



# 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

*Anna-Lisa Taylor*

EVERYTHING CHANGED WHEN MEN hit the sandboxes. Jealousy was to be expected in these environments and word had spread that C-Squadron, The Black Mambas, had arrived back on base. The selections left some ruffled feathers amongst the regular troops; the process bruised egos. Being a member of Black Mamba required a certain mind and skill set and some men just weren't made for it. The high attrition rate was testament to that. In his opinion, the attitudes of the men denied a spot toward those who achieved one just supported the choices. But as with all things military, his opinion counted for nothing.

The Black Mambas had a reputation, and they'd earned it. But it meant they copped the blame for everything. It was exhausting. Not that he would admit it. The most frustrating damn thing of all was that his troop owned their shit, did so with pride and didn't get caught. Everyone knew it and yet he was having to defend them. Again. They'd only just returned to the base and shit was already hitting the fan. His team weren't interested in petty squabbles, but they ended them if

people left shit on their doorstep. If you were going to step into their nest, you'd better be quick. Training had ensured that none of them were impulsive hotheads; They were cold, methodical mother fuckers. It was fitting to be named after the most dangerous snake in the world, and they were proud to personify a lot of its traits. Honestly, you'd think some troops would watch Sir David Attenborough or something. In his head, he could hear the British, Natural Historian describing the fearsome creatures, "The species shows tenacity, fearlessness and aggression when threatened or when defending its territory. The Black Mamba have a 100% envenomation rate. The venom is the most rapidly acting of any snake species, and if untreated, Black Mamba bites have a mortality rate of 100%" His team would agree.

It was galling to Toolan that John had felt the need to come to him about inter-squadron domestics in the mess hall. He'd known Major Bill Matrix for over twenty years. Everyone called him "John". Some people were oblivious to how he got the name or what for. Toolan wasn't one of those people. For Christ's sakes, they'd risen through the ranks together, but politics reigned throughout the military. Quite the dichotomy: They'd take a bullet for you, but you still had to watch your six for a bitch-fit from them, especially if it meant they could outshine you or get promoted before you. He'd give John the benefit of the doubt. He'd be gutted when he realised this was their last chat. It would be a lie to say that having to navigate schoolboy tantrums and petty behaviour wasn't part of his decision to retire. Perhaps he would have kept his counsel if he knew. As it was, he would know by the end of today. The Lieutenant Colonel was scheduled to call him in and explain the new management of the Mambas.

He fought the urge to roll his eyes as John walked away. It

would've been easier to let the men work it out between themselves. Interfering could exacerbate problems. Unless absolutely necessary, Toolan preferred not to intervene. That option had gone thanks to John, and he knew it, if the smug look on his face had been anything to go by. It wasn't necessarily malicious. John viewed it as healthy competition. In reality, it was that but also him airing his own frustrations against C-Squadron. Psychology was fascinating to Toolan. John felt he was in a position of power over him, purely because he was wearing a starched uniform, had his hair coiffed with military precision, and had, had a wet shave as part of his morning ablutions. Observing his colleague, he noticed the discomfort in his gait, the telltale signs of prickly heat from the sweat that was held by his uniform and unable to wick away thanks to the uncompromising material covering it. His face looked sensitive too, the grooming and his pale skin tone at odds with the climate they found themselves in. Toolan felt sympathy for all of them. This heat was relentless, and it took a while to acclimatise when you first arrived. Unlike John, he didn't have to wear a uniform, and he was grateful for it today.

Toolan dropped past the Officers' mess to pick up some water and made his way towards the Mambas' barracks as he left. He'd already planned to make his way there for a chat; he had some news to share with them all and he'd just add this issue to the agenda. They needed to know the storm brewing so they could prepare for it, but it wouldn't come as a surprise. They were used to it. Knowing them, they'd probably already dealt with the matter and John was oblivious. Regardless, it needed discussion.

There were a few perks to being a mamba, and the accommodation was one of them. The comfort afforded them

wasn't to the Officers' level, but it wasn't too far from it either. The military still expected them to share, but it was much more luxurious than the digs of normal soldiers. Situated away from the other barracks, the mambas had much more space, better amenities, quality beds, bedding and their own showers. The Mambas also had permission to skip food queues and had access to a dedicated satellite phone to talk to loved ones. The squaddies tolerated most of those things as C-Squadron [and what they knew of their duties] demanded a level of respect around the base. But the bonus that seemed the most tactically obvious, was the one that set them apart and got a rise from the other troops most, appearance.

In order to fit in with the locals and achieve certain objectives, the Mambas did not have to stick to regulations about dress code or grooming. This seemed unfair to those who had to abide by the rules, and there were penalties for disobeying. The threat of disciplinary action jaded soldiers and made them blind to the security implications those rules had on covert ops. Whilst they prohibited normal personnel from growing beards or facial hair aside from pre-approved moustaches, dictating that they remain clean shaven at all times, they gave the Black Mambas the choice to grow beards to better meld into their surroundings. For similar reasons, they required normal troops to wear military issue uniform and tactical clothing, and wear their hair in styles befitting of military personnel. Although this varied slightly between the forces, cuts had to be short, professional and smart. At no point should hair be unruly, messy, or long. By appearing different and out of uniform, it created distrust and derision within the base. Was it any surprise that soldiers showed open hostility about it when the officers did, too?

Toolan loved the hum of the base and he drank it in as he

approached the tent. This part of the world held its own beauty. Dehmari was rugged, sandy, and the mountains stood like sentinels against the sky. The problem with attractive vistas was that evil still hid within them. Such views weren't exempt. It made it hard to appreciate it fully because it afforded so many bolt holes for terrorists. Outside the entryway, he paused and looked out over the hills, scrutinising. They ingrained it within him, the constant need to assess potential threats and even on the base he remained on alert.

They all did. His hand rubbed the nape of his neck and came away covered in grains of sand. That was the biggest aggravation here. The sand got everywhere.

What he wouldn't give to hunt down the Ghaf-Yohmar leader. For all they knew, he was nearby, preparing for an attack. They didn't even know his name. After all these years!

Rubbing his hands together to dislodge the sand from his nape, he called out,

"Black Mambas to attention." As expected, he heard the shuffling of his team standing to attention in greeting and respect. It had always made him uncomfortable, but it was just the rules they abided by.

"At ease. Get comfy. We've got a few things we need to discuss." He looked around at the group of men before him as they settled back on their cots, their eyes focused on him. Whatever they had been doing left untouched. It didn't take long to make an assessment of the room or what they had been doing in their downtime, but it spoke volumes about the tactical men before him. It looked as though Glover had been carrying out maintenance on his rifle. As the team's Marksman, this wasn't surprising.

The lads were like family. Their skills were invaluable, and they'd been in some tight spots together and made it through,

but it was more than that. Each one was a force of nature. They had their own personalities, mannerisms, foibles and he loved them all. He thought he knew how each of them would react to the news, but even after all this time, they still surprised him. It made him feel sick, the thought of telling them, let alone leaving.

He wasn't usually a coward, but there were two sets of eyes he was struggling to meet. Those of his second, Sergeant Tom Harris and Staff Sergeant Chris Grange. They'd been part of the team longest and Harris would take offence to being kept in the dark. Grange was his wild card. Truth be told, now he was in their barracks, he realised he should have taken them aside and told them first. He was struggling to be subjective with his team, and at some point, it could lead to a fatal mistake. He had realised it and so had his superiors.

"I'm going to get to the point, Sergeants. There's a shit storm gathering and heading your way from some of the other squadrons. It grinds my gears that I've had to come and warn you about it. You're grown arse men and can clear up your own messes, but we've all got our short and curlies in someone else's grip. Anyone know anything about it?"

He sat himself down on a crate near the door. It was common for these to be used as make-shift tables around the base and suddenly, he realised he didn't want to be superior to these men anymore. He wanted to be their equal.

For a while, no one spoke, but Toolan caught the glances exchanged around the room.

"We have dealt it with, sir." It was Sergeant Boykin that spoke. Ever the diplomat, it wasn't a surprise that he'd be the spokesperson, particularly if information needed to be circumnavigated. He was the master of 'need to know'.

"Do I want to know how you've dealt with it, Sergeant



Boykin?”

“I suggest not, sir.” He gave a small blink, but gave nothing else away.

“Does it risk fatigue for any of you before mission starts tomorrow?”

He heard a gruff chuckle, surreptitiously muffled by a throat being cleared. Usually, Toolan would have called Grange out for it, but he let it slide, mindful of the disclosure about to take place.

Boykin responded again, “Absolutely not, Sir. It’s being handled using typical Mamba speed and accuracy.” There was a hint of humour in his voice. Toolan wanted to probe because the story was bound to be entertaining, but sometimes it was best not to know. Curiosity killed the cat.

He took an audible inhale and the men visibly tensed around him. “Once I’ve finished speaking, I give you all permission to speak freely.”

“I’m just going to spit it out. I’m retiring from C-squadron guys. Instead of taking my leave stateside, I’m retiring and I’m moving into private security. The last five years have been incredible and, well shit, you guys are my family. My brothers. But it’s time to call it. I fly home this evening. If you have questions, shoot.” He swallowed. It was disconcerting to find that his throat felt swollen and thick from emotion. They were all trained against this stuff. It was more proof that he was just too close and his boundaries had blurred.

The room was silent. You could have heard a pin drop. There were so many things he wanted to say to interrupt the silence, to justify himself. He owed them that, at least. But sometimes giving people time to process was more important. Frankly, he couldn’t find the words.

It wasn’t wholly unexpected, but the crash of a crate being

smashed and the telltale whizz of the air moving near him and the slight movement of his hair, told him that a knife had just narrowly, and intentionally, missed his ear. If it was intended to meet its target, it would have.

“Are you serious, Sir?” Hanley asked. Toolan nodded. Hanley stood pulling down his linen shirt which had ridden up his back and approached him. Although, Toolan felt sudden heavy he stood up to meet him. “It’s been an honour, sir, and I wish you all the best for the future.” They clasped hands. The newest member of the team it showed the intensity of the bonds forged. He felt he could stand up and try to diffuse the bomb poised to go off.

“I’m sure I speak for us all, sir. It will not be the same without you. I joined the Mambas to work with you. It’s been my privilege.” He clapped Toolan on the back as he went to move past him, but instead of moving out of the barracks, he paused and stayed standing, deciding it was best to stay and present a united front.

Next to approach was Sergeant Faisal. As the field medic, Toolan felt his eyes assessing him for signs of stress - Faisal couldn’t help himself. A medic was always on duty and ready for an emergency, but Toolan was as fit as a fiddle. His usual mask may not be in place, but he would not drop dead. It felt awkward as he clasped Faisal’s hand and they hugged. There had never been uncomfortable moments like this, like things weren’t being said. Toolan hadn’t run his unit like that. Yet now he was the one causing the tensions.

“Spit it out, guys. We’ve never held back.” It felt like the tables had turned and his training had gone out of the window, whilst theirs remained resolutely in place. More silence met his comment. Faisal and Hanley stood to his left and the other six just stared at him, or anywhere but him. He

turned his back and pulled the knife out of the support beam. He couldn't help the trickle of admiration. What a shot. The precision needed for tha was exceptional. He turned the blade over in his hand. He would recognise it anywhere.

“What the fuck do you want us to say, Sir? You've come in and just announced all casually that you're retiring while we're fucking left up shits creak without a Team Leader! Like we've not been through hell and back together. As if the unrest here isn't so thick you couldn't chew on it like my Pop's tobacco.” He ran his fingers through his hair before continuing, “I mean, what the actual fuck, Toolan? I'd be happy for you if you were going home. But we don't do that shit. We can't. So you've what? Followed the money? Chosen a different team?” Sergeant Cole was pacing. Toolan had been tracking his movements from the moment he got up, back when Hanley was talking to him, but in the three years he'd managed him, Toolan had never seen this tell from him. Knowing Cole, he'd calm down soon and be open to a reasonable conversation, but right now, he was agitated. There was no point in responding. There were nods to support his outburst.

Clearing his throat whilst packing away his dismantled gun, Glover stood up from a crouch position to face Toolan, “I'm not surprised, Sir. Happy for you. If you're ever in Arizona, come by for Menudo and fry bread, man. You'll always be welcome. I've always got your six if you need me. I know you've got mine and hell, I might need a job one day.”

“Thanks, Glover. Means a lot, bro.” His voice was thicker, and he made the move to hug his friend this time. He wrapped his arms around him and held him tighter than he meant to. For someone who shot people with clinical precision, he was a warm-hearted man. Glover squeezed him back, “Ah man, I sensed it was coming. There was just something different the

last few months. Stay safe out there, brother.”

Looking at his watch, Faisal murmured, “If we’re going to be on time we need to go now.” Boykin joined them and slapped the retiring team leader on the shoulder. “Good Luck, Serg. Gonna miss you, bro.”

Similarly, Williams approached. There was always a clay-like smell that accompanied him. Over the years, it had become a comforting smell. The bleach was less welcome though. Williams said little. He just shook hands with a cursory, “Good luck” but he didn’t meet his eyes. As someone all about details and proportions, his reserved stance told Toolan he’d messed up. It made him feel bad that all these men he respected seemed disappointed in him.

Still embracing Toolan, Glover chuckled. “We’re not letting you off the hook or running out on this here situation. Guess we can tell you now, Serg. There’s a bare knuckle fight tournament happening soon. They’re sending their best fighters from each squadron to take us on. Fools. Obviously, it won’t last long, but it’ll settle the tensions and get them all to shut the fuck up with their whining. It’s not our fault they couldn’t cut it as Mambas, but if they want to take us on, we’ll play.” Glover’s laugh was hearty, deep and infectious. There was no other response but to laugh along with him and slap him on the back. They were a blood-thirsty bunch and did not suffer fools gladly.

Meeting the eyes of Faisal, Boykin, Williams and Hanley in turn he made sure to give them all one last nod as they left with Glover. It was his way of showing respect to them. Everything was cyclical; He remembered each of those men joining the troop and watching them leave hurt more than the transfers and discharges he’d witnessed over the years.

Slowly, he turned to face those remaining, deliberately

giving himself time to prepare for their wrath. These men had served with him the longest and the bond they shared was deeper.

“It was classified. I wasn’t allowed to tell you!” His voice sounded defensive even to his own ears.

“Bullshit. You chose not to tell us. There’s procedure and then there’s betrayal, man. What’s wrong with you? Why didn’t you tell us?” Cole. He was so angry spittle flew from his mouth.

“Guessing you’ve fucked me over ‘bro’ and I won’t be the guys’ team leader, either? Just kick after kick, huh?” Harris was raging.

Well, two could play at that game. His hands were shaking. “What the fuck, Harris? You think that little of me? You know I don’t have that kinda sway. All I know is that the Colonel and Rizer are having a meeting later, talkin’ to John and that’s it. I gave my recommendation, but it doesn’t mean shit!”

Harris just gave a derisive snort and crossed his arms without another word. “For what it’s worth, Harris. I think you should lead. But by that point they wouldn’t listen to me, anyway!”

“Oh right! Here we go... You want sympathy, Ryan, is that it? You want us all to feel sorry for you?” That Cole had used his Christian name was a good sign. They always used their rank or surnames. Cole threw himself onto his bunk. The pacing had stopped, but the rage was still palpable.

“Why?” It was the only word Grange had uttered since the news. He’d laid with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, throwing and catching a squash ball. Not once had he missed it. There was no hint of emotion in his voice. Grange was all business at that moment.

Toolan rubbed his hands firmly through his hair and down

his face before he answered and leant back against the same post he'd pulled the knife from. "The powers that be think my judgement's impaired. I'm too close and they think retirement is the best option before I fuck up and, well, they basically implied I'm going to get one of you killed or destroy an operation. You want a kick in the balls, Harris? That's a kick so hard I felt my nad sack join my tonsils. Even worse, they're right. I want to cry right now. I didn't cry when my kids were born or my Moma died. Yet, stood here with you lot fucking hating me and thinking I'm a disloyal son of a bitch? Yeah, that kills me. But it shouldn't. It's time. Time for me to go private and hopefully catch this ass wipe we haven't been able to find all this fucking time. He's laughing at us. So fuck yeah. I'm taking retirement, but you know what? I'm not abandoning you arseholes. You need a job, you'll be back with me. But I need time to get my venom back."

The silence was deafening in response to his speech. It felt like hours had passed before anyone moved, except for Grange's perpetual throwing and catching.

Cole spoke up, "We've got to neutralise this problem." With that, they rose on mass. "I love you, man. Dick move, though. I'm gonna be pissed at you for a while. Keep in touch and don't fucking die. I'll burn the world down if you die." There was no hug or handshake. "Let's go pound some flesh, I feel the need right now."

Harris was next, and he shot a concerned look at Cole's back as he exited the barracks. "They're not going to be okay without you, Ryan. You are the soul of the mambas. I don't even know if I want the job. I always thought I would. I envied you at times, you know?"

They clasped hands, and Toolan shrugged. "I really don't know who will lead, but I hope it's you and not an outsider."

Look after them. I'm not the mambas, I'm just a man. We're a team and I've got you all wherever we all are."

"Move out the fucking way, Serg. Go check Cole doesn't get thrown in the brig. I always thought I was the mamba thug, but he's livid. Christ! I don't envy the squaddie who takes him on... I'm not sure dental will cover the costs." He half laughed, half groaned.

With a nod and a raised eyebrow at Grange for his insubordination, Harris left. He'd let it slide for now, but it would definitely come up in conversation another time.

"You don't want to go?" Grange's eyes searched his for any lies.

"Of course not, but it's right to, man. I've gone soft. I need to sharpen up and find this son of a bitch. He's all I think about." Toolan wanted to turn around, but he didn't want to break this stare off.

Finally, Grange blinked, showing that he believed Toolan, that man could keep his eyes open longer than anyone he'd ever met when he wanted to. It was a relief to have one of his oldest friends back on his side. "But civi' street, Ryan? Really?"

Toolan shrugged dejectedly. "No other choice, bro. I wish you guys could come with me, but I've checked and your time's not up yet. You bastards are stuck here while I get cut loose. Look after them for me?"

"Of course, Serg, but I hate I won't be able to have your six while you're out there. The others will come around in time. It just hurts, and you know we all suck at expressing our emotions. You may have turned into a pussy and have got benched by the firm, but we haven't. They won't be mad or hurt forever."

All Toolan could do was nod as his eyes finally filled up.

"God, you are such a pussy now, Ryan! Do you want a

tampon?” He laughed and patted Toolan’s arm uncomfortably, “You do know I’ll be there when I can... if I had the choice I’d be going with you. Your aim is shit compared to mine!”

“Speaking of which, you want this back, bro?” Toolan held out the blade Grange had thrown at him. It really was a work of art. Whenever he was stateside, Grange made his own weapons and customised his military grade ones. They were original and instantly recognisable; his calling card with his insignia, a G made into a black mamba.

“No. You’re going to need it more than me. I sharpened it this afternoon. Go to my place and raid the cache - you know where it is. You can return them when it’s my time to join you. I’m gonna miss you, bro. I really will.”

With that, Grange left to join the rest of the Black Mambas as they settled any inter-squadron jealousies or disputes by releasing their frustrations and spilling blood. Sometimes teaching respect hurt the student.

Toolan made his way back to his own barracks, collected his personal affects and handed back all of his clearance documents. On the journey to the airport, he prepared for his flight home and stared at those undulating hills. In that moment, he made a vow to always have the mambas six and to rid the world of tyranny for as long as he was able.



## chapter two

*Heather Lovelace-Gilpin*

*WAIT?*

*What?*

*Back the fuck up?*

*Did they just hand the promotion to Cole?*

*They sure the fuck did.*

*Well, shit.*

*Didn't see that coming.*

Those are the thoughts each member of the Black Mambas had going through their heads the moment they made the announcement.

Eyes darted towards Harris. He sat stoned face, but the clench of his jaw told them everything they needed to know.

Harris is not fucking happy. Not happy at all.

Because technically, he should have gotten the promotion. Assistant team leader. Four years with the Black Mambas. Toolan assured him if he leaves, the promotion was his.

But Sergeant First Class Tom Harris was not named Master Sergeant. Sergeant First Class Dalton Cole was.

So why the hell did they hand the promotion to Cole?

“I’m better looking.” Cole stated when Glover walked up to him once they’ve been dismissed from the briefing room and he’s outside to get some fresh air.

Glover shook his head.

“He’s pissed.”

Cole yanked his t-shirt over his head, using it to wipe the sweat trickling down his chest.

Tell me something I don’t already know, Cole thought, rubbing his eyes.

While Grange never seems to tire, Cole’s fucking exhausted.

“Don’t know what to say.” Cole said, spotting his teammates.

They’re talking among themselves, occasionally casting glances his way.

“Doesn’t change what we’re here to do.”

While hot, it’s not any hotter than Texas around this time of year. Some guys have a hell of a time when they first arrive, especially if they’re from somewhere cold. It takes time to adjust to the heat, and seeking refuge inside isn’t any better. Sometimes, it’s hotter inside than it is out. And there’s a stench that just doesn’t seem to go away.

“Some guys are siding with Harris.”

Cole sighed, shooting him a dirty look.

“This isn’t good for you, Cole.”

“Not much any of us can say about it. What’s done is done. Get over it.”

