



# SEAL TEAM BRAVO BLACK OPS AFGHANISTAN IN FLAMES

FROM THE BEST SELLING AUTHOR  
**ERIC MEYER**

**SEAL TEAM BRAVO: BLACK OPS – AFGHANISTAN IN FLAMES**

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## Foreword

*CNN International News: NATO has announced the further withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. The situation has stabilized after years of war, and at last, the country is looking at a period of new prosperity. The billions of dollars of investment will at last provide the solid foundation for peace in that troubled land. Here in the United States, families anticipate their loved ones coming home. In other news, the war against ISIS still rages. Homeland Security has raised the terror alert level following new threats made against the United States.*

They appeared like fleeting shadows from the depths of the night, eight men. The northern part of Afghanistan had been quiet of late, and the security guards posted at the natural gas refinery in Qala-e-Naw were not in evidence. Men cut corners on the long, cold nights on watch, as is the norm. Not unusual in a place where men were paid to guard against a non-existent threat. Their lack of vigilance was premature.

On that bitter cold March night, the frost was heavy on the harsh surface. The thaw was late this year, and the guards were inside their hut; clustered around the warmth of the paraffin heater when they should have been patrolling the perimeter.

The natural gas processing plant was the pride of the province of Badghis, in northwest Afghanistan. Many of the population of nine thousand people worked at the plant. In the short time it had been operating, men, women, and children had experienced a miraculous increase in their quality of life. They had jobs and wages, a hospital for their children when they were sick, and even a school, although no girls attended classes. Girls had other priorities, cooking, cleaning, and keeping themselves pure for when a man took them for himself. They could look forward to a lifetime of slavery and bondage; hidden from the sunlight by the voluminous blue burqas their gender required them to wear. If they were lucky, their husbands wouldn't beat them with too much savagery.

Sediq Rasooli, the lean, hardened leader threw up a hand, and the seven men behind him dropped to the hard, frozen ground. They were at the top of a small rise, overlooking the gas refinery of Qala-e-Naw. The tall, metal cylinders were stark against the night sky, surrounded by a mass of pipework and girders. Near where they waited, the pipeline stretched away from the refinery, going north. Supplying Helmand province and neighboring regions with the essential gas to heat their homes and cook hot food during the icy temperatures.

Not for much longer. His small warband had a vital task to perform. To destroy the refinery, so the precious gas would cease to flow. Then the population would know the truth. The Taliban were not defeated. Far from it, as they sat shivering in their unheated homes, eating cold food, they would have time to dwell on the reality of Afghan politics. The Taliban was here to stay and would bring them to the realization of the glory of the Prophet. When they had defeated the infidel invaders, the nation would know Allah's mercy, through reading the Koran and learning the wisdom of Sharia law.

He watched intently, and after ten minutes had elapsed, knew their mission would succeed. The guards were comfortable inside their hut, and they would have a clear run to the perimeter. He glanced around at his men. They'd swapped their white robes for black and dark brown garments, and all wore black scarves to hide their faces. With the black turbans, they would be all but invisible, except for the scars. Two of his men were missing an eye, with just a dark cloth patch to hide the wound. Rasooli had a deep scar that ran down from his forehead and underneath his scarf. Four had faces riddled with childhood acne, exacerbated by the powder marks as the result of repeated firing of a weapon from the shoulder. Only the youngest of them displayed clear skin, so far unblemished by war or disease. It wasn't to last.

The Talibs looked back at him, their faces alive with enthusiasm. They were waiting for his final words, final because none would leave this place. This was a Shaheed mission. Each member of the band had made his peace with God. Their fate had been written, as if in tablets of stone. Within the hour, every one of them would be in Paradise, surrounded by nubile virgins, and reaping the rewards the Prophet promised to those men who became martyrs.

“We are about to fulfill the will of Allah. Does any man doubt there is a God, his name is Allah, and he sent his Prophet Mohammed to earth to show us the way?”

“Praise be His holy name,” seven voices replied in unison.

He stared at them for a moment longer and gave a grim nod. “Praise be His holy name,” he repeated. “Jamal, you have chosen to be the first. You know what to do?”

Jamal Rasooli was his young cousin. The boy’s mother had pleaded with him to leave him behind. He was the last of her sons. Her husband and eldest son had died in a futile attack against an American armored patrol. She’d been carrying another baby, who turned out to be a boy, but the shock caused her to miscarry. She had no other children, and to be childless in Afghanistan was a brutal reality no woman wanted to face.

Without relatives to support her, and prevented from seeking work by the medieval laws of the Mullahs who ruled her home village, she would have to choose between the worst of two evils; beggary, which would condemn her to almost constant starvation, or prostitution. The life of a whore would leave her at the mercy of any man who wanted to use her as a punch bag to satisfy his contempt for women. Prostitution was also a crime, and Sharia law unequivocal. If she went before an Islamic court, she would face the agonies of death by stoning. Sediq had listened to her pleading and then scolded her.

“Woman, we are warriors of Allah, about to embark on a holy mission. What you are doing is wrong, trying to dissuade us. This is blasphemy.”

She’d gone quiet then, knowing her fate was sealed. They would die, and her life would end in hunger and pain.

Jamal stared back at his cousin. His task was to approach the guard hut at the entrance to the refinery and knock on the door. They would confront him with weapons drawn, which would make no difference. Underneath the dark woolen jacket over his robe, he wore a suicide vest. The heavy canvas garment had pockets that contained sticks of C4 explosive. The wire to the detonator ran down his sleeve and into the palm of his hand. All they would see was a young boy, with his hands empty of any weapon. Unarmed, or so they would think. It would be their final view of this world. The explosion would send them straight to hell, a punishment for their cooperation with the unholy government in Kabul and infidels from overseas.

He stared back with all of the easy confidence of a thirteen-year-old. “I know what to do, Sediq. Is it time?”

The warband leader gave a final glance at the target below. “Yes, it is time. Go with God, and soon we will meet in Paradise.”

He hugged the younger man and held him tight for a few seconds. Jamal wriggled away in embarrassment. He was a warrior, a brave warrior, and he needed no comfort from Sediq.

“We will meet in Paradise,” the boy agreed. He got to his feet and went to each of the men, shaking their hands. Each intoned, “It is the will of Allah that we meet again. God is with us, and we carry out His holy work.”

He jogged down the path and stopped when he reached the hut. Sediq watched him knock on the door, and after a few seconds, it opened. Three men crowded in the doorway, each pointing a rifle at the newcomer. One barked a question, and Jamal didn’t answer. The guard's eyebrows knitted in surprise, and he shouted even louder. The boy opened his mouth to shout the praises of Allah, and in that instant, they knew. One man, quicker than the others, got off a shot that tore into Jamal, but it was already too late, much too late.

Even as the bullet left the muzzle of the rifle, he’d pressed the button of the detonator, shouting, “Allahu...”

He didn’t get it all out. The stunning shock of the bullet as it pierced his belly silenced the cry, and then the explosives detonated with a massive roar.

On the hill, Sediq felt a momentary pang as he saw his cousin blown apart. Then he dismissed the emotion. He'd done his duty, and the guard hut was a smoking ruin. Jamal was in Paradise. Now it was their turn. He jumped to his feet and threw up the hand clutching the assault rifle. “Attack, attack! Allahu Akbar! Paradise awaits, kill the unbelievers!”

He raced along the path, his men hard on his heels, heading straight for main gate. The explosion had made a huge gap in the defensive perimeter, and nothing prevented them carrying out their assigned tasks. He leapt over a small obstacle, and with a start, recognized the head of Jamal. He put it out of his mind, for it was irrelevant. They were on a mission from God. There was nothing to stop them. No guards, no gates, no perimeter wire, nothing. The entire gas refinery was at their mercy.

As they ran through the compound, vaulting over pipes and ironwork that made their progress an obstacle course, he shouted orders to his men.

“You know what to do. Abu, make sure you place your charges on the pipeline. I want it destroyed for at least two hundred meters. Hamid, the gas storage tanks, quickly. The rest of you place your charges anywhere you find equipment that will be difficult to replace. Hurry! They’ll have heard the explosion from ten kilometers away, and they’ll send troops. If you see any of the refinery personnel, kill them. God is great!”

“God is great,” they echoed.

He went to his assigned target, the refinery control room. It was no more than fifty meters away, and he raced past the pipes and tanks, lit by the flickering flames from the explosion. The door to the control room was locked, but it was easy to open it with a burst from his AKM assault rifle. Six bullets destroyed the lock, and he kicked the door open with his boot. When he ran inside, a man was standing opposite, staring at him. His mouth was open in terror, and in his hand, he held a pistol pointed at Sediq.

“This is private property,” he faltered, “You...er... must leave immediately. Otherwise, I will report you to...”

His voice tailed off. The Taliban leader chuckled, a grating laugh that had the icy overtones of imminent death. “Your infidel collaborators are all dead. Who will save you now? Only Allah, and if you have faith, you should call on His mercy.”

The man lowered the pistol. “Will you let me live? I don’t want to die. I have a wife and five children.”

Sediq greeted his comment with another laugh. It sounded like faulty bearings in a gas engine, harsh and metallic. The presentiment of a catastrophic end. “We will all die, because it is Allah’s will for the faithful to meet death and see the full glory of His mercy.”

The man's mouth opened and closed like a fish, but he failed to reply, struck dumb by terror. The seconds ticked away, and he knew it was long enough for his men to have completed their assignments. He walked to the engineer, knowing the man was too frightened to shoot. Sediq snatched the pistol from his shaking hands, and then placed the charges. It wasn’t just about cutting off the gas supplies. Their mission was to destroy the refinery so utterly it would take years to rebuild; a mortal blow to the unbelievers and apostates in Kabul.



When he'd finished, he went to the door and looked out. The headlights of trucks were visible in the distance, and he estimated they'd be here inside of two or three minutes. It was time, and they were ready. Even if some of his men hadn't finished placing their charges, they were certain to detonate in sympathy with the other explosions. If not, the exploding, burning gas would do the job. He took out the remote detonator, a converted cellphone, and turned back to the engineer, who was shivering in terror.

"The moment is upon us. Have you made your peace with God?"

The man stared back at him, still unable to speak, shaking his head from side to side. Sediq shrugged, what they were about to do would put this entire region in turmoil. They'd have to divert massive sums of cash to repair the damage. He knew they'd recover, but it would send a message that would resound around the halls of government. The name of Sediq Rasooli would be remembered for decades to come.

He jabbed his finger on the button of the detonator and screamed, "Allahu Akbar!" All it took was a light pressure, and the signal transmitted to the charges. He saw an enormous flash of white, felt searing, awful heat, and then there was nothing.

\* \* \*

Sediq underestimated the effects of the destruction of the refinery. A week after the explosion the company officers met in the Kabul headquarters of Afgas, the owners of the destroyed facility. They had much to discuss. More than any of them knew was on the agenda. Save one man. There were four men present, but it was the word of one man, Chief Executive Adnan Kovac, that would decide their future. They all knew it would be bad. How bad was what they'd come here to discover. They watched him and waited. Like a snake watches a mongoose, waiting for the death lunge. Their Chief Executive had that effect on people.

Kovac was a short, bald, thickset bull of a man. He had the muscles of a stevedore, which had in fact been his employment before he left his home country. He arrived in the United States from Croatia. Ostensibly a penniless refugee, he'd exploited his contacts in certain parts of the criminal underworld. Most were in the drugs trade, which enabled him to re-invest

his money in produce and make his first million inside of twelve months. Two years later, he made his first billion, having climbed his way up the ladder over the bodies of several men who'd tried to oppose him. Then he decided to invest his fortune in the mineral resources of Afghanistan.

He formed Afgas with the three other men present at the meeting, to exploit the recovering economy of the benighted nation. Flushed with optimism, and Kovac's assurances, they committed all of the company's cash to building the refinery at Qala-e-Naw. At first, it made money. Lots of money, and plans were in hand to build a second installation.

Now it was gone, all of it, the refinery and the money, along with their dreams of a constant stream of cash to pay off their creditors and fund their extravagant lifestyles. The bank account was empty, and the gas had ceased to flow. He stared at the other three men, his chief operating officer, Zak Willoughby, the company accountant, Grant Murdoch, and company lawyer, Philip Worthington. He hated them for their smooth Harvard educated faces, designer suits, hand-tooled brogues, and polished loafers. His clothes never hung well on him, despite the money he threw at his tailors. He didn't care. Neither did he care about their sneers. He wasn't one of them and knew they believed he lacked what they would consider as 'polish.' All that mattered was the ability to make money. He had it, and they didn't, which meant taking the all-important decisions that would ensure high levels of profit. They sometimes disagreed with his bullying management style, although it made little difference. Besides, he despised them for their weakness and inability to see the bigger picture.

He placed his briefcase on the table. He was proud of that briefcase. The company that sold it to him told him it was made of layers of titanium. The final cost was in excess of five thousand dollars, and the unique selling point was its ability to withstand any kind of attack. Up to and including a bomb blast. It wasn't an affectation. Inside the case, he carried more secrets than he'd care to admit. If anyone got hold of it, well, he didn't want to go there. What was the expression? 'Heads would roll.' They sure would. He opened the lid, took out a document, and pretended to read. He already knew what it contained. Calling it a bombshell would be an understatement.

"We're broke!" It was little more than a murmur, but all three flinched.

Murdoch, the accountant, stared back at him. "When you say broke, Adnan, what do you mean? Could you spell it out? How much do we have

left with which to rebuild?”

“I meant what I said. It’s gone, everything.”

“That’s impossible. How will we service our debts? You know where some of that money came from. Those people won’t be happy if we fail to pay. I mean...”

“You mean they’ll come gunning for us.”

“Well...”

Much of the company-financing package he’d put together came from the drug trade. These men knew about it, and they’d all agreed. It was the sole way to get access to the tens of millions of dollars they needed for such a speculative venture. It was also a massive risk. He knew the kind of men they were dealing with, and failure to repay the debt would mean the principals pursuing them to the ends of the earth for payment. No matter where they hid, one day, armed men would appear on the doorstep, offering them two alternatives. Pay what you owe, including accumulated interest at a rate that would cause even a banker to sweat blood, or die.

“You’re right. They’d come after us,” he acknowledged. He saw the other men flinch again and didn’t bother to conceal his grin.

*Weaklings!*

“What we have here is a situation that requires a drastic solution, if we’re going to survive this.”

“By drastic, what do you mean? How drastic?”

He sneered at Worthington, the lawyer. The man had picked up on the word for good reason. In discussions of this magnitude, drastic had an ominous meaning, illegal and worse. Next to him, Zak Willoughby nodded his agreement with the question.

*Another spineless weakling!*

Kovac paused for effect. He could see them hanging on his next words, waiting for the magic solution that would free them from the horrors of forced bankruptcy. Fine, he had that solution. It was time to spell it out to them.

“We need a war.”

They stared at him. “A war?” Worthington spluttered, “Tell me you’re kidding.”

He silenced him with a savage look. “This is too serious for jokes. No, my friends, there’s one thing that will save us. A good old-fashioned, one

hundred percent, bullets and bombs in the air, boots on the ground, shooting war. We need troops and aircraft. Armies of soldiers running around killing each other.”

He held up his hand as all of them began to protest. “Wait! You haven’t thought this through. Think about it; the moment a war starts, the dollars start to flow, billions of dollars. Suddenly, everyone wants to throw money at the solution, and I intend to make sure a big chunk of those dollars come our way.”

“But how do you start a war? Murdoch gasped.

“Never mind the how,” he snarled, “I’ll take care of the how. Just think of the benefits. One of their priorities will be to win hearts and minds, and how will they do that? By restoring heating and cooking for the natives. That means paying us to rebuild the refinery, so they’ll hand over the money with a smile on their faces and beg us to make a start.”

“Until the Taliban destroy it again,” Murdoch grumbled.

“They won’t destroy it.” Kovac stared at them, a smile pasted on his face, “They won’t destroy it for a simple reason. That’s the beauty of the war, the other benefit. There’ll be so many troops deployed in the area the Taliban would need an army to mount another attack. The insurgents will be on the run, harried from place to place by drones and helicopter gunships. They won’t have time to think about hitting us again, let alone actually do it. Think about it,” his face changed, his eyes glazed as he outlined his dream. He was a man who wasn’t about to see his dream destroyed, no matter how many thousands of lives it cost.

“Adnan, I don’t know about this. A war, people will die, in the hundreds and thousands. Jesus Christ, it’s not that easy. You can’t just start a war.”

Worthington sat back in his chair, a smug look on his face. Like an adult who’d just explained a simple fact to a child, or a lawyer after he’d just told his client he was going to jail for a long time and there was no alternative.

Kovac waited him out with a cold smile. “You’re right, Phil, and you’re wrong. Look at your history. World War Two began with a cross-border raid, a bit of subterfuge, and bingo, the armies start to roll. No, no,” he grinned, “I’m not planning on World War Three. I’m just making a point. Leave it to me, and I’ll kick these bastards into action. Once the war starts,

prices will rocket, and that includes the price of our natural gas. Governments will be throwing money at a solution to end the war. They always do. That means grants, loans, and bribes to the right people in the right places. Our share price will go through the roof, and I guarantee we'll have politicians queuing up at our door to pay for the reconstruction."

Philip Worthington still wasn't convinced. An experienced lawyer, he'd seen too many schemes that started on a wave of naive optimism, and then collapsed because their proponent hadn't thought things through. He was also a devout Catholic, and the idea of committing murder in the name of profit was an anathema to his beliefs.

"Adnan, it's not right. First, it goes against everything I believe in, and..."

"You're Catholic, ain't that right, Phil? What're you worried about, letting it all out at confession? Some priest bugging you over a little thing like this? Forget it. There's only one confessional you need to concern yourself with, and that's right here in this room. Nothing, and I mean nothing, leaves this meeting. Clear?"

"Well, yes, Adnan, but..."

"Hey, Phil, what do you think, the fucking Vatican's gonna find out what we're up to? Not in a million years."

It was a false assumption, and one that would come back to haunt him, to his death.

Worthington made another attempt to appeal to Kovac's conscience. "Adnan, what you said about the origins of World War Two. It was rather more than 'a cross-border raid.' If I remember right, they shot up a Polish border post and killed a lot of innocent people. People call that murder."

Kovac shot him an angry glance. "I don't give a shit what they call it, Phil. This isn't the United States, or Europe. This is Afghanistan. They murder people every day, when did you ever let that worry you? A few people get killed; a school or a hospital is destroyed by insurgents, who gives a goddamn? Right now, war means wealth. That's the reality. I need a vote on this. I need a decision before I go ahead. What's it to be, wealth or poverty? That's the choice you have to make today, Gentlemen, war or peace?"

Worthington put up a timid hand. "Adnan, you're talking about some kind of terrorist act, a huge loss of life. Am I right?"

He spat out the answer. "Yes. It's the only way."

"I thought as much. What kind of people would you find to do this work? You're talking about taking innocent life. Murder."

Kovac surveyed each man in turn, his gaze cold and cruel. "Since you ask, and since we're all in this together, I'll tell you. I have a contact inside the government, a senior minister, Kabir Khan. I've been paying him for 'consultancy services.' You all know what that means."

They knew the terminology of the bribe, a way of life inside Asia for the vast majority of officials. Everyone from government ministers down to cops, postal workers, and even street sweepers.

"What can this minister give us?" Zac Willoughby asked him.

"His half-brother. Most people aren't aware of the connection, but Kabir hired him to do a job for me a few years back. You may remember, there was that company bidding for the gas leases we wanted?"

Murdoch looked puzzled. "I thought they went bust, after the Chief Executive died when his aircraft went down."

Kovac grinned. "Near enough. No one ever knew the details, but Kabir hired his half-brother, Akram Khan, to fix it for me. I believe he used an RPG on that occasion, when he was taking off from remote strip in the south. The coroner hushed it up and put it down to mechanical failure, for a consideration. Akram is a former Taliban fighter. He led a warband against the NATO Coalition when they launched their invasion. It's enough for you to know this guy would help us get our war off the ground. For a price."

The shock around the table was palpable. Murdoch spoke first. "If any of this gets out, Adnan, we'd be screwed, big time. How do you know you can trust him?"

Kovac grinned. "He won't know who he's working for, and I know we can trust Kabir. Okay, I've told you enough, what's it going to be? Bankruptcy, food stamps, and a house in the projects, or do I contact the Minister?"

The show of hands was unsurprising. These men enjoyed sumptuous lifestyles. Executive jets, kids in private school, Ivy League universities, and mistresses in paid-for apartments close to Central Park.

They drifted away, muttering to themselves. Still not certain they were doing the right thing, but seeing no alternative. If a few ragheads had to go down to support their way of life, so be it. They were always killing

themselves, so what difference would a few more bodies make? Provided his plan worked, their financial worries would soon be over. Even better, they could finish up with far more wealth than before.

The uneasiness of what they'd agreed dissipated, and the smiles came back. The consensus that their plan would be enough to kick up a storm, but no more, enough to bring the troops and the dollars flooding back. Give it a few months, a few billion dollars, and it would all be over.

They were wrong. More wrong than they might imagine.

Kovac made a call on his encrypted satellite phone. It was a state of the art device, with software to make it impossible for a snooper to overhear his conversations. Proof against dust, dirt, water, and vibration damage, it had an Achilles heel called network outage. After a few minutes of clicking noises and digital nonsense, a digitized voice announced the system was down due to 'unforeseen technical problems.' A euphemism for someone had screwed up.

*Fucking incompetents!*

He took a chance and used the landline. The party answered after a short delay. Kabir Khan was not a full Minister, as he'd intimated, but the Deputy Minister of Defense. A minor detail, and one he didn't think was of any concern to his board members. He spelled out what he wanted, and at first, Khan demurred.

"Adnan, you're talking about starting another war, are you serious? How can I sanction something this extreme? My country has still not recovered after the last two wars."

Kovac laughed. "Which means they won't notice the difference. Dammit, Kabir, when was this place not at war? They live and breathe war, so what's a few bullets and bombs either way? Once they've bombed the school, the rest will take care of itself. Like kicking a ball downhill, the momentum will take over. It's a cinch."

The Deputy Minister sounded uneasy. "I don't like this. My brother is a bloody butcher, Adnan. A loose cannon."

"Exactly what we need, yeah, I like that. A cannon. Akram can fire his first shot by stirring up the Taliban. Get them into action. We need people to believe they're starting a new operation. When they hit the school, it'll just be part of their new campaign. It'll work. I guarantee it. I can also guarantee you'll be rich."

A pause. "Still..." He sounded unhappy, "Adnan, it's not as simple as you believe. The Vatican has been making noises about treatment of Christians inside Afghanistan."

"The Vatican! You're shitting me."

"No, Adnan. They sent a priest to tour parts of the country, including the area around Qala-e-Naw. His brief is to monitor our treatment of Catholics in the country."

"Get rid of him."

"We can't. He's very highly connected, they tell me, and very clever. A new offensive right now would be very suspicious, people will wonder at the reasons. What you propose could be very dangerous, if he comes across evidence of a link to your company. People talk."

"Is that so? In which case, we'll have to make sure we shut them up. What is the name of this priest?"

Khan told him. "He's a Jesuit."

"I don't care if he's a fucking nun. I'll take care of him. What does he look like, what's his name?"

"I'll send you an email while we're talking. It's all in there, but Adnan, I'm not so sure. It's a risk." It was obvious he wasn't happy, "What you are talking about could backfire on all of us."

"No way, no one will ever know. It's a shame about the priest, and a shame about the kids, but they're just Hindus. Who gives a shit? You know how the Indians will react. They'll withdraw their Ambassador, close the Embassy, and threaten war if the Taliban are not punished. Afghanistan will refuse to take responsibility, the Indians will send troops to the borders, and NATO reacts the way they always do. Money and troops."

"I understand. It'll just be Hindus. Infidels."

Kovac knew he'd won. "Hindus, correct."

"What would be my percentage?"

He was hooked. The rest was details. They agreed on the payment he would shovel toward Khan, ending the call with a promise for the Deputy Minister to contact his brother and put him on the road to war. Kovac was satisfied the grandiose scheme would kick up a storm. Although had he known it would be a storm beyond his worst nightmares, he may have reconsidered. Kovac was about to grab the tiger by the tail. The result



would be a hurricane of fury unlike anything they'd seen in this part of Asia in a long, long time.

He glanced through his email and waited for the attachment to come down. When he opened it, the image reminded him of someone, a contractor who'd done work for him in the past. Wet work. From Calabria, in Southern Italy, he'd lived much of his life in the States. What surprised everyone who knew this man was his religion. A stone killer, yet a devout Christian. Strangely, he was Orthodox, after his Greek father married an Italian.

*Who gives a shit, Catholic, Orthodox, what difference does it make? Damn all.*

What would make a difference was the fact that the man resembled the priest, to a degree that was uncanny. It would make everything that much easier. All he needed was to agree a price with the man, and forward him the email he was reading. The contractor would do the rest. Kovac happened to know he was in Kabul, between jobs, which meant he was available. Perfect.

He congratulated himself on making a good deal with Kabir Khan. It would be good for his company, and good for him. All it took was a single telephone call, and no one would be any the wiser. He fired off an email to the man in Kabul, anticipating an early reply. He'd tied up the loose ends, and the only man who would know all of it was him.

He'd made a big mistake. The switchboard operator had noticed the light flash to indicate an outgoing call from the Chief Executive. What he heard gave him pause for thought, a lot of thought. He decided to contact his brother-in-law, a refinery engineer, and closet Catholic who'd been caught up in the refinery explosion at Qala-e-Naw. He deserved to know what his bosses were planning. Then it would be up to him to decide what to do.

The local hospital had been overflowing, and they'd moved him to a small emergency clinic in Helmand. He would write to him and ask his advice. A letter was the best way to handle it. Unlike telephone calls, letters were confidential.

He was wrong.

## Chapter One

*CNN International News: Following the almost total destruction of a natural gas refinery in Northwest Afghanistan, increased insurgent activity has taken the Afghan government and the NATO Coalition by surprise. Efforts are underway to stabilize the situation, and some say SOCOM is on increased levels of alert to deploy Special Forces. The Pentagon denies there is cause for alarm. The attacks are localized and not part of a more major offensive. Despite this, they are taking a toll on the ordinary citizen. People are already feeling the effects, and hypothermia is a serious problem. The sick and elderly are dying for lack of heating and hot food. Further reports will follow the moment the news reaches us.*

The Heathe N. Craig Joint Theater Hospital was a military medical facility situated close to Bagram Airfield. They named it after Staff Sergeant Heathe N. Craig, a United States Army combat medic who died trying to save a wounded comrade. People said the modern building housed enough equipment and expertise to rival many modern hospitals in the United States. Treatment was first class, and even the chow edible. They didn't mention the crushing boredom.

Navy SEAL Lieutenant Kyle Nolan commanded a small SEAL unit, SEAL Team Bravo. At least, he used to command them, before the injury put him out of business. Right now, all he commanded was a hospital bed, and even worse, he wasn't incarcerated because of a battlefield wound. Not a bullet in the guts, or a knife slash to the arm, his own carelessness had reduced him to the status of a helpless medical patient.

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It happened when he led them into a Taliban-held village, an anonymous shithole that didn't even warrant a mention on the map. As for a name, forget it. If it had one, no one knew what it was. There were ten in the squad, and they approached the target during the dark, lonely hours of the

night. A helo dropped them on the designated LZ, ten klicks from the village, and they hiked in to arrive an hour before dawn.

He'd put out his flankers, two men with machine guns, M249s, to make sure no one got away. Vince Merano, the unit sniper, watched from a low rise with a good field of view over the target. They went in using NV equipment, and unless the enemy had changed their medieval mentality, Team Bravo would be the sole user of the advanced optical technology this night. During a night assault, there was an added benefit of night vision optics. A sound suppressed bullet striking from the dark had a devastating effect on the recipient's morale. The effect on their health was invariably a whole lot worse.

He crouched low, ten meters away from the first of the stone huts. It was quiet, too quiet. There should have been a sentry, maybe the sound of women up before the dawn, preparing breakfast for the fighters. Nothing. He glanced at Master Chief Petty Officer Will Bryce, his number two, the man who'd left the black ghettos of Detroit behind to emerge as a legend among fighting men.

Even viewed through night vision, the African American was unmistakable. A strong, crag-like profile, with big bones and a jutting chin under a powerful, almost regal countenance. Under the body armor his huge body was clad with slabs of hard muscle, the result of constant physical training to keep him at the very peak of physical fitness and skill.

When people stared at Bryce, they saw a man of massive strength and authority, indestructible, always there when he needed him. Will was Bravo's granite foundation.

"What's your take on it, Chief? It doesn't smell right to me."

"I'm thinking the same thing," he mumbled, "They told us this was an important enemy staging post, which means they'd be watching for an attack. We should recce the place first."

Another man spoke. "You want me to take a look?"

John-Wesley Ryder waited for a reply. To most folks, the weasely-looking pastor's son from New Orleans didn't cut an impressive figure. Most folks would be wrong. If they were an enemy, dismissing Ryder as a nonentity was a mistake, usually a fatal mistake. The scrawny SEAL was a complex figure, a half-crazed religious fanatic, with a view of Christianity warped by an unhealthy dose of Voodoo. Some said John-Wesley was crazy.

