE POLICE POLICE RAID" echoed across all seven floors of the hotel, one after another, a call and reply song.

"All clear," came multiple voices over radio. There was no one in the entire building, but a massive chamber had been found in the basement, somewhat like a cellar.

The power was put back on, and tools were brought in to pry apart floorboards.

"Here's the illegal drugs. Heroin," Harris said, tossing a

phone sized shrinkwrapped package on the floor littered with woodchips. Everyone else was still digging with crowbars and shovels.

"Confiscate it all, boys," said Cole with strangely not much enthusiasm.

“Local police have secured the building. Mission success.”

## chapter five

*Dawn Oshima*

“HEY, COLE!”

Cole looked up from the table, fork poised in midair. “This better be good, Harris. I’ve been jonesing for this meatloaf since...”

Harris cut him off in mid-sentence with a sharp wave of his hand as if swatting a pesky fly in the desert heat. “The Ghaf-Yohmar is targeting Keating again.”

Cole sat up straight. “Fuck. Is that on the level?”

Harris nodded. “Straight from headquarters from a reliable source. Seems like they want us to go save his ass again.”

Dinner forgotten, Cole pushed his chair away from the table slipping into mission mode. “Contact the team and tell them to gear up. We meet back in the common room by 20:00, ready to rock and roll.”

With a quick nod Harris turned on his heel and walked off, phone already on speed dial. Cole rubbed the back of his head trying to knead out the stress built up during their last mission, the one the CIA had publicly disavowed any knowledge of but expected the team to bring home the win. “Just like Tom

Cruise, only without the fancy toys and the big ass guns and the money money money, “ he thought then shook the derisive thought away. Now was not the time to gripe about the job; now was the time for the Black Mambas to prove their worth yet again. ###

No one spoke in the car on their way to the US embassy in Kanabad. Grange volunteered to drive the Land Rover and was happy as a clam, humming another one of those insufferable pop songs that he loved so much while sucking on a cigarette. Everyone else except for Cole took the chance to rest up, heads back on their headrest or lightly snoring against the door.

“Hey Boss, what d’ya think?”

“Think about what?”

Grange grabbed the cig out of his mouth and waved it at the city far off in the distance, lit up like a tired Christmas tree in the middle of nowhere. “What’s the deal with the hit on Keating? Why the big to-do? If the Ghaf-Yohmar want his ass so bad then I vote for letting them take it. It’s not like he’s done anything newsworthy so why now and why him? Why drag us into the middle of all this hoo hah?”

Cole sighed. “The trouble with you, Grange, is you think too much. Bad for the system and bad for the head. Just think about the current mission and you’ll be fine.”

“Me, I like to know who and why I’m risking my life.”

“It’s all politics: Keating, the Ghaf-Yohmar, and the good ol’ US of A. Nothing new, you should know that.”

“Yeah, good thing I dropped out of college so I could travel the world.”

Someone in the back sniggered at that and Grange gave the bird to everyone in the back before jamming the burning cig back into his mouth. No one else had anything to say the

rest of the way to the capital.

The city was a ghost town when they finally pulled up within eyesight of the embassy. There were fewer lights on as the town had finally decided to go to sleep. The team checked their weapons and gear one more time before sitting at attention. Cole surveyed them from the front seat before silently motioning them to fall into their designated positions. After securing the Land Rover Cole took the lead with Boykin close behind, Faisal with Hanley and Glover with Williams guarding the center and Grange and Harris bringing up the rear. The Black Mambas stuck to the shadows of the nearby buildings until they reached the corner of the embassy where they stopped to take in the situation. Cole raised his right fist and pointed at the entrance, paused, then slowly peered around the corner. He turned back and knelt down, tearing off his helmet in disgust.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“What’s up, guards off their posts?” Boykin tried to look over their leader’s head to see what was up but Cole waved him back. “Yo, Faisal.”

“Yeah, Boss.”

“Go check on the guards. Don’t have to worry about the enemy now.”

Faisal looked confused. “I don’t understand...”

“The mission’s scrubbed. The Ghaf-Yohmar got here before us.”

Harris shook his head. “But headquarters said...”

“Fuck headquarters, Harris. Maybe we’ll get lucky and Keating found himself a panic room. C’mon, let’s go prove me wrong.” ###

The embassy was in shambles. Guards and civilians alike



lay in pools of blood everywhere amongst broken furniture and torn curtains. It took a while but Williams finally found Keating on the second floor of the embassy. Cole and Faisal quickly ran up the stairs after he messaged them while Hanley joined them on the way. Together they looked at the body of the fallen diplomat that they had vainly tried to protect. It was a disheartening sight. He had been tied to one of the office pillars and shot in the head, blood still oozing out of the wound.

“Gotta give it up for the fat man. He went down fighting,” said Faisal as he pointed out the two black eyes, bruising around his midriff seen through his torn shirt, and a broken leg. “Not a lot of civilians would put up a fight when they know they’re going to die.”

Hanley shook his head. “He was supposed to be safe here. I made sure of that myself, only...”

“Only what, Hanley?”

Hanley shook his head and turned to Cole. “Only I didn’t get to finish my intel ‘cause we got called out on that CIA mission. I tried to tell Morgan to delay but he didn’t listen.”

“So headquarters wanted us to make sure he was safe then the CIA suddenly sets us up with some secret mission that headquarters isn’t supposed to know about. Something’s not adding up. Let’s go find the rest of the team.”

Cole, Williams, Hanley, and Faisal joined the rest of the Black Mambas in the downstairs courtyard inside the main entrance. The fountain’s gentle spray failed to mask the bloody violence that had taken place in the last few hours. Could they have prevented this massacre? Cole didn’t know the answer but he had a sneaking suspicion about the person who would know.###

Morgan looked around at the Black Mambas as they hung

back behind their team leader, relaxed but alert to their conversation. “So, why’d you call me here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Look around and tell me what you see.”

The CIA officer slowly took in the bloody bodies and general chaos then turned back to Cole with a shrug. “Shouldn’t you be calling headquarters for backup? This isn’t the CIA’s responsibility.”

“I want to know if you had anything to do with planning this assassination.”

“Careful now, those words could get you all in a lot of trouble.”

“But you don’t deny that you knew something like this was going to go down. Isn’t that why you sent us out on that mission, to get us out of the way?”

Morgan laughed as he shook his head. “Ah, the stories we tell each other to save face. To answer your question, that mission was legitimate and you were the best team to see it through. As for all of this carnage, well, it’s hard to predict what the Ghaf-Yohmar will do. Even the CIA with all its resources at its disposal can make a tactical error.”

“But not you.”

“You will have to take me at my word when I tell you that the CIA had nothing to do with this bloodletting. Now, if you will excuse me I have another appointment.” Morgan gave a quick nod as he turned on his heel and left the building.

“That’s it? That’s all we gonna do here?” Grange tossed his cigarette into the fountain in disgust as the rest of the team grumbled under their breaths. Cole watched as Morgan got into his car then turned back to the team.

“Nope, that’s not how we do things here. First we call this in then we’ll do a little reconnaissance of our own. Who’s for a little side mission?” As the Black Mambas raised their fists

defiantly Cole grimly smiled as he reached for his phone.

## chapter six

*Julia Pierce*

“OKAY VARLEY, I GET why you’ve been sent here, and I get why you’re pissed. I’m pissed, Minetti over there hauling ration boxes is pissed. Even the damn dogs that hang around by the trash are pissed. But you can’t throw your toys out the buggy like a little kid - you know the drill. You’re heading up a unit - show some leadership and get yourself under control and even better, your men under control. Extra duty tonight. Report to Group C.”

“Yes, Lieutenant-Colonel, sir. Sorry Lieutenant-Colonel sir.”

Varley really did have good reason to be angry, though Lieutenant-Colonel Kinski, as he watched the young Marine head out through the tent’s door. All the years and all the money spent on stopping this hell hole descend into all out war and what did they do to thank us? Stood by while Ghaf-Yohmar massacred a harmless diplomat, that’s what. And everyone had liked Keating, hence the anger and, like Varley, the shouting about revenge - Keating was one of the good guys and pretty useful to boot. He was on track to sort out all

the minor NGOs, amongst other things. They meant well, but they tended to spend their time blundering from one diplomatic incident or near kidnapping to the next. If it wasn't for his Marines picking up the pieces on a regular basis, there would have been more international crises than he could count.

"Dehmar." He said the country's name with a groan as he brushed a scattering of sand from the pile of orders and maps in front of him. No wonder the Russians had headed for home after two decades of pointless struggle - in the end the damn country beat you. Now it was the turn of the US to pour money and men into its gaping, bottomless maw. The country was like a Venus flytrap, full of gas, oil and anything else that you could get a lot of money for, but set foot on its soil and one way or another, Dehmar would kill you. Between the stupid yo-yoing climate and those idiots Ghaf-Yohmar, something was sure to finish you off. Or maybe it you'd just go mad from the sand. The damn sand. It was in everything - his clothes, his bed, his books. You got it under control, then a storm came along and there it was again. Still, 20 days and he'd be shipping home to green forests and family; not a grain of sand in sight. He was counting down the hours now...

"Sir, orders from Major-General Behr, sir." Staff Sergeant Detter interrupted his daydream.

"We're moving out to Annratur at 14.00 hours. Central command wants to have a Marine presence in the area. Keep an eye out for Ghaf-Yohmar operatives and make sure the locals are in line. That sort of thing. Charlie Squadron will be babysitting."

Keep the locals in line? More like central command knows the mood in this camp and thinks the men need something to do to stop the lid blowing off, thought Kinski. Even Charlie

Squadron, the famous Black Mambas, the elite of the elite, were angry and edgy. He'd passed Cole, their Team Leader, in the mess hall earlier and the man looked ready to spring.

"Any other mission detail, Detter?"

"Yes sir - the order says 'all confrontation allowed', sir."

"Is that so? Pity the locals. Thank you Staff Sergeant. Leave the paperwork on my desk and tell Sergeants Woodrow and Haddad to be ready to move out on my command."

"See anything Varley?"

"Something at one o'clock." Varley picked up the Humvee's comms device. "Command, this is Gold Two. We have contact. Two males, three clicks from current position four clicks south south west of Annratur gate."

"Copy Gold Two. Roger that. Move in. Gold One and Gold Three to backup. Charlie One hang back. You are not heading up this mission today."

"Command, contact with potential hostiles now two point five clicks. Two men in possession of object unknown. Clear to proceed?"

"Negative Gold Two. Amend course east. Maintain dispersion with Golds One and Three at 45kmh. Army gunship Marin Two One cleared hot."

"Affirmative command - missile away."

"Wow - they're gonna blowing them away?" The question came from Velasquez, a new recruit on his first combat mission.

"Yep, vaporise now, ask questions later - if you can find anything left to ask," Varley replied, as the force of the missile's explosion hit his vehicle, throwing it momentarily off course. "Command's as angry as I was when I threw over that mess table earlier. I get the feeling today's mission isn't

focussed on winning over hearts and minds but that's too bad. It's punishment time for whoever knows about the GY. Oh - and good luck to anyone trying to find someone to take Keating's place. It isn't exactly job of the year, given what happened to him." He turned to the radio again. "Hostiles suppressed. Anders, can we swing left? Nobody wants to see that mess, man."

The squad trundled on, into the deserted streets of Annratur. Occasionally a shutter twitched but otherwise, no sign of life existed.

"Hey, are we getting escort tanks for this job? This Humvee's just a little tinny if we're up against it."

"Sorry Velasquez, we're on our own," explained Meyerson, the fourth member of the squad. "But hell, if anything goes down that we can't handle, Command says the Mambas in Charlie Squadron are going to swing in from their current position someplace way behind our collective asses and save the day. Praise be!"

"Uh, Meyerson... hang on - that's a negative. Gold One and Gold Three are right behind but Charlie Squadron are someplace else. What's the deal?"

Varley swore. "Where'd they go?"

This wasn't the time for them to go off piste - they knew the mission. Head to the square by the main mosque and keep an eye out while Gold made themselves visible right before Friday prayers. Shake down anyone who gave the Marines so much as a side eye.

"Command... command... dammit - the radio's jammed. Anders, let's back up... this road is getting narrow and I don't like what I see. Meyerson, have your weapon ready, and Velasquez, signal to the other vehicles to get the hell out and make it quick. Keep your head down while you do it. I'm

getting a really bad feeling about this...”

The words were barely out of Varley’s mouth before a massive explosion ripped through the rear vehicle, obliterating Gold Three and setting Gold One alight. The fiery Marines within jumped from Gold One’s cabin, jackets alight, as snipers appearing in the windows above put them down as soon as their feet hit the street...

Velasquez yelled in shock and fear as the doors of Gold Two were pulled open and the muzzles of several AK-47s were thrust inside...

“Man, can my week get any better? A dead diplomat and now we’re holding the hands of some grunts while they let off some steam by intimidating the locals... That Keating guy was a good dude. I wouldn’t want to have saved him from a burning building - even Grange would struggle with that on the stairs - but he did us a few solids. When do we get time out to find the guys who did the hit?”

“Hey Faisal, what about patience being whatever you said when you last got all philosophical on me? They can’t hide forever.”

“Yeah, thanks Boykin. Nice return... I guess so. But I’m starting the clock on bringing them down.”

Boykin, Faisal, Harris and Grange had followed the three Gold squad vehicles at a respectful distance across the arid plains to the gates of Annratur.

“Hey, Cole sir, this is Charlie One. We’re now entering Annratur. Staying frosty. Everything is ice cool and we’re keeping the kids under control.”

“Roger Harris. Let’s keep some respect for our fellow soldiers and...men...mission and remember... intelligence... together...” The remainder of his message faded out.



“Boykin, what’s with the comms?”

“I don’t know - Probably the damn sand - or the ripple from smoking those farmers. I’ll give the box a tap when we stop. Hey - what’s that in the road?”

A child lay inside the gate next to an upset cart screaming in pain while two men - presumably relatives - stood wailing beside them.

“Damn grunts,” complained Grange. “Command said proceed at 45kmh, not like a Nascar champion. Hey, Boykin, can you tell them to pick up the kid and head for HQ? Let them know they’ll be able to apply for compensation or something. Just get them out of the road. I’m losing sight of Gold Squad now and comms are out - this is starting to feel a little off to me.”

Boykin had only shouted a few words to the family when a shot pinged past the side of the vehicle. A split second later, Grange’s foot hit the gas and the vehicle shot backwards through the gates, just as a truck appeared from the west, attempting - too late - to seal off the entrance where only moments earlier, Charlie One had been halted.

“Boykin, get your head inside. It’s going to be some ride back to base. Command... command...”

“This is Command. Reading you loud and clear. Your signal was jammed but you’re out of range now. We have eyes in the sky on Gold Squadron. Gold Three and Gold One are terminated. Multiple marines down. Hostiles have taken Gold Two - four marines now in the wind. Get back to base. You’ve got a busy night ahead. Over and out.”

## chapter seven

*Oleksandr Baranov AKA Garrett*

COLE WAS ANGRILY CIRCLING the large tent where Black Mambas commanding staff lived. Harris sat back on his bed and looked at his long-time friend.

"Calm down. No good to come out of stressing too much," he said.

"Hey, come with me. I want to go for a ride," Cole said.

"In this heat?" Harris was not sure about the idea.

"Nah, come on. The sun is setting anyway. A little windy, so not bad. And you wanted me to relax? So help me to."

"Fine. Let's go." Harris and Cole left the tent and went to the parking next to the gates of the camp. They took a civilian looking Toyota so that not to attract too much of attention: anything on the road outside of the city could be seen as prey by some gangs. But not some battered old Toyota.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, Harris behind the wheel.

"I can't stop thinking about them. Four of our own! Snatched right under our noses! While we were doing who-knows-what," Cole started abruptly.

"They are not exactly ours; they are still Marines. You know all too well that we were doing our job. It's them who got their guard down! It's not our fault!" Harris threw the wheel to the side. Cole snatched at some handgrips and looked back at him.

"Do you know what these bloody fanatics do to OUR guys?" Cole asked in his low and tired voice. "They blow up civilians, or chop off their hands for thievery, or ride into our outposts all wired up, that's one thing. But if they manage to get their hands on some of ours, some of the "crusaders", and we are all Crusaders to them, Marine or Army,- oh, they don't do it quick and easy. They make us bleed. They make us suffer. For weeks!"

"Yes, and I will weep for the guys", Harris replied calmly looking out at the road. "But it - was - not - our - fault!"