“Get over it?”

“Oh shit.” Hanley said under his breath, snapping his fingers to grab the others’ attention.

They all turned to see Cole drop his shirt, straightening his shoulders as Harris stormed towards him.

“Get over it?” Harris said again. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Harris shoved him. Cole lifted an eyebrow, taking one step back before digging his heavy boots into the dusty ground. He has no intention of fighting him, but watching his team crowd them, he will lose their respect if he backs down.

“Come on, Harris. You don’t want to do this.” Cole said, the sound of choppers flying past drowning out most of what he’s saying.

And because he can’t let the opportunity go, he flashed a smile, hoping it lightens the mood.

“I am your master sergeant. I don’t want to assign you bathroom detail...”

Harris did more than shove. He threw punches. And not very accurate ones either. Cole brought his fists up, narrowing his eyes.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Harris.”

“Why they pick you?”

Cole dodged to his left, Harris recalculating, nailing Cole in the jaw. The tangy metallic flavor of blood filled his mouth.

“Who did you fucking blow, Cole, to get my fucking rank?”

*Yup. Fucking done.*

Cole’s right fist shot out, blood dripping out of one of Harris’s nostrils. Had he not pulled back at the last minute, he would have busted his nose.

“Stop!” Cole commanded. “I am not going to fucking fight you, Harris.”

Harris isn’t listening, throwing himself at Cole. Cole misjudged which way he’s moving, Harris knocking them both to the ground. It took a couple of punches before Cole grasped some sort of control. Not much. Cole’s hands pushing Harris’s head back awkwardly, holding him off the

best he can.

This is a fight neither one can win. They both have the same build, the same strength, the same training. Harris might have one year more in the special forces, but Cole's younger and he's the balls to the wall kind of guy. But he doesn't want to hurt his teammate. A man down is one weakness they cannot afford.

"Knock it the fuck off." Cole hissed roughly, narrowing his eyes. "Get the fuck off of me and walk the fuck away. You understand, Sergeant First Class?"

There's no denying the condescending tone Cole used when he referred to Harris's rank.

"Jesus, Cole." Grange mumbled, his face appearing behind Harris's left shoulder. "How is that helpful?"

It took Grange and Glover to pull Harris off.

Boots pounded the hard, dusty ground. More choppers flew overhead, and while Cole would normally look up, he didn't. More members of the Black Mambas arrived to restore order.

"The fuck are you two doing?" Grange demanded.

He offered Cole a hand, he took it, jumping to his feet. Faisal quickly went to Harris to survey the damage, pulling an individually wrapped bandage from his pocket. Blood is still dripping from Harris's nostril, swelling under the left eye, spitting blood onto the ground.

"I get you're pissed, but it's not like Cole had a say either."

"Who's ass are you trying to kiss, Hanley?"

"Come on." Boykin said. "What difference does it make?"

Harris pushed Faisal away. Glover stepped between them.

"You two better get your fucking shit together. We cannot have you two at war when we go in."

"Glover's right." Williams said. "Nothing's changed except

Toolan's out and Cole takes his place. You're still second in command."

"I should be first."

"Well, you're not."

"Fuck you."

Cole scratched at the tattoo dragon on his left arm, ready to defend himself again if he has to.

"Keep it up and you both will be court marshaled." Hanley said, looking at one and then the other. "Okay, so this isn't what we were fucking expecting, but like Cole said, what's done is done. Sorry, Harris. We all thought it was yours."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Bosses had a different opinion."

"I have no intention of stripping you as assistant team leader."

Harris spat another mouthful of blood onto the ground before wiping the blood drying underneath his nose.

"We can't be divided. Not when it's time to go in."

"He's right."

"What do you say?" Cole asked, stepping towards him, holding out his hand. "Kiss and make up?"

He grinned, but Harris is far from amused.

It took a few moments to consider his options before he shook Cole's hand, giving it a firm squeeze.

*Not because I accept you as master sergeant, Asshole.*

"We good?" Cole asked, eyes resting on each member of his team.

One by one, they nodded their heads.

"I need more than a nod."

"Yes, Sir!" Six voices said in unison.

This is his team. The men he trusts with his life. Including Harris.

He'll get over it if he wants to remain a member of the Black Mambas, Cole thought, and this time he took his eyes off of him.

"I need us all on the same page here."

"Yes, Sir!" They said in unison again.

"Harris."

"Whatever you say." Harris said, spinning on his heels to head to the fabricated building. "You're the fucking boss."

Good enough.

Faisal followed him, Hanley too. Cole laughed when he overheard the comment Hanley made. While not funny, shit like that can be construed wrong, a threat against a master sergeant, he let it go. There's been enough tension for one day.

"Look on the bright side. If Cole dies, no way they'll pass you up a second time."

## chapter three

*Chelsea Fuchs*

“SERG, THE PERIMETER HAS been secured and we’re ready for the diplomat’s arrival.”

Master Sergeant Dalton Cole looked across the airfield at his men. *His men.* The change was still fresh in his mind. He’d have to get used to it. And Harris. But that was a problem for another day.

The big C-130 lumbered through the silent desert air, making its way through the twists and turns of the mountains surrounding the airstrip. The afternoon felt too quiet. They were all on the lookout. It was easy to find the beauty in this place, when Ghaf-Yohmar wasn’t trying to blow the American’s heads off.

He rested his hand on his gun sling and waited for the giant beast of a craft to land. They had a very narrow window to get this diplomat back to base before the window of air coverage would be closing.

“Come on,” he said under his breath, a feeling of unrest settling under his breastbone. There hadn’t been any action lately. It had been too quiet. They needed to get back to the

base. How had Sergeant Toolan done this for so long?

The plane touched down, finally. Cole took a deep breath. His worst nightmare would be the plane getting blown up before touching down and then having to deal with a rescue on top of the already shaky security envelop, they had going on here.

It was one thing to be on a protective detail. Cole was learning that it was completely different to lead that detail. He went over the particulars from that day's security briefing. It felt like something was missing, but he couldn't put his finger on exactly what it was. He wanted to confer with Harris, but that would show weakness. Something he couldn't do. Not yet.

Could this be taking any longer? Cole looked out over his men again. They were as restless as he was.

"Perimeter check," he called out before the doors opened. Another routine pickup although nothing was routine here. It was somewhere between someone's worse nightmare and Groundhogs Day.

"All clear."

Cole gave the signal to the pilot and the side door swung open. Someone on the landing strip brought the rolling stairs to the plane and the diplomat slowly descended the stairs. He was an overweight average sized man that seemed to be huffing and puffing on his way down the stairs. Great. As long as we didn't have to count on him having to run, they'd be okay.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm Master Sergeant Dalton Cole and this is my assistant team lead Sergeant First Class Tom Harris. We will be your protective detail while you're at Kanabad. Let's get you loaded up and out of here."

Cole scanned the area as they escorted the dignitary to the convoy. As his men fell in and they started rolling down the



road, he knew it was too soon to put down his guard. As they rolled closer to the base, Cole began to relax.

The next day, Keating had a meeting with a local leader. Cole wasn't happy about it, but it was his job to make sure that the diplomat made it where he needed to go and in one piece. The morning report was typical for September activity and there were no indications of foul intent.

The first half hour of the trip was filled with the normal chit chat.

“So,” Keating asked as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. These seats were made for function, not comfort and Cole felt bad for the diplomat who had clearly never traveled in military style before. “Where are you from?”

Grange answered first. “Louisiana, sir.”

Boykin answered next, “Idaho, sir.”

Keating looked at Harris. “North Carolina, sir.”

“How about you Sergeant Cole?”

“Texas, sir. How about you?”

“Arizona. The scenery here reminds me a bit of the area outside of Flagstaff before you get into the mountains. How long have you all been part of the Black Mambas? Where did that name come from anyways?”

Cole cleared his throat. “Well sir, are you very familiar with the black mamba snake?”

The diplomat shook his head no. “It's a large and incredibly venomous snake that lives in South Africa. It's the fastest moving land snake in the world and if it bites you, that's it. The species shows tenacity, fearlessness and aggression when threatened or when it's defending its territory.”

Keating nodded his head. “All good characteristics to have.”

The men nodded their heads in agreement. Every man on the

team would agree.

“So how did you end up with babysitting duties of an overweight, middle-aged dignitary when you should be taking out the bad guys?” Keating laughed. The men looked at each other uncomfortably. This was anything but a babysitting job. And that’s when the first boom left their ears ringing.

“We’re under attack,” the radio squawked as the first explosion rattled through the air. The smell of fire filled the inside of the armored truck. They slowed the convoy as the troops scrambled out of the truck and into a defense position. An IED had blown up most of the road ahead and they needed to ensure that the road was stable enough to proceed forward. And that there weren’t more IED’s hiding in the road ahead.

“Harris, secure the asset.” Cole commanded as he take assessment of the situation. “Anybody injured?”

No’s filled the air. Thank God. “Glover, get eyes on target,” he said over the radio. “Faisal, coverage.”

“Yes, sir.” The two Black Mambas squatted and duckwalked as they made their way around the convoy, heading to higher ground to surveille the situation. There was no time for emotions. No time for fear or self-doubt. This is what they trained for. This is what they lived for.

“This is command, we’ve got eyes on two possible targets. Do you need air support?”

Cole reached up for the radio on his shoulder. “Send drones but hold off, we need time to assess the situation. There are friendlies in the area.”

“Copy.” The radio went dead. Explosions continued to pepper the ground around them.

“We need to get these vehicles rolling. Give me a status. Glover, do you have a target yet?”

“Sir, not yet sir.”

“Get on it.” Cole needed to decide if they were going to conduct a counter attack or get the asset back to safety. Safety was the right answer, regardless of what he wanted to do.

“Williams, have you found anything useful yet?” Cole asked as he looked at a map to determine where they were. Their best bet was to turn around and get back to base. It was safer there.

Running down the checklist he’d memorized and rehearsed time and time again he continued to check in with his team.

“Hanley, give me a report.”

“Not detecting anything right now, Serg,” Hanley replied, his Texas accent more pronounced than normal.

“Harris, how’s the asset?” Cole asked, afraid of the answer that might come back. No wonder Toolan retired to take care of wealthy suckers. The additional stress wasn’t something he’d been expecting.

“He’s shaken up, but unharmed.” Cole nodded his head. “ETA on getting this convoy back on the road? We’re going to return to base.”

Nods and grunts of approval calmed his shaking nerves but weren’t necessary for his decision. It was his to make. The consequences his to bare and his alone.

“Ten minutes, sir.”

Ten minutes might as well have been a lifetime. Then needed to get back on the road.

“Make it five.” They needed to get back on the road. They were overly exposed here.

Activity buzzed around, each of the trained specialists doing what they needed to in order to get the show back on the road as safely and quickly as possible.

Soon the road back was deemed safe and the convoy was back and running at full speed.

Cole turned to look back at Keating. He was pale and appeared to be shaking. Cole needed to make sure he didn't go into shock.

"You okay?" Cole asked as he grabbed a water and handed it to Keating.

"Does this happen all the time?" He paused, before continuing on. "I'd been warned, but I thought it was an overextraction. I never expected to actually be shot at."

Boykin, who had been sitting next to Keating shook his head. "The Ghaf-Yohmar want us dead and take every opportunity they can to make that happen."

Keating looked down at his hands before making eye contact with Cole. "I thought your team was overkill, but you guys are amazing. I can't believe we're still alive."

Cole nodded. The Black Mambas were an amazing team and he was honored to be able to lead them.

They bounced down the road in silence. How do you add to the obvious?

The group let out a collective breath of relief as the gates to the installation came into view. The sooner they had Keating on the other side of those gates the better.

## chapter four

*Ian Philpot*

“CAN I HAVE SOME?” Hanley asked.

Grange and Faisal did not turn to acknowledge Hanley’s presence or request. Faisal was holding a small paper bag with a rolled top to make it easier to grab at whatever was inside. Grange did his best to squeeze his hand into the bag to pinch at whatever was inside with his forefingers. The bag crinkled and he rooted with his forefingers, but Grange ended up with a couple of small, white morsels that he brought to his lips.

“It was another hot one today,” Grange said before to placed his fingers into his mouth and licked them clean.

“Yeah,” Faisal responded. “But it’s a dry heat.”

Hanley walked in front of the men to get their attention.

“Can I please—”

“Hey!” Grange exclaimed. “Don’t block the sunset, man.”

“I just want to give that a try,” Hanley explained as he motioned to the paper bag.

“You didn’t like the centipede eggs last time,” Faisal said as he continued to watch the horizon.

“Whatever it is, I won’t spit it out this time,” Hanley pled.

“Besides, it wasn’t the taste, it was the texture that I didn’t like.”

“The texture was the best part,” Grange said as he went back to staring into the distance and reached his forefingers back into the bag.

“The texture was everything,” Faisal agreed.

“Besides,” Grange continued as he pulled his fingers out of the bag, “this stuff is fifty times more expensive than the eggs.”

“It was only ten times more expensive,” Faisal corrected.

“Whatever,” Grange said as he took a taste. He let out a moan of satisfaction.

“Come on, guys. Please.”

“I think we’re going to have a problem,” Faisal said plainly.

Grange grunted and in one motion flexed every muscle in his upper body. “Why can’t we just be left alone to watch the Dehmari sunset?”

Hanley took a step back in a purely instinctive reaction. Grange was wearing a black sleeveless shirt with a skull on his chest. “I don’t want to be a problem.”

Grange locked eyes with Hanley. “You’re never a problem. That.” Grange pointed at the sunset, and it took a moment for Hanley to see the small dust cloud forming in the distance.

“Bogey?” Hanley asked, but the other men didn’t respond. All three men stared off as some commotion started in the base behind them. Typical precautions—radio chatter, moving munitions, and some eager sergeant barking commands.

When the vehicle was just in sight, Faisal rolled the top of the paper bag and stuffed it into one of his cargo pockets. He and Grange turned in one motion and started for the Delta Force barracks.

“You guys don’t want to watch the fireworks?” Hanley

asked as he tried to keep up with them.

“It’s a late-model German car,” Grange said.

“So it’s someone from command? But I thought command drove American.”

“They do,” Faisal said.

“And the Ghaf-Yohmar drive Japanese,” Hanley said.

“Only one type of person can get a German SUV in this region,” Grange said with a grunt.

“Germans?” Hanley posited.

Faisal and Grange stopped. “CIA.”

“This has got to be for us,” Harris told Cole. “In my experience, intelligence doesn’t show up in-person, unannounced unless it’s for the Mambas.”

The two men were loitering outside of the Command Center. After Grange had given them the news about the car coming in, they came to this spot and watched a clean-shaven black man in a suit step out of a black SUV and walk into the tent.

“In *my* experience,” Cole said, “it doesn’t help to think about something that might not happen.”

“You’ve got a number of years before you have as much experience as I do,” Harris said.

“Do we really need to turn this into a pissing match?”

“We don’t have to, Harris said with a wink, but that would be fun and a lot more academic way of sorting out the chain of command than what happened when Toolan retired.”

“I have no doubts that you were qualified for this command, but I’ve heard of your prostate issues and really don’t want you to be embarrassed when I out-piss you, old man,” Cole said.

Harris stepped in front of Cole and leaned forward so

their faces were mere inches apart. "You—"

Someone at the entrance of the command center cleared their throat. "Colonel Donahue would like to see you, Master Sergeant Cole."

Cole took three steps toward the entrance of the tent and turned around. "Are you coming?"

"They didn't ask for me," said Harris.

"But I am," Cole said.

The inside of the Command Center was busy. There was always conversation and clicking of keyboards and printing of papers. An endless stream of busy work. The sergeant that had brought the man into the tent made them to the back where they entered a room with Colonel Donahue and the black man.

"Master Sergeant Dalton Cole, Sergeant First Class Tom Harris, I would like you to meet Agent Morgan with the CIA," the colonel said in his formal introduction voice. "Agent Morgan, the leaders of the Black Mambas."

Morgan gave both men a firm handshake. "Nice to meet you both."

"We are in a time crunch here," Donahue started. "We have VIPs arriving on base at 0800, and we are still securing a section of Kanabad for the visit. I've seen the high-level brief, and I believe Charlie Squadron is exactly what Agent Morgan needs for this mission." Donahue reached out to shake Morgan's hand. "I'll leave you the room to continue the briefing."

Cole and Harris saluted Donahue as he left the room.

"The CIA needs your help," Morgan said as he reached up to loosen his tie. "Have you been to Annrabur?"

"I went to Ann Arbor some years ago when UT played Michigan," Cole said with a grin. "Does that count?"



“Not quite.”

“I haven’t been there either,” Harris responded with a more professional tone.

“It’s close to the border with Afghanistan,” Morgan said unbuttoning the top button on his shirt and walking over to a briefcase. “I have intel that there’s about to be a massive shipment of heroin that’s going to cross the border and brought to Annratur where it will be divided up and sent all over the world. And I need your help to secure it.” Morgan pulled a hard-shell laptop out of the briefcase, opened it, and showed an aerial map of a city with a red pin next to it.

“Do you have briefing documents to share with the team?” Cole asked.

“There are none,” Morgan responded. “This is a CIA mission, not an Army mission.”

Harris looked confused. “The CIA doesn’t use briefing documents?”

Morgan shook his head. “For all intents and purposes, no. I have pictures I can show you and information I can share with you verbally, but nothing can be written down or printed.”

“Wait,” Cole interjected. “If this isn’t an Army mission, then won’t we be leaving our post? We are supposed to help with the VIP visit tomorrow.”

“Colonel Donahue has granted leave for your squadron,” Morgan said. “It’s on the other side of the country. Expect it to take us all night to drive there, and we will set up in a house of friendlies for the day. Tomorrow night, we will scout the target. The following night, we’ll storm the facility, grab the drugs, and bring them to a secure location for disposal.”

“It sounds like you don’t even need me to say yes,” Cole said, “but count us in.”

“Glad to hear it,” Morgan said and put out his hand so Cole could shake it.

When Cole and Harris returned to the barracks, the rest of the squadron was waiting outside. The mood was light—Hanley seemed to be at the center of everyone’s attention. Boykin and Glover were reaching into the paper bag and tasting what they pulled out. Williams passed.

“If Williams doesn’t want any, then you sure wouldn’t like it either,” Glover said to Hanley.

“You especially wouldn’t like where it came from,” Williams added.

“Why won’t you just tell me?” Hanley begged.

“Mambas,” Cole said addressing the group. The smiles in the group dropped.

“He came for us, didn’t he?” Boykin asked as he rubbed his head.

“Pack up,” Cole said. “We leave at sunset.”

“It was sunset fifteen minutes ago,” Faisal pointed out.

Cole looked up to the sky. “Then we’re already running behind.”

“Where are we going?” Grange asked.

“That is on a need-to-know basis,” Cole said.

Harris extended his arm and placed his pointed finger in Grange’s chest. “And you don’t need to know.”

“Is he really from the CIA?” Williams asked.

“Since when did everyone think they could ask so many questions of their commanding officer?” Harris asked.

“Get your stuff and let’s go,” Cole commanded. “And if anyone asks, the Black Mambas are taking a couple of well-earned days off.”

The humvees drove across Dehmar without any major events,

though no one from the Black Mambas slept in the bumpy ride over the mountains. The men passed the time in their usual way—playing desert island, never have I ever, and would you rather.

When they arrived at the safe house, the sun was just coming up. A Dehmari man came running out to greet them and ushered them out of their vehicles. Another man started pulling a large, brown tarp over the vehicles and grabbed a push broom to clear the tire tracks.

The first man started talking to Morgan in Dehmari Persian as they entered the house. Cole was immediately behind Morgan, and he motioned for Boykin to catch up to him. Boykin was especially good with languages and had picked up some of the local dialects. Cole tapped on his ear and pointed to the man leading them in. A few seconds later, Boykin started nodding and leaned close to Cole.

“He’s saying we’re late,” Boykin whispered.

“Late for what?” asked Harris who was also leaning in.

Boykin gave Harris a strange look and turned back to listen to the man speaking. “It arrived yesterday. It will be gone soon.”

Cole put up his hand to acknowledge and also let Boykin know he could stop talking.

They entered a dining room, and there was breakfast all across the table for the men.

“Eat and get some rest,” Morgan told them. “Cole, a word?”

Harris had already grabbed a plate when Cole called out to him. Harris put his plate down and followed Cole and Morgan out of the room. Morgan led them to a bedroom upstairs.

“The timeline changed,” Morgan said as he put his briefcase on the bed, opened it, and got out his laptop. “Our

friends tell me that today is the last day the heroin will be in Annratur. We will need to take the 48 hours we had to plan and squeeze it down to twelve.”

Harris spoke first. “That’s not a lot of time to—”

“We will make it work,” Cole interrupted.

“Good,” Morgan said. “We’ve been told that a trailer is going to leave the facility after dark and head for a nearby airfield. We can’t strike so early that the truck isn’t loaded yet, but we can’t hit the truck on the road or we risk a threat to civilians.”

“Got it,” Cole said. “After chow, Glover and Hanley will make the first run while the other sleep. Glover will look for rooftops to set up on, and Hanley can set up some cameras to get us eyes on the facility. Next, Williams and Grange. They will scout for strike points. Are we OK to use explosives?”