He sure wasn't one hundred percent sane. On the other hand, he was expert with a knife, lightning fast with a gun, and able to move through hostile terrain like a ghost. Like Will Bryce, he was a vital part of the Team. A man who'd made killing an art.

It was no surprise that he'd volunteered to go. Ryder was always on the lookout for hostile flesh with which to practice his knife fighting skills. The offer was tempting, but Nolan turned him down.

"Not this time, John-Wesley. I want to take a look myself before we commit. We don't know if they've abandoned the place, or if there's some other reason for the silence. Keep me covered. I'm going down there to take a look."

It was a desolate, poverty-stricken heap of crude stone dwellings. As much of Afghanistan, it had failed to greet the twenty-first century and was stuck in a time warp, roughly the seventh century. The time when Mohammed began his campaign of bloody slaughter intended to bring the glories of Islam to the rest of the world. Like the Prophet's quest, the village was a testament to Islamic destruction and degradation of hitherto peaceful communities.

Nolan slithered across the rough ground and peered inside the first stone hut. It was empty, just a beaten earth floor. He eased through the glassless window and looked around the room. To allow light to penetrate the dingy, foul-smelling quarters, he pulled aside the sheet of corrugated steel that served as a door. He looked out. The street was empty.

*Have they abandoned the village? It looks like it, and yet, something is wrong. What?*

He took a single step into the street and knew he'd made a mistake. His boot sunk into a small patch of ground, a fractionally different color from the surrounding hard packed mud. He saw it an instant before he stepped into it.

They called it a Punji trap, a booby-trapped stake buried in the ground. They were made of wood, placed upright, and like most Punji traps, this one had a coating of poison. He didn't notice it at the time, all he felt was the pain of the pointed stick spearing the sole of his boot and entering his foot. The sickness would come later.

He hit the transmit button. "Bravo Two, this is One. Bring them in, but leave Vince back there to cover us. There's no sign of hostiles, but

something about this place stinks, and not just for the lack of sanitary facilities. Watch out for Punjis. I just found one.

"You okay?"

"No sweat."

Bryce acknowledged. Nolan didn't need to mention the need to stay low and take precautions against a sudden attack. They were Navy SEALs and sneaking into hostile territory was SOP, Standard Operating Procedure. He covered them with his rifle, a compact Heckler and Koch MP7 assault rifle. The tiny weapon fired a special 4.6mm armor-piercing round that packed a lethal punch for such a small chunk of metal.

He crouched, scanning the shadows for any sign of opposition. Chief Bryce came through the same window he'd used, skidding to a stop as Nolan blocked the door with his body. "Don't even think about stepping outside. I just got a Punji stake in my boot, and there could be more."

"Any sign of the enemy?"

"Nothing. It reeks of them, but they're not showing themselves."

Will grimaced when he saw the stake. "It could be poisoned."

"Maybe, but I don't feel weird, not yet, anyway." Another shadow materialized out of the darkness. "Ryder, watch for the Punji trap."

"I see it."

"Okay. We'll move out and recce the place. They're around here somewhere. I can smell 'em. Sneaky bastards."

John-Wesley slid away and disappeared behind the huts. That was when the shooting started, a long burst of machine gun fire from behind a low wall outside the village. Vince Merano, the sniper stationed a hundred meters back, called in a warning.

"Heads up, guys. We have hostiles moving in from the east. I count eight, but there could be more."

"Copy that. Try to take care of the machine gun."

"I'm on it."

Nolan sent Bryce to skirt around the south perimeter with two men, and he led Brad Rose and Zeke Murray into the village to confront the men moving in from the east. They made it halfway, and he signaled a stop. He could hear the enemy racing toward them, footsteps pattering on the stony ground. The three SEALs sunk into the darkness. It was a short wait. Several seconds later, the first Talib appeared.

The hostiles were visible in the precision optics of their night vision equipment, and the Talibs ran into the muzzles of the waiting guns. There was no warning, just the suppressed bullets ripping into them. Nolan knocked down the leader with a double tap to the chest, and as he dropped, he picked off the man behind him. Rose and Murray looked for and found their own targets. Within seconds, they were reduced to three.

The survivors dove into cover, a stone hut. Nolan motioned for them to surround it.

“Brad, Zeke, cover the front door. I’ll take the window. When I give the word, hose the place down.”

“Copy that.”

He ran to the window and peered over the sill. The gomers had grouped in the center, their rifles covering the door, as if the Americans were about to make a frontal assault. It was almost too easy. He aimed his MP7, selected full auto, and wiped them out with a long, devastating burst of the hardened bullets. He doubted they knew what had hit them, and when he ceased fire, they were no more than a bundle of bloody rags.

He left Brad and Zeke to hold their position while he went inside. His intention was to search for anything that could be useful to the intel weenies back at base. Many successful attacks had followed the seizing of documents from what appeared to be innocuous peasant dwellings. His first move was to make certain the men he’d shot were dead. His aim had been good. The bullets were even better. He doubted the Prophet Mohammed could repair the shredded corpses.

One had a pack fastened to his back, and he knelt to remove it. Inside there were documents.

*Bingo!*

A potential treasure trove, he pulled them out. He couldn’t read the Pashtu but knew what he had in his hands would be of more use to the Coalition than killing a few Talibs. At that moment, someone shouted a warning.

“Boss, there’s more coming in. Half a dozen from the west.” It was Vince Merano, from his position outside the village.

“Can you take them?”

A pause. “Most, but I can’t guarantee them all. They’re dodging from cover to cover, difficult targets. If you go to the western side, I’ll open up on

them. Any survivors have to run your way, so you can fry their asses.”

“Copy that. Brad, Zeke, I’m coming outside. Hold your fire.”

Two clicks in his earpiece acknowledged they’d got the message. He climbed to his feet and then staggered, as if his leg had lost all its strength.

*Have I been shot? No, that’s not possible, I’d have felt it. It has to be something else. The Punji trap, it was poisoned! Shit and double shit! It’s going to be more trouble than I realized.*

He tried once more to get to his feet. Again he tripped, and this time it was as if the lower part of his body was going numb. His hand moved to the transmit button to call for help, but it didn’t connect. The numbness reached all of his limbs, and everything went black.

\* \* \*

They told him afterward it was the venom of the saw-scaled viper, amongst the most poisonous snakes on earth. Doctors said they had no known antidote for the venom, and treatment would be hit and miss. He’d been out for three days. Bravo killed the remaining hostiles in the village and called in a helo to exfil Bravo direct to Bagram. Since then, he’d been confined to a hospital room, the walls painted in a sickly shade of blue, the floor covered in blue linoleum. Even the bedding was blue, as was the chair provided for a visitor. The one variation was the medical equipment, electronics, monitors, and drip stands, most of which were white. He had little doubt some military mind would sooner or later decide to paint them all blue as well.

There was little to break up the monotony. An hour ago, a nurse had brought him his laptop. He’d been asking for it every waking hour, but at first they’d insisted he needed to rest. Forget resting, he needed to be back in the loop. He switched on, booted Windows, and connected to the Internet. Now he had the means of seeing what was going on in the world outside. He tried his pals on Facebook, but his efforts met with silence. No one was on-line. Then he connected to his email account and found a message from Will Bryce.

For security reasons, the wording was vague, but he understood Will was leading the team on an operation inside Iraq to interdict a weapons smuggling pipeline. He tried to imagine them at that moment, sitting in the

cavernous hold of a C-17, as it carried them to their next target. Ready to parachute to a remote LZ, appear from nowhere, and hit the enemy hard. A blazing firefight, and destroy their command and control infrastructure. Leave the target a blazing, corpse-strewn wasteland. They'd leave behind a few less assault rifles, broken and useless RPGs and machine guns that wouldn't fire. Less ordnance, less shooters to kill NATO and Iraqi soldiers until they created the next warband. Then they'd have to do it all again.

*Shit, I should be with them, instead of stuck in this place. It's tough work, but it's what I trained for. If I don't get out of here soon, I'll go crazy.*

He thought of a single possibility to explore. Skype. A couple of keystrokes loaded the program, and he scanned down his list of contacts. Almost all of them were off-line, except one, and he hit the call and connect button. Oz Brennan was a man he'd met when he first joined the Navy SEALs. They were both snipers back then, and during extended training, they forged a bond that had never disappeared.

When they split up to join their new units, they rarely saw each other. He heard later that Petty Officer First Class Oscar Brennan had cracked. They'd sent him into an impossible situation to take down a senior Talib commander. His command left him out in the boonies, alone and without support, while he hunkered down, waiting for the shot.

He was there for nine days until the chance came. The target appeared in his scope, and he took aim with his Stoner SR-25. A gentle squeeze of the trigger, the man went down, and then all hell let loose. The Talibs swarmed around his position like angry bees. They wanted revenge. They wanted blood. His blood. It took him eight days to escape the trap, eight days during which he had no food, almost nothing to drink, and no support.

He arrived at his Forward Operating Base a scarecrow, ruined both physically and mentally. Weeks later, he took medical retirement from the Service. Using his lump-sum benefit, with his small savings, he bought an aircraft. Already a qualified pilot, he progressed through the ratings necessary to gain a commercial ticket. His dream was to build a new career as a charter pilot.

His hopes were dashed when every door slammed shut on his dreams. The problem was medical. Aviation authorities tended to look closely at the medical records of prospective commercial pilots. They turned him down in the U.S. and in Europe. He knocked on the door of most every country in



the world, until he found one prepared to accept him. After payment of the bribes they demanded to rubber stamp his license.

Brennan wound up flying his second-hand Cessna 208 caravan out of Chaman in Pakistan. The busy town was close to the Afghan border and situated at a crossroads between the two countries. As the ravages of war wound down, there was still enough demand to keep a small charter aircraft in the air. He even began to make a profit. Oz flew from his own strip, a grass field next to the office that served as his company headquarters. His was a one-man business. One man and one woman.

Amy Gul was the daughter of an American father and an Asian mother. When he first arrived in Pakistan, Oz saved her from a gang of Muslims intent on raping her. Rape was big with young Pakistanis, better than soccer, and whole lot more fun. Not surprising in a Muslim nation where they regarded women as a lower form of life.

She'd stayed with him ever since he rescued her, both out of gratitude and for protection. She grew to like him and made herself useful, sharing the day-to-day tasks of running an air charter operation. Before many days had elapsed, she also shared his bed.

Nolan smiled as he recalled his old friend. The call connected and then the video appeared. His face hadn't changed, the uncombed hair, ragged short beard, and ever-present cigarette stuck in his mouth. Neither had the wrinkles changed. Since that last operation, his forehead had become etched with deep lines. His hair had also become streaked with gray. He looked every inch the mercenary, which wasn't far from the truth. There were rumors that Brennan wasn't that fussy when it came to the kind of people and cargoes he transported.

"Oz! How are things going across the border?"

"Across the border? That means you're in Afghanistan again. Hey, isn't that a hospital room I can see?"

"It's a long story, but yeah, I'm stuck here while my Team has all the fun. How's business?"

A shrug. "Same as always. Amy keeps nagging me to find more work, but I reckon we're doing okay. She's even learning to fly. She's started to come with me on some contracts, sits in the right-hand seat and pilots the plane."

"I guess you're pretty busy, then."

"It could be better. I've got a party of engineers coming in soon, a trip to Northern Afghanistan, which should pay well. You heard about that trouble in Qala-e-Naw? The Taliban launched a suicide attack on a gas refinery. Now they have to rebuild it fast before half the country freezes their asses. These engineers are going up there to make a start."

"I hadn't heard, no. I've been out of it for a bit."

"You're okay now?"

"Yeah, almost recovered, the boredom's killing me, though. The medics say I need another four weeks until I can get back into the field. Problem is, by then I'll be off my head."

"You should come over here and see me and Amy. Where are you, Bagram?"

"Yeah, that's right. Maybe I will, if they'll..."

He stopped as the door to his room opened, and a man walked in. He was in MARPAT camos, a tall, lean figure carrying an HK-416 rifle. He had a pistol strapped on one side of his waist and a huge knife on the other. Nolan's face split into a smile. He was staring at a face he hadn't seen in a long time. The man was another Navy SEAL. Petty Officer First Class Jim Highcloud was still on the active list.

Jim Highcloud, a full blood Cherokee, a weapons specialist, and a man who'd made his name in every theatre in which the SEALs had been involved. His face was swarthy, with his hair styled in a buzz cut. He grinned as he approached the bed.

"Nolan."

"Jim, dammit, this is a welcome surprise." He gestured at the screen, "I'm on a call to Oz Brennan. You remember Oz?"

He chuckled. "How could you forget him?" He stared at the screen. "Oz, how's it all hanging?"

"As good as it can be in this place. One thing about Pakistan, it's not such a hellhole as Afghanistan. Comes close, but there're at least a few things that make life bearable. Not like where you are now. What are you working on at the moment, Jim?"

Highcloud grimaced. "I've got a driver outside waiting for me. We're heading down to Qala-e-Naw, the place where they bombed that refinery. SOCOM is worried about more raids against installations in that region."

We're gonna take a look at other vulnerable targets, with a view to beefing up the defenses."

Oz raised an eyebrow. "Qala-e-Naw? I might even see you there. I'll be flying in a party of engineers as soon as they turn up. They're working on the reconstruction."

"I'd wear an armored vest," Nolan advised, "The last thing you need is to fly into some crappy little field and find some raghead trying to fill you full of holes."

He laughed. "Don't worry. I'm always careful. Stay out of trouble, that's my motto. Ever since..."

He tailed off, and his expression went rigid. There was an awkward silence. They knew what he meant when he said 'ever since.' The nightmarish hell he'd suffered and which ended his career. Jim Highcloud broke the silence.

"Guys, it's been nice talking to you, but I've got a Humvee waiting outside, and a lot of ground to cover. How about I look you up when I come back, Nolan? You, too, Oz, I'll make sure to use this Skype thing to give you a call. If I'm ever in your neck of the woods, maybe I'll call in."

"You do that." They heard a female voice in the background, and Oz's smile returned, "That's Amy, my assistant and general nuisance. She's pushing me to finish up some paperwork, so I'll say goodbye."

"Adios," Highcloud said.

"Yeah, you, too. Nolan, get yourself out of that hospital before you start putting down roots."

The screen went dead as the call ended. Highcloud held up his hand. "I'll be seeing you. Let's make it soon."

He disappeared through the door, and once again, the hospital room was quiet. Even more quiet, without the voices of his SEAL comrades. He swung his legs aside and put his feet on the floor. The wounded foot that had taken the worst of the snake venom was still painful, but he practiced walking around the room and found he could manage just fine.

*Oz was right. I've been here too long, and it's time to do something about it. They said I need four weeks to recover. That's fine and dandy, but if I spend another four hours trapped inside these four walls, I'll go berserk.*

Two hours later, he was recovering from a major battle with a determined nurse. She'd done her best to drag him back to his bed. Her

intention was to make certain the patient recovered. Then again, that look she gave him suggested she might have something altogether more interesting in mind. Well, okay, he could live with that. The Lieutenant was tall, six-one, and lean, with the features people called chiseled. He called them roughhewn and angular. Some people saw him as Mr. Average, although others saw something they didn't.

More than one girlfriend had told him he reminded them of a young Clint Eastwood; a compliment he'd always accepted with some grace, even if they were plain loco. His angular face was again considered almost average, at first sight. It was his strong chin and piercing eyes, the color of a clear, deep blue sky; a hint that the man they belonged to was anything but Mr. Average. Despite his blue eyes, he had thick, dark brown hair, which some people found strange, except for those women who found it attractive.

It took a deal of argument, but at last, he was dressed in his camos and walking through the door of SOCOM, Special Operations Command. He reached a suspicious looking Lieutenant Commander who'd briefed him on an operation a few weeks before. The man looked him up and down, his face creased into a frown.

"Shouldn't you be in bed, Lieutenant Nolan? Last I heard you almost died after wrong footing that Punji trap."

He shrugged off the comment. "I'm over it, Sir. Fully recovered, and if I don't get something to do, I'll go crazy, rip off my clothes, and start running around the hospital naked."

The officer smiled. "No, I wouldn't advise that. What did you have in mind?"

"Anything. Any kind of job you can give me. For Christ's sake, Commander, everyone knows we're shorthanded. There has to be something you can give me."

"I would send you back in the field, but the medics would roast my hide if I did." He paused, thinking, and then glanced at some paperwork on his desk, "There is something else. You've heard about this Qala-e-Naw debacle?"

"It's about all I've heard lately. The gas refinery they destroyed."

"Right. I've got an officer who went sick. He was slated to fly a liaison mission. The plan is to link up with an Afghan Army unit patrolling an area west of Herat. That's about fifty klicks out from the refinery. If you want to

take that seat in the helo, it's yours. It's not too challenging. You meet the officer in command. He speaks good English, by the way. You'll discuss what kind of logistical support he needs, and then report back. There won't be any shooting, at least, not last time I checked. It's a simple job. You fly out at dawn tomorrow, and you'll be home in time for dinner. What you say?"

If they'd sent him to polish the windshield of the helo, he wouldn't have turned it down. The following morning, he was sitting in passenger seat of an MH-6 Little Bird as it clattered through the sky, heading due west. He watched the grim, gray landscape unfold beneath them, and it held little interest for him. The words of the Commander who'd briefed him on the errand came back to him.

"I don't want you to underestimate the importance of what you're going out there to do, Nolan. One more attack, one more destroyed refinery, and much of what we've achieved over the last few years could vanish. Your average Afghan would decide we weren't able to protect them, couldn't even supply them with gas to cook a hot meal. Your job is to fill in some routine paperwork, a summary of what the Afghans have to say. Make no mistake; they're going to need that help, so make sure you get it right. I don't want you screwing around with any decimal points."

He'd saluted and left, gone to hospital, and given them the news he was leaving. Then he walked to the room they'd given him in the BOQ, the Bachelor Officer Quarters, after telling the medics he'd spent enough time in bed. They'd agreed to give him a qualified release, with extreme reluctance, after he'd made it clear he was going anyway. The doctor gave him a handful of morphine pills and told him to use them if the pain was bad. He was tired, and yet when the nurse came to his room to deliver an extra carton of pills for his coming journey, he found he wasn't that tired. She stayed until the early hours of the morning, and for a short time, he found himself able to relax. He held her warm body, clasped in his arms, and listened as she pointedly told him of the dangers of what he was doing. Leaving the hospital, despite not being certified fit for duty. Going into a possible danger zone, and find himself not able to deal with what he found. There was something else.

"Lieutenant Nolan, do you trust me?"

"With my life."

"So don't leave. Not yet. Trust me, it's too soon. You'll suffer if you don't give it time to heal."

Her name was First Lieutenant Clara Barton, U.S. Army. She was eye candy, enough to make any man want to spend time in sickbay. As cute as a button, and in the sack, it was fireworks all the way. For a short time, he enjoyed the feeling of total relaxation. He trusted her with his life, that's what he'd told her, and it was true, a rare feeling to be with someone so special. Like most men, he'd had more than his share of scrapes with women. Some were good. Some were bad, but as for trust? Clara Barton restored much of the faith he'd lost in women over the past couple of years. Too often he'd let his defenses down, and it blew back in your face. She was different. Trust was a good feeling.

He took his leave, promising to return, and meant it. He'd taken a couple of pills on the morning of the flight, and already he was feeling the effect of the soporific. Moments later, he was asleep, despite the incredible noise of the engine, the rotors, and the crosswinds that buffeted the tiny craft.

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Oz Brennan spent most of the night filling in paperwork. Half dead with exhaustion, he worked another hour battling to free a problem with the starboard aileron controls. Worn out and exhausted, he was in a deep sleep when Amy entered the bedroom of his tiny bungalow next to the field they used as an airstrip, and kicked him awake.

"Wake up, you're needed. Wheels up in thirty."

He was slow coming awake, emerging from a dark dream in which he'd been trapped in a burning building, and every time he tried to get out, a snarling figure with a beard, brown robes and black turban, pointed a gun at him. The flames were licking around his body, and his camos were on fire. He was preparing for a last desperate attempt to get out when he recognized the voice calling to him.

"You're not serious. I was working most of the night. There's no way I'm going anywhere, not this morning."

It was as if he hadn't spoken. "There's fresh coffee on the kitchen table. I've put some waffles in the toaster, and there's a pack of sandwiches

to take with you. Get in the shower, and make yourself presentable.”

“I told you...”

“Move it, Brennan. Unless you want me to fly this one myself.”

“You don’t have a license, not yet.”

“Right. I suggest you hurry while you still have an aircraft intact.”

He hurried, a two-minute shower, brushed his teeth, and dragged on the clothes he’d worn the day before. And the day before that, and the day before that. He didn’t trouble to seat himself at the table but perched on the edge of a desk. They used the room as an office, dining room, and anything else they needed. He washed down two waffles with strong coffee and walked outside. It was still cold, and the four men waiting for him were dressed in warm, thermal clothing, with hoods, gloves, and boots. He stared at them for a few moments and then snarled, “Are you waiting for me?”

They looked at one another. One man replied, “You’re booked to fly us down to Qala-e-Naw.”

“Yeah, I get it. There’s no rush. Why don’t you come inside the office for coffee?”

The man looked pained. “We were due to take-off half an hour ago.”

“Uh, sure. The aircraft is over there. Why don’t you get aboard, and I’ll be with you shortly.”

They stared at him for almost a minute, and then looked at the aircraft. The Cessna was sitting forlornly at the edge of a rough strip comprised of stubbled grass, interspersed between patches of gravel. The Brennan charter operation had no money for the niceties, and the strip bore a remarkable resemblance to a stretch of wasteland, waiting for the earthmovers to come in and start tearing up for development. Desolate was a word that didn’t do it justice.

They looked back at him and then trudged toward the Cessna. Oz grimaced and went back toward the office. Amy stood in the doorway.

“Not this time, Buster. Get yourself into that aircraft, and take the paying customers where they want to go. Is everything working okay?”

“All except the radio,” he murmured under his breath.

She had hearing like a bat. “The radio! You idiot, you were supposed to get it fixed.”

He kicked at a loose stone. “I called the radio guy. He said he was busy. Besides, we don’t have a tower, and there’s no tower where we’re

going.”

She fumed. “What’ll you do if an Air Force plane calls you for identification?”

“I’ll give him a friendly wave. Listen, Amy, I need more coffee. I’m still half asleep.”

“Out! When you get back, I want that radio fixed. Don’t tell me we can’t afford it either. We can always sell that long sheepskin coat you like to wear when the weather’s really cold.”

“My coat, you wouldn’t dare!”

“Try me. Now get out.”

He gave in to the inevitable and strolled out to the aircraft. The Cessna 208 Caravan was one of his few achievements. It was a single-engine turboprop with fixed-tricycle landing gear. A budget, short-haul regional airliner and utility aircraft that emerged from the Cessna factory in the U.S.A. Capable of seating nine passengers and the pilot, its short takeoff and land ability and rugged construction allowed it to operate from rough strips anywhere in the world, making it ideal for his kind of operation. Much of Brennan’s work was of the cash in the hand, no questions asked, ‘take-off and we’ll tell you where to land’ variety.

He pulled himself into the cockpit, took the left-hand seat, and glanced back at the passengers. Three were seated near the back, as if they thought it was the safest place to occupy in case of an emergency. They were huddled in their warm coats, except for the fourth man, who was sitting in the seat behind him. To his surprise, the man had taken off his coat to display his clerical garb, a black shirt and white dog collar underneath an olive windcheater.

He nodded a greeting. “I take it you’re not an engineer.”

The man smiled and held out his hand. “Father David Clark, Society of Jesus. You’re Oscar Brennan, so I understand. Formally Petty Officer Oscar Brennan, of the U.S. Navy.”

The accent was pure American, although the priest looked like he’d hailed from the Mediterranean region. His skin was olive, eyes and hair dark, and he looked more like a Sicilian than a Jesuit priest. He wondered how the man had uncovered his personal information. Brennan preferred to keep his past in that exact place, in the past. The country was home to a great number of Islamists who held a jaundiced view of the American



Special Forces, for good reason. If they'd ever carried the banner for the insurgents in Afghanistan, they could possibly have appeared in Brennan's sights. They were unlikely to have made it home.

He turned the conversation back to the priest. "There're not too many churches down where you're going. At the last count, it stood at about zero."

"My office is in the Vatican, but I go wherever I'm needed."

The Vatican, which explained a lot, the oldest and most efficient intelligence service in the world. The Catholic Church was two thousand years old, and in that time, they'd forged a secret network second to none. "So they're sending you to Afghanistan."

"I go anywhere in Asia I'm needed. As for churches, it's not necessary to worship in a church, not always. I have other duties as well, checking on the wellbeing of our priests and nuns. After I've finished my duties in Qala-e-Naw, I have to visit an aid station in Helmand. It's about fifty kilometers from Kandahar."

"More members of your flock?"

He shook his head. "A doctor, a nun. She's been working in this place for some months."

"The last I heard, it was fatal for nuns to roam around Afghanistan," Oz murmured, "As for Helmand, forget it."

He dismissed the comment. "I'm sure she'll be safe. She's doesn't wear her habit inside the country. Besides, she'll be leaving Afghanistan very soon. They've recalled her to the Vatican for reassignment."

"I wouldn't waste any time. If they pick her up on a raid, they'll rape her for helping the enemy. That's anyone who isn't Taliban. Wearing a nun's habit, they'll murder her, after they've raped her."

It was no secret that the Afghans would not allow Christians or any other non-Islamic faith to construct churches in their country, or to spread the gospel. The penalty for breaking the law was death. Should any Afghan Muslim convert to Christianity, the penalty was death. The law at least was simple, with little room for misunderstanding. Father David didn't answer, and Oz went through the checklist as always before a takeoff. Despite the precarious nature of both his license and charter operation, Brennan was a conscientious pilot.

*What is it they say? There are old pilots, and bold pilots. However, there are no old, bold pilots.*

When he was satisfied, he started the engine, swept his gaze across the gauges, moved the throttle of the single Pratt and Whitney 868 horsepower turboprop engine, and began to taxi. He didn't trouble himself calling the tower for clearance. Chaman Airfield had no tower. When he reached the end of the field, he swung her into the wind, glanced up at the sky to make sure it was clear, and pushed the throttles all the way to the stops. The Cessna gathered speed, and inside of a distance that most people were astonished at, he'd reached take-off speed. He pulled back on the column, and the tough little aircraft climbed into the sky.

When he reached cruising altitude of three thousand meters, he leveled off and throttled back to cruising speed. Then he looked back at the priest.

"If you want to come up front, there's a better view through the windshield."

Clark smiled his thanks and moved into the right-hand seat. With a start, Oz realized he'd forgotten to tell them all to buckle up before they took off. Never mind, they'd got into the air. What was important was the aircraft got off the ground in one piece. If something went wrong, a seatbelt would be of little more than psychological value. He was flying a single-engine light aircraft, not a multi-engine passenger jet. It wasn't a civil airliner with more safety features and crew than you could shake a stick at.

They flew over the border between the two countries, and he was inside Afghanistan. As he looked down, the memories returned, and he felt the old tightening in his chest. He shrugged them off and forced his mind to concentrate on flying the aircraft. He checked the instruments, altitude, fuel gauge, oil pressure, and the all-important navigational instruments. Instruments that if they worked correctly would fly him to a tiny, ruined, speck of the landscape in the northwest of the country. If not, he could wind up in the crosshairs of an Afghan Air Force jet, after he'd inadvertently crossed a hostile border. The course checked out, and he relaxed.

When he dropped his gaze, he saw what he'd hoped to see. Amy, as she always did, had stowed a vacuum flask of coffee at the side of his seat. He looked at the priest.

"If you want to pour, we can share a cup of Java. Only the one cup, I'm afraid."

Clark grinned his appreciation. "I'd love one. I've been up since the early hours of the morning, and I've been wanting a coffee ever since I woke up."

"You can take the first one," Oz told him, "I guess you've been praying, is that the kind of thing you guys do? On your knees before dawn breaks, praying the rosary or something like that?"

The Jesuit gave him speculative look, and then decided the words carried no insult. "You're partly right. Yes, we do rise early, and yes, we do pray to God each day, several times a day, in fact. No, I didn't pray the rosary this morning. I had other work to do."

It sounded mysterious, and he decided not to pursue it. Like Jesuits the world over, with a deserved reputation for secrecy, this man looked like someone who kept his affairs close to his vest; whatever affairs they were. He finished the coffee, refilled the cup, and passed it to Oz, who sipped at it in quiet contemplation. The sun was rising in the sky, and it lit up the landscape. It made it look almost beautiful and grand, which from experience was a mistake.

Afghanistan was not beautiful. Not by any conventional measure. For most of its inhabitants, the country was a war-torn hellhole of grime and disease-ridden poverty. A place where the Mullahs held sway over a population blinded by Islam to the need for change. For food, education, clean water, jobs, and housing. Instead, the men carried their assault rifles like badges of manhood, which they were. Misogyny was a word they used to describe the treatment of their women, and the women languished in brutal subjection. If there was any beauty in Afghanistan, it was when it snowed, and covered the destruction and neglect of generations with a blanket of virgin white.

They flew over a range of hills, and he could see far below a line of pack animals, either donkeys or ponies. They were accompanied by a group of Afghans, and it had to be one of two things; a smuggler train carrying the opium that had wrecked the nation's economy and health. The alternative a Taliban warband; in which case the pack animals carried their food and weapons. Either was bad news.