"It fucking was!" Cole blew up again. "We heard the noises, the shouting, we just hid our heads in the sand like the bloody ostrich! We are Black Mambas, we move, strike and kill, we do not hide!"

"We had our orders," Harris said, shaking his head. "We had no choice."

"But we do now!" Cole hastened to add. "There is no active mission for the next week. Rizer would approve if we present him with a good plan, and the Colonel doesn't need to know until it's done".

"What?!", Harris said incredulously. "What plan? What do you mean? Go after them?"

"Yes! I know we can get them back."

Harris wasn't impressed. "That's not the first time you say that you know what you're doing."

"That's right", Cole said, "but this time we'll be good."

Keeping his eyes on the road, Harris said, "What about

other times? Look, Cole, we've known each other for as long as you serve in the squad, and I know how you want to be like Toolan. I feel for you. I've been on this team for four years, and with Sarge, we had a good streak. But you?"

"I know what you mean. I swear to you....", Cole started.

"Do you know how lucky we are that we still have eight guys on the job? After that last mission? And the one before? Yes, the first one with in you charge was good, but you are too young for this shit."

"Come on, I'm thirty-eight and you know it!" Cole exclaimed.

"Yes, and I'm five years older than you. I will want out soon enough. I like what Sarge is doing now. High pay, low risk, suits and yachts and martinis. But I need to be alive for that."

"So, you'll chicken out? On the guys you know are going to be tortured and butchered and recorded and posted live - and their families will see all that shit?" Cole decided to push a little harder.

Harris shook his head, "Hey, man, I'm no chicken. I just don't trust your management style. You are too rash. Sometimes, foolishly so."

"What if I have some information on where they are held? And we get an easy way to get inside?" Cole suggested.

Harris was beginning to get interested. "What are we talking about here?"

Cole said, "Eight of us will ride in and out of there like a breeze. I guarantee it".

"Right," Harris was still skeptical. "In a limo, no less."

He looked at Cole. Cole seemed serious. No jokes, no pranks. He said again, "What's your in?"

"John Matrix knows Morgan. And can get us in touch with

him"

"Morgan who? That Agency dude in Kanabad?"

"Yeah, him," Cole said.

Harris shook his head. "Deal me out."

Harris steered them up onto the smaller road that led back to the camp, while Cole said, "You don't want to listen further?"

"I just heard it," Harris told him. "That guy is trouble. Whatever he will say, there still will be a lot of attention to us. Mercs, fanatics, suicide bombers, sentries, AT guns, AA guns. Probably dogs. Definitely helicopters. All that. And he won't help for nothing, Marines or no Marines. This mission will go sideways, definitely. And besides that, any place they hold the guys in will be a fortress, they seal these places like a virgin's... you know."

"All of this is true," Cole said. "But he will have a way in, and we can arrange a way out as well."

"Then I still know the plan," Harris told him, "and I still don't want it."

Cole said, "Just out of curiosity, why?"

"Because to even think about following your plan," Harris told him, "and to do it in Dehmar, there's two things you got to have. One is the insider, who will turn out to be a traitor, in the end, and who's going to bring us down. And the other is a helicopter as a way out, which is even worse, because there's no way off a shot down and falling heli."

Cole said, "That's yes and no. Morgan has got the insider, that's true, but he's nowhere near the place."

Toying with the AC control, Cole continued, "He seems to have a little trouble with nose powder, so he needs extra money. But Morgan thinks his information is solid. And at least, he won't become a problem, not for us. He's done other

stuff in Dehmar, was a good help to Morgan. He knows the place, he knows the routine, he knows everything about it."

"Possibly," Harris said. "What about the helicopter?"

"No helicopter," Cole assured him. "I a hundred percent agree with you about helis. They are death traps here."

"So what is the way out?"

"This we can work on together. I agree with you, Harris. I'm bad at this job. I suck – still. I almost got the guys killed last time. And I think you should've been the next MSG after Sarge. But we are where the brass puts us. I'm willing to learn, man. I vow to keep our guys safe. And I vow to get the Marines out. Are you with me?" And he extended his hand to Harris.

"Son of a bitch. I'm in". And Harris reluctantly shook hands with Cole.

## chapter eight

*Julia Ward*

“MEN,” SGT FIRST CLASS Harris began as he glanced around at his team, the team that *should* have been his.

When Command had promoted Cole, it had been a hard pill to swallow. Harris had seniority, was older and had been assistant team lead for two years, half of his time in the Black Mambas. He was Cole’s senior in so many ways. It had galled him.

But orders were orders. He’d worked with Cole all three years the man had been in the unit. Even if he wasn’t thrilled to be passed over for command, there wasn’t anyone else in the world he’d want watching his back.

And right now, he hoped their new team leader was right.

“Cole believes we need to after these jar heads. They’re American soldiers. This is what we do. I agree with him.”

Harris explained the situation to the team: missing Marines, undisclosed location, impossible odds, pitiless opposition.

He was proud when his team all looked at each and then responded as one. “Impossible is what we do.” A corner of his lips lifted in the hint of a smile.

The team immediately went into planning mode and when they had enough to begin, Cole spoke up. “I’ll contact the Lieutenant Colonel and let him know what we’re wanting to do.”

As the team continued discussing their plans, they kept watch on MSG Cole whose body language screamed in depth conversation, aka argument.

Harris, still pointing at the map they were discussing, shook his head. “Doesn’t look promising.”

“We can’t give up, Harris.” Staff Sergeant Grange chewed the end of his unlit cigar.

Staff Sergeant Pete Hanley winced. “Especially since it happened right in our backyard.”

A chorus of agreement followed. Pride was on the line. Somehow the Ghaf-Yohmar had been waiting for the Marines. It begged the question: Had the terrorists known the Marines were coming and went specifically after them, or had the Marines fallen into a trap meant for the Black Mambas?

Before Harris could consider any answer, Cole returned. “He won’t give us the okay. No support. They won’t risk our unit.” His eyes cast around the room, taking in every face. Disgust. Disbelief. And then each jaw was set. Determination.

Harris saw it too. His team... *Their* team was in. They would go after these guys, no matter what. Maybe they could get the CIA to back them. CIA sometimes would support missions when the Army couldn’t. *Thank God for the “State Department.”*

Rubbing his jaw, Harris said, “We could go to Morgan. See what he’ll do for us.”

Cole’s subtle nod might have been missed by anyone who didn’t know him.

In situations like this, every second counted, and Cole felt like



he'd lost far too many seconds setting up the meeting with Morgan, their CIA contact at the base. He comforted himself knowing that his team was getting everything ready so they could go the moment they had what they needed.

As he waited in Morgan's office, losing yet more seconds, he tried to keep his impatience at bay. The man never seemed to be there. He had to know what was going on, didn't he? Why wasn't he there?

"Sorry to keep you, Cole. Now..."

Morgan took his seat and shuffled some papers on his desk. His casual demeanour had Cole nearly screaming inside in frustration.

Morgan leaned on his desk and said, "I know why you're here. The Marines. I'm guessing your team want to go after them. But what you're asking is impossible."

"I know. But I didn't have to say a word to my team to convince them." Which was true. Cole hadn't said anything. He'd asked Harris to do that. Shoving aside the annoyance that the team always looked at Harris first, Cole rubbed his hands on his pant leg and then stopped, not wanting to look as nervous as he felt. He added, "They were all for going."

"I'm sure they are. Look," he said, leaning forward on his desk, steepling his fingers. "What you're asking of me, of my office..." Lowering his hands to his lap, he leaned back at his desk. "I get it. I do. It's a matter of pride. These guys were taken in broad daylight on your turf. But I can't risk losing your team too, Cole." Leaning back, he shook his head and ran his hand over his short hair.

Cole suppressed the urge to rub his palms on his pants again. They needed to do this mission. As a team, under his command, they needed a win. Losing the Marines was demoralizing. He went into the same song he'd used on Harris

to convince him. “But they’re Americans.”

“True. But they’re also military. This is what every one of you signs up for. It’s not like in the last thirty years someone has joined the military thinking they will *never* be in danger. They knew what they were in for, Cole. Go back to your team.”

“Morgan, we need this.” Sitting forward in his seat, Cole pressed his palms together. He had to get across how important this was. Not just for his team, but for those soldiers, for all of the people back home. “Those Marines have families. How can we go home and face our own, knowing we didn’t try?”

Morgan lowered his head and stared at Cole. It reminded him of his sixth grade teacher who always looked over her glasses to glower at the class. If the situation hadn’t been so dire, he would have laughed at the image of sour old Mrs. Lancaster superimposed on Morgan’s face.

“What do you need?”

Working hard to keep his relief in check, Cole spoke in as measured a tone as he could manage. “We need someone to cover our absence from the base. Passes. Paperwork to get us around. Intel if you can get it.” The CIA always had intel. The real question was not if they could get it, but if they would share it.

“I’ll get you your passes and paperwork. You’ll be ‘on leave’ for the next several days. As for intel, I’ll have to ask around.”

“It’s all we can ask. I’ll have my own team working on it too.”

“You let me know what you find out.” Morgan rose, extending his hand. “Keep me in the loop as long as you can.”

Rising, Cole extended his own hand and shook that of his

CIA contact. “Of course.”

The other man held onto his hand until things got uncomfortable as his gaze pierced Cole. “I’m not going to sugar coat this. I don’t think you were the right man for this job. Harris was in line, and he’s level-headed. He’s been the assistant lead and with the unit longer than anyone still in it. He’s proven himself a good leader. So you remember, this is off the books. If things go pear-shaped, you’re on your own. And there will be hell to pay if we lose your team on top of the Marines. Don’t fuck up.”

Cole, knots in his stomach, radioed Harris that he was on his way back. The mission was a go.

Morgan’s parting comment wasn’t helping his nerves any. As if Cole wasn’t aware of the danger. And that comment about not being the right man for the job? That wasn’t what he needed at the moment. *Damn it.*

As he approached his team’s base camp, he set aside his own worries. Now was the time for confidence. He believed in himself and his team. He knew they were up for the mission.

The real concern was time. They still had no clue on where the Marines were being held. There’d been some rumours that they were in town, but just as convincing was the rumour that they were at a farm outside of town. He hoped that the rumour they’d been completely removed from Dehmar was wrong.

It could take days of Boykin talking to locals and Hanley doing surveillance. Not that every member of the team wouldn’t be on the lookout. But he hoped that Morgan would contact him with the intel soon.

As he stepped inside their “base,” Harris hurried him in. “There’s a message. Broadcast. From the Ghaf-Yohmar. You’ll

want to see this.”

A masked terrorist with a thick Dehmari accent spoke in perfect English. “You have seven days to remove all U.S. presence from Dehmar. If you do not, we will kill these dogs. And when they are gone, we will find more.”

A voice spoke quickly off screen catching the speakers attention just before the video ended.

“Did you catch what he said, Boykin?” Cole asked the skilled linguist.

Boykin shook his head. “No. It was too quiet and too short.”

“Sounded mad though,” Faisal added.

“He did.” Harris words came slowly as if he were thinking.

Hanley spoke up. “You suppose he spoke out of turn? Like, maybe he’d gone off script?”

“Maybe. It could be.” Harris still spoke slowly as he nodded.

“We need to find them. Seven days before they kill ‘em.” Hanley’s fist hit his hand. “Damn it.”

Boykin clapped in him the shoulder but said nothing.

Faisal’s lip twitched as he looked around room. No one voiced what everyone knew. More than likely, they were going to kill them anyway. And quite possibly, before the seven days were up.

## chapter nine

*N.D. Robitaille*

“CHECK THIS OUT! GOTTA be in full battle rattle just to protect your nuts.” Grange barged through the DEFAC waving his cell phone and flopping into the chair across from Cole.

Cole laughed, returning to his breakfast of eggs and toast. The photo showed Grange, in full gear, pointing to a faded yellow sign on the barbed wire fence outside: DANGER. KEEP OUT. CHEMICAL AGENTS UNEXPLODED AREA.

“Updating your dating profile?” Cole joked before shoveling a fork full of eggs into his mouth. “We roll out in ten. Everything ready?”

Before Cole could take another bite, Boykin stepped into the room, his buzzed head already shiny with sweat. “Taxi’s waiting.”

“Affirmative” Cole responded, pushing back in his chair. Something felt different, and the others could sense it too. Was it Toolin’s absence? The silence was palpable in the rickety old truck. Shouting above the rattle of armoured plating and repurposed shocks, Granger leaned around the front seat. “I

think I need my own warning sign. Government issued.”

Pete wiped the sweat from his forehead, looking at Cole with wide eyes.

Ignoring Grange, Cole looked directly at Pete. “He’s a crazy bastard, but at least he’s on our side.”

Morgan had arranged transport on a C-130 Hercules. Living up to it’s name, the Hercules has four propellers and enough cargo space to deliver groups of people or large machinery. Typically it’s used for humanitarian or supply missions, so it only made sense to hitch a ride to Annratur, but this bus would be self service and it took almost an hour before the team buckled themselves in.

A man in a white button up and wrinkled khakis walks up the ramp just as it begins to lock into place for flight. He’s clean, but sweaty, with a blue cloth draped around his neck and gold rimmed sunglasses.

“CIA?” Faisal mutters, adjusting the straps to fit his torso.

Taking the empty seat beside Faisal, the man in the white shirt chimes in, “just think of me as your tour guide”.

Cole shouted just as the engines fired up, “Lead the way.”

The tour guide pulled on a headset and began to explain, “Gentlemen, welcome to vacation in the sandbox. In approximately one hour, you will land in Annratur where we are hoping to track down this man.”

He pulled a paper with a mostly empty dossier. “As you can see, we have very little intel. We do know that he is the leader of the Ghaf-Yohmar terrorist group, male, approximately five foot five, and witnesses have described him as overweight, possibly in his early forties. The target does speak english, but he moves frequently and has resources. Keep your eyes open out there. Local intel says they are suspected of doing business at a small family owned restaurant in the Annratur Market.”

Closing his eyes, the tour guide leaned back in his seat, giving Cole the lead. “You heard him. We have limited intel and we need to get our guys back. Boykin.Hanley. You’ll go East to the restaurant. Talk to the locals, see what intel you can get. Glover and Grange will be your eyes from the sky. The two of you take the high ground. Faisal, you’re with me. We’re going to block off the side entrance and sweep our way toward Boykin and Hanley. Williams, you are going to hang back at the intersection. There are two roads leading into that courtyard. If Ghaf-Yohmar decides to bring more to the party, I want you to create the traffic jam. I know things feel different this time, but remember your training, watch your backs, and follow the plan. Let’s do this.”

When the plane landed, an MRAP armoured vehicle was already waiting. Within minutes, they were heading toward Annratur. Road signs with Russian lettering littered the roadside, seemingly out of place with the desert backdrop. As the armoured truck reached the market area, the team recognized the wide eyed fear behind the covered faces of women shopping in the market. Danger lurked around every corner, and sometimes it was difficult to tell who was winning the fight. Glover leaned his helmet against the back of the seat, he had no problem with doing his job. An excellent marksman, killing was all part of the equation, but these were just people like his mom or sister going to shop. No pressure. Just don’t make a mistake. Once again, the team fell silent.

The driver dropped Glover and Grange off a few blocks before the market. A line of flat roofed buildings sat directly beside the restaurant with a clear view of the entire courtyard. Although this wasn’t rush hour, the streets were filled with people, vehicles, and sometimes live animals. It was too difficult to get to the first building unnoticed.

The second building was a two story white complex sitting farther back from the market than the first. Glover climbed a rusted out ladder on the back of the building until he made it to the roof. When Glover reached the top, he watched for Grange to do the same until both men were looking down on the city below. It was a beautiful view, despite the chaos and crime.

It was only a few feet back to the first building. The midday sun pounded down, making the gear seem heavier. With a head start, he ran and leapt to the next roof, losing his balance and dropping his gear.

“I saw that.” Grange chided, sliding on some gravel, almost falling himself. Once in place, the rest of the team made their move to the restaurant.

The sweep of the market didn’t reveal anything new. In fact, most people didn’t want to answer any questions, despite Boykins sweet talk. One flash of those pearly whites at home and the ladies line up, but here no one ever sees anything. No one knows anything. Everyone was in the dark, and after the additional prep time needed, the restaurant would close soon and it would all be a waste.

“Faisal. Take Hanley with you. We’re running out of time. I think it’s time to order some dinner.” Cole whispered.