“As long as you don’t incapacitate the truck, that should be fine. And it would help in burning down the facility when we leave.”

“Great,” Morgan said as he sat on the bed and started typing on his laptop. “Let’s plan to talk again at 1400.”

Cole nodded and motioned for Harris to follow him into the hallway. When they were outside, Cole stopped Harris before going down the stairway.

“I am the commander of this squad, and you need to let me speak first. I am the one that accepted this mission, and I am responsible for the team.”

“If you don’t want to hear what I have to say,” Harris said, “then why have you brought me into every meeting?”

“Because I want your perspective.”

“But you haven’t listened to it.

“I have. I just disagree.”

Harris narrowed his eyes. “Permissions to get chow, sir?”

Cole rolled his eyes. “Go.”

The briefing at 1400 was satisfactory. Cole assembled the team in the dining room with a half dozen screens up—some with live camera feeds, some with pictures of the known drug runners, some with aerial pictures of the route from the facility to the airport. Morgan stood in the doorway and watched as Cole outlined the plan. It was a mere 15 minutes before Cole let everyone go to relax.

At 1800, the squad left Morgan at the house to watch the monitors. Each man wore two body cameras, one on his helmet and one on his chest. Morgan didn’t have enough screens to see everything, so he prioritized Cole and Glover to start.

Glover was positioned on a rooftop about 50 yards away. Hanley and Boykin positioned themselves at a park next to a soccer field across the street. Hanley pointed a parabolic microphone at the facility, and Boykin listened in to interpret. Harris, Williams, and Faisal were in a borrowed van. They were going to take the backdoor into the facility while Cole and Grange waited a block away in an alleyway. They were tasked with securing the truck.

After about twenty minutes, Hanley turned off his microphone.

“What did you do that for?” Boykin asked.

“Maghrib.”

Just then, a man singing came on several loudspeakers across town. It was time for the early evening prayers.

Cole got on his radio, “M, team is in position. How are visuals?”

“Coming in clear,” Morgan replied.

“Copy. Now we wait.”

After about twenty minutes, there was silence across the city and Hanley turned on his microphone. Immediately he could hear several men talking.

“I have ears,” Hanley said on the radio.

Boykin furrowed his brow and looked at Hanley. “I can’t hardly make anything out. It’s like an echo.”

Hanley looked around to see if anyone could see him, and he stood up and raised his arms to aim the microphone differently. “How’s this?” he asked. Boykin shook his head. Hanley moved. “This?” Boykin shook his head again. Hanley moved again and Boykin put up his hand. Hanley froze.

“It’s happening,” Boykin said in a low voice. “Time is now,” he said clearly into the radio.

“Williams, move,” Cole said.

Williams, Harris, and Faisal exited the van and approached the facility. Harris stood on one side of the door while Faisal was on the other. Williams placed the explosive device next to the door handle and went to the side that Harris was standing on. He squeezed the trigger of the device in his hand, and the door popped open with a bang.

Immediately they were shouting on the inside of the facility and a man came running out of the side door to get into the truck. Cole and Grange were running up to the truck when the man stopped and pulled out a weapon. Before either of them could react, there was a noise and the man fell to the ground. Glover came on the radio, “I got him.”

Cole checked the man for keys and found them.

“Take the truck,” Grange said.

“I can’t until we’re sure that everything is inside.”

“Just warm it up,” Grange said. “We’ll take care of it.”

Hanley and Boykin approached the front of the facility and waited. A man and a woman came running out, and Boykin

shouted in Dari for them to get on the ground with their hands on their heads. They did.

Harris and Williams entered the back door first, and they shouted for people to get on the ground. They didn't see anyone carrying guns, so they just motioned for those people to get down. They had cleared the back when they heard several pops and then a loud yell of exertion. They turned a corner and saw a man sliding across the floor of the trailer loading area. Grange was about ten feet away breathing heavy with an intense look on his face. There were two other men with guns, but they were holding them in the air. Harris and Williams fixed on them immediately and shouted for them to get on the ground. The men tossed their guns and got on the floor. Faisal came running in and went straight at Grange.

“Were you hit?” Faisal asked.

“No.” Grange grunted.

Morgan got on the radio and said, “Hanley, get the van and take over to the truckside. We need to clear out.”

“Copy,” Hanley said leaving Boykin at the front.

“Are we secure?” Cole asked on the radio.

“Just checking the north side of the building,” Harris responded. There was a minute-long pause, and then “All clear.”

“Truck is closed with the load,” Grange said.

The truck engine turned. “Grange, get in here. We're leaving,” Cole said on the radio.

“Everyone else, leave through the west door,” Hanley said. “I'm waiting. Glover, pack up. You're next.”

When they got to the safe house, Morgan had already wrapped up what dining room space. All visuals, notes, and the like were disposed of.

“That was fast,” Glover said.

“It’s like we were never here,” Boykin said.

Williams slapped his shoulder. “We never were.”

“Enjoy yourselves, men,” Morgan said as he pointed to a case of beer in the kitchen. “Don’t go too crazy. And Cole, we’ll debrief in the morning and make plans to get you back to Kanabad.”

“Copy,” Cole responded.

As the beers started getting distributed, Faisal walked over to Hanley with the paper bag. “Here,” he said. “Try some. You’ve earned it.”

Hanley smiled and reached into the back to pull out some white bits. He put them in his mouth and chewed. They crunched, and his tongue retreated into his throat.

“It’s so salty! What is it?”

“It’s the ground of bladder stone of a horse,” Faisal told him.

“It’s great for replenishing electrolytes in this heat,” Grange said with a wink.



## chapter five

*Ann M. Beardsley*

THE HELICOPTER BUCKED UNDER the strong winds in the valley between the rugged mountaintops of Dehmar. Even now, in September, snow covered the tips and the sheen of the ice glared in the strong sunlight. Unable to fly higher because of density altitude, the aircraft struggled to make it through the narrow pass. A particularly strong gust sent the craft careening toward the towering cliffs and a narrow river appeared out the right side of the helicopter for a moment before righting itself.

“Like carrots in the bottom of a blender,” thought MSG Cole. “Up and down and around, slicing through that channel between life and death.” He loved the adrenalin rush of a completed mission, especially now that they were nearly back to Kanabad. Not normally so poetic, he figured the lack of sleep, the extra coffee, and the fact his team had all made it back without serious injury messed with his pragmatic, analytical mind. That, or Harris had slipped something into his coffee, hard to tell.

Cole liked Harris but figured the man would still be

harbouring some resentment that he'd been passed over for team leader. Ah, well, he thought, the man would outgrow it or not. Hell, chances were they'd all be dead in a few years anyway. Time was short, and he saw no reason to hold a grudge. Except maybe against Morgan, he'd make an exception for the lanky CIA officer. The way Morgan sneaked around, the way he knew what was going on before they did, caused the hairs on the back of Cole's neck to raise, which he only felt when there was something odd going down. And his neck had been itching all damn day.

It was a fluke they'd caught a copter ride back to Kanabad, maybe that had caused the itch. The pilot was dead-heading back after dropping off another team nearby but had been delayed by weather. One of the translators had offered to take their Humvee back to the base later that day, and Cole had accepted. A few extra hours of down time would be a good morale-booster for the team.

He glanced around at the rest of his team. Harris leaned against the side of the craft, legs splayed in front of him, fingers clasped, eyes closed, his helmet pulled low over his forehead. He appeared asleep, but Cole would bet his last dollar that the man was wide awake. Glover and Williams were deep in conversation, but judging by the occasional snickers, he guessed they were comparing either the effects of the recently deployed explosives or the women they'd had during their last leave. Should be named Bang and Boom, he thought, and one side of his mouth curved up. He'd have to mention that at the next Black Mambas meeting.

“What you laughing at, Master Sarge?” asked Glover.

“Your mother,” he gave his standard reply, and saw Williams chortle as he nudged the other man.

On the other side of the craft, Grange was reading from

the small Bible he carried everywhere, Faisal was leafing through the instructions for a new medical device that the hospital on base had recently acquired, and Boykin mumbled something unintelligible to himself, probably trying to remember verb tenses in Dari. That left Hanley. Where...there he was, on the other side of Williams. The man could somehow make you look right over him, never noticing his presence.

The helicopter banked right in a strong gust.

“Tiger7 returning to base, 3.5 to the south. Please advise,” said the pilot, deftly handling the speaker on the controls and guiding the copter back to the left.

“Cleared to land,” said the operator. “No activity.”

Cole relaxed slightly. No activity meant that they hadn’t seen any enemy action nearby, and the helicopter would probably—always just a probability, as nothing was certain—*not* run into enemy fire on its descent.

And so it proved.

Team 1 disembarked amid the dust and turbulence and wound their way in the direction of the barracks. A shower, some good old American pizza, and maybe some TV time would be good. *I Love Lucy* was a team favourite, but they’d just gotten a new episode of *Ted Lasso*. Everyone but Faisal identified with the rough, tough Roy Kent. Faisal couldn’t make up his mind between Coach Beard and Nate. Nobody wanted to be Ted.

But halfway back, Cole’s radio flared to life. “Gunfire reported in the direction of the embassy. Anyone in the vicinity, please respond.”

The embassy was several miles away, but everyone knew there had been previous attacks on the Charge d’Affaires, Richard Keating. Without an ambassador in place, Keating was

more or less the acting ambassador and representative of the US government. Cole didn't quite understand the hostility in which the Ghaf-Yohmar held Keating, as the man was basically a bureaucrat who held fancy dinners and placated local leaders—in Cole's book, nobody with any real power. Absently, he patted his automatic rifle. Now *that* was power. Still, it was Cole's duty to protect the man even if he didn't respect him. He whistled for his team to follow and headed back to the helicopter, its blades powered down but still turning.

Within two minutes, they were once more airborne, and within five they were circling the embassy—or, rather, what had been the embassy. From the air, smoke billowed from sides of the building. The protective walls had fallen in, people scrambled in to provide rescue and out to escape the building. Flashes of gunfire erupted in the northern corner of the building. Cole motioned for his team to prepare for a gunfight as the helicopter hovered a few feet above the street, and they were out the door before it had finished landing.

Cole keyed his radio. "Faisal, with me. We'll head for Keating's office direct. Glover, Hanley, cover the east then head north. Grange, Harris, scout to the west, then find me. Williams, Boykin, talk to the locals, find out what you can."

He took off at a run, Faisal close behind. As they cleared the wall, Cole heard the screech of tires when a vehicle gunned its engine and departed somewhere off to the north. Sliding down the stones and gravel of the former wall, he glanced around. He heard crying, the sizzle of a fire extinguisher, but no more gunshots. Smoke and gunfire residue filled the air and he covered his mouth.

He rounded a corner, nearly hitting a young secretary with his rifle. She backed up in surprise, her temple slowly dripping

blood onto her supporting hand.

“Not seriously hurt,” he immediately analysed, so instead he asked, “Keating?”

The woman pointed back the way she’d come and he took off down the hallway. Gunfire had punctured doors and walls, smears of blood marking the places where people had steadied themselves. A few survivors rested in the hallway, either too shocked or too injured to leave. Cole heard voices from the far end.

They were too late. Keating lay behind his desk, shot at least half a dozen times in the chest, spattering his white, so white, shirt. Blood pooled beneath him, spilling off to the sides onto a blue Persian carpet. His glasses had fallen to one side, and his right hand still held a pen. Faisal approached him, laid a finger on his neck, and shook his head.

“I’ll go see where else I’m needed,” Faisal said as he stood. Cole nodded, then noticed the three other people in the office.

“What happened?” he asked, and braced himself for a long afternoon. There’d been a delivery of food by an overweight messenger who spoke English, so everyone assumed he was permitted to be there, a sudden scuffle, a loud explosion, and then, depending on who you asked, anywhere from a dozen to a hundred people shooting everything in sight. At one end, black-clad ninjas walking through walls, demon-like humans looking for blood, masked raiders looking to rape, pillage, and steal. At the other end, some embassy employees hadn’t seen anything unusual at all. Separating truth from fiction—and one person’s truth was another person’s fiction—and the important from the unimportant would take days. In the end, though, Keating and six others lay dead.

As he listened, Cole thought about the timing, and it didn’t sit right. When Major Matrix arrived and took over, Cole

found a quiet place to sit and think, then he gathered his team and went in search of Morgan.

They found the CIA officer in a small office in the southern wing of the embassy, typing on a laptop, ear buds in his ears, ignoring the hustle, bustle, and bloodshed around him.

“Do you have a moment, sir?” asked Cole politely, and stepped inside. The guys remained just outside the door.

Morgan stood. “Of course. I didn’t expect you back until much later. Did the mission go well? I’ll expect your report tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. About that—”

“What about it?”

“Well, I’m wondering if it was necessary, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

Cole paused, searching for the right words. “In addition to our other jobs, you sent us to rescue a shopkeeper, a man who by your account was in imminent danger of being kidnapped by enemy forces, a man who has been feeding you information about the GHAF-YOHMAR.”

Morgan stiffened. “That’s right. And...?”

“The man isn’t Muslim, he’s Hindu. And he doesn’t speak Dari, Turkmen, Russian, or Uzbek, Staff Sergeant Boykin tried. The man had only a smattering of Dehmari Persian and Boykin didn’t speak Hindu. His wife or daughter—I’m not sure which—had to translate for us. So if he’s an informant, how does he get his information? A Hindu man won’t involve the women in his family for something like this; it’s too dangerous. And while he might be in danger because of his nationality, it wouldn’t be because of the information he provides. So why was this so urgent?”

“That’s not for you to know. It’s enough to know that it

was necessary. Now I suggest that you and your team head back to base and take a well-deserved break. That's all, Master Sergeant Cole."

The itch on the back of his neck grew. Cole ignored the hint to leave. "Did you get us out of the way on purpose, Morgan, so that we wouldn't be here to save Richard Keating? And you would have been here to tidy up before we came back, since you didn't expect us until later today? That's what it looks like to me. Sir." He said the last word in a tone of voice that indicated the opposite.

Morgan reached to close the door and Cole stepped back. As he did so, Morgan whispered, "Just do your job, Master Sergeant. Don't mess up someone else's."

Cole glared at him, deliberately turned his back, and left.

As they left, Harris cocked his head to the right, and the two men stepped into a nearby hallway.

"Did you mean it, Cole? You really think Morgan had it in for Keating?" Harris whispered.

"I don't know. Just...something seems off. And too convenient that we were far away on something that really didn't seem all that important when you get right down to it." He shrugged. "I wish I knew."

"How did you know the shopkeeper was Hindu?"

"The family had a tulasi plant in the front courtyard and a household shrine just inside the front door. And the women weren't covered up the way the Muslim women do. If they'd been Muslim, we wouldn't have seen them."

"Let me know if you figure it all out, okay?"

"Will do. But it's nothing I'm going to figure out in the next hour, so let's go find a shower, pizza, and TV in that order."

Which they did. The evening was filled with laughter, a fair

amount of beer, teasing, and much joking until Roy Kent kissed Keeley in Episode 4, and the boos and hisses echoed throughout the barracks.



## 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 Annrabur.

“Hey, Cole sir, this is Charlie One. We’re now entering Annrabur. 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

*Alex Brantham*

"TEAM MEETING, NOW," BARKED Cole as he stormed into the tent.

Glover looked up, still struggling to get his boots off. "Hey, man, what's the rush? We only just got in, for fuck's sake."

"Yeah, I haven't even had time to take a crap yet," added Faisal, unbuckling his harness and throwing it onto his cot.

Cole had reached the table that served as their impromptu meeting room. "I said NOW!"

Glances were flung between the men and a short silence fell. Hanley and Faisal stood up, as if to comply, but then held back. A space filled the room, and Harris stepped into it.

"The guys could do with a break, Cole. What's the rush?"

"Gather round and you'll find out," said Cole, as he took up his position at the head of the briefing table. "We've got a job to do, soldier."

"Cut the command crap, Cole," said Harris. "You're not in the Rangers anymore. We do things differently here, as you'd know if that extra stripe hadn't gone to your head."

Cole leaned forward, his hands balled into fists leaning on

the edge of the table. He paused for just a moment before continuing. "Thank you for that helpful input, esteemed comrade. Now, if you don't mind, I have something that I would very much appreciate discussing with you all. As time is of the essence, perhaps we could expedite this matter?"

Boykin looked at Grange. Hanley looked at Faisal. They all looked at Harris, who shrugged and took a seat at the table. The others gathered round, Glover still in one boot.

"Now," began Cole, "we need to talk about those four Marines. I don't need to remind you that they were captured right under our noses."

"Yeah," said Williams, "we all feel shit about that but there was nothing we could do. Unless you want to say otherwise?"

Cole shook his head. "There may be a time to review what happened back there, but this isn't it. The simple fact is this - four American soldiers have been captured by the bad guys, while we were on the clock, and it's our job to get them back."

"Says who?" asked Harris. "Have you had any orders, or are you just looking for another of your crazy adventures?"

"No orders, no. Since when did we need those? We're the ones here in the field, and it's our job to take responsibility for those men."

"Meaning what, exactly?" asked Harris.

"I'd have thought it was obvious, but if you want me to spell it out then I will. We need to head back to Annratur to locate and extract them, and we need to do it right now while there is still a trail to follow. If we leave it for even a few hours, those boys will be dead if they're lucky or, more likely, penned up somewhere we'll never find them."

"Have you checked with the Major?" asked Boykin.

"He's not available. He's out with team three and won't be back until tonight at the earliest. Maybe not until the morning,



which is much too late. And, before you ask, Colonel Rizer isn't contactable either - I just checked. Which means that it's down to us to take the initiative."

Harris leaned forward. "That's all very well, Cole, but comic book heroics are just stupid. If your previous efforts at planning a mission are anything to go by, we'll just end up running round in the dark getting shot at while our targets are disappearing into the distance."

"He's got a point, Cole," said Glover, who had by now managed to release both feet. "I'm all in favour of bringing the boys home and all that but it won't do anyone any good if we just get blown up ourselves."

"That's right," said Harris. "I'm really sorry that those four guys are in the shit but there's nothing we can do about it. Whatever you're planning, I'm out."

Cole opened his mouth to reply but, before any words had managed to form themselves, he was interrupted by a commotion outside. Not that the secure area of the military base was ever exactly quiet, but this shouting had a different level of urgency that could not be ignored.

Faisal was closest to the door and, without needing to be instructed or asked, left the group and stuck his head out to see what was going on.

He quickly ducked back inside. "You need to see this, Cole. There's trouble out here."

Cole, closely followed by Harris, ran to the entrance and peered out. The street - or, more accurately, the dusty strip running between the lines of tents and other temporary buildings - was usually occupied by a steady stream of men on foot in various uniforms, with the occasional truck thrown in to make it interesting.

Now, looking to the left, there was just an empty stretch of

dirt with a crowd of assorted personnel gathered about fifty metres away. Looking to the right, there was a similar view with the added element of a small knot of people just a few metres off.

One, a swarthy looking man in generic civilian clothes, had one arm wrapped around the neck of a woman in army fatigues, his other hand holding a pistol to her head. On his shoulders hung a small backpack, which from the way it was hanging seemed to contain something heavy.

As Harris stuck his head out of the opening, crouching just below Cole, the man with the gun spun his head in their direction. "Back," he shouted, "or she gets it."

Harris looked up at Cole. "It's Mary," he hissed. "The bastard's got Mary..."

Cole squinted into the low afternoon sun. Harris was right, it was Mary, the comms specialist they'd been drinking with at the fancy dress party just a few nights before, though she did look different now she wasn't wearing that pirate costume. He looked down at Harris, nodded for him to go back inside, and muttered "Take Glover out the back".

Harris slipped back inside the tent, leaving Cole alone in the doorway. Looking around, there didn't seem to be anyone else within speaking distance. Damn, he was going to have to deal with this one himself.

Cole slowly eased both his hands forward and showed them to the gunman. "I'm unarmed," he called. "What do you want?"

The man's eyes darted in all directions before resting back on Cole. "You can come and join us if you want. We all could have a party." For the first time, Cole got a handle on the man's accent: this guy was from Texas. His face looked vaguely familiar: he was sure he'd seen him around the base before,

just another uniform among thousands of others.

"You're a long way from home, bro," said Cole. "What's up?"

Still locked in the man's grip, Mary was wriggling but getting nowhere. Her captor thrust his weapon deeper into the side of her head. "Keep still, bitch, or you're gone." Then he turned back to Cole. "This is my home, you shithead. Took me a while but I finally figured out where I really came from. And now you guys are all going home, one way or another."

Cole eased out from the tent - it's canvas and wooden frame wasn't much protection anyway - and, still showing his hands, took a couple of steps into the road. "Okay, so talk to me. What do you want right now?"

Behind him, Cole could just about hear the sound of his team shifting away from the front of the tent, followed by the soft rippling of ropes being undone and canvas being lifted at the back. But, whatever else, he had to keep his eyes forward. A glance in the wrong direction could be bad news for all of them.

"I'm taking her out of here, with me. Bring me a car. A civilian one."

"What, a Corolla or something?" Cole didn't think for one moment that the model was going to be important, but every second wasted in conversation could be useful.

"Sure. Bring it here, then I take the girl and we leave."

"What happens then? Will you let her go?"

"That's for others to decide. Right now it's a simple choice for you."