One of the engineers in the rear of the cabin interrupted his reverie. "Pilot, I see you have coffee. It smells good. Do we get any?"

He didn't turn around. "No."

“No? Why not? You gave some to the priest.”

“He ordered it with his flight booking. If you want coffee on the journey, you have to order it in advance. Didn’t you check your boarding cards?”

“Boarding cards? They didn’t give us any boarding cards.”

“That’s because you didn’t ask.”

They flew on in silence. As they neared their destination, Qala-e-Naw, he had misgivings. Genuine misgivings. Twice he’d sighted columns of smoke, which may have meant attacks on either civilians or military. He didn’t fly low to look, for fear of ground-to-air missiles, but the smoke was bad news. They flew over a third column of smoke, and when he checked their position, they were less than thirty klicks from their destination, the ruined refinery of Qala-e-Naw.

Even at three thousand meters, he could smell them. The suicide bombers who’d destroyed the gas plant may be dead, but the job wasn’t over, not by a long way. Their pals were on the march. The destruction of Qala-e-Naw was just the beginning.

## Chapter Two

*CNN International News: Pentagon sources say reports of a new insurgency fighting inside Afghanistan are untrue. In certain areas, there has been local unrest, but this is not indicative of any major instability inside the country. In the northwest, engineers have been called in to accelerate repairs to the natural refinery, and Afgas says they are confident they will have the plant up and running inside a very short time. They have also called for more Coalition troops to be deployed in country. The American government has indicated their unwillingness to send more soldiers overseas. A Pentagon spokesman said, 'We've beaten back the Taliban threat. Now it's time to bring our boys home. There is no way this administration would send out more of our young men to become target practice for the insurgents.'*

He slept for an hour and woke, as the helo tilted to one the side and began to descend. He didn't need to ask the reason, a plume of smoke reached up into the sky from a burning truck. The pilot had descended to check for casualties. There were none. They climbed back into the sky and resumed their course, but within a short distance, there were more plumes of smoke, more signs of a recent attack.

He glanced at the pilot. "Any idea what's behind all this? They often make sneak attacks, small-scale stuff, but this is something else. It's like," he searched for the words, "it's like they're getting geared up to start another war."

The pilot grimaced. "Ever since they hit the refinery, the number of attacks has increased week on week. Where've you been?"

"Stuck in a goddamn hospital room and bored out of my brains."

The other man grunted. "Doesn't sound like a barrel of laughs. What about the nurses? Some of them are pretty enough, it makes the time go quicker."

"There were a couple I'd be more than happy to take back to my quarters, but most of them when I was there had big boots, and they grew moustaches."

"Ouch."

“Yeah, ouch is about right. So you’ve no ideas what’s going on?”

“Zilch. It came as a surprise. That’s one of the reasons the brass want you to liaise with the Afghan Army. It’s their country, and they’re sure to know more about it than we do.”

*Don’t count on it. When I talk to the Afghans, I always come away astonished they don’t have a clue about what’s going on.*

A minute later, the radio burst into life. “This is the Qala-e-Naw Police, on security detail at the refinery. We’re under attack from an unknown number of insurgents. We need immediate assistance from any units in the area. Please respond.”

“I’ll take it.” Nolan hit the transmit button before the pilot had time to speak. “This is Lieutenant Nolan, U.S. Navy, approximately thirty clicks out from your position. How many men do you have in place?”

A pause. “Four.”

*Jesus Christ!*

“Do you have a rough estimate of the number of hostiles?”

This time the pause was longer, and he heard the man speaking to someone else. There was also the sound of rifle and machine gun fire, and then an explosion.

*Hand grenade, perhaps, or it could be an RPG.*

The reply came two seconds later. “We believe there are around fifteen or twenty. They’re armed with light weapons and hand grenades.”

“No sign of any missiles?”

“Not so far. Can you help us? There’s no one else, no one answered our call, except you. If we don’t get help soon, they’ll wipe us all out, and destroy the equipment and tools in place to rebuild the plant.”

“We’ll do what we can. Right now, you have to hold them off any way you can. Nolan out.”

He ended the transmission and glanced at the pilot. “How long to get us to Qala-e-Naw?”

The man shook his head. “Now hold on there, buddy. My orders are to put you down close to that Afghan Army unit, and your orders are to liaise with them. That’s what I’m going to do. Those guys will have to take care of themselves.”

He stared at the man. “My orders are to submit a report on the logistical and military requirements of the Afghans in this region. I reckon

that attack is all the report they need. The T-men are on the rampage, again, and the one way to stop them will be the way we did it before. Hit them with everything we have. That's what I'm going to tell them. As far as I'm concerned, the job is done. You've seen the destruction we've flown over, and you heard that guy from Qala-e-Naw. If they don't get help soon, they're dead. We're all they have."

"It's not going to happen, Lieutenant. We stay on course."

Nolan's frustration increased. It was like being back in that hospital bed. Helpless, trapped by other people whose intentions may be good, but they were wrong, just plain wrong. The war was starting, and they were going the wrong way.

\* \* \*

Jim Highcloud gazed around at the surrounding landscape as the Humvee jolted its way along the crude track, heading for Qala-e-Naw. In the distance, he'd seen smoke. When the wind was in the right direction, he could swear there'd been gunfire. There was one thing he knew for certain. The security detail at the refinery would need plenty of shoring up if what he'd seen were anything to go by. He didn't need to catch sight of a Kalashnikov toting, turbaned and bearded insurgent to know the Taliban were once again on the warpath. The signs were all there, and it would take a fool to deny their existence. Someone was stirring them up. Somewhere a new leader had emerged, or even a new faction. They'd planted the seed of violence into minds that were always receptive to the way of the bomb and the bullet.

The driver, PFC Manuel Fernandez, swerved to avoid a patch of freshly dug earth on the track. "Jesus Christ, was that what I think it was?"

Highcloud nodded. He had his M249 machine gun cradled in his lap. It was that kind of area, a place where something bad could happen at any moment.

"Yeah, I reckon so. Manuel, they usually position those things as an ambush site. If I were you..."

He got nothing else out. The burst of machine gun fire came out of nowhere, and Highcloud pinpointed a small mound of earth and rocks

where they'd made a covered firing point. His eyes scanned the ground around them, and it was evident they wouldn't make it through. Not alive.

"Private, stop the vehicle. We'll have to deal with this on foot. There's no other way."

Bullets were pinging against the bodywork, and the driver turned his head to reply, but he failed to get the word out. The 7.62mm round took him in the head. It went all the way through and plastered blood and brains all over the interior of the vehicle. Highcloud made a grab for the wheel. The Humvee was lurching to the side, up on two wheels, and he made it by a whisker, steering to a stop less than a hundred meters from the enemy position.

The machine gun was on the driver side. Unseen, he exited the open passenger window and took cover behind the rear wheels. When he looked underneath the vehicle, he had a good view of the Taliban machine gun position. The crew of two men climbed out, assuming they'd killed both men in the American vehicle. Three more emerged from a foxhole nearby, and the two groups merged. Five Taliban fighters came toward him on their way to gloat over their victory. To pillage the bodies of their victims and take away weapons, food, and anything else they could carry.

*Not this time, motherfuckers.*

They were exultant, their cries of triumph echoing across the ground as they came nearer. He lowered the bipod of the M249, tucked the stock into his shoulder, and took aim. The belt was unused, full of 5.56mm steel-tipped rounds. The sustained rate of fire was one hundred rounds per minute, but in rapid fire, he could hurl out two hundred in a single minute; more than enough to deal with the gomers coming toward him, their faces smiling broadly, exposing blackened and rotting teeth.

He'd already chosen his mark, a position twenty-five meters from where he lay. He was under no illusions. Highcloud was a veteran of innumerable engagements in the Afghan and Iraqi theatres. If he didn't take them all down with a single burst, they'd scatter and find cover. In which case, they could come at him from both sides, and the outcome would be inevitable. He'd be dead.

They reached the spot he'd chosen, and he squeezed the trigger. Squeezed again, and kept on squeezing until the firing pin clicked on empty. They went down like strands of wheat before a combine. One moment



savoring their gory trophies, and the next, spinning to the ground as the hurricane of bullets tore into them. The last man was still dropping to the ground as Highcloud raced from underneath the Humvee, catapulted to his feet, and ran toward them, snatching out his pistol. He'd abandoned the machine gun when he had insufficient time to reload; yet he had to finish the job fast before any of the lightly wounded recovered enough to return fire.

He reached the huddle of torn and bloody bodies, and went to each one in turn. Two had survived, and both glared up at him with eyes projecting hatred at the American. He shot the first and reached the second just in time to stop him from bringing around his AK to open fire. The American put his boot on the barrel of the gun and looked down at the man. He was young; perhaps 'youth' would have described him best. So young, he'd yet to grow a beard. Sparse stubble adorned his chin, betraying his efforts to grow the desirable 'beard of the Prophet.' Yet he was old enough to have learned hatred and how to commit murder.

He hesitated a moment and said, "Sorry, buddy, I don't have a choice."

The bullet slammed into the man's head to drive into the brain, and the light faded from his eyes. It was done. Highcloud took a wary look around but saw no further sign of hostile activity. They were all dead. He walked back to the Humvee and lifted the body of Manuel Fernandez from the driver's seat, stowing it carefully in the back. With a heavy heart for the dead soldier, he took the wheel, started the engine, and continued his journey toward Qala-e-Naw.

He made half a klick before a short burst whistled in front of the vehicle, one bullet striking the hood. It did no damage. He assumed the shooter was part of the ambush party. A man who'd taken up a blocking position should the primary target evade both the IED and the machine gun. He rammed his foot down on the gas pedal and tore away from the area. Ten minutes later, he was driving into Qala-e-Naw, a scene of smoking devastation. This time, they'd made no mistakes. He was heading for what appeared to be the remaining defenders, blazing away at a bunch of men pouring on fire from the cover of a heap of rocks less than three hundred meters distant.

He cursed the fools for not demolishing an obvious place for attackers to hide behind. A second later an RPG missile hurtled toward him and

slammed into the hood. The Humvee leapt up in the air as if hit with a giant sledgehammer, coming to rest upside down. Amazed he'd survived, he tried to reach for his pistol, but his arm was trapped. Unable to move, he watched the attackers move in for the kill. He glanced at the Afghan security position, but the firing had stopped. He was alone, apart from the bodies. Only the dead would keep him company as the insurgents came nearer, and then his would be yet another body to put on the growing heap of corpses.

\* \* \*

He enjoyed a good start to the operation, the first he'd led without Lieutenant Nolan. A HALO drop to the east of Kut close to the Iranian border. The target was a notorious weapons smuggler, Sharif Jafar. Estimates put half the weaponry tearing the nation apart down to Jafar, and the planners had made the long overdue mission to put the enterprising Iraqi out of business. Permanently.

Will touched down on the LZ and stowed his 'chute as the rest of his Team landed. The modified MT1 Ram-Air canopy system was an older design, which the Navy had altered to improve its characteristics for their specialist operations. John-Wesley Ryder made a perfect landing a few meters away. Next, he saw Vince Merano hit the ground, alongside Brad Rose. In less than two minutes, nineteen men were ready to move out, weapons deployed and 'chutes stowed.

They moved off, and he took point. Following the path was a cinch using his NV goggles to pierce the pitch-black desert night. All it needed was the occasional glance at his wrist-mounted navigational computer to guide them along the preplanned route. It would take them wide of known enemy positions, and if all went to plan, they'd arrive at Jafar's compound outside Kut an hour before dawn. If not, okay, that's what they trained for.

They hiked for an hour, and then he held up a clenched fist. They dropped to the sand.

*Voices up ahead, it could be anything. Boys out herding goats or a bunch of wayward Muslim men, we've all seen it. They go drinking and whoring out in the desert, away from the prying gaze of the local Mullah or his spies. On the other hand, it could be something else, hostiles, Jafar's men.*

He tapped the transmit button.

“Vince, I need you up here.”

“On my way.”

Seconds later the sniper crawled up beside him, and Will pointed ahead. Together, they snaked across the sand, aiming for a gap between two dunes. The voices resolved into a bunch of ten men, sitting on the sand in a natural oasis. The water was a murky pool surrounded by a few rocks, and on the other side, a threadbare palm tree. The men were talking, laughing. Two were brewing coffee on a tiny spirit stove, the rest sharing a bottle. It looked like brandy, but it could have been something else alcoholic.

Vince tapped his shoulder, but he’d already seen them. Wooden crates piled in an untidy heap close to the palm tree. The sniper used his night scope to inspect them and turned to Will.

“Russian markings, I’ve seen ‘em before.”

“Weapons?”

“They’re not bringing food and medical supplies, that’s for sure. I recognized the Cyrillic stenciling on some of the boxes. C4 and RPGs. Missiles intended for anti-materiel use. My guess is the others are stuffed with Kalashnikovs and ammo.”

“Copy that. We have to take them down, but it’ll have to be silent. Our main target is Jafar, not his camel drivers, but we can’t let this lot disappear. There’s a pile of death and misery in that shipment. We’ll use the suppressors and hit them from both sides.”

“I’m ready when you are. What about Ryder?”

“What about him?”

“He could sneak around the far side and take out any sentries. He’ll be in position to stop any leakers or squirts once the shooting starts.”

It took a second to make up his mind. “We’ll do it.” He called them in. Ten seconds later, the first man appeared next to him. It was Ryder.

“John-Wesley, I want you on the opposite side of the oasis. Take out any sentries you come across, and hold your position to stop anyone who tries to run.”

“Copy that, Master Chief.”

“And Ryder, keep your head down when the shooting starts. You’ll be in the line of fire.”

He nodded, and then he'd gone. Even with Night Vision, he seemed to meld with the night. The man had an instinct for finding cover where even a mouse would have trouble staying out of sight. Bryce sent four men to the south of the oasis where they'd have a good field of fire. They'd be at ninety degrees to his main force, which would stop any blue on blue incidents.

*Except for Ryder, I'm worried about the weird native of New Orleans, but if he keeps his head down, he'll be safe. If not, well...I can't afford to lose him. Not the first time I lead a mission in the field.*

He clicked the transmit button.

"Heads up, people. Ryder will be somewhere to the east of that palm tree. If it's possible, put your shots to the north or the south."

A chorus of clicks came into his earpiece, acknowledging the warning. They were ready. He could see the four men in position to the south. At least, he could just about make out the dark barrels of their rifles. There'd be no machine guns, not for this. Even with a suppressor, they made too much noise. If they spooked Jafar, the mission would be a bust.

A final glance and he decided he'd done everything possible. A touch on the transmit button. "Do it."

The gunfire was devastating, and from the first second, men started to fall, but three of them quicker than the others started to run. Vince got two, but the third rolled into a shallow depression in the sand and vanished from sight. Men took aim and fired, reloaded, and fired again. Through it all, Vince's steady sniper fire took out as many of the enemy as the combined weight of assault rifle fire. They'd done enough, and the bodies of their enemies bore witness to the slaughter.

"Cease fire."

The silence was eerie. A faint wind blew across the desert, stirring the sand, until they heard footsteps. A man running, tripping, sliding, even at a distance the noise of his labored, panicked breathing reached them. They heard his loud shriek of terror when a dark shadow reared up before him. As if the sand itself had taken the form of a spook. Maybe he'd recognized the ghost as an American. Then again, maybe he was covering all his bases, but his shout was clear enough. "No, please, no!"

The arm rose, and the huge blade was visible, pale green in their goggles. The arm fell, and the blade disappeared into the man's body.

Green, viscous liquid flowed from the place where the blade had entered. It soaked his green robes, dripping down to the green sand. Bryce heard a single word in his earpiece. "Clear."

Ryder stared at them for a moment, waved once, and started toward them. They could take him at his word. If a hostile still lived, he'd have been hunting him down. Ryder was a fanatic about killing.

"Good work, John-Wesley."

A pause. "And when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee, thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them. Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor show mercy unto them."

Will smiled to himself. The SEAL was a fanatic about something else, religion, Christianity, the bible, mixed in with a dash of Voodoo. Not unexpected in a man rooted in the bayous of Louisiana and reared in New Orleans. He took his bible seriously. Ryder was always ready to justify a killing with a suitable quotation. He took his mind to more pressing matters. They had a job to do, and the one-sided battle was an interruption to a tight schedule.

"That was good shooting. First, we sanitize the area and hide the bodies so people won't notice them. At least, not till we've been and gone. Find a shallow depression, toss them in, and cover it with sand."

Zeke Murray, their explosives and technical wizard, was inspecting the mechanism of his HK-416 for sand and dust. He looked up. "What about the ordnance? If we leave it here, it'll give open season for any gomer who happens along."

"If you rig it for destruction, it'll sound the alarm for ten clicks in every direction."

"Unless I booby trap it. The first insurgent who comes along to help himself will get a big surprise. An early ticket to Paradise."

"Go ahead. That'll take care of the problem. As soon as we're done here, we move out." He checked his wristwatch and cursed, "We're not gonna make it. Not all the way to Jafar's compound before dawn. Shit, we'll have to camp out here and go in tonight."

Zeke smiled. "Don't worry about it, Master Sergeant. You're doing a great job, and besides, we could all do with a rest."

"Out here in the fucking desert?"

Murray winced. "Okay, I was a tad optimistic. I'll go take a look at those crates."

Will looked around for PO3 Carol Nicolescu. His parents hailed from Romania, and the first name had given him the occasional problem. He was a squad machine gunner, one of two. He carried a SAW, Squad Automatic Weapon, an M249. He hadn't needed his weapon for the brief attack, and instead, Zeke had entrusted him with the encrypted satellite radio. He saw the man a few meters away, dragging a body of one of the first men to fall.

"Carol, I need you to contact base. I'll call this in and advise them of the delay. Get Admiral Jacks on the horn so I can give him the good news."

Nicolescu took the radio from his pack and switched it on. Connection was quick, and two minutes later, he heard the voice of Vice-Admiral Jacks.

"Sir, this is Master Chief Bryce. You wanted me to call in if we hit any problems. Well, okay, we've hit one."

It sounded as if the Admiral was thinking of something else, which surprised him. Jacks kept his eye on the ball where his men in the field were concerned. "Master Chief, it's good to hear from you. How serious is your problem?"

"Just a delay, Admiral, twenty-four hours. We ran into a bunch of enemy fighters and had to deal with them. The target was not alerted, so we're good. We'll lay up through the day, and I'll take them into the target's compound after dark tomorrow."

He heard a sigh. "I want you to put the next senior man in charge, and he'll lead them in. I have another operation for you, Master Chief, and this one takes precedence over everything. You'll need four of your best men. We have a serious situation in Afghanistan."

*Jesus Christ, we've just come from Afghanistan.*

"How serious, Sir?"

"At the least, a war. At worst, a nuclear exchange."

"That's serious."

"Yeah. Listen up, I'm sending an MH-60 helo to pick you up, courtesy of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment."

*He means the Night Stalkers, the Army Spec Ops outfit that navigates the night skies over enemy territory in modified Black Hawks. Even so...*

"Admiral, they're good and quiet, but even those guys make a noise. It could alert Jafar that we're in the area."

“That’s of secondary importance, Master Chief. I need you out of there, ASAP. And there’s a C-17 on the tarmac at Baghdad International waiting to get you in the air.”

“It’s that serious?”

“More. We have two nations, India and Pakistan, about to declare war on each other. In the middle, there is an Afghan they blame for murdering a bunch of school kids and starting the whole thing off. Your mission is straightforward. You locate this man, and bring him back, dead or alive. I’ll give you the details when you’re in the air.”

“Yes, Sir, I understand.” He didn’t understand at all. They were about to hit a sensitive target, one that would make a difference.

*Why can’t he pull someone else out to do this other job? There is another alternative. They call it a Hellfire missile.*

Jacks answered before he asked the question. “Master Chief, I know what you’re thinking. Why not hit him with a missile launched from a drone? And why you?”

“Yessir.”

“We can’t use a missile because the parties concerned would go ape, the Paks especially. They’d see it as gunboat diplomacy; kill a Muslim without giving him time to explain. It’s a crazy situation. The Indians want him dead, period. The Paks don’t. As for the other part, why you, it’s because you can put together a four-man fireteam that’s the best in the business. For this job, we need the best, bar none.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“It’s the truth. There’s something else, you...” He stopped, “Forget I said that. Send your men on to Kut, and pull back five clicks to your LZ. By the time you arrive, they’ll be waiting for you. I’ll call you when you’re aboard the C-17 and en route to Afghanistan. Jacks out.”

Nicolescu regarded him with an expression of surprise. “Did I hear that right, Master Chief? They’re recalling some of the men?”

He nodded. “Me and three others. I’ll be taking Vince, John-Wesley, and Brad Rose.”

“Why them?”

*Because when it comes to killing, they’re the best.*

“That’s my decision, Carol. Pack the radio, and get ready to move out.” He hit the transmit button. “Merano, Ryder, Rose, report to me, on the

double.”

He almost smiled when he saw their faces. “Afghanistan,” Rose moaned, “Dammit, Master Chief, we just left. What’re we going there for, to start a war?”

*You couldn’t be further from the truth.*

“To stop a war, Brad. I’ll fill you in later. We’re returning to the LZ.”

He strolled over to the oasis and noted the shallow pool holding the water had grown rough, as the wind picked up and churned the smooth surface into a ragged turbulence. Before he reached Zeke, it crossed his mind that someone, somewhere was sending him a message. He was heading into the teeth of a storm, and the chances of reaching a safe port were not good.

“Zeke, I need a word.”

He straightened. “I’m about done, Master Chief. What is it?”

“I’m leaving, with three of the men. Change of plans.”

“You’re shittin’ me.”

“Nope. That means you’re in charge. I’m going with Brad, John-Wesley, and Vince back to the LZ for the pickup. You’re to head on to Kut and complete the operation. Any questions?”

“Just one. Which dumb shit decided to mess with us?”

“Vice-Admiral Jacks.” He grinned at Zeke's embarrassment.

“I didn’t mean...”

“I know what you meant, and you could be right. Time will tell, but right now, we have some ground to cover. So long, Zeke, and good luck.”

They shook hands. “Good luck, Will. Whatever you’re up to, give ‘em hell.”

“Always do.”

Two hours later, he was leading his men up the ramp of a C-17, with the four huge engines already idling, and the crew chief gesturing for them to hurry. They found seats in the echoing, vibrating, and shaking hold, sharing some of the space with a consignment of Humvees. The aircraft began to taxi while the ramp was still halfway up, and he glanced at the crew chief.

“What’s the rush? Anyone would think we were in the middle of a war.”



The man gave him a strange look. "You guys ain't been listening to the news broadcasts the past twenty-four hours?"

"No, we've been busy. No time."

"Gotcha. If I were you, I'd take the time."

"Why?"

"The war. If it isn't on yet, it's mighty close."

\* \* \*

The MH6 Little Bird stayed on its heading for the rendezvous with the Afghan Army. Nolan felt his frustration growing. The action was a few kilometers to the north, yet they were sliding past. Heading for some stupid meeting with soldiers who would already know what they faced. An overwhelming enemy force, well armed, and out for blood. He tried again.

"Pilot, for the last time, this is wrong. There's a battle raging not far away, and guys calling us the help. We have to do something. We can't fly past as if nothing had happened. You have to change course."

He didn't even turn his head but kept his gaze fixed on the terrain ahead of them. "I already told you, Lieutenant, that's a negative. I have my orders, and you have your orders. We go on."

"You're happy to see those men die?"

"It's not my business who lives or who dies. I have a job to do."

He had no other way. Nolan carried two weapons, a sidearm, a Sig Sauer P226, and the M-16 they'd lent him back at Bagram. It was long, much longer than his stubby MP7 that disappeared when he went into hospital. The Sig wasn't long. He reached a hand down, pulled it from the holster, and pointed the barrel at the pilot. "Change course. We're going to Qala-e-Naw."

The man sighed. "How many more times do I have to tell you?" Then he glanced aside and stiffened, "You're kidding me. Are you threatening me with that gun?"

"I'm ordering you to change course."

"If I don't?"

"I don't want to kill you. I'll put a bullet in your leg, and you'll have no choice but to land."

"In which case, you won't have a pilot."

“I can fly this thing. Don’t make me do it, pal. You know the heading. Turn her around, and let’s go help out those guys.”

Without a word, he adjusted the controls. The nose of the McDonnell Douglas helo swung around to point to the northeast. They flew on for several minutes before the pilot spoke.

“There’s something you haven’t thought of. We haven’t heard a thing from the defenders for some time. They could all be dead.”

“In which case, we can do something about the men who killed them.”

“Take on the Taliban with this thing? You know those guys have rockets, RPGs, surface-to-air missiles?”

“I know. You’ve got an M230 chaingun mounted above the port skid, and what looks like a rocket pod above the starboard skid. Enough to do a lot of damage.”

“If they don’t shoot us down,” the pilot murmured.

Nolan ignored him and prepared his M-16 for use. He had one full clip loaded in the breech and four more in his harness. If enemy fire forced them down, he had something with which to fight. A few minutes later, the smoke from the battle around the refinery came into view. As did the rack of the upturn Humvee, close to the bodies of several men in uniform, obviously the cops who’d been guarding the place.

He pointed to the pile of rocks where men were already emerging. They heard the Little Bird approaching and pointed up at the sky. Every man blazed away with his assault rifle, and Nolan said two words; “Roast them.”

The pilot looked like he was about to argue, maybe wait for further target identification. The hesitation was momentary, and then he thought better of it. When men are blazing away at you with semi-automatic rifles, it’s about the best target identification known to man. You don’t need IFF, Identification of Friend or Foe. He squeezed the trigger, and the motor of the M230 chaingun came to life. The tiny helicopter shook as an enormous quantity of 30mm rounds ripped into the men below. The effect was devastating.

Of the large group of Talibs, a mere half-dozen survived the shattering burst. They raced back toward the shelter of the rocks, and the helo pilot sent a pair of rockets after them for good measure. They needed to know how many had survived, and it couldn’t be done while they were in the air.

“We have to land, right now. Put her down by the wrecked Humvee.”

“No way! I’m not putting down there. The place is crawling with hostiles. Up here were safe. Down there, we’re dead meat.”

“I don’t give a shit what we are. I’m going down to look for survivors, theirs and ours. Ours are going to need help. Theirs will need killing.”

“Forget it. The minute the skids touched the ground, we’ll take a rocket up the ass. I’m staying aloft.”

The guy had a point, and yet there could be people down there who needed help. He persuaded him to land beside the Humvee, using the metal body as cover from the incoming fire. The plan was to leap out while the helo was close to the ground. The pilot would hover at a safe height and give him some cover with his minigun.

The Little Bird descended until they were a hundred meters off the ground. Without warning, the pilot’s worst fears were realized. The smoke trail of a rocket flared out from wreckage the shooter was using as a hide and impacted on the tail boom. Immediately, warning alarms sounded, the fuselage tipped and began to upend, while the pilot struggled to prevent a crash landing.

“We’re going in! Tighten your straps and brace for impact!”

The fuselage spun faster and faster. When it hit the ground, all that saved them was a combination of momentum and the rotor smashing into the ground to absorb some of the impact. They rolled over three times, until the wreckage of what had once been a proud aircraft came to a stop.

Nolan unstrapped and reached for the pilot in case he needed help. He was beyond help. His head hung at an unnatural angle to his body, and it was obvious he was dead. All that was left to do was to recover the body, although right now he had other priorities. They’d crashed in the center of a firefight, and there was at least one hostile still alive, the missile shooter.

He darted away from the wreckage, keeping low to avoid enemy fire. He managed no more than a few meters when a massive explosion burst from behind. The helo he’d just left had taken another hit from an RPG missile, and if there’d been any doubt before about the extent of the damage, the second hit dispelled it. It was no longer a crashed helo. It had become a twisted heap of aluminum and Perspex. Somewhere inside was the body of the dead pilot, and it would need a squad of engineers to extract it.

He put it behind him and raced toward where he estimated the missile had launched. Gunfire spat out from the rocks, and he now knew there were other Taliban fighters still alive, and still fighting. Nolan zigzagged away, rolled across the ground, and as bullets hissed overhead, snaked toward the position of the missile shooter. He was close, and the man understood his danger. He dropped his launcher, stood up, and fired a long burst from his assault rifle.

It was poor shooting, and the SEAL made a difficult target, lying prone, with his head toward the enemy. The man emptied the magazine and snatched out the empty one to replace it. It was too tempting a target to ignore, and Nolan took him down with a two-shot tap. Then he crawled toward the rocks. There were still two men there, if not more, and they had at least one working machine gun. Maybe even another RPG. Until he'd neutralized them, he wasn't going anywhere.

It was at that moment he heard an aircraft engine. About three clicks away, a light aircraft was descending from the sky, backlit by the sun. Somehow, he knew the maniac was about to attempt a landing, and he had to warn him off. His gaze fell on the security hut. There'd be a radio inside. After all, they'd transmitted the original SOS he'd picked up in the Little Bird. He made it in a fast crawl, staying below the line of fire, and darted through the door as bullets punched holes in the thin, aluminum walls.

The radio was still in one piece, an old, battered and scratched Yaesu, but it would be enough. He snatched the microphone off the table, and staying low called the incoming aircraft on the guard frequency.

