



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

Michael Roberts

FIREBASE CONNELLY WAS SPINNING down from the weekends' ops.

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

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

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

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

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

Faisal looked at the bathroom.

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

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

“So, you have something?”

Faisal shrugged.

“Don’t hold out on me, Fayz.”

“I hear they made a decision?”

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

Faisal sighed.

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

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

“Fuck, seriously?”

“Like I said...”

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

“Hardly ever.”

“So, it’s Cole...”

Harris looked around.

“Any idea where Grange might be hiding?”

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

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

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

“Fair enough.”

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

Everything in its place and a place for everything.

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

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

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

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

from the hills about a kilometre away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grange was one of them.

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

No-one cared really.

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

“Yo, Christo...”

Grange looked up and then over at him.

“Waddup?”

“A word?”

Grange stepped out from the squat bar.

“What’s up?”

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

He looked over at the squat bar.

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

“Six Twenty.”

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

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

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

“More or less,” Harris said.

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

“This isn’t a loyalty check, is it?”

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

“Whatever the big boys decide.”

“Out of my hands,” Harris agreed.

Grange nodded.

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

“What the actual fuck?”

Harris gave him a shrug.

“Not confirmed but...”

“If Fayz said it....”

“Yeah,” Harris said, “Looks like...”

The Colonel was in his office when Harris arrived.

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

“I guess I do, Colonel.”

“Fayz’s grapevine?”

Harris nodded.

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

“Fuck,” Harris said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Fuck...OK,” Harris said.

“Again,” the Colonel said, “Sorry.”

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

“Dismissed, I guess.”

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

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

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

“Should be Harris.”

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

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

“This time I think he means it.”

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

He shrugged.

“Same same, I guess.”

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

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

“OK,” he said, “ I’ll get to it.”

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

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

They knew.

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

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

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

“That’s it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He’ll shake it off.”

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

“Might just do that.”

Cole caught up to Harris by the yard.

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

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

“I could refuse.”

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

“You could ask for command of another unit.”

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

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

interesting to see.”

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

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

Harris patted him on the arm.

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

“With some help...”

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

They were gathered in the Rec Centre.

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

“Fucking right,” Grange said.

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

“Amen.”

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

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

“OK, this filthy swarm of rabble.”

“That’s better.”

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

“Oh shit, “ Cole said, smiling.

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

He pulled a Sharpie from his pocket.

“Mister Cole, if you would, please.”

Cole sighed and pulled off his shirt.

“Turn please.”

Cole turned in his seat.

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

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

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

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

“Far more appropriate.”

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

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

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

“That’s pretty,” he said.

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

“Aw, that’s fucking poetry,”

“Shakespeare would be proud of that.”

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

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

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

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

“Assholes.” Cole said, grinning.

They drank.

chapter three

Pete Becker

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT ON THE Incident of September 16, 2020

The following is transcribed from the recording device found in the possession of subject Tommie Miller. The device is quite sophisticated; its miniaturization and voice-triggered noise-cancelling microphone involve technology that is not generally available for civilian use. It also has a GPS receiver, so each segment of the recording has a time and location attached.

The transcript is followed by a summary of the Activity Report prepared by [name redacted] who investigated this incident at the request of this office. For the full Report, see document #[redacted].

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

9:30 AM, Eastern Standard Time, Monday, September 15, East of Washington, DC

[Miller] Sarah, I know, I know, this is for recording the Ambassador, but I can't stand it! I tried to call ... couldn't reach you before I left. But I just have to tell you ... even if it's only in a recording ... I know you'll hear this later ... what a wonderful weekend! I love you!

[Miller] So I'm on my way to Qatar, going to change planes there to get to Dehmar. It's nine thirty in the morning here, four-thirty in the afternoon there. Thirteen hours on this plane. Sigh. I'll get there at 5 o'clock in the morning. Have to try to sleep. But flying with the Ambassador has its perks: First class! And an empty seat beside me! And free drinks!

4:00 AM, Arabian Standard Time, Tuesday, September 16, West of Qatar

[Miller] Oops, sorry, had to cut that short. The flight attendant was looking at me funny. I guess seeing someone talking to themselves makes them nervous. So I asked for another drink, and then I fell asleep. This is exciting! Whoops, here he comes again. Later...

6:30 AM, Arabian Standard Time, Tuesday, September 16, Qatar

[Miller] Wow, hot and dry! The sun isn't up yet, and it's already over 80. And now I'm on a three hour flight in a military transport to get to Dehmar. All the seats face backwards. Supposed to be safer. No booze on this flight. I can't stop thinking of you. Looking forward to getting home and seeing you again!

**11:15 AM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16,
100 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar**

[Miller] Uh oh, just got orders to strap in. The crew seems tense. Talk later.

**11:45 AM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16,
10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar**

[Heavy breathing]

[Miller] Shit. Shit. Shit. [Heavy breathing] They shot us down. I saw one engine on fire. Lots of flames. Lots of smoke. [Heavy breathing] Plane bounced, spun. Thought I was going to die. [Heavy breathing] Don't know how the pilot got the plane down without it coming apart. Don't remember much. Ambassador dragged me out. [Heavy breathing] Propped me up under the wing. Said that nobody else survived. Went off to look around.

**11:55 AM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16,
10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar**

[Miller] It's hot here. Hotter than in Qatar. Sun is behind me. Behind what's left of the plane. [Long pause] Desert straight ahead as far as I can see. Hills come in close on either side. Looks like we landed in a valley [Long pause] Some plants growing near the hills. Must be water there. Are those oases?

**12:06 PM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16,
10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar**

[Miller] Ambassador came back. Pointed to dust cloud on the horizon across the desert. Said it's rescuers. Said they'll be here in ten or fifteen minutes. [Pause] I don't feel good.

12:21 PM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16, 10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar

[Miller] Dust cloud is four or five old cars. Ragheads found us. Safe!

12:23 PM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16, 10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar

[Various noises, multiple gunshots]

12:25 PM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16, 10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar

[Miller] Ambassador sitting on the ground at the tail of the plane. Two ragheads with guns standing beside him. [Long pause] They're not protecting him. They're pointing their guns at him and yelling. Omigod! They're not rescuing us. We're prisoners.

[Miller] I don't know if anybody will ever hear this, but I'll go on telling you what's happening. [Long pause] Not moving, hopefully they'll think I'm asleep. Or dead.

12:44 PM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16, 10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar

[Miller] Loud bang like an explosion from the oasis on my right. Both ragheads by the ambassador turned to see what's up. The one nearest to me crumpled, and then the other one crumpled on top of the ambassador. [Pause] Now there's gunfire from the oases on both sides. Ragheads falling down everywhere..

[Miller] Men in tan camouflage are running toward us, pointing guns. Not shooting. Looks like the ragheads are all on the ground.

**12:56 PM, Turkmenistan Time, Tuesday, September 16,
10 miles West of Kanabad, Dehmar**

[Miller] Can barely keep my eyes open. Someone shouting "secure". Seems like it's over. Maybe we're safe? [Long pause] Everyone's facing away, looking toward the hills and the desert. Except for one guy. Talking to the ambassador. Now he's coming toward me.

[Voice identified as SSG Faisal] Hey, buddy, how you doin'?

[Heavy breathing]

[Faisal] Stay with me! You're going to be okay.

[Miller] [unintelligible] to sleep.

[Faisal] That's it, keep talking. Tell me about yourself.

[Miller] Just want to sleep.

[Faisal] Not now! You've got to stay awake!

[Unintelligible]

[Faisal] Hey, buddy, what's your name?

[Miller] Tommie. [Pause] I'm Tommie.

[Faisal] Hey, Tommie. Nice suit! Most folks don't dress up like that out here.

[Silence]

[Faisal] Tommie, you got a girl back home? C'mon, you can tell me!

[Miller] Sarah. Sarah Black.

[Faisal] I'll bet you're gonna have a good time with Sarah when you get home.

[Miller] Sarah. [Long pause]

[Silence]

[Faisal] Master Sergeant! Looks like we're losing him!

[Unintelligible]

[Faisal] Hey, he's got a recorder strapped to him.

TRANSCRIPT ENDS

Activity Report

Subject: Thomas "Tommie" Miller

[Name redacted], roommate of subject, reports that he and subject went to the Last Chance Bar on the evening of September 11, 2020. Each had two beers. Subject was then approached by a young woman, later determined to be Sarah Black. Black flirted with subject, asked him to buy her a drink, which he did. She spoke almost exclusively with subject, complimenting him on his looks, touching his arm. After approximately half an hour subject left with Black. Subject did not return to shared apartment that weekend. Roommate reports that that was unusual; describes subject as a "geek", girls weren't interested in him.

Subject's cell phone contacts included a number labeled "Sarah". The number was a cell phone which investigation revealed had been first activated on September 11 and was deactivated on September 16. That phone has not been found.

Subject called this number twice on the morning of September 15, shortly before his departure for Dehmar. Neither call connected. Subject subsequently send a text message to that number. Content of the message is as follows:

Sarah, I'm in the departure lounge at Dulles, flying to Qatar, and then on to Kanabad. High security, so I won't be allowed to call you from there. I'll call when I get back.

A few hours after this text was sent, Black was seen by a neighbor leaving her apartment with two suitcases. A subsequent search of the apartment turned up nothing of note.

From these facts and the contents of the preceding

recordings, tentative conclusion is that Black seduced subject with the intention of persuading him to record secret conversations involving Ambassador Keating and top government officials in Dehmar. When subject informed Black of his imminent departure, thus revealing the time frame for the Ambassador's trip, the plan changed, resulting in the attack on the Ambassador's plane on September 16.

chapter four

Skylar Goodspeed

CIA OFFICER MORGAN WALKED into the Black Mambas base near desert city of Kanabad. He blinked and rubbed his eyes into obedience, temporarily blind in the shade. Outside, September sun was in its best shape, powdering the desert mercilessly with its glare.

Around him, men's voices and metallic sounds of guns and ammo being kept in working state with top-notch precision. In the distance, what sounded like a TV. Then:

“Hey, officer Morgan, what brings you here today, sir?”

Morgan turned to see SFC Tom Harris approaching him.

“I need to talk to somebody in charge,” he said and looked around as if Harris didn't even exist.

“That would be me,” said a voice behind Harris.

Both men turned to see MSG Dalton Cole approaching them.

“Oh yeah, right, you're the boss now,” Harris said, straightening up all of a sudden to show that although he may not be higher in rank, he was definitely one inch higher in height.

“That would be all, not-master-sergeant,” Cole responded, ignoring his grudge.

“Troubles?” Morgan asked when Harris was out of earshot. Cole only smiled.

“With all due respect, sir, my men are not your concern.”

“Then don’t make it one, Master Sergeant. Now gather your team. Mr. Keating wants to talk to you.”

CIA officer Morgan didn’t even wait for Cole’s response. A little too assured of his own importance, he turned away and walked towards an overweight man who looked as out of place as humanly possible.

That person was Richard G. Keating, a recent transplant to the US Embassy in Kanabad, Dehmar, arriving to the base to brief the eight members of this most elite military group about a rather last-minute mission.

Just the sight of the trained men standing in front of him made him reconsider starting to work out.

He felt like high school all over again, being cornered by a couple of football players that ruled the corridors. His big eyes behind glasses gave him the look of being permanently terrified.

Or maybe he was indeed terrified, being out of his comfy, airconditioned office in downtown Kanabad.

“Gentlemen, it is a privilege to meet you in person,” he said and hoped he sounded braver than he felt. “Officer Morgan has assured me you’re just the right people for this job.”

Keating turned to a big screen where a map of Kanabad popped up. One house on its outskirts was marked with a red cross. Keating couldn’t help but remember his childhood in Arizona, going on treasure hunts with the few friends he had.

Now he was in terrorist-infested hell hole he was sure most of people would not be able to show on a map.

“As you already know, selling drugs is major income for the terrorist organisation Ghaf-Yohmar. According to our sources, the next shipment of heroin will arrive to this house tonight. Unfortunately, we only found out about it two hours ago. We want you to intercept it. And it has to be as quiet as possible. Last thing we need is a bloody mayhem and guns blazing all over the city. It would not look good in the news, you know.”

No need to specify that “we” means Pentagon in Washington DC, the office-based puppet master of anything going on in this part of the world.

Keating turned to face the men again.

“A piece of cake,” said Staff Sergeant Chris Grange, mumbling the words over a cigar between his lips, looking as confident as ever before Cole took over with a dose of common sense.

“What do we know about the place and its surroundings? For all we know it will be guarded by a bunch of trigger-hungry assholes shooting everything that moves.”

“Sounds like a quite evening in Texas to me,” said Staff Sergeant Pete Hanley – born and raised Texan, just like Cole. Cole ignored him.

“There are up to twenty men inside and five to ten guarding the premises. The drugs are in the basement.” Keating said, flipping through his notes.

Harris didn’t feel like joining the conversation yet. He noticed now-retired Master Sergeant Ryan Toolan walking through the base, the sight of him reminding Harris that he had been overlooked for promotion, having Cole to take Toolan’s place instead.