“Going in,” Faisal responded, casually walking across the courtyard.

Watching, waiting, and before long the night would bring an entirely different crowd to the market. Ghaf-Yohmar could be anywhere, also watching waiting. Shoppers were few and far between, most already home for the night. In the dessert, danger lurks in every shadow.

Inside the restaurant, Faisal and Hanley beside the back wall, near the doorway to a back room. The elderly woman



behind the counter didn't lift her eyes as she wiped down the countertops, never making eye contact as she took Faisals order.

The restaurant was plain in comparison to a large chain, but the tables were clean and the smell of curried meat, rice, and sweet breads were somehow comforting. Faisal stumbled through ordering stew while Hanley pushed a wire behind the door frame and soon the entire team could hear everything clearly.

Boykin cut in, "Hey guys, I don't know if we have the right guys. Did you hear that last part? He's saying there's a shipment of heroin coming in. We may be wasting our time."

"Shhh... he's talking again." Washington calmly whispered. "Relocating. I need to get closer to the truck. Courtyard's starting to fill up again."

The group of men meeting in the restaurant picked up conversations again. Boykin continued to translate, "That's more like it. It sounds like our new friends are in business with Ghaf-Yohmar."

"It sounds like we've got a party to crash. Let's close up shop. They're meeting tomorrow night."

As they made their way back to the truck, the skeptical daytime looks of passers-by turned to threatening glares. Morgan had made arrangements for a safe house overnight. There the Mambas could stay out of sight and plan their next move. Heroin wasn't what they were after, but it had to work. They worked on their plan until halfway through the next day, then toasted some MRE's before gearing up again.

Once again, they stepped into the routine of checking gear and following the plan. Without good intel, these soldiers weren't going to make it home.

Washington spoke up as he wired explosives at the kitchen

table. “We do the job. Then we go home. All of us.”

Solemn nods filled the room as the Mambas finished packing their gear and headed out for the night.

## chapter ten

*Sheila Lynch*

THE TWO RATTY TOYOTA Corollas pulled to a stop along the desert road, just before they got to the restaurant.

“I’m happy to be outside the wire, but I’m fuckin sick of the MRE life. Maybe after we take care of this shit, we can use their kitchen to make a decent meal,” said Hanley as he climbed out of the passenger seat, the restaurant only two clicks away.

“That’s life in the sandbox, man. No decent food anywhere in sight. You’d think being in Asia that we’d have at least a half a shot of getting a good plate of grub. Back in Philly we have the best food, even the Asian food is amazing. The garbage we live on here makes me crave the good old food back home. What I wouldn’t give for a fuckin’ cheesesteak right now!” said Faisal as he patted his stomach.

“Your scrawny ass doesn’t know anything about good food. Look at ya! You look like you barely eat enough to survive,” chuckled Grange, walking around the car towards the trunk. “I can teach you a thing or two about being able to eat. If you want to survive in this life, you gotta know how to

throw down in the kitchen, even when your options of ingredients are limited. I can teach you how to make a Creole jambalaya that will stick to your ribs and help you add some meat to your bones.”

“Nah, see, if you want good home cookin’ you gotta get to Texas. That’s where it’s at. A couple good ol’ pulled pork sandwiches and you won’t even remember what a cheesesteak is,” boasted Hanley.

“I can vouch for that. Although you don’t look like you’ve eaten your share of those sandwiches, pal,” said Cole. “Let’s get focused. We have less than three hours until the restaurant closes and this deal goes down. Load up and move out. That is our AO,” he said pointing at an obviously abandoned two-story apartment structure located across from the restaurant.

The eight men gathered their rucksacks and weapons from the back of the cars, and headed toward a shrub-infested bit of desert that would provide them with enough cover to get to the disheveled building, while also letting them see all areas of possible points of entry to the restaurant.

“Harris, take point,” ordered Cole as they approached the building. “Boykin, you’ve got tail.”

The men worked together like a well-oiled machine, falling into line seamlessly. They all knew they had a role to play and what that role was, including what direction to point their eyes in the rooms they breach. As they approached the back of the building, Harris turned to look at his crew.

“What a bunch of oxygen thieves,” he thought to himself. He couldn’t seem to let go of the fact that Cole slipped in and stole his promotion. Yes, this is a team, but he should have been the leader, especially since he had been a part of the Black Mambas longer. A team is only as strong as their leader, and although he did admire Cole, he still felt as though he

would have made a wiser choice for Master Sergeant. He gave the signal to the unit to move up, and they all progressed to the back door. They turned on their night vision goggles and prepared for entry. Harris and Grange took either side of the door, as Williams took lead on the breach. With a strong kick from the bottom of his boot, the door splintered as it flew off, sending what looked like moon dust and splinters throughout the air, as what was left of it barely made a sound when it hit the floor.

The team crept through the first floor of the building like a finely choreographed ballet, no one with an ounce of hesitation in their movements. They searched every room and met at the base of the stairs leading to the second story. With Harris still acting as point man, the Black Mambas filed up the stairwell knowing this would be their TOC where they figured out their next move. Although it wouldn't exactly be overly technical, it would still suit their needs for an operation center, and give them a place to organize before the drug deal was set to go down.

As they reached the top of the stairs, Harris stopped suddenly. Raising his fist in the air to give the "hold" command, the rest of the men dropped to a knee and each held their weapon in such a way to cover every angle from which they may encounter an enemy. Harris and Cole met eyes, and Harris gave a signal to indicate that he heard people talking. When Harris gave the signal, the SOG moved stealthily down the corridor towards the direction the voices were coming from, each with their weapons at the ready. As they got closer, they were able to discern two adult male voices who were obviously getting more and more hostile with each other. As Harris reached the door, he grabbed a flash-bang and heaved it through the open door. The loud explosion

sounded, and the eight men rushed the room, quickly locating and subduing the two startled men without any bit of resistance.

“Boykin, you and Grange find out who they are and what they’re doing. We’ll go clear the rest of the building,” said Cole. He and the five others headed back to the stairwell to continue up the stairs. Harris led the men to the top of the next flight of stairs, and onto the roof.

“Glover, Faisal - take overwatch there,” ordered Cole as he pointed at the southern corner of the roof. This allowed them to take cover behind a giant piece of debris while giving them an eagle-eye view of the restaurant. Glover and Faisal wasted no time in getting into position. “The rest of you, on me.” Cole led the rest of the unit back downstairs to find out what Boykin and Grange found out about their mystery friends.

“Anything good?” asked Harris as they all filed into the room with the two strangers.

“I can’t get anything useful,” said Boykin. “All they want to talk about is how they are looking for their nephew who ran away two nights ago.”

“They’re a waste of time. Stuff them in the corner. Harris, you’re in charge of babysitting. Williams, Hanley with me. Let’s get some eyes on the restaurant from here,” he said pointing into the room across the hall at a window with a bit of cloth still attached to the top of the frame. “Boykin, look around to see if there are any kinds of supplies we could use. Water, food, weapons, whatever. We could be here a while.” Cole walked over to the window, pulling the cloth to the side just enough to peek out at the restaurant directly across the street.

“I’m going to see what they’ve got on the roof. You guys get situated while I figure out our next move. I didn’t expect

such a close seat to the action, so I need to adjust the plan accordingly.” Cole walked out of the room and left Williams and Hanley to unpack their equipment.

As Hanley began unpacking his surveillance equipment, something caught Williams’ eye.

“What the fuck are you doing with that?” asked Williams as he crouched down to get a closer look at what appeared to be a remote control car.

“That’s our eyes, my guy,” chuckled Hanley. “There’s a thermal camera hidden in between the headlights. I’m gonna drive this fucker right up to the front door so we can get a good look at how many people we have to deal with inside.”

“Boys and their toys,” said Williams as he rolled his eyes.

“He who dies with the most toys...” began Hanley.

“Still dies,” interrupted Williams. “Don’t matter what you’ve got here man, we all go empty handed in the end.”

“Someone is a bit cynical today,” Hanley remarked. “Why don’t you eat a Snickers.”

“Fuck off,” laughed Williams, as he emptied some explosives from his bag. “You can keep your little boy toys, I’ll take my man-stuff over that any day.”

Cole reached the rooftop in time to overhear the not-so-intriguing conversation between Glover and Faisal.

“Dude, your scrawny ass don’t even look like you could eat a whole cheesesteak, let alone tell me where to go find a good one. I don’t think it would be all that hard to find a decent one in Philly. Kind of like shooting fish in a barrel — you’re bound to hit something eventually,” said Glover.

“Man, what do you know about good food? You’re from the midwest. Nothing good comes from there,” said Faisal with a hearty laugh.

“Keep it down!” urged Cole as he approached the men. “What do you see?” He knelt down between the two already posted up behind the debris.

“Looks pretty fucking empty,” said Glover. “You sure this is the place?”

“Based on the intel, yeah, that’s it. Don’t be so upset that there aren’t more people. Less risk of innocent casualties. That’s not a bad thing, Glover. Don’t be such a meat eater. Faiasal, what do you see?”

“Three people at a table — two males, one female. An old man greeted them at the door when they arrived. Can’t see much more than that from here,” he replied. “We have a hell of a vantage point though, so we’ll be able to see once they start arriving for the deal.”

“Roger. That’s all I needed to know for now. Let me know if and when there’s new movement.” Cole got up and crept back into the belly of the building. He had to find out what Hanley planned to do to get some further intel. As he got closer to the room he left Hanley and Williams in, he heard shouting coming from the other room. Cole hurried to find out what was happening, and as he reached the door, he saw Grange sitting on the chest of one of their prisoners and noticed Harris knocked out on the ground.

“What the fuck is going on?” yelled Cole. Grange turned to look at him, and Cole noticed a fresh cut above Grange’s left eye. “What the fuck happened to you? I haven’t even been gone ten minutes.”

“This ol’ boy right here got the better of Harris. Acted like he had to go take a piss, and as soon as Harris helped him up, this piece of shit sucker punched him and knocked him out. Don’t worry, I’ve got him under control. Might want to check on our buddy, though. His head hit the floor pretty hard.”



Cole rushed to Harris and rolled him onto his side, exposing a huge knot on his forehead. Harris was beginning to come-to, mumbling something. “What’s that you’re sayin’? Can you hear me? Harris!”

As he opened his eyes, Harris noticed Cole was in his face. “What happened?” he said, obviously bewildered.

“Apparently you needed a nap,” said Cole sarcastically, helping him to his feet. “You good?”

“Yeah, fine,” he said rubbing his forehead tenderly, then wiping freshly crusted blood from his lip. “This motherfucker!” he exclaimed rushing toward the man still being held down by Grange’s ass on his chest.

“Chill out! This is why you’re not the fucking leader, man. You need to think about shit before you do it. You’re gonna end up getting us all killed one day if you keep doing this selfish shit. I’ve had it. Get your shit together, seriously. You’re coming untied.” As the words left his lips, Cole regretted what he said. He knew it was a hot-button issue, but he also knew that he was right. Harris was too quick to fly off the cuff and do shit spontaneously out of anger. He needed to get this under control before it got someone in their unit killed.

“Boss, might want to see this,” hollered Hanley from the other room. As Cole walked in, he noticed the video feed from the RC car which had successfully made it out of the building and across the street to the restaurant. He could tell by the thermal imaging there were not just the three customers and the door greeter, but in total there were nine people inside. Six in the dining room, including the four Faisal told him about. The three in the kitchen were the ones he was focused on. He knew one of the cooks was responsible for inviting this deluge of hell into their lives. Cole wasted no time

in telling Hanley to get around the building so they could assess all possible entry and exit points. He and Williams watched in awe as Hanley maneuvered this toy better than a race car driver handles the left turns on a track. As the car made its way around the back of the building, a new body appeared on the screen, but the thermal imaging wouldn't allow any details of this person's identity to be seen. It was merely another human showing up and approaching the door in the back, knocking four times. After a moment someone from inside approached and opened the door, and the body entered the building, bringing the count inside to ten.

"What do we have?" asked Harris as he entered the room, watching the screen showing the car finishing up its lap of the restaurant.

"Holy shit! Are you okay?" said Williams when he saw Harris' swollen forehead and split lip.

"I'm fine. What do we have?" he said, obviously annoyed.

"Ten inside. A door in the rear, and another on the East. Four in the back of the building. One just arrived, but it's an odd time of day for it to be someone beginning their shift," replied Cole. "Shouldn't you be in the other room with Grange?"

"He's got it under control. Don't need both of us, and he can obviously handle them just fine. What's the plan, Boss?" Harris said with an undertone of sarcasm.

"They close in less than two hours, so let me see what's happening with the rest of the squad and I'll get back to you in a few." Cole walked out the door, looking for Boykin. "He should have been back by now with some kind of word about whether there's anything helpful here or not," he thought to himself. As he reached the first floor of the stairwell, he caught a glimpse of movement from the far end of the

hallway. He began walking that way and whisper-screamed “Boykin! What’s up?”

Cole entered the room at the end of the hall and found Boykin at the barrel end of a pistol in the shaking hand of a young girl. He was trying to have a dialogue with her. He first tried speaking in Dehmari Persian, then Dari, and then finally saw a flect of recognition when his words came out in Turkmen. He ensured they weren’t going to hurt her. That they were there to help make the world a better place. After a few minutes of reasoning, the girl handed her pistol to Boykin and then threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist talking rapidly at him.

“What’s she saying?” asked Cole, surprised at the turn of events that he just witnessed.

“She thought we were the guys that killed her family. She used to live here, and said about three months ago some scary-looking guys came through and killed everyone in sight, dragging their bodies to the street and setting them on fire. She was hiding up in the fireplace when they were in the building. She shimmied up the chimney when she heard the first gunshots. Said she stayed hidden all night and came out when it was dark. That’s when she saw the pile of burning bodies in the street. This kid’s gonna be fucked up for the rest of her life. She’s so young,” Boykin said empathetically as he handed her his canteen to let her have some fresh water. “Give her a few minutes and I’ll send her away so she stays safe. Just give her heart a second to rest. I feel like this is the safest she’s been in months and I don’t want to take that away from her so fast. I got some cans of food and stuff I think we could use in a box in the next room. I’m gonna sit with her for a few more minutes. I’ll meet you upstairs.” As he said that, he pulled a chair over to the girl to let her rest also bringing one

for himself. He wanted to give this kid some kind of comforting words before he sent her away. He wanted to gift her with some kind of inspiration, although now knowing what she'd witnessed, he wasn't sure hope would be a concept she was able to understand right now.

"You've got two minutes. Then go to the roof and get Glover and Faisal so we can brief on floor two in five." Cole headed into the next room to grab the box of supplies and take them upstairs with him. He looked in the box and found four cans of food with no labels, a hammer, a wrench, box of nails and electrical tape. "What kind of MacGuyver shit is he gonna try and pull with this bunch of trash?" he thought to himself as he lugged the box upstairs into the room where three of his guys were waiting for him. He was curious to know if anyone else had arrived across the street yet, and as he entered the room Hanley was eager to fill him in.

"We have three more, Boss," he said. "All entered from the rear. Those three are now at a table near the front." Cole decided to go downstairs and take a look from the window facing the street. He grabbed his spotting scope from his rucksack and headed back down the stairs, passing Boykin on the way.

"She left," said Boykin. "All clear."

"How the fuck did we miss her when we cleared the floor?! This is un-fucking-acceptable! This needs to be a lesson for all of us. Even children can't be trusted," hissed Cole.

"I know, trust me. That barrel and I got to know each other way faster than I'd ever imagined it happening," said Boykin obviously a bit shaken by the whole experience. "We got lucky. I won't count on that ever being the case again."

"We have three new people across the street, taking the total to thirteen. Not exactly a lucky number. I'm going to try

and get a look from the window downstairs. I'll be back up in a minute." Cole once again headed down the stairs, and Boykin headed up to the roof to get Glover and Faisal.

Cole entered the room directly across the street from the restaurant, backing himself against the wall to line up directly with the window to give himself an obstruction-free view. He raised his scope and then knew it was a good thing he had himself against the wall, because he suddenly needed some support to stay upright. A mere few hundred feet away, at a chair facing the window, was a face he never thought he would see anytime soon, let alone here. He couldn't be 100% sure, but he felt as though their eyes met — he knew he'd been seen. He just didn't know if they knew who, or what, they saw.

He ran up the stairs, and as he was sprinting through the second floor hallway, Cole nearly collided with Grange as he was coming out of the room with their prisoners. "They good?" he asked.