"This is Qala-e-Naw, calling an identified Cessna on final approach. Abort your landing. I say again, abort your landing! We're under attack from an unknown number of insurgents. Until the situation is resolved, there's no question of attempting any kind of a landing. Turnaround and head back to where you came from. If you are low on fuel, I suggest you make for Herat, and wait there for further news."

The silence mocked him. For some reason, the aircraft refused to reply or even acknowledge the transmission. It occurred to him his radio may be broken, or even the set in the aircraft may not be working. Light aircraft in this region were notorious for the poor state of repairs. He tried twice more, but still there was nothing. Out of options, he did the one thing he could do,

and went outside to cover the landing. He found a tiny patch of cover in the flat field. The foxhole previously occupied by the missile shooter.

Now, all that remained was the launcher he'd dropped when he came out to kill him. The body of the man he'd shot lay two meters away, and he ignored it. The Cessna dropped lower and lower, and he held his breath. So far, the Talibs hadn't started shooting. He wondered if they'd gone away, or they were waiting for a juicy target.

\* \* \*

Brennan throttled back, dropped his flaps to maximum to allow for a short field landing, and scanned the ground below. There'd been a battle in this place, and recently. The wreckage of a small helicopter was on fire, sending up plumes of smoke. There were also bodies. He counted at least half a dozen. He wasn't happy, although it looked as if the battle was over. He looked at the men behind.

"Make sure you strap in. We're going in for a hard landing. The field's been shot up pretty bad, but there's enough for us to get down."

He ignored the chorus of protests, pushed the column to lower the nose, and dropped lower. In front of him, he could see a tiny, flat piece of field less than a hundred meters long. It should be enough, and he aimed at the edge of the field. At the last moment, he noticed Father David was praying, and this time it was the rosary, as he fingered his beads.

"You'd better say one for all of us, Father. We may need it."

"We are in God's hands, Mr. Brennan. If it is His will, we will survive."

"And if it isn't His will?"

Clark didn't answer. Oz flared in for a landing, and as the three wheels of the tricycle undercarriage touched solid ground, he knew he'd made a mistake. The shooting started, and bullets punched holes in the fuselage behind him. He felt a stab of pain as something punched him hard in the shoulder, and he lost all feeling to his right arm. The Cessna was still racing along the field, and the numbness extended all the way down the right side of his body. He could use the left toe brake, but not the one on the right. He shouted at Father David, "Quit the praying, and put your foot on that pedal. Do it now fuck's sake, or were all gonna die!"

The priest twisted around in the seat, moved his foot the right brake pedal. "Now?"

"Now!"

Both men stamped on the pedals, and Oz cut the engine. It wasn't enough. Their speed came off, yet they were still plunging toward the end of the field. The nosewheel abruptly sunk into a deep rut, and the entire fuselage reared up as if it were about to tip over. The kinetic force of motion over impact speed caused the Cessna to swing around, and it almost ran back the way they come before it came to a stop.

The priest took charge, flung open the door, and bellowed at the men in a voice that rang with authority to exit the aircraft and find cover. Bullets were still peppering around them when he saw the last of them out the door and dragged Oz outside. They threw themselves to the ground and looked for the enemy. It wasn't difficult to see them. Puffs of smoke came from behind the rocks, and he guessed they were out of range. It was open ground all the way, and besides, the best he could come up with was a big old Colt 1911. The gun was vintage, yet as reliable and accurate as the day it emerged from the factory. Which meant beyond about thirty meters would be hard to hit with any accuracy.

"Who's that?" the priest asked him.

Brennan looked up, wincing as a stab of pain from his shoulder wound tore through him. He dragged himself around to look in the direction the man was pointing, and to his astonishment saw an American soldier charging down the enemy. He had an M-16 in his right hand and an automatic pistol in the other, firing from the hip as he ran. It was an incredible sight, and he felt a surge of pride at the bravery of his fellow countryman. Several bullets struck him as he ran, but his armored vest was enough to prevent serious injury. At the last moment, seeing they were about to be overrun by the infidel madman, two Talibs jumped to their feet to meet him head-on.

The end was almost preordained. They opened fire, missed, and corrected their aim. Then the American pumped several shots into the group, even as their bullets slammed into his vest. They wore no vests, and they went down at the last moment. They were eyeball-to-eyeball with their enemy, one short meter from Nolan and his smoking weapons. The soldier stood over them, delivered a final shot into each of the victims, and scooped

up their rifles. Oz watched him, and he came out with a handful of spare magazines. Then he turned and started walking toward them.

“Nolan! Jesus fucking Christ, by all the saints, I don’t believe it.” He ignored the Jesuit’s frown, “We’re saved.”

The frown deepened, but Clark made no further comment about his profanity. They watched the SEAL as he approached, and then his jaw dropped.

“Oz! I might have known it would take a lunatic to make that landing. Why didn’t you answer my radio call?”

“I’ve got a problem with the electronics. The radio is not working right now.” He started toward him and then stopped, the right side of his body refusing to obey his commands.

“What is it? Have you been hit?”

“Yeah, bummer. Just a scratch, it’s...”

He passed out. The priest grabbed him as he fell. The two men looked closely at the wound, and Clark pursed his lips. “It’s bad, very bad. He’s still losing blood, and I’ll do my best to stop it, but the bullet tore right into him. My best guess is his body is suffering some kind of shock, and he’ll need a period of rest and recuperation to recover, as well as a few stitches and antibiotics, of course. Then, there could be debris in the wound, which is another problem. When the examining surgeon...”

Nolan reached over and grabbed his arm. “Listen, whoever you are, we’re in the middle of a hot zone. There’re no surgeons, no hospitals, no nothing. The best we can do is get him out of here before more of them turn up.”

“I am Father David Clark, and can you fly that aircraft? He doesn’t look in any state to do anything, leastwise get us off the ground.”

“I can fly. Fix up that wound, and I’ll start rounding up those guys who came in with you. I’ll get you all out and call in the nearest Army unit to come in and cleanse the place. They’ll need to establish a garrison as well, if they’re ever going to get this mess cleared up. It looks to me like the Taliban are about to start a war.”

The priest pulled out a clean handkerchief from inside his coat, folded it into a pad, and pushed it over the wound. Without looking up, he said, “I will be leaving. They sent me here to do a job, and I won’t leave until I’m finished.”

“You stay here and you won’t ever leave, period. Who sent you?”

A pause. “I work in the Vatican.”

Nolan looked up in surprise. “The Vatican? You’re a long way from home.”

The priest didn’t stop working to staunch the flow of blood. “I go where the Holy Father sends me. It’s not widely known, but inside the town of Qala-e-Naw, there’s a small group of Christians. They secretly converted when the refinery was first built several years ago, and no one has ministered to them for a long time. That’s why I’m here, to help them with any problems they have, and to remind them that their Pope is aware of their existence.”

Nolan chuckled. “Christian Afghans, who’d have believed it. So you’re telling me the Pope has suddenly taken an interest in these people?”

“He has.” The priest finished binding the dressing and removed his hand. He waited for a few seconds. The blood loss had slowed to a slight trickle, “That should do it. Yes, the Holy Father has taken a personal interest in this matter, an oasis of Christianity in the middle of the Islamic desert. Besides, there's something else I have to do."

“You can forget it for now. You're coming back with me. If you don’t get on that plane, you won’t survive another twenty-four hours.”

The priest's expression changed, and he looked angry. It passed a moment later, and he gave a reluctant nod. “Perhaps you're right. I have another mission to carry out, more important. If I fail, the Holy Father will not be pleased.”

“He’ll get over it.” Nolan was staring around into the distance. He was certain he’d seen movement about two clicks away. They had little time, and he mentally promised himself to get the aircraft off the ground in the next ten minutes.

“I doubt it.”

“You doubt it? How the hell would you know? They’re just a few ragheads, and the Vatican has hundreds of millions of people to minister to.” He grinned, “I mean, did he tell you personally? Something like, ‘Father David, if you don’t go see these folks, I’m gonna be real annoyed.’”

A pause. His eyes narrowed. “Something like that.”

“Something like that? You know him?”



This time the pause was longer. “As a matter of fact, yes. We’re related through my grandfather. He emigrated from Sicily to the U.S. and brought up his family there.”

“Clark doesn’t sound Sicilian.”

“No, he changed the family name when they reached Ellis Island, thought it would be better to have an American-sounding name.” He shrugged, as if to say none of it was of any importance, “Although I prefer to keep my relationship to the Holy Father under wraps. I’ve said too much already.”

It stopped him dead. “You’re serious? You really are related to the Pope?”

“I’m serious, yes.”

“Jesus Christ. You don’t even sound Italian.” The priest gave him an odd look, something between fear and anger, but he ignored it, “Give me a hand to get Oz inside the aircraft. I’ll round up those men, and we’re getting out of here.”

They lifted him between them and made him comfortable behind the pilot’s seat. Father David stayed with him, and he ran to where the engineers were cowering. “Get in the plane. We’re leaving. There’re more hostiles coming in. They’ll be here inside of a few minutes.”

They didn’t need him to tell them twice. The men leapt to their feet, ran to the door of the Cessna, and scrambled aboard. Nolan took a last look around and spotted the upturned Humvee. Another glance at the oncoming insurgents told him he didn’t have time to check it out. He ran across to it, anyway. A man was lying underneath, half in and half out of the driver’s seat. He felt a jolt of recognition. It was as if fate had ordained they would all meet in this place. The question was, had fate ordained they’d ever get out of it? He dragged Jim Hightower from the wreckage and slung the big Indian over his shoulder. Then he jogged to the aircraft, and hands reached out to get him inside.

He could see them more clearly, less than one kilometer away. He vaulted through the door, slammed it shut, and started the engine. He took several minutes to taxi back down the rough ground, but when he was satisfied, he clicked on the rudder, stamped on the starboard brake, and brought the Cessna into wind. Then he slammed the throttle all the way to the stops, and they picked up speed.

At the last moment, he eased back on the stick, and the laden aircraft left the ground. A few shots came at them from the hostile shooters, although at first, none came near. Then a further fusillade arced toward them. Someone had opened up with a machine gun. Holes appeared in the tailplane, and he could see damage to the control surfaces. He'd got off the ground, but getting back down would be interesting.

He flew low, refusing to sacrifice speed for height, until they were clear of the immediate threat. It was time to decide the next move, and he was still trying to work out where to land when Oz Brennan groaned and came back to consciousness.

"Damn, that hurt. I'd forgotten what it was like to take a bullet. Is that you flying this thing, Nolan?"

"Yep. It's good to hear you're okay. Hey, who is that lying across the seat behind me? It looks like...No!"

"You got it. You remember Jim said he was going to the refinery? It almost killed him."

"Will he live?"

"It's concussion, I'm sure," the priest answered, "I've looked for any sign of a wound, but apart from a few cuts and bruises, he should be okay. He must have banged his head when the jeep overturned."

Brennan nodded. "That's good. I heard shooting earlier, someone shooting at my plane. Did we take any damage?"

Nolan glanced behind and assessed the damage. "They hit the tailplane. It looks like a colander, so it's gonna be kinda hairy putting her down."

"You'll have to take her back to Chaman," Oz said right away, "We can fix her up there. I have spares and equipment in the shop next to the office."

Nolan hesitated, but it was for a second. Afghanistan was erupting into a shooting war, and he was about to fly across the border into Pakistan. His outfit, the U.S. Navy SEALs, would soon need every man to quell the violence. Then again, Oz needed to go home, needed to get his plane home.

"I'll fly her back to Chaman for you, and we'll ask Father Clark to call for divine intervention to help us land. Then I have to leave. I'll find a way to get back over the border and report back to SOCOM in Bagram."

He got no reply, and when he looked around, Oz had fallen unconscious again. “He’ll be okay,” the priest told him, “This is normal after the shock of a wound, and the subsequent blood loss. A few hours’ rest and a transfusion, or at the very least, a saline drip to help him recover the body’s fluids, and he’ll start to mend.”

“I hear you.”

They flew on and crossed the border into Pakistan without incident. At one stage, a Pakistani MIG 29 roared past them, and the airframe shook with the force of the slipstream. The pilot waved back at him, and it was obvious the Cessna Caravan was no stranger to him. No one asked the question, what if it had been a pilot who was new to the area? One who didn’t recognize Brennan’s plane and couldn’t raise them on the radio. They didn’t ask, because they didn’t want to know the answer.

A gust of wind caught the fuselage as he lined up for final approach at Chaman. It would be a tough one with the holes in the tailplane. He couldn’t know how the control surfaces would react when they got lower. Then there was the possibility of damage to the rods and cables that connected to the controls in the cockpit. There was one way to find out.

He shouted over the roar of the engine, but they strained to hear his voice above the noise.

“Strap in. We’re about to land.”

“Can we make it?” the Jesuit asked. He sounded irritated, which surprised Nolan. He’d have thought the priest would have already made his peace with his God. If not God, with God’s representative on earth. Yet there was something unexpected in his voice. Like fear.

*Why isn't he praying, instead of asking me questions I don't have the answer to? Especially when you have the Pope as a relative?*

“Ask your boss.”

## Chapter Three

*CNN International News: In early trading, shares in Afgas were marked down to less than fifty percent of the price they fetched before the explosion that destroyed their Qala-e-Naw refinery. Chief Executive and major shareholder Adnan Kovac said the company was rock solid, and plans were in hand to strengthen their position in the energy industry. His words were, 'Watch this space. Afgas is on the brink of success in a major new program, and the company stock is set to skyrocket.' The markets are watching the performance of Afgas with interest, and so far, no one can see how they can bounce back from losing their natural gas refinery.*

Akram Khan was content. The contract his brother had arranged for him came at a good time. His fortunes were on the wane, his bank account empty, and his men deserting him. He'd gambled everything on a Taliban victory over the NATO Coalition, and his gamble had failed. Most of the investments he'd made, purchasing stolen assets from former wealthy land and factory owners, had failed when the government in Kabul returned them to their former owners. Men left him after the rewards became few and far between, the result he was reduced to little more than forty men; although they were the best of the bunch, forty of the toughest, cruelest, and most sadistic fighters in the country.

He'd begun the campaign by visiting those few Taliban commanders who still remembered the days when Akram Khan had been a man to fear. By promising millions of dollars after they'd achieved their objective, he'd persuaded them to begin a new campaign of violence. Not that persuading the Taliban to commit acts of violence was ever a problem. It was more a question of pointing them in the right direction. The country was already in fear, expecting fresh attacks, and he knew the warband leaders wouldn't disappoint. The time had come to put into effect the next stage. His brother, Kabir Khan, had outlined the plan. He couldn't help but admire what he had to say.

When the country faced the threat of a new war, there'd be opportunities for a man like him. He'd no idea why the principal wanted a war. Neither did he give a damn. War meant profit and reputation. A time

when men like him could rebuild their flagging fortunes. Carve out small empires inside a nation riven by increased turmoil. If everything went to plan, they'd soon face the threat of attack from outside. His brother had explained that Kabul's allies, the NATO Coalition and their respective governments, would pour troops into the country and vast sums of cash.

This would be his time. Akram Khan would be a force to be reckoned with once more. Once again, men would fear him, and fear his name. First, he had a mission to complete, one that would light a fire and send the entire continent plunging into chaos. Their target was the junior school in Indian Kashmir, a region long disputed by Pakistan. When the attack on the sleepy town was known, it would throw petrol on the fire. Nation would threaten nation, and troops would mobilize, threatening war. The Afghan government and NATO would throw troops and money at the problem, as they always did, and Kabir would make certain he and his brother were amongst the principal recipients.

*All for a few, cleverly targeted attacks, followed by a bunch of dead kids lying in the rubble of their ruined school, what does it matter? They are Hindus, not even Muslims. Who will care? No one.*

He was very mistaken.

\* \* \*

He dropped lower, crossing the edge of the field before he flared for a landing. It wasn't entirely successful. The tailplane was doing all manner of weird things. The aircraft wobbled alarmingly when he moved the controls. Someone in the back cried out in alarm. He pushed the nose down and fought to correct as the tailplane reared up, applied a touch of throttle, brought the tail down again, and cut the engine.

The Cessna bumped down onto the strip, rolled to the end and into the rough ground. It stopped when the wheels plowed into a pit of soft sand, and a babble of voices came to him from back in the cabin. He made out the voice of one of the engineers sitting in the seat behind him.

"Nolan, this is all very well, but our orders are to report back to our headquarters in Kabul if things go wrong at Qala-e-Naw. Time is money, pal, and they'll want us for reassignment. When do we take-off again?"

He heard a loud chuckle and recognized Jim Highcloud's voice.

*Good, he's conscious. That's promising.*

"My friend, consider yourself lucky to be alive. That landing was a miracle. You should thank the man who got us down. Or maybe the priest, perhaps someone listened to his prayers."

"That's as maybe, but we've got work to do. We have to get back."

"What we need," Nolan growled, "is to get you all outside and turn the aircraft around so we can get the wheels back on the strip. If it settles into this soft sand, we're gonna have even more problems."

"Us?" It was the same voice, "We're paying passengers. We're not laborers."

"It's that or you can get the bus back to Kabul. You'll have to share it with the chickens and goats. If you think that's bad, there'll also be a bunch of folks who stink even worse than their animals."

Muttering protests, they climbed out and began heaving on the tail boom to swing it around. Nolan restarted the engine and gunned the revs to jerk the Cessna into motion. At the same time, they tugged and pushed to extract the wheels from the soft sand. It took almost a half hour before the sweating, sand-covered men could step back and watch the aircraft taxi back to the stand, outside Oz's office and shop. Amy was watching and waiting. She ran to help as they lifted Brennan from the cabin and carried him inside to lay him on the couch.

She eyed Nolan warily. "What happened?"

He explained about the skirmish at Qala-e-Naw, and how Oz had been hit during the landing. "My helicopter got hit and went down. The pilot's still in the wreckage."

She heard the bitterness in his voice. "I'm so sorry, but let me attend to Oz first. Is his wound bad?"

Father David took over and talked to her in a manner that left no doubt he had previous experience of battlefield wounds. He described what he'd done, and what needed to be done. She nodded and raced from the room, returning a minute later with a large aluminum flight case. When she opened it, she had bags of saline, a folding stand, and a good supply of antibiotics.

She saw their glance. "Medicine is primitive in this part of the world. I got this stuff in case we ever needed it."

Clark nodded his approval. "Do you want me to set up the drip?"

“I’ll do it.”

The answer came so fast it was obvious she was much more than Brennan’s administrator. Clark smiled, and they left her to it. Outside, Highcloud was sitting on the stoop, feeding rounds into the magazine of his pistol. He glanced around as they emerged.

“How is he?”

“He’ll live. What about you, Jim? You’re the last person I expected to see in that place.”

He smiled. “You, too. What’re we gonna do now? We’re stuck in the middle of nowhere, and I need to report in.”

“First, we talk to Amy and whistle up some chow. Then we fix the damage to the plane. A few hours’ work and it’ll be ready to fly again, and I can take you back to Kabul along with the other guys. We should be off the ground by late afternoon.”

“Suits me.”

Amy was busy working on Brennan, but the priest proved to have another talent. Inside of thirty minutes, he’d produced plates of hot food for breakfast, with a gallon of fresh brewed coffee. They ate outside, and when they were done, he cleared away while the two SEALs went to work on the aircraft. There was ample aluminum in the shop and metal shears to cut it to shape. When each patch was ready, Highcloud drilled holes around the edges and riveted the new metal to cover the damage. Aerodynamically it left a lot to be desired, but it would be possible to fly the plane without tipping over on takeoff or landing.

When the last patch was in place, three hours had elapsed, but Nolan wasn’t satisfied. “I’ll take a look at that radio. There’s a manual I noticed on the bench, and if some hotshot interceptor pilot comes to give us the once over, I want to be able to convince him we’re the good guys. It’s a one-man job, so I suggest you find some gas and fill up the tanks.”

“Sounds good to me.”

It was late afternoon by the time they were done. The radio was more of a problem than he’d realized, and he spent several hours unsoldering a tiny chip from the circuit board, replacing it with another he’d found in a heap of broken radio equipment lying in the corner of the shop. Jim had gassed up the tanks and gone back inside to check on Oz. He walked back, tired, hungry, and weary. Inside the office, they were sitting around the

radio, listening to a new broadcast. Their faces were stretched with disbelief, and in some cases, fear.

He seated himself on a rickety office chair and listened to what they were saying. The situation inside Afghanistan wasn't bad. It was worse, much worse.

\* \* \*

While Nolan was cutting chunks of aluminum to make repairs, Akram Khan was working a contract, another mission of destruction. With twenty of his men hidden in the back of a livestock truck, they'd crossed from Afghanistan into Pakistan. After following a narrow smugglers trail through the mountains, they arrived inside Indian controlled Kashmir, the destination a village eighty kilometers west of Srinagar. The plan was to attack the village school, kill everyone they could find inside, children and teachers, and finish the job with explosives to destroy the building.

The best part of the plot was the two Taliban fighters he'd brought along, one Afghan, the other Pakistani. They were Shaheeds, persuaded to die for Allah and a quick journey to Paradise. There would also be a sizable bounty for each of their families. Khan's plan was to leave ample evidence that the killings were a revenge attack. It would have all the hallmarks of an attack carried out by a combined force of Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. An attack made to revenge the insults to their Muslim brothers in Indian Kashmir. He'd even filmed the two Shaheeds stating their deadly purpose and posted it on the Internet. After the attack, a quick phone call would alert the media to its existence.

Everything went to plan. His men ran around the school, rifles on full auto, bullets spitting from the muzzles, and cutting down the intended targets. When the building was awash with the blood of the innocents, the Shaheeds went about their deadly task. Their job was to finish any survivors and reduce the school to rubble. Khan and his men were already driving away when they heard the blast. He took out his phone and made the call. Now the world would swallow the story he'd planted. They grinned, knowing what he was doing. Soon, it would be war. They would be rich. They were still nodding and smiling to each other, cracking jokes, when one man said, "Where is Abbas?"



They stared around in the gloom of the truck and came up blank. In the front passenger seat, Khan jerked his head around. "What do you mean, where is Abbas? He must be in the truck."

They stared at each other, and in the silence the awful truth descended on them. They'd left Abbas Fatemi behind. Already, they could hear the scream of sirens, and then an Indian Army infantry carrier raced past them, heading toward the scene of the attack. Khan knew if they took him alive, it would all be over. The Indians would force the truth out of him. Extract under torture the names of the men who'd planned and carried out the attack. The names would include Kabir Khan, the Deputy Defense Minister, who'd given his blessing to the operation. They would also have the name of Akram Khan, as the man who carried it out. No doubt it would lead to who'd put out the contract and so far kept himself in the shadows.

Akram took another guess at who was behind it. Who was the paymaster, the man who had so much to gain from the country going to war? If they uncovered this man's name, he'd do well to make himself scarce, and mighty fast. If they caught up with him, he was a dead man. The problem was he was certain he knew who it was. Ever since the destruction of the natural gas refinery at Qala-e-Naw, the violence had escalated. It had been the catalyst for all that happened since, and he was convinced the Chief Executive of Afgas, Adnan Kovac, was behind it. He had no proof, of course he didn't. Although if he ever got proof...how much would it be worth to keep it hidden? He smiled to himself. It would be worth a lot, unless he was in prison.

He knew the outbreaks of violence would continue as furious relatives of the dead Indian children demanded justice. They'd demand the capture and execution of men like him, men like Kabir and Adnan Kovac. Until that time, there'd be more angry gestures, saber rattling between nations, until the threats became military action. Divisions of tanks and motorized infantry would roll across the borders, and the war would begin.

It may never end, not until the region was a radioactive desert. India and Pakistan were nuclear powers, and a nuclear exchange was a possibility. He cursed his brother for getting him involved, and he cursed Abbas for allowing himself to fall into enemy hands.

*What have we started here? It should have been a simple operation. Kill a few Hindus, no loss to the world. Then get out and disappear across*

*the border. Instead, we've kicked over a stinking shitheap.*

He put a brave face on it. "Abbas will have escaped. He's no fool. Even if they do capture him, he won't talk. Remember, the Taliban claimed responsibility. At least, they believe that. We're safe. No one can touch us."

No one replied. He doubted they believed him, and they were right not to. He didn't believe it himself. He had a single choice left to him if he were to survive. To put his men at the disposal of a friendly Taliban commander, and do his utmost to convince them he still believed in the cause. They would never betray him to an enemy. He could hide out amongst the Taliban in a safe area under their control, like parts of Helmand. He'd heard a whisper they were about to mount a major attack on Kandahar, starting with the nearby Marine Base, Camp Dwyer.

It would be perfect. Once the furor over the attack on the Indian school had blown over, he would be on his way back. His moth-eaten rabble of cutthroats and murderers would once again win the respect and appreciation of the Islamic cause. His mind ranged over the possibilities. He'd been a fool to go it alone. He knew that now. A war leader needed to be part of an army, with large numbers of troops to command. In Afghanistan, that meant the Taliban. They would welcome him with open arms.

\* \* \*

The resourceful Father David had brewed hot coffee. Nolan reflected it was almost as good as having the Pope himself brew your Java.

*Okay, Clark's just a relative, but it's near enough.*

Amy switched on the TV as they warmed themselves around the kerosene stove. "I like to watch the news around this time, and find out if there're any problems we should know about."

Jim grinned. "You mean like the Paks deciding to declare war. Nothing would surprise me in this part of the world. Or maybe the Indians, they're always threatening to take revenge on the Muslims for some insult, real or imaginary."

Even the engineers, sitting in a disconsolate group furthest from the heater, were smiling. It was all the same to them. They made bundles of cash repairing damaged infrastructures, caused when men fought bitter battles around important installations, like Qala-e-Naw. They also made

bundles of cash during peacetime, building the installations for the insurgents to destroy. As for the general population, well, that was too bad. Besides, war was more profitable. Provided you lived to reap the rewards.

Father David wasn't smiling. "I find it distasteful, laughing about people being killed. Men, women, and children suffer because of the evil that men do."

"How would you know?" Oz called to him. He'd recovered well through the day, and he'd found a walking stick to enable him to hobble along. Nolan smiled; Brennan was as fit as ever, a testament to his SEAL training.

The priest surprised them all with his answer. "I've been here before. In Afghanistan, I mean. After college, I joined the U.S. Marine Corps. Yes, I was here, a lieutenant, Marine Force Recon. Those were tough times."

"You came in after 911?"

"Yes, everyone wanted to come over and deal with bin Laden. I served for two years before I resigned my commission and became a priest."

"Quite a career change."

"Perhaps. We're still soldiers, the Jesuits. The difference is we serve Christ and work for peace. I've had my fill of violence. What these people need is to enjoy a normal family life. To bring up their children and educate them in security."

*He talks about a normal life. Here in Afghanistan, killing is part of their 'normal life.' As for schools, they're not for the girls, who're forced to stay home, cooking and cleaning. Security in this country? What they call security is when all of the enemy is dead. Even so, you can't blame him for trying. Given his family connection, maybe he has a chance of succeeding.*

The CNN News program streamed by satellite was received courtesy of a dish on the roof. At that moment, the screen was playing a clip that displayed a still-burning building, the remains of a school. Through the smoke, it was possible to see the tiny bodies of the young victims strewn around the outside. It looked as if they'd been murdered trying to escape. They watched, fascinated as the story unfolded. They cut to a segment showing two young suicide bombers, proudly spitting out their message of hatred. The image returned to the studio. The news anchor, an attractive young woman wearing enough makeup to outfit the cast of a major feature film, breathlessly explained the day's events.

*“At first, it was assumed to be the work of Taliban militants, drawn from both Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, security forces captured and interrogated one of the insurgents who failed to get away. His story is fascinating, a plot by Kabul to incite violence inside Afghanistan and start a new war. It is believed they acted with a major energy company, although this has to be confirmed. The purpose of the war was to persuade America and the NATO countries to send more troops and shower aid dollars into the country. India is already preparing a retaliatory strike. The Indian Defense Minister stated, ‘Our people will not sit idly by and see their children wiped out. Murdered by hired Islamic assassins, and paid for by the corrupt regime in Kabul. We regard this as an act of war, and we will respond in kind. These murders will not escape our justice.’”*

They watched, stunned as she finished reading the prepared statement.

“We’re sitting in the middle,” Brennan growled, “India to the west, Afghanistan to the north. Shit, shit, shit!”

Amy used the remote to switch off. “We’ve had enough bad news. Say, you’re not planning to leave tonight, are you?”

“I have to get back,” Nolan asserted, “My unit will want to know my whereabouts, and I need to make a report about that helo.”

She shook her head. “Tell that to the Pakistanis. We’re not allowed to use the airfield at night.”

“You’re telling me Oz doesn’t fly in and out at night when it’s necessary?”

“Not when the war drums are beating. No way, Nolan, this is not the time to upset the Paks, believe me.” She glanced at Brennan. “Tell him.”

He sighed. “Amy’s right. The Indians are on the warpath, so the Paks will respond with heightened security. Besides, they’ll side with the Afghans, who’re their fellow Muslims, and they’ll take any chance to do something to upset the Indians. Forget the night takeoff. You’re stuck here until dawn.”

“I’ll make some more coffee,” Father David said.