“It’s pretty last-minute if you asked me,” said Staff Sergeant Emir Faisal, the field medic.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but that’s why I’m briefing you instead of throwing it to some regular G.I.Joes.” Keating responded, somewhat surprised at the doubt.

Indeed, it was a quiet night in Kanabad. The place looked almost idyllic under the dome of starry sky. However, a random passersby might have noticed a shadow on a roof, which would be Staff Sergeant Michael Glover keeping an eye on his fellow soldiers, ready to send a bullet diving through an enemy’s head, decorating walls with some bloody contemporary art. If this random passerby wandered to an un-descriptive house at the outskirts of Kanabad, he might have noticed a flash of light or two, which would have alarmed him to a drama unfolding inside.

The last bullet, shot by Cole, went through the throat of a man raising his gun at Harris.

“What the fuck did you do that for? I had him,” complained Harris, ignoring the dead man’s blood splattered on his face.

“You’re welcome,” Cole smiled.

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you, s-i-r. Now let’s get the shipment and the hell out of here.”

“Roger that, sir,” Harris couldn’t help the smirk. Cole turned, their faces only inches apart.

“Look, if you want to pretend life is some sort of a children’s story where everybody gets what they deserve and sing Kumbaya, it’s fine with me, as long as nobody gets hurt or killed. Including you. I got promoted, you weren’t. Deal with it.”

Cole turned around and headed to the basement.

Grange was right – it was a piece of cake for the Black Mambas, and his grin, overlooking the load of heroin, said it all: “I told you so”.

chapter five

Annette Pateman

TEAM 1, 2ND TROOP, C Squadron, aka “The Black Mambas” walked toward their base.

The unremarkable grey low rise apartment building, was situated in an ordinary Kanabad street. It’s small square windows, sported the curved brown grilles of iron oxidized by the dry desert air. People moved through the street going about their business. Women could be seen wearing the religious hijab or scarf, draped around their heads and upper body. Some women wore a face covering called the niqab. Children held onto the hands of their mothers. Men sat outside houses on low stools, talking and watching the world go by. Some men sat outside the many small cafes that spilled onto the pavements. The men drank the refreshing hot sweet mint tea, that was popular in the area.

Master sergeant Dalton Cole recognized the importance of blending in with the local people as much as possible. His innocuous looking rucksack mirrored that of the seven other men who walked with him towards their base. His rucksack

contained among other things, a powerful machine gun, a hand gun, ammunition, a number of grenades and an emergency medical kit. Also, night vision goggles that had proved so useful on a number of other missions. Of course he carried a special compact phone and a very lightweight and strong helmet also a telescopic lens, and a tripod to mount and steady a gun.

Sergeant Dalton was very tired, but his special ops training, meant that he walked with a straight back and set a stalwart example for his team. Sergeant Dalton was looking forward to having a nice cold beer. He planned to have this beverage in the privacy of his small room.

The debriefing regarding the unsuccessful mission, could wait till the morning when he and his team would have eaten and rested.

The Black Mambas entered their base.

Sergeant First Class Tom Harris, deposited his rucksack heavily onto the brown carpet tiled floor, of his bedroom. He then walked briskly to the shared kitchen. He selected a freshly cooked steak dinner that had been prepared by one of the two chefs. The chef's worked in the large restaurant standard kitchen, which was situated in the basement of the building.

Sergeant Harris liked his steak rare. He took it to the large kitchen table. He ate his dinner quickly, and thought over the mission that he had taken part in that day. Failure wasn't something he liked to admit too. Sergeant Harris wondered what they could have done to have changed the mission outcome. He returned to his bedroom and threw himself onto his bed.

He was soon in a light sleep.

The medic Emir Faisal, went to the compact fridge that he

kept in his room, and removed a vitamin infused, carbonated pineapple drink. He downed this and proceeded to burp loudly. He then went to the shared squadron kitchen, and collected the lean chicken breast and rice dinner he had ordered, before leaving for the earlier mission. Medic Emir Faisal carried the plate of food back to his room. He settled down to eat his meal in front of the little window that looked out onto the street.

After eating his meal in the squadron kitchen, staff sergeant Jermaine Williams returned to his room. He kept a small altar on which he kept a small black obsidian rock he had brought in a rock and mineral shop in Wyoming, a small brass statue of a smiling Buddha, and various incense sticks. He didn't have to light these incense sticks. They gave of a subtle fragrance without the need for fire. Sergeant Jermaine Williams needed to decompress after the earlier mission. He needed to have a quiet and certainty deep within him. This was so that sergeant Jermaine Williams could successfully disarm munitions and bombs that were designed to kill and maim him, and The Black Mamba team. He sat cross legged on the floor by his bed, in the lotus yoga position. Sergeant Jermaine Williams slowed his breathing, and began to meditate.

Sergeant Chris Grange was contemplating lighting up one of his cigars, when he caught sight of sergeant Bill Boykin and Sergeant Pete Hanley walking in the direction of the lounge. He joined them and caught the end of their discussion. Sergeant Hanley said that in his opinion, the mission would have benefited from more detailed planning. He had felt rushed and unable to deliver the level of counter surveillance he would usually bring to missions.

That left him with a feeling of frustration, as he felt that solid counter surveillance was a key ingredient to a successful

mission. Staff Sergeant Bill Boykin agreed that the mission had been unsatisfactory, but that they were certain to be able to continue with future successful missions against Ghaf-Yohmar.

The Black Mambas had been back at base for just under two hours, when Sergeant Cole Dalton called them to the briefing room. This was a secure room in the building, equipped with soundproofing, a smart board, a large ordnance survey wall map of Kanabad and the surrounding area and a projector. The room also had a bullet proof door. The familiar square jawed face of Morgan appeared on the screen.

“ We have received intelligence that Ghaf-Yohmar are planning to attack and kill Keating. Master Sergeant Dalton Cole, your orders are to stop this planned attack. You will leave immediately. The rendezvous is just outside the city limits, in the hills surrounding Kanabad.

A known stronghold for Ghaf - Yohmar. Here are the coordinates.”

It took the men five minutes to gather their belongings and exit the base apartment building through a back entrance, and into two ordinary looking civilian vans. Two vans were used because if one van was attacked or intercepted, then the other could likely avoid capture or even an explosive device. The second van was for there for back up purposes as a type of mission insurance.

It was now eight o'clock in the evening and night had settled on Kanabad. Women and children were absent from the streets. Some younger male villagers could be seen wondering around, but the place were quiet.

Sergeant Hanley drives the first van, and Sergeant Bill Boykin the second van. The drive takes a speedy forty mins to

get to the city outskirts and the hills. After that the men exit the vans and they travel the rest of the way on foot. Sergeant Cole refers again to the coordinates they have been given, as does sergeant Tom Harris. The men hear the sound of shouting and the unmistakable sound of rapid gunfire as they approach a house with two dilapidated outbuildings. Sergeant Grange swears quietly under his breath. Sergeant Dalton looks pensive. Sergeant Williams scans the area with that special sense he has for hidden explosives. The area could be littered with improvised explosive devices or IEDs

It is Sergeant Glover that using his telescopic sniper gun site, sees what appears to be a cloth flapping on the ground outside the larger of the two dilapidated buildings. The team draws closer. The men are tired but their adrenalin and training kick in. They draw nearer to the house and see that what appeared to be a cloth flapping on the ground, is in fact the loose white shirt of Keating. He has been shot at close range in the chest and once in the left leg. The area appears to have been very recently abandoned. The mission is a over. The mission is a fail. Keating is dead.

The team avoid one another's eyes. Sergeant Grange and Sergeant Boykin enter the main house to make sure that there are no members of Ghaf-Yohmar waiting inside to pick them of, one by one using sniper fire. Sergeant Harris and Sergeant Glover check the smaller of the dilapidated buildings and it's surrounding area. Sergeant Williams and sergeant Hanley check out the larger of the dilapidated outbuildings. Sergeant Cole and sergeant Faisal construct a portable stretcher using the tools and materials in their rucksack. They carry the necessary equipment to construct a basic, yet strong stretcher.

The Black Mambas complete their searches. They find no members of Ghaf-Yohmar in the area. There is a suppressed

anger that can almost be tasted in the air. Each man in the unit is angry. Each struggles with his own bleak demons. Keating is dead, and all of their combined training hasn't been enough to save him, and to keep him alive.

The sun has risen and shines brightly on the scant succulent and shrubby plants of the hills.

The Black Mambas make their way quickly and quietly down from the hill.

The two vans are parked just where they were left seemingly a lifetime ago.

The body of Keating is placed carefully into the van.

On his return to base, Sergeant Dalton Cole takes the body of Keating to the morgue. The base has a morgue built for this purpose. Keating's body will be flown back to the USA, to his family as soon as that can be arranged. Sergeant Dalton and his team go straight to the briefing room. Morgan is there and they want to know what happened. They want to know what Morgan knows. When did he become aware of the imminent threat to Keating's life. Sergeant Grange gets a sudden craving for one of his Cuban cigars. Sergeant Dalton thinks it is all too neat, that his elite unit arrived five mins too late to save Keating's life.

Morgan is standing in front of the briefing room podium. He is gripping the sides of the podium so hard, that his knuckles look purple. He looks stressed. He asks The Black Mambas to be seated. Morgan talks about his remorse and sadness for the bereaved family of Keating. Sergeant Dalton stands up. He asks Morgan outright whether he sent The Black Mambas out on the earlier mission, with the aim of leaving Keating

vulnerable to attack by Ghaf- Yohmar.

Sergeant Dalton watches as Morgan swallows and hesitates a bit too long, before he denies the assertion that he sent The Black Mambas out on a mission to get them out of the way.

chapter six

Julia Pierce

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Any other mission detail, Detter?"

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

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

"See anything Varley?"

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

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

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

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

"Affirmative command - missile away."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Varley swore. "Where'd they go?"

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

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

getting a really bad feeling about this...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Boykin, what’s with the comms?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

chapter seven

Nick Calvert

MSG DALTON COLE FOUND the whole team lying around the common room of their billet when he got back from the command block. Most were only wearing shorts and they'd opened all the shutters, but the heat was still close to unbearable, the redolent smell of sweat taking him back to his high school football days, and that awful locker room.

They all looked up as he came through the door, all but one acknowledging him with a swift "Boss" before they went back to what they were doing.

Glover had stripped his rifle and was meticulously cleaning the barrel with a pull-through, whilst Grange was doing what Grange always did when he had time: playing a game of Space Pirate Dolphins on his tablet. Dalton paused to see his progress. He'd got to level ten where the dolphins sashayed into a bar, pretending to be customers and demanding copious amounts of rum. Dalton frowned. He didn't understand Grange's obsession with the game. He was sure there were much better games out there that didn't anthropomorphise aquatic mammals into sabre wielding space pirates.

“Got you, you fucker!” Grange muttered as the tablet cheerfully chirped and the screen changed to a cut scene before the next level started. He looked up at Dalton and raised an eyebrow. “You okay boss?”

“Yeah,” Dalton lied.

“Level eleven! Woot, eh!” Grange grinned.

“Yeah... woot.” Dalton said. He turned to see Tom Harris standing by the open door, glaring at him.

“Harris, I need...” Dalton said, but Harris was gone, the door slamming shut behind him. “Fuck.”

“Don’t worry, Boss,” Williams called. “He’s just pissed he didn’t get the promotion when Toolan retired.”

“And, he’s a little upset Toolan didn’t offer him a job,” Grange added, chuckling, his thumbs flying over the tablet as he manoeuvred a pod of dolphins around level eleven’s shopping mall.

“When he gets back, tell him I need to see him ASAP. And Williams?”

Williams, who had just added a fourth and fifth ball of plastique to his juggling display, caught them all and looked up. “Boss?”

“Please stop the juggling with explosives. It make me nervous.”

“Aww, Boss. Safe as house without a fuse. Honestly. And I’m nearly at six.”

“Still, if you don’t mind,” Dalton said. “I’m going to get some shut eye and I don’t want to find myself waking up at the pearly gates.”

“Boss?” Faisal said quietly. The room stilled. Staff Sergeant Emir Faisal was the youngest of the Black Mambas, both in age and in service time. And yet he had a quiet gravitas that made them all pay attention. Dalton turned to him.

“Yes, Faisal?”

“When are we going?”

Dalton realised the tension and anticipation in the room was now palpable. He turned slowly, meeting each of their gazes with what he hoped was a calm, measured response. “As soon as it gets dark. I’ll be briefing you as soon as I’ve spoken with Harris.”

Smiling, he walked into his room, shut the door, stripped his sodden fatigues off, lay on the cot in his shorts and was asleep in seconds.

Dalton realised he was back at the Bar at the Folies Bergere, again. He didn’t dream often, or if he did he didn’t remember, but the bar at the folies bergere seemed to crop up more frequently than he thought it should.

The dream stemmed from a painting by Édouard Manet, a French impressionist. Set in the late eighteen hundreds the painting shows a pretty, but sad looking blonde barmaid, behind her bar. Various bottles, and a display of oranges in a bowl, stand on the bar in front of her. Behind her, a huge mirror shows the barmaid’s back, a stately looking man in a top hat, and all the rest of the bars many patrons.