Cole was running out of ideas and time. "All right," he said, "we'll get one for you." He turned to the small crowd standing at a distance down the street, and shouted: "The guy wants a civilian car. Someone go and fetch one."

A distant "Got it" confirmed that he'd been heard. Cole turned back to the gunman. "It's on its way, okay? Let's all stay calm and everything will be fine." Still holding his hands in an open position, he slowly moved across the road, so that he was on the same side as the gunman, but still maintaining his distance. There was no need to get too close, but he did want to change the angle of the man's gaze. He also needed to change the position of Mary's head... Sure enough, the man turned his shoulders to follow Cole, bringing Mary around with him so that Cole couldn't take a shot without risking Mary. Not that Cole had a gun, of course, at least not one the man could see, but this guy's training had clearly only covered basic combat, if that.

He clearly didn't know that no-one was ever going to let him leave the base with a hostage, certainly not a female one. Nor did he understand that the car was never going to come. Nor did he hear, as Cole did, the softest of clicks as Glover readied his weapon beside the next tent to theirs. And, given that a rifle bullet travels considerably faster than sound, he wouldn't have heard the crack of the shot, nor the impact of the bullet on the side of his head, nor the soft "plop" as his brain exploded, nor Mary's scream as she fell to the floor covered in the remains of the contents of his head.

Within seconds, the place was overrun with personnel from every service within the compound. Mary, thankfully, was fine - a bit splattered, but fine.

The Black Mambas gathered around. Cole nodded appreciatively at his team. "Nice shot, Glover."

Mary was rather more effusive in her thanks, which extended to a big hug for Glover. "Yeah, thanks - that's the best present I've had for years."

"Who do you think he is, Santa Claus?" asked Hanley.

Faisal laughed: "Looking at that nose, I'd say he was more like Rudolph."

"In which case, he can pull my sleigh any time," said Mary.

Dealing with that mess - the administration, not the street cleaning - took an hour they really didn't have. By the time they were able to get back together in their tent, Cole was getting anxious.

"You did good," said Harris. "Even Toolan might not have handled that as well."

"Thanks," said Cole. "I think the learning is that we all did our jobs, and we got the right outcome. Agreed?"

Nods and murmurs signified assent around the table.

"Now," he continued, "I want to return to the subject of those Marines. There are four of our comrades out there. We lost them, and I reckon it's our responsibility to get them back, and that we need to do it now. Are you with me?"

He looked around the group. One by one they nodded, until finally he turned to Harris. "Well, Tom, are you with us?"

"Hell, yeah," said Harris. "Let's go get the fuckers."

## 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

*Jaysen O'Dell*

THE WHITE BUS SEEMED out of place. Armored Personal Carriers, tanks, AH-64s. These belonged here. A white Provost painted with the logo of the Red Cross should not have seemed out of place. Every combat zone had a dozen. As Staff Sergeant Chris Grange walked toward the bus he realized that it wasn't the bus that was out of place. The rifles, machine guns, and ammo boxes being loaded into the cargo holds were out of place. "Now you have become death, the destroyer of worlds", he mumbled under his breath.

Staff Sergeant Emir Faisal mutter back, "That is a fitting indictment of what we do."

"Yeah, I have a problem with that." Grange pointed at the bus. "This will get someone into some hot shit later. Use UN or some Gates Foundation crap. The Cross ... leave them out of it. These guys... they matter. Gad damned Morgan."

"Speak of satan's left nut..."

As they approached Morgan greeted them. "Good morning men. Diver is Victor. Victor Kite. Former operator in UKSF. Been here since the commies left. He has experience

with the area and pulled some strings to get us cleared to the zone.”

“Self preservation you twit. I figure you spooks will make a monkeys mess of my area if I leave you alone.”

“Mr Kite.” The acknowledgment from Grange and Faisal was simultaneous. Kite nodded in acknowledgment. He had a haggard look about him. The cliché “kind recognized kind” exists because it is true. Grange and Faisal saw their future. A bit overweight. Hair that would never see a “salon”. Hands that struggled to be gentle. Eyes that seemed to see something few others recognized. The inability to hear.

“What?”

“Good morning sir”, Faisal spoke directly at Kite.

“Eh. We all woke up. All we can hope for is to sleep in peace later. If we are lucky, sleep we choose.”

“Kind of bleak” muttered Grange.

“British,” was the one word reply from Morgan.

“Black Mambas!” Master Sergeant Dolton Cole yelled from his location directly behind the driver.

“Hoorah!” The unit replied.

“Fecking Yanks” mutter Kite from the driver’s seat.

The bus was immediately devoid of any motion or noise.

Morgan looked at Kite. “Let get going”.

Kite picked up the radio. “Get to your business.”

Cole looked over the men. Deep breath. Sorting some papers. He began.

“Secondary briefings prior to operational deployment will commence.

“Recap of the primary briefing is as follows... Four US Marines captured by Ghaf Yohmar and believed to be held in Annratur. Our mission is the recovery of these assets. Refer

to your primary briefing packets for personal details.

“Beginning secondary briefings...

“Objective... Open to change. Acquire actionable intel leading to the location of or additional intel sources relevant to the location of the assets. Intel will be vetted in real time with objective updates communicated via direct, in person interaction. I will manage communication of objective updates. Methods will be communicated in the secondary comms briefing.

“Action overview... We have identified an opportunity for wide social interaction at the weekly medical clinic. We will be paired with CIA vetted Dehmari Persian interpreters. Leverage your training to provide initial assessment of clinic visitors and administer care as appropriate. You are part of the medical team until relieved. If you acquire intel use the blue assistance flag. I will be posing as your support and will relay acquired intel or request interrogation outside the clinic. You will **not** be provided realtime 2 way comms but we will have ears on you. Secondary comms briefing will provide detail.

“Sig has been in area and indicates heavy radio surveillance. Assume you are insecure in any language or comm form. Big Army has secured the facility so we are going in unarmed and unarmored. There will be heavy troop presence. I have required small arms be available via overload on select security detail. Look for blue indicators at the grip to identify your arms. Use password ‘phoenix’ to indicate your need for arms.

“Secondary comms brief will be presented by Sig member First Sergeant Jackson. Jackson?”

First Sergeant James Jackson stood and turned to face the team.

“Secondary communications briefing.

“As mentioned by Master Sergeant Cole, you will have no

two way comms. We have added listening devices to your med kits. Keep them as close as possible. We will have one or more 35 fox dedicated to each channel. They will provide immediate validation of intel. The thirty five fox will have authority to end the op for individual members or the unit once actions are determined. To facilitate, sig has added a pager to your med kit. Should your pager be activated take the indicated actions. Please note the following pager codes.

“999: abort operation with prejudice. Return to vehicle for immediate evac.

“888: detain current client until indicated

“777: release client

“666: report for instruction. Use the blue assist to avoid attention

“555: close station and return to vehicle

“444: delay client per 35 fox. Raise blue assist and direction will be provided.

“333: client identified as hostile operator. Use extreme caution. We will move small arms carrier close as precaution.

“222: no op. This will be used to provide randomness.

“111: close operation. Casual exfil to vehicle.

“Good hunting.”

Master Sergeant Cole was back on his feet.

“Take 5 and review the med kit for basic inventory. You are all qualified in the use of all equipment included.”

Grange looked at his kit. It was a basic first aid kit. He always felt weird playing nurse. Even to his own nice and nephew. “Uncle Bear” was what they called him. He was 6’ 3” and 284lbs with dark hair and full beard. His wife would laugh every time they called him Uncle Bear and comment “he’s the backside of the bear sweeties, he won’t bite no matter how bad he smells”. The memory made him smile.

“Grange, we aren’t giving you a CIA interpreter. We want you to work with Faisal.”

“Ok. Anything I need to know about?”

“Kids. They love you. Even my brats call you Uncle Bear. Every time we are in the field, they flock to you. Morgan has some additional supplies for your kit. Candy. I swear they are clean. I watched him pick them up from PX.”

“This will be fun”, Faisal said from the seat behind Grange. “Hell, even my wife likes the bear.”

“I like your wife.”

“Fuck you Grange! Fuck you.”

“That’s what she said.” Everyone chuckled at Victor Kite’s unexpected comment.

“Black Mambas!”

“Hoorah!”

The secondary briefings continued.

The convoy pulled into a parking lot surrounded by multi-story buildings. The men in the bus shuffled away from the windows and instinctively reached for firearms that were stowed below.

“Gentlemen”, Victor said, “please let me assure you that I have personally overseen the securing of this area as I have no intention of dying here today. With the generosity of your country’s NGOs I’ve managed to purchase this block and have staffed security with my colleagues. All of whom served in Her Majesty’s armed forces. You are perfectly safe here.”

“You know they’ve blown up bigger buildings?”

“Yes, but we don’t have planes of that size here!” The smile on Victor’s face conflicted with the steel hard glare in his eye. “Mr Morgan and his lot have placed additional measures to ensure the safety of the teams here today.”



The unit exited the bus.

“Morgan, get your guys over here. Harris, make sure everyone has their station identified. Everyone get your nurse on.”

From inside the bus came a quiet, “That’s what she said” followed by a lone chuckle.

Faisal and Grange went through a door marked with the Red Cross logo and the universal entry sign. A mosquito wing (Private First Class) who was clearly right out of infantry school started to react. Faisal, in a hilarious falsetto, looked at Granger and said, “Us nurse don’t know nothing about no soldiering so we sweetheart!”. Granger taking his lead used his deepest voice to reply, “no we don’t, and anyone that acts like we do will be taken out back and educated.” The mosquito wing’s sergeant understood the message and smacked the PFC on the helmet.

“Excuse me ma’am, we’ve been instructed to assist with the children today”. Faisal was speaking to a woman in a hijab in Persian.

“He’s... huge!” She replied.

“The kids will love him. We don’t know why, but they all do.”

“He must have Allah in his heart.”

“He would agree with you if you can accept his name for Allah.”

“Ah...” she said thoughtfully. “A man of kindness wrapped in the shape of a bear!”

Faisal translated this in realtime to Granger. Granger burst out in his normal raucous laughter and bowed to her in the traditional, formal greeting used between men and women of Dehmar.

“Tell her ‘may Allah smile on you today and all days. May he bless you with happiness’. I think that is right reply. If not ... fix it.

Faisal translated his message — he included the direction to “fix it” — and the woman laughed bowing in response. She turned to lead them to the children’s room. Looking over her shoulder she told Faisal, “It’s a shame American soldiers are not as civil as American nurses.”

The “room” Faisal and Granger worked out of was nothing more than a large office with a table on one side. The table was for examination, writing and any other activity that needed a flat surface higher than the floor. When they arrived, the room was already full of parents and children under the age of 6 with a long line down the hall. The children were in various states of unhappiness.

“Please be courteous of the mothers and daughters. I know it is rude to say, but I must.”

As Faisal translated, Grangers face reddened. “Ma’am, I promise to respect all as I have respected you.”

“I believe you” she replied. “May you see the face of Allah for the work you do.”

“Faisal, who is this?”

“This is Kahli.”

“Hello Kahli, you can call me Bear.”

Kahli buried her face in the young boy’s shoulder.

“Faisal...?”

After some exchange, Faisal replied, “the is Ahmed, her brother. He is 10. Their farther forbade them from coming here but he doesn’t want her to die. His other sisters have died of ‘the fever’ and his mother won’t leave the house.”

“Boy has balls.” Granger started doing some basic checks. Temperature. Pulse. Eyes. Ears. “She has a cold. I don’t think this is the same fever he is worried about. Ask him about vaccinations.”

“None. She’s never been to a doctor. Dad seems ... overly controlling?”

“Yeah. Ask him why that is. Also ask about giving her some vax.”

Faisal and Ahmed chatted for a bit. Granger’s pager when off.

“Faisal, trip 3. What the hell where you talking about.”

“Kid’s dad is moving product.”

“H?”

“He wants her to have the vax. Draw that out.”

Granger went to get the vaccines. “Flag is up. Others are packing up. Be ready.”

“While you were out he opened up. Lonely kid. Dad is isolating for security. The older brothers are in the business. You have another page. Trip 2. I’m concerned that this kid is going to get beat for bringing the girl here.”

“Do you think we can protect?”

“Directly, no. Fuck, too many ears.”

Pager rattled. Tripple 1. Granger looked at the line of people still waiting to be seen. Morgan was in the doorway. “Gentlemen, we have your relief ready to take over for you.” Two young women stepped into the room.

“He’s bigger than Amira said!”

“Ladies, he is married. And he smells.” Faisal told them in Persian.

“He says you smell.”

Faisal took a quick step away.

Granger laughed. The walls seemed to shake. “All bears

smell. In my defense, I've been puked on, peed on, pooped on and I'm hungry."

Faisal and Granger walked slowly back to the bus.

"... arrival needs to be 15min after the delivery."

Morgan and Cole were discussing some change in the op.

"Granger, Faisal, great work. You worked that kid perfectly."

"You mean we treated him with respect and listened to what he said?" Granger was standing over Morgan looking at him with a bit more disdain than was appropriate. "You know, if you all stopped being part of the problem..."

Faisal stepped between them. "The kid was scared. All we did was offer some hope for his sister. There was no working. What did we get from the other teams?"

"Nothing." Cole was clearly less than satisfied. "To be clear, you did not probe or push for intel. You are certain this was 100% volunteered?"

"Yeah. I'm sure they recorded it."

"We did."

"While Granger was doing the prep I asked the kid why his sisters weren't taken to the clinic. I suggested the standard religious response. He was adamant that it wasn't religion and that his father wasn't practicing Muslim. He said it was about people asking too many questions about their business. He mentioned that he was surprised that we didn't ask what his father did in the business and I told Ahmed it didn't matter to us. He went on to talk about the product, how it arrives and how they use a family restaurant to conduct large scale sales. Apparently there is one planned for tonight."

Morgan looked around. "Get them ready. We've already confirmed the facts. We estimate the transaction will be after

1820 local. The restaurant closes 1800 local. Deliveries start about 6:15. We have briefings being prepared.”

Cole looked at his men. “Black Mambas! Gear up! We move in 30. Full loads. Expect heavy resistance. Make time to find God and be at peace.”

Turning to Granger and Faisal he said, “Morgan has already submitted your names. ‘Fucking badasses that can adapt to anything.’ I’m sure that will be redacted. When we make it back to base I’ll supply the non-existent liquor for our non-existent celebration. Good job.”

“Bear my ass.” Victor said from the bus door. “You’re a fucking snake. We’ve been trying to break that ring for three years. Let me know when you want a job ‘sweetheart’”

“Shit... I forgot about the mic in the bag.” Faisal laughed.

Granger slammed Faisal with his body armor. “Get dressed snookems. We have pills of lead to dispense.”

## chapter ten

*Ioa Petra'ka*

### *SLAVUSH AND THE BEAR*

September nights come swiftly, and often unanticipated, after the long deception of a cloud feathered sky's slow dimming. Siavush flicked aside the oily embroidered curtains that separated the kitchen from the seating area of the restaurant. His eyes flicked through habitual patterns across the gloom. Around low tables—burdened with coffee glasses in various state of depletion, caramel mounds of tobacco leaf and the remaining morsels of dinner—those who lingered in the after hours engaged in the diminished sort of conversation that bubbles and gurgles long after it needs to. Some already succumbed to the fatigue of digestion, and reclining on pillows, laced their hands across fattened bellies and nodded absently in response to murmured words of their fellows.

Though it had been cooling for some time now, the warmth of the kitchen at his back was a familiar and comforting presence against the colder desert air now flowing freely through the common area. As he had learnt from his father, and his grandfather before him, the best way to flush

out the night crowd was to leave every window and door wide to the elements. Discomfort would do what no amount of admonishment and shooing would, and he noted with approval that arms were already being crossed over chests, and palpable disappointment could be felt across the room whenever a sip of coffee was found to be too chilled to offer reprieve.

It was through one of these open doors, and with the aid of a badly flickering street lamp, that Siavush first spied the overly casual movement of men between buildings. They had the look of those trying to not be seen, while trying to not appear as though hiding. The time was coming. Soon his tables would be burdened not with falafel crumbs, but with bricks worth more than the entire surrounding village.

He stepped further back into the shadows for a moment, making certain of his intuition, and then let the curtain fall as he turned back into the kitchen. “Nousha!” he whispered fierce, and flipped his hand toward the back entrance. Despite the tension across his upper back and jaw, he felt a familiar warmth of compassion as he watched his wife flurry about. Illuminated by the waning embers of the stoves, she gathered up the grumbling child who had been curled like a cat in the corner of the larder for the past two hours.

“Vida,” he said more softly, and his daughter’s eyes flashed from the shadows as she turned to face him, melting his heart as they always did. “I will be home soon, mind your mother’s words and stay inside.” Vida nodded sleepily and clutched at Nousha’s leg. He lifted his gaze to his wife’s, and felt slapped by the hard stain of disapproval in her eyes. He felt his arms lift in a shrug, but then stopped himself short. “I can make no other choice, it must be done. Now go. Go.”

She was right, as she always was. He was wagering all of

their souls with these deals, but to refuse would be an offering of their lives, or worse. He shivered and extended his hands over the waning glow of the stove. The wheel of his thoughts slipped into that old deepened rut so easily, things were simpler for my father. At least with the Soviets, you knew what to expect from one day to the next, and they were only there to remove from the land a thing none of us wanted. But when the wounded arm of the USSR pulled itself limp and bleeding from the hole of Afghanistan where they'd stuck it, they had left a smeared trail of gore and opportunistic anger behind, all through the heart of Dehmar.

She was right, but she was also an idealist. If you did not pay tribute to the anger then you might as well be an American sympathiser. There was scarce safety in that prospect, as their flying robots were just as likely to scrape your house and all memory of your family from the cliffs, like the remnants of crushed beetle from the bottom of one's shoe. It did not even matter if you paid your tribute

But of course, things were complicated then as well, and there was just as much anger festering in the cracks behind faces. Siavush and all of his kind would always be the beetles, and there was only so much one could do to stay uncrushed. Making it so there was only one boot above and not two was a start. He shook his head to clear the mud of thought from his eyes, and in that moment the low droning of voices in the common area came to a sudden hush.

He walked back to the entry, pulled aside the gold and blue curtain and felt his heart stop at sight of an ox of a man standing in the doorway. It was only after a moment that he realised the man was facing out, into the flickering light of the street, and had not yet seen him. Those who had lingered too long were rising from the floor and kicked at the thighs of



those in half slumber. Fellow beetles all, they scurried and slipped out side doors into the falling dark, while the man in the doorway hooked a thumb into the lip of his trousers. His manner spoke of obliviousness, but this was only a thin veneer covering a predatory awareness of his surroundings. An American, here? Was the deal compromised already?

Drifting back into the kitchen, he felt, more than observed, the hackles of the foreigner stiffen as the curtain slipped back into place. He knew then that he was known, but it was seemingly of no concern to the man, for through the worn fabric the intimidating shadow moved not.

He had heard fanciful stories told of the great white bears of the far north. It was said that if you saw one, no matter how far off, you were already dead, that it had been tracking you for days and had only just now caught up to the point where your feeble senses could make your mind aware of inevitability. There was no running, no hiding, and not even a rifle round could put a comma in its advance.

Despite, no awareness of inevitability can suppress the instinct toward survival. Unwilling to turn from the threat, he backed through the well-known topology of the kitchen, reached back to push open the wooden door leading to the outside, and collided with a wall of bone and equally hard muscle. A rough hand that smelt of sand and gun oil slipped over his mouth, and he could think only of the northern bear as his thoughts otherwise paralysed. A warm whisper, which smelt of American chewing gum and cheap cigarettes, asked in broken Dehmari, “Quietly. How many in restaurant?”

Siavush shook his head, and the edge of the hand lifted from over his mouth. He could smell his own fear around the gun oil as he spat out, in equally broken English, “Only your kind there.”

Seemingly not expected the answer, the man holding him captive paused, and for the first time he felt something hard, cold and sharp aggravating the side of his ribcage. The point of aggravation became sharp and painful, leading him to taking shallow breaths to avoid movement. The point of pain pulled away, and the man made some intricate gesture with a dull black knife. A shadow peeled out from the wall across the street, ducking through flickers in the light like a moth. “You lie and...”, the blade returned with force, and a trickle of warmth running down his side finished the sentence for him.

“I know of nothing, I only working with kitchen,” Siavush gasp words mashed against the palm of the hand. He saw the other shapes moving amidst the buildings across the square. They advanced on the restaurant despite being in line of sight of the Ox that was surely still guarding the front. Were the Americans on the take here? Of course, they moved brown like no other force in the world; some even say that is the true reason for why they took the place the Russians could never hold, but that was not the impression that the jihadist had made when they asked to use the restaurant.

The mothlike shadow that was crouching below the window gave a signal, and he found himself being dragged back into the abandoned granary that he had intended to sneak through on his way out. These men moved and barked like soldiers, but were dressed like tourists, of all things. Three joined the one that was holding him, and rapidly clipped English flowed around him, sounding as ever at once soft, lyrical and terrifying.

The mothlike one spoke, “Fucking Toolan, I swear by it, I know Toolan from half a klick away and three fifths a bottle down the pipe, it’s him no doubt.” They crouched behind rubble and watched as the Ghaf-Yohmari filed into the

common room, one clearly burdened with the satchel containing riches.