"Yeah, I used the tape and hog-tied them. They're not going anywhere," he said confidently.

"Good. We all need to talk. Come on." Cole led Granger into the room where the other six were ready and waiting for their orders.

"We've got a problem," he said, the disdain dripping from his few words. "We can't move on the deal like we thought we could. There's a situation that we didn't plan for. That we couldn't have planned for."

"Well, damn. What is it already?" said Harris.

"Toolan's in there," he sneered. "That fucker is across the street right now with our fucking enemies."

"Makes him an enemy if he's working with the enemy," snarled Harris.

"We can't go in with him in there. We just need to watch

and see what goes down later. Maybe he is just there for food?” Faisal said, already knowing the truth.

“Yeah. And I’m gonna wash the black off me when I get in the shower later,” replied Williams. “There’s no way you really believe that could be even a little realistic. A highly trained person like him just happens to be at a front for the Ghaf-Yohmar operation? Can I sell you some ocean-front property in Wyoming too?”

“No need to get shitty with each other. The enemy is across the street, not in here. Don’t let this come between us. We’re better than that,” said Cole. “Set up some way to get a camera over there and get a clear image of Toolan. I have a feeling it might come in handy later if the shit hits the fan.”

Hanley got up and reached into his bag, pulling out a small box no bigger than Grange’s fist. “Ask and receive, Boss. This here’s my newest little buddy. I call him Spud. He’s got a HD camera that is virtually undetectable. Look how little he is! Smaller than a baby Bic lighter,” he said with pride. “I’ll get you a nice crisp up-close picture of that traitor. Something to hang on our dartboard back home.” He hit the power button on his mini drone, and then went to his laptop to hook up the video feed.

“Glover, Faisal; I need you back on the roof. We need as many eyes all around us as we can get. We’ve got more to worry about than we thought we would. Williams, Boykin, you two go to floor one with Harris and keep look from down there. I’ll stay here on two with Grange and Hanley. Everyone knows their role. We’ll see how tonight plays out and figure shit out from there. I know we don’t typically play it by ear, but we’ve never been in this position before. This is now also a situation of domestic terrorism, and we all have a personal connection with Toolan which puts us in directly into deep

shit. Hanley, how's it coming?"

"Ready to go, Boss." He set the drone on the window sill, and took a seat at his laptop to let Spud take flight. The men watched the screen as it zoomed in on the interior of the restaurant, scanning the faces from left to right. "That's a positive ID on Toolan," said Hanley as the camera settled onto the seated man facing the window.

"From the looks of it, he's not there because he's hungry. We all know that look. That's his concentration face. This sonofabitch is protecting the enemy? What the actual fuck!?" said Grange, obviously feeling betrayed.

"Take your positions everyone. Looks like this might be an interesting night. We can only imagine what will happen now," said Cole as he glared at the face still sitting on the laptop screen. "The enemy might have helped to train us, but he doesn't know all of our tricks."

## chapter eleven

*John Gray*

BOYKIN FOUND IT HARD to sit still. The road was bad enough anyway, without the box concealed in the seat bashing him every time they went over a bump. This slightly scruffy white Corolla was never going to be described as luxurious (and anyway luxury wasn't what he'd enlisted for) but the extra kit they'd got hidden inside the seat made it particularly uncomfortable. The couple of extra bullet holes and the broken window it had acquired in their "rapid departure" had not added to the luxury image either but at least they didn't stand out too much around here. Their second car had got off completely unscathed.

They sat mainly in silence, aside from when Grange started humming what sounded like a cheery tune that really didn't fit the mood. Harris looked at him and he stopped. Boykin reflected that Grange never quite judged the mood of the moment, but maybe they were all going to handle this shock in different ways. Once they'd got back to their base they'd get a chance to review what had just happened and to plan what they were going to do next.



In the meantime though, Boykin was not concerned with plans or tactics. For the moment he was just thinking that they ought to get some extra blankets to dump on the back seat and that would at least make the next journey a bit softer.

The cotton mill was a cluster of several buildings in a commercial estate near the edge of Annratur with a mixture of run-down fence and wall around it. A now-faded sign over the main gate carried a Dehmari name, with an English subtitle reading “Superior Ginning”. When Boykin had first seen it he’d smiled at the thought of superior gin in Dehmar. There was a large machinery shed, long since stripped of its equipment, a couple of silos and storage sheds and an office and caretaker’s house. There weren’t many neighbours (if you discounted the feral cats) to inform on any irregular movements there might be.

They left the cars in the shed and gathered in the house. It was sparsely furnished but suited them. It had rooms across two floors and windows that overlooked an alley intersection at the back. It was defensible and offered a workable escape route into the labyrinth that formed this side of the city. So it would do for a temporary base. They had good views from upstairs towards the gate — the view of the surrounding area was enhanced by the discreet wireless cameras they’d placed on the top of the old silos. Sheltered by a couple of trees, the house would at least stay a little cooler in the heat. Surprisingly there was an old AC pack upstairs in the house which the scrap metal scavengers had obviously missed. They’d even tried it out of curiosity when they arrived, but in this weather it wasn’t essential and would just draw attention.

“So... what next?” asked Boykin after they’d talked through

the timeline of the encounter, taking notes of the details they'd learned that might inform their next steps.

“Can we get any more intel on what Toolan's up to?” Bridge said.

Cole was unsure whether intel would help them. “Would it add more to a rescue plan? We know roughly where he's based anyway, so a bit of extra recon might be all we need to identify the exact location for planning the extraction.” He paused, then added “If I can get back to Morgan I can ask if he's got anything for us ... but I'm not sure it will help. I think we just have to plan from where we are rather than building up volumes of data.”

He shot a wry glance at Hanley: “And don't give me the ‘Information is Power’ crap, ‘cos we know that ‘Information is Distraction’ too!”

Hanley snorted in response.

“But maybe we know some of how Toolan thinks, even if it's going to seem hard going up against an old Team Leader. You've got to put that out of your mind. Your loyalty is to our cause, to the interests of the United States and not to a turncoat or a mercenary. Remember that.”

“Anyway, enough of me giving speeches. Let's get a plan together. Faisal - keep watch, Harris and Williams come next door with me. And the rest of you probably best get some rest and prep for the next steps.”

They went out and the others settled down to the routine of their base - cleaning the dust off their weapons, drinking and snacking. Eventually some closed their eyes and dreamed; some of home, some of the mission ahead.

Boykin swigged on his water (again). Something had irritated his throat - the dust? The shouting earlier? It wasn't really sore

yet, but needed to be watched. He shuffled nervously as he rummaged through his pockets for something to suck.

“Just need to have little patience, Bill”, Grange said cheerfully.

Boykin smiled as he reminisced. “Ah, Patience. I was a dragoon guard in Patience years ago.”

“A dragoon guard?” queried Grange.

Faisal looked up from cleaning his kit:

“It’s a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta - that’s called ‘Patience’. I did them at school too.”

Boykin smiled. “If my throat wasn’t so dry we could sing something. But I wouldn’t want to wake up sleeping beauty there”. He gestured to Hanley, dozing in the corner.

Grange was learning something new about his comrades which he had not picked up previously: “So what’s it about?”

“The women of the village all fall in love with an ‘aesthetic’ poet called Bunthorne - like, think Oscar Wilde with floppy collars and pastel shades and all - and so these women they trail around after him as he does his pretentious poetry thing. The soldiers, the dragoon guards, come back and discover this and eventually have to dress up and pose in the style of the poets to win back the women. But they don’t do it very well. It’s a comedy and there’s a happy ending and who knows, maybe there’s a message in there for us, somehow. I’m damned if I know what it is though.”

Faisal laughed. “Well, maybe, the Delta Force version instead...”

He was interrupted by a loud beep from his monitor, and his focus switched instantly.

“Vehicle approaching!” he called over the radio.

“Adopt defensive positions,” Cole responded.

Rapidly everyone went through their own transition from

sprawling to readiness, rousing the daydreamer. Glover grabbed his rifle and dashed out the door. Everyone positioned to defend if needed, or just to turn back a lost passerby or hopeful scrap merchant.

“Grey SUV coming up the track, just over 300 metres away passing the burned out substation and slowing down. He’s stopped,” Cole reported from the camera display.

After a few seconds, Glover came on the radio:

“In position, clear view of vehicle. Someone’s getting out. Armed. Oh...”. He paused. “It’s Toolan!”

They waited as Toolan came up the track towards them. Hanley was the first to comment.

“I think he knows we’re here and he’s coming to see us. He wouldn’t get out and walk if he didn’t want us to see him.”

“OK. Careful guys.”

They waited. As he approached the gate, Cole nodded to Hanley to take over the camera watch and stepped outside.

Toolan spoke first, his arms spread wide to reassure, though the expression on his face was grim and tense rather than genial.

“Hiya guys. Just here to talk. Offer some advice.”

“You’ve got a fucking nerve,” Cole replied, “but you’d better come into the house.”

He pushed the door open. “But don’t expect a really warm welcome.”

As Toolan came into the main room of the house, it was Harris who spoke up first.

“So what the fuck are you doing? Betraying your country, siding with the enemy!”

Toolan opened his mouth to respond.

“And why shouldn’t we just shoot you and be done?”

“I doubt that’s in your rules of engagement, soldier... You

may be mad at me, but I'm here to offer you some good advice. Let's just keep the peace."

"Keep the peace? By joining the terrorists? Betraying America for some shitty dollars?"

"Look, my business is my business, not yours. Let's stick to the point."

Harris had reddened and his hand had started to reach for his pistol.

"You bastard!"

"Harris!" Cole barked sternly at him.

"I'll say what I need to say and then I'll go. I'm not here to socialise and I'm not here to make trouble amongst you guys." He paused, thinking for a moment.

"This business with the Marines. Just stay back, out of it."

"You're trying to give us fucking orders now? I think you lost that right!". Cole was clearly riled too.

"Not orders. Just advice. In your best interests. Look, I've taken a risk here. I worked out where I'd set up in Annrubar, and you've done what I'd do. No-one else told me where you are and I'm not planning to tell anyone. I'm just saying for your own safety to give it up. I reckon you've not actually been tasked to rescue the Marines anyway."

"I'm not going to tell you anything about our fucking tasking!"

"Of course. Just saying it's not worth your time. They're dead already."

"And you would know? That's worse! It doesn't matter anyway. We have our job to do and we'll do it. That's who the Black Mambas are. If ... and I mean if... they're dead we'll be getting the bodies back for their families."

Toolan shrugged.

"I did what I could to warn you."

Toolan turned his back on them and strode out. They watched on the camera as he returned to his SUV and drove away in a cloud of dust.

## chapter twelve

*B. Morris Allen*

IT LOOKED A LITTLE like Texas, if you stretched your mind. Not a lot. Not as flat. But it had that arid feel to it, despite the green of vegetation all around him. He felt sometimes like he was working his way through a shallow belt of plant life, occasionally poking his head up to feel the dry air stretching up to the mountains above.

“Like a catfish in a scummy river,” Grange had said, the one time Hanley tried to explain it to him. That had been the start and the end of their philosophical chats.

Scum was about right, though. Grange had been talking shit, mocking Hanley for thinking about something other than guns and girls. But scum was right on topic. Shit too, for that matter. There was some human shit-scum down the valley right now, in the form of one Ryan Toolan, ex-good guy. Five years he’d been in the Black Mambas; *led* the Black Mambas. And only now had the truth of him floated to the surface.

The valley stretched away from Hanley into the distance. On this side, the sandy taupe of Annratur’s lumpy houses, bordered by the tall, drying stalks of fennel, their seed already

harvested, but a faint hint of liquorice still floating through the air. Around the creek at the center of the valley, little clusters of evergreens, like vertebrae in the thin, green spine running down the middle. On the far side, fields of drying cumin and coriander, their perfume spicier, headier, less sweet.

And right in the middle was Toolan, the contaminant that made the whole dish inedible. He'd paused by a cypress grove at the far edge of the fennel fields, a place where he could sit in comfort and look across the fields towards town, watching for watchers. For Hanley in particular, perhaps.

If he knew they were on to him, he'd know they'd follow him, know they'd send Hanley. But if he knew, would he have come to the staging post, put himself at their mercy? It was hard to say. Toolan might be shit, but he was talented shit. Just not as talented as Hanley.

After a quarter hour, Toolan gave up his faux meditation. If he hadn't spotted a watcher by now, he never would. And Hanley was sure he hadn't. The beige lizard perched on the toe of his left boot was testament to his ability to stay silent and still. He watched from the corner of his eye while it flared its throat, startling purple flaps opening up to each side of a gaping mouth, like a breathing Venus flytrap. It was out of place, he thought, just like him. It was a desert creature, and shouldn't be anywhere near this fertile valley, with its spices and seeds and not-very-hidden poppy fields. Toolan had taught him that, of all people. He'd said the name, too — something ludicrous, pompous — the Secret Afghan Toadhead. Something like that. Something funny that disguised a dangerous, treacherous nature.

Toolan rose, took a final look around, and headed back through the fields, angling slightly away from the creek, slightly back toward town. He was out of sight immediately, no doubt



slinking through the fennel stalks like a lizard, but he was easy enough to track. Here, a crow fluttered down to nab disturbed grasshoppers; there, a cluster of starlings moved closer to the rest of their flock. Once, the stalks even shifted in the sun as Toolan made his way past a dense patch. For an expert, Toolan's tradecraft was rusty.

*On your way, Toadie.* Hanley winked as he shifted his boot and the lizard scurried off. *Desert's that way.* It didn't acknowledge him as it disappeared behind the safety of a clod of earth. *Watch out for snakes.* Because, snake against lizard, most often the snake won. Especially a black mamba.

Toolan was nearing town by the time Hanley drew near, the ex-Mamba's light khaki pants and shirt trying to blend with the rusty beige of the wall of houses and failing. The dark, patchy stubble on his chin stood out — poor camouflage outside, better in town, though he'd never pass for a local. Muscled bulk and arrogant bearing worked against him there. Hanley, blond and clean-shaven didn't pass any better, but then, he wasn't trying. Good guys, bad guys, innocent locals; he knew which one he was. And which Toolan was.

The pair slipped further and further into the twisting alleys and courtyards that made up the back streets of Annratur — a town seemingly made up only of back streets and crowded markets, with only an occasional barren boulevard or dusty square to leaven them. Hanley was spotted, of course — he stood out against the bearded Afghans in their tunics and loose trousers — but not by Toolan. The former Master Sergeant made what seemed only token efforts to lose a tail — crowded markets, doubling back, rickshaws, courtyards and alleys — nothing that troubled Hanley. There'd been one time, when what seemed a closed courtyard turned out to have a door leading to a hallway and another street, but he'd worked

it out, coming around a corner in time to see Toolan ducking into a little rickshaw for a short jaunt down the street. The rest had been simple.

After an hour or so of this, they'd worked their way to a residential area of town — clusters of walled houses and courtyards spread among potted trees and dusty shops. And sentries. Not that they made it obvious, of course. But suddenly the old men squatting on their stoops were sharper eyed, the young boys playing in alleys more purposeful, the shopkeepers more nervous, the women less visible. And, in the clump of high-walled, narrow-windowed buildings Toolan finally turned toward, the glint of metal and glass on the flat roofs above. A stronghold, then; a fortress, perhaps. Possibly the Ghaf Yohmar center of operations in Annrabur.

Hanley turned away a street from the place. He hadn't seen Toolan go in, hadn't seen him meet with bearded men with AK-47s and a handful of silver. But it was enough. The house and its guards were Ghaf-Yohmar, without question. And Toolan had been headed their way. More proof, if they'd needed it. More important, a target.

Hanley took his time working his way back to the Mambas' staging point, stopping to chat with an elder here, a market vendor there. He ate, drank tea, talked local politics and broad philosophy — a standard, obvious, intelligence-gathering mission. He lost a couple of casual tails — local boys out for a dare, perhaps hoping to earn an afghani or two from local warlords — and let a few older men keep track of him. One way or another, their reports would reach Ghaf Yohmar, but there'd be nothing new in them; they'd seen this behaviour from Mambas before, and Hanley gave them nothing to suggest his trip had been anything but routine. They'd know, of course, that he'd been in some of the areas where Toolan

had been, but there'd been Mambas in other parts of town today, giving Hanley cover and making it credible that his mission had had nothing to do with Toolan.