Back home, in Texas, Dalton’s aunt had had a full size poster of the painting framed and hung in her bedroom. As a child it had captivated Dalton. He’d spent hours sitting on her bed, staring at the painting and especially the barmaid. He’d wondered why she looked so sad, and had imagined all sorts of explanations. He’d wanted to roam the rest of the bar that appeared in the mirror, too. But it was a reproduction of a painting that existed thousands of miles away, and fun though the idea was, a fantasy like that couldn’t really happen.

Until, one night, in a dream, it did.

The first time he'd had the dream he had been at college and he'd stood in the bar in his football uniform, shoulder pads, helmet and all. Then it had been vivid and oh so exciting as the painting had come to life. The noise and the smells, the grubbiness and the poverty, the wealth and the pain. He'd wandered around and though he didn't speak French it was obvious what the patrons were thinking as they whistled and shrieked and laughed and clapped the girls who danced the can-can. Bemused and befuddled, with an erection like steel, Eighteen year old Dalton had woken back in his bedroom.

In a cot in a room in a country as far away from Texas as he'd ever wanted to go, Dalton found himself back at the bar and morphing into the man in the top hat. This time he was wearing full battle gear, a bandolier of ammunition crossing his chest, his gun slung across his stomach. He turned towards the stage just in time to see the small orchestra walk on and start playing. A table at the front emptied, the occupants beckoning Dalton to take it. The thump of his boots on the straw covered wooden floor lay as a counterpoint to the music. He sat at the table just as the barmaid put down a tray with a bottle of absinthe, a jug of water, rough sugar cubes and a spoon. Absently, he watched her prepare the drink he hadn't ordered and smiled at her when she'd finished. She curtsied, and for the first time in any of his dreams she smiled, leant in and spoke.

“Vous faites ce qu'il faut, monsieur.” - You are doing the right thing, sir.

The dancers trouped on as the band started playing the can-can and Dalton saw they weren't the lithe and sensual girls he'd seen every time he'd had the dream, but the remaining seven Black Mambas. Dalton found himself starting to laugh, but he stopped as the dream started to fracture. The dream

stabilised and Dalton got a deep feeling of approval before he was swept back up in it and found himself joining the others on stage.

Oddly, all six feet three inches of Chris Grange--who was built like a brick shithouse--danced beautifully. Dalton watched as Grange swept SFC Harris off his feet and spun him around and around and around, and soon the rest of the Black Mambas were pirouetting and cavorting, too.

A loud crash shattered the dream and Dalton found himself still lying on his cot with his handgun pointed at Harris who was glowering in the doorway.

“You fucking idiot!” Dalton said, sitting up and putting his handgun down. “I could have shot you. Knock first in future, would you?”

“No!” Harris spat as he came in and slammed the door behind him. “You’re not going to take us on another half arsed mission, no matter how noble the others say it is. It’s your fault those marines got taken by the Ghaf-Yohmar in the first place. I have zero intent of putting my life on the line to get them out.

“We’re a unit, SFC Harris,” Dalton snapped, getting to his feet and facing Harris nose to nose. “The Black Mambas are a unit. And we’re a unit I command. Get it.”

Dalton thought he’d pushed too hard as Harris flushed red and started vibrating with obvious anger. He took a step back. “Oh, sit down Tom. We really have to talk.”

“Sit where?” Harris said, looking around the empty room, then pointedly at the cot.

“You take the foot end and I’ll take the pillow end,” Dalton said, hoping Harris would laugh. “It’s my pillow and I really don’t want your sweaty arse on it.”

Po-faced, Harris grunted and sat down.

“Let me say what I have to say and then you can have a turn, okay?” Dalton said, as he pulled on a clean set of fatigue trousers, then rearranged his pillow and sat down on it. Harris grunted, again.

“Right. First off, I’m sorry you got bumped for command when Toolan retired. It wasn’t fair. You had seniority, and the post should have been yours, not mine.”

“What?” Harris said.

“It should have been yours. Major Matrix thinks so, too. But I need you to look at the possible ‘whys’ without getting angry.”

“I can do that,” Harris said, grudgingly.

“We, and by we I mean the whole of Delta Force, are a unique fighting unit. An army within an army. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Harris said.

“Part of what makes us unique is our ability to blend in. The fact that we can appear to be civilians, not soldiers. Yeah?”

“Yes,” Harris nodded.

“Well, Tom, out of us all you’re the one who gets his hair buzz cut and shaves every day. Take Toolan. He was always unshaven and, frankly, scruffy. It’s what’s expected of us. The Black Mambas are killing machines without the militaria. You... you look like a soldier, sorry to say. Now, here’s my guess, and, for that matter, it’s Major Matrix’s guess, too.

“We think your appearance is something you’ve never talked about: with anyone. And you’ve probably never even considered it. Am I right?”

After a long silence Harris turned to Dalton and nodded.

“So, MSG Cole,” he said with a wry grin, “we’ve got to rescue those four idiot marines and kill as many of those Ghaf-Yohmar as we can. What’s the plan? I assume it’s sneaky

and cunning, and we have drone support.”

“I have the basic brief, SFC Harris, but I have no doubt we can finesse it to make it better,” Dalton said, holding out his hand. They shook. “So let’s tell the rest of them we’ve made up and get to it, eh?”

“Yes Boss!”

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

E. Kinna

JUST OUTSIDE THE KANABAD base's Radio Command Centre, hot desert sand swirled around a table that had been set up under an open tent. Dalton Cole stood beside it and lowered his sunglasses to watch two men approach from Command Ops. They were young, dressed in civilian clothes, and too clean to be military. One had dark hair, and other taller man had blonde hair. Both wore dark sunglasses, and both walked with an air of administrative arrogance. Dalton motioned for Tom Harris to come closer.

"Who're the lily whites?" Tom asked, his voice quiet enough that only Dalton could hear it.

"I'm guessing Morgan's boys, with the Annrabur recon. How are Glover and Williams doing with the supplies?"

"On schedule," Tom said. "Everything will be ready at 1400 as ordered."

"Good."

The two CIA operatives stopped at the table, pulled several pages out of an envelope, and set them down. The blonde one said, "These images of Annrabur were taken within the last 24

hours.”

“Wait.” Dalton said with a grin, “No hello, no introductions? Tsk, tsk. I guess the CIA isn’t teaching kids any manners these days.”

Tom smirked and both CIA agents stood up straighter. The dark one said, “A toothless Black Mamba. How disappointing.” Then, the two agents turned and walked away.

“Assholes,” Dalton said before turning his attention to the satellite photos. He looked one over for a few seconds, one that had a focused view of a large building. “This is where the Marines were last seen, near the old Dehmar International Hotel. It’s approximately two miles from the city’s north entrance.”

Tom leaned in to get a better look. “What’s the deal with the hotel?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s our priority objective. That area is near the street vendors who likely saw the whole thing go down.” Dalton then shuffled to a photo that had a zoomed-out overview of the city. He pointed to several structures staggered around every couple of blocks, each with sandbag fortifications visible on the roof. “See these?”

“Yeah, but if we stick to the main roads and use the local shops and traffic for cover, we should be able to avoid any trigger-happy snipers.”

Several soldiers were milling around, watching Tom and Dalton with curiosity. It was time to go dark. Dalton packed up the photos and signalled for Tom to follow him to a beige civilian pickup truck. It was parked nearby but away from prying eyes. Because the Black Mambas were technically on leave and resources were valuable, it was expected that they’d use one of the non-military vehicles to leave the base.

The other six team members were already at the truck,

loading in their backpacks. Bill Boykin jogged towards Dalton.
“Hey Boss.”

“Is our transport arranged?”

“Yep. They’ll meet us about ten miles west of the Annratur checkpoint at 0800 tomorrow morning.”

“Good. And the Red Cross vests?”

“Packed.”

“Good work, Boykin.” Dalton gave Bill’s shoulder a light slap. “Good work.”

Though there hadn’t been any recent, major skirmishes in Annratur, anything resembling U.S. Military would be viewed with extra suspicion by the locals. It had been Pete Hanley’s idea to pose as Red Cross workers to infiltrate the city and it was brilliant. Faisal managed to get his hands on extra medical supplies in exchange for a 24-hour loan of uniforms and a Red Cross vehicle. Now, all they had to do was hope that would be enough time to get the information they needed.

The Red Cross van was at the location as promised; a white Toyota model complete with a white flag bearing the famous red cross and the name, *Comite International Geneve*. Cole and his men had managed to grab a few hours of sleep before the rendezvous, and were now jammed together inside the van, dressed in civilian clothes and Red Cross vests.

The sun had risen high above the southern mountains and heat waves started to appear on the rutted road. It was almost 0900 as they approached the city of Annratur. A pair of UN soldiers standing guard at the city’s entrance gate waived the Black Mamba’s through without insisting they stop to identify themselves.

“Fucking unbelievable,” Grange said as they drove past mud-walled buildings and throngs of people making their way

along the main street. “Four Marines are missing, and the UN still doesn’t give a shit about who’s in the city.”

“Okay, listen up,” Cole said, “we’re going to get out by the central bazaar and make our way to the old hotel on foot.”

A traffic jam of busses, cars and bicycles slowed the van down to a crawl, and Cole searched for a spot to park. “I want two teams. Glover, Grange, and Boykin, you’re with me and we’re taking the left side of the street. The rest of you are with Harris and taking the right.”

Tom Harris, sitting up front next to Cole spoke next. “Remember our cover. We’re Red Cross workers who are supposed to meet up with some U.S. Marines as our escort to one of the Southern Villages. Keep your weapons hidden and try to find someone willing to be our translator. Offer them Euros, more than usual, but not so much that it raises suspicion.”

After finding an empty spot in front of an Anratur café, a blast of warm air hit Dalton as soon as he opened the van’s door. It carried with it the scent of diesel fumes, ripe produce, and livestock. A burka covered woman rushed past, and two young boys clutching a beat-up soccer ball darted into the street. Harris’s team had already crossed to the right side, while Cole’s team followed him into the café.

Inside, half a dozen Dehmari men sat around small tables sipping their coffees. Only a few looked up at Cole. He smiled and waved at a thin, elderly man near the centre of the room, judging him to be the proprietor based on his fistful of Dehmari cash.

Cole nudged Boykin, who stepped forward and asked in Persian, “Shama nglisi suhbat may kenid?”

With a wary gaze from rheumy brown eyes, the man replied. “Yes, speak English little bit. Cross Red.” The man

stated pointing to Cole's vest.

"Um, yes. Red Cross. We need a translator. We can pay." Cole pulled out several Euro currency notes.

The old man's eyes brightened for a moment, then he shook his head and pointed to a younger man stepping out from a back room. "Pasaram."

Boykin whispered, "Son."

Cole watched the old man speak in hushed tones to the younger one, who then stepped forward. "You need translator?"

"Yes," Cole said and handed him several bills. "We need to find our U.S. Military escort."

The young man's eyes grew wide as he pocketed the money and Cole wondered if he'd made a mistake and given too much. "Come, I will help," the boy said.

He led the Black Mamba's outside, where Cole whistled and waived to Harris and his group who re-joined them.

"No luck finding a translator," Harris said.

"Never-mind, we found one. This is...um..." Cole gestured to the young man and paused before asking, "What's your name, kid?"

"Abed."

Cole then explained to Abed that they were supposed to meet the soldiers at the old hotel. He asked Abed if he'd seen them, but he said he hadn't.

The team made their way through the bazaar, and Abed asked all the vendors and shoppers if they had seen the four American soldiers. No one had.

After weaving through what seemed like endless mountains of vegetables, fruits, and trays of fragrant spices, the group turned down a side street and walked several blocks towards the old hotel. It was one of the nicer buildings in the city, with

blue lapis lazuli accented tiles covering much of the front entrance and only a few bullet holes marring the façade. Silver metal plating on the ornate corbels glinted in the sunlight—a reminder of this city’s grander past.

There was little traffic, human or otherwise, now that they were away from the bazaar, and it was quiet. Too quiet. Cole noticed that Abed was moving away and fidgeting with something in his pocket. He reached for the Beretta M9 in his own and gripped the handle. “Abed,” he said, “do you know this place?”

The young man shook his head. “Not good place. Not good for Red Cross.”

Harris nodded at Cole and their team spread out, lowering their backpacks as they formed a line. In unison they opened their packs and pulled out their Walther MPs, the compact but powerful sub-machine guns favoured by Delta Force.

“Not Red Cross! Not Red Cross!” Abed yelled, pointing at the weapons. He shouted something in what sounded like Dari and ran away.

“Shit,” Harris said.

Cole made a sharp gesture with his hand across his throat to silence his team. With a quick glance at the surrounding buildings, he motioned for Glover to take position on a balcony across the street. The man moved fast, scaling a broken fire escape in seconds, and swapping out the Walther for his M4A1 sniper rifle.

To the rest of the team, Cole gestured for them to split up with Harris’s group to go around and enter from the back, while he and his team entered through the front.

Cole walked with silent steps to the arched entrance door. It was made of heavy, dark wood, probably a few hundred years old. He gave the handle a gentle tug, and it gave way. It

wasn't locked.