“The fuck is he doing here?” his captor said, with an explosion of peppermint and Marlboros.

One of the men gestured at their captive, and the knife once again dug into his side in silent demand. “I know only kitchen, I see man you call Toolan and then you taking me. Please, I see only this.”

“Ssh!” the fourth hissed and they all froze. Down below, the Ox Toolan rounded the corner, circling the back of the restaurant. All around, Siavush could hear only their breathing, and the sound of boot leather groaning. Toolan stopped at the back door, and almost casually swept aside dust with the toe of his boot, before looking up slowly along the path of footprints he and his captor had left behind, coming to rest with finality on the rubble of the granary.

The bear had been tracking him for days, he thought, as glints of light reflected from Toolan’s eyes. After five minutes of staring down the dark pits and shadows in the granary, he reached into his shirt pocket and extracted a cigarette. A flash of blue flame leapt from behind his muzzling hand, and the white of smoke billowed momentary before drifting slowly across the square.

Not a word was said, but he’d made his point, they were known.

“What now?” someone said beneath the sound of the wind.

“Let me fucking think a minute,” came the answer from his captor.

“Can we use him?” the man gestured at Siavush. The hand tightened around his jaw, pulling his head to the side, eyes wide and bladder threatening to let loose. His thoughts had

become somewhere far away from it all, as though his soul had already bolted for home, but yet remained aware in a choking way that he was still right there, pinned down by the blood and the knife point, the gun oil and the calm, controlling gaze of the bear below.

“No”, the captor said, “nobody here tonight cares if this one dies.” Leather boots creaked as men shifted, and from his distant place of perception, he felt his limp body pulled back through the blackness of the old granary, and with a violence of reconnection to body and mind, found himself face down in the dirt. The boot on the beetle pressed between his shoulder blades, and peppermint promises told of the ruin he would be left in if he didn’t run far away.

Choking and gagging on dust, Siavush scabbled overs rocks and through cracks in the cliffs toward home. He heaved and wept, thinking only of Nousha, and his dear Vida and the warmth of the fire they would have kindled for his return.

## chapter eleven

*Jeanette Everson*

“FUCK THIS,” GRANGE GRINDS a half-smoked roll-up under his boot and glares at the team leader. “I vote we eat, talk, plan.” He turns on his heel and covers the ground to the vehicle in six easy strides.

The others exchange agreement, allowing the practicalities of Grange’s suggestion to temporarily overrule disbelief and anger.

Back at base – a shabby assortment of rooms in a low-budget hotel on the darker side of Annrabur – Boykin puts his limited Dehmari Persian and even more limited charm to use. He *thinks* the sulky youth at the desk has understood enough to phone through a food order, although given the language barrier, he can’t be sure. Boykin hopes the crumpled notes shoved into the lad’s hand, the dodgy grammatical constructs and the repetition of the Dehmari words for *food, here, room, now*, the emphasised certainty of that universal word *Pizza*, and the eight fingers held up in the boy’s face have been enough. They usually eat away from the hotel – dividing into pairs,

fours, never a conspicuous eight – following the odours of the bustling town into cramped bars, filthy cafes, busy restaurants, or towards carts of generic and unidentifiable street food vendors parked at haphazard angles and street corners throughout the built-up areas. After the events of today, though, urgency to formulate a response is more crucial than discretion. Their long-ingrained mantra of eat-when-you-can dictates pizza with discussion in the privacy of the rooms to be the only sensible option. Boykin assures them that the desk boy has ordered something. Something edible, delivered, and quick.

They've been careful, until now, to never present as an identifiable eight. Until now, they've come and gone only in ones or twos, using different exits, different times, never acknowledging more than their allocated roommates within the bounds of the hotel. Harris, Faisal, and Glover are shackled up in a neighbouring sleaze-fest across the street—eight English speaking single men in one hotel for the same duration deemed too conspicuous for comfort—but their favoured meeting point is this connected pair of rooms shared between Grange, Boykin and Williams. Tomorrow, they'll have to look for new accommodation, but for, now, they sprawl across the twin beds, floor, and single rickety chair of Boykin and Williams' boudoir. Most of them are still, resting, but Cole paces the patch of carpet in front of the window, casting occasional glances beyond the yellowing nets that flutter not with breeze from the cracked-open window – the air is still and heavy in these last dregs of desert summer – but from the movement created by his restlessness.

*Would you not conserve your fucking energy?* Harris keeps the thought to himself, wondering again how Cole has been bequeathed the rank of Team Leader when he clearly becomes

ruffled in certain situations. Such as this. Harris, still as a snake waiting for its moment to seize an unsuspecting prey, reclines on Williams' bed, arms pillowing his head, boots putting a dusty dip into the grubby counterpane. He is alert, but his body rests while it can. Williams, his bed occupied, has commandeered the room's only chair. He tips precariously backwards on two unstable legs, rocking the chair back and forth with a continually bouncing foot that betrays his pent-up energy and aversion to stillness. Grange has dragged the chair from his neighbouring single room into the connecting doorway, and drapes his hefty body across it. Beneath his weight, the chair dips and groans; insubstantial and fragile. Hanley leans against the desk, toying with a button on his shirt sleeve and gazing into the middle distance without seeing anything except the thoughts unfurling in his head. He'll be replaying what they'd seen, Harris knows. He knows them all so damn well. He'd have made a good leader. He casts another furtive glance at Cole, waiting to see if their actual leader will be forthcoming with any leadership now.

Cole, sensing the silent questions, stops pacing and, back to window, faces his team. *Fucking stupid*, Harris thinks, again. *Fourth floor or no, you wouldn't catch my back to a window today*. He dismisses the thought grudgingly. He's being unreasonable. They chose this room because it lines up only with low-level garaging and open vistas. No possible angle on shots into it. Gotta get over it. Cole was promoted for reasons, whatever the fuck they were. Harris gives his head a mental shake, pulling his mind back to where it's needed. His team. *His* team.

Boykin speaks first. "We know what we saw, but we don't know what we *saw*." He lets the words hang.

Williams nods. "Scenarios, then?"

Glover holds up a finger. "One, Toolan's gone rogue. Just

as it looks. We have no option but to take him down.”

“He’s sold out,” Faisal spits agreement into the humid air. “Unbelievable, sure, but we can’t deny what we saw. The real question is how do we deal?”

Cole resumes his pacing. “We will deal, but not until we’ve got information from him. He’s our way in. Inside knowledge. We need to know what he knows; what he’s doing. What he’s *done*.” The word is venom on his tongue.

Faisal is on his feet, anger barely concealed. “Fucking sold out. Sold his own fucking brothers. Our. Fucking. Brothers.”

The room is silent as each one thinks of their captured colleagues. They can’t disagree with Faisal. They all think it. The enormity of Toolan’s betrayal mars their rationale. They need to regain focus. There is more at stake here.

Hanley puts voice to it, “First, report back to Morgan.” Cole nods assent. He’ll get on to that in a minute. “Second, regroup, get this mission back on track. The team is our priority; getting them out. Toolan must come second. We can use him, to find the others, but we can’t let what he’s done get in the way of the rescue.”

“Agreed,” Grange tips his heavy body forward, leaning head on fist and arms on tree-trunk thighs. “We need to find Toolan, bring him in, find out what he knows, make him talk.” He encompasses the room. They all know what “make him talk” means. They’ve all made people talk.

Boykin suppresses a shudder he can’t let show. Toolan is family. It’s not the same, making family talk. He’s not sure he can put brotherhood on hold to make Toolan talk. He knows some, at least, of the others feel the same.

Harris knows them well enough. He needs to reassure them they’ve got this. “We’ve done tough jobs before. That’s who we are. *Why* we are who we are. We have to focus on the



bigger picture.”

Voices blur as they speak over each other.

“Toolan has become enemy. That’s the bottom line.”

“Just another problem to take out with the trash.”

“We must—”

“We should—”

“I propose—”

Only Hanley remains silent, processing his thoughts like a video on rewind. He’s probably listening too, but they can’t be certain.

The shrill purr of the grubby phone on the desk behind Hanley’s arse interrupts the buzz of their unhappy decisions and stills Cole’s pacing. Boykin reaches past Hanley and snatches up the handset. A tinny voice is undecipherable to the rest of the room but Boykin listens, nods, smiles. “Okay.” He says something no one understands, and rests the handset into its cradle. “Pizza,” he says to the room, “Down at the desk. Gis’ a hand one of you.” He’s already at the door, tugging it open, starting for the stairs. The footsteps behind him are Williams’. Boykin can tell from the stride, even if he didn’t know that Williams’ stomach would pull him towards the food delivery. Williams’ athletic build and constant motion keep him perpetually hungry, calories burned before they have time to digest. He’ll most likely have a pizza devoured before they are back at the room.

In the dimly lit lobby, a teetering pile of pizza boxes form a barrier between Boykin and the cramped space behind the desk. The pungent smell of garlic and hot dough draws them in. Behind the stack, the figure at the desk is not the boy Boykin had spoken to before. As they approach, the man who is not that boy raises his head lazily, pushes back the low-

brimmed cap from his head, but Boykin and Williams have already stopped, hands automatically on their weapons.

“Toolan.” Williams says, gun in hand, as their old friend stands to greet them.

“Any reason why I don’t just shoot you?” Boykin flanks Williams, gun also pointed at their former leader’s head.

Toolan spreads his arms in a conciliatory gesture. “Don’t want to get blood splatter on the pizzas?” His slow smile is so familiar to Boykin; that old humour evident even now in this most incongruous of circumstances. “I’m alone; you’re all hungry. What say I join you for supper? Like the good old days?”

Boykin kicks on the door, calls out quietly for someone to open it. Hanley pulls it open, surprise momentarily crossing his face before his usual calm façade replaces it. “Saves us lookin’ for him, anyway.” He holds the door wide to expose Toolan to the room. Toolan is ushered into the room by Williams’ gun, the pizza boxes a leaning tower in his hands. Williams and Boykin keep their guns on him, already knowing they won’t be using them yet. Whatever Toolan has become, stupid won’t be on the list. He hasn’t come here alone, hasn’t walked voluntarily into this room of eight of the best knowing they could take him down in a heartbeat, just to be taken down in that heartbeat. He’s here for a bigger reason.

Boykin gestures to the desk. Toolan slowly, gradually, lowers his body, bending at the knees to put down the pizzas. Now he stands, turns to the room, arms by his sides, hands open. *I’m here, see, just me, your old friend, his gesture says, Trust me.*

Cole nods, a tiny movement, “Go on.” His voice has a thorny edge, but other than that, he behaves as if Toolan was

already speaking and his arrival in their midst is entirely normal. Like it used to be.

The room is on full alert now. Harris no longer slumps on the bed; Cole no longer paces. All eight chair legs are planted firmly on the ancient brown-grey carpet, and everyone's eyes are on Toolan. Except Williams', which drift to the pizza for a fraction of a second, before he returns them reluctantly to his old boss. The smell though... he can feel the heat seeping from the boxes, clogging the already too-warm air.

"Go on," Cole says again, "How'd you find us?"

Toolan almost laughs. "Did you all forget I trained you? Cheap hotel on edges of town. Close enough to food joints. Far enough to be off the main hustle. Seedy enough for cash and a blind eye. Big enough to get lost in. Multiple exit points, but no dark, unwatchable alleys. A watchable alley, an asset, of course. Discount the first option – too obvious. Discount the second – ditto. Take the third."

Hanley, the most recent recruit to the team, objects with the equally obvious. "This ain't the third—"

Toolan continues as if Hanley were no more than a stain on the room's cheap sheets—expected, but irrelevant. "You know how I think. So you'd be one step ahead. Go to the fourth? Of course not." He pauses for dramatic intent, raises a finger. "'Let's go back,' you'd say. 'Not to the second. He'll figure that out quick enough.' And here we are." He looks around the room, holding gaze with each of his ex-colleagues in turn. A fleeting half-second to see into their souls. Hanley looks away. Boykin laughs, shrugs. He's the first to break the pizza pile, grabs a box, pushes a hunk of pizza into his still-grinning mouth.

Faisal holds Toolan's glare a little longer, arrogant, challenging. "Here we are," he agrees. "Back at square one."

Sleazy hotel, number one.”

Grange steps forward into Toolan’s personal space. For a man of such bulk, his tread is light, delicate even, a man approaching a dance partner. “You think we’d be hiding from you?” His tone is even, light as his step. “We didn’t know it would be you we’d need to worry about, ’til now, did we. Wanna explain what’s going on?”

The air in the room shifts around the two men as the factions subtly tighten. Those who cling to lingering trust, loyalty, lean towards Grange with almost imperceptible shifts of weight. Those unconvinced, doubtful of Toolan’s intentions side-step in minute movements to stand united in front of the lopsided TV unit, braced for discord.

Toolan takes them in, nods his recognition, approvement, even. He’s trained them well, both sides of the factions. He notes who he has to play to. Cole, his replacement as team leader, stands slightly proud of the other two—Glover and his sidekick Faisal—*Look at me*, Cole’s stance says; *I’m in charge here now*. Harris, he suspects, wants to be as distrusting as Cole, but that underlying resentment of being passed over will hold him at arms-length. *Shame; that resentment will get in his way*, Toolan thinks, as he surveys the currents swirling around the muggy room with the hovering dust motes.

He gives a short, humourless laugh, aborted before it reaches the walls. “Look at you. Divided. What happened to trust? What happened to the unquestioning brotherhood, watching each other’s backs, united and secure that whatever you are faced with, you’re in it together?”

The question loiters for a minute. Toolan helps himself to a slice of congealing pizza.

Cole watches him, weighing the scene. When he speaks, his voice is firm and authoritative, calm and considered, “You.

You happened.”

Toolan nods, a slow incline of his head, before he takes another bite. He chews, swallows, waits. *Make sure they're listening.* “It’s not what you think. But you need to listen to me. You must abort the mission. Let it go. The guys are already dead. Leave it be.”

The words fall among them like stones on a glassy lake. There is silence while the ripples are processed. The garlic, the onions, the tomatoes waft through, teasing, tormenting.

“Proof?” is what Cole finally offers. Harris has misjudged him. This is the best response; the only sensible one.

The others nod. This is what they all *meant* to think. Not the racing, horror-filled images of how their friends had died that spooled through each of their minds.

Toolan shakes his head. “Trust. Brotherhood. Black Mambas. That *is* your proof.”

Several of the men now shake their own heads. “Not enough. We no longer have reason to give you our trust.”

“Did it not occur to any of you fuckwits why they were taken under your stupid ignorant noses? They want to lure you in, kill you all. If you don’t back off, you will all be dead before you have time to pee in your pants or call for your mamas.”

The room is silent. The dust motes falter, hanging static in the shafts of lowering afternoon sun.

“They are dead,” Toolan repeats. There is a flicker of something in his eyes. Remorse? Sorrow? Maybe guilt. Or lies. “You have to back off, or you will die too.” He scans their gazes; Grange, Boykin, Hanley, one by one, meeting their eyes and conveying the unquestionable belief they had in each other, once.

He gets to Glover, who refuses to maintain the contact, shakes his head in disgust. “We saw you. With them. We have

proof. Proof of your betrayal.” He spits at his old friend, his mentor, his advocate. You are scum. You haven’t given us any reason not to finish you.”

Faisal, always in support of Glover, nods. “No reason at all.”

“You have to trust me,” Toolan is quiet, firm. “I have never let you down. We are family.”

Williams is on his feet. “Fucks sake. You stopped being family the minute you joined fucking Ghaf-Yohmar and sold out. You come in here, try to divide us, turn us against each other, shake our fucking foundations.” He steps forward, grabs the next pizza box, pulls open the lid, rips a hunk of pizza and jams half the slice into his mouth. Chews, swallows. “You stopped being family right then, and we—” he waves the half-slice at his team, “we are the only family now. Us, and the other four. You can do this the easy way, or the way you taught us.” He shoves in the rest of the wedge, and rips another from the open box.

Glover has been moving softly around in the connecting room, emerges with lengths of rope, a couple of belts, and a roll of strong tape. He throws the tape to Faisal, and the two step towards Toolan. Toolan stops them with the opening of his jacket, exposing the tangle of tapes and wires already in place across his chest. “I wouldn’t come any closer,” he says. Glover and Faisal freeze, their restraints hanging useless and limp.

Toolan sits gingerly onto the desk chair. “I can’t let you keep looking for the boys. I will detonate this if I have to.” His face is furrowed with lines none of them noticed before.

Cole’s leadership qualities rise to the fore. “Ryan,” he says, calmly, switching to his old friend’s first name. “Ryan. You must know that even if they are dead—which is a point you

haven't verified—even if they are, we can't leave without them. Take us to their bodies, if that is all we have.”

Boykin takes a small step forward. “We won't leave without the bodies, Ryan. You know we can't. You wouldn't expect us to.”

Toolan looks at his friends, his family, his brothers, and gets to his feet again. “I have come here to insist that you abort the mission. I have delivered the message. If you try to stop me, I will detonate this device. If you shoot me, it will blow anyway. Trust me, and let it go.”

“We can't leave without their bodies, Ryan. You of all people know that.”

“Then you will die.” His voice is resigned, sad. He plucks a slice of pizza from the box, pulls open the door, and leaves the room.

The stunned silence hums around them, punctuated only by Williams' chewing as he shoves a fourth slice of pizza into his mouth.

“What?” he asks, with a shrug. “Eat while you can.”

## 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

*Keith Blount*

DAWN. EARLY ENOUGH FOR the sand-swept streets of Annratur to be mostly empty, but not so early that two Western tourists wandering around its northern district would seem too conspicuous—excepting for the rarity of tourists at all.

Williams had an old Leica slung around his neck, and whenever a local was in sight, he would drop to his knee and take a shot of a dusty square, a mosque, a building corner. There was no film in the camera, something he now regretted, as through the viewfinder the red sun blazed along the crooked mountain edges jutting above the horizon of the city like the rusty teeth of a saw. He clicked the button anyway.

A camera bag hung from his shoulder. It contained nothing but four blocks of C4.

“Damn. I should have been a photographer.”

“I dunno, Williams. You’re a pretty shit shot. How about we get on with the job? These streets ain’t going to stay empty for long.”

Williams glanced at Grange’s lurid green shirt as though

noticing it for the first time—dazzling beneath his safari jacket, a pubic mass of hair at the collar—and then at his overgrown beard. “Why do you look like a seventies porn star?”

Grange sucked on his cigar before answering. “I must have missed the Abercrombie and Fitch on the high street here. Anyway, this town needs a bit of colour.”

“You know if people think we’re a couple—”

Grange laughed. “Don’t worry. No one would mistake us for a couple. I’m out of your league.” He winked.

Aside from a not inoffensive shirt, Grange’s only tourist prop was a selfie stick with no camera attached.

They walked in silence for a while, looking around as though curious about a town alien to them, peering into side streets. They seemed a little lost, but it was a studied sort of seeming—they knew exactly where they were going.

Apparently provoked by their previous interaction and feeling himself to be in the presence of a philistine in such matters, Grange broke the silence by holding forth for some time on the merits of 1970s pornography, an oration which, while beginning—perhaps unsurprisingly—by dwelling on the hirsuteness of genital regions and the authenticity of the inevitably oversized bosoms involved, ended on a more subdued and melancholic note of nostalgia. “I don’t know, man,” he sighed in conclusion. “Back then, no one was slapping anyone’s ass or grabbing anyone by the throat. Porn back then was just... more romantic. You know what I mean?”

“This is the area,” said Williams with some relief, checking the marks on a local street map he had unfolded from his pocket during Grange’s speech.

Grange chewed on his cigar and grunted.

There wasn't anything particularly striking about this part of town. Just another cluster of grey-brown buildings and narrow sandy streets cast in shadow. Two scrawny kids kicking a deflated football against a wall: high walls connected a number of the houses here, presumably enclosing some sort of shared courtyard. There was nothing unusual about that, either.

But somewhere in these buildings, the Ghaf-Yohmar were holding the four marines—or at least storing their bodies.

“Definitely the place, huh?” growled Grange, a trace of doubt in his voice.

“Let's blow some shit up and find out.”

“Amen to that.”

Planting the first charge was easy. Leaning against one of the buildings they found a wooden pallet on some old hessian sacking. Williams crouched down, pretending to tie his shoe lace, and within a minute of Grange giving him the all clear for pedestrians, the C4 was tucked away between the wall and the pallet, covered by a sack.

The location of the second was trickier. A long, narrow alley ran between two of the tall walls between compounds. Williams wanted to place a charge right at its centre.

“If anyone sees us, we're fucked,” protested Grange. “There's no way out if they cover both entrances.”

Williams surveyed the streets. A withered old lady, leaning against a middle-aged man in a baseball cap and jeans, trudged, with great effort, up three steps to the entrance of a house, and then they both disappeared inside. Around the corner, the disappointed sound of a deflated ball hitting a wall. Further off, traffic noises, a male voice calling out.

“There’s no one around,” said Williams.

Grange shrugged and walked the full length of the alley, then back. “Now or never.”

In the middle of the alley, Williams pulled a stick of C4 from his camera bag. He wrapped it in a plastic bag he pulled from his pocket—a makeshift disguise—and set it down on the floor against the wall. Grange walked around him, attempting the impossible task of hiding him from view of both sides of the alley.