No one replied. Later, the engineers grumbled at the delay but stopped when Oz reminded them they could get the bus. They whiled away the remainder of the evening, talking about the strange story coming out of India. Then Amy switched the TV on again for the late news. It banished their tiredness more than ten cups of strong coffee could have done. One

word caught their attention. War. India was considering war on Afghanistan. Pakistan had stated their intention to go to the aid of their Islamic neighbors if they were attacked. It was their Islamic duty to help them defend themselves against the Hindu aggressors.

The news anchor, this time an older, sleek, gray haired man, plastered on a serious expression.

*“People shouldn’t be confused by the alliance of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Indians and Pakistanis have been struggling for more than sixty years to resolve their disagreements over Kashmir. The attack by a Muslim nation against Indian Kashmir was bound to provoke a harsh response. The question on everyone’s lips now, is how tough will India’s response be? The world must watch and wait. Hope they will they continue the diplomatic efforts to find a resolution. This is Hugh Granger for CNN...”*

She switched off the set. “Sorry, but I’m bored with all this talk of war.”

“Any guesses where this is going, anyone?” Oz was worried, although he tried to keep a brave face. If a limited war broke out, he was an American on the wrong side of the Pakistan Afghanistan border. It could ruin his business if the Paks viewed him as an enemy. When he received no reply, he darted Amy a look of despair. The wound had stopped him flying, at least for a week or two, and now there was this talk of war.

The priest cut into the silence. “It won’t come to anything, I assure you. They’ll talk, the diplomats will come up with a solution, and they’ll settle without a fight. You know the kind of thing, they’ll close a few embassies, send troops to the border, and they’ll spit and snarl at each other until it’s over.”

Somehow, Father David’s analysis didn’t sound too convincing.

“You’re almost right. It’ll be diplomacy by other means,” Highcloud asserted, “Isn’t that the way Clausewitz described war?”

They sipped more coffee, and the conversation was muted. After an hour, one of the engineers turned on the TV, and it was still tuned to CNN news. The serious, concerned face of Hugh Granger stared at them in all of its pseudo sincerity.

*“Breaking news, the security situation inside Asia worsens by the moment. The Indian Army has raided a village in Pakistani-controlled*

*Kashmir, claiming the Taliban used it as a training center for their fighters. In response, the Pakistani Taliban declared a holy war against the Indians, and the Pakistan government is understood to be considering its options. Meanwhile, inside Afghanistan, insurgents have attacked and overrun Camp Dwyer Marine Base in Helmand. We're hearing reports that casualties are high, some say in the hundreds. The first priority of the NATO Coalition is to attempt to reach the area to bring out any survivors."*

"No shit," Brennan murmured. They'd turned to look were look at Highcloud, whose face was tight with anxiety. Lines of worry had creased his otherwise smooth forehead.

"My brother, Vernon," his voice was almost a whisper.

Nolan stared at him. "Your brother? He's involved?"

"He's at Dwyer. Well, he was there before the attack. He's a sniper, Marine Raider Regiment."

"I'm sorry, Jim."

The Indian shook his head and scowled a reply. "Sorry? You're premature, Lt, much too premature. What makes you think anything happened to him? For all we know, he could be fine, alive, and on his way back to Kabul. Oh, shit," he put his head in his hands, and his body shook with emotion. He was savvy enough to know the difference between fantasy and reality; the fantasy that his brother had survived the attack, measured against the near certainty he hadn't.

Nolan went to him and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Jim, you're right. He could be okay."

The head shook from side to side. "We don't know. That's what's bugging me. He could be dead, could be a prisoner of the Taliban," he shuddered. The Taliban were not noted for their gentle handling of prisoners, "He could even be lying some place, wounded, dying for lack of medical attention."

"You don't know that, Jim. Besides, you heard the report. They're attempting to get down there and bring out survivors. If he's wounded, they'll medevac him to a hospital."

Highcloud pulled his hand away from his face and looked up. "Yeah, I heard the report. They're 'attempting' to get down there. What does that mean, hours, days, weeks? What the hell are they doing, Nolan?"

“They’re doing their best. It’s early days yet. Give them a chance to do their stuff.”

Every person in that room pitied his grief. Finally, he looked up and around the room. “I’m going to Helmand. I have to find Vernon. He could be in serious trouble, and I can’t wait for the brass in Kabul to make up their minds about sending a rescue force down there. You know how it goes, Nolan. It could take weeks of discussion, getting a strong force together, persuading the Afghans to allow them to take the battle to the Taliban. Weeks,” he repeated, “By that time Vernon could be dead.”

No one stated the obvious, unless he was already dead. No one blamed him. Most men would do the same and go to help out a younger brother in trouble. Except it wasn't that simple, Highcloud was a serving SEAL, which meant he couldn't just take off on some personal quest when he fancied. Even if it were to save the life of a member of the United States military. A numb silence had overtaken the room. There were no solutions. Nothing good could come out of this. If he went, the shit would hit the fan. If he didn't, Vernon could die. Assuming he hadn't already. Besides, there was another even bigger problem. They were in Pakistan, a long way from Camp Dwyer in Helmand. Apart from the distance, there was also a border between the two countries, a border under heavy guard, after the war clouds gathered over Asia.

“I’m going to Helmand,” he repeated.

\* \* \*

For Captain Rashul Dev, commander of Cobra Flight, Indian Air Force, this moment made him feel proud again. Stationed outside Srinagar, in the region known as Indian Kashmir, he’d seen too many cross border raids by stooges of the Pakistanis, raids that in his opinion hadn’t been taken seriously by the military. Now it was different. After the murder of Indian schoolchildren, they’d decided enough was enough. They had to hit back at the perpetrators, and now they’d discovered the Afghan government was behind it. So be it. They’d soon know what it was like to feel the impact of bombs on their towns and cities.

His aircraft was a French-built Dassault Mirage 2000. His country had named it the Vajra, which was Sanskrit for Thunderbolt, an apt name. His

squadron of Thunderbolts would hit the enemy so hard they'd regret the day they'd decided to murder innocent children.

The six aircraft of his fighter wing carried bombs, unguided Type 82 bombs. Each fighter also carried air-to-air missiles, Matras, to deal with any threats from enemy fighter jets. Even from NATO fighter aircraft, should they have the arrogance to interfere. For close combat, they also carried two .30 caliber DEFA 554 rotary cannon. Their orders were straightforward, to penetrate Afghan airspace and bomb a number of government buildings in Kabul. If any hostile aircraft tried to prevent them from carrying out their mission, they would shoot them from the sky.

He made a visual check of the fighters under his command. Each pilot gave him a thumbs-up in return. They were ready, and they were angry. The Snecma turbofans were idling, waiting for clearance from the tower. He lowered his canopy and waited no more than fifteen seconds.

"Cobra flight, you are cleared to take off. Vector due north, and turn east toward Kabul when you reach your waypoint at Wakhan. Climb to ten thousand meters, and do not exceed military power until you reach Wakhan, to conserve fuel. When you are ten klicks out, drop to low altitude, reduce speed, and use your Terrain Following Radar to cross Afghanistan. They won't even know you're there until the bombs start falling. Avenge our dead children for us, Captain. The nation's prayers go with you."

"Understood, tower. Cobra flight, follow me."

He advanced the throttle, gunned her up to full power, and felt the kick as the massive turbofan propelled the fueled and armed fighter aircraft along the runway. At the correct moment, he pulled back on the stick and roared up into the darkening sky. The Muslims were about to taste Indian vengeance.



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## Chapter Four

*CNN International News: Reports of a war about to erupt between India and Pakistan are exaggerated, according to Washington sources. Diplomats are still talking and trying to reach a resolution. The security situation in Afghanistan is confused, amidst claims of large bands of insurgents moving through the country. Some say the Taliban has entered the first phase of a new civil war, but this is pure speculation, according to official sources in Kabul.*

He had a rough night, thinking of his friend Jim Highcloud's worries about his brother. It wasn't the only thing on his mind. The fate of Helmand Province hung in the balance, if it was true, and the Marine Base had fallen to a massive Taliban attack; which meant the fragile peace they'd fought and shed blood for over the past years was coming to an end. The Afghans were back to doing what they did best. Killing.

Nolan had to observe a standard procedure, as required by the U.S. Navy. To report in to his superiors as soon as it was physically possible. Unable to sleep, he walked out into the night and tried his cellphone. As expected, the signal was non-existent. He had no way to contact his superiors. Then it came to him. There may be a way, and he thought of the radio in the aircraft. He'd repaired it, and it was working again. It would mean risking a conversation in the clear, but he could get over that by choosing his words with caution. The man he wanted to speak to was in the U.S. as far as he knew. Vice-Admiral Drew Jacks, the man in charge of all SEAL units operating out of Coronado Base, San Diego.

He thought of the man who called the shots for Bravo, and for the other Teams, a powerhouse of a man, who looked after his men as if they were gold-plated. Despite his hard driving personality, Jacks was short and bow-legged. He was also broad-shouldered and hard muscled, with close-cropped blonde hair and a neat beard. He walked around the base with a hint of a bantam swagger, but it was the swagger of pride in his men, not boasting.

The razor-creased working uniform he wore around Coronado was devoid of unnecessary embellishment, just the name patch, Jacks, and the insignia of a Vice-Admiral on the collar, the single star and gold stripe. Jacks was not known for false vanity. His trim physique, the result of constant training and long workouts, kept him at the peak of physical fitness. His sole purpose, to enable him to be ready to do the best he could for his men, always, and every time. On occasion, he'd even gone on operations, if he felt he could make a difference. The question was whether he could make contact with him using an aircraft radio.

He climbed into the cockpit of the Cessna and switched on the electrical power. Then he tried the radio, and it came to life. Chaman was close to Afghanistan, and he made contact with an American AWACS recon aircraft close to the border. The response when he found their frequency wasn't too promising.

"Who the hell are you, Mister?"

"This is Nolan, Lieutenant, U.S. Navy. I'm currently to the north of your position, unable to make contact by regular means. I need to get in contact with my boss."

"Oh, yeah, what for? A friendly chat?"

"It's not a friendly chat. This is to do with my unit."

"Which unit would that be, pal?"

"The one that spends part of its life under the sea, part on the land, and part in the air."

A pause. "Okay, I read you, Nolan. Suppose I believe you are who you say. Who is it you need to talk to?"

"Jacks."

"Jacks." The voice was flat, disbelieving or not understanding, "Is that it?"

"He runs an organization outside San Diego."

The guy caught on. "That place?"

"That place."

"Okay, let's see what we can do. Stay on this frequency. I'll call if I have any luck."

Nolan waited; five minutes became ten, and then twenty. A half-hour later, he heard the familiar voice. "This is Jacks."

"Nolan. I'll skip the titles. This is an open channel."

“So I gather.” He sounded frosty, “What is it you want?”

“If you ask the aircraft that patched me through to triangulate this transmission, you’ll know where I am. In case you were wondering after that little trip I went on.”

“I wondered. What about your friend?”

“He won’t be coming back.”

A pause. “Understood. When are you coming home?”

“Soon. I’m still signed off sick, so I thought...”

“Tomorrow. No later, I have another job in mind. Your Team is about to, well, they’re about to do what they do.”

“I hear you. I’ll do my best to make it back tomorrow.”

Jacks sighed. “Nolan, although you were signed off sick, you must know the shit has hit the fan.”

“Yes, er, Mr. Jacks.”

“You’d better be there. For your information, both the Indians and the Pakistanis have made definite threats of war. We’re talking about two nuclear-armed nations. Time is running out, Nolan, so get your ass back to base, sign off the sick list, and get back to work. Jacks out.”

He switched off the radio. If Oz agreed, he’d fly the Cessna back to Bagram with any of the passengers who cared to come along. Staying in Pakistan didn’t look like a healthy proposition, not with the way things were going. Back at base, they could put pressure on the brass to send someone to go looking for Vernon Highcloud, and any other survivors of the attack.

He had a decision to make. He could link back up with his unit, and fit or not, he knew he’d be back in the field before too many days had elapsed. There was always the chance they’d head for Helmand to hack into some of the Taliban who’d overrun the Marine Base. That was fine by him. There was always the possibility they’d find out the fate of Vernon Highcloud, one way, or the other.

He assumed Father David would fly out with them. There was nothing else for him to do. Thinking about the priest, he couldn’t help but wonder about the man. With connections like his, he could have his pick of any number of choice postings within the Vatican hierarchy. Instead, he’d come to a shithole like Afghanistan. Whatever his motivation, he’d chosen the worst possible time. It was hard to imagine how it could be any worse, with

the Taliban attacking from inside, and the Paks and Indians riled up from the outside. No wonder Jacks wanted him back ASAP.

He strolled back to the office. They were all awake, watching him. He felt as if he'd walked into an interview with a bunch of hostile recruiters.

“What?”

Oz replied first. “You heard what Jim said. He’s going to look for his brother.”

“I heard. It’ll take a whole lot of organization, and the first port of call will be to talk to the brass at SOCOM. The chances are they’ll put together a Search and Rescue mission to go looking for any survivors. I wanted to talk to you about getting back to base. I’ll need to use the Cessna to fly back to Bagram. To be honest, Oz, it would be useful for you to go there. You could do with some first rate medics to take a look at that wound. You’ll have time to look around for a pilot to help you out while you’re recovering. It’s the smart move.”

“Some of us don’t see it that way, Nolan.” He inclined his head toward Jim Highcloud, who'd somehow got his hands on an assault rifle. It was an AKM, a more modern, 5.56mm Kalashnikov derivative. He’d stripped the action and was cleaning each part with the meticulous care they’d trained him to do in the SEALs, “Jim’s going to look for Vernon.”

“To Helmand? Is he crazy? The place was overrun by insurgents, and the chances of getting in alive are remote enough, as for getting out, forget it.” He looked at the Indian. “Jim, come back with us to Bagram and talk to them there. Things are getting hot right now, and there’s no question they’ll want you for a fresh assignment. You can talk to them at the same time and find out everything you need to know about what happened to your brother.”

He stared back, and his gaze was flat, fathomless. “It’s not going to happen. I’m going to get him, if I have to walk every step of the way. If he’s alive, I intend to find him.”

He finished by working the action a few times, and then he snapped a new magazine into the breech. Last, he put the selector on safe, and put the weapon aside. Then he took the handgun from the holster on his belt and repeated the whole process.

“You may as well put a bullet in your head. One man against hundreds, it’s the surest route to a quick death. I know how you feel, but

what you're suggesting can't be done. One man against the Taliban, no way."

"It's not one man," Oz said, "I'm sorry, I know you want to use the plane to fly back to Bagram, but I've agreed to take Jim down to Helmand. Find a place to land, and then I'll help him look around. With any luck, we'll stay out of trouble long enough to locate him. Then we'll fly out again before they even know we've been there."

"One man and a cripple, you think that evens up the odds? It doesn't. All it means is you'll get someone else killed. Besides, you can't fly that aircraft, not in your condition."

Brennan climbed to his feet and used a walking stick to make his way across to a steel cupboard. It was unlocked, and when he opened the door, what greeted him was a small armory. Fixed to the wall rack was a pair of M16s. There were also four AK-47s that looked as if they'd been through every war since Korea. There was also a Russian light machine gun, a PKM with the metal ammunition box that mounted underneath the breech. There was another rifle, and with his free hand, Oz took it from the cabinet.

"I used to use one like this, you know..."

He knew. Oz Brennan had been amongst the finest snipers in the entire U.S. military. His weapon of choice had been the same as the one he was holding. A Stoner SR-25 first produced in 1990, a bolt-action semi-auto that fired a hefty 7.62mm round from a magazine holding ten bullets. Designed for match-grade 7.62 NATO ammo, and fitted with a precision Leupold scope. The weapon was intended for a single use, to kill the enemy at long-range. Distances considered impossible for most rifles in use by the military.

It ended on that day when they left him alone without food or water, and with no more than his mental anguish to feed on; after that came the long period of PTSD, which he still suffered from. Nolan was trying to work out how to bring it up, without it sounding like a stab in the back. There was only one way to save his friend's life, to be brutal and honest.

"You're sick, Oz. You know that, and you also know there's no way you should be thinking about getting back into the field."

He raised the stick and wobbled slightly. "Look, I can manage. As long as I can get there, I can fight, and I can shoot. If any T-men are holding Vernon, I'll waste them, period."

“And when their pals come running, fifty or a hundred angry tribesmen, what then? Besides, I wasn’t talking about the leg. I meant the other thing.”

He sighed. *It doesn’t make scrap of difference. I can’t let a pal down, not ever. Never have, never will, I can’t do it.*

“I’ll have to get the bus to Kabul, or find some other way. Sorry, Nolan.” Oz stared at him, as if he understood. Yet he knew inside what he’d be thinking of him. He tried one last time.

“You’re crazy, both of you. Two men won’t stand a chance.”

They watched him, and he stared back at them. Father David spoke.

“Three men.”

He strode to the cupboard and took out the PK machine gun, “I did an evaluation of one of these things. It became as familiar to me as an M249. Not such a good weapon, of course, and not so reliable, but even so, it packs a good punch. A good friend when you’re in a tight jam.” He saw them all staring at him and formed an embarrassed smile, “I know what you’re thinking. I’m a priest who’s vowed to work for peace on this earth. To preserve and treasure life, not to take up a weapon that can kill people. It’s not like that, not at all.”

“So what is it like?” Amy asked him.

“There’s nothing in my vows that prevents me from taking up arms in order to save life. I’ll go along, but I can only use this in the event we’re attacked. I can defend our lives if we’re in imminent danger. I cannot, and will not use it to take life. Only to save life.”

He stared around the room, as if challenging anyone who may disagree.

Highcloud fingered the crucifix he wore around his neck, as if to ward off any satanic influence. “Why are you doing this? You’re here to use words to influence the Afghans, not bullets. What would the Holy Father have to say if he knew one of his priests was carrying a machine gun? Even worse, a man who’s related to his family.”

“You’re Catholic, Mr. Highcloud.” He pointed at the crucifix, “I assume your bother is, too.”

“Yeah, we’re all Catholic in our family. My grandfather converted a long time ago, and he brought us up the same.”

“Very well. No doubt I'm the sole priest in side of five hundred miles, so that makes you part of my flock, at least for now. My flock is in trouble and needs help, so I'll do my best. There's something else. I need to contact a nun who works at an aid station in Kandahar, Sister Maria. I have instructions for her new posting. In view of this flare up I'm worried about her, and if there's any chance to get her out before...”

“Before the Taliban rape and behead her, you mean.”

He gave Nolan a sharp glance, “Before she gets into serious trouble. I intend to keep a sharp eye out for any sign of her.”

“It shouldn't be too hard. There're not many girls in black and white habits in this neck of the woods.”

“She wears civilian clothes,” he retorted, “So as not to upset the locals.”

Nolan couldn't help it. “You wouldn't want to upset their delicate sensibilities.”

“No, we wouldn't.” He deliberately let the sarcasm slide past him and looked at Highcloud. “I take it you have no problem with accepting my help.”

He shrugged and made no reply. The priest could claim to speak with a degree of authority from the Pope, hard to argue with someone that high. “It's your funeral.”

Nolan knew it was a waste of time to try to persuade them out of their insane plan.

*Maybe Amy can talk sense to him. Yeah, I've seen the way she looks at him and fusses over his wound.*

“Amy, talk to Oz. He'll lose his life, the aircraft, and everything he's built up since he came to Pakistan. He'll lose you, too.”

“He won't lose me. I'm going along.”

“Amy, no...” Oz protested.

She flared at him. “Shut up. You can hardly walk, let alone fly a plane or look after yourself.” She marched to the cabinet and extracted an AK-47, thought better of the length and weight of the weapon, then replaced it and took out a pistol, a Makarov 9mm, “If you go, I go. Who else would look after you?”

He shrugged helplessly and made no reply. Amy wasn't finished. She turned her wrath on Nolan. “You can fly, and yet you're leaving him and



returning to Bagram. How could you leave your friends in the lurch?"

He stared back at her, almost lost for words. "I have to report back. My boss was pretty definite about it, in view of the war clouds gathering over the region. I owe it to him to report back."

"I owe this to my brother," Highcloud said.

Every face stared back at Nolan. In that moment, he cursed himself for not thinking more deeply about all of it. Highcloud was a SEAL, and they had a proud boast. Never leave a man behind. Never.

*Am I making the right decision? I don't know. What I do know is India and Pakistan have been at war ever since the Brits left and partitioned was what India into India and Pakistan, and Kashmir that has always been the real flashpoint. Will it make a difference, a few hours either way, maybe a day? I don't think so. Well, I hope not.*

He stared back at her. "You asked me how could I leave my friends in the lurch. I can't."

"You can't what?"

"I was wrong. I'm not going to Bagram, not yet. I'll fly the plane."

He ignored their astonished looks. "Listen, I'll fly us in there. We can take a look around, and after that, I have to report in. Unless..." He had an idea. It was worth a try.

"Unless?" Oz gave him a keen glance.

"Hold it, I have an idea."

He spun on his heel and left the room. Back out to the Cessna, he switched on the electrics and powered up the radio. He was in luck. The same AWACS aircraft was still within range. The pilot sounded impatient.

"Hey, Lieutenant, we have more to do than act as your personal telephone switchboard. What is it this time?"

"Same as last time. I need you to patch me through to the same person."

"Don't they issue you guys with satellite communication equipment anymore?"

"It's a long story."

The sigh was loud over the cabin speaker. "Save it. Give us ten. We'll call you."

In the event, the patch came through in six minutes. Jacks sounded weary. No, Nolan reassessed his mood, he sounded pissed.

“What is it this time?”

He explained, using innocent sounding language, about the missing men at the Marine Base. “They’re in real trouble, Sir, and if we move fast, I believe we can get them out. One of our guys, a former member of the unit, runs an aircraft business. We can use his Cessna to go down and pick them up.”

“I know the guy you mean. There can’t be too many like him inside Pakistan. However, you have a big problem, and that’s finding them. Assuming they’re still alive.” Jacks’ tone changed to one of concern, “Nolan, I sympathize with what you’re saying, and maybe I can spare you for a short time, but I don’t like it. Is this some hare-brained solo mission you’re putting together?”

“Nossir. I have some good men with me, three good men. The guy with the aircraft, and a serving member of your unit.”

“Describe him.”

“He’s a Cherokee.”

“Okay, we thought we’d lost him when he didn’t report in after heading for that refinery.”

“He’s with me, Sir.”

“Who’s the third man?”

“He’s a civilian.”

“A civilian? What does he do inside Afghanistan, is he an engineer, a contractor, or what?”

He didn't know how to make it sound any better. “He’s a Jesuit priest.”

A long silence, “Run that past me again.”

“This guy is a priest.”

“What’s he gonna do, pray for divine intervention?”

“He’ll help us, Sir. He’s not afraid to use force if necessary, to defend us if we come under attack.”

“Okay, so I was right the first time. It is a hare-brained scheme. I’m not happy. You’re wanted elsewhere. I guess you know the country is falling apart with the renewed Taliban raids, and now we have this India Pakistan squabble. As it happens, I’m sending four men from your Team into the same area, and they’ll arrive sometime tomorrow. Their brief is priority one, to locate the guy behind the attack in India. I want him found, yesterday.

The President wants him found. The Indians want him found. No, correct that. They want him dead. You heard about it?"

"The school, yeah. A nasty business."

"They don't get any worse. The situation is fluid at present, each side threatening the other, and there's even been talk of it going nuclear. However, the President has calmed things down a tad, and persuaded them both to hang fire until we can find the person or persons behind it all. It gives us a little time."

"You have any names?"

"We believe so. We also have an approximate location. That's where your men are headed. One of our satellites picked up a whisper about where we may find the guy who led the attack. I can't say where, but it's not a million miles from your search area. That's all I can say on that subject."

"Yes, Sir, I understand."

*Get this guy and present his head on a plate to the Indians. Kill two birds with one stone. First, get them to stand down from the brink of a nuclear war. Second, cut off the head of the organization, and the body dies. Kill the guy at the top, and most of them will fade into the hills. That's the theory.*

"Good. How long do you need?"

He could hardly believe he'd persuaded the Admiral so easily. Then again, he now realized Jacks wanted him in Helmand. He'd put the threads together, found round pegs for round holes. While Nolan had been fighting to persuade him to let him go, it was what he wanted him to do anyway. No wonder he'd made Admiral. He decided to gamble for longer than he needed. "Three days, Sir." The response surprised him.

"Three days it is. What about communications?"

"All I have access to is this radio."

"That won't cut it. Contact me when you land, and I'll arrange to have a secure satcom dropped on your location. You can let me have the coordinates as soon as you know which field you use to make a landing. I imagine it'll be somewhere out of sight of the main population centers. We still don't have any idea as to the extent of this renewed Taliban insurgency, but we have to assume there they'll be there in strength. Anything else you need?"

There was plenty he needed, but he'd manage. That's what SEALs did. "I'll be fine, Sir."

"Very well. Good luck, Nolan. Find those boys, any of them still out there. As soon as possible, I'll arrange to drop you a radio. Your aircraft will give me the approximate location. I was thinking about using that friendly AWACS pilot as a delivery boy."

Nolan chuckled. "He'll love that."

"He'll do as he's ordered. The alternative is for you to meet up with your men."

"They'll be close to Dwyer?"

A pause. "Close, yeah. You're right about getting those men out. We don't leave our own inside enemy territory. Not if there's the slightest chance to get them back. Give my regards to your pals. I remember a certain sniper. He was the best until we let him down. Good luck, Nolan, and remember me to our Indian friend. Use the radio we send, and contact your men as soon as they arrive. Remember, their mission is to stop a war, and we don't have too much time left. There's nothing takes precedence, nothing. Jacks out."

He switched off and went back inside. It was like a frozen tableau, as if they'd hadn't moved since he went out to use the radio.

"I have three days, courtesy of my boss."

They clapped and cheered. Amy even ran and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you."

"No worries. Listen up, people. It'll be daylight in an hour or so. I have a suggestion. We get out of here just before dawn breaks."

"They're not keen on night operations from my strip." Oz Brennan wore an anxious look on his face, "They could even send an Air Force jet to intercept if they're not happy."

"Oz, we may all be dead in forty-eight hours time, so how is that a problem?"

"You could be right. Okay, we'll do it your way, wheels up in thirty minutes. Amy, can you pack us some food? We could be gone for two days."

She went to the tiny kitchen, while Father David volunteered to check out the medical kit. Highcloud grabbed as many weapons and as much ammunition as he could carry, and began taking it all out to the Cessna.

With fifteen minutes to go, Amy returned with a carton packed with food and bottles of water. She placed them on the desk and switched on the TV. She gave them an apologetic glance. “Just in case anything’s happened in the last few hours.”

The familiar face of the CNN anchor, Hugh Granger filled the screen. He looked different, tired and haggard. Something was wrong. They watched and waited.

“Here is a newflash. The Indian Air Force has just attacked targets in Kabul, Afghanistan. We understand six aircraft bombed government buildings in the center of the city. The damage is described as substantial and many buildings reduced to rubble. It is too early to estimate how many lives have been lost, but we believe the numbers will run into the hundreds. People were still working in their offices, dealing with the emergency. Many of them are missing. Pakistan was the first to respond. They stated their intention to stand by their Islamic ally, Afghanistan, and to respond to the attack on that country as if it were on Pakistan itself. The situation is worsening by the hour, and we could soon enter a nightmare scenario, a war between two nuclear powers, Pakistan and India. More reports to follow, as soon as the data comes in. This is Hugh Granger...”

She switched off. Brennan swore. “That’s it then. It’s war.”

Nolan shook his head. “Not yet. It looks bad, but until whole divisions of troops and armor start crossing borders, it’s still tit for tat. There are also things going on behind the scenes that I can’t talk about, but it’s not a shooting war, not yet.”

“Those Indian fighter bombers weren’t dropping leaflets,” Highcloud said.

“Neither were the Afghans who bombed their school. It changes one thing, though. We have to go now. Father David, can you help me get Oz to the plane? Amy, load the food. Time to move, people, Pakistan will put the country on a war footing at any moment, and when that happens, we’re not going anywhere.”

The engineers looked as if they’d been aroused from a deep sleep, but they’d picked up on the conversation. One shouted, “Hey, what about us? We need to get back to Kabul.”

Oz and Nolan answered at the same time. “Get the fucking bus along with the goats.”

Minutes later, they'd stowed the last of the supplies and equipment in the rear of the cabin. It was still dark, and there were no runway lights. Brennan was in the left-hand seat. It was his airfield and his aircraft. Nolan switched on and took a minute to sweep his eyes over the gauges. Then he pressed the engine start button and glanced aside as it roared into life. He adjusted the throttle, and the noise settled into a smooth tick over. He turned to Oz.

"We don't have any lights or any way of knowing what's in front of us. You've done this a few hundred times, so guide me out. Anything you think I need to know, potholes, debris, ruts in the strip, even a stray cat lives halfway along the field."

"Sure. Keep straight ahead, and I'll correct your course as you go."

He took a last look around and saw nothing. It was all pitch-black. All he could rely on was Brennan's knowledge of the field, and Father David's prayers. He had no doubt he'd be contacting the guy upstairs right now. He slammed the throttle to maximum power, and when the engine was screaming like a banshee, let off the brake. The laden aircraft bounded along the strip like a greyhound released from the starting gate. They bounced and rolled along the rough field as the speed increased.