The rusted, iron hinges creaked when the door opened wider. Peeking his head around, with his gun out, Cole looked inside. The dim light revealed little, but he could make out the old reception desk. He moved ahead, slow and steady. His team fanned out behind him, each one checking doors and corners. There were no sounds, and the only other movement came from dust particles falling through the stale air.

Faisal turned on his flashlight, and the beam highlighted fresh streaks on the dusty floor. It looked like something, or someone had been dragged across it, and recently. Cole followed the marks, which led to a closed door. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something move and aimed his weapon. It was Harris, who gave the all clear signal.

Cole opened the door to follow the drag marks, revealing a staircase to a lower level. He took the lead. It grew darker with each downward step, but his eyes were quick to adjust.

When Cole reached the bottom, he heard a scraping sound, like a door opening. Bright light flooded into the space and something cold and sharp dug into his neck. *Fuck*, he thought, *a knife*. He could only feel, not see, the person wielding it.

A dusky voice said, "You have two choices. Turn around and leave or die."

His mind raced to assess the situation. The angle of the knife and arm resting on his shoulder meant he was taller than his assailant. Probably some kid drug runner. The light told Cole that the knife wielder likely came from an adjacent room. His men, invisible in the stairway's dimness, would now be able to see him clearly. He relaxed and made a slight gesture with his hand to tell his team to stay back.

"Only two choices?" Cole said.

The knife dug in a little more. "Tell you what. I'll choose

for you.”

“No thanks, I think I’ll choose number three.” And with one swift jerking motion, Cole grabbed the wrist holding the knife, and whipped around, pinning the person against a wall with his arm against their throat.

Grange called out. “You okay, Sir?”

“Yeah, you and Boykin wait there. Harris!”

“Here.”

“Keep looking around upstairs. Let me know if you find anything.”

“Understood.”

Cole’s arm remained pressed against the throat of his hooded attacker, who was now wiggling and gasping for air. He leaned in. “Now, I have two choices for you. Tell me who you are, or I’ll make you wish you could die.”

“Let...me...go...I...”

There was something odd about the voice, and Cole relaxed some of the pressure. The person was small, several inches shorter than he with a hood that had fallen forward, covering their face. With a quick flick of his hand, Cole yanked the hood back. A mass of long black hair spilled out and dark, almond shaped eyes glared up at him. A woman. And a pretty one. He hadn’t expected that.

“Well,” he said, “now that I know what you are, why don’t you tell me who you are?”

“Let go of me, and I will.”

“Nah, you go first.”

“Haramzadeh,” she said with a hiss.

That was one Persian word he knew, *bastard*.

“Tsk, tsk. That’s not very nice.” He grabbed the collar of her shirt and pulled her forward. “Let’s try this again, shall we? What is your name and why did you try to kill me? These are

not difficult questions.”

She squirmed and kicked at his legs, but his grip was too strong. “Look,” she said, her breathing hard and shallow, “I’m sorry, okay? But I thought you were Ghaf-Yohmar.”

It was a plausible explanation, and she wasn’t a threat for the moment, so he let go. She took a step back and walked into the lighted room. He followed and saw that there were stacks of boxes from floor to ceiling.

“What’s all this,” he asked, noting that many of the boxes had U.S. Military seals.”

“Food, clothing,” she said. “I make sure it gets to people who need it.”

“Do you know what the penalty is for stealing from the American Armed Forces.”

She let out a little laugh. “Severe, I’d imagine. Look, I didn’t steal any of it. I, and the people I work with, provide information to your military in exchange for supplies.”

“You’re a spy.” Cole stated it as fact, and then realized his good luck. “Excellent. I am in need of some information. Four U.S. Marines were kidnapped in this area, and I need to know their location.”

“I don’t know what happened to them. I’m sorry.”

“Those drag marks...” He stopped mid-sentence, realizing that it was the dragging of the boxes downstairs that had made those marks in the dust.

“Like I said, I don’t know what happened to them but,” she started to whisper, “there is one piece of information I can give you. For a price.”

Cole stared at her, his gaze narrowing. “What price?”

“I need a vehicle. One that won’t raise suspicion. One that, perhaps, has a white flag with a red cross?”

Cole took a deep breath, rolling back on his heels as he

thought about it. Not that it wouldn't be easy enough to find another truck or van, but the Red Cross was gonna be pissed when they realize theirs wasn't coming back. Oh well, he thought. "Done." He threw her the keys and she caught them.

"Good," she said. "There is a restaurant near the western gate. After sundown, when it closes, deals are made."

"What kind of deals?"

"The kind that involve heroin exports to other countries, like your great United States."

"Ghaf-Yohmar?"

"Of course. Who else?" Her disgust was palpable. "No one does anything in Annrabur that is not sanctioned by those hrumzadeh hai khaaen."

Another Persian phrase Cole knew. *Traitorous bastards.*

She added. "The Ghaf-Yohmar who meet at the restaurant aren't local lackeys. They're powerful, and everyone fears them. If someone took your Marines, this is where you should look."

Cole nodded. "Boykin!"

The soldier appeared beside him. "Here, Sir."

"Find Harris."

"Yes, Sir."

"Tonight," Cole grinned, "we're dining out."

chapter ten

L.G. Red

THE BLACK MAMBAS TREKKED down the mountain, leaking a thin murmur of complaint. The two Texans were together as usual – the team leader, Master Sergeant Dalton Cole, ruffling his dirty blond hair with the palm of a hand, and Pete Hanley, the counterintelligence guy, smirking from behind his shoulder.

The Black Mambas, pride of the American military, the most deadly Special Forces group in existence. All eight of them.

The mountains of Dehmar towered above them. Earlier they had seen a lion. The flies were driving them crazy; they were everywhere. Cole understood now why all the Dehmaris wore caps and turbans. Apart from having a taste for eyes, the flies liked to dine on scalp sweat. No wonder this was the centre of the terrorist Ghaf-Yohmar group. Living here would make anyone ill-tempered.

They'd even been warned not to drink the water, and not to eat the rice, wick was boiled in sewer-infested water. Meat: you decide on your own risks.

They were coming down into farming country now. Their guide had left them a while ago, gesturing vaguely at a village in the distance and calling something in Dehmari Persian with a friendly grin. “He says that’s where we’ll get the stuff,” Boykin said between his teeth as soon as they were well away. “I think that’s what he said.”

They were posing as builders, but they were also supposedly heroin buyers looking for a deal.

Cole went back over his briefing. Four marines had been kidnapped. They already knew that much. They were on an unofficial job here. America would deny all knowledge of them if this went wrong. Dehmar was known to be the headquarters of Ghaf-Yohmar, the most secret and deadliest arm of the worldwide jihad. “Not as deadly as your Black Mambas, though,” the CIA man Morgan had said as he sent them jovially out to risk their lives. Yeah, right. Eight special forces guys against the force of terror. Nobody knew who the leader of Ghaf-Yomar, nobody was even sure what the name meant. Apparently it was something like “Our Mountain”.

The two-metre-tall monster, Chris Grange, was at the back, hefting most of the luggage: armaments disguised as surveyors’ tackle, and the ropes and tackle that went with the job. The rest carried old rifles – or to be exact, very new-tech rifles disguised as old guns from the Sixties.

In between Cole and Harris, the others carefully straggled. The only one who looked like he belonged here was the medic, Emir Faisal. The only one who could understand a word spoken here was Bill Boykin. At least Cole hoped he could. But he’d never been with Boykin anywhere he couldn’t pick up the conversation and run with it, a magical gift. Wherever he went, Boykin became a local within minutes.

“What’s that in the field? Flowers?” asked Glover from

behind, speaking English too loudly.

“Poppies,” said Faisal softly. “Hence the heroin. It’s the farmers’ big money crop hereabouts. This used to be the bread basket of Asia. Pomegranates and peaches and almonds from here were once sent all over the British Empire, and to the courts of the rajahs in India. But war has destroyed this place. Now only drugs are a crop to sell.”

According to the CIA briefing, a big drug deal was going down. Ghaf-Yohmar was financed by heroin – the group was in control of all the heroin in the Middle East at this stage – and so the brilliant idea was that the Black Mambas would seize some Ghaf-Yohmar soldiers and interrogate them, learn the location of the four kidnapped Marines and bring them home to a ticker-tape parade with bugles and trumpets sounding. *Quid erat demonstrandum.*

They were beginning to split into two groups, one led by Cole, the others following his second-in-command Tom Harris, who’d expected to get the team leader job when Cole was brought in. A guy their old team leader had described as a shiver looking for a spine to creep up. Maybe that was why that team leader, Toolan, had left the service to go into private security; he didn’t want Harris at his back.

Harris was strutting, leading the sniper and the demolitions guy, Glover and Williams. Faisal was kind of straying between the two groups.

Cole could have done with Toolan now. They’d clasped hands, that last day, gripping each other’s arms, Toolan’s dragon tattoo seeming to writhe along his forearm. He knew this place, could interpret the landscape and the people. Whereas Cole was playing it by ear in a music he couldn’t whistle.

The track looped around a derelict building and they ran

into a group coming up the mountain. Women, their faces uncovered, ran in chaos, dragging their scarves across their mouths, dropping the baskets and pots they carried.

Grange swung down his load and picked up the spilled containers, stacking them politely by the side of the road. He bowed to the women standing above them, clutching their scarves to conceal their faces. A burst of chatter – they were just girls, most of them – then he smiled, lifted his load and fastened it around himself again and the group of men set off.

The restaurant was where the guide had described it: a tea-house around an open courtyard. A teenage boy ran out and called to Cole and Hanley, gesturing them in. Boykin stepped in front of them, and waved “No thank you!” and he and the boy spoke on and on while Cole stared in astonishment. Harris went to step around them and Cole shouldered him back.

At last, they were in. In the dark interior, figures gradually appeared. Boykin whispered to Harris, “It’s polite to refuse an invitation two or three times.”

The place was jammed with people. With men. Two playing a game of chess, watched by four more. A long table of men drinking tea and pouring out and comparing seeds from pouches. A cat and her kittens snoozing before a blazing stove on a bed made of a sheepskin coat. And the proprietor, turning the tap of a great brass boiler to fill a series of aluminium teapots.

He came towards them, the teapots and tea-cups on a tray, and laid out the tea before them, and proceeded to have a long discussion with Boykin, before going off and shouting orders into a back room. They drank their tea and watched. In a while another waiter appeared, carrying dishes of stew with meat balls, spiced spinach and rice. Boykin spoke again; the rice was

taken away and substituted with fresh, hot flatbread.

“Well, this is nice,” said Harris in a ladylike tone.

Something about the way he said it made Cole look sharply up. The hugely-bearded waiter, in his long white shirt and waistcoat and baggy pants, his eyes ringed with kohl, was staring at Harris. He was ladling spinach onto Boykin’s plate. The hand holding the ladle wore a ring with a green square-cut stone.

Boykin spoke to him. He nodded. When he went, Boykin said: “I told him we’re builders, hired to make a western-style house for a guy in the capital, he wants a dacha like the Russians have. He seemed satisfied with that.”

They sat quietly spooning up the stew with the flatbread. It was good.

Then the place emptied in seconds. Shit – had they been spotted? Cole leaned towards the door and lifted the curtain aside enough to see out. They were praying. Boykin spoke into his ear. “Everyone except the waiter. And the cat. Maybe.”

“They’re all related – cousins from all over these mountains. The boss told me. It’s the harvest sales, they’re waiting for the buyers.”

They all filed back in and settled down. One picked a musical instrument off the wall and sang a slow, plaintive song. Boykin translated in an undertone: “This is the mountain, the mountain where the spring of life rises. This is our mountain, the spring of life will nourish the whole world...”

Harris’s back went rigid. “What?”

But before Boykin could answer, the curtain at the door was pulled aside. A strikingly tall man in a striped turban ducked in, followed by a swaggering group of black-eyed acolytes. Nobody looked up. Except the cat. She ran to the man, chirruping, and he scooped her up, held her against his

chest and scratched under her chin. Her purring resounded through the room in the silence. Then he placed her gently down with her kittens and threw his leg over the back of a chair to sit down with the farmers at the long table.

The Black Mamba with one movement looked lazily elsewhere. Unlike everyone else in the room. Everyone was riveted.

The dealing started. Quite openly, several bottles of black treacle were plumped onto the table. Opium direct from the poppies.

Cole signalled with his eyes: Wait.

The deal was done fast. The big man beckoned with two fingers and one of his men brought a briefcase and pulled out bags of stacked notes – euros. Cole calculated it at five hundred thousand. This must be the Ghaf-Yohmar.

Harris was out of his seat, swinging his rifle. He knocked the chessboard, and the two chess players grabbed their guns. All the Americans were on their feet, guns covering the room. So were the Dehmaris. Rifles and pistols bristled from every hand. Except the man in the striped turban. He turned and spoke, graciously.

“What’s he say? What’s he say?”

Boykin sank back into his seat. “He’s the chief doctor from the capital. They can’t get morphine because of the sanctions, so they buy the opium here and make morphine and heroin for treatment in their laboratory.

The tall man put his hand into his waistcoat – the Americans tensed. He pulled out ID and threw it on the table in front of them. “Not that this is your business,” he said in perfect English.