To no avail, it seemed, for a man’s voice suddenly echoed between the walls, calling out something in Dari.

“Shit.” Grange tapped Williams with this foot. From the end of the alley, the man in the baseball cap who had been helping the old woman was yelling something at them.

Williams, who was already kneeling, doubled over the plastic bag containing the C4 and started making loud, impromptu retching sounds. “What’s he saying?” he whispered between retches.

“Fuck knows. Where’s Boykin when you need him?” Grange moved along the alley a little way towards the man, stood back to indicate Williams, who was still fake-vomiting into the bag, and then, thumb and pinkie finger extended, made the universal sign for “he’s been drinking”.

The man’s face contorted in a fusion of disgust and apoplexy, and the words he shouted next, while still in Dari, Grange didn’t need Boykin to translate. No matter where you lived in the world—Louisiana no exception—there was no more pleasurable disgust than that you could feel towards the behaviour of tourists.

“On the plus side,” said Grange as soon as the man, still muttering to himself, had disappeared from view, “no one is going to come anywhere *near* this plastic bag now.”



Number three was straightforward. Two streets along and parallel to the alley, on a cobblestone street that made Williams think of his wife tipsily tripping over her heels in Pine Bluffs, they found a covered entrance with a boarded-up doorway. They sat on the step, ostensibly and perhaps ostentatiously swigging water from dirty bottles, while Williams prodded the C4 into an out-of-sight nook.

Grange was feeling talkative again. “You think Harris is ever going to forgive Cole for being promoted over him?”

Williams shrugged. “I just wish they’d stop bitching at each other. It’s like being a kid, before my parents divorced.”

After a moment, Grange said, “You know what I really loved as a kid?”

“Is this about seventies pornography again?”

“Sand. You know what I really fucking hate now?”

“Sand?”

“*Sand*. Fucking sand, man. I mean, if we’re going to have to thrash around in the sand, couldn’t it at least be, I don’t know, Bondi Beach or something?”

“You want to blow up Bondi Beach?”

“I’d just prefer this ‘leave’ to be somewhere the girls wear bikinis instead of burkas.”

“I’m starting to understand your affinity for the 1970s.”

For a moment, Grange watched Williams expertly mould the explosive into the corner. “Did you always want to blow things up?”

“Only since I met you.”

“Yeah, I have that effect on people.”

“Actually I wanted to build things. Ironically. My dad was an architect, my brother a builder. I was pretty good at that sort of stuff too. Knowing how to put things together makes

you pretty good at blowing them apart, I guess.”

“There’s probably a metaphor in that.”

“This is a good breach point,” said Williams.

“Huh. No shit,” said Grange.

They had been standing for some time now staring at one of the outer walls of a courtyard next to a small square, but they didn’t have to worry about passersby wondering what they were doing, because the wall was covered in a huge and colourful mural. To anyone walking or driving past, they were just two tourists admiring the mural.

“Well, you wanted colour,” said Williams.

“What the fuck does it mean?” pondered Grange. “Is *that* some kind of metaphor?”

The mural depicted the calm surface of the sea. Perhaps it wasn’t surprising that people living in a landlocked country would take pleasure in a painting of the ocean. Breaking the surface of the water was a friendly-looking dolphin—the artist clearly intended the dolphin to look friendly because the dolphin was smiling. Everyone loved dolphins; there was nothing particularly strange, perhaps, about a mural of a dolphin swimming in the sea. What *was* particularly strange was the flamingo that was riding on the dolphin’s back.

“I think we’ve found who did Cole’s tattoos,” said Williams.

“Ha.”

So that was where they planted the fourth block of C4. They almost gave up on the idea, despite Williams asserting it the perfect spot, because they saw no way of avoiding detection: dawn was long gone, the sun had climbed white and insistent in the sky, and the streets were busier with pedestrians and vehicles now. But just as they were about to

scout for another location, a truck pulled up fortuitously right in front of the mural. They watched as the driver got out, unloaded two boxes, and headed off down one of the alleyways. It gave them the time and cover they needed.

Equally fortuitously, the artist had made the mural so busy that even from only a couple of feet away, the explosive stuck to the wall became invisible.

“Hidden in plain sight. I like it,” commented Grange.

And thus it was that Williams and Grange, having planted all four explosives without detection, were in a celebratory mood as they started their walk back towards the battered Peugeot that would return them to camp—Williams complaisant enough, even, to feign interest in Grange’s discourse on the genius inherent in the films of Michael Bay. Celebratory, but always alert—so it would be impossible to tell which was the first to spot, as they rounded the corner on to a wide avenue, the man with the baseball cap flanked by two men wearing sunglasses and AK-47s.

And then several things happened seemingly at once.

Baseball cap pointed at them.

Another man with a rifle appeared from a doorway behind Williams.

The street became empty. Pedestrians disappeared around corners or behind closed doors.

Williams and Grange were surrounded by men tugging at them, asking them questions in a language they didn’t understand.

Someone was gesturing for Williams to hand over his camera, then pulling open the back of the camera, then pointing angrily, accusingly, indicating the lack of film.

“Huh. I thought it was digital,” smiled Williams.

Someone else was pulling the map out of Williams’s

pocket, which would have been incriminating enough, but as they did so they glimpsed Williams's gun, hidden under his jacket, and now three—or was it four?—rifle barrels were pointed at Williams and Grange's heads.

Then Grange was taking a swing at someone's head with the selfie stick. Which broke.

A rifle butt connected with Grange's head.

The gunmen were only momentarily nonplussed that Grange's only reaction was, "That hurt."

And now the gunmen—the Ghaf-Yohmar—had the Delta Force pistols too. And not only the pistols—they had Williams and Grange, and both men knew it, knew there was no possibility of escape.

They were pushed and prodded, rifle muzzles nuzzling between vertebrae, back towards the mural, past the C4 they had planted—still lost in the foam of the sea—around a corner, where a large arched door opened in the wall, through which they had no choice but to stagger, knowing that the fate of the marines was about to be revealed to them, wondering if theirs would be the same.

## 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

*Ian Hocking*

COLE SAT UP. THE ringing in his ears was familiar, but that didn't make it any less painful. He did what he always did in these situations, and that was to remember the instructor hauling him out of a water tunnel on the British commando course: "Compose yourself!" Cole did just that. He straightened his neck and pressed his back against the roof of the half-turned VW bus, already growing warm with the flames inside. The flames would reach the fuel tank soon, but that was not his priority. His priority was his men. Harris was crouched at the tail of the bus, firing bursts into the night down the street to the east, where the edge of the shopping district blared with light and noise. Harris turned and shouted at Hanley, who was scuttling out of cover—almost tripping on the hem of his oversized partug—to snag a torn belt from the middle of the road. It was a foolish move, and as if to prove it, a round kicked up dust not six inches from Hanley's grab... but he grabbed, uninjured, and made it back to Harris, who fired two more blind rounds over his head before Hanley skidded into Cole like he was home plate.

Thanks to the bright street lamps, Cole could see Hanley's lips as he shouted, "Pardon me!" like he'd stepped on Cole's foot at the hop. Cole just nodded. He knew that the belt on that pouch held the remote detonator that would blow this part of what passed for the local electricity grid. They had planned to blow it much later, but the best laid plans aft fuck right up, as their former commander Toolan had often said.

So much for Harris and Hanley. Where was Boykin?

Cole looked to the front of the bus. Sure enough, Boykin was giving the western flank the same treatment that Harris was giving the east. That was everyone. His men were safe. As for him... his hearing was coming back. The dull popping sounds of automatic weapons were resolving to sharp, painful cracks of noise. Cole put a hand to his ear. It was bleeding freely. Vehicle accidents will do that.

"Sir," said Hanley, who had managed to keep his boyish enthusiasm intact, "I'mma blow the lights."

Before Cole could reply, Harris said, "The fuck you will."

Hanley switched his attention from Harris to Cole and back again. It would have been comical if they hadn't been pinned down by half of the Ghaf-Yohmar.

"Do it," said Cole.

Harris held his fire and scooted over to Cole. "We ain't doing it."

Cole did not shout him down, or cuff his chops, or offer any sign that he needed an insubordinate sergeant like he needed a hole in his karakul hat. "We are doing it. Get back to your covering fire, sergeant."

"Sir, you're injured and I should assume control."

"All you need to assume," said Cole, as a round glanced off the roof the bus, "is that I know I'm doing."

Cole hoped he sounded confident. He could barely hear

his own voice. It sounded some talking from the bottom of a well.

Harris opened his mouth to object again. That was when he was shot in the back. He pitched forward, snarling with surprise. Cole didn't hesitate. He rolled forward to assume a position alongside Harris, sighted down his rifle, and fired into the street. He didn't like to fire blind like this. Then again, there was much he didn't like about the situation. The situation, as that British instructor might have said, held some room for improvement. They were under fire with little cover beyond their overturned bus, three other vehicles (whose owners had abandoned them the moment gunfire broke out), and a hastily upturned vegetable cart. Fire was coming their way from both ends of the street. A boy—he couldn't have been more than fifteen years old—lay not far from the reinforced gate of the Ghaf-Yohmar stronghold; he looked like a piles of rags, but he wasn't. He was a boy and he was dead. He had been carrying water in bladders lashed at opposite ends of a stick, probably earning enough for a meal a day when he was lucky, and now he was dead, unlucky, probably killed by whatever ordnance had flipped the bus and plunged Cole and his team into this situation—the situation that held some room from improvement.

And then everything changed.

With a terrific crack, a high velocity round passed through the bus and hit the ground near Cole's shoulder. Both he and Haley looked at the hole. The round hadn't splashed up. It had gone deep. It had buried itself with full military honours. Cole checked out the hole in the bus. It was the size of his fist. Suddenly, what cover they could count on from the vehicles and the upturned cart didn't mean shit.

An amplified American voice came from the direction of

the stronghold. It was a voice used to giving instructions. And it was heard by men who were used to carrying them out. What made Cole share a look of disbelief with Hanley was the identity of the voice. It was Toolan. Master Sergeant Ryan Toolan, Retired, and hearing his voice so far from home, now, was just about the biggest coincidence Cole had ever heard.

“Put down your weapons,” said the voice.

Which made him wonder if this *was* a coincidence.

Things had, after all, gone to shit more quickly than even this unfunded, Hail Mary enterprise had any right to expect. They had wanted to drive into the compound freely—with Harris having bribed several members of the family who worked the gate—before rescuing their own guys, and the Marines, and any others who wanted to come along for the ride in return for information useful to Morgan and his friends.

But they hadn’t even made it to the door before their bus was on its side and Cole had found himself leaning against it, trying to compose himself like a good soldier.

Cole looked at Hanley to gauge his reaction. It didn’t take much gauging. Hanley’s world had turned upside down, inside out and backwards. “They... they’ve got the old sergeant in there.”

“No,” said Cole. “The old sergeant has got us out here.”

Boykin slid over. His gun was still trained west but he had ceased firing. So too, Cole noticed, had their unseen assailants from either end of the street. That suggested coordination.

“Sir?”

“I’m not the not the one you should be asking,” said Cole. “Harris can fill us in.”

Harris, for his part, had slithered up against the bus. He had removed his ragged achkan jacket to expose the webbing

underneath. There was a smouldering hole in his armour. He shook it off.

“I’m not filling you in on shit.”

Toolan’s voice boomed over their heads once more. It passed through the smoke and flames now rising ever higher from the bus. It echoed off the walls of the surrounding shops. The dead water carrier heard nothing. The soldiers heard their former commander, and it was a little like hearing the voice mail greeting of an old, dead friend.

“Boykin,” said Cole, “you went to Annratur with Harris. What happened?”

“I told you,” said Harris to Cole; but he was looking at Boykin. “I gave them the money. Dollars and gold sovereigns. Their family head, the one whose daughter was killed by the leader of the Ghaf-Yohmar, agreed to let us in tonight. Boykin translated it all. Right, Boykin?”

Boykin frowned. “You spoke to another man, though.”

“What?” asked Cole.

“The sergeant spoke to another man just after. I couldn’t hear what they were saying.”

“That was just a kid,” said Harris. “He wanted to see my handgun. I did it as a favour to the head man.”

“But you kept me out of the room, didn’t you?” said Boykin. “And there was a no kid in that house. No way. I saw no toys, comics, nothing.”

Toolan called, “You have thirty seconds minute. After that, we’re going to light you up.”

Cole said, “Alright, Hanley, you ready with that detonator?”

“Sir.”

“On my mark. Harris,” said Cole, “I want you to strip. Put your gear in a neat pile, right here.”

“Jesus, Cole,” said Harris, not moving. “Jesus.”

Cole stared at Harris and Harris stared right back.

Boykin sighed. "I reckon that's thirty seconds, sir."

Cole said, "Hanley."

"If you press that detonator," said Toolan, holding his sidearm to Hanley's temple, "the next thing to go is your head. Disarm it."

Silently, Hanley sprung the detonator into two pieces, dropping each on the ground.

Cole said, "Long time no see, Toolan. What are you doing here?"

"You'll find out if you live long enough. Harris?"

Harris looked at all of them. "I know you think I'm a piece of shit. But this way nobody gets hurt."

"None of *us* get hurt," said Boykin. "Though the night is young. What about the hostages?"

"You grunts have a very simple view of the world," said Toolan. "Before sun up you'll have spoken to people that help you see a broader picture."

Boykin said, "Does this picture include you relaxing on a beach somewhere?"

"Alright," said Cole. "What's the next step, Toolan?"

"We're going to move away from this bus before it blows and I ruin my good looks. Then you're going to put your weapons in a big fat pile. Harris will collect your IDs and any cash you have. Better that all stays with me. You can get a message to Morgan tomorrow after prayers."

Cole asked, "What I am going to tell him?"

"Tell him the plot has thickened. Let's go."



## chapter sixteen

*Sue Cowling*

“YOU’RE A FUCKING TRAITOR, you fucking bastard.” Hanley spat the words at Harris as the Ghaf Yohmar terrorists struggled to hold him. Harris just smirked and moving towards him, punching him in the stomach, hard enough for Hanley to puke on the floor just missing Harris, who jumped back. Hanley straightened, turning his head to wipe his chin on his tee, then looking at Harris with pure hatred and revenge written over his face, then he smiled. “Cole is the perfect choice for the MSG, you, you’re just a loser, you hear me, just fucking shit on the bottom of my shoes. You were never going to be promoted, you don’t have the balls to lead good honest men, you never have.”

Harris stopped smirking, uncontrollable anger showing in his body language, his hands clenched ready to hit Hanley again, but before he could Hanley shouted “Your dead, you understand that, fucking dead.”

This time Harris broke his nose, blood dripping onto the floor, quickly followed by a knee to the groin, making Hanley fold in on himself.

“Just drag him along the ground,” he told the men still holding onto him. “he can join his friends in the cell.” They dragged Hanley, who was still struggling to get at Harris, in the opposite direction away from Cole and Toolan.

Cole stood there, held still by two more terrorists, Toolan standing beside him watching until they had disappeared around the corner. Toolan turned to Cole, “I expect better from you, as you stepped into my shoes, follow me.”

Cole looked at Toolan, “Hanley is a good soldier, there was no need for what went down there, what the hell has happened to you. I looked up to you as a good role model. What made you into a traitor to your own country, to the world?” Cole was truly puzzled about Toolan, he had been a good man and a great team leader.

Toolan shrugged his shoulders, “No hard feelings mate, life happens and I got an offer I could not refuse. It’s just about the money and you lot, you have just become collateral damage.” He walked down the dusty shaded path, and Cole was dragged along after him.

“I am not your mate Toolan, you and Harris you will get what’s going to be coming for you, make no mistake.” Cole struggled to get free, but the terrorists had him in an iron grip.

Toolan just laughed. “As I see it, we have you right where we want you, I think we have the strongest negotiation, don’t you?”

Cole stayed silent, he was trying to work out where they were going, dammed if he was not going to get free and get everyone else out. At that moment they came to the end of the path and turned right into direct sunlight, the sun was blinding and hot.

“Jeez it’s a fucking hotbox out here.” Toolan wiped the back of his hand across his forehead and then took a long

swig from his water bottle. Cole felt his own thirst increase, and the incessant heat on his face and skin, burning him. He lowered his eyes to the ground, trying not to be blinded by the glare of the sun. He would need full sight if he got an opportunity to escape.

They carried on walking in silence, across the compound to a small makeshift hut with a curtain as a door and stopped outside.

“Wait here.” Toolan said and then disappeared inside, and Cole could hear low conversation inside. He tried to break free but just got a punch to his kidneys from the two men guarding him, for trying.

The sun was relentless, and the dust kicked up by vehicles and foot movement made Coles throat feel dry, and scratchy, while his skin felt itchy. He tried to ignore it, he was trained for this type of torture, but what he would give for one glass of water.

At that moment Toolan came outside and beckoned them in. The men pushed him forward with a force that sent him through the doorway and onto his knees on a floor made of rough wooden planks. The room was shaded and cool, which was a relief and a bonus. It gave Cole time to gather his thoughts. Cole looked up and saw a plastic table with tubular metal legs, on the table was a jug of water, with droplets of water on the outside and a glass. Cole swallowed, that water was ice cold, and his thirst got worse.

Standing beside the table was a man, Cole guessed him to be in his late thirties, maybe early forties, short and overweight. He had a full beard and wore a long white tunic with loose pants. On his fingers he wore a thick gold ring.

He moved forward. “Stand him up is that anyway to treat a guest of ours?”

Cole was dragged to his feet and pulled forward to stand just a few feet away from this man. He turned to Toolan, asking arrogantly “Is this a friend of yours?”

The man moved fast for his size and lashed out with a closed fist around Cole’s head, sending him back to the floor. “I don’t remember saying you could speak.” He turned to Toolan. “You never taught your men any manners I see.”

Toolan turned to Cole and dragged him off the floor. “Keep your mouth shut. This is the leader of the Ghaf Yohmar and you’re only alive while he says you are, understand?”

Cole looked at the man with new interest, taking in as many details as he could for intelligence, although it did not bode well that he was given this information so freely. “So does this leader have a name?” He was expecting the second blow and although he stumbled, he managed to keep on his feet. He could feel the blood running down his cheek, he guessed it was the thick gold ring that had cut him. He never attempted to wipe it away. He shook his head and just watched the man, determined not to give an inch.

The man frowned, “You are a stubborn man Cole, you need to learn from my man Toolan, he does what I say and nothing more, nothing less.” He laughed. “He was well trained for this job by the special forces. Leader of the Black Mambas and now my man, doing what I want him to do, but trained by your government.” He laughed again. “There is what would you say, irony in that.”

Anger curled in Coles stomach, but before he could retort Toolan shook his head, and the Ghaf Yohmar leader smiled with satisfaction. Cole decided to try patience and see what information he could gather.

“I am a powerful man, Cole. I have increasing control of

the regions, a powerful network of men I have recruited, that do my bidding.” With those words he again looked at Toolan, and Cole felt anger burning up inside him again at what Toolan had done. “Also, Cole, I am wealthy, I love money and what that brings with it, power, control, anything I want. You can never have enough money in this life, can you?”

He turned to the table and picked up the jug, poured himself a large glass of water. Cole watched his movements as he turned to him and said, “you must be thirsty?”

Cole just stared at him as the leader lifted the glass and swallowed the contents. He would not show how much he needed water. At the same time, he realised that the men that had been holding him were gone, it was just Toolan, him and the leader in the room, and Toolan had moved slightly nearer the leader. This was his chance, and he did not waste it. He grabbed the jug of water throwing it over the leader and Toolan, then threw the jug for good measure, and turned and run out of the entrance and into the sun. He heard a shout behind him, but did not wait, the compound was clear and he run along the side of the hut and into another narrow dusty lane between two storage areas he guessed. He moved slowly to the end and looked around the corner, seeing no one he moved forward and straight into Toolan and one of his men.

He was dragged back to the hut, but instead of being taken back inside, he was kicked and punched onto the ground prone on his back, his wrists and ankles attached to ropes that were fixed to stakes and tightened until taunt and he could not move.

“Are you fucking stupid?” Toolan shouted, kicking him in the sides, you’re not getting out of here unless we will it, and that’s never going to happen, not now.” He walked away leaving Cole on the ground spread eagle and with the heat of

the day turning him crisp.

It seemed like hours passed, no water no food, and no help. He had time to think about the set up here and wondered how many more Toolan and Harris guys there were working for Mr No Name. How the fuck was he going to keep his team safe and get all of them and the Marines out of here, in one piece.

At that moment the leader came out of the hut and walked over to him, he had on clean, dry robe and pants. “I think it’s time you joined your friends in the cell, you will all be my guests...” he smiled “Delta Force prisoner’s will be very good for my fundraising needs and for propaganda purposes. In fact, I was happy to have the Marines, but you are a far better prize.” He rubbed his thick hands together. “Enjoy your stay Cole, and do try to stay out of trouble, my patience is short.” He turned and went back into the hut.

The same two terrorists untied him and dragged him to his feet. He looked around for Toolan, if only he could talk sense to him, maybe he could get him round to helping them, but he was not about.