"Vehicles approaching. They're heading this way." Highcloud was staring out the side window, "Their headlights are turning onto the field. They've stopped outside Oz's office. Cops, I can see the reflection on the blue roof light. Wait, they're driving onto the field. I reckon they're coming after us. You been doing something you shouldn't, Oz?"

"It's what I feared," Nolan said, "They're putting the country on a war footing, and that means grounding foreign owned aircraft." He ignored them, kept the Cessna on its jolting course, and glanced at Oz. "How long is the strip?"

"About seven hundred meters. You'll be fine. We'll make it before the cops get up with us."

"What's the takeoff roll for this crate?"

"Six hundred and fifty meters. I've never had a problem."

"At night, with no runway lights?"

"I never tried it."

"Great. Ground speed?"

"Sixty-five knots. We're at V1."

Nolan eased back on the column, and the nose began to rise. A shot zinging past the fuselage, and then another. The message was clear. He glanced at Oz. "Speed?"

"Sixty-seven, sixty-eight, almost there...seventy knots, rotate."

A gentle pull on the column, and the Cessna left the strip and climbed. Too slow. More gunfire sounded behind them, and a long machine gun burst spat past meters to starboard. The aircraft was skimming away from the police, but it was slow and too low. The next burst could be on target.

"Altitude?"

"Eighty meters."

He raised his voice. "Hold on, I'm taking avoiding action."

He jerked and twisted the control yoke to one side, stamped on the rudder pedal, and the aircraft plunged over to one side.

Brennan's hands flew to the column, as if he could correct the violent maneuver. "What the fuck..."

Another long burst whistled through the night sky, roiling the air where they would have been if he'd stayed on course. He held the column steady in the tight maneuver, the ground rising up to meet them. At the last moment, he eased back on the column, and the nose pointed upward, but he held her close to the ground as they picked up speed. He heard Brennan let out a long breath. "I didn't have a choice, Oz. They looked as if they meant business."

"Yeah, okay, but next time, warn me in advance. Christ, I could have died of suffocation, I held my breath for so long."

As they flew further away from Chaman, he gained a few meters in height but kept as low as possible without colliding with a mountain. They'd got out ahead of the cops, but now they had an even bigger worry. Much bigger, the Pakistani Air Force. He glanced at Oz. "I need a heading for Helmand. You can put the coordinates for Dwyer in the Garmin. It'll be light soon, which should make it easier for us to locate a good landing ground."

"It'll also make it easier for the T-men to see us arrive."

He smiled. "There is that, yeah."

\* \* \*

There were others tuned to CNN International that morning. Inside the remains of what had been the officers' dining hall in Camp Dwyer, Akram Khan was also watching developments. It had taken them all day and all night to reach Helmand, and he'd begun to relax. Until he listened to how the crisis he'd caused was developing. He partially understood English, and a man was translating as the infidel anchorwoman spoke in breathless, gushing tones. He worked to concentrate and swallow his indignation.

The brazen whore was wearing makeup, parading herself in front of the world like a painted Jezebel. If she came within range of a Taliban bullet, her broadcasting days would come to an abrupt end.

"Sources in Washington state they've made contact with both the Pakistani and Indian governments. The intention is to thrash out a deal to prevent the escalation of hostilities. The Indians have demanded, as a minimum, compensation to the families of the victims, as well as the rebuilding of the school. There is something else, perhaps the most important part of the agreement. They are demanding the handover of the men responsible so they can be put on trial and hanged for mass murder. Until they have these criminals in custody, there will be no deals, and the preparations for war will continue. The State Department is working closely with the military to find a way to give India what they want, the criminals behind the school bombing. Unofficial sources suggest they'll put Special Forces into the region to search for these men. In addition, the NSA is using all of its formidable intelligence gathering capabilities to locate the bombers. We'll bring you continuing live updates the moment we get them. This is Holly Wright for CNN New International. Now for a short break."

Someone used the remote to mute the sound as an advertisement for a remedy for graying hair appeared. Khan felt calm amidst the company of men like him, men who'd been fighting for most of their lives and for a variety of causes, when a hand fell on his shoulder.

"I want a word with you, Brother."

He kept his expression neutral, although inside he felt a pang of fear. His name was Tarzi. He had no first name, or if he did, not one to which he owned. He was in overall charge of the men who'd overrun Camp Dwyer. With a long scar that reached from his left eye, diagonally across his nose to the corner of his mouth on the opposite side, his visage was fearsome. Lean, hard, and as desiccated as the rough, wild landscape, a man who'd devoted



his life to the way of the Prophet. He had little time for those who wavered, who were less than devout in their daily prayers. He also had little time for those he felt to have offended God.

“How can I help you, Commander?”

“This business in Pakistan. Tell me about it.”

Khan had prepared for this moment. “It’s not the way it looks, Commander. It wasn’t just a school. The Hindus were using it as a store for explosives. Our attack was intended to destroy them after we’d evacuated the children, but the Indians confronted us and we got into a firefight. In the end, a stray shot set off the charges.”

Tarzi stared at him for long moments, and Khan felt his bowels turn to jelly. “Hindus, storing explosives? Why?”

“Hindu militants, Sir. We learned they were planning to attack a Muslim village, across the border in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.”

“I will check out your story, Akram. You know that killing children, even infidel children, gives us bad publicity. Our leadership has specifically forbidden such acts.”

“I know that, Commander. This wasn’t our fault.”

Another pause while he considered what Khan had told him. “That man of yours, the one you left behind. He told a different story.”

Khan sneered. “Torture, that’s all it was. They beat it out of him.”

“Did they? I have contacts in the region. Hafiz Saeed of Lashkar-e-Taiba has promised to investigate. For your sake, Akram, I hope you are telling you the truth.”

“The Indians are all liars, Commander. No matter what they say, it will be false. That school was an explosives store for attacks against our Muslim brothers in Kashmir. Anything else will be a lie.”

“We shall see. Now that you have rejoined us, I want you to split your men into four groups of ten. We need patrols out in the area to guard against any surprise counterattacks by the Coalition.”

“My men are tired. It’s been a long journey,” he muttered, “They need food and rest, and maybe a woman. After that, when they’re...”

“In which case, you will lead the first patrol, Akram. You are a senior member of the Taliban now, a junior commander. It is our burden to lead by example. That will allow the remainder of the men to rest. You will start in the direction of Kandahar. It is from there I would expect any attack to

come. You will leave in one hour. One more thing, I want you to make a slight detour. There is a village ten kilometers from here, Garmsir. They have a Catholic clinic and aid station, and I want you to ensure they're not sheltering any of the men who escaped from this camp."

"I know the place. The doctor there is a nun. My second-in-command, Javed Amiri, was wounded a few weeks back. It was during the attack on Qala-e-Naw, and they took him there for medical attention."

"Did they help him?"

"I don't know. Poor Javed was raving with the infection when he got there. I was worried he might start telling everyone who was behind the attack, so I contacted my brother. He's a Minister. He said he'd take care of it."

"What if Javed has already told the doctor what he knows? They could know everything."

"He said he knew of someone who could deal with it, someone who could get close to her. Did you know my brother is a Minister?"

"A Deputy Minister, yes, I already knew."

Khan's face fell. His attempt to impress Tarzi was unsuccessful. "Yes, well, as it happened, he died. I doubt he passed on anything important. If he told the doctor anything, Kabir's man will deal with her."

"Kill her?"

"He'll gain her confidence first, and then kill her. What else, we cannot take a chance."

Tarzi shrugged. "Allah moves in mysterious ways. Was there anything else you had to tell me before you leave on your patrol, Akram?"

Khan kept his smile fixed on his face. Inside, he was fuming. A lengthy and dangerous journey across the harsh, desert-like terrain would now become even harder. After the victory at Camp Dwyer, and at many towns and villages in Helmand, the infidels would hunt them with a vengeance. Their accursed drones would fill the skies, and if his luck failed him, one would find him and obliterate his force with a missile.

"Nothing. I will check out that clinic, Tarzi. If we capture any foreign soldiers?"

He shrugged. "Kill them all. Wipe out the villagers. Leave no man, woman, or child alive. People must know the penalty for siding with the infidel invaders."

“Yes, Commander. You’re sure it wouldn’t be better to check the village after we’ve been to Kandahar. The fighting is still going on there. We have yet to achieve total victory. If they learn of an attack on Garmsir, it will forewarn them, and they will send their fighter bombers.”

“You will go to Garmsir first.”

He mentally considered the worst, most bitter curses in his repertoire. “Yes, Tarzi. One hour. The women in that aid station; there is one in particular, the doctor. She is very pretty, for an infidel.”

“I don't want you wasting your time playing with this girl. Your task is too important. On the other hand, if you and your men wish to have some fun, I have no objection provided it doesn't interfere with your mission.” Tarzi shrugged, “She's an infidel, of little value. Do as you wish. Just be quick about it, and then continue on to Kandahar.”

Khan smiled. Perhaps the task given to him wouldn’t be so bad. His men would be pleased, and as far as he was concerned, as long as he was the first, the rest could do as they wished with the foreign whore.

## Chapter Five

*CNN International News: India has issued a clear ultimatum to Pakistan, either hand over the people behind the bombing of their school in Kashmir or face war. In reply to protests that the terrorists came from Afghanistan, not Pakistan, the Indian spokesman replied, 'Pakistan has given their unequivocal support for their Muslim friend and neighbor. If they wish to halt preparations for war, they should order Afghanistan to hand over those who are guilty.' When asked to reply, the Pakistanis had no comment, other than to blame India for the military escalation.*

The border was a mere five clicks from Chaman. The proximity made it a haven for weapons smugglers and drug shippers. As well as those men wanted by the governments on both sides of the border. Nolan's worst fear was to encounter a Pakistani fighter jet, and he instructed them all to keep their eyes skinned for trouble. They almost missed it.

The Chengdu J-7 swooped down on them from behind, and it was Highcloud's eagle-eyed vision that caught it one click out. "Aircraft coming in, and he don't look friendly."

"Shit. Oz, will he shoot first or ask questions?"

"It's a gamble. He could do either. If I'm on a legit flight, I call them up and talk to them."

"But we're not on a legit flight."

"No, we're not."

"Understood, hold tight, everyone."

As he uttered the last word, he flung the aircraft over into a long, skidding turn to port. The jet roared past, and he glimpsed a Chinese built Chengdu J-7, the license built version of the MiG-21. The NATO codename was Fishbed. Somewhere in the depths of his memory, he recalled it could fly at Mach 2; of more interest its armament, a 30mm cannon and air-to-air missiles. It was no unarmed border patrol plane.

They had a single chance, and that was to lose the eager-beaver fighter jock. The dark line was just a shadow, etched into the low mountains that marked the border. It meant a pass, and he arrowed straight for it. The moment he changed direction, the Pakistani squawked on the cabin speaker.

“Unidentified Cessna, flying south of Chaman. You are ordered to return to your departure point and await clearance by the Pakistani authorities. If you fail to comply, you will be shot down. Acknowledge.”

He flew on. Getting into a debate with a trigger-happy pilot was a non-starter. The dark line grew larger as they neared the mountain range, and Oz guessed his intentions. “You’re not serious? That’s a donkey track. You won’t make it in this.”

“We have to make it. Get on the radio, and tell that guy we’re complying with his request. We’re trying to gain height to make the turn, but we have engine trouble. We need a little more time.”

Brennan grinned and hit the transmit button. “This is Cessna AP-VZV. We are on a charter to Afghanistan, carrying relief supplies. We will comply with your request, but we can’t gain height. Do not, repeat; do not open fire! We have a religious leader in the cabin. If you shoot, you could kill this man and cause an international incident.”

A pause. “Who is he, this man? Which religion?”

Oz glanced at Nolan. “How long do you need?”

“About four seconds.”

“Okay.” He hit the transmit button again. “He’s the, er, the Mullah... what was that, Mullah? I didn’t catch your name. Wait one second, Air Force, I’m clarifying it now.”

“You have five seconds, or I open fire.”

The gray sky disappeared, and they were flying through a narrow pass. Nolan kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, relying on his peripheral vision to keep him away from the granite walls threatening to pluck them from the air and smash them into a thousand pieces. No one spoke. There was just the drone of the engine and the roar as it echoed from the sides of the pass, meters from the wingtips. It seemed like an hour, yet it couldn’t have been more than thirty seconds, and the Cessna flew out into the open skies. They were in Afghanistan.

Oz let out his breath with a long sigh, and a few in the rear of the cabin followed. “Jesus Christ, you ever want to do that again, let me know, and I’ll stay home.”

He didn’t reply at first. He was busy checking the course Oz had set. There’d be no problem getting to their destination. The question was what they faced when they arrived.

“Whatever. Listen, we need to decide where we’re gonna land. Putting down close to Dwyer is not possible, unless we want them to fill us full of holes the moment we touch down.”

Father David answered his question. “I have a suggestion. There is a small village named Garmsir, less than ten kilometers away from Camp Dwyer. It is on the edge of the desert and surrounded by plenty of flat terrain. We should be able to land safely, and there is a chance the survivors of the attack will have gone there for medical treatment.”

“This aid station you mentioned?”

“The Hazar Juft Comprehensive Health Clinic. She took a temporary assignment when their previous appointee, Dr. Ali Hasan, was murdered.”

“Murdered? What was it, a religious thing?”

“We’re not sure. It could have been a simple rivalry, we don’t know. Whatever the reason, Sister Maria volunteered to take his place. She’s a very brave girl. It’s her first assignment. She came out of medical school and joined the convent, and they sent her straight out to Afghanistan.”

He thought about it for a few seconds. It sounded doable, provided the place wasn’t overrun. “You know this place?”

“I’ve been there, when I was with the military. Yes, I know it quite well.”

He came to an abrupt decision. It was perfect, and he instructed Oz to give him a course. “We’ll do a flyover and check it out, but if it’s clear, it could be a good place to RV with my men.”

“How will they get there?”

The priest’s question sounded odd. “They’re SEALs. They’ll get there. Don’t worry about it. Oz, you got those coordinates for me?”

“I’m looking. It’s not much more than a goat shed by the look of it, so it’s taking a time. Yeah, I got it now, punched in and ready for you. Follow the GPS, and it’ll take you right there.”

He nodded an acknowledgement, and they flew on, heading west. The dawn came and lit the sky, a clear, cold shade of blue. In the distance, the taller buildings of Kandahar appeared on the horizon, twenty clicks to starboard. They were flying across flat, empty semi-scrub desert. From two thousand meters, it looked like a billiard table. He knew the reality was different. Flat ground in the main, arid, desolate, and littered with enough debris, rocks, pothole, and crevasses to destroy the plane if he tried to land.

Wherever he put down, it would need a careful inspection before he tried, as much as was possible from the air. The rest would be in the hands of the Gods of fortune. Provided they were smiling down on them this morning.

A final check of the heading, and he started to come down. The village appeared in front, and off to port, the compound that comprised Camp Dwyer. He cursed, knowing they would have seen them. Their best hope was that they dismissed the light, unarmed aircraft as bringing in supplies for the aid station, or maybe a smuggler using the local village as a drop off point. There was one last task before he searched for a suitable landing place. He contacted the AWACs.

They were waiting for the call. Vice-Admiral Jacks would have stressed the importance of his call.

“What is it now, Navy?”

He grinned. The aircraft commander couldn’t take out his irritation at being a messenger boy to an admiral, so he’d make do with a lowly lieutenant.

“This is Nolan.”

“No shit. What do you want this time, a pizza?”

“I have the numbers for you.”

“Go ahead.” The guy was all business now, “I’ve used a simple encryption, just added the first number of my birth date to each digit. Copy?”

“We copy.”

“31.1167 North, 64.2000 East.”

“Got it. I’ll pass it on to Admiral Jacks. Anything else? Starbucks coffee, how about a Ben and Jerry’s ice-cream?”

“Maybe next time. Much obliged, Air Force.”

“You’re welcome, Navy. I’d say have a nice day, but I guess that’s not on the cards, not where you’re going.”

“You’ve got it in one. Nolan out.”

He ended the transmission and dropped down to five hundred meters. The village was the usual Afghan shithouse, a cluster of stone huts; some looked to be made of mud. Poverty, disease, and despair. He thought of Dante’s poem *The Inferno*, and the famous sign over the entrance to hell. ‘Abandon hope all ye who enter here.’ Yeah, if anyone had any hope, they'd abandoned it long before. He doubted they had a school, and they were

lucky the aid station had opened to give them primary medical care and access to food when they were starving.

The main canal that fed the irrigation system was visible, cutting through the gray, drab country like a bright ribbon. Next to Garmsir lay a steel girder bridge, built by the ISAF forces to enable both troops and civilians to cross. Of more importance was the flat piece of ground close to the bridge, on the opposite side from the village. It would give them a degree of security if the village came under attack from insurgents. It occurred to him he was making a dangerous assumption, that the place was still clear of hostiles. That wasn't something for any man to hazard a guess about. He put the nose down ready to make a recon sweep of the area.

The village looked clear. Three women hurrying along, two dressed in the familiar blue burqa. They carried large bundle in their arms, and he assumed they were taking the family washing to the canal. Apparently, Mohammed didn't approve of the modern washing machine. Neither was it his concern if they had no electricity in their homes. The Prophet didn't approve of the men working themselves to death either. Five turbaned figures could be seen looking up at the aircraft from where they were sitting on a collection of old wooden crates. No doubt left by departing troops, a gift for those who lacked the luxuries of life, like a chair.

He saw no evidence of the Taliban. No insurgents staring up at them with hate-filled eyes. No hands clutching well used AK-47s, or RPG surface-to air-shoulder launched missiles.

"It looks clear."

He nodded to Oz without turning his head. His hands twitched on the controls. Ready to throw the aircraft into a violent turn if a stream of heavy machine gun bullets hurtled toward them, or he spotted the telltale trail of smoke as an RPG-7 left the launcher. There was nothing. He circled the area and checked again. This time, a few kids came outside and waved. No one waved back. The Taliban had on more than one occasion sent children to wave at a passing helo or low flying aircraft to tempt the pilot into coming nearer before they attacked. Still nothing.

He made the decision. "We'll land on the opposite bank of the canal, on that patch of ground we picked out. Remember, people, this is Indian country." A slight cough, and he said, "Sorry, Jim, no offence."

"None taken, white boy."



He chuckled. “Okay, the moment we’re wheels on the ground, get ready to climb out and find some cover. Make sure your weapons are loaded, and keep your heads down. If you spot anything that looks wrong, it is wrong. You know what to do.”

“We know what to do,” Highcloud murmured.

“Right. We’re going in. Oz, twenty degrees of flap.”

“Flaps down.”

He throttled back to idle and guided the aircraft lower toward the flat strip of ground. At the last moment, he flared into a perfect landing. They bumped along the ground for a few meters and came to stop.

“Out, everyone out, and keep your heads down. If they start shooting, they’ll target the plane, so move away a few meters, just in case.”

He helped Oz climb out the door, and they all followed. Less than thirty seconds later, they were lying flat on the hard, rocky ground. There were no insurgents, and no gunfire whistled overhead. The single sound to disturb the sigh of the breeze was the jingle of numerous bells attached to goats grazing on a patch of stubbly grass. Then a voice rang across the open ground, the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. There was always time for prayer. Like killing, you could always spare the time.

Two boys approached them, kicking a part-deflated football. They stared at the aircraft with a great deal of interest and then came nearer. Nolan climbed to his feet, and the others followed. The boys said something, but he didn’t understand. Father David had no such problems and soon engaged them in spirited conversation. Eventually, they walked away, and he explained what had been said.

“According to them, there’re no Taliban inside the village. They did come through after the battle, demanding medicines and dressings for their wounded. When they had what they wanted, they left.”

“Do you believe them?” Nolan asked.

“I think so, yes. They also said the aid center is intact, and the girl they know as Dr. Maria is still at work inside.”

“Okay.”

He looked at Highcloud. “What do you thing?”

He pursed his lips and took a last look around. Then he nodded. “I concur with Father David. It looks clear.”

“Okay, we’ll head in. I’ll take point. Jim, you’re on our six. Father David stay in the center with Oz and Amy. She may need a hand with him, unless you want to stay with the plane, Oz? You could cover us from here with that rifle of yours.”

“Count me in. If there’s gonna be trouble, it’ll be inside that village, and we’ll need every gun. If Vernon Highcloud is in there, we’ll have just the one chance to get him out. The plane can take care of itself.”

“Okay, let’s do it, people.”

Nolan led the way to the bridge where he held up his hand. “I’ll cross first, then give you the wave if it’s clear.”

He dodged across the steel structure, with his assault rifle held ready to return fire, but it wasn’t necessary. Silence surrounded the village of Garmsir.

*An ominous silence, or the silence of rural peace and tranquility, that’s the sixty-four dollar question.*

He gave the signal, and they caught up with him. The village lay three hundred meters away across flat, open ground. They had to cross it, but he noted every drainage ditch in case they needed to dive for cover.

A blind man would have found his way into Garmsir, the stench its most prominent feature. There was nothing else remarkable about the place. Gray and brown stone buildings, mud, expressionless, dirty faces, men wiped out after years of opium abuse. People emerged into the narrow streets after they’d taken cover when they heard the aircraft engine. Even their clothes were brown and gray, except for the ragged, stained burqas.

*Abandon hope all ye who enter here.*

The largest building was long, low, and single story. A sign was prominent over the main door, ‘Hazar Juft Comprehensive Health Clinic.’ According to the kids, Sister Maria would be inside. He knew they were sure to find survivors of the rout at Dwyer.

*If they were wounded, and on the run, where else would they come? Unless the Talibs had got here ahead of them, in which case there’d be little more than corpses to litter the ground.*

Father David pointed to the sign.

“That’s where Sister Maria will be working, and they’ll be able to give us information on the whereabouts of any hostiles.”

He carried the PK machine gun on his shoulder, and Nolan had to hide his smile. Somehow, it didn't go with the dog collar. The priest had found a scarf from one of his pockets, and it hung around his neck, ready to hide the collar. Wise move, a Christian priest in Afghanistan would be like tossing a lighted match into a barrel of gasoline. They reached the clinic, and he motioned to Oz.

"Station yourself out here. I want you on sentry with that long rifle. If you see insurgents heading our way, you know what to do. Amy..."

She was already nodding her head. "I'll stay with him, of course."

She helped him limp across to a cafe opposite the aid center. A single story building, like the rest of the structures in the village, but this one had an open front, with chairs and tables. They served soft drinks and coffee, naturally, unless you were in the know. There was always water, but in this place, people looked hard at a glass of water. Most preferred something with a brand written on the side. Even bottled water had been contaminated. The flimsy plastic bottles could be refilled often, using water that had come from who knew where. What was important was the flight of stone steps at the side, which led up to the roof. She helped him toward the steps, and they started up.

Nolan led the way through the front door of the clinic. The one similarity to clinics in the West was the same. The place stank of unwashed bodies, blood, and misery. A man looked up at them from behind a reception counter. It was painted white, two meters long. The stenciled writing on the side was still visible through the paint. 'Property of the military of the United States of America. Missile FIM-92, Man-Portable Air-Defense System.' Otherwise known as a Stinger missile, it was good to think these people had put the packaging to good use.

Without looking up, the man snapped out a harsh greeting in Pashtu. They didn't reply, and when he raised his head, his jaw sagged. Their guns evidently made something of a difference. His voice moderated, and his snarl became a greasy smile. "Sirs, how can I help you?"

The priest spoke first. "I'm here to speak to your doctor. Where is she?"

"Dr. Maria? She is inside, dealing with a patient. Shall I tell her you are here? You may wait in the waiting room," he indicated a dirty cubicle to the side of the room. Even from a distance, the stench was all but

overpowering, much worse than when they'd entered the clinic, "She won't be long."

Clark did his best to hide his distaste and gave him a polite smile. "We'll wait outside. Would you tell her?"

"Yes, Sir."

They trooped back out into the fresh air. Nolan positioned his meager force to cover the building. The priest was to cover the eastern approaches to the village with the PK and Highcloud the west. With Oz and Amy on the roof opposite, he felt confident they wouldn't be surprised. He'd wanted to leave someone to cover the bridge. It would be their means of escape if they ran into trouble, but he didn't have enough personnel. Not yet.

*I wonder how long before the men get here. Not too long, I hope. I smell more than just the usual odors of ordure, of garbage and rank, stinking body odor. I smell trouble. I smell Taliban.*

As if they were already coming along the main street, he covered his eyes against the sun and stared into the distance. Nothing. He shuffled his feet, looked inside the clinic again, and then across at the bar. Oz waved from the roof. Amy was sitting next to him cross-legged on the floor, leaning into him slightly, as if for security.

He wondered if Oz could handle any action if it came to it. He'd showed either a surfeit of guts or of stupidity when he tried that landing at Qala-e-Naw. Here it was different. At least it would be if the T-men put in an appearance, shooting the robed and turbaned insurgents when they were coming at you full on, blazing away with machine gun bullets peppering the ground around you. Facing them down and standing your ground until they were all dead, or you were dead. Not every man could hold when the shit hit the fan.

Could Brennan do it, or would he fold? Collapse into a gibbering heap. Not because he was afraid, but because he was sick, afflicted with the curse of PTSD after the military had let him down. It wasn't his fault. It was just the way it affected his brain. Nolan had no choice but to deal with it. He was too short on manpower. There was no other marksman skilled with a Barrett long rifle, prepared to go along, and accurate enough to get a result when he pulled the trigger. If a man is in a minority of one, there isn't a great deal of choice but to use him.

Satisfied he'd done everything he could, he waited outside the clinic. A few meters away, Highcloud gave him a wave. Father David did the same, and from the rooftop, Amy smiled. A good sign, it was okay up there. No sign of the enemy, and no sign of Oz giving any indication he was about to crack. The door opened behind him, and he turned. The girl standing there looked nothing like a nun, or a doctor.

Father David had told him she was about mid-twenties and of medium height. The rest of her was anything but medium. Her auburn, almost flaming red hair showed from under the filmy headscarf she wore to cover her head. Her face was what you'd describe as waif-like, as if it belonged to someone younger. Wearing tight jeans that hugged her hips, tucked into laced high canvas boots, a t-shirt stretched over her firm, shapely breasts, he figured she'd have given most men a shot in the arm when she came calling.

If ever a man were in a hospital bed, feeling sick, one look at her would shake them out of it. She was beautiful, a rose among the thorns. In a land of the sick and diseased, the prematurely aged, and those women perpetually covered by the hideous burqa, she was like a cool mountain stream running through the desert. The sole evidence of her vocation hung around her neck, a miniature Rosary with a crucifix hanging beneath.

"You wanted me?" She sounded amused, and he realized he'd been staring.

*Shit, I need to snap out of it. It's not easy, not with this girl. Even her voice is musical, like the sound of a wind chime in a gentle breeze. She's in the wrong profession. She could make a fortune in movies. She looks and sounds magnetic.*

"Sorry, Ma'am, I was woolgathering. Er, there's a guy wants to see you, Father David Clark." He pointed to the priest, who had turned to look at her.

She frowned at the machine gun. "A priest?"

"Oh, yeah, the gun. It's just a defensive thing."

"I see."

The Jesuit strolled toward them and nodded a greeting. "I'm Father David Clark, sent by the Vatican to attend to the needs of Catholics in the region."

"That won't take you long," she smiled, "I'm sure you can count them on the fingers of two hands."

He frowned. "Perhaps. You are Sister Maria? Novice of the Convent of the Sisters of the Divine Miracle?"

"Yes, that's correct. Strictly speaking, I'm not a Sister yet. I'm due to take my final vows in two years' time."

"I see. My instructions are to arrange for your recall to Rome. I'm sorry it's at short notice, but the Vatican is concerned at the situation in Afghanistan. I was on my way to Qala-e-Naw, and part of my brief was to deliver the same message. Sadly, it's too late. For obvious reasons, they're recalling vulnerable personnel in other parts of the country."

She shook her head in confusion. "Father, I understand the reasons, but I can't just leave these people. No, it's out of the question. I have to stay. At least until they can arrange for a replacement."

"Sister, that's not possible. The instruction comes from the highest levels of the Vatican Curia. You don't have a choice."

Her expression relaxed, and she smiled. "I assure you, Father, my instruction comes from an even higher level. I have been called by God to care for these poor people. I will not leave until my replacement is in post." He went to argue, but she held up a hand like a traffic cop, and he closed his mouth. Doctors are like that. They often seem to be surrounded by an aura of authority. Then again, it may have had more to do with the fact she was stunningly beautiful, "The answer is no. If they want me back in Rome, they'll have to find a new doctor for this clinic. That is my final word."

Astonishingly, the Jesuit went pale with anger and stomped away to his assigned position a few meters away. He jerked up the machine gun in a savage movement and pointed it eastward, as if looking for someone to shoot to take the edge off his anger.

*I didn't think priests were like that. What's got into him? He should admire her courage and resolve to help the sick. Isn't that what the church is all about? At least, it should be.*

Highcloud joined them, and still keeping his gaze to the west, gave her a nod of greeting. "Name's Jim Highcloud, Ma'am. Is it Sister, Doctor, or what?"

"Maria is fine," she smiled, "I haven't taken my final vows, so Sister is not technically accurate. As for Doctor, I find it overly formal. My name is Maria Engstrom."

“Maria, got it. The thing is, you know about Camp Dwyer, the Taliban attack?”