The guns went back under the tables. Cole and his counterintel guy, Hanley, chatted with the doctor about their

supposed building job. Everything settled down.

Until the waiter came out. The doctor's eyes flicked up to him, as did Harris's. But it was not till he reached across the doctor to take the plates the Cole saw his tattoo. "Toolan!" he just stopped himself from saying. Then the others saw. Grange stood, and lurched away, turning his ankle on the gun Harris had put down. He staggered, and his foot landed on the cat's tail. She yowled, and the doctor leaped across the table, punched Grange full in the face and kicked him. His men rose as one, and from under their cloaks pulled automatic pistols and let go. The Black Mambo ran, Cole dragging the massive Grange with him. Behind them, they saw the doctor – or terrorist – with the cat, her kittens and their sheepskin coat hugged to his chest with one hand while he fired an Uzi with the other.

Outside, they reassembled behind a house, sheltered from the firing by stone walls. "What the hell?" snapped Harris. "What the hell is Toolan doing here?"

"And what," said Boykin, "what the hell is the leader of Ghaf-Yohmar doing here with his central council? And how can we capture them now?"

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

Ruth McCracken

COLE STUMBLED BACK INTO the tent. Seeing him so visibly shaken, jaw open, eyes darting round searching for meaning, brought home just how serious this was.

Boykin broke the silence.

“He’s goadin’ us,” he said. “Like we was a couple few bulls.”

“What the fuck?” growled Grange.

“First they provoke him with capes, then wound him, gee him all up. Then the matador, he comes in all swagger and show, an’...”

Here Boykin clasped one fist in the other, raised his arms and plunged a sword into the shoulders of an imaginary bull.

“Ok, settle down,” Cole barked. He looked calmer now, his composure regained, his back straight. “Hanley.”

“Sir?”

Hanley was outside the tent, watching Toolan’s retreat. He didn’t break his gaze as Cole spoke to him.

“Can you still see him?”

“I sure can, sir. He’s on foot, headin’ up into the hills.”

“On foot?”

“All by his lonesome.”

Cole frowned. “Strange.”

“Let’s tail the motherfucker.” Grange shifted his bulk, but Cole shook his head.

“Find out where he’s going, Hanley. Report back by nightfall.”

“Sir.”

“Be careful.”

Hanley was still staring, beyond the staging post’s perimeter, out into the midday heat and the parched hillside, as he took off his radio and gave it to Cole. He waved aside the Master Sergeant’s protest. He’d have a water canteen, his binoculars, a compact SLR and a pistol. Better to take as little as possible, minimise the risk of being seen or heard.

He slipped away before anyone could dissuade him otherwise.

The sun blazed in an unforgiving blue sky. Hanley noted its position, then began the steep ascent. There’d been no rain for months, and no matter how carefully he tried to place his feet, he kicked up swirls of dust round his boots. Vegetation was sparse. Once he got to the ridge, it would be difficult to remain hidden.

They could pick him off the moment the tip of his nose got to the top, he thought, and for a moment he paused, clenching and unclenching his fists, fighting to control his quickening breathing.

You got this. You’re here because people trust you can do it. You’re not that weedy kid in the schoolyard any more.

So what if he was following one of the best, someone who’d seen more action than him? Someone who knew how

the unit worked because not so long ago they had revered him, respected him, listened to him. They'd taken the piss and sang his praises when Toolan left, pretending it didn't hurt when he drove off to start his new life.

If only they'd known then how that would turn out. They'd've been lining up to slit his throat mid-snore.

Nothing made sense. And when nothing makes sense, you put your blinkers on and focus on the next second, and the one after that.

There are actions that become so much a part of you that you forget you ever had to learn them. Cleaning your teeth. Tying bootlaces. Changing gear while steering your Daddy's borrowed-without-permission pickup. Not crying out when you're jerking off. Cleaning a rifle. Using it to shoot a guy.

Tailing someone you're mad at who's scrambling down a rocky slope without them knowing you're there.

It was tempting, the urge to get close, hide behind a boulder and shout out his name, wait for him to turn round, off-guard, then fire one off, see it hit him between his eyes, the satisfaction of watching him drop, blood and brains spattering the ground.

Who ya foolin'? Not me, Toolan. Bastard.

But he had his orders. He was to follow, observe, return unharmed, report what he'd seen and heard. Undetected. A dead hero would be no use to those four hostages.

Besides, he knew as soon as Toolan heard his name, he'd go to ground. Then maybe it would be *him* lying in the sun, fermenting for the vultures. Pete Hanley, lover of Tex-Mex food, shooting pool and downing beers, and driving his eighty-five-year-old grandmother to Matagorda Bay for ice-cream "cos I ain't dead yet, hear that y'all? Still life in this old mamaw."

A sudden clatter interrupted his thoughts and set his heart racing. He froze as several stones narrowly missed his head and tumbled down the incline. Had Toolan heard? No, he was climbing again, following what looked like an old shepherd's track that snaked up and round and up a bit more. He didn't even pause.

It was hard to listen with blood roaring in your ears, but Hanley strained, waiting for a shout in Dehmari from behind that meant the game was up. *This is it. I'm going to die. I'll never see home again.* To his shame, he was shaking.

He tasted sour bile in his throat as he thought back to eighteen months ago, his first day of assignment with the troop, and the pep talk that Master Sergeant Toolan was giving his latest recruit.

"Do you know why they call this team The Black Mambas?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me, Hanley."

"Fastest-moving land snake in the world, sir. Can be up to 3 metres long. Extremely venomous."

"Any other qualities?"

"Er... Very aggressive, sir."

"Aggressive, fearless, tenacious. No-one threatens or attacks a black mamba and gets away with it. You know what colour a black mamba is, Hanley?"

"Black... sir...?"

"No!"

Toolan roared and pressed his face so close to Hanley's he could smell the spearmint from his gum.

"Brown, Hanley, a dull, feeble brown. But guess what? When his blood's up and he opens his fangs wide, then you see the inside of his mouth. Guess what colour that is?"

“Black, sir!”

“Black, Hanley!” Toolan was shouting into his ear now, making Hanley feel he was still in the wrong. “And what does that mean?”

“I don’ rightly know, sir. Mebbe... it’s not what’s on show that’s important? Your strength is hidden within?”

Toolan had stood back then, smiled and reached out his hand.

“Welcome aboard, Staff Sergeant Hanley. Welcome to the Black Mambas.”

And now here he was, cowering on the ground in a foreign country he’d never heard of until a few months ago, showing as much bite and hostility as his niece’s pink unicorn doll.

He heard a noise above him, somewhere between a bleat, a sneeze and a snort, and cautiously turned his head to look. A pair of goats, their long thick horns curling round their ears, were staring at him as if he were an exhibit in a zoo.

“Fuck!” he whispered.

He forced himself up to a squat and took a welcome swig of water. He reckoned they’d been on the move for over an hour now. He knew it would be chilly once the sun set, and wished he’d thought to bring a blanket. This could be a long trip.

Hanley lay on his stomach, looked through the camera viewfinder, and captured what lay in front of him.

The city of Annrabor was a sprawling mass of higgledy-piggledy mud, stone and wooden shacks, some built over others on stilts, all with shallow-pitched roof-tops. There seemed to be no room to move between them, they were so closely huddled together. Yet Hanley knew that there would be streets that wandered in a way that made sense to them, from

the food store to the market with its array of fresh spices, from the barber's to the school, from the fabric shop to the Mosque. Filled with crowds hustling and bustling, people, livestock, stray dogs sniffing out scraps.

Usually. For a split second, Hanley wondered how the pandemic had impacted the people that lived there.

Jeez. You really are goin' soft, boy.

Toolan was marching along a wider street, open on one side to the valley. There was no way Hanley could follow him now without arousing suspicion. He'd stick out like an alligator at a rodeo. The intel he was getting was good, though. They'd heard unconfirmed reports that a Ghaf-Yohmar stronghold was in the area.

There was something about Toolan's behaviour that was bothering him, though. He was making no attempt to conceal himself and had slowed to a stroll.

This ain't no promenade. What ya up to?

It was odd. Toolan leaving the staging post on foot... Come to think of it, Hanley had had no problem keeping him in his sights. He was more like Mr Bean than an experienced trooper. And now here he was, out in the open, as if he were untouchable, protected by some invisible force shield. The arrogance of that guy.

Or maybe... Could it be?

Hanley shook his head, and concentrated on photographing Toolan as he reached a high-walled compound, with turrets at regular intervals. There was one small narrow gate, next to which stood a group of several men. Switching to his binoculars, Hanley noted the bandoliers across their chests, and the automatic rifles held casually in their hands. A quick glance confirmed the turrets were manned with machine guns.

And that there was a school on one side of the compound,

and what could be a hospital or medical centre on the other.

Hanley watched as the men at the gate saluted Toolan when he approached, and he exchanged some pleasantries that had them all laughing. Then Toolan pulled out a cigarette, and as one of them held out a lighter for him, he turned and looked straight at Hanley. Not coincidentally in a vague direction, but straight at him, straight through him. Then he laughed again and went through the gate.

Too late, Hanley realised he had no photos of him engaging with the gunmen or entering what they were so securely guarding. He was unsettled. He had to get the hell out of there. Had he been led into a trap, a lamb to slaughter?

The sun was getting low, but he might just make it back to the staging post while it was still light enough to see, though at the same time he wished he could travel under the darkness of a moonless sky.

Suddenly, the call to prayer rang out, clear and strong. Hanley had long since given up on God, any god, but there was something about the timbre of the Imam's voice, the primeval sound it made, and the way it echoed round the landscape that caught his attention. He had heard nothing like it, and for a moment he was spellbound, compelled to listen.

A shout, and he flattened himself. Footsteps approached and faded. Silence. He lifted his head and saw two young men running towards the city, saw the trail of dust following their heels. He realised he had tensed up and forced himself to relax. Time to hit the road.

Overhead, he saw a bird of prey wheel and heard it mewl.

It was dusk when he got back. He was tired; he was hungry; he had a headache. And how Toolan had stared at him was still needling him, though in his exhaustion he was prepared to put

it down to a fevered imagination.

How had he got here? One minute he was having his face flushed down the toilets, the next he was winning medals in the boxing ring, the next he was in the Army Cadets. The rest, as they say, is history. Driven to be stronger, faster, more fearless, more invisible than anyone else.

He fell into this life, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to climb out of it. What would he return to? Peanut fudge ice-cream in a waffle cone with his grandmother would be fine and dandy once in a while, but... How could he ever belong again? Seeing what he'd seen done in the name of democracy? Doing what he'd done in the name of peace? Justifiable just because it was marginally less bad than the other guys?

Y'all more churned up than a tornado. You need to get to bed.

Yes. Fallen into it. And the only way out was to be damaged, in his limbs, in his mind.

Or dragged out in a body bag, like a dead bull.

“Yo, good to see you man.”

Grange's gruff voice was the sweetest thing Hanley had ever heard.

“You're such a lousy watchman.”

“Hey, I knew it was you from miles off, the girly way you move your butt.”

“Asshole.”

Grange slapped him on the back and laughed, and it reminded Hanley of a similar show of camaraderie he'd witnessed earlier.

He better find Coles. Somewhere, four men just like him were waiting to be killed.

Hanley paused at the tent. Faisal was checking over the contents of a medical bag. The others were cleaning rifles.

Cole sensed his presence and glanced up.

“Well, Hanley? Should we carry on preparing for action?”

Hanley nodded.

“Yes, sir.”

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

Cassandra Lee

IT WAS SEPTEMBER. THERE was always a September surprise. The year 2020 was no different. The problem was the surprise was six American military men imprisoned in a fortified compound in an unAmerican city, and their hope was six other American military men huddled in a flimsy tent in the middle of a sweltering desert, maps and memos strewn all over the makeshift war room.

“Like a right hand trying to save a right hand,” thought Cole aloud.

“That’s called a handshake,” said Harris.

“Over the edge of a cliff,” said Cole.

“Killjoy,” said Harris. “Look, rookie, we’re just as good as the Navy SEALs. Lighten up. Blasting Annratur will be a piece of cake.”

No wonder they passed you on for the role of leading us Black Mambas, thought Cole, this time careful to keep this sentiment under his thick skull. “No man left behind”: he knew the mantra. There was no room to be jovial about the seriousness of the issue at hand. Not to mention that the only

gunfire they had were those they carried—a truck with additional ammo for them had been seized at the Iran-Dehmari border.

No wonder this rookie took over Toolan, thought Harris. Toolan was the former Major Sergeant of the Black Mambas, this very team under Delta Force, and Harris had suppressed his natural sarcastic instinct all those years under Toolan's thumb. Just as with public health authorities, it always seemed that those in command had no to-hell-with-everything sense of humour, and age made no difference. If only he could become the first team leader to ditch their abrasive non-sense attitude...

Faisal broke their impasse. "Where did Toolan go?"

"Retired. Last time I heard, it was private security," replied Harris. "Probably guarding some multi-millionaire owning some island in the Caribbean. He once mentioned an opening to be a Trump bodyguard. Least of our concerns..."