Eventually, he made his way back to the staging post. He made his report to MSG Cole and SFC Harris, answered their questions. Yes, he was certain the buildings were Ghaf Yohmar; yes, they were heavily defended; yes, Toolan had been headed there. He listened as Cole and Harris talked, watched as Cole made his decision, applauded it in his heart. When Cole came out to give the squadron their orders, he pinpointed the location on the map, highlighted buildings on satellite photos, gave his best estimates of potential force size, weaponry, choke points, exit strategies — everything that might give the team an edge, might increase their chances of accomplishing the objective and getting out alive.

Then, along with the rest of the Black Mambas, he settled in to polish his fangs and load up on venom. Toolan and the rest of his lizards were about to find out just how deadly a snake could be when you trod on its tail.

## chapter thirteen

Greg Ray

*GRANGE COULD BE KIND of an ass and they were probably marching to their deaths, but this was a trust operation from front to back. That's just how it was going to be. Grange had instincts and some definite idea in his head. But what was it? They'd been and finished the work but now they'd been spotted out beyond the perimeter. So why was Grange marching them straight back toward the compound of their enemy?*

"You ever think about going home?" Grange was a hulk of a man who looked awkward laid out on the ground. He was looking up at the stars.

Sergeant Williams wasn't quite listening. "I guess. As much as base life sucks. I guess I do."

"No, I mean home-home."

"You mean like Wyoming?"

"That's right. I forgot you were some kind of cowboy, Williams."

The two were flat on the ground under cover of some scrub and a small group of trees that on up a ways ran along one side of the back of the Annrabor compound. They were

already inside the outer circuit patrolled by Ghaf-Yohmar strongmen. All their kit stashed in the brush, they just had to lay low into the night before moving in closer.

They had already set up some rounds of ghostfire earlier on the far side of the complex — loosely aimed at windows or cars in the drive. When the time came these would create the illusion of taking fire from that direction. Well, technically they would be taking fire from that direction, but that wasn't the point. The point was misdirection; none of their team would be there. The ghostfire set up had been remarkably easy. This next part, not so much.

"Wyoming is some beautiful country, but there's issues."

"Issues everywhere you go."

"Yeah, well, there's issues and then there's issues."

"Truth."

Williams didn't really need the distraction right now, but *go along to get along*. "How about you? Louisiana, right?"

"Funny thing that. I oughta be well quit of that place. Louisiana was no friend of mine. All backwater country to me and nothing but trouble back then. Still, I think about it. Ain't that a helluva thing."

"You know I'm doing something, right?" Williams also lying on his back, his attention on a handheld device. Through its night-mode display, he was the eyes of a sparrow-hawk drone hovering close over another clump of trees on the far side of a turned field that backed up against the compound. Having completed a cautious surveillance run, Williams was engaged in the delicate maneuver of bringing the drone down among the leaves and branches of the tree closest to the perimeter wall of the compound. He was looking for a suitable place to park the drone in the tree.

Just then Williams was wishing for easier tech options for

this operation. Maybe a little drone with some whistle and flash that you could just park on the roof. What he had instead was this sparrow-hawk outfitted for powder shot. But it was all off-book, so you had to do with that you had — or what you could nip in a pinch.

He nudged the drone gently down and watched as its pincer legs latched tight onto the branch he had chosen. He shut down the rotors and breathed a sigh of relief.

"How 'bout New Orleans," he said. "That's something isn't it?"

Still peering at the display, Williams made the barrel of the sparrow-hawk roll back and forth between a position up behind the bough and another where it had a clear shot at the right side wall of the main house of the compound. When triggered, the device would roll into position just like this and take its shot. Crazy powder clung to everything. Could whiteout all four of those windows. Not the most useful element to bring on here, but it was okay.

"There's more to Louisiana, y'know. I never even been to New Orleans."

"Now that *is* a helluva thing." Williams put the bird to sleep. The thing didn't look remotely like a bird, of course, but it could sleep on that branch until called on. He rolled over and tapped Grange. It was time to move.

Grange was up and hefting his pack. Williams wrapped the controller into a bit of gunny cloth and tossed it lightly into the weeds.

Williams' drone reconnaissance had made clear they had limited options on this side of the compound. Between two scrubby banks of trees was a triangular spit of land, an open area of turned soil. This abutted the perimeter wall that ran

around the back of the compound — cement topped with coiled razor wire. In the middle of the broad stretch of wall and butt up against it there stood another taller wall. It was not hard to guess its purpose — a shielding wall to provide more coverage for the main mass of the building from direct fire.

It took anxiety to put in a wall like that and anxiety was something they could work with. Unlikely they would find any position there for the largest toy they'd brought, but something could be done. Williams had explained the need to get out to that shielding wall. Grange didn't like the exposure of it.

The two men had crawled up to the very edge of their tree cover at the point where it met the corner of the perimeter wall. In one direction was the back stretch and the shield wall, in the other, the wall ran to the front of the property and the street — where a dusty Toyota pickup was slowly passing now.

"Easy enough for you to disappear in the dark."

Williams exhaled. "Eat dirt, Grange."

Grange suppressed a chuckle. "Think that'll do it, bro?"

"No words, sergeant, just no words." Williams shook his head, but found he couldn't let it rest — though he couldn't have said why just then. "Why d'guys like you always gotta say shit like that?"

"Aw now, don't listen to me. They didn't take me on for brains, you know. You now maybe, but me? Nah. If I had any brains I wouldn't be here. Look whose carrying all the kit-up."

"That is a fair point, brawn-for-brains. If either of us had our wits we'd be kickeed it back in New Orleans."

"Exactly. Let's haul."

Grange was surprisingly light on his feet for a man of his build. Like a bear, Williams thought, back in Wyoming. Big, heavy creatures, but that was all muscle mass, so when they

wanted to move out, they moved out like there was nothing to it. The two of them ran along the exposed back stretch. Grange pulled up midway and silently drew Williams' attention to a small culvert drain pipe that came through the wall there. This was the sort of detail his aerial surveillance did not reveal, though he didn't know what use it was to them. But Grange was on the move again, and like the guys in the squad said, *wondering is for dead men.*

As expected, there was some give between the perimeter and shield walls, and there was some wild shrub there which could hide their handiwork. With a leg up from Grange, Williams was up the wall in a second and high enough to gain a foothold where the crevice between the two walls was wide enough.

They didn't have enough bang to wedge in here to bust either of these walls, but they could sure send up a mess of concrete and dust. Something that might give the impression of an assault from that direction.

Williams hefted the block of explosive putty into the crevice for packing. He fetched out a detonation controller. He caught the heavy trigger wire and bent it with his teeth.

Grange tapped his shin. He held up the handful of smoke bombs they'd brought. Were these available? his gesture asked. Yes, Williams nodded. Grange put two fingers to his temple and then pointed back along the wall. He had some idea about that drain pipe. Williams turned back to his work.

In little time, Grange was back. This time he wanted Williams now-empty kit bag. Looking down, Williams realized Grange was suddenly shirtless under his regular scratch jacket. Grange didn't wait for an answer on the kit bag, but pushed off along the wall in the other direction this time.



Williams had finished his work but decided to await for a leg-down rather than risk any noise from the jumping. From his perch he could see Grange half again further along the perimeter wall — there would be a second drain pipe there. It was too dark to really see what the man up to, but it was not hard for Williams to fill in the details. Grange placing smoke bombs in the drain pipe. Grange packing dirt in behind it. Grange rolling up the empty sack and stuffing it in after — effectively creating smoke pipe bombs pointed into the most shielded region of the compound. Two of them. The far one would usefully take in an area where two sedans were parked up close to the house. That was good, simple craft. And it also explained where the man's damn shirt had gotten to.

Williams was drawn up short by the sound of voices over the wall. He had enough Dehmari Persian to get that someone had heard or was concerned about something. He had no way to signal Grange, who looked like he might have decided to pack more dirt in behind the rolled kipsack.

Just two voices on the far side. A bump of lumber against something hard. Then a 4x4 stuck up over the edge of the inner wall — a makeshift ladder, no doubt — and way too close for comfort. But Williams was stuck right where he was; all he could do was hope for invisibility. He could see a man's silhouette rising up against the night sky.

It was kind of an idiot move, if the guy really thought he heard something. This fellow was definitely going to be the first to die in an assault. And what was he expecting to see from there anyway? It didn't seem likely, but it was impossible to tell if this guy had line of sight on Grange's location, and Williams couldn't risk turning to see if Grange had taken cover. Williams' weapon was out; it was an easy shot, but all

hell would break loose and that was not the plan, so he held tight. The fellow's concern seemed to be down the other way, but Williams watched as his head turned to survey the general area. Just seconds now, if this guy was going to spot Grange.

But it didn't look like he was seeing anything. And in the end, the 4x4 ladder toggled under a shift in his weight. Then the fool grabbed at the wire coil to steady his weight. Well, a certain lack of training there. The man cursed vehemently. The other voice from below engaging him now in open exchange. He disappeared from view still cursing.

Williams turned then to find Grange there tight below him, weapon also at the ready. His improvising might have gotten them caught, Williams thought, but not tonight. Grange parked his weapon and gave Williams a leg-down from the wall.

Grange hefted his still-heavy kipsack. What about the big boy? he signaled. Not here and certainly not now, Williams signed. Time to bug out. Williams figured they might set the bigger explosive back in the trees a couple houses down the way. It wouldn't do damage, but it could remain hidden there and might still be a useful diversion. Besides, Williams had lost that first remote detonator down the crack between the walls, and had had to use the other. So, they needed this last explosive to be somewhere they could target later to set it off.

But they hadn't got that far when it became clear they had been spotted moving through the trees. Grange had taken the lead then and was marching them straight back to the compound for some damn reason — Ghaf-Yohmar heavies trailing in their shadow no doubt.

Grange was moving ahead of him. "It's gameshow" he had muttered to Williams as they did their quick about face. Now

Grange was moving with curious deliberation — a caricature of stealth.

From out the trees up ahead a bright light hit them.

They dropped their weapons and put their hands on their heads. Clearly outflanked, the thing to do now was not get shot. Grange who had pulled the quick release of his pack let it drop to the ground also.

They were quickly surrounded by Dehmari jihadists with guns. One of them knelt down and opened the pack, revealing a sizeable explosive — their big boy.

A tall Dehmari man, distinguished only by his headband strode forward. He looked at Grange and Williams with obvious disgust. He kicked the explosive with his foot, saying something to his brethren in Persian.

Williams realized then that these Ghaf-Yohmar men thought they had caught he and Grange on their way *in* to plant that explosive and so had no inkling of all they had done. He looked over at Grange. That was damn smart. And they were still alive for some reason which was not a bad bonus.

The tall Dehmari was up in Grange's face now barking something in Persian.

"What's he saying?" Grange said.

"Does it matter?"

Grange looked the Dehmari in the eye. "Fuck you."

The jihadist swung his rifle and caught Grange in the jaw with the butt of it.

Grange staggered, spitting blood. "Yup, it matters."

## chapter fourteen

*Charlotte Barker*

“ARE YOU SURE COLE?” He stood up and stared at the cloudless night,

“There’s not much else we can do Harris.” He turned to face his team, the cool wind brushed his neck.

“We need to get Williams and Grange, as well as the marines out of there.” He gulped away his fear, “and the direct assault is the only way.” Harris glanced over at Glover,

“have you got enough ammunition?” He scraped his gun across the floor and checked his backpack. He squinted his eyes and dropped his shoulders,

“We’ve got some. I could give you a window for say half an hour, but to be honest?” He placed his gun on his bag and scratched his head, “it depends how many people we’re up against.” Cole looked onto the river of sand,

“It has to be enough. We have no other choice.” He stared at the urban jungle in the midst of the desert terrain. There was the odd light on in the buildings, camouflaging itself with the horizon.

“Have you got anything else you could make into a weapon

in your backpack Hanley?” He looked in his bag and frowned. He checked again. He walked over to the workshop counter and flung open the drawers.

“Not much Boykin but I might be able to make a few nail grenades.”

“Right guys gather round.” They met in the middle of the lightless room huddling Cole. “We’ll go in for the assault at dawn.” Boykin nodded,

“they’ll be changing over then.”

“Exactly. Glover, there’s an overwatch here.” He drew into the dirt, “We’ll get you this far and then it’ll be up to you to create the path for us.” He looked at Col’s drawing in the dirt, his eyes trying to calculate the routine.

“Yes, Sarg.”

“We’ll go by foot until we start to reach Graf-Yohmar. Once we’re in Glover, make sure there’s an exit for us.” He glanced around the room, “Do you all have your ear pieces?” They checked and nodded in a Mexican flag-style.

“Hanley, how quick can you get us those nail grenades?” He searched the counter tops and emptied the contents of his backpack on the counter top.

“Around three for dawn. One’s already made.” Faisal brushed his hand through his matted curls,

“But Sarg, what do we do once we’re there? Where are we going to escape to?” Cole chuckled darkly. He glanced up at him and smiled.

“You should know by now Faisal. We’ll improvise. Additional weapons can be gathered from the fallen and as long as we can get a vehicle on the way, we can try and reach back-up.” Faisal frowned. He felt two hands grip his shoulders. Cole searched his eyes,

“We’ve done it before, remember? We can do it again.”

The moonlight beamed on his blonde hair, ageing him by a decade. Faisal nodded, reassuring himself. He swallowed,

“We strike at dawn?” Cole’s lips curve at the corners into a smile, his shoulder relax,  
‘Dawn.’”

The dark curtain was still down on the night’s sky but the sunrise’s hues were beginning to peak through. Glover fitted his sniper rifle with a silencer and pulled his rag over his nose. He watched the enemy’s overwatch from behind. He lifted his left arm up for Faisal to move in. He shot the overwatch in the head for a speedy death. Faisal moved in and caught him before he hit the ground. He dragged him towards the sandbags and retrieve his gun whilst Glover got in place. He pressed his hand to his ear piece,

“Overwatch is down. Ready to lead your path.”

“Nice one. Lead us the way Glover.” He looked through the eye socket and zoomed into the nearest jeep. One down. He moved to the building next to it. Two down. He lightly grazed the tip of the next two buildings and took out the back ups. Before the last man on the roof had fell, Faisal had already rejoined Cole and the others and were making their way on foot past the abandoned jeep.

Cole edged his way nearer to the corner of the building and peered around the edge.

“Looks like we’ve got company guys.” He pressed to his ear, “Do your best Glover.” Cole nodded, pulled his rag over his nose and turned to shoot one of the security men. As he looked up he noticed another man aiming for him. He was about to shoot when he was shot himself. He hurried over to the other building, trying to protect himself and his team.

“How’s it going Glover?”

“Not bad but I just need to - argh!”

“shit, Glover are you ok?” Glover lowered his gun and rested his back to the wall.

“Negative. Shit,” he looked back at his shoulder. His shirt now turning crimson. “Think I’m down Sarg.” He looked back at Faisal who had already reached for his ear piece.

“I’m on my way Glover. Put pressure on it, I’ll be with you soon.” Faisal blended back into the darkness and retreated to Glover’s needs.

“What do we do Cole?” He shrugged the annoyance away.

“We continue on Hanley. Boykin hang back a bit, we don’t want to be seen together.” He nodded as the others ran towards the other building and began to cover each other. The sun was beginning to lighten their surroundings into clear view. Harris looks around and hits Hanley in the arm. He gestures to the jeep.

“Sarg” Cole looks back and notices the jeep too. He listens and can hear footsteps coming from around the corner. He turns to shoot when a group of ten soldiers are coming at him armed. He ducks behind the wall,

“Get to the jeep, quick.” They sprint over, Boykin begins flicking the wires to start the engine.

“I’ll meet you all down the end of the street.” They nod and drive away leaving Boykin in the shadows of daylight.

Cole looked out of his wing mirror and noticed Boykin take a right down the street. He mimics his pattern and takes a right towards his direction. He glances at Hanley in the back of the jeep,

“How’re those grenades coming along?”

“ready to use” Harris has began to shoot the tires of other cars, to stop any following. More and more soldiers are beginning to shoot at the jeep. Cole tries to doge them in his

seat, veering the Jeep itself out of the way.

‘Good. Take out the building on the left and Harris, throw one behind. It looks like they’re onto us.’ They put the window down, and throw the grenade at the building. Harris threw the other up into the sunroof, before landing back down into a following Jeep. Within seconds they begin to erupt like fireworks. Cole glances back at them and laughs. As soon as his attention is back onto the main road, another jeep crashes into the side of them. The jeep spins and smashes onto its side. Cole kicks the door with his foot and slides out.