“Of course, it was terrible. We had people streaming in here looking for medical aid. At first, the Taliban came and took most of our medical supplies, and then we had a number of soldiers who’d been hiding out in the desert, wounded.”

His eyebrows rose. “They’re still here?”

“Yes, we have eight American soldiers in all. They’re in the room at the end. If the Taliban appear, it’s the easiest place to slip out from. There’s a fire door.” She looked to the west, toward Camp Dwyer, as if the Talibs were already on the way.

“The thing is, Maria, I’m searching for my brother. He’s a Marine Sniper, based at Dwyer. I’m hoping he may have escaped, and if he was wounded, he may have wound up here.”

“Why don’t you come inside and take a look? You, too, if you like. Perhaps you could see how we’re looking after the American soldiers who came here. They’ll need transport to get them to a safer location. No doubt you can fix something up, Mr...”

“Nolan, Lieutenant Nolan, U.S. Navy. Kyle.” He held out a hand, and they shook. Her grip was firm and cool, and he drowned in the stare from her smoky gray eyes.

“Kyle, nice to meet you. Why don’t you come on in with your friend, and see how we do things here?”

“Me, come inside?”

She grinned. “I have an ulterior motive. We need supplies, and we need them urgently. You’re a military man. Maybe you can put in a word for us.”

“You don’t get shipments of medical supplies?” He was astounded, “Why not?”

She grimaced. “They send them out, and the insurgents hijack them, sometimes for their own use, but mostly to sell on the black market. It would help if the military would provide an escort, but they always say they’re too busy. Perhaps now that we’re taking care of some of their people, it’ll make a difference.”

“I’m sure it will. I’ll put in the word for you when I get back.”

He and Highcloud followed her into the clinic. They threaded along the corridor, gagging at the stench, and she opened a door at the end. They were in a small room, maybe four meters square. There were no beds, just men lying on the floor on thin mattresses. There wouldn't have been room for beds.

Both men went straight to the Americans, most of who were conscious. Apart from two men covered in dressings and connected to a makeshift drip stand, a length of thin string fastened to a hook on the ceiling. Highcloud examined all of them, and his face fell. His brother wasn't there. A Marine stared back at him.

"Is this a rescue? Damn, we were beginning to think we were trapped in this place." He glanced at Maria. "Begging your pardon, Doc, you've been great, but it's time we became Marines again." She nodded her understanding.

"It's okay. I can imagine how you feel."

"It's not a rescue," Highcloud told them, "I'm sorry, but we came here looking for my brother. He was a sniper based at Dwyer when the attack came. I guess I..."

"Sniper. I know Vernon. Yeah, he looks just like a younger version of you. He ain't here. He didn't make it."

Jim nodded, and his eyes clouded over. "I get it. How did he die?"

"Die? I didn't say he died. I said he didn't make it. I meant, didn't make it out with us. We figured they grabbed him. He was amongst the last of the defenders. He elected to stay and cover the retreat."

"Yeah, he would," Jim murmured.

"Right. So that's where he'll be, is my guess. Unless they've..."

He didn't need to say the rest, unless they'd executed him. "He's alive," the Indian grated, in a voice that meant he'd descend in to the depths of Hades to pluck him out if that's what it took. Either way, his brother wasn't dead.

"Sure he is. They'll be holding him prisoner. I expect they'll be looking for a prisoner exchange pretty soon, or maybe even a ransom."

A silence fell. No one wanted to consider the third option. It was possible they were holding their prisoners in readiness for a stage-managed public execution. It wouldn't be the first time. Maria broke the silence and looked at Nolan. "I need you men out of here. These patients are due for a



number of routine treatments around now. Why don't you wait outside, and I'll call you when we're all done."

Nolan looked back at her and found he was staring again. "Yeah, we'll do that. Thank you, er, Maria."

He nudged Highcloud, and they walked back through the clinic and into the blessed fresh air. The Indian stopped him outside the door. "I'm going in to get him out of that place. You know what they'll do to their prisoners."

"I know, yeah." He sighed, "Listen, Jim, it's not that easy. You know what it'll be like, trying to infil an enemy camp. They'll be crawling all over that place like ants."

"Would you leave your brother if he was in there?"

He couldn't lie. "No, I wouldn't."

"Right. I'll go in tonight. Hike across the desert, get inside, and find him. Dammit, that's what they trained us for. I'm a SEAL, not some quartermaster's clerk."

"You're right, but you can forget going in there alone. I'll be with you, but here's the thing. We do it my way, okay? You're fired up about this, and if your brother is going to have a chance, we need a plan. A good plan."

He thought about that for a second. "Thanks, Nolan, whatever you say. I just want him back."

"If it's possible, we'll get him out. Jim, give me a couple of hours. I have to think this through. There're some things I need to take into account. Four of my men are due here in the next twenty-four hours, so I'll need to take into consideration what they're doing."

"A kill mission." It wasn't a question.

"A kill mission, right. It's possible the two operations may mesh together, in which case we'll have four more SEALs to boost the team."

He nodded. "I'll wait and see what you come up with. Thanks."

"No sweat. Do me a favor, and take a look outside the village, to the west. If they come, it'll be from that direction."

"Copy that."

He walked away, and Nolan took another look around at his dispositions. Oz and Amy both waved from the roof, so no problems there.

*Did he have his arm around her? Well, okay, good luck to them.*

He glanced to where the priest should have been stationed, and wasn't. The approaches to the east were unguarded, and he shouted up to Oz, "Keep an eye out. Father David's vanished. I'm going to look for him."

Another wave. Some instinct made him go inside the clinic first, and he found Clark right away. He was engaged in a furious argument with Maria. Nolan listened at first, not wanting to intervene, but unhappy the man had left his post. He said he'd been a soldier. He should have known better. He waited in the shadows.

"I told you, it's imperative you return to Rome with me, Sister Maria. You're a nun, and subject to the discipline of the church."

"I've already explained to you it's impossible. I cannot leave here with patients uncared for."

"You have staff, Sister. There must be more people in the clinic with medical training. What do you think you are, some kind of saint?"

Her voice dripped with scorn. "I think I'm a doctor. I have responsibilities that I will not abandon. I cannot do what you ask."

"You do not seem to understand. It's not a request. It's an order. An order from the Holy Father himself."

"It makes no difference. I have already told you. Now please, Father, you must accept what I have said. My mind is made up, and I have my patients to attend to."

His voice came back as a low growl, and there was almost an edge of menace in it. "We will speak of this later, Sister Maria."

"Whatever."

He stormed out through the front without noticing Nolan, still clutching his PK machine gun. He stepped from the shadows, and she grimaced. "I take it you heard all of that."

"Yeah, kind of. I was looking for the priest. He wasn't at his post, but I didn't like to interrupt."

"Thank you." She pulled a few strands of hair from her face and tucked them inside the scarf, "I don't understand why it's so important to him."

"He didn't tell you about his family?"

"His family?"

"Yeah, he's a distant relation of the Pope. I guess that hangs around his shoulders, and he feels the need to make a success of the work they give

him.”

She nodded. “That makes sense, I suppose. Not that it makes any difference to me, you heard what I said; I’m not going.”

“Are they normally so concerned about their missionaries and medics? He sounds pretty pissed.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t encountered it before. He’ll just have to return to Rome and tell them I refused. They can do what they like, and I don’t care who gives the orders. Even if it’s the Pope, it won’t make any difference.”

“They could refuse to allow you to become a nun. You know, refuse to let you take the vows.”

She looked amused. “I’ve no doubt Father David will threaten that next, but the answer will still be no. I can do the work I’m doing without belonging to a religious order. In fact, I’m beginning to have doubts already. Perhaps I’ve made a mistake, if they think so little of what I’m doing here.”

“Maybe.” He couldn’t help looking at her and struggled to look away. She knew the effect she had on him, “Is something wrong, Kyle? You don’t look well.”

She was playing with him now. He knew that, and the trouble was, as far as he was concerned, she could keep on doing it. Anything to prolong the time he spent with a pretty girl. Then again, maybe she had a point. They’d put him in the hospital to recover from the poisonous Punji trap that he fell into. It hit him again, and he felt the effects of the poison returning. A churning in the guts, and then his legs were like rubber.

“I feel fine. I...”

He wasn’t aware of her catching him, but he couldn’t move. Her pretty face stared down at him. “Can you hear me?”

He couldn’t, and he opened his mouth to tell her, but someone else was shouting, and he strained to catch the words. It was Highcloud, and what he said was all bad.

“They’re here, the Taliban. Around ten of them, coming in on a truck from the west, the direction of Dwyer, and they’re about ten minutes out.”

He struggled to make sense of the words.

*The Taliban? Here?*

Then it hit him, as his brain started to function. He struggled to climb to his feet.

“I need my rifle. I think I dropped it. The aircraft, tell Father David to stop them crossing the bridge. Alert Oz, tell him we’re...”

*Tell him what? Taliban fighters are on the way in, and I’m staring up at a beautiful girl like a lovesick schoolboy.*

She was waiting for him to finish. With an effort, he forced himself halfway up and propped himself on one elbow.

“Tell him...tell him...”

*Tell him we’re fucked. There’s no way out of this. No hope, and nowhere to run.*

## Chapter Six

*CNN International News: Satellite reconnaissance images released by the NSA show Indian and Pakistani armor massing at the borders. In a more sinister development, there are signs that both parties are dispersing their mobile nuclear missile launchers to secret locations. Military experts state this is standard procedure in the run-up to war, but the Pentagon sees the threat as escalating out of control. Once again, Pakistan refused to comment. India was more forthcoming, a spokesman said, 'If the Pakistanis and their Afghan friends wish to avoid annihilation, they should hand over the guilty. The men responsible for the murder of our children must die for their foul crime.' Asked how long they would wait for a resolution, he said, 'My country is running out of patience. Time is running out, we will not wait much longer for justice. In a few days' time, it will be too late.'*

They approached the village of Garmsir, and Khan snarled at his men to stop bickering. "We'll be there soon. There shouldn't be much resistance, but I want every house checked in case there're soldiers hiding in there."

One of his younger fighters, Mustafa, gave him a broad smile. He was seventeen, and he'd been fighting since the age of ten. Killing since the age of twelve, and his first rape was on his thirteenth birthday. "Akram, you should be celebrating. This will be easy. We will kill enemy soldiers, if Allah wills it, and then there is the woman."

His head jerked around. "Woman?"

"Yes, don't you remember? I helped you carry Javed into the clinic, and that delicious doctor came to tend to his wounds. She was truly a wonder to behold, and I have counted the days ever since until I may have the chance to see her again. To gaze on her beauty, to strip off her clothes, and delight in her milky white, infidel skin. To ravish her body, and..."

"You will not touch the doctor, Mustafa. You hear me?"

The boy looked puzzled. "But, why not? I have sworn before Allah to take that woman and screw her so hard she begs for mercy."

"Leave her, and find another woman."

At seventeen years old, he'd seen most things, including jealousy. "You want her for yourself."

Akram snapped a reply. "I am the leader of this group, so yes, I have first pick of the booty, including the women. That is the way it has always been."

At first, Mustafa didn't answer. A sly look came into his eyes. "I will do my best to obey your order, Akram. Although you know in the heat of battle, there isn't always time to recognize whom you are killing. And who you are screwing."

Khan knew in that moment he'd have to kill the insolent puppy. He was the leader, and his word was law. He didn't recognize the very human emotion of jealousy inside him. Had never needed to consider how it may influence his thinking. He had a simple answer for what could become jealousy, a terminal answer. He held up a hand to make him stop. One of his men was waving frantically and shouting something.

"What is it?"

The man came nearer. "An aircraft, Akram. It could be the one we heard earlier, when we were leaving Dwyer."

"What kind of aircraft? Military?"

"No, not military. It's a civilian plane, like the ones the smugglers use."

He was undecided what to do. It was more than smugglers who used light aircraft. Charters were not uncommon amongst the contractors, who worked to repair the ruined infrastructure of the country. Infrastructure he'd had a hand in destroying. He smiled; it would give them plenty to do. There was another possibility. Special Forces had been known to use this type of aircraft for the clandestine insertion of troops. He needed to see for himself.

"I'll take a look. Show me where it is."

One kilometer out from the village everything came into view. The stone huts, the low building he remembered as the clinic, and the steel-girder bridge. Across the bridge, he saw a high wing monoplane. The area looked empty, but he took out a small pocket telescope to check and focused on the village. He looked for a long time, quartered the area with the Russian made optics, and removed it from his eye.

"The enemy is there ahead of us. Armed men, I can see two on a roof opposite the clinic, two in the main street, and the other standing in front of the clinic. They must have landed in the aircraft, so that may be all of them."

“Are they soldiers, Akram?”

“They are armed, and they are infidels. Whether or not they are soldiers, we will treat them in the same way, and kill them. But the first task is the airplane, to make sure they don’t escape.”

Mustafa nodded, but he was already thinking ahead. He’d no idea how many men were inside the village, and it could be his ten fighters may not be enough. Khan was no fool. A veteran of countless battles with the enemy, he knew how to minimize casualties while he hit the enemy in overwhelming force.

“Call Jami to me. I want him to return to Dwyer and order more men to join us. If he is quick, they’ll be here in less than an hour.”

The young man arrived out of breath from running, and Khan gave him instructions. He’d chosen Jami for a reason. The young man was a good driver, not disposed to destroy their truck with a macho display of hard driving, like some men under his command. He ran to the truck, drove away, and Khan considered what to do about this unexpected problem. It still rankled that Mustafa was planning to muscle in on the woman he’d decided to have for himself, although he had an idea that would resolve two problems at a single stroke. One of his men, Rasul, carried a pack filled with explosives. None of them knew its deadly secret. He’d attached a second, remote detonator inside the pack, as well as the conventional timer. He kept the remote transmitter on his person. Unknown to them, he’d ordered a secondary device made, in case the timer on the main detonator failed. Should the need arise; he could use it to detonate the pack prematurely. He called Mustafa to him.

“Take the pack from Rasul. We shall attack the village and kill those men. The moment the attack starts, I want you to get across the bridge and place the explosives underneath the aircraft. Set the timer for two minutes and then rejoin us.”

Mustafa gaped. “Akram, they’ll see me crossing the bridge. I won’t make it.”

He gave a reassuring smile. “You will. Head to the north, and when you reach the bank of the waterway, slide down out of sight. Make your way to the bridge and crawl over underneath the girders. It won’t be a problem.”

A sigh. “As you say, Akram.”

“Good. Start now before the shooting starts.”

He watched the boy take the pack and jog at a tangent into Garmsir. He was thoughtful as he watched him go.

*What would be the more useful target for the pack? If I destroy the aircraft, it will force them to stay here until my men have wiped them out. Alternatively, I could destroy the bridge. I could send the remote detonation command while he's crawling across. The aircraft or the bridge, I must decide, and soon.*

He waited until Mustafa was halfway to the river and then glanced at his men. They were watching him, expectantly, waiting for the signal that would unleash their craving to kill. That would bring them loot, women, and infidels to kill. He smiled to himself. It was like having a pack of wild dogs under his control, yet infinitely more satisfying. He nodded. “Attack!”

\* \* \*

She was helping him to his feet when the first shots cracked out. Bullets smacked against the stonework outside, ricocheting and whistling around the huddle of poor dwellings. He made a huge effort as adrenaline surged through his system, and rushed to the door. Behind him, he heard her calling his name.

“Nolan come back, you're not fit enough.”

He ignored her. He was still alive. That's what mattered. If they didn't fight back, they'd all be dead. He shouldered the door open and dived outside, rolling across the street as bullets whined past. In the distance he heard the shouts of men bellowing orders and the pig-grunt, “Allah Akbar,” the inevitable dedication of mass murder to their God. Highcloud was shooting back, using his M-16 like the professional he was. Firing three-shot bursts to conserve ammo.

Oz hadn't started shooting. The insurgents had changed direction and were coming in from a different angle. Amy was helping him move to the opposite side of the roof to get a shot, and as he watched, the veteran sniper flopped down, hugged his rifle into his shoulder, aimed, and fired. He glanced down at Nola, grinned, and shouted, “Scratch one.”

“How many more?”



“I counted ten. Wait, there’re eight of them still coming, that’s nine with the one I killed. One of them’s missing. We need to keep our eyes skinned for the bastard.”

He waved an acknowledgment and looked at Highcloud. “You get that?”

“I heard,” he rumbled, without taking his eyes away from the enemy, “Bastards are going to ground. This whole area is littered with drainage ditches. They’ll snipe at us and use them like trenches to come at us. There’s not a lot we can do about it.”

“I hear you, but do what you can. We need to bring more firepower to bear, so I guess it’s time our good priest joined the fight.”

“Now would be about right.”

“Yeah, I’ll get him to move his position.”

The incoming fire had slackened, so he jumped to his feet and raced over to Father David. “You need to move your position. The enemy has vectored to the north. You won’t be able to hit them from here.”

He shook his head. “I told you, I will use a weapon to defend life, but until our lives are directly threatened, I cannot help you. When I see them about to kill one of our people, I will shoot back. Until then, I will pray for them, and for you.”

Nolan was struck dumb for a few seconds. The man had military experience, a machine gun in his hands, and the enemy was getting close. He’d seen the way he handled a gun, like his military experience wasn’t so far in the past as he’d told them. “Mister, if you don’t use that thing, we’re all gonna die. That includes the staff in your precious clinic, your Sister Maria, and those wounded Marines inside. You need to start shooting back before they get any closer.”

He stared back at him. “No. I cannot do it. Not yet, I told you. I have a duty to preserve life, not take it.”

Nolan snarled, “Fuck you, you asshole,” and went to turn away. Then he remembered the missing man.

“We may have one of their men trying to infil the village from the opposite side from their attack. Cover the north side, and if you see anyone, kill them.” He saw the priest’s expression and modified his order, “Okay, you want to pray for his black, evil Muslim soul, go ahead. Just help us out and give us a shout first so we can deal with him.”

“I will do that.”

He shouldered the machine gun and began walking to the far side of the village. Nolan swung around to face the imminent threat, and as he did so, a long burst of automatic fire raked past him. He dived for the ground and crawled into the space between the clinic and the nearest house. Oz was on the roof, firing single aimed shots, and he looked down. “It’s not good. The bastards are crawling along the ditch. I can’t see them enough to get a shot. Every now and again I see movement, but so far all I’ve done is drilled a few holes through their robes. We need a plan B, Nolan, and we need it fast.”

“I hear you. Jim, how about those two shooters?”

“Same here. They’re hunkered down in one of those ditches, and all I can do is remind them we’re here and stop them getting any closer. It’s like trench warfare, except they have all the trenches, and we’re stuck in this place. Sooner or later we’ll run out of ammo, and they know it.”

“Copy that. I’m working on it. Oz, I’m coming up to join you, see how it looks from up there.”

“It looks like shit,” the reply came back.

He hadn’t exaggerated. So far, he was holding up well. Amy spotted for him, but the enemies they faced were no rookies. The sniper managed to keep their heads down, but he scored no hits, and they were getting nearer. Nolan estimated they’d covered about a quarter of the distance. He was working out the time they had left when a hail of bullets whined overhead, and they ducked low. The gunfire came from a place less than two hundred meters from the roof they were lying on. He’d been wrong.

“What’s going on, Oz? How’d they get that near?”

The sniper was staring through the telescope fixed to his rifle. “It looks like two of ‘em split off from the main group. They crawled along the bottom of the ditch while the others showed themselves every few seconds so we didn’t notice. Jesus, these are crafty bastards. They’ve done this before.”

He came to a decision. “I’m going out there to meet them. If they get any nearer, they’ll start scoring hits.”

He noticed Brennan’s slight shiver, and Amy met his eyes. She nodded. She’d keep an eye on him. She was good people, and he left them to it, ran back down the stone steps, and skirted around the dwellings until

he came to the edge of open ground. The ditch ended twenty meters from the nearest house, and it would be a sprint. He was in full view of the half dozen men sniping at them from half a kilometer away. The men crawling along the ditch weren't visible, and he discounted them. He'd meet them soon enough. He sucked in air and ran.

The gut-searing race against incoming bullets tore at his lungs and ripped at his guts. They didn't see him at first. He'd surprised them, but he was no more than halfway to the ditch when bullets began to pluck at his clothing. The hot lead chewed chunks of earth and stone from the ground around his boots. He ran on, and a bullet ripped through his sleeve. He felt the passage of air as another bullet graze his scalp, and then with a massive leap he was there, landing in six inches of water at the bottom of the ditch.

The two men they knew were creeping along the ditch weren't two hundred meters out. They were five meters in front of him, wiping the water out of their eyes from the enormous splash when he'd landed. They were stunned at first, and he seized the advantage. He'd hung on tight to the M-16, and he brought it to the aim, flipped the selector to burst mode, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The bitter realization came to him his landing in the muddy, wet ditch had caused debris to block the action. The Islamists came to the same conclusion about three seconds later, when they realized they were still alive.

They were bringing up the barrels of their rifles when he made the last move open to him. He ran at them. It wasn't a fast run. He was paddling in water and slipping in mud, but the adrenaline pumping around inside gave him speed. He reached the first man as the muzzle of his rifle aimed at his belly and clubbed it aside with his useless M-16. The man grunted and tried to twist away, but Nolan swiveled the rifle and slammed the plastic butt hard into his face. The edge caught in his eye, and he screamed in pain, turning away to favor his wound.

It was enough to rule him out for a few seconds. He turned his attention to the second fighter, who had the sense to back away. He couldn't reach him, and already his lips were tightening into a full-fledged scream of victory for when he killed his infidel opponent. There was insufficient room to twist away in the confines of the ditch, and no time. Nothing to shelter behind, except...with a massive lunge, he dived to where the man he'd wounded was still trying to clear his vision. The first bullet slammed past

him and buried itself in the mud. His fingers found the cloth of a dark-colored robe. He gripped it and used his momentum to drag the man between him and the shooter.

The body jerked as three bullets slammed into it, and the man became a corpse. He wasn't out of trouble. The shooter had stepped back even further and out of his reach. His expression was calm as he drew a bead on Nolan and grinned. He said something in Pashtu, but whatever it was made no difference. Both men, American and Afghan, knew his rifle was useless. He couldn't shoot back, couldn't reach him, could do nothing. Except die, as soon as the other man had maneuvered to squeeze in a burst of gunfire that would end the unequal contest. Desperately, he looked around for a way out, but there was nothing, just a wet, muddy ditch, a man trying to kill him, and a useless rifle.

Then he saw a possibility, an outside chance. It wasn't just two men and two rifles, one useless. There was also a corpse. The corpse had carried a rifle, which had fallen to the side of the ditch less than a meter from the body. With a huge effort, he picked up the body, took a step, and hurled it toward the shooter. The throw was short, but it was enough. The man who can see the body of a comrade flung at him in the heat of battle, and not flinch, is a rare creature indeed. He flinched, and it was an opening. Nolan darted toward the AK, swept it up, and brought it to the aim. A finger to check the position of the selector, and he flicked it to full auto.

The burst ripped along the ditch, and bullets tore into the insurgent. The magazine was half-full, but half was still fifteen bullets. He didn't count, but at least six ripped apart his belly. The kinetic force of the impact smashed him back, and he fell into the ditch, his lifeless eyes staring up at the sky. He took a moment to snatch up his AK and the webbing pouches with spare magazines, and then he was running back to the village.

This time they were ready, and bursts of semi-auto gunfire chased him all the way, but Oz was on to for them. He'd pinpointed their position and waited. Everyone knew it was impossible to fire a rifle without showing yourself. Oz nailed the first man before they realized the danger, and when Nolan sprinted back into the shelter of the stone dwelling, the shooting had stopped.

Highcloud waved his appreciation as he raced up the staircase to join Oz. He flopped down next to him and Amy. "What's the situation, how

many are left?”

The former SEAL's face was grim. “You mean of the original bunch, or the ones who came to join them?”

\* \* \*

Khan heard the shooting and minutes later saw the foreign soldier racing back from the ditch toward the village. It wasn't difficult to work out what had happened, and he thanked Allah for having the foreknowledge to send for more men. His message was for another ten of his best fighters to join him. He'd taken casualties, but when the new men arrived, he'd be back up to strength. Then he'd be unstoppable. No doubt these newcomers had arrived in the small aircraft, which meant there couldn't be many of them, perhaps ten, maybe less. His men would slaughter them, and the streets would run red with their blood when they'd finished.

Jami stopped the truck close to where he waited, crouched behind a meter-high earth wall next to a large drainage ditch. He grinned at him as men poured from the back of the truck and took cover in the gully next to him. They waited for him to give them their orders. They were eager for blood, loot, and women.

“My friends, we are facing a small force of foreigners hiding like cowards inside the village. Their numbers are limited. The aircraft they arrived in is across the main canal, and Mustafa is about to destroy it. When the explosion occurs, we will attack, but first, we must approach the village along these ditches. We will split into three groups of five, and move off now. Wait as close to the houses as you can, and go in when you hear the bomb detonate. They will be confused and disoriented, which is the moment to strike them.”

No one spoke. They were waiting, and he gave them what they wanted. “Inside the village, you will find loot. The drugs in the clinic will fetch big money on the black market, and there are women you can take for your own. Except for the doctor, she is mine.”

“She is pretty, Akram?” someone shouted.

He grinned. “Too pretty for the likes of you. She is not to be harmed.”

“The staff in the clinic, what do we do with them?”

“There will be women, nurses, they are yours. The rest, kill them.”

“And the patients in their beds?”

“We cannot take time to separate and identify any of them. You know what to do.”

They knew. Every man had brightened at the possibility of loot and women. Besides, the foreign soldiers would have valuables and good quality weapons. Watches pens, wallets stuffed with currency, cellphones. Not a huge fortune, but a just reward for doing Allah’s work. They murmured to each other as they decided who would go in which groups, and then they crept toward the ditches. Khan followed, making certain to stay in the rear. They’d surprised his two men who’d crawled along the ditch, but he’d make sure it didn’t happen to him. Why command a warband, and put your own life at risk?

\* \* \*

“I count ten men arriving in that truck. Eleven with the driver.”

Oz was watching them as they jumped from the truck. They stood on the opposite side, with the vehicle body hiding them from him. Nolan was next to him, working out their next move, if he had a next move.

“They’ll come in along the ditches again, and this time, they’ll be more careful. We can’t hold them, Oz.”

“I can get three or four when they make the final rush into the village.”

“Which leaves us with more than ten of them to handle, and Christ knows how many more coming to join them. We need to get everyone in the Cessna and get out of here fast.”

Oz stared at him. Even as he spoke the words, he knew it was impossible. The aircraft wouldn’t take them all, period. Not if they included the wounded Marines, Sister Maria, and the staff from the clinic who would almost certainly be killed.

“There has to be some way of getting away from here, a vehicle, even something small. We take some in the Cessna and the rest get out by road.”

“As long as you get the Cessna out," Brennan said, "When this is over, I still have a living to make.”

“Back in Pakistan? You think they’ll be okay with that, after you avoided their border patrol.”

“The aircraft was hijacked,” Amy said, “I saw it all happen. They took Oz and me prisoner and made him fly to Afghanistan.”

He grinned. “It may work. Okay, we’ll...”

“Nolan!”

He looked down, Father David, still holding the PK machine gun, was gesticulating for him to come down. He descended the stone steps and glanced across at Highcloud. He was waiting in the shadows, and he waved. He was guarding the western approach to the village, and Nolan joined him. “What is it?”

“I saw movement, someone on the bridge.”

He looked at the structure of interlaced girders but saw nothing. “You sure about that?”

“I’m positive, a man with a pack on his back, moving toward the bridge from the main canal. He...wait, he's under the bridge.”

He'd spotted him, a dark shape moving from hand to hand, swinging underneath. Crossing the bridge, but why? One man couldn't hope to stop them crossing over, unless he blew it up. Unlikely. He started walking toward him, turning back to murmur a warning. “Keep an eye out. There may be others heading this way.”

“Yes.”

He ran to the edge of the canal and stepped onto the bridge. Too late, the man was climbing out the other side, and in a sickening moment of clarity, he knew what he was doing. Spot an Islamist with a backpack, and the chances were he wasn't carrying his sandwiches inside. The gomer ran, and Nolan brought up the AK he'd taken from the dead fighter, sighted on the running man, and stopped. The target was already close to the aircraft, and a near miss could drill holes in the fuselage, even hit some vital mechanical or electronic component. He had to do it the hard way. Man to man.

The question was whether he was facing a man about to place a bomb for remote detonation, or a Shaheed with his finger on the button. He had to assume the former. He'd kill the bastard and disarm the bomb, or toss it into the water. He ran. The man looked around, saw him closing, and increased his speed. At the same time, he unslung the backpack and reached inside. He made it to the Cessna, still with a hand inside the backpack, and disappeared on the opposite side, out of sight.

Nolan put on a burst of speed. If they lost the aircraft, they lost the chance of getting out of this hellhole. Couldn't fly out the wounded, including Vernon Highcloud, assuming they could spring him from Dwyer. He saw movement, a man's leg showing beneath the belly of the plane, and threw himself to the ground to take aim. He never got off the shot.

He was about forty meters from the Cessna when the ground lifted, and a sheet of flame tore up into the sky. The aircraft almost went up vertically, rearing up two meters in the air, and then bursting into flames as it fell back to earth. Jets of flame spurted from the wreckage, and he felt the searing heat as the fire licked overhead. The Cessna was broken, a smoking ruin of pieces of scrap metal. A million dollars of light aircraft reduced to a smoking heap of garbage. With it went Oz's livelihood, Amy's job, and the chances of a swift evacuation for the wounded.