Cole had unfolded a map of the building housing the six hostages. "It's a bloody fortified compound with 24/7 Dehmari troops." He cursed under his breath.

"Wish we still had Williams," said Hanley. "He should have taken them all out in one fell swoop."

"All the more reason we must get him back," said Harris.

"Can't we just sneak up to the compound undercover?" asked Boykin. "I'll pretend to be one of their men and you all as fake hostages?" Boykin was fluent in Dehmari Persian and, with his tan, could pass for a local.

"Either we crash the place in plain sight or we don't break in at all," said Cole. "We're not sure how well stealth methods would work for the unpredictable radicals we're facing. Right now Williams and Grange and the four Marines are held in separate rooms and there's no guarantee they're fed or even

allowed to pee. On TV, the Ghaf-Yohmar shows their men riding exercise bikes backwards and running on treadmills that aren't powered on, but that could very well be a psyop. No one knows how well- or ill-trained they are—”

“—Until Keating,” interrupted Harris. He was referring to a US diplomat who had kept himself extremely low-profile and still got whacked. Cole wasn't thinking straight. A direct attack would surely attract the Ghaf-Yohmar and no one knows what hell that would unleash.

Boykin, Faisal and Hanley nodded quietly. Cole shot Harris a look of contempt. As much as he, being the team leader, hated to face it, Harris had a point. Although the Ghaf-Yohmar didn't admit to it outright—they hardly ever—the late Keating was probably murdered at their hands near the capital city of Kanabad. These terrorists also had military-level obfuscation techniques: they could scrub criminal evidence so well they could make the innocent appear guilty—they were known to have decimated the once-formidable USSR by making it seem as if a mutiny caused the death of USSR soldiers. Many media outlets posted “whistleblower” documents which were later found out to be faked, but the urban myth that the USSR attacked its own troops in Annratur in spectacular conspiratorial fashion had stuck and this discredited-too-late notion might have, on a positive note, hastened the end of the Cold War. Perhaps that forgery was why some nebulous global military force—possibly the UN Peace Corps, no one knows for sure—initially struck down the Dehmar government only to realise the mistake too late. They had weakened the wrong party in their quest to keep peace in the middle East.

“Time is running out, old man,” said Cole. “If we go in stealth, who knows how long it takes to rescue our men?” He

eyed Hanley. “And Williams.” Hanley rubbed his eyes. Cole continued, “But if we hit them over the target, we can make good use of what we already know, and extricate our folks. It’ll be over in a day. Chop-chop. One and done.”

Rookie doesn’t know what he’s talking about, thought Harris. But there was no arguing with your captain, especially after having been given a dirty look. Too bad Harris was second in command. Orders had to be followed.

It was almost sunset. The Black Mambas put on their disguise concealing their ammunition and bulletproof vests: green robes and headscarfs counterfeiting the Ghaf-Yohmar’s uniform, as well as beard wigs. They approached the main gate of Annratur. The few pedestrians still hanging around were male. Only men were free to walk around in public anytime. Dehmari women tended to stay home especially during this time of the day.

Hanley, who was skilled in counter-surveillance, entered first. He scouted the region for the target and a suitable location for Glover to shoot attackers. Contrary to what he had read in field reports, the residential building at the centre of Annratur was no different from its neighbours, all appearing unguarded and dilapidated, bricks jutting out of the wall here and there, plus random splotches of dirt or camel dung. Hanley opined this was the perfect cover for a deadly stronghold, and knew from the maps that this was exactly where Williams, Grange and the four Marines were held prisoner. It was odd that none of the reports had a ground-view photograph of this particular building, but then again realisation often came a little too late to be of any use. He signalled the rest of his team, and they all entered the city.

The Ghaf-Yohmar were not known to use drones or

hidden cameras, but who knows whether they had mastered the technology? They were so secretive in their dealings that hardly anyone knew the inner workings of this terrorist group well, with the exception of Toolan. On a deep level, Harris's ignorance terrified him. "Know thine enemy," sayeth Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*, but this enemy was almost unknowable. Even the little they knew about the Ghaf-Yohmar might well be disinformation produced by the terrorists themselves.

"Put on your sarongs," said Boykin in Dehmari Persian, using a local idiom alluding to Muslim modesty as the code phrase for "take your positions". Faisal and Glover joined Cole in entering an adjacent building through the back door. Harris, Hanley and Boykin traipsed along the street opposite the target compound. They had to approach it without touching it or they might set off hidden booby traps.

Behind the target were several military vehicles. The three managed to hack into an unmanned Ghaf-Yohmar jeep and crawled in. Hanley spotted a familiar black face, mouth taped and hands tied back in a chair, through one of the windows on the target. "Williams!" muttered Boykin.

"Hush," said Harris. "The bad guys can overhear."

"I smell kerosene in the air," Hanley said. Harris and Boykin's eyes met his. They feared for the safety of Glover and their two men with him. Opening fire might prove more disastrous than they all expected.

The geometric-patterned curtains in the window opposite Glover were drawn to reveal three men wearing the green tunics that the Black Mambas had counterfeited. They stared at the window where Glover held his sniper still, and the one in the middle produced a rifle. Glover adjusted his sight at the man, who looked suspiciously familiar.

An explosion. Smoke filled the room where the three

Ghaf-Yohmar men were. False alarm?

Acrid smoke seeped from behind Cole, Faisal and Glover. They braced themselves. Distraction warfare. Glover grimaced. A bullet had just hit Glover in the left shoulder and hot blood gushed out of the wound. The master marksman has met his match. What kind of evil genius could have shot him almost fatally?

Faisal dragged Glover away from the smoke and propped him up against the wall, unfurled his own headdress and pressed it down on Glover's bleeding shoulder. Unlike Glover, Faisal recognised the man who shot Glover right away: Toolan. Except that a shocked Glover stared blankly at him, unprepared for this revelation.

"Hunker down," Cole told both and left the room. Another man in a green tunic met him and Cole gunned him down reflexively. He ran down the stairs only to rush headlong into more smoke. More explosions nearby. Cole held his breath and dashed out of the building into the street. He hid himself behind the jeep where Harris, Hanley and Boykin were.

Shots rang out of the target, and different parts of the wall exploded in succession. Harris, Hanley and Boykin covered their ears.

It wasn't until the air had cleared that they heard someone tapping outside Hanley's window. It was Cole. Hanley and Boykin heaved him into the van. "Plan B," panted Cole. They would pretend to be reinforcements of the Ghaf-Yohmar and talk their way into the compound. Boykin was to convince the Ghaf-Yohmar that they were on their side. Hanley would sneak in to find the hostages. Harris and Cole would lead them to the nearest safe exit.

Boykin turned the engine key on the jeep. The jeep

wobbled but the engine sound died shortly.

The real Ghaf-Yohmar guards were scanning the carpark and nearing the jeep, screaming louder and louder in Dehmari. Boykin breathed shallowly; the men were saying “someone has hijacked the general’s jeep” in their language. The four Americans held their heads down.

Harris glanced at the jeep key. Its label: “TOOLAN”. They were finished.

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

Conrad Gempf

I DO NOT LIKE this. I do not understand it. Allah calls for the blood of the infidels, yet we keep them alive — feed them out of the mouths of our own families! How can this be right? Are we truly lions? Or are we sheep? Allah forbid the righteous Ghaf-Yohmar ever should live as sheep.

“Avram, Avram,” the Leader tells me, “Allah is patient and his purposes are complex. American blood is sweet like almonds, yes; but to taste blood and victory together, that is the sweetest, like almonds and honey. We use them, alive, to manipulate those Americans we cannot reach. Then they will all die at our hands. And meanwhile, to have them dependent on us, to have them kneel before us, that too is sweet is not?”

He is the man of the Lord’s choosing, so he is right, he must be right. I know Rachim has been worried that the infidels have affected the Leader, caused him to focus less on spiritual things, made him softer. But the Leader has always shown himself to be a lion, not a sheep.

Still, I see no sweetness in the forced kneeling of the unrighteous. When I kneel and bow to the Merciful One, it is

of my choosing to be obedient. When the Leader grabs the hair of the infidel and forces him to his knees as he loves to do, there is no sweetness there for me, only the foretaste of the sweetness of victory over all infidels; hasten that day, oh Allah, please.

Yet we keep these dogs of men here in our camp, where we live, where we pray. It is a test to me.

And then to even conspire with some of them and allow them to join us?? This I do not understand. Satan's guns we can be sure will work for us; I do would take no chances with Satan's minions. Me, I do as I am told, I have my part to play, but this I truly do not understand.

As we walk through the compound, I look at the one they call Toolan, and the other called Harris. These are creatures who have no love for the Lord. Some call the Christians "people of another book." These have no book. They do sometimes call upon their prophet Jesus, but even then it is without reverence or respect. Americans; they care more for big houses than for heaven. They care more about riches than about righteousness. Because the Leader offered to pay them, these Americans side with us against their brothers! What more proof is needed that they and the way of life that so corrupted them should be destroyed. They are all lying, whoring, blasphemers — vermin who should be exterminated for the health, the spiritual health, of the nations.

"But be patient, Avram, as Allah is patient," I tell myself, as I watch this Harris take the captive Hanley away to the cells. Rachim, Abbas, and I accompany the Toolan as we take their chieftain, Cole, to our Leader. How I would love to see him slash the throats of both! How Rachim and I would rejoice and go forward!

Yasin and Zemar are guarding the doorway to the Leader's

audience room. They don't meet the eyes of the Toolan, but nod to the rest of us as we go through behind the infidels.

Inside the room, we have to go around Mohmand and his little video camera and tripod.

The prisoner Cole is brought to the far wall, where the lights will shine on him and the camera will see him. I see the contempt in his eyes when the Leader come in. His American eyes see only the outside of the man, and, unlike Cole, our Leader is a large man, and does not have the kind of body that American women would pay to see shirtless. But the Leader is strong in ways that these pig defenders and their women cannot measure.

“On your knees, infidel,” the Leader says for the camera, grabbing Cole's hair and pushing him down. The camera does not see Abbas and I pointing our rifles, but we make very sure the Cole can see the consequences should he disobey. He does not disobey. Even when they think they're about to die, they obey the Leader. Such is his spiritual strength.

“Your Delta Force does not worry me,” he says to the camera, “Your strength is the strength of men, but ours is the strength of God against which you cannot stand.” I make eye contact with Rachim, as if to say “See?”

“This is Cole of the Black Snakes. You call us terrorists, but this man is a killer. He is one of your best, but we have bested him and his brothers. Your Black Snakes and your marines; we have them now. They bow to us now. If you want them back, you will have to pay us, and pay us dearly.”

Now I try not to look at Rachim, for it would be his turn to say “See?”

“You think you can take all the gold and silver, but you will not keep it. One day your betters will take it all from you. Your cars and your clothes, your machines and your

computers, you think they will be your salvation, but the Merciful One did not make them for you to be saved but for us to enjoy. You will pay and be sorry and we will not be sorry for you.”

The Leader preached a bit longer, but it was clear there would be no blood, no cleansing, this day, only demands. The infidel was to live, for now.

We were told to take Cole back to the cells to his team and with the marines. Abbas and Rachim grab an arm each and I am behind. We were between the buildings when Abbas stubs his toe and stumbles.

The Cole reacts like lightning; as if he'd been concentrating every minute waiting for an opportunity such as this. His wrists were bound together, but he takes advantage of Abbas's loosened grip to thrust his elbow into Rachim's stomach. Then, as Rachim is bending over in startled pain, Cole reverses motion and brings his two fists up and into the jaw of Abbas, recovering from his stumble.

They are still reeling, but I have my rifle calmly pointed at his heart, I am out of his reach. Had I been two steps closer.... But Allah is merciful. But why do I not shoot and rid the world of one more parasite?

“Be patient, Avram, as Allah is patient.”

Our eyes lock. The infidel smiles and shrugs. “You can't blame a guy for....” But he never finished because Abbas now hit him hard with the stock of his rifle and he goes down.

We bring the dog back to the cells. I wish I could shoot them all.

Rachim and I would argue that night.

chapter seventeen

Caroline Whiteman

NONE OF THEM HAD any idea how long they'd been there anymore, or even if they were still in the same place. It certainly wasn't the same cell that they'd started in and Cole prayed to a higher power that Harris had worked his magic and got them to where they needed to be. Time had telescoped and shrunk and telescoped again, pain and fear pumping as much as blood through their bodies. Night and day had merged, and a few seconds or hours or days might have passed, disorientation and torture muddying the senses and messing with heads so that nothing other than the moment of exquisite pain or fear meant anything. The Ghaf-Yohmar henchmen were good at their job.

Cole opened his eyes and took in the single cell, a window slit high on the sandstone wall from which a welcome draft of fresh air cut through the putrefying stink of their prison. Cole was hoping it had only been hours since he, Boykin and Hanley had been there. They were going to need their strength to get them all out. There was no way he was letting any of them, the Marines included, be executed in this godforsaken

place. He was no one's fucking trophy. Nor was he going to let them be used as a bartering tool for the Ghaf-Yohmar fuckers; pictured bound, gagged and beaten whilst they make their demands. Hell no. And anyway, they were officially "on leave". This op could never hit the world's headlines. This went wrong and they'd end up mutilated corpses, desiccating in some shallow grave, politically dead to the country of ideals that had invested so much in getting them here.