“are you two ok?” They follow suit and have a few scrapes.

A dark laugh booms over Cole’s body; his body shivers.

“Surely you guys are used to a bit of rough, am I right?” Cole turns and sees Toolan. He frowns,

“Are you here to - “ He points a gun to Cole’s head,

“On the floor Cole,” he points the gun to Harris and Hanley, “all of you on the floor now.” His voice as coarse as a cut to the throat. Cole looks at Harris and Hanley and nods. They fall to the floor, whilst Toolan kicks their guns out of reach.

“You know I should have left ages ago. I would’ve brought you over Cole, if I could trust you.” Cole watches his gun fall out of reach and notices Boykin in the distance.

“You can trust me Toolan. I’ve never let you down.” He scoffed,

“You only wanted my job. That’s all you’ve ever wanted.” He looks over at Hanley and Harris on the floor.

“All we’ve ever wanted is justice and to protect our country Toolan. Surely you understand that.”

He crouched down next to them,

“I do, i do.” Cole lifted his head,

“Then work with us.” He placed his gun onto Cole’s head.



The cool metal pressed against his skull.

“I don’t think so. You’re too cheap.” He went to shoot when Boykin put him in a headlock and got the gun out of his hands. Toolan laughed, threw him over onto his back and stood on his chest.

“Is that the best you can do?” He spat on the floor and picked up his gun.

“And you call yourself protecting your country.” Boykin glanced over at Harris and Hanley and noticed their fear dripping down their face. He looked back at the Jeep and noticed the petrol was leaking onto the floor. He looked back towards Cole frowning, trying to think of a way out.

## chapter fifteen

*Rob Ryter*

LIKE MANY IN ANNURABUR, the street was narrow and unpaved. Fortunately, the weather had been dry for some weeks, or the road would have been a mud bath. A high wall, the same colour as the dry desert dust, aflame in the afternoon sun, ran along the northern side. Behind that was the fortified camp of Ghaf-Yohmar, a former residential compound, now the stronghold of the terrorist group. Master Sergeant Dalton Cole knew the militia men would have both ends of the street covered. Sergeant First Class Tom Harris had an excellent service record - although, Cole was sure - he was still stinging about being passed over for Leader of Team 1, 2nd Troop, C Squadron, The Black Mambas. However, there was no doubt Harris had screwed up this time. A split second to decide; Cole had consulted Harris, who he thought knew this part of Annratur like the back of his hand, and they'd turned right, into this confined thoroughfare, at the first staccato pops of the sniper rifles.

There was no time for recrimination after a mistake. It didn't work like that in Delta Force. You got on with the job

and that was how you stayed alive. Cole's eyes flicked over the two derelict houses on the street's south side, glassless windows, gaping doorways. Harris was already making for the first house. Behind Cole and to his left, the running footsteps of Staff Sergeants Pete Hanley and Bill Boykin reassured him none of his men had been hit.

Into the house, following Harris. Instinctively, they spread out and cleared the first space, machine pistols drawn, the hours of training in the shoot house ever-fresh in their untiring minds. The room was empty and bare, unfurnished, with no sign of occupation, recent or otherwise.

Damn, thought Cole. Two ground floor rooms and a back entrance. No sight line from front door to back door. Bad choice. At least there was no upstairs to worry about. "Harris. Hanley. Cover the rear."

The two men moved to comply.

"Boykin. With me." Cole and Boykin took up position in the shadows of the front room, on opposite sides, giving them the best combined view of as much of the narrow street as possible.

Constant, calm vigilance. They could keep this up, day and night, for a week if they needed to. They had all come through the selection course, which had a ninety-five percent failure rate, and had been followed by six months on the Operator Training Course. Standoffs like this, when you were outnumbered and outgunned, could seem hopeless, but it was surprisingly easy for the tables to turn. Cole was aware that Ghaf-Yohmar were a disorganised rabble; an uncoordinated bunch of young hotheads with access to just a few expert strategists - including, he knew, Master Sergeant Ryan Toolan, his immediate predecessor as Team Leader, whose services Ghaf-Yohmar had been only too happy to avail of. With no

coherent lead and minimal training, the militia men's nerve could crack at any time and they were not hard to win over. All Cole and his men needed to do was capture one or two of them if they approached and became isolated in the street, then terrify them into giving him what intelligence they could.

Another popping crack to remind the Delta men that the snipers were still there. Maybe that was Toolan himself shooting, Cole thought. However, no way would the Ghaf-Yohmar mob let Toolan approach them in person in this situation, with them armed and dangerous. He was too valuable to them. No, if there was to be a skirmish in the street, it would be with the locals, whose fanatical drive went some way to make up for their lack of operational training.

A movement at the corner of the westernmost window. A flash of red. Cole's eyes fixed, unblinking, his machine pistol aimed, his mind on his Browning handgun at his right thigh, and his knife at his waist.

The red was the bright turban of a diminutive figure, a boy of around ten, in colourful, traditional Dehmari dress. He was wandering along the street, his lips moving, seemingly unaware of the mortal danger all around him.

Boykin sensed his skipper tense up, and followed his gaze. The boy looked as though he was talking to himself, his mouth moving as he walked hesitantly toward their place of concealment. Boykin had picked up quite a bit of Dari, and a few words of Dehmari Persian, during his service in the country and he suddenly realised what the boy was saying.

"Skip, no!" Boykin yelled, but Cole was already half way through the door into the street. A volley of pops and cracks followed, from all around the house. Boykin saw Cole flat on the ground, the young boy underneath him, shielded by the soldier's body, Cole himself lying east-west, presenting the

smallest possible target to anyone sniping from either end of the street. No shots. Cole raised a hand to show he was OK and made as if to get up, to get the boy into the safety of the building.

“Lie down flat on your belly, Sergeant Boykin.” The voice was Harris’s, coming from behind Hanley, who was himself walking through from the back room, his hands firm on his head. “And you, Sergeant Hanley.” Harris covered them both with his machine pistol. By the time Cole pulled the boy into the room, both Boykin and Hanley were flat on the ground, arms outstretched, Harris standing over them.

The words Boykin had recognised on the boy’s lips translated roughly as, “Death to the infidel. God shall protect me.”

Cole faced Harris, cold fury in his eyes, and in his voice. “Tom, if I live to be a hundred...”

“Spare me the speech, Master Sergeant Cole, Team Leader, sir. Now get down on the floor with your men, weapons to me, please, arms and legs out, starfish style. One move and you’re all dead. Every one of you is expendable. You don’t figure in my plans for the next phase of my career, with Toolan’s security consultancy.” Then he spoke to the boy, waiting at his elbow. “Go get Master Toolan.”

Dalton Cole was furious with himself. The boy had been a trap, a diversion to distract him while Harris dealt with Hanley and Boykin. It was Harris who had guided them into this street, and this house - with its two separate rooms, forcing him to divide his team. He was surprised Hanley hadn’t suspected anything - usually, he would be the first to spot someone acting strangely.

An ant skittered over the earth floor, an inch or two from Cole’s cheek. He hoped it would not crawl on him. It passed

him by. Small mercies.

“Good work, Harris.”

Cole knew the voice without needing to look up. Master Sergeant Ryan Toolan, Retired, who had until recently been his Team Leader.

Toolan went on, now addressing a trio of militia men who had entered the house behind him. “Gather up the weapons. Tie the men’s hands and get them on their feet.”

One young militia man, more bilingual than his peers, relayed the orders in Dari. Several of the men moved to comply. Plastic wrist ties appeared and were soon in place, rather too tight, securing the three men’s hands behind their backs. Frisked and stripped of all their weapons, Cole, Hanley and Boykin were bundled shamefacedly out of the house, the militia men prodding them with their gun barrels like Satan’s imps. Boykin glanced around and saw the young boy, now bearing a sub-machine gun, the word ‘kuffar’ mouthed in a silent snarl as the group was led away.

It was a short walk to the eastern end of the street, then a left turn, and the tall, iron gates of the Ghaf-Yohmar compound stood ahead of them. The terrorists had embellished the gates with razor wire and a steel vertical extension on each, riveted rather haphazardly into place. Each of the gates bore an Arabic inscription, which Cole assumed to be a religious endorsement of Ghaf-Yohmar’s political ambitions.

With surprising speed, a little crowd was gathering, regarding the three captives with hateful stares, calling out in Dari, celebrating their capture, kowtowing to their Ghaf-Yohmar protectors. A woman covered from head to toe in a blue burqa threw a stinking, rotten tomato with impressive accuracy. It splattered on Cole’s cheek and plopped onto his

fatigues. He showed no sign of acknowledgment nor ire. A young man made cut throat gestures as he called out, “Kuffar, kuffar.”

The gates swung open at the hands of two more militia, both heavily armed. Cole wondered if there was a factory somewhere that churned these guys out, carbon copies off the same blueprint. Toolan led the party across the threshold, tossing a greeting in Dari to the nearer of the two gate guards. The man made no response; his expressionless eyes as black as tar pits beneath his turban. Harris brought up the rear. The gates clanged shut with awful finality. Cole, Boykin and Hanley were prisoners of Ghaf-Yohmar.

## chapter sixteen

*Gerald Hornsby*

COLE LIMPED SLIGHTLY AS he was prodded forward by the AK-47 at his back. “I’d have thought you’d be able to afford something better than the AK, the money you’re making.”

Ryan Toolan have an extra hard jab in the centre of Cole’s back. “It’s good enough. Works well in the environment. Spares cheap and easy to find.”

“So what made you do this then? You were smart when you were with us. One of the best.”

“Man gets tired of being pushed around by the politicians, safely hidden away in their bunkers and situation rooms. Me? I’m my own boss, got a few good men working for me. The pay’s good, and the orders are clear, simple. You’re getting close to the age when I left. You might think of joining us. I could use a good man like you. What you lose in stature, you gain in smarts.”

Cole stopped. Compared to most of his teammates, he was one of the shortest. Toolan had three inches on him. “Nah. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t sell out my friends for a few dollars.”

“Maybe I was wrong about the smarts.” Toolan grabbed



him by the shoulder, and pushed him forward. “Big guy wants to see you. I don’t know why you, particularly.”

“Maybe he’s gonna offer me a better job than you?” Cole laughed, then coughed. A couple of drops of blood shot out of his mouth.”

“Looks like you got some internal damage there, Cole. I’ll ask the guys to go easy on you.”

Cole laughed again. He knew it was important to keep the upper hand, especially where morals were concerned. It was just about all he had. “Yeah, like you have any control over them. You just carry on your nursemaid duties, like the good little boy you...” A hard jab in the back knocked the wind out of his lungs.

“You can shut your mouth now. We’re here.”

Cole ducked through an open entrance into a room. He guessed it would be about thirty feet long and wide, and roughly square in shape. Several pieces of broken furniture lay scattered around. Munitions boxes were opened, and various pieces of military firepower, mostly rifles, were piled up against a wall. Cole’s eyes flicked left and right, looking for anything which might prove useful in an escape attempt, but with his hands cable-tied behind his back, the options were limited.

Across one corner of the room was an enormous desk. It looked like solid wood, maybe oak? It was almost certainly imported, maybe even liberated from an American embassy. He felt the hackles rise on his neck. He hadn’t known Richard Keating personally, but a lot of people who did spoke highly of him and his work as Charge d’Affaires here in Dehmar.. Just another casualty in this mostly pointless operation. They should have brought all US people home and let them get on with it.

Maybe Toolan was right? Could it be time to break free of the US military which had served him well for so many years? Toolan had backed off from him a little, although from the corner of his eye, Cole could still see the barrel of the rifle pointed his way. Toolan wasn't stupid. He'd take no chances.

There was one other person in the room. His head faced the desktop, reading some papers. He seemed oblivious to Cole's entrance, his woollen cap jammed on the top of his head.

Toolan must have felt impatient. "Master Sergeant Dalton Cole. Leader of the Black Mambas."

"I am aware of who is in here, Toolan. You can wait outside."

"With respect, I'd rather..."

"You have your orders. Do it." The leader didn't raise his force, or shout, or even look up from the desk. But there was an authority, a power in his voice. Cole heard Toolan shuffle away.

"You gonna cut the ties?" Cole asked. "There's no blood getting to my hands."

"Tough," Toolan replied. "Deal with it."

The Dhemar leader looked up at last. "Maybe when we've introduced ourselves," he said, his English heavily-accented but easily understood.

"You speak English well."

"That's what an Oxford education does for you. It comes in handy sometimes. However, I'm not a fan of what your country has done to the language, bastardizing it and trying to make it your own. Much as you do with your foreign exploits, eh?"

The leader stood, and even from a distance of several feet, he towered over Cole. He estimated his height at well over six

feet. “So, Master Sergeant Cole, what brings you to our camp? Is it a friendly visit, or perhaps something else?”

“You have some Marines of ours. We’d rather like them back.”

The man grinned, his beard stretching, and he let out a huge laugh. “Oh well, Master Sergeant Cole, since you asked so nicely, how could I refuse?” He picked up a huge Khyber knife from his desk.

Cole felt his muscles tighten. “I’m trained in counter interrogation. You can do whatever you like, I won’t divulge any military information.”

Again, the man laughed. “Oh, Mister Cole, or should I call you Dalton? That would be more friendly, since it’s looking like we might be spending some quality time together. Your friend Mr Toolan has given us plenty of information. He’s a bit of an ideologue, it seems. Who’d have thought it, a member of your esteemed Delta Force turning pacifist? Or maybe he’s getting old.” He raised his voice. “Is that it, Toolan? Getting too old for the exciting action?”

There was no reply. “You see, Mr Cole, I know all about your Delta Forces. You know we have internet here in Dehmar? You westerners, always so desperate to show you’re open and honest. I call you stupid.” He slammed the knife into the surface of the desk.

Cole winced.

“What’s the matter, Mr Cole? Does my defiling your embassy’s desk offend you?”

Cole shrugged, as much as his bindings allowed him.

“Here. Let me cut those ties. Some of the people we employ are so barbaric. I can’t think where they get it from.”

Cole tensed again as the man approached him, the curved blade of the foot-long knife curved upward. “Turn around, Mr

Cole. If I'd have wanted to kill you, you would already be dead. You and your friends are a valuable commodity, so maybe I'll be able to afford a proper base and some of the nice things our political leaders furnish themselves with."

Cole turned, and after a small tug on his arms, he felt them fall down to his sides. There was no sign of Toolan outside the room, and he could see the leader still standing too close behind him. Still facing away, he rubbed his sore wrists and bent over to rub his head. He twisted his head from side to side, as if exercising his neck.

"That feel better, Mr Cole? You can see, we are not mindless thugs, unlike so much of your special forces cast offs."

Cole extended his leg backwards, temporarily forgetting the damage to his knee sustained whilst getting captured. He felt his heavy boot connect with some part of the man's midriff, hopefully his genitals, and still bent over, he began running forward towards the open entrance. He had no idea what he would do next, although he had a rough idea of the layout of the base. He glanced at the pile of rifles as he passed, but he couldn't afford the time to check them over, get ammunition. His main aim was to escape this room and at least cause some disturbance. Behind him, he could hear the leader gasping for air and grunting, clearly in considerable pain.

Still no sign of Toolan, who he guessed had taken a break, and as he burst through the doorway, he instantly saw the hard-packed dirt floor of the base rushing up to meet him. Unable to protect himself, his face smashed onto the ground, and he felt his nose crack and the pain shoot up into his head. He lay still for several seconds, aware that he was in danger of being attacked while prone, but he couldn't even roll off his stomach. He gasped air, tiny particles of dust swept up into

his mouth and down his throat, causing him to cough.

“Hello, Cole.”

He recognised the voice. So many hours of training, so many operations, so much R&R time. He managed to roll over, and squint into the eyes of the man standing over him.

“Harris.”

“Yup. Sorry I had to trip you up, boss. But we can’t have you running around lose, can we?”

“You bastard,” Cole gasped.

The leader approached. “I should kill you now,” he said, holding his midriff. He waved the Khyber knife in a threatening manner. “But... I won’t. You are worth far more to me alive than dead. I can’t wait to see the faces of your president and his lackeys when I parade you on television. Especially with Harris and Toolan behind you.” He turned to Harris. “Take him down to the cells with the others. I shall be seeing him later.”