He struggled, every step of the way back across the compound and along the shaded lane right to the end this time, and then alongside an open area full of crates. He noted the guns and other weapons, and tried again to pull free, it would be so easy if he could just reach a crate. The men kept a tight hold of him and soon he was past the crates and moving towards a solid looking building with high slats in the walls. Someone from inside opened the door and he was pushed hard, through another door and then down steps. He heard his men before he saw them banging on any surface they could. They stopped as the door was unlocked, and he was pushed in before anyone could try and escape. He was back with his

team and the marines, all of them were in a sorry state as he looked around, arms in make do slings, cuts bruises and broken noses and bones, he now had to come up with a plan to get them all out to safety. Then he would be back for those traitors and Mr No Name.

## chapter seventeen

*topher*

COLE STOOD NEXT TO the door, straining to see through the small window. He tapped his fingers on the hardwood. It seemed solid enough. Too solid to force it, and he had no tools in here for that, anyway.

He looked around the small room, lit by the flickering flames of two lanterns. Their interference patterns generated moving shadows. Boykin stood on the other side of the door, his ear close to the hinge where there was a gap, listening to the muted voices farther down the hall. It stunk in here. After a long, hot day locked up, a single bucket for the five of them to use as a toilet, even the coolness of the evening didn't relieve the lingering stench of shit, sweat, and fear.

Hanley and Williams sat on the floor on opposite sides, facing each other. They created a game with a pebble, essentially tossing it back and forth, with a single bounce between them. If the pebble bounced more than once, it was a point deducted.

"Eight-hundred, sixty-five, " Hanley whispered. He returned the pebble to Williams, a single bounce.



"Eight-hundred, sixty-six", Williams said. And so the game continued.

Grange lay against the far wall, his bulk taking up a good deal of the remaining space. He was using one of his boots as a pillow, and a soft snore escaped his lips.

A lingering moan came from a single window in the wall above Williams' head. That was the cell where they kept the Marines. The terrorists had beaten the Marines pretty badly, and the Gunnery Sergeant, they called "Gunny", could barely walk. They may have broken his knee. Cole sighed. A liability.

"What are they saying?" Cole said. Boykin shushed him, and Cole glared back.

"We're so fucked man." It was the voice of the youngest Marine. Private Hudson. His face badly beaten, he looked like a hamburger patty. One of his eyes swollen shut. Cole wished it was his mouth that was swollen shut.

"Secure that shit, private." It was the Gunny. Badly injured, he still had an authoritative voice. It worked at first to keep Hudson in line, but after the long hours of confinement, the young private was becoming agitated. Another liability.

"We're fucked, Gunny," Hudson said. "We are all fucked."

"Dammit," Boykin hissed. "I'm trying to make out what they're saying."

"I know what they're sayin," Hudson said, pressing his face against the bars. "We're all dead. They gonna kill us."

Grange's boot slapped against the bars next to Hudson's face, and the young Marine stepped back. Grange sat up, holding his finger to his lips. Hudson's face screwed up in despair, and he retreated into the other room.

The men grew silent and Boykin pressed his ear against the gap in the door. After a moment, he looked at Cole.

"Sounds like they're planning a party in our honor," Boykin

said. "At least that's what I get from the few words I know."

"A party?" Cole said.

"With girls?" Grange said. "Throwin beads down from the windows. A parade, I bet."

"More like gasoline," Boykins said. "They're trying to decide to burn us or behead us."

"Makes sense," Williams said.

"Wait, what?" Hudson said, appearing at the window. "They gonna burn us? What the fuck? Dear Lord Jesus, this shit's not happening. It can't be happening, man."

"Shut the fuck up, Private." It was the hard voice of the Gunny.

"No man, no," Hudson said, retreating again into the room.

"When's the festivities supposed to start?" Cole said, straining his neck to peer out the tiny window.

"Man I was short," Hudson said.

"Private, shut it."

"I was fuckin' short, man. Twenty-four wake-ups and a freedom bird, and I was gone."

"I think I caught the word 'morning', but it could have been 'next week'," Boykin said. "Seriously, this kid needs to calm down." He poked a thumb toward the adjoining cell.

"We're all gonna die, man," Hudson appeared at the window, squeezing his fists around the bars until his knuckles turned white.

"Hudson," Williams stood, placing his hand on Hudson's. "You need to calm down. We're all in this together."

"We're gonna burn together." Hudson pressed his forehead against the bars, a string of spittle dangling from his lips. "I don't wanna burn, man."

"Look at me." Williams reached in and laid a hand on

Hudson's head. "Look at me, Private. We are not going to burn." Hudson's wet eyes glistened in the torchlight. "I'm not going to let that happen. We all gonna be okay. We're leaving here together."

"We all in this, Jarhead." Grange rose to his feet and stretched, pulling at his unkempt beard. "One way or other, we all leaving together." He glanced at Hudson. "In a box or on your feet. It's your choice."

"Oh, fuck man." Hudson's face screwed up, tears falling from his good eye.

"Thanks, Grange," Williams said, frowning. "That was really helpful."

"Look at me, Jarhead." Grange stepped to the window, retrieving his boot. Hudson's neck cracked as he gazed up at the big man, his eye gaping with fear.

"I know how I'm leaving, and it ain't in no box." He scowled at the young Marine. "We sending these boys to hell with so many holes, even the devil won't recognize them. That's what we do, Jarhead. You hear me?"

"Okay," Hudson said, passing his hand over his face. He bit his lower lip. "Okay, okay."

"Someone's coming," Cole said.

They heard heavy footfalls, and he and Boykin moved back on either side of the door. The lock rattled, and the door swung outward. The hard face of an older man appeared in the doorway. He had dark buzzed hair and hard blue eyes. He gazed around the room at the dirty faces of the team. Two armed men wearing bandannas appeared behind him.

"Well, look what crawled from under his rock," Granger said. "Harris."

"Get back against the far wall," Harris said, pointing. "Move it."

Cole, Boykin, and Williams stepped to the back wall, but Granger stood his ground in front of the window at the side of the cell, glaring at Harris. The two armed terrorists stepped into the room, flanking Harris and brandishing their AK's, their dark eyes flashing above the rim of their bandannas.

"Back against the wall," Harris said, pointing one finger at Granger's chest

"How's it feel, buddy?" Granger said.

"I just need to give the word Granger," Harris said.

"Answer my question," Granger said, taking one step forward. The closest terrorist poked the barrel of his rifle at Granger, shouting something. Granger ignored him. "How's it feel, Harris?" The other terrorist pointed his weapon at Granger, tensing.

"I did what I had to do," Harris said. "What anyone would do, you know that."

"No." Granger shook his head. "I would never betray what I fought for." He raised a hand, pointing it at Harris. "I would never betray my team. How's that feel?"

"A lot better than you're going to feel when I give the word, and you get a Russian 7-6-2 through your thick skull," Harris said, smirking. He said something to the guard, who raised his weapon to his shoulder and sighted down the barrel at Granger. "Now back the fuck down."

"Do what you gotta do," Granger said.

With lightening swiftness, Granger brought his hand up under the barrel of the AK, pushing it up and twisting it counter-clockwise out of the grip of the terrorist. Simultaneously, Cole grabbed the weapon from the other terrorist and twisted it from his grip. Harris grabbed the terrorist's head in both hands and gave it a quick turn resulting in a sickening snap. Behind him, Cole pounded the other

terrorist with the butt of his rifle.

Granger pointed the AK at Harris, smiling.

"So how's it feel?"

"Feels damn good, brother," Harris said, smiling. "Good to see you in one piece."

"Damn, that was good," Boykin said, smiling. "I almost thought you were going to let them shoot Granger."

"I thought about it, but I remembered Granger owes me 20 bucks on the Laker's game," Harris said.

"Holy fuck," Hudson said. "That was like... Holy Fuck."

"Told you we'd be okay," Williams said.

"Not okay yet," Harris said, backing out the door and glancing up and down the street. "We got zero time and a long way to go." He looked at Williams. "You got your special trick setup?"

"Primed and ready at the main gate. Just get me to the detonator."

"Where's our gear?" Cole said.

"That's our next problem," Harris said. "It's well guarded."

"We all about problem solving," Granger said, kneeling down and retrieving two full magazines from the dead guard. He stood and checked the action on the AK. "Point the way."

Cole retrieved ammo from the other guard and stepped through the door, gazing cautiously in both directions.

"Where's Glover and Faisal?" Cole said

"I got them out already," Harris said. "Glover did such a good job playing dead, they didn't bother with a guard. They got the sniper rifle and made for the rooftop near the main gate. We'll pick them up on the way out."

"Let's get these Marines out of here," Cole said. Harris handed a key to Boykin, who stepped into the hall and unlocked the door to the Marine's cell. Hudson was the first to

emerge, and he looked at Harris.

"Damn, you were on our side the whole time?" Hudson said, pointing to his face. "You watched while they did this shit to me."

"They did you a favor," Harris said, looking down his nose at Hudson. "They made you a lot prettier."

Three more Marines emerged from the cell, two of them flanking the Gunny, his arms laying over their shoulders. He grimaced at each step.

"You gonna be alright, Gunny?" Boykin said.

"I'll be fine. I'm not staying here."

"Damn right you're not," Boykin said.

"Alright, follow me," Harris said, drawing his handgun and moving down the corridor. "Cole, you stay with me, and Granger, you cover our rear."

Harris lead the way out of the detention area into what were actually narrow streets between buildings. The street was cobblestone, and they had to step carefully to avoid making a lot of noise. Harris stopped at intersections and peered in all directions, listening and waiting until he felt it was safe to move through.

At one cross street, he stopped and held up a fist, then motioned for the team to move against the wall. Holstering his handgun, he leaned against the corner of the building. He chatted in Persian with an unseen individual, exchanging a few sentences and a chuckle. He waved a hand, waiting until the other person was sufficiently distant, then drew his handgun and motioned for the team to proceed through the intersection.

They came to the next intersection, partially lit by a flickering light from the left. Conversation and the smell of cooking drifted to them. Harris peeked around the corner and

motioned for Cole to move to the other side of the intersection. Grange came forward and Harris whispered instructions. Grange moved back to the rear and disappeared into the building next to them. Harris motioned to Boykin.

"Keep everyone here and quiet. The gear is down that way." He gestured towards the fire.

Harris holstered his pistol and stepped down the street to the left. Boykin peeked around the corner, watching Harris approach a group of three men seated in chairs around a fire. Harris greeted the men in their language, stopping at the left rear of the closest terrorist. Boykin saw an AK leaning against the wall next to the terrorist, and another lying across an empty chair. There were no visible weapons from the other two, but Boykin assumed they were armed. The unattended AK concerned him, and he peered into the darkness ahead and to his right.

As Harris chatted with them, Boykin spotted a shadow moving toward the fire from the far end and a hint of movement from the doorway to their left. The terrorist on the left, who was leaning back in his chair and smoking, fell back, his arms flailing, as a massive shadow descended on him. The terrorist on the far end stood, grappling at something in his belt, was wrapped with two arms, one of them around his throat, that lifted him into the air. The third terrorist slumped forward, the glint of a blade protruding from the back of his neck as Harris guided him to the cobblestones. The other two terrorists struggled for a moment before they went limp, their bodies sagging in the powerful grip of Cole and Granger.

Harris turned and motioned for the rest of the team to join them at the fire. Boykin motioned them forward and watched from the intersection as they proceeded to the light of the fire. He heard a sharp sound and looked back as a

young man appeared behind him in the dark; the owner of the unattended AK. The boy stopped and looked up wide-eyed at Boykin. As if in explanation as to his absence, he was struggling with the zipper on his pants.

"Holy shit, that was sweet," Hudson said, gazing at the three bodies

Harris hushed him and picked up a bucket of water to douse the fire. Behind him, Boykin appeared, carrying the limp corpse of the boy. He laid him down next to his comrades and stood back, turning his eyes away.

"Shit, that kid can't be more than 15 or 16," Granger said. "Shame."

"I got a boy that age," Harris said, looking down at the young, peaceful face. He poured the water over the fire, dousing the flame.

"The gear is in that room," Harris said, pointing to a closed door. Boykin, Hanley, and Williams entered the room while Cole and Granger covered the street outside. The Gunny sat on one chair, rubbing his knee and grimacing.

"You gonna be okay, Gunny?" Harris said.

"I'll be fine," Gunny said, retrieving the AK from the chair next to him. "Just tell me what direction to point this, and I'll knock 'em down."

"There'll be plenty of that to do," Granger said.

The team emerged from the room carrying rifles and ammo pouches and distributed them to the Delta team. Grange handed off his AK and ammo to Hudson.

"You ever fire an AK?" Grange said.

"Can't be that hard, right?" Hudson gazed at the weapon in his hands like it was going to bite him.

Grange chuckled and showed Hudson the safety, magazine release, and showing him how to load it.



"This is safe, semi-auto, and full auto. I recommend you use it in semi, or you'll be spraying lead all over the damn place, hitting everything but what you are trying to shoot."

"Roger that," Hudson said, looking over the weapon and practicing unloading and loading it. "I think I got it."

"You find your detonator?" Cole said to Williams.

"Right here." Williams held up a small, one-handed plunger. "Batteries are good, so we just need to get close."

"Alright, now listen," Harris said, gathering the team. "We're going to the main gate where Williams set the charges. There's a big open area, like a town square with a fountain in the middle, and not a lot of cover, except for a low wall around the periphery. We'll have to crawl behind that, so it'll be slow moving under fire. Glover and Faisal should be there to cover us with the sniper rifle."

"The bad news is they also have an armored car, so we have to keep them away from that. If they get to it, they can do a lot of damage."

"I might be able to help with that," Williams said, holding up a block of C4 explosive. "Just get me close and it's toast."

"Alright, we'll use that as Plan B," Cole said. "Let's move out. Granger, take point. I'll be behind you. Marines in the middle and Boykin takes tail-end."

"Let me up front," Hudson said. "Right behind Granger."

"Yeah, no, I don't think so," Cole said.

"Hey c'mon," Hudson said. "I want to make up for earlier. I'm a machine gunner. I'm used to being up front." He glanced at Granger.

Cole looked at Granger, who shrugged.

"Let the kid up front," Granger said. He nodded at Hudson. "You best cover my ass, Jarhead."

"You got it," Hudson said.

As they start out towards the main gate, the sky above them was brightening. They moved quickly, but quietly, along the narrow, deserted street, keeping to the shadows and close to the walls on either side of the street. Granger stopped them at each intersection, glancing back at Harris for directions.

Turning to the right, Granger signalled for Harris, who came forward, glancing to the right.

"Looks like the square," Granger said.

"That's it," Harris acknowledged. "Let's go."

Granger shouldered his rifle and turned right, followed by Hudson and the rest of the team. They were almost to the square when the Gunny stumbled and cried out in pain. He covered his mouth, too late, and they heard voices ahead. A terrorist appeared in the street, holding his AK down and calling out. Granger shot him and turned his head.

"That's it, let's go."

They charged ahead, spreading out behind the low wall as they entered the square. From the opposite side of the square, several terrorists appeared from buildings, appearing confused. The team opened fire on them, dropping several of the terrorists. The rest took cover behind the wall on the opposite side and returned fire. Williams slid in behind the wall like he was making home plate, and lay flat against it, the detonator in his hand.

"Say when," Williams said to Cole.

Cole held up his hand, gazing through a gap in the wall as the terrorists poured into the square from the buildings on the opposite side. Several of them squatted down near the gate.

"Now," Cole said.

"Fire in the hole!" Williams shouted and squeezed the detonator. The gate blew inward, spraying wood, metal, and rock across the square, chunks of it hitting the walls of the

buildings behind the team. Dust and debris provided cover for the team, and they sprinted a short distance around the periphery before the terrorists could recover and return fire. At that point, the team hunkered down behind the low wall and returned fire. Several of the terrorists dropped as accurate fire hit them in the flank, originating from somewhere on the rooftop to the right.

"That's Glover and Faisal," Cole shouted.

Several terrorists burst from cover, attempting to get to the armored car sitting next to the fountain in the center of the square. Glover's accurate sniper fire dropped most of them, but one terrorist disappeared into the side hatch of the car, and started turning over the motor.

"Dammit," Cole said, looking over at Williams. "We got to take out that car."

"Get me close," Williams said, pulling the block of C4 from his pack. "Hanley, come with me."

"Covering fire!" Cole shouted. The team popped up from the wall, spraying rounds on the terrorists positions.

"Oh, you want some of this?" Hudson said, putting the AK in full auto and spraying rounds left to right. "You want some too? Come on! Come on, you bastards!"

Williams and Hanley make it to the armored car, and Williams slid underneath to place the charge. Once he was done, Hanley signaled the team.

"Alright, covering fire!" They spray murderous fire at the terrorists as Williams and Hanley run back and dive behind the wall. Williams hits the detonator, and a deafening explosion lifted the armored car into the air. The smoke from the burning fuel filled the square.

"We got cover," Cole jumped up and led the way around the periphery of the square to the breached gate.

Cole reached the breach, followed by Granger and Hudson. They provided cover fire while the team helped the injured Marines through the torn opening in the gate and into the street beyond. Glover and Faisal dropped from the wall on the outside of the compound and joined the team as they move away.

## chapter eighteen

*Carly Brooks*

TOOLAN TURNS AT THE boom and crash of bricks. Flashes of yellow and green show a quickly rising plume of dust above the squat houses covered in night. The lights die, the darkness returns, punctuated by the sound of vehicles and shouts. His nostrils widen; they have lost. The Mambas have come. A surging slurry of delight and fight mixes in his veins. Alarmed yells from the men gathered under the arch bring his attention back to his surroundings, although his body has already begun tensing and turning. His gaze crosses their faces and they quiet, but he can see them shifting with offense, knowing that they have to take orders from the American.

Toolan gestures. “Come. We have to go.” They nod, gripping their rifles, jaws clenched, boots scraping, not needing to know where. Back to the compound, back to their leader.

They move in silence going north on the *bazar*, the long trade road winding away from the 8<sup>th</sup> century cluster of Ghaznid relics that they have inhabited for a few years now. It has proven mostly effective in terms of hiding - squat in its

ruin and situated in an overflowing residential area. The Americans have been less than eager to fully assault the compound, its cloak of civilians and cultural import preventing a direct confrontation. No longer. It is now returned to what it was - a ruin. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

His boots hit the gravel, his pack wearing heavy on his back. Flares again, green, yellow. Toolan lifts his eyes, and Ben stared back at him, grinning, sweat pouring down his red face, clearly exhausted. He was in the canyons of Arizona, finishing his operators training, their boots crunching, stars doming overhead in multitudes.

“Are we having fun yet?”

Toolan smiled, hefting the 45-pound weight on his back, licked his lips, and tasted the salt and something bitter - sunscreen? - come off his stubble. “It’s just a little after-dinner stroll”. Ben turned back to the cowpath, smiling continuing on the Long Walk. Toolan saw his head lift up to take in the stars. A brief fear flashed inside him that Ben will stumble back, but the man kept straight. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Toolan waited. He could feel the other soldier thinking.

“I can’t feel my legs. But they’re still going.” Crunch. Crunch. “Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know.”

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

“I think our bodies know something. They know something we don’t know *know*, you know?”

Toolan smiled at the ground, blue and black below them.

“Maybe.”

“I think that must be it. This training is supposed to break us down, right? Reconstitute us, remake us. Maybe what they remake us from is our own bodies, from that knowledge.”

Crunch crunch crunch crunch.

Ben Lawry will die in a skirmish outside of Tunis a year later. His body losing whatever knowledge it had to broken ribs and burst organs.

“Yeah. Our bodies know.”

*But Someone else does too,* Toolan thinks on his way to the Ghaf-Yohmar compound six years later.

Crunchcrunchcrunchcrunch. Toolan can see the bearded outlines of the men running next to him, white scarves glowing in what little light fires and buildings lend them. The residents are quiet, huddled, waiting for it to pass, knowing that the next storm is on its way.

Toolan sees the shadows of the curb-cornered iwan and knows they are at the edge of the compound. He runs faster, and gestures to the men with him. Stay alert. Watch your seven. Watch each other.

As he runs past the scraggly remains of the jujube tree outside the compound, a boom echos off the dusty brick walls, and he stops. He is now in front of the massive iwan, blocky survivor of fires and Mongol invasions. He raises his fist, signaling his men to wait. He knows Williams’ work all too well. A blinding flare shoots from behind the rectangular structure, and as if on cue, the iwan cracks, and begins crumbling. He watches the fall, feeling the loss of his history. Iwans were said to mimic the outstretched hands of believers in prayers. The umma. And now it is fallen, dust billowing outward, he and his men scrambling to feel their backs against anything, their bodies knowing that the the lack of visibility makes them vulnerable. No shots, no fire. *They’re retreating, they’re done . . . for now.* He says a brief prayer, for whom, he does not know, but leaves how it hits up to God.

Jermaine Williams’s grinning face swims up before him out of the dissipating cloud. He never smiled except for when he

knew his work was impeccable. And it was impeccable tonight.

Toolan waves the soldiers forward, and they fan out, assessing the damage. He knows where the leader is, and enters the crumbling courtyard of the central palace, taking the stairs by two up to what had been and is still now the private quarters of the ruler of this place. A plump bearded man stands in the middle of the room, face shining with rage, opaque dust covering his loose white tunic, but he does not scream or rant. His words come out in an unexpected bass, smooth and strong.