That wasn't going to happen. They had a plan. There's always a plan. And they would get out of here. Today. He wasn't about to let his boys be shredded.

Cole took a few steadying breaths - he needed to be in control of himself before he could marshal the troops. He quickly took stock. The Marines were alive but that was the only good thing that they had going for them. And the rest of his operators? The ones who needed to be were here in this room. Right place, and with lady luck on our side also the right time. But fuck all he could do if it wasn't. The others? Well, that was the thrill of covert ops. The plan was in place. And he had to trust the plan. He had to trust them.

But for now, they needed to focus.

"Right folks, no more snoozing. The wounded need treating and the room scoped so we're ready to mobilise with as few surprises as possible". He spoke in a low voice, barely audible above the buzz of flies circling the stinking cell, settling on stains he preferred not to look at and the open wounds of the men. But, quietly or otherwise, he'd no need to talk. His crack team were already taking their places; Hanley at the window slit, observing the street, and Bill Boykin at the 50mm thick steel door, listening, the tiny amplifier with the ability to pick up a pin drop still miraculously in place. Just hope to the fucking gods he can get it out before the bangs

start. The brick shit house that was Grange was already tearing up the pile of grimy sheeting in the corner to make an approximation of dressings. Not the most hygienic, but if they'd got this right they'd be able to get proper treatment in a few hours. At least it'd be protection from the fucking flies.

Momentarily he slumped against the wall. He had a headache like nothing he'd ever experienced and his recall felt slow. Thank god the team were strong. He wasn't sure he could string a sentence together, let alone a string of commands. He diagnosed a concussion. Not a surprise given what they'd been through, and a blessed relief that he couldn't remember it all. But he couldn't go all bravo foxtrot on them. A concussion he could cope with, as long as it didn't balls up the plan.

The view from the slit window was limited, but it provided all the connection to the outside world they needed with Hanley's skill set. He was the best counter-surveillance man any of them had ever worked with. He had eyes not just in the back of his head but also in his fingertips and hair follicles. There wasn't a lock in this shit hole of a desert that he couldn't pick. Or not so far anyway. Pray to the gods that this remained true today. He had an inbuilt radar that knew the moment when something was off and nothing that was happening outside would get past him, despite the limited view. With everyone in position inside the room, it was now a waiting game, reliant on the operatives outside the room to work their magic.

"He's there. I see him. That son of a bitch, he's good". For a moment Cole took Hanley's place at the slit and glimpsed a subdued trio of burka-clad women heading into the building opposite. A casual observer wouldn't have noticed anything

amiss, but for Cole, it was more than obvious that one was Faisal, field medic and Glover's spotter.

Cole chuckled "Oh, yeah. There he goes. I can fucking recognise you guys faster than I recognise my own fucking family, burka, clown suit or fucking whatever."

"Those women have my respect." Grange had come up behind him.

"Fuck yes", Boykin agreed, not leaving his post by the thick metal door, alert for any sound or conversation from the corridor. "We'd be right royally screwed without their intel. Bloody heroes. Any sign of Glover?"

"No - but if the Women's Underground have done their thing he should be in position. Hanley, let me know when Emir starts messaging - we need to get a sense of when the next call to prayer is due. And Boykin, anything to report? Any sign of Harris yet?"

"No - they've mentioned that Harris and that fucker Toolin are expected, but nothing else."

"Okay. Grange, Williams, do you perceive any problems your end?"

"No sir. Grange and I positioned the explosives before those fuckers got us, and both Glover and Faisal have the ability to remotely detonate them. The Women's Underground has been surveilling the ones on the gate, so Faisal will be able to update us once he's in place."

"Good, and their network will be keeping a live feed on what's happening on the streets for us so we should get a clear run once we're out of here. Fuck knows what we do if they're compromised. Do not want to be a sitting target in one of this cities bloody gridlocks. We've got to get nine people out of here safely and we're not going to be able to do that without the local assets. Never thought I'd be grateful for burkas but

they certainly make surveillance easier.”

Over by the door, Cole was conscious of a change in Boykin’s posture, a slight tensioning across his shoulders and then a thumbs up. Silence fell across the cell as they all strained to listen. If this part failed, the whole fucking plan fell apart. It’d be down to Harris, Glover and Faisal to come up with a new one - a Humvee through the wall as a last resort, then an airlift by a chinook rather than the well-crafted and discrete plan they were working on. But this plan relied on Harris being able to pull off a slick piece of misdirection and well-timed sleight of hand to slip a wafer-thin pack of explosives and lock picks under the security door, and those inside primed to aid its disappearance. And the timing. Everything relied on timing and a shit load of luck.

Suddenly, there it was. A split second, blink and you’d miss it moment and Boykin was holding the pack. Palpable excitement quietly ricocheted between the men as Boykin held up his hand to indicate Harris was still outside.

Shaking his head, he relaxed. “Boy that man can schmooze. He’s got those fuckers out there eating out of his hands. They didn’t notice a damned thing.” He waved the packet, underlining his point.

By the window, Hanley signalled. “Faisal’s in position, He’s made contact.” From across the street, through a minuscule scratch on a painted out window designed to stop male eyes falling on the women, the flashes of an encoded morse message could be seen. Hanley didn’t pause in his translation; “10 minutes until party time. Ready boys?”

Harris had worked hard behind the scenes to get them all together and into this particular cell. He couldn’t stop the

beatings and disorientation techniques, but his masterful use of pulling strings and calling in favours combined with his prowess in psychological manipulation techniques meant he could drip-feed signals to ensure it happened. And it helped that Toolan, and by association, him were important to these fucked up maniacs' plans. They'd have likely ended up here anyway. It was where prisoners were stored when it wasn't convenient to have their brutalised bodies in the main part of the compound; when dignitaries were visiting and a veneer of political politeness was needed to deflect from single-minded brutality. Although it was an open secret what happened behind these closed doors, the Ghaf-Yohmar liked to control and choose when and how someone stumbled upon one of their dirty little secrets and this particular cell served their purpose.

For the Black Mambas, it served a different purpose. One that made the rescue of the four Marines possible. Hanley and Faisal could signal to each other thanks to the location of the Women's NGO across the street and that almost unnoticeable but very deliberate scratch in the paintwork. And, most importantly, the judicious use of a small amount of explosive combined with Williams wizardry would allow the captive operatives direct and virtually silent access to the temporary ammo store, and from there to the small disused courtyard at the rear of the compound, and from there the streets of Annratur where a network of assets would pull together the final pieces of their escape. Nine people ghosted from the Ghaf-Yohmar compound, along with a good load of their artillery. That was going to piss them off. Big time. And that gave the Black Mambas immense satisfaction. They'd have preferred to have killed the bastards - taken everyone down, but that would have risked their op. So this was second best,

but it would do. And Glover and Faisal should be able to make their mark. Under the soft drapes of the burka, Faial had more than balls. He was armed to the back teeth. And Glover, well Glover was special. He was the best shot in the team. His skills as a sniper were legendary. He could shoot a fly from the air at 3000 metres. Cole wished he was here now - take out some of these fucking flies in this shit bucket of a cell.

But.

Timing was all. And for now, it was a waiting game whilst Williams and Grange prepped the wall, the final hurdle between them and the weapons, and Boykin and Hanley kept up surveillance from their posts.

“Harris has confirmed that the handcart is in the ammo store”.

How had the man managed to bring that into conversation with the guards? But Cole was glad he had.

“Roger that. At least that means we should be able to transport the wounded easily. Remember,” Cole now addressed the room, “once we’re through into the store Grange and I will get the men who can’t walk onto the cart and then the weapons. Boykin and Hanley stay at your posts until the last minute whilst Williams works his magic on the door to the courtyard.

“Hanley, what’s the status of the vehicles? And is Faisal primed for detonation?”

He signals a positive.

“This is going to go fast boys. Remember, we are elite, we are family and we will prevail.”

The words had barely left his lips before the lilting wail of the adhan drifted from minarets around the city, filling the cell with the haunting beauty of the calls to prayer. From the front of the compound, they heard an explosion which, even from

this distance smothered the sound of Williams breaching the wall to the armoury.

Within moments they were through. Then Williams was working on the outside door, and Hanley reporting that vehicle one was in position and that Faisal had confirmed he'd blow the gate the second they appeared in the courtyard. With superhuman strength, Grange had the injured men on the cart, sacking thrown over the top of them and the weapons and was dragging it to the door even as Williams blew it wide open. They could hear the sounds of chaos and gunshots from the front of the compound and the heat of the courtyard raised up and hit them.

“Go go go”.

They headed to the gate, Hanley and Boykin gaining on them as the gate gracefully fell from its hinges and the side door of a people carrier was flung open and the nine men were pulled inside, slipping over the bare metal of the stripped interior.

The five Black Mambas grinned at each other.

“I just love it when a plan comes together.” Cole solemnly intoned.

Back at the compound, Faisal and Glover slipped invisibly back into the crowds.

chapter eighteen

Susan Wheeler

MSG TOOLAN SAT WITH his back against the wall, one knee up, trying to get back his breath. His gun slung over his shoulder, hand resting on the barrel ready on high alert. He looked around him at the colourless landscape, his eyes wide, daring not to blink; the now desolate piece of land filled with acrid smoke, plants and shrubbery destroyed by fire still smoking.

In the distance he could hear the cracking of gunfire as the realisation kicked in that his old squadron, his new enemy, had made it out and he was now on his own.

He takes in the crumbled buildings around him now blackened mounds of earth and sand messing with his sense of direction as he tries to piece together some resemblance of a plan. He needs to find Amir Arsalan.

His mind drifts off to a time when he retired from Black Mambas and was offered this first ever mission. He knew that he would find it hard switching out completely but perhaps he shouldn't have jumped in too soon without checking out who this leader dude was and who his new enemies were going to be. He had to put his loyalty to the Black Mambas to one side

to protect Amir.

“I can’t fail my first ever mission” - glancing up at the sky, a big chaotic mess jumbled with clouds and smoke, and loads of grey, unable to give him the clarity plan he needed right now. The greyness in the sky felt false but mirrored his mood perfectly.

A soft scurrying put Toolan on high alert. He tightened his grip on his gun.

He slowly stood up - edged towards the burnt out truck, his finger hovering over the trigger as he saw a shadow under the vehicle move towards him. He held the rifle up to his face to focus - alert and ready to fire. Covertly moving silently forwards, his senses sharp.

“TOOLAN - DON’T SHOOT”

Toolan jolted, his finger tightening against the trigger

“It’s me, Amir, Don’t Shoot!” Amir appeared from behind the vehicle, his hands half raised, his feet crunching on the rubble as he stood up to full height. He brushed all the dust and debris from his long thobe and straightened his red and white ghutra tied at his head.

Toolan let out his breath he was holding and lowered his gun, his heart racing as adrenaline coursed through his whole body. He shook the lightheaded feeling and wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead and across his unshaven stubble, trying to get his breathing under control. He looked around the area and ushered Amir inside a doorway of a half standing building, facing outwards with his gun scanning the burnt out landscape.

Once inside, he lowered his gun and left it secured to his body.

“We need to leave now, it’s not safe here. Follow me out” Toolan ordered in a harsh low tone, “Let’s go”

“Wait, I need to go back to the compound” Amir pushed in front of Toolan determined to get passed him out of the doorway.

Toolan grabbed Amir and pushed him back against the wall “No, there is no time, we need to leave now”. Toolan grabbed his gun again in an attempt to make Amir know he meant every word “Don’t make me force you Amir, I will if I have to. We need to leave now”

Amir slumped against the wall, his head bowed. “Look Toolan, the US troops are not going to give up without a fight and they will be planning another attack on the compound. I need to go back, there are things I need to get. If they end up in the wrong hands - “ the sentence drifted off unfinished “I just need to go back - shoot me if you must, but I need to go back” Amir shrugged his shoulders and made another attempt to leave the hideaway.

“I said No” - Toolan raised his gun to eye level, his finger resting on the trigger, his stare meeting eye to eye with Amir, his bulky body rigid with authority.

Amir stood more upright, holding in his paunchy stomach and squaring his shoulders “I think you need a reminder who you are talking to Toolan, you work for me, so put your gun down and get me to my compound safely so I can get what I need... and that.. is an order”

Toolan lowered his weapon reluctantly and stood inline behind Amir.

“Thank you” Amir nodded at Toolan. “Now let’s go. You lead the path back to my quarters”

The men left, stealthily moving down the side of the building. They reached a slightly open area and Toolan stretches out his arm to push Amir back behind him and asked him to wait while he took in the surroundings. “Stay here

while I check out the other side, don't move"

Amir stood flat with his back to the wall, his arms splayed out by his side, his head turned towards the open space and occasionally looking behind him. His breathing was laboured as the blood tried to service his overweight frame.

Toolan crept along the outskirts of a wall ruin, the rest of the build in a rubble behind it. He looked around and seeing it safe beckoned Amir to join him.

They moved forwards and at last the compound was in sight.