## chapter seventeen

*Waleed Ovasse*

THIN BEAMS OF LIGHT streamed through their cell, from the small openings in the ceiling high above them. Cole had initially thought they were like skylights, letting in some light as long as the Sun was in the sky. But as the day had worn on, and the looks on his men's faces had turned from anger to confusion as to their predicament, he realized that those little windows were bare reminders that they weren't free. No one who landed in Ghaf-Yohmar's cells was free - and most never made it out of this compound alive. The CIA spook, Morgan, had mumbled something about missing operatives, but had declined to say anything further.

He had gotten an odd feeling about Morgan. CIA wonks had always seemed untrustworthy, not to mention unsavory. A good clean fight was always better than one waged in back rooms where the people in the fight didn't even have names. Not like his men, he knew their names and he had served with them long enough to know their importance first hand.

Cole reminded himself, as he looked across at his team, that the mistakes that lead to their capture was his to bear

alone. And frankly, a small part of him was glad that it was Toolan who had captured them. He was a legend in his own right and he had outfoxed them in the same ways he had outfoxed so many other teams over so many other conflicts.

And that's what this was: a conflict. It was difficult not to take it personally, even as he looked across at his men, their heads hanging slightly as sleep overtook most of them. Had he failed them? Yes, he admitted. But there was still time to fix this, because like Toolan, Cole always had another plan in his pocket.

"Have you heard from any of the Marines?" asked Grange, the creases in his eyes the only sign that he probably hadn't slept for more than 10 minutes at a time.

"Not a peep," muttered Hanley. He had been keeping an eye out and an ear to the ground to see if he could even hear them. "Maybe a moan, maybe a groan, but nothing serious."

"Being beaten will do that to you," responded Cole, looking around at his men. "We ready for this?"

"What's the plan?" asked Boykin, rubbing his hands together. "We've been here for longer than we had anticipated."

Cole gave Boykin a sharp look: it was not clear how much English any of the guards really knew. It was a combat situation, behind enemy lines. Discretion wasn't just advised, slipping would get them all killed.

"I'm still thinking," responded Cole. "There's always a start to these things. And for Cole, the start to every plan was the weapons. Their small, but carefully selected arsenal, had been taken from them. Hand to hand combat did not seem like the best idea in these circumstances. Eventually a bullet would find its target, especially when you only had your hands to defend you as you ran away. They would have to strike quickly, and

effectively, to catch the guards off their game. Neither of the two regular guards they had seen seemed to be green and they were very vigilant with their watches.

“Maybe we can wiggle our way through this,” muttered Cole. He didn’t bother saying the obvious, Boykin was right: they were running out of options and time. Cole quickly gestured to one of the guards: he was sitting on a metal chair, messing with the antenna on an old television set. The guard looked up and waved him away. Cole banged his hand on the bars, trying to make noise to get the Guard to come over.

The Guard froze for a second and didn’t move, the static on the television screen the only motion. Finally, he got up, his massive frame blocking Cole’s view of the television, and moved to the door of the cell, his hand on his sidearm. He stared at Cole, and pushed his chin upwards, non verbally asking what the hell Cole wanted.

“I fucking want to see Toolan!” yelled Cole at the guard. Moments passed as Cole waited for a response. He gestured to Boykin and Grange behind, a slight twitch of his wrist, his fingers telling them to be ready.

The Guard stepped back from the bars and spit in Cole’s face. Cole lunged for the Guard’s arm, pulling it away from his sidearm, while Grange pushed both of his own arms through the bars and grabbed the guard’s legs and pulled him to the floor. The dust from the fight stung their eyes as they tried to use their arms through the bar to get leverage over the guard.

But it was no use, the Guard kicked his way away from them, moving back towards the wall in front of the cell. He spit blood into a corner, clearing his mouth.

“Fucking idiots,” the guard muttered in Dari, as he pushed himself off the floor and removed his sidearm from the holster. “You wanted this!” he exclaimed, holding it up for



them to see: so tantalizing, but out of their reach. “I will show you how it works,” he muttered, leveling it at Boykin.

Boykin stood fast, ready for the oncoming blow. He had been shot before - more times than he wanted to recall, or tell to any inquiring people at parties - and it was always that moment before the shot was fired that created the oncoming anxiety of pain. If he knew he would be shot, it hurt the most.

“Stand fast, Boykin!” muttered Cole. When he ran the probabilities in his head, he knew this was a possibility. The entire team getting shot was also a possibility, but not one that was high on the list.

The guard pushed the safety off, smiled, and took aim.

“Guns down, please,” said a familiar voice, in stilted Dari. From beyond the settling dust, the familiar sight of Sergeant Harris appeared, his hand at his sidearm as he approached.

“You may be Toolan’s friend,” said the Guard, “but I do not trust you.”

“You may not trust me, but if you do this, you are a dead man,” muttered Harris, moving closer to the Guard.

The Guard grunted and lowered his gun, pushing it into its holster. “It will be your turn to look after them,” he replied.

“Yes, I will do a better job than you,” muttered Harris, in English. He quickly drew his firearm and shot the Guard in chest.

The force of the point blank blow knocked the Guard off his feet, pushing him back towards the wall behind him. Harris had aimed straight and true, and as the man slumped to the floor, Harris knew he was dead.

He turned to his teammates. “I’m pretty much done with this shitty fucking game of charades, how about you guys?”

“You’re still one of us?” said Grange, looking at him suspiciously.

Cole put his hand on Grange's chest. "Remember. There is always a plan B." Cole smiled, the first smile he had, had in days. "Get me the fuck out of this cell. That's an order."

"My pleasure," said Harris.

The sound of Harris's gun hadn't aroused any attention, but even as he had helped his teammates out of the cell and given each of them what small arms he could carry on his person, he kept looking around wondering if anyone would notice they were all escaping.

As he finally got Grange out - he noticed the small window at the top of the cell, with its bars that let light in and kept people from seeing the outside world. This was a terrible place to be trapped and he felt a guttural urge to bring Toolan back with them, just so he could stand trial for it.

Boykin stooped down and picked up the guard's side arm. He stared at it for a moment, as Harris and Cole tried to orient themselves and find where the Marines were being kept. He flicked the safety off and held it at his side. Time to put it to good use, he thought.

"Grange, Boykin, Hanley, as soon as we find the Marines, it is on you to keep them alive as we get out of here. I'll take point with Harris, Williams bring up the rear," said Cole.

They each nodded in reply. "When should I blow the shit out of this place?" muttered Williams.

"Very soon," said Cole, knowing just how much Williams was itching to see the side of the compound turn to rubble. Williams had carefully placed charges before they were captured, just in case of this eventuality.

He motioned to them to take their positions and they set off down the halls of the compound, listening closely for the sounds of the Marines. Boykin had noticed on their way they

were being kept together - hopefully that was still the case.

Another guard rounded the corner, a sandwich wrapped in tin foil in his hand, but he was down before his right foot came around: Cole was quick and efficient. One gunshot had been ignored, but two would cause attention. They moved faster. Harris stooped low and quickly the guard's side arm off him as they swiftly walked away.

Hanley had oriented them quickly, and once they could retrace their steps, they finally came upon the marines. Cole could see new bruises had formed, and one of them had several more lines of blood across his face. He put a finger to his lips as they came up to the cell.

The Marines all rose to their feet - although one needed help as he stumbled forward. His leg had clearly seen better days.

Harris unlocked the cell, and pulled knives out of his waistband and handed them to the marines. To the one who looked the best out of the four, he handed the dead guard's side arm.

"We're gonna need more if we're gonna get out of here," muttered Cole.

"The rest of it is in the main yard, but we're going to need that distraction if you want all of that back," replied Harris. "That yard is an open field, we'll all get killed."

"Did you someone say distraction?" said Williams. He grinned. He was more than ready.

Faisal remembered that, at some point during the briefing for this mission, Williams had mumbled that the explosion would make the dust storms in Iraq look like a light haze. Thus far, the sky was clear and the world was still.

He was stationed outside the compound, alongside Glover

- an uninjured Glover - waiting for their team to resurface and make their way towards the rendezvous point. Secrecy had been important throughout the entire mission, but he was glad they could finally come clean about the plan.

Glover was hidden in the brush, barely visible amidst the leaves and dust. His finger was steadily on the trigger of his sniper rifle that lay in front of him.

No one made a sound even as the walls of the compound blew outwards towards their position. Chunks of rock, debris, and dust launched into the air, spraying towards them. It took Faisal a moment to realize it wasn't all moving in slow motion, even though his ears had taken a beating from the sound of the blast. Williams had not been wrong, he realized, as the plume of dust burst outward and upward, bringing the entire world into its haze.

Glover hadn't moved, hadn't even flinched as he looked through the scope to find his teammates or - better yet - someone to shoot.

The dust was making it difficult to predict what was happening, or what was next, but as the last of the rubble fell, the sounds of machine gun fire filled the air. Yelling from within the compound was mixed with screams, but Faisal couldn't tell the difference. He clutched his med bag and crouched, ready for move.

Glover squeezed the trigger once, and let off a round, and then eased off. "Fucker," he mumbled.

"Get him?"

"Don't ask dumb questions," muttered Glover, as he let off another round. Through the scope he had finally seen Cole and Harris, and close behind were the four Marines with Grange and the others. But behind them, was a mass of Ghaf-Yomar men. It was time to get to work.

Glover let off several rounds, picking off as many as he could, and then waved to Faisal to move forward. At least one of those Marines wasn't going to get back it back without more help.

Faisal rushed forward, and Glover grabbed his radio from his pocket. "We're going to need that chopper, now!" he said into it. A voice acknowledged the request. In the distance he thought he could hear the Blackhawk's blades beating the air, but they were stationed 2 minutes out, too far to actually hear, especially over the sound of his rifle firing.

He kept picking off anyone who tried to follow his team, while also monitoring the rim of the compound, looking for anyone who might cause trouble.

The team was making their way towards their rendezvous position, and with Glover's help, there was less pursuit. The chopper finally landed behind Glover's position, but he didn't move until the last Marine and Faisal had reached his position.

The Blackhawk's blades kicked up dust all around them, revealing their position with pinpoint accuracy. Glover only hoped that there wasn't enough people left alive in the compound to notice, or care. He finally got up and dusted off his knees. "They got surface to air?" he asked the Marine, as he hobbled by.

The marine shook his head. "I don't know sir!"

Glover followed them back as the chopper began to take off. "Let's fucking hope not." He swung his rifle and its pack on his shoulder and jumped into the Blackhawk.

Glover counted 4 Marines, Cole, Boykin, Hanley, Williams, Grange, and Faisal. Everyone was accounted for. The Blackhawk piloted nodded once and rose into the air.

Faisal flipped the bird at the compound as they left it behind them.

Questions rolled through Cole's mind as he finally put his head back against the Blackhawk's metal. Should there have been more pursuit? Or was Toolan letting them get away? Did this mean that Toolan had something else in store for them?

Grange took out a cigar from somewhere on his person and lit it.

"Where did you get that?" asked Faisal.

"I always come prepared," laughed Grange.

The team joined in, finally having a moment of levity, but Cole knew this was far from over.

## chapter eighteen

*Matthew Merkovich*

“DAMN,” TOOLAN UTTERED TO himself as the shockwave knocked the dust off the shelves around him. The blast was loud, but it didn’t sound like military ordinance. It sounded like something improvised. He assumed the worst, that his former team had escaped and was on the move. He knew all too well how efficient they were. Toolan was also worried about the new team leader and what he would do here. Operations like this were always just opportunities to burnish one’s reputation, which any ambitious new team leader would want. Toolan needed to find his employer, the Ghaf-Yohmar leader, and he needed to do it fast. This was bad.

BAM! That explosion was closer, but he recognized it as another improvised job. The first caught Toolan by surprise. This second blast was expected. There would be more. Toolan took a look at the street outside through the sheer drapes. At least under the glare of the sun, the drapes would offer him some visual cover as he sat in the darkness of his room. He just wanted to avoid getting picked off by sniper fire. The civilians outside were in a panic, running aimlessly, not

knowing where to go. No visible casualties though. That was good.

Instantly, the drapes started billowing in and getting peppered with bullet holes before being totally ripped from the window frame. That was unexpected. Toolan was already commando crawling toward the back entrance of his improvised workspace. Damn, his old unit was annoyingly good. They probably didn't know he was there, but they really could identify a great observation point behind those sheer drapes. One can never be too safe when breaking out of a prison. Toolan sprung up to a crouch and flung the back entrance door open as a test. He paused behind the door frame for cover. No weapons fire. Good. He had to get to his employer and he had to risk running for it. Toolan took a quick look at the surrounding buildings and found his first waypoint, a solidly built residence across the street.

Toolan ran for it. He thought if they spotted him, they'd begin shooting immediately, and of course someone in his old team spotted him and began shooting immediately. The bullets began kicking up puffs of dust as they hit the ground surrounding him. Toolan was already running a zigzag pattern, but in it all the action, he noticed a small delay in the rifle report from the time he heard the first bullet hit. The shooter wasn't close. If whoever in his unit that was shooting had been close, he'd already be dead, or at least wounded.

Toolan crashed through the front door of the building he was heading toward, but he knew he couldn't keep this cat and mouse game going. The cat always gets the mouse, and he was the mouse. Only his old unit was a *clowder* of cats. A clowder? He hated that he always thought of trivia in times of great stress. He also hated that he thought in cliché metaphors. His old unit really caught him with his pants down. Damn.



Another cliché metaphor. Military retirement and his new big-money job had taken the razor edge off his discipline. Time to focus and get himself back up to some respectable level of proficiency.

Time to do an assessment of the situation. Toolan checked his sidearm, a Sig Sauer P320. He pulled the slide to chamber a round and double checked the safety. He then looked around the building he had entered. Residential, lived in, but abandoned. The explosions had probably scared off whoever was there. He moved deeper into the home and found a closet. In it some local man's civilian clothes. Perfect. He donned the baggiest garments he could find over his fatigues. Toolan was a big guy, but the clothes, not so much. They'd have to do. There was also a kufi and a cane. He put the kufi on his head, grabbed the cane and poofed out his short beard as far as he could, which wasn't much. He just hoped his acting was good enough. He pulled his weapon and fired two rounds into the ceiling and then screamed in pretend fear.

Through a rifle scope, a hunched over peasant stumbled out of the house, hobbling on his cane, looking like he was trying to get away from someone inside the dwelling. The villager then hurriedly limped away on his cane as fast as he could as another explosion went off. This one was even closer now.

Toolan's acting *was* good enough to fool the sniper. He ducked down an alley and disappeared from sight.

"What the fuck is going on out there?" The annoyed Ghaf-Yohmar leader stood in his HQ and looked at Toolan like he was the one who'd been setting off all the explosions.

Toolan removed his disguise as he replied. "Looks like my old team broke out of your little prison, and I guarantee the

guys you have guarding this compound won't be able to stop them, so now we have to get you out of here."

"I'm paying you a lot of money to *stay* here and protect me, Toolan, so no, we're not going anywhere." Then, dripping with condescension, "I think we've proven over the years that your military isn't all the western propaganda machine makes them out to be," said the Ghaf-Yohmar leader. "There are things here I need to secure, so earn your money, and make sure the path is clear." The Ghaf-Yohmar leader began heading out the door toward the rear of the compound. Toolan followed.

As the two men hurried along, more explosions and automatic weapons fire drew closer. Toolan kept checking his surroundings, and as far as he could tell, the area was clear. The unconcerned Ghaf-Yohmar leader approached another building, pulled out his keys and unlocked the front entrance. He talked as he worked.

"You can keep sending your troops, and sending your troops, but you will never beat us, Toolan." The Ghaf-Yohmar leader opened the door and entered, Toolan following.

"Your military's war on terror is like your government's war on drugs. You like fighting these phantom enemies, and that is why you can never win," said the Ghaf-Yohmar leader.

"Phantom enemies like *you*?" asked Toolan. "You've never even told me your name."

"Yes, like me. I am indeed a phantom." The Ghaf-Yohmar leader heads for another locked door at the end of a long hallway. He does the keys/lock/door bit again while continuing to goad Toolan. "You'll also never win because your military is just a business venture. It's just a means of profit for your military weapons manufacturing corporations and your oil magnates. And look at even you. All I had to do

was pay you and now you are fighting your *own* military.”

This asshole was really starting to get under Toolan’s skin, mostly because Toolan knew he was right. “Can we just get what we came here for? What *are* we here for?”