“Where have you been? Your job was here. Next to me.” His eyes glitter.

“Apologies. I was out securing the southern border of the compound.” Toolan grinds his teeth. This man, the so-called leader, proclaiming himself to be Salafi, following in the footsteps of the first three generations of Muslims, when he only mentions the purity of Islam to radicalize and rile others to violence. Toolan had not even converted when they hired him; he had still been a Christian by birth, an unbeliever. It wasn't faith or righteousness that mattered here, but power, and their leader had wanted to buy his - his training, his experience, the knowledge that lived in his body.

The leader strides up to his face, staring, needing to know that he is still in command of this white American soldier. Toolan ducks his eyes, giving him the acquiescence the man needs.

“Never again. Come. There will be more Americans. This is just the first of it. We have to move.” Toolan nods and turns to follow his white-clothed back down a spiral stair at the rear of the room.

They descend quickly, Toolan only interrupting their flight to clear the rectangular slashes of windows in the stairwell



brick that leak shining light onto their faces. They stop at the ground level, and Toolan pulls up a thick slab of dun colored rock, revealing wooden steps leading below ground. Stale, cool air rushed up to them, and they move quicker now until they are at the bottom, smelling the leather and electrical cords endemic to the hidden room. The leader flicks a switch, and lights blink on, thankfully operational.

“Wait here. We will gather what we need and leave.” Toolan nods, taking his place by the stair, the only way in or out of this chamber. The whole room is artificially quiet, and Toolan can almost feel the feet of his old unit above. He watches the leader stride around the only table in the room, covered in onion skin papers and pens. His fat fingers rifle through them until finds a buried laptop; he turns to the desk in the corner, equally laden with paper and cords, and opens drawers, feeling underneath the writing surface, not finding what he seeks. *Nothing is holy down here, Toolan thinks. It is all plans and funding, money and power for a country who’s people are tired and searching for a way out. Spoils of war.*

“God only forbids you as to those who have fought you in religion’s case, and expelled you from your habitations, and have supported in your expulsion, that you should take them for friends. And whosoever takes them for friends, those — they are the evildoers.”

“What?”

Bill Boykin’s face comes into focus. Back in the chamber, Toolan smiles. Boykin’s gift for languages always manifested when he least expected it.

“That’s what Morgan had you learn as a sign. Or at least that’s the translation of it. It’s Sura 60, The Woman Tested.” Toolan stared at him. Boykin shrugged and wrinkled his nose. “It’s not my favorite to be honest. Maybe start with twenty-

four, Al-Noor, the Sura of Light. At least it's one of the most famous.”

Toolan raised an eyebrow at who was then the newest member of the Black Mambas. Although the men were close, it still took some balls to approach the leader in the manner of a teacher. Boykin slapped a pockmarked copy of the Quran in front of him, and he barely lifted his hands up in time to receive it.

“In case you want to know more.” And then Boykin was past him, whistling down the hall of the barracks. Toolan watched him go, running a hand over his stubble, then looked down at the book. It had been the beginning.

Standing in the chamber beneath the Ghaf-Yohmar compound, he reflexively pats his pocket, feeling the reassuring weight of the Quran Boykin had given him. The book had not left his side since that day. Clutching the laptop and now four hard drives, the leader comes to him.

“Let's go.” Looking at the leader's red face, Toolan feels the anger boil inside him, a blinding light. The leader has a split lip, and the blood shines dully in the dark. This man had asked for help from a Christian and had paid money for that help. This man had turned his back on him when he sought to convert, saying that Islam was not for him, the Infidel. Toolan had been left to do it himself with assists from the men he commanded. This man now clutched everything that held him to this throne of power and blood.

Faster than he knew *knew* he could but as fast as his body had always known it could, Toolan's arm is out, the knife is passed between the men, and the throat is cut. The leader only looks mildly surprised, as if he had found something deeply bitter in his sweet, as he shrinks, black blood spilling richly in the dust below. Toolan is reminded of the rain in the desert,

fat drops becoming quick craters on the hard ground. God sees the rain. God sees this too.

Quickly, Toolan gathers the laptop and drives and drops them into the pack he's taken off his back. He mounts the stairs again, but he stops before coming out of the underground room, rifle pointed at the gaping hole above him, and listens. All is quiet. He advances, silently flipping the slab back into place, catching it before it can make a sound, and brushes the dust off the walls to cover the cracks where it meets the floor. He opens the wooden door to the courtyard, rifle at the ready, looking around.

The stars spin overhead, as brilliant as that Arizona night, for the dust has settled, the Mambas have left.

Rifle close to his face, Toolan examines the once-again-ruined courtyard: the new pockmarks, the cracks that will cause a wall to fail in two days time, and the Kufic band that runs proudly above the arches, chunks missing from the elegant painted characters. He smiles; although he cannot read the language, one of the men under his command told him that it describes the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon, of how the jinn brought her throne to him, and she repented, stunned by the polished crystal marvel of his floor and the power wielded in the name of his belief.

Toolan vibrates, feeling his belief surge within him. There will be a new way now - one of peace, lived in the true fashion of the first Muslims and the Prophet himself.

He lowers his rifle, and walks into the September night.

## chapter nineteen

*M.T. Decker*

SEPTEMBER IN DEHMAR WAS only mildly cooler than August in Dehmar. It had been five years since he'd come to this god-forsaken corner of the world five years of dust, sand, and blood. He was done.

There was a time he was proud of being one of the Black Mambas.

A time when he felt like he belonged.

It was why he was here, now. It was why he'd done what he had done— at least that's what he told himself. The truth was, the past was catching up with him and he wanted to make amends for what he'd done— and failed to do.

Each step seemed to bring back memories of another life, memories of the lives he'd ruined, and the ones he'd saved. There were the women he'd promised to love, honor, and cherish: women he'd lied to. Then there were the men who severed by his side, men who had been like brothers and men he had betrayed. Their memories swam in front of him like mirages trailing back the way he'd come.

They had all led him to this point and he prayed for the

strength needed to finish the job.

He wasn't sure exactly where he'd end up. He only knew he had to keep moving and keep his ghosts at bay for just a little while longer. He had to finish what he'd started.

He pushed on, his target a small base near Kanabad, Dehmar, where his handler waited for him. He was done with the CIA, with the intrigue and backstabbing world of intelligence, counterintelligence, patriots, and zealots. He had one last package to deliver before his mission was complete and he could escape the spider's web that held him trapped in a world he hated.

He hoped it was enough.

Staff Sergeant Michael Glover sat in the small tower that gave him a commanding view of the surrounding area while giving him as much cover as possible. While most people write off the people of Dehmar as a pack of hide-bound, backward-thinking traditionalists, in truth, the Ghaf-Yohmar were quick adopters of any technology that would give them the upper hand.

It was not uncommon to see nomads following traditional trade routes while scouting ahead with drones they'd purchased through Amazon. To be honest, Glover was still waiting for his Air Hogs Star Trek U.S.S. Enterprise Drone to be delivered.

He was taking a stretch break when Staff Sergeant Faisal climbed the stairs and set down two plates.

"Hey Emir," he said as he gave the plates a suspicious glance. "Canteen or food truck?"

"Canteen, you know what happened the last time I got you something from a food cart."

"The part where I was the only one who didn't get food

poisoning or the part where I got reamed out for eating local instead of ‘protected?’”

Emir handed him a fork, his eyes twinkling. “Let’s just say, no one will be yelling at you and leave it at that.”

“I say, hello ptomaine.”

He took a bite and sighed. Things had been quiet the past few days and that meant fighting boredom. It also meant they needed to keep their guard up. Time was the enemy here, the more time they had, the better the chances of theoretical Amazon remotes finding their way into the hands of the Ghaf-Yohmar. Hell, for all he knew they’d gotten their Amazon packages delivered by drone and were even now weaponising them.

“What’s the word?”

“Morgan’s waiting for a special delivery and we’re supposed to keep an eye out for anything unusual.”

“Unusual, isn’t that the definition of a day in our lives here?”

“Pretty much,” Glover agreed with a wry smile.

“You want company?”

“What, you lose at poker again?”

“Eh, they’ve graduated to bridge, although last I checked I think Williams and Grange were playing spades.”

“Sounds like poker night to me. Is there a difference?”

“Not the way they play.”

The two men lapsed into silence, as they surveyed their surroundings and tried not to think about what they were eating.

After about forty-five minutes, Faisal nodded towards the North, “Brah, you seein’ what I’m seeing?”

Glover aimed his .50 Cal in the direction indicated and started scanning the area through the scope.

“I’ve got movement,” he confirmed. “Heading for us— on foot.”

On foot was strange enough to draw their attention and as Glover tried to get a fix on the man heading their way, Faisal started scanning everywhere else— in case the walker was a diversion.

“Oh, it gets better,” Glover said after a moment, still keeping his eyes on the approaching man.

Before Faisal could ask what, Glover was on the radio. “Boss,” he called over the com. “You aren’t going to believe who’s walking our way...”

“Overwatch, did you say ‘walking?’”

“A-Firm. Walking— as on foot.”

“Not playing guessing games today, Glover— what you got?”

“Ghost of Missions past, boss - we got us a Toolan sighting.”

Faisal nearly spit his drink when he heard Glover’s report. “You have got to be kidding fucking me.”

“Keep an eye on him,” Cole’s command was almost lost under Faisal’s swearing.

Master Sergeant Dalton Cole had stepped away from the table when Glover’s comments and Faisal’s swearing came across the comms. He wasn’t sure which was worse. How calm Glover seemed or the swearing that was now coming from the usually laid-back, self-appointed team medic.

“Make sure he’s alone,” Cole added as he nodded towards Hanley and Boykin. “You two are with me. The rest of you - spread out, take positions... Harris, I want you to man the camera feeds - I’m not sure what’s going to happen but this sounds a little too convenient to me. You spot anything out of

character, you sing out.”

“You mean more out of character than our former boss working for our former enemy, and by former I mean, newly deceased reportedly at the hands of said former boss?”

“Yeah. That.” Cole agreed.

“You got it, boss.”

There was something in the way Harris said ‘boss’ that made Cole cringe. By all rights, Harris should have been running the show by now, but his ties to Toolan had precluded him from the list of candidates to take over the Mambas. Not that he’d be anything other than bitter if it had been him in Harris’ shoes.

“Watch your six, Toolan’s been dealing from the bottom of the deck again and I hear it’s all face cards.”

Cole nodded, a twinkle in his eye, Smith and Wesson still beats four aces. Stay frosty.”

“Always.”

Toolan paused as the men manning the gate checked his credentials. They were outdated, but things tended to move at their own pace out here, if they moved at all, insha'Allah.

He wondered how many times he’d heard the phrase over the course of his career, and how many languages he’d spoken them in. ‘God willing.’ Did God will this or was this all man’s doing? Did it even matter anymore?

He waited, knowing it was a matter of time before his men — his former men caught wind of his arrival. It was not a reunion he was looking forward to.

He wasn’t surprised they were surrounding him as soon as he entered the base. “Boys,” he said as he nodded to his former teammates.

“Toolan,” Cole answered as he stepped forward.



“It’s just Ryan, these days,” Toolan answered.

“Not what I heard,” Cole answered. “Word is you were working freelance ops - consultant at best - but your choice in clients leaves more than a little bit to be desired.”

“Look, I’d love to stop and chat about old times, but I’ve got to see a man about a corpse and his computers.”

Cole’s eyes narrowed. “You know we got attacked after you left.”

“Yes, and we both know we got attacked before I left, doesn’t change a thing.”

“Except it was on my watch,” Cole answered, “and they had a lot of information on how we do things.”

“Hell Son, you know as well as I do, they can google as well as we can and between Wikipedia, Hasbro, and Revel - they have better Intel than we do half the time.”

“Not on my watch,” Cole repeated.

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya— but we both know that’s not why I’m here. Morgan still skulking about?”

Cole remained vigilant until he heard a click on the radio from Glover, and a confirming one from Harris - nothing suspicious from their standpoints.

“He’s at the motor pool, trying to figure out how to get a half track back to his home in Fairfax.

“I’ll catch up with you at the canteen for a bad cup of coffee,” Toolan said as he headed towards the motor pool.

“Not if I catch you first,” Cole answered as he headed back the way he’d come. He signaled Harris to keep eyes on Toolan’s progress and went to check in with Glover.

Harris followed the cameras as Toolan made a straight line to the motor pool. At least he was going where he was directed. That was something.

He watched as Morgan made a show of inspecting the vehicles and ignoring Toolan until his circuit took him back to the entrance.

“Toolan,” he said cordially. “Didn’t expect to see you here any time soon. Trying to get the band back together?”

“Cut the crap J,” Toolan said with a sigh. “We both know I’d pull back here after my little side job paid off, it’s why you’re here. It’s why they’re here. I need to know if it’s so they can do your wet work or if they’re here to protect what I’ve got, so you tell me.”

“I wanted you to be able to clear the air with your boys before you finally called it,” Morgan answered. “I’m sentimental that way.”

“Yeah, that’s not how I remember it,” Toolan replied. “I believe the words you used were - Play it close to the vest, don’t tell anybody anything and something about plausible deniability with a side of suspicion and scorn.”

“Those were the orders going in - coming back out... I assume you’ve found what you were looking for?”

Toolan pulled out a messenger bag and handed it to Morgan who began emptying the contents onto the hood of a nearby Jeep.

“This is a laptop,” he growled, looking at Toolan.

“It’s a laptop,” Toolan agreed. “And two external hard drives.”

“And I’m supposed to do what with these?”

Toolan paused, and Harris could almost hear his former Team Leader tell Morgan what to do with them before he answered. “Decrypt them. They contain all the plans and people the Ghaf-Yohmar have currently in play.”

“Decrypt? You didn’t get the password?”

“I asked nicely, but he didn’t trust me. I got you the drives -

the rest is up to you and the boys in Langley. I'm out."

Morgan nodded as he slipped everything back into the canvas bag. "Then I'm right in assuming Ghaf-Yohmar is..."

"Between leaders," Toolan confirmed.

"Then until next time," Morgan said as he turned to leave.

"There is no next time. There's me, a fishing boat, and the open water," Toolan answered as he watched the man leave.

"Until the next time," Morgan added, waving at him with his back still turned.

Shaking his head, Toolan headed for the canteen knowing he still had a lot of explaining to do.

Harris split his attention between the two men, but it became obvious they knew where the cameras were. Toolan followed the quickest path to the canteen, staying in plain view all the way, while Morgan slipped out from the camera's watchful eye and vanished.

Cole climbed the stairs to check in with Glover and Faisal. He knew they wanted to see Toolan almost as much as he wanted to— but he figured he'd give them the chance.

He was more than a little surprised when Faisal was the first to reply with a head shake and a "just give us the reader's condensed digest version," he suggested.

"So far, all I know for sure is— he's here for Morgan."

"Well, that can be— interesting?" Faisal asked, unsure what exactly Cole would call a visit with Morgan.

Glover gave a snort and a headshake.

"What?" Faisal asked.

"Interesting? There's an understatement," Glover commented, "a visit with Morgan is one of those 'count your fingers and toes after he shakes your hand' encounters."

He turned towards Cole. "What's the op?"

“Figure out who’s on who’s side,” Cole answered. “And try not to get any on you.”

Glover nodded. “I think I’ll stay back and keep an eye on things, I’ll have Faisal give me the RDC after-action report to me, while I look at the pictures.”

“See Toolan go. See Toolan get a job, with the enemy— see Toolan run away. See Toolan come back. See Morgan. Morgan is not our friend. Run Morgan, run.”

“Pretty much,” Glover agreed.

“If you two are finished— I’ll go get the details and get back to you.”

“Thanks,” Glover said, his eyes continuing to sweep the area.

Cole wasn’t sure what to expect when he got back, but Toolan, telling tall tales to anyone who’d listen was the most likely option.

“... like I was saying, this was my last mission,” he heard Toolan say as he entered the area designated ‘the Canteen’ and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“Tell us the one where you quit and hired out to the other side— or the one where you swore you were done dealing with the CIA,” Cole prompted, keeping his tone even.

“Cole— it was an assignment, the retirement was kinda the truth. I got contacted through a third party as word of my retirement made it through the ranks. Then Morgan was there with a plan that could only have come from Langley.

“The part where you sold us out?”

“The part where I let the leader of the Ghaf-Yohmar hire me as his security consultant.”

“Yeah, how’d that work out for him?”

“Not very good,” Toolan admitted. “Seems he lacked

proper security and he left his laptop laying around. Look— I’m not proud of what I’ve done, but in doing it— I’ve kept our casualties to a minimum and secured their plans.”

“And you were working for Morgan all this time?”

Toolan shook his head. “Oh, hell nah, I was working for the CIA - Morgan was my contact.”

Cole wanted to ask him what the difference was but the vibe within the unit had changed, at least for now.

Relief and more than a little annoyance had replaced the rage and disbelief. Cole studied the men as they slowly drifted into the canteen, drank a coffee or two, toasted their former leader, and headed back into the field, their steps a little lighter.

But as he stood there, he realized he could not afford to trust the old man, and, to be honest, he didn’t want to. There was still too much at stake.

As if reading him. Toolan nodded to the side and went to refill his cup. Cole followed him.

“Okay, Cole— I’ve seen porcupines that were less prickly than you’re being out there. Talk to me.”

“To be honest, I’m not sure where to start.”

“Never stopped you before.”

Cole gave the older man’s words a few seconds of thought before agreeing. “And it’s not going to stop me now I guess.”

“Go for it.”

“I don’t trust you. I didn’t trust you before— and I certainly don’t trust you now. You left us and went to consult for the folks who are trying to wipe us off the face of the earth. And you did it to him before he could do it to you, nothing more.”

“Cole, you got it wrong. I was doing the CIA a solid.”

“Are you listening to yourself? Solid? CIA? Okay, those two might not be so bad, but Morgan?” his sigh sounded

almost like an exasperated hiss as he shook his head, before trying again.

“At best you’re working with a weasel who can’t be trusted with a pencil, let alone our reputation.”

“At worst?”

“At worst, you sold us out— used what you learned against your own men and it will come back to haunt us. Hell, it’s already haunting us.”

“How?”

“Well, let’s face it— I wasn’t a big fan of yours before you defected, and they made me Team Leader. Me, leaving your second back where you left him. Harris was your defender and your second in command and he’s now persona non-grata in the command structure. What does that tell you?”

“Look,” Toolan sighed. “I did what I had to to protect you and the others. Believe it or don’t. At the end of the day— it really doesn’t matter.”

“Great epitaph.”

“Right up there with ‘I was just following orders,’” Toolan agreed. “But at least I did what I thought was right.”

“That’s the thing. ‘What I thought was right,’ is the biggest cop-out of them all, It’s something I’d expect Morgan to say.”

Toolan let out another sigh. “Look at the end of the day, my conscience is clear and my men are safe.”

“No, Toolan— they stopped being your men when you left and sold yourself out to the highest bidder. They’re my men— and so help me God, if I find out you’ve done anything to compromise them— to compromise us...”

He let the threat end there.

In the end, they both knew, if he had compromised them — neither of them would live long enough to know.

“I’m retired. For real this time,” Toolan answered. “Let’s

leave it at that.”

Cole nodded. “Then you tell them you’re leaving— and you keep your word.”

Toolan nodded and headed back to the others. It was time to say goodbye for real.

Cole watched his men for a moment and was about to leave, when Henley made his was over.

“Boss, thought you’d want to know - we’re heading home for debrief - with the chief. Langley thought it would be great if Toolan came with us - Burgers at the White House? Tea and Medals?”

He let his breath out and gave the younger man a relieved smile. “How soon?”

“Word is, we leave tomorrow.”

Cole nodded. “Pass it on.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” he paused noticing Cole was getting ready to leave. “Where are you headed?”

“Going to let Harris and the others know— let them say their good-byes. Once I’m done, I’ll be in ops doin’ the paperwork.”

“Fair enough.”

When the evac chopper arrived the next day, there was no sign of Morgan or Toolan. It was just the remaining members of the Black Mambas, the pilot, and two reporters.

The chopper took them from Kanabad and dropped them off at the U.S. Air force base in Izmir, Turkey. From there it was a transport bus to Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen Airport where they grabbed a flight home to Dulles International on Qatar airlines.

To Cole, it was as if they were deep sea divers surfacing in steps as they headed home, decompressing a little at each

transfer point. When they finally made it home, he felt as if he could breathe again. Two nights later, you'd have thought they'd never left the DC Metro area.

While they could neither confirm nor deny anything about their debrief, they all agreed Five Guys was indeed amazing, although Harris still insisted that Little Tavern would have hit the spot at that point.

Comparing notes afterward, they all agreed they still had no idea what had happened— but the Commander-in-Chief was happy with their work and none of them were under investigation or arrest. All-in-all, it was the best mission they'd never been on.

They never saw Toolan again, but as they were leaving, Cole heard the Director of the CIA tell the President, “Well, sir— we're still analysing the data these men were able to secure. But, considering there was over 12 terabytes of data, scattered over 3 drives of encrypted hardware - we're going to be very busy for the next few months.

Another day, and someone else's problem, Cole would take that as a win as he headed back to base.