"Stay close" Toolan instructed, "we are getting near and I am not sure if it's clear"

Amir nodded even though Toolan couldn't see him and moved slowly forward in the shelter of Toolan's footsteps.

They moved along the outside of the compound wall and as they approached the opening once again Toolan struck his arm out to prevent Amir from moving forwards "Stay here"

Toolan slid up to the entrance and held his gun at eye level ready to fire if need be. He made his way inside. The inside was dark and he gave his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dull, airless room.

Satisfied that it was all clear, he signalled Amir to enter the room and let go of his gun and let it rest on its strap across his chest.

Amir entered the room, his feet scrunching on broken glass and bits of rubble and made his way over to a metal desk as Toolan looked on.

"You have no idea what this stuff can do" Amir smugly stated as he picked up the upturned chair, sat in it and wheeled himself closer to the desk. He reached to the bottom drawer.

"What is it?" Toolan asked, knowing too well that it was outside of his authority to ask and not really expecting a reply.

“Let’s just say, troops can come and destroy us over and over but I have the blueprint to start over. The Ghaf-Yohmar lives on”

Toolan walked slowly round the room, his eyes taking in everything around him, his hands returning to the comfort of the barrel of his strapped gun.

“What about you Toolan? What’s next for you?, this mission is nearly done”

Toolan raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “Back in retirement I guess.”

Amir laughed. “Yeah, sure, I know your type, I see them all the time. You won’t retire!” it was more a statement than a question.

Toolan didn’t like the direction this conversation was heading - it was getting way too personal and uncomfortable for his liking but he had to keep Amir distracted.

“Who knows” Toolan offered, “I live day to day, go where I am needed. I spent a lot of time out in the field, seen all the destruction. I think it’s time to stop”.

Amir laughed shaking his head as he continued to rattle around in the desk drawer. His mood notched higher as he laid a laptop out on the desk, and fiddled with the tangled mains lead and reached back into the drawer and stacked four different hard drives in a pile next to the laptop.

Toolan suddenly felt uneasy. The hairs prickled the back of his neck. He was running out of time. The thought of Ghaf-Yohmar being set up repeatedly and ready to create endless destruction spurred him on to put a stop to it all. He looked at the laptop and drives on the desk and a feeling of utter repulsion shook him to his core. He needed to act fast.

He walked round the room once more, anger seething with every step.

Amir picked up on the mood change of Toolan and slowly stood up from the desk, wheeling the chair backwards against the wall.

Toolan turned quickly, seeing Amir reach inside his throbe and pull out a knife.

Amir rushed at Toolan, ready to slash downwards with the knife into Toolan. With Toolan's military training in the special forces and Amir's overweight frame, Amir swiped at the air as Toolan sidestepped to the right. Amir was quick and an uppercut slashed at Toolan's outstretched hand.

Before Amir could respond with a follow-up, Toolan swiftly punched Amir in the pit of his stomach, knocking the wind out of him, and stunning him for a brief moment. Toolan took this time to quickly unstrap his knife from the inside of his military boot and gripped it ready. Amir stepped backwards and Toolan moved closer to him and forced Amir so that his back was almost to the wall. Amir slashed forward with his knife, Toolan arching backwards to dodge as the blade passed a hairs breath from his face. Toolan kicked out, catching Amir's leg taking him off balance. He stumbled forwards, Toolan stepped sideways and grabbed his head and neck in a hold and sliced the blade across his bulging throat. Blood squirted as gurgling air escaped from the gash in Amir's throat.

Toolan held on to the slumped body until he could feel no more movement then let Amir's head go and left it sprawled on the floor. Toolan felt for a pulse just to make sure and then wiped his blade on his cargo trousers before strapping it back in his boot.

He wiped his bloodied hand from the slash and wrapped it with a grey cloth from his pocket and pulled it tight with his teeth and made his way over to the metal desk.

He threw open the lid of the laptop and powered it up, hoping that there was enough battery life to get a glimpse of what was on it.

As soon as it opened up, he whistled when he realised what he had stumbled on. “No wonder he wanted to keep this under wraps”.

Toolan slammed the lid shut of the laptop and placed it in his rucksack along with the 3 of the 4 hard drives. He placed the 4th in his inside jacket pocket.

He dragged Amir’s lifeless body to the corner of the room under the table so anyone entering wouldn’t see it straight away and made his way to the open doorway. He stood against the wall and held his gun at eye level as he peered round the doorway, making sure it was clear. Stepping out, he ran down the side of the building, back tracking his steps from earlier, looking in each direction. When he was a safe distance from the Amir’s quarters, he slowed down and made his way out of the area, running between walls and ruins.

chapter nineteen

Russella Lucien

TOOLAN STOOD IN THE hills, looking at the collection of buildings in the base of the valley. He rubbed the dirt from his eyes and adjusted the heavy jacket, taking a glimpse of the small blood drops on the cuff of his canvas jacket. The heavy laptop and three hard drives inside the brown backpack leaves indentations on his shoulder. He thought, "I must be getting old. A full sack never used to feel this heavy." Toolan continues to walk towards the military base. The sand blows in his eyes and he rubs them. Thoughts of blood spraying in the air and a pair of eyes looking at him before they shut into eternal sleep. Death is part of the job but it is never easy.

The members of Black Mamba's were getting ready for the daily patrol and saw a lone figure walking towards the base. Lone figures are worse than groups. Groups mean an attack. But a lone person? It could mean a cooperative citizen surrendering to the US for help. Or it could mean a suicide bomber. The suicide bomber forces you to think twice and second guessing could cost you your life. Master Sargent Dalton Cole rubs his beard and looks through his binoculars to

see a scruffy male trudge closer to the base. The figure in the distance has slumped shoulders and walks slowly towards the base. MSG Cole motions to Staff Sargent Michael Glover to get ready with his long gun to take out the figure in the distance. SSG Glover takes out his rifle and stands on top of a supply shed to get ready to take out the figure. Staff Sargent Chris Grainge sat in the Humvee and saw the figure in the distance and took out his gun if the figure in the distance becomes more threatening.

Toolan stopped walking when he got close to the base and placed the backpack on the sandy ground. Then, he knelt down and placed his hands behind his head. SSG Bill Boykin looked out and saw the figure kneeling down with the backpack in front. SSG Bill Boykin calls out in Dari to Toolan and says, "Take off your jacket and throw it to the side." Toolan takes off his jacket and throws it to the side. Then SSG Boykin says in Dari, "Take off your shirt." Toolan thinks, "They're lucky that it's September and it's not too cold." He takes off the beige cotton shirt with a couple of blood spots and throws it off to the side. The rest of the Black Mambas see the blood splattered shirt and they raise their guns. But MSG Cole looks closer at the frame of the mysterious figure and remembered that he looks like his previous MSG Toolan. He heard that Toolan works for Ghaf-Yohmar as private security. What is he doing here? MSG Cole yells out to Toolan, "Lie down on the ground. You can use the scarf to cover your face. Move slowly." Toolan wraps the scarf around his face, lays on the ground and places his hands on top of his head. Cole motions to SSG Glover and everyone else to stand down. Cole, Grainge and SSG Jermaine Williams drive slowly towards Toolan. SSG Williams looks at the backpack and takes a long probe to see if it would explode. Williams says to

Cole, “The backpack would have detonated if it hit the ground but we can’t be too sure.” Cole picks up the back pack with the thin probe and put it in the back of the Humvee. Cole walks closer to Toolan and places a knee on his back and handcuffs Toolan’s hands. Cole whispers, “I don’t know what you’re about but if you try anything, it’s a bullet straight to the head and you won’t see it coming.” Toolan replies, “Give the laptop and hard drives to Morgan. He’ll know what to do with them.” He walks Toolan out to the Humvee and Grainge drives all of them back to the base.

Toolan sat in the holding cell and remembered placing some combatants in this small, cramped space with a dirty toilet in the corner and a grubby sink. Then one of the officers picks up Toolan by the arms and takes him to another room. Toolan sits down in the room with the rest of the Black Mambas and says, “I need to speak with Morgan.” Everyone looks around and MSG Cole says “What right do you get to speak with Morgan. You’ve been working with our enemy for the past couple of years. You could have killed us with the backpack.” Toolan replies, “Look, I couldn’t tell you everything but I was sent to work with Ghaf-Yohmar. I didn’t want to leave you guys. But the retirement, the move to private security, it was Morgan’s idea to get close to the leader.” Morgan walks into the room and says, “I need to talk to Toolan on what happened in the past couple of days.” Toolan gets up and walks with Morgan to another room.

Toolan and Morgan sit in the room with a tape recorder on the table with the red light on for recording. Morgan says, “What happened after the leader got eliminated?” Toolan says, “After he died, I walked out of the room and closed the door. I told the others that he was sleeping and wanted some time alone. I went to the car and said that I was driving out to

determine the security of the next area. I had the laptop and hard drives with me and drove the car a couple of miles. Then I ditched it outside of Annratur and proceeded to walk back to the base. I had enough supplies to last a day or two. I didn't want to attract attention to myself. I moved at night and hid out in the caves during the day." Morgan says, "The laptop and the hard drives? How did you get away with them?" Toolan replies, "I placed the laptop and hard drives in a backpack earlier in the day. No one suspected me of having a lot of items on with the laptop."

The rest of the Black Mamba discussed the events of today. SSG Boykin said, "Why are we treating him with kid gloves. He retires, then becomes security for the enemy for more money and then we are expected to welcome him with open arms. Fuck that shit!" Williams said, "He almost looked like the member of Ghaf. He had the hat and the tunic. If I didn't know that he was a former commander, I would say that he turned on us." The others nodded in agreement. Cole interrupted the murmuring and said, "I don't have any more information than you guys do. He's going through the debrief with Morgan right now. I had no idea about his surrender or the information on the laptops and hard drives." Then, Toolan and Morgan walk into the room. The others straightened up and remained quiet. Morgan says, "I sent Toolan to go undercover to work as private security for Ghaf-Yohmar. Everything that comes with that mission, the retirement, the position and the death of the leader came from the top. I'm sorry that I didn't tell the Black Mambas anything about the mission. But I was told that this mission was top secret and that only myself, Toolan and my superiors knew about the mission." SFC Tom Harris says, "All this activity and lies and you couldn't tell us anything about this mission? This isn't

right. The Black Mambas are a fighting unit and a brotherhood. Toolan, you couldn't trust us with this mission?" Toolan said, "This was way above my head. Ghaf-Yohmar continues to run this country into the ground. The bombings were increasing. This mission needed to remain quiet. I'm sorry that I didn't tell you guys about this mission. But there are so many people on this base that I couldn't risk it. I didn't want to put the Black Mamba's at risk of the Ghaf." The room got quiet and then SSG Pete Hanley says, "We are disappointed and pissed but understand that the mission sometimes comes before the others in the group." Toolan nods and Morgan says, "There will be a further debrief in the US but for now, let Toolan relax." Cole looks at Toolan and asks, "Do you want a drink in the mess hall?"

Cole and Toolan are sitting in the mess hall and having a couple of drinks. Toolan says, "Look, I'm sorry about this. The retirement, the mission and the surrender. I was sworn to complete secrecy. Now, I really retired and finished with the military. This is no joke." Cole takes a swig of his beer, looks him in the eyes and says, "I'm not so convinced the you were working for the CIA. I think you wanted more money and were tired of working for the military. For all I know, you killed the leader to make way for the next one. How do I know that you haven't sent signals for the rest of the Ghaf to come and surprise attack the base." Toolan says, "I realize that it's hard to trust me but I swear that I have not joined the Ghaf." Cole replies, "The way you were dressed and the fact that you have not touched your beer makes me think you a true believer. This isn't over and I will be sleeping with one eye open as long as you are in the base. If any attack happens, we will sacrifice you first." Cole takes a long gulp of his warm beer and walks away from Toolan.

In CIA headquarters, SSG Boykin looks around at the room and sees his Black Mamba brothers dressed up to give Toolan an award for his successful mission. SSG Faisal thought, “Maybe Toolan is running late since I don’t see him here.” SFC Harris stands in the corner and slowly sips his coffee and nods in the direction of the president and secret service. The president stands at the podium and says, “We are pleased to present MSG Ryan Toolan with an award for bravery and courage. Toolan deserves this award for working undercover to becoming a member and infiltrating the Ghaf-Yohmar, eliminating the leader and obtaining much needed information from the group.” The applause slows down and SSG Grainge says, “Where’s Toolan? This is for him.” MSG Cole whispers to SSG Hanley, “I stopped trusting Toolan after he came back. Now I’m justified.” Morgan says at the podium, “I’m not sure what happened but that Toolan isn’t here. I’ll see that he gets his award.”

The CIA director and the president meet at another building after the awards ceremony. The director clears her throat and says, “I don’t know what happened to Toolan.” The president replies, “I can’t determine if Toolan doesn’t like crowds or if you arranged for him not to come. I won’t inquire any further.” The CIA director says, “O.K. we are looking though the laptop and hard drives that Toolan brought back and we are still looking through it. We will give you a full report when everything is disseminated.” The president replies, “Keep me posted. The public knows that the leader is dead but nothing else.”