“Intelligence,” said the Ghaf-Yomar leader as he looked through the room. “All the intelligence your *former* friends want to collect on the Ghaf-Yomar.” The leader pulled a laptop off a shelf and opened it up. His fingers tapped out login credentials as he continued to pontificate. “Yes, Toolan, you are right. We can’t win this *battle*, but we will continue the war. We’ll just set up elsewhere and start all over again.” Satisfied with what he saw on the laptop, he carefully closed it and looked back to the shelf. Not seeing what he came for, the Ghaf-Yohmar leader kept scouring the room.

“A war of attrition with the US military seems pretty foolish ... ‘Phantom’. The USA is backed by fiat currency. How do you ever think you can win this?” asked Toolan.

“Ah, here.” The Ghaf-Yomar leader found a stack of hard drives wrapped in anti-static bags. “We don’t have to win for you to lose, Toolan. All we have to do is bleed you. Fiat currency, ha!” the Ghaf-Yomar leader added with a guffaw. “You can’t just keep printing money that only enriches your wealthy and never improves the lives of the lower castes in your own society.”

Automatic weapons fire outside the building continued to get closer. The Ghaf-Yomar leader, unfazed, pulled the first of the hard drives from its plastic bag and hooked it up to the laptop.

Toolan tried to get his employer’s attention. “I don’t really want to discuss my country’s society. What I want to do is get you out of here before we both get shot.”

Another explosion outside, this one very close, followed by

nearby machine gun fire. Toolan readied his sidearm and faced the door to the room that they now seem to be trapped in. “Why did I ever agree to this?” Toolan rhetorically asked himself, but the Ghaf-Yohmar leader answered anyway.

“Money, of course.”

For Toolan, this truth stung.

“But I think you have underestimated me again, Master Sergeant.” And with that, The Ghaf-Yohmar leader reopened the laptop and brought up a series of building security controls. He clicked a button labelled “Security Doors.” A grinding sound accompanied heavy steel doors sliding in to cover the entrance. Toolan looked surprised, then concerned.

“Cute, but now we’re really trapped,” said Toolan.

“You have a real knack for underestimation,” said the Ghaf-Yohmar leader, before clicking another button on the security display on the laptop. A trap door slid open in the floor revealing stairs leading down.

Toolan realized this guy is full of surprises. “Don’t you care that my former military unit is killing all your guards out there?” It’s another rhetorical question the Ghaf-Yohmar leader decided to answer.

“No. They are all pawns in our little chess game, and sometimes pawns need to be sacrificed. I’m almost done here, Toolan.” The Ghaf-Yohmar leader unwrapped the remaining hard-drives from their plastic packaging and checked their contents. Financial records scrolled by that would make the Panama and Pandora papers blush, revealing the wealth hoarding elite of the world secretly playing both sides in the war on terror.

The Ghaf-Yohmar leader seemed to be satisfied, and began repackaging the hard drives and the laptop. Toolan kept thinking about the pawns-in-a-chess-game comment and

wondered if he too was just one of those pawns. He thought maybe we're *all* pawns in this totally corrupt world.

The Ghaf-Yohmar leader stuffed the hard drives and laptop into a black messenger bag and headed for the trap door. Toolan's mind was racing. Pawns. Pawns. Pawns.

“Pawns, eh?” Toolan asked the Ghaf-Yohmar leader. He looked over to see Toolan's 9mm Sig Sauer pointed right at him. His look of initial surprise melted into an expression like he's seen this scenario many times. He just dismissively shook his head and replied, “Is this a contract renegotiation? What are you doing Toolan? Do you just want more money. That can be arranged.”

Toolan realized he no longer cared about the money. He just wanted to knock over this totally corrupt chessboard. Damn. Another cliché metaphor.

Toolan pulled the trigger sending a cheap three cent 9mm round through the Ghaf-Yohmar leader's skull. He then grabbed the messenger bag with the laptop and hard drives, and made his way down the stairs into the secret passage. Toolan hit a button inside the tunnel to close the trap door behind him, not leaving a trace.

## chapter nineteen

*Kimberlee Gerstmann*

DUST CLOUDS SWIRLED IN front of the small windowless car as it sped across the barren land outside the base. Ryan Toolen raised a finger, pointing toward the side of what passed as the road. The driver swerved and tapped the brakes, coming to a rough stop a few hundred yards south of the base buffer.

Toolen fidgeted with the bent door handle, feeling a moment of claustrophobia when it wouldn't open. He yanked on it, and it responded, a feeling of relief washing over him. He nodded and thanked the driver, tugging his backpack off the floor. Closing the door, he patted the roof before reaching back in to push a roll of bills into the driver's hand. In return, the driver gave him a mostly toothless grin and accelerated, a blast of dust spewing from the rear tires as he took off into the afternoon.

Ryan's feeling of claustrophobia reappeared as he neared the base. He wanted to laugh at himself but couldn't. He trained to be above small things like claustrophobia. Especially when he was out in the middle of nowhere and had no business feeling closed in. He didn't know why it was hitting

him like that but supposed it was the pressure of going back to face the guys when they thought he'd betrayed them.

In the distance, Toolen could see Hanley with a rope and it looked like he was trying to teach Glover how to lasso the stray goat, Mugsy. *Typical Texan*, Toolan thought.

Grange sat to the left in a nylon lawn chair laughing at both men, a fat cigar nearly falling from between his clenched teeth. Ryan leaned back against a burn barrel, crossed his arms, and watched the scene unfold in front of him. Most of the Mambas were lounging around the base in varying degrees of relaxation. If he didn't know any better, Toolan could have imagined a very different scene in front of him.

*Glover took the lasso in hand and swung it above his head. Mugsy bounded out of reach, and Glover caught a fence post instead. He threw his head back and laughed, his brilliant white teeth flashing. He unwound the rope and started to sing.*

*Tum-tum-tumbleweeds*

*Rumblin' round my mind  
Goats bounce on rubber legs  
The lasso just can't find  
Traction like a tumbleweed  
Rollin' through the sand  
I just want to climb my horse  
The saddle in my hand...*

*Glover started to dance, a cowboy rap beat thumping across the base. His uniform turned into a furry white vest with black cow spots. A bedazzled microphone appeared in his hand as he started spitting out additional lyrics. Hanley swung into action, dancing backup, and others joined in-- a square dance hip hop extravaganza. Soon they were all in cowboy shirts*

*and chaps, ten-gallon hats on their heads. Harris had boots with shiny silver spurs. He started break dancing, the spurs spinning with each kick of his feet. Mugsy, the goat, began weaving in and out, bounding between the dancers, kicking his small white legs up behind him. Lights swept across the men, washing them in colored beams. A disco ball appeared and threw glittered highlights against the drab landscape.*

The cowboy musical continued in Toolan's mind, growing flashier and more absurd with each passing minute.

"Fuck you, Toolan!"

*That* didn't belong in the musical.

He shook his head to clear it.

For a moment, as the scene in his mind dissolved, he wondered what the psych team would say about his diversionary daydream. *You don't need to worry about the psych team anymore. You're retired.*

As if Toolan hadn't heard it, Harris repeated himself. "Fuck you, Toolan!"

"Hey," Williams interjected.

"Nah, bro," Harris said. "I meant it. Traitorous motherfucker."

Toolan shook his head again.

With that, Harris charged at him.

Toolan had time to brace himself but was still jarred when Harris's head rammed his chest. He staggered back a step, his strong forearms pushing Harris off him. Harris doubled down and pushed back, digging his boots into the dirt. Their arms entwined, Toolan kept pushing forward against Harris's lunges. Harris growled, his anger hampering his verbal ability. More pushing. More growling. Toolan tried to breathe above Harris's overwhelming body spray but was losing the battle. Finally, Williams reached them and started to pull Harris away, Harris's



hands still flailing toward Toolan.

Toolan appreciated the assist from Williams. He knew that the man had always been level-headed and fair. Harris on the other hand...

Hanley reached the group and helped keep Harris back. Grange walked over and thumped Harris on the forehead.

“Idiot,” Grange barked. Grange’s stinky cigar cut the sweet stench of Harris, but the combination wasn’t pleasant.

“Fuck that...” Harris said, a small blob of spittle pooling on the side of his mouth.

“Let’s hear what he has to say for himself first,” Grange said, never taking the stogey out of his mouth.

“CIA,” was all Toolan offered.

“Jesus Christ,” Harris yanked his left arm away from Hanley and spun away from Williams. He glared at Toolan and looked like he still wanted to charge. “That’s bullshit.”

Toolan shrugged.

“Prove it,” Harris countered.

“Son, I don’t need to prove anything to you.” He knew Harris hated the condescending term. “Where’s Morgan?” Toolan asked.

Grange nodded toward the mess tent.

Harris stomped past, bumping Grange in the process. The cigar fell from Grange’s mouth.

“Fuckin’ idiot,” Grange scolded and he smacked the back of Harris’s head as Harris retreated away from the group. Grange bent down and picked up the cigar stub, looked it over, and put it right back between his teeth. He looked at Toolan, eyebrows raised, asking the question without asking it.

“I’ve got something for him,” Toolan replied, motioning to the backpack he’d set near the barrel.

“Bruh,” Grange chuckled. “Fucking double agent. That *is* some bullshit.” He shook his head as he walked away. Hanley and some of the others followed. Most of the men scowled and wouldn’t look Toolan in the eye.

“Give them time,” Williams said. “It’s been a crazy ride. No one expected that. Harris and Cole had everyone pretty worked up.” He reached over and gave Toolan a light punch in the arm. “You should have said something.”

Toolan opened his mouth to speak but had no words.

“I know. I know. You couldn’t. They’ll all realize that. It sucks though. You know trust isn’t the easiest thing to come by these days.” Williams ran a large hand across his head. Sweat glistened on his brow. “I’m glad though. Ya know?”

That, Toolan could respond to. “Yeah. I know. Me too.” Toolan smirked and reached for the backpack. He swung it up and over a shoulder and set off to find Morgan.

Ducking into the mess tent, Toolan was surprised to find Morgan holding a putting club in his hands. He concentrated on the ball in front of him and gave it a slight tap, sending it spinning toward an empty tomato sauce can.

“Hole in one?” Toolan asked.

Morgan raised his shoulders in a shrug and turned to face him. “Tiger Woods, I am not. Glad you made it back,” he stated. “No issues?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” he gave a half-smile. “Isn’t that all you need to know?”

“You know me. I like all the info I can get.”

“Well, have at it.” Toolan passed the backpack over to Morgan. “Laptop and hard drives.”

“Golden.”

“Always.”

Morgan turned back toward his makeshift putting green.

Toolan grabbed a bottle of water and drank half of it before taking a breath. Before he stepped out of the tent, he watched Morgan take his next putt.

As his eyes followed the pitted ball toward the hole, he was reminded of Maggie and their first date at the putt-putt golf course near the college. He hadn't thought about that in years.

*His palms were damp as his fingers gripped the steering wheel. The nerves in his stomach buzzed like a nest of bees. He parked in front of the sorority house and checked himself in the mirror before heading to the front door. One of the other girls answered the door and giggled as she ran up the stairs, calling Maggie's name. A couple of minutes passed and he spent them looking at the framed photos of the house's former occupants. When Maggie appeared at the top of the staircase, she almost seemed to glow. Her chestnut curls flowed down around her shoulders. She wore a white sundress that set off the tan she'd spent the summer curating, and on her feet were an old pair of pink Chucks. She looked adorable. He couldn't believe she'd agreed to go out with him. The nervous feelings in his abdomen returned until she made it safely down the stairs and grabbed his hand.*

*"Should we?" Maggie asked as she pulled him toward the door.*

*Such an innocent question, but his mind ran with it. That was only the first on the list of shoulds. During the short drive to the golf course, they chatted and he felt himself relax. Once they picked out their clubs and balls, he already felt comfortable with her. The first time he caught her cheating during the game, he knew he had to have a relationship with her, and by the end of the night, he was certain they'd be married someday.*

*Somehow they ended up joking about getting Miracle Spring Water from a television infomercial. She assured him it would help his game.*

*"Maybe it will save you from burning in hell after cheating in putt-putt," he teased. Although he could tell that at first, she was going to try*

*to deny it, she laughed instead. Laughed until she cried. He fell in love with her at that moment. And oh how he'd loved her.*

That was before the ugliness. Before the Black Mambas. Before almost everything.

*Maggie.*

Now his time with the Mambas was finished. Maybe he could also be finished with the ugliness. For the first time, he realized that he could look her up when he got back. The safety of social media was on his side for once. Just a little peek. He knew he had no right to hope that she would still be single. Someone like Maggie wouldn't be. But he could still hope.

He stepped out of the mess hall trying to reorient himself. His thoughts were like balls in a pinball machine--zigging and zagging everywhere. *Maybe it is a good thing I'm leaving. I'm no good to anyone like this. I can't even focus. I've been through a lot in the past weeks. That has to explain it. I just need a little break and can get back to normal. Just hang on.*

He rounded the corner and Cole stepped out of the shadows.

"Cole," he greeted the younger man.

Cole clenched his jaw. His hands were on his waist and his arm muscles were twitching, causing his tattoos to jump.

"What's this bullshit I hear about you being a double agent?"

"It's not bullshit," Toolan replied.

"Whatever." Cole ran a hand through his scruffy blonde hair. "You need to leave."

"I don't take orders from you," Toolan stated.

"You're a traitor. I'm not sure who you take orders from."

"Now *that* is bullshit."

“You know, Toolan, I don’t really care what you think. I just want your ass out of here. No one trusts you.”

“You think you can lead by bullying? It might work for a bit, but no one will respect you in the long run.”

“You’re one to talk about respect. Motherfucking turn on your own team to sell us out? And then you expect us to all fall for your story. Like this is some heroic redemption arc? I’m done with it.”

Toolan smiled.

“Fuck off, Toolan,” Cole snarled.

“Whatever, man. You got what you wanted. I’m out, and you are team leader. You should just be happy about that and leave me the fuck alone.”

“I will. Once you’re gone. You’re not welcome here.” Cole crossed his thick arms across his chest.

“There’s that old saying, ‘cut off your nose to spite your face.’ Are you familiar with it? I think you probably are because that’s the fuck you’re doing. Fucking spiting your own face.”

Cole leaned forward, his hot breath reaching Toolan’s face. “Get the fuck out now.”

Toolan glared at Cole. A sudden need to challenge him made his blood run hot and thick. Instead, he paused and stepped back. “I’m done here. I’ve retired, and you aren’t worth the bother,” he said.

Cole stood stock still and looked like he was barely controlling himself. He let out a shaky breath. “Fuck. You.”

Toolan turned and walked away. He made his way to the admin building to make travel arrangements. He knew he no longer belonged. He was getting out of Dodge.

“Did you text him?” Grange asked.

“Off and on the past couple of weeks,” Williams said.  
“He’s got that sweet security gig lined up.

“Is he going to show at the White House?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t answer.

“You know Cole is going to want to kick your ass for inviting him.”

“Fuck Cole. He can kiss my Black ass. We wouldn’t even be getting the medals if it wasn’t for Toolan.”

“That’s not how he sees it.”

“He only sees what benefits him.”

President Jameson wrapped up his remarks. “Anyway, I wanted to thank you gentlemen for coming all the way to DC. I know you all want to get back to your families, so I wanted to keep it brief.”

Several of the Mambas smirked because they knew POTUS had a tendency to ramble on and drag things out and he’d already been talking for close to thirty minutes. Williams ignored the others’ amusement and tried to stay focused on the informal ceremony. He looked around the Oval Office and wanted to remember every detail. His fingers traced the letters etched into the metal. He scanned the faces of the team and gave a few seconds’ thought to Toolan, who didn’t show up. *Fuck Cole.*

Cole stood to the side, taking pride in the team as if he were responsible. He stuck his hand out to shake the President’s as they filed out of the room.

After the Black Mambas left the room, President Jameson unbuttoned his jacket and loosened his tie a bit. He sat on the sofa, tugging at the shirt stretched taut across his belly. The CIA Director, Madison, sat south of the president, elbows on

his knees, leaning forward with interest.

“So?” Jameson asked.

“We’ve recovered data from three drives. We have our best team on it and should have some information for you soon. The Mambas did good work. Of course, I’ll update you as soon as they unencrypt it. By this time next week, you’ll have more information than you ever thought possible.”

“Good. That’s good.” The president nodded. He pressed his pointer fingers together in a steeple and then rested the tips on his bottom lip. “Very good indeed.”

Madison smiled.

“I cannot wait,” Jameson admitted.