He was lucky. If he'd kept on running instead of stopping to lie prone to take the shot, he'd have been dead. He could hear the exultant shouts of the enemy as they rose out of their cover and came into the village. Jim's M-16 opened up, and he heard Oz's SR-25 spitting bullets, but both weapons stopped firing almost as soon as they'd started. He knew why. The enemy had arrived in strength, forcing them back. He catapulted to his feet, raced across the bridge, and passed Father David, who was waiting at the edge of the village, watching him. He still held the PK, but for all the use it was, he may as well have had a mop and bucket in his hands.

"They're coming in, and we have to hold them off. Come with me, and get ready to use that thing."

The Jesuit jogged alongside him. "I cannot shoot unless I see someone under immediate threat of death. I've made that clear. For now, I suggest I go to the clinic and do what I can to prepare the place for attack."

"Yeah, you do that."

He left him to it and joined Jim across from the clinic. He was waiting for Oz, who was climbing down the staircase, helped by Amy. His look was bitter.

"I'm sorry, Nolan, there were too many of them. They're at the other side of the building. They'll be here any moment. I saw the plane. I guess that's it."

"Worry about that later. Right now, we need to get into cover. We'll use the clinic. It looks solid, and we can protect the staff. We'll worry about



the rest of it after.”

He grabbed his friend and helped Amy get him across the road. They made it inside the door as bullets cracked into the woodwork.

“Get down. They’ll be shooting through the windows. Keep your heads down.”

He ran through the clinic to the room at the end where the Marines lay on their cots. “Heads up, we have hostiles incoming. If any of you can fire a gun, now would be a good time to move.”

They stared back at him, and at the person who’d entered the room behind him. Sister Maria, the nun doctor, and her eyes flashed with fury. “If you think you can force these men to leave their beds and take part in a battle, you can forget it. They are all very sick. Some have blood poisoning from their wounds, and any sudden movement is liable to kill them.”

“The men coming here are liable to kill them if they get inside this building.”

“They cannot fight. Every man is gravely ill, or they would have left before now.”

He heaved a sigh of frustration. “Do you have a radio, a telephone, any way we can call for help?”

She shook her head. “There used to be a two-way radio, but it was stolen long ago. I’m afraid we’re cut off. You’ll have to manage as best you can.”

She flinched as a furious burst of gunfire shattered against an outside wall and met his eyes. “They’re here.”

“Yeah, they’re here. We’ll do our best.”

He left her and raced through to the front to rejoin his small force. Highcloud was watching the front door, peering through a tiny window. He looked up as Nolan appeared. “They’re all around us. Amy took Oz on a tour of the building to check out the weak points. We’re lucky. I count two small windows, and they’re both barred and shuttered to prevent thieves getting inside to steal the supplies. If they want to get in, they have to come through either the front or rear door.”

“There’s always the roof.”

He nodded. “Yeah, there’s that, too, but we’ll hear them if they get up there. We can assume they’ll try to break through the doors to get to us. We could do with some help at the rear. I was thinking those Marines.”

He explained he'd tried but been blocked by the doctor. Jim shrugged. "Try again when she's not around. Here, take this." He gave him a spare AK-47, "They know what's at stake. We have to have that rear door covered."

They glanced down the corridor, in time to see Maria walk into another room. He hefted the assault rifle and headed back. A wounded Marine looked up with interest. He had a bandage over half his face, covering one eye, and more dressings wound around his chest.

"Lieutenant, if you need me to help give me the gun. First Sergeant Alejandro Ramirez."

"I'm Nolan, Lieutenant, U.S. Navy SEALs. The gun's yours, Sarge. What we need is for you to cover the rear door, the fire door behind you. That's it. If anyone tries to get through, you know what to do. If we hear shooting, we'll come a running."

He gave him a cold grin. "I've been looking to hit these bastards back ever since they took Dwyer. Jesus, they're animals, Lt. They killed the wounded and sick, and even the women, the nurses. You had to see it to believe it. They were raping those poor girls while the bullets were still flying. Any of 'em tries to get in, don't you worry. As long as there's bullets to fire, I'll shoot 'em."

"Thanks, Sergeant Ramirez. It's good to know we have you covering our six. They'll hit us in force soon, so I'll be getting back to the front. That's where they'll try to get in."

He left him to it returned to the front of the building. Maria was watching from a doorway, not far away. "I heard what you said, Lieutenant Nolan."

"Just Nolan is fine. Tell me, before you chew me out; is there a skylight in this place? Anywhere they could force an entry?"

She glanced to the doorway behind her. "The treatment room in there."

"You can get out onto the roof, or they can get in?"

"Yes to both. Listen, I don't approve of what you just did. I told you, those men are my patients, and every one of them is very sick."

"But they're not dead."

She regarded him, her eyes liquid and filled with concern. "No, they're not dead."

“They will be if those hostiles get in. It won’t be blood poisoning that kills them. It’ll be lead poisoning. One more thing, Doc. I’d pick up a small pistol if you can find one from somewhere. If they get in here, you’ll be better off with a bullet to the head. The alternative is they’ll gang rape you and then put a bullet in your head.”

“Suicide is a mortal sin, Nolan. I take it you’re not Catholic?”

“No, and it don’t make a world of difference when they’re torturing and raping. If you want me to do it for you, let me know.”

“You’re serious? You’d do it for me? Put a bullet in my head?”

“To save you the alternative, yes, I’d do it.”

Her expression changed and seemed to soften. She moved closer to him and spoke softly. “I appreciate the offer. But Nolan, it won’t come to that.”

“It won’t?”

“No, because I have every faith in you. You don’t strike me as the kind of man who would let bad things happen. One way or the other, you’ll defeat these bad people, and we can continue our work here, caring for the sick.”

She touched him on the forearm as she spoke, and he felt like he’d been hit with an electric shock. For one, mad, moment, he wanted to sweep her into his arms and take her somewhere safe. He came to his senses. She was a nun, and outside a gang of armed crazies was trying to kill them. Still, despite the threat of imminent death, he found himself enjoying the moment.

*She’s gorgeous. Also spoken for, and I can’t compete with God. I’ve fought a few battles in my time, but I’m not about to start that one.*

“I’ll do my best.”

Highcloud was busy returning fire from the front. He’d knocked out the glass in the tiny window and used it as a firing loop. He ducked back as a furious burst of bullets smacked against the door, and several rounds found their way inside the building, ricocheting against the walls. He saw Nolan approaching. “It looks bad. There’re about six out there, and the rest have disappeared. They’re up to something unpleasant, but the problem is, we don’t know what.”

“I hear you. Chances are, they’re going through the village, hunting out the locals. They’ll want to make sure the place is sanitized before they

turn their attention to us. They know we're going nowhere, so they can take their time. Problem is, we need to know when they're coming at us." He saw the Jesuit priest approach from inside the clinic. He still held the PK machine gun. "Father, what can you do to help us? We need that machine gun deployed, ready to fight off their next attack."

His expression was angry, "I will not use a weapon unless it is to directly save life. If they point a gun at a patient, and threaten to pull the trigger, then I am allowed to fire. Until then, I cannot."

"Okay, Father, I'll ask them to write you a letter and give you some notice. Until we get a reply, give me the gun. You're not helping."

"You have a weapon, the M-16."

He seemed reluctant to part with the light machine gun, but Nolan made up his mind for him and took it off him. He gave his rifle to Amy. "Take this, and use it to back up Oz." It was then he noticed Oz wasn't there, "Where is he?"

She looked away, embarrassed. "He went to see the doctor, Sister Maria. Said he needed some painkillers. I said I'd go for him, but he wanted to do it himself."

Her look said everything. He was about to crack under the stress of the siege. His mind had gone into automatic mode. He wanted out.

*This is going from bad to worse. What's he gonna do, fill his system with morphine so he's almost senseless? We're running out of options, and what we need here is something drastic. If I do nothing, we're finished.*

"Get him back here, and I don't give a shit what his problem is. Tell him to back up Highcloud. They can take turns at the window. One fires while the other reloads."

"I'll help him, and make sure he's okay," she nodded.

"No, you won't." He handed her the M-16, "You can use one of these?"

"I've fired a few shots in my time. Oz gave me some lessons a while back."

"Good. Get him out here, kick his ass, threaten to put a bullet in his head, I don't care how you do it. Just get him here. I want you to stand ready to go wherever you're needed. If they're trying to force a way in, get there fast and back up whoever is defending that place. Clear?"

She inclined her head, but she wasn't happy. "Oz may need me."

“I don’t give a shit. If they get in, we’re all gonna die.”

Her expression changed as she worked something out. “Where will you be?”

“I’m going out there. I can exit from the roof, and I’ll work my way through the village and hit them where they’re least expecting it.”

“You’re not serious? They’ll kill you.”

“They can try. If I can’t start to cut down their numbers, they’ll swamp us. Get Oz back here. I’m leaving.”

She left, and Highcloud glanced at him. “You’re taking an awful risk going out there.”

He shrugged it off. “Not as big a risk as if I stay here.”

He nodded his understanding. “Good luck, Lieutenant.” He threw up a salute, and Nolan returned it.

*A salute, or a goodbye? We’ll see.*

He walked through the doorway Maria had indicated led to the room with the skylight set into the roof. She was in the room, tending to patients lying on mattresses on the floor, six to each side. He ignored her, placed a table under the skylight, and climbed up. He could peer through the narrow iron bars and see out onto the flat roof. It was clear and not overlooked by other buildings. A heavy iron bolt secured the hatch, and he called down to her to help him.

“I want you up here and fasten the bolt when I’ve left.”

She stared at him. “You won’t be coming back?”

“I’ll be back, just not this way.”

They’d be watching and waiting, and if he came back over the roof, they’d see him. She nodded, and he pulled her up onto the table alongside him. Her proximity was overwhelming, the odor of a young, fit woman, overlaid by the tang of disinfectant. He wished he could have known her before she’d joined a convent.

He slid open the bolt, lifted the hatch, and pulled himself up. It all happened at once, and he knew he’d been wrong. They weren’t planning to attack the doors at either end of the building. The enemy had worked out something else. A tremendous crash shook the building, and in the room below, the fender of a truck appeared as it bulldozed through the flimsy structure. Patients screamed in terror as a huge hole appeared in the wall,

and armed men poured through, firing on the run. The clinic was about to fall.

## Chapter Seven

*CNN International News: The nations involved in the Asian crisis, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, show no signs of backing down. Experts believe it is a matter of days, even hours, before the war breaks out; a war that could tip the sub-continent into bloody chaos, and worse. Neither nation has excluded the nuclear option. The United Nations is working hard to forge a resolution to the crisis, although faced with stubborn refusals from all sides; no one believes they will be any more successful than they have in the past. Meanwhile, the world watches and waits for the war to start.*

Vice-Admiral Jacks shuffled the NSA reports, and they were all bad. Two nations were about to go to war. Both armed with nukes. The entire region was poised on the edge of a precipice. India, smarting over the bombing of a school in the part of Kashmir they ruled. Then there was Pakistan, natural Islamic allies of the Afghans. It appeared Afghan mercenaries had carried out the attack, with the connivance of certain senior people in Kabul. Now this.

It made for gruesome reading. Ten fighter-bombers of the Pakistani Air Force, Chengdu J-10 multi-role attack jets, sophisticated, Chinese-built aircraft with a performance equal to the F-16 and the Russian MIG 29. Attacking from the west of Jammu and Kashmir, they'd targeted a police-training center in Indian Srinagar. Ironically, it was the very city from where they'd launched the raid. The building had a full complement of personnel for a passing-out parade, and so far, the butcher's bill was high. Some said it would reach three hundred when they'd pulled the last corpse from the smoking rubble.

The diplomatic cables flew between the parties concerned. First, those determined to retaliate and set their nation's war machines in motion. Then there were those who would attempt a resolution by any means other than war. When the message reached the bottom of the chain, it landed on Jacks' desk. For the tenth time, he considered his response, although in his heart, he knew he had no alternatives.

A small fireteam from SEAL Team Bravo was en route to Helmand. He'd dispatched them in response to the initial demand to locate the man responsible for the school bombing, and bring him back to face justice. Either that, or administer justice in the field. The problem was, the intel people had discovered he'd surrounded himself with his own kind, hundreds of Taliban fighters, the men who'd overrun Camp Dwyer. Four men weren't enough, and he knew he'd made a mistake sending so few. It was too late to change the plan.

The message had come in an hour ago while his men were still in the air. Pakistani and Indian armor were massing on the borders, and even more ominous, they'd detected the precursors to a nuclear launch from both sides. The signs were all there. The recall of key military personnel, the increase in security around known launch sites, and a massive boost in signals traffic between the military headquarters and the silos. The next step was all too clear. They'd launch, and the world would bear witness to the horrors of a nuclear exchange.

They had a single chance. Find the man behind it all, and bring him back, dead or alive. They had a name, Akram Khan. Intel reports him as going to ground inside Dwyer. The problem was simple. A four-man infiltration team would take time to recce the objective and prepare to make a clandestine approach. The operation was critical, and failure was unthinkable. Yet his new instructions made failure a racing certainty. He sighed as he recalled the telephone conversation with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General William O'Rourke.

"Admiral, I want your men to go in the moment they hit the ground, and then tell me they've captured or killed this guy."

"Sir, you know there are too few of them for this job. Four SEALs, and they'll be up against a Taliban battalion. There's no way they'll ever get out of there."

A pause. "Can they get to this Akram Khan guy? Kill him?"

He didn't like to say it, but he wouldn't lie. "General, these men are SEALs. It's what they're trained to do." He ignored the attempted interruption and finished what he was saying, "The problem is this. Without adequate preparation or support, they won't get out. There's no way. You can send a hit team into any kind of place, and they'll do the job."



Afterward, they won't get out. What you're suggesting is a suicide mission."

"I'm sorry, Admiral, but that makes no difference. The job has to be done. You know what's at stake here."

"Four men, Sir. Four SEALs. Men with families, wives, kids. You're asking me to send them to their deaths."

"Dammit, I'm asking you to get them to carry out a job that will save tens of thousands of lives, maybe even millions. If they don't see this Khan, either dead or in custody, the missiles are gonna launch. There's nothing we can do to stop it."

Jacks closed his eyes. It was nothing like he'd ever been ordered to do in the past. Was it an order or a request? He briefly considered asking O'Rourke to confirm it in writing. To state unequivocally he was ordering him to send four men to their deaths. He dismissed the thought. It was cowardly, not worthy of the post he held. Quite simply, he didn't have a choice. Not a single one.

"Admiral, I'm waiting for your answer. We don't have much time."

"I'll speak to them the moment this call ends, and advise them to go in immediately they hit the ground."

*May God have mercy on my soul!*

"Understood, and tell them good luck."

He grimaced as he ended the call and summoned his secretary to come in. She gave him a smart salute. "Yes, Sir."

"I want a patch through to our Bravo Fireteam. They're somewhere in the air over Asia right now."

"Lieutenant Nolan's Team?"

"Nolan's already assigned. I want to speak to Master Chief Will Bryce."

"Master Chief Bryce, yessir."

\* \* \*

It was cold, bitterly cold, in the noisy, pressurized hold of the giant C-17. Master Chief Petty Officer Will Bryce glanced around at the other three men with him. The weasel faced knife fighter, John-Wesley Ryder, son of a New Orleans preacher. He looked unassuming, a man you could miss in a crowd until you noticed the eyes, the intent, fanatic eyes of a stone killer.

There was Brad Rose, the dandy of the unit, with the appearance of a California beach boy and the skills of a Mafia hitman. Lastly, Vince Merano, the Italian American sniper, clutching his weapon choice, the Barrett Light 50, fifty calibers of massive, long-range hitting power, death from a distance.

They'd been about to move to the north of the country when word came in of the change of plans. They'd split part of the Team to undertake a separate operation, one about which Bryce had misgivings, Helmand, the province where the Taliban were restarting their campaign of terror. Where since the current troubles had started, had taken over large chunks of territory. Chief among them was the capture and mass slaughter at the Marine base at Camp Dwyer.

They'd intended the new operation to be a search and destroy mission; hiking through the boonies, questioning the locals, gathering data, and getting close enough to the target. Akram Khan. Identify the target and take it out. Make a lot of people happy. It would be a long, hard trek, moving by night, hiding up through the day, and then the final hit. If they could get close enough, Ryder would finish the job. It would be a silent kill. The Louisianan could even sneak up on an Arab head of state, get past his massive security, and then kill him. Not a bad idea, he had a few candidates in mind. He dismissed the thought with a smile. It would be enough to get Khan.

If they could confirm the target at long-range, they'd use Vince to do the job. His opinion was they wouldn't a chance at a sniper shot. These men tended to stay in the shadows, aware of the intense hatred the world had for them. No, it would be Ryder who took him down, it was almost certain. A clandestine infil, hide out and wait for the moment, then take him out and leave town. They'd done it before, and the chances were they'd do it again this time. Even so, he wished it were anywhere other than Helmand, the graveyard of more troops than he cared to think about.

A crewmember walked down from the flight deck, and he looked up. "Is it time already? I thought we had another half hour before we're due to drop."

"That's correct, Master Chief. You're wanted on the flight deck. A call came in from your base."

"On the way."

He put down the rifle he'd been holding for a final weapons check and followed the man through the echoing, half-empty cargo hold. Apart from the four SEALs, a line of new Humvees was strapped to the aluminum floor, replacements for destroyed and worn out vehicles. They'd offload them when they landed. He reached the cockpit and went though. It was warmer than the cargo hold.

*Maybe I should have joined the Air Force and signed up for aircrew.*

He took the headset and spoke. "This is Bryce."

"Admiral Jacks, Master Chief. How's the trip?"

"Cold, noisy, and uncomfortable, Sir."

A dry chuckle. "I won't tell you what it's like here in Southern California."

"No, Sir."

"Listen, Master Chief, the plan's changed. There isn't time for a slow approach. We're days away from a possible nuclear exchange, maybe even hours."

"They'll have to wait, Admiral. If we're not careful, we'll spook the bastard, and he'll disappear."

"I know, I know, it's a gamble. We need you to ramp up the timetable. When you're boots on the ground at Garmsir, I want you to move out right away to hit the target. Lieutenant Nolan should be waiting for you there, so that'll be an extra man. Your orders are to infil Camp Dwyer, kill Akram Khan, and get out. You have twenty-four hours to complete the mission, and even that may be too long. We're almost out of time, Bryce. The tanks are waiting to roll, and the aircraft are in the air."

Bryce didn't answer at first. His mind was filled with images of five men sneaking into Dwyer, surrounded by a horde of rabid Talibs. It was too much, and too soon. They needed time to observe the enemy schedules, view the way they positioned and changed their sentries. Was there an irrigation ditch they could use that ran close to the wire? For an accurate sniper shot, they'd need to observe the ground, and make certain an enemy patrol didn't turn up and walk right into the sniper before he'd taken a shot.

"Sir, I'm not sure that's a good idea. If we go in there without any recon, we won't get out. You know how it works."

A pause. "I know. Nonetheless, those're your orders; link up with Nolan when you reach Garmsir, and then head to Dwyer. We want this

Khan dead, and if he doesn't die, we're looking at a full-scale war."

He made one last try. "What you're suggesting is as good as suicide, Sir. Sure, we'll take him down, but our chances of getting out, well..."

"I'm sorry, Master Chief. Those are my orders." Jacks wasn't prepared to tell him the orders had been handed down to him. That it wasn't his call, he was under the cosh, just as much as they were. That would be cowardly. He was the man at the top in Coronado. He'd take the flak.

*No, that's not true. Nolan, Bryce, and three other men, they'll take the flak.*

Will Bryce walked back to the cargo hold. He had no choice but to pass on to the men what they'd told him. The operation had changed from a carefully planned locate and destroy, to a suicide mission. Their chances of getting out were almost nonexistent, and there was no point in lying to men who may be about to lay down their lives.

\* \* \*

Captain Wasim Aziz felt the kick as he went to afterburner for a fast crossing of the Indian border. As always, flying the F-16 Falcon gave him a thrill. It never failed to astound him that they paid him to fly these magnificent aircraft. Some men lusted after fast cars, Porsches, Lamborghinis, and Ferraris. It was understandable. They were fantastic machines. All of them paled in comparison to the F-16. Capable of Mach 2, he was carrying a full load of ordnance, meaning his range would be severely limited. Not that it mattered, the cowardly Indians would still be asleep after he'd unloaded his bombs on the target and re-crossed the border for home.

Four 450 lb bombs hung from the hardpoints either side of the aircraft. He also carried two Aim-7 Sparrow missiles. Just in case. Not that he expected trouble. The Indians weren't expecting this raid, and it would catch them with their pants down. He glanced at his wingman, Raja Zardari, whose F-16 had taken up station to starboard and a few meters back. He checked his HUD, the heads up display, and confirmed he was on course. The target was Srinagar, which would be symbolic. It was from Srinagar the aircraft had flown to drop bombs on Pakistan, so it was appropriate they returned the compliment.

This time, the Air Force generals and politicians had decided on a target with a difference, an engineering and maintenance factory outside the city. For some reason, the stupid Hindus had built it next to an ordnance plant. This factory made artillery shells. Captain Aziz was confident his bombs would destroy both targets and send a message the Indians couldn't ignore. Attack Pakistan, and they were playing with fire.

They were flying low, and he checked his fuel state. At two hundred meters, they should avoid most of the Indian air defenses, but the massive General Electric turbofan burned fuel at an alarming rate. There was enough, just, to get to the target, unload the bombs, and then head for home. They could fly close to their service ceiling of fifteen thousand meters on the way back. The need for stealth would be ended. The Indians would know who was in their airspace.

The range to target in his display showed ten kilometers. He glanced aside at Raja and clicked his transmit button. Two answering clicks told him his wingman understood, and he pulled back the stick. The Falcons stood on their tails and roared up into the sky, leveling off at five thousand meters; a perfect height for dropping their ordnance. A minute later, the beep in his headphones signaled it was time to drop. He toggled the release button and felt the aircraft buck upward as the heavy weight of the bombs came off the airframe. A fraction of a second later, he saw Raja's bombs fall away. They both pulled back hard on the stick and kicked the rudder pedal to change course for home.

They past ten thousand meters, and he smiled as he throttled back and reduced the rate of climb. The smile widened as the bombs exploded. He saw several jets of flame far below, and then a secondary, much bigger blast. The explosives factory had gone up, a job well done. The reason for radio silence had ended. The Indians knew they were in the area. "Flight leader to Scimitar Two. A good job, Raja, it's time those bastards learned a lesson."

A chuckle came back to him. "We singed their balls, that's for sure, Captain. A pity we can't do this every day, and bomb them back into the Stone Age."

Aziz winced. It wasn't uncommon for his fellow pilots to feel the same way. The testosterone-fueled idiots rarely stopped to consider the response to their actions. The Indians could hit them with nukes, and it was possible

they could raze Pakistan before they had a chance to hit back. As it was, there'd be retaliatory raids, no question. It was certain they'd be earning their flight pay in the next days and weeks, patrolling the skies of Pakistan, lying in wait for the enemy aircraft and hitting them when they approached the border.

*I could be an ace! My name would be famous throughout the country, Captain Wasim Aziz. Five kills, that's all it would take. I'd be a hero. Medals, women, media appearances, it is all possible. Yes, all I...*

The threat-warning alert was harsh in his headphones, and he automatically scanned the radar screen.

*There, coming in fast from close to the border!*

They'd launched a surface-to-air missile, and it almost had him. He kicked in the afterburners, jerked the stick over the put the Falcon into a controlled spin, veering away from the missile. It had to be an Anza, similar to the U.S. Stinger. Fitted with an infrared targeting system, it would have locked onto the heat emissions from his engine. He could see it now, arcing around to follow his violent maneuver. With luck, he'd evade it and cross the border into Pakistan.

He watched its trajectory change and realized it had lost lock. He smiled with relief, and then his smile faded. The Anza had lost his aircraft, but it went back into seek mode, and a moment later, locked onto Raja's engine. His wingman was not an experienced pilot, and as he watched, the fool made a mistake and turned into the missile. A sound tactic, normally, except not with this missile. The theory was he'd be turning the heat from his engine away from the infrared seeker, and it would lose lock.

Raja flung his Falcon into a tight turn, putting the nose down, and following his leader into a spin. Too late and too slow, the Anza heat-seeking nose had sniffed out the emissions from his engine, and this time it hung on like a terrier. He tried everything in the book, and a few terrified maneuvers that weren't in the book. No matter what he tried, the end was inevitable. Aziz watched in horrified fascination as the long, dark shape drew nearer. The vapor from its rocket engine trailed behind like a long snake, and then it exploded.

The magnificent F-16 Fighting Falcon was no more. Instead, it became a disintegrating mass of metal fragments, or at least the fuselage at the rear did. The front part of the aircraft, the cockpit, lasted longer. Fully five

seconds after impact, and he could still hear the long, wailing scream of terror.

"Wasim...no...I'm on fire. Help me..."

"Eject, eject, Raja! Get out!"

The voice was muffled, filled with agony. "Can't...fire..."

He saw it then. The rear bulkhead had holed at the level of the cockpit floor, and Raja was burning. The impact had torn away the detonating mechanism of the ejection seat, and if he wanted to survive, he'd have to get out manually. Use the emergency canopy release, undo the seat straps, and fling the aircraft over on its back. He'd tumble out and release his parachute manually. It was no go.

The flames were licking up from the floor, around his chest, and they came up to his face. Two seconds later, the aircraft literally fell apart, and fragments of a multi-million dollar fighter jet dropped from the sky. Metal, burning jet fuel, rubber, nylon, and human flesh. It had been quick, but not quick enough. Wasim shivered, it could have been him, yet it wasn't. Raja was a young man, with a life to live. He shouldn't have gone like that, a skilled pilot in a superb machine, reduced to fragments of aluminum and bone. He felt a rage take over his body. He would take revenge, sooner or later. If he had any choice, this first raid over Indian Kashmir would not be the last. He'd volunteer to fly every single one. It was all he could offer to the memory of Raja Zardari.

*Kill Indians, as many as possible.*

\* \* \*

Will Bryce's overwhelming feeling was one of relief. Although they'd moved the schedule forward, and he'd need to make adjustments, the waiting had ended. He saw the Jumpmaster make the final checks and plug in his headset. Then he glanced at Will.

"Five minutes. Stand clear, I'm lowering the ramp, switch to oxygen."

The four men adjusted their masks and goggles, and watched as the huge ramp began to lower. Gale force winds howled inside the fuselage, and the temperature dropped by forty degrees in a few seconds. The cold bit through their combat clothes, even seemed to penetrate their armored vests, which would stop a rifle bullet. He regarded Vince Merano, the unit sniper,

who was making a final check of his precious rifle. The long-range Barrett M107, fifty calibers of death to whoever appeared in the optics of his Leupold Mk 4 scope. Vince snapped the lid closed and tucked further chunks of foam rubber under the harness that double secured the case. He looked up.

"Just making sure, Master Chief."

"Uh, huh, I know what you're doing. Four minutes, move to the ramp for final checks."

"On my way."

He was going through the usual checks and procedures when the voice came into his earpiece, the pilot, speaking from the flight deck.

"Master Chief Bryce? A message from Admiral Jacks."

"I'm listening."

"He said to tell you the Paks just bombed a major facility in Indian Kashmir. The Indians managed to down a Pakistani fighter."

"That's it?"

"Yep, that's it. Well, except for what we've all just heard. It was on all the news channels."

"Reception's not too good inside this cargo hold."

"I guess not." He didn't sound sympathetic, "They're staring each other down across the border, and the Pentagon has gone to Defcon 2."

"I beg your pardon? Did you say Defcon 2?"

"That's correct. It's SOP when two nuclear powers look to be about to start a shooting war. When that armor rolls over their respective borders, it'll be Defcon 1."

Will grimaced.

*What the hell are we getting into? If we don't get this guy, they're gonna launch nuclear tipped missiles? Crazy bastards.*

"Copy that."

There'd be time to give them the news when they hit the ground. The news that the stakes had just risen. He looked at the man hanging back in the shadows. John-Wesley Ryder. The religious nut as expert at short-range killing as Vince was at long-range. Ryder was skilled with most weapons, but the knife was his preferred choice. He liked to see the eyes of his opponent when he slid the blade between the ribs; even quoted Biblical verses as the arterial blood spurted from the body impaled on his blade. He



was there for one reason. He spent most of his life in the shadows. When Ryder killed, he came out of nowhere, hit the target, and vanished. He acknowledged Will's glance.

"You got it. You okay, Master Chief? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm good."

He joined Vince, moving through the vast, clattering, windswept cargo hold to the ramp. The fourth member of his unit tucked a photograph into the pocket of his combats, nodded, and joined the others. Brad Rose, the California beach boy, all streaked, curly hair, golden, tanned skin, and wide eyes innocence. That was on the outside. Inside, he was the consummate professional, like the others, a killer. Rose smiled and joined them. They busied themselves checking their rigs and waited. The Jumpmaster held up a single finger. One minute. They stood, watching the tiny pinpricks of light from six miles below, and then he was counting down with his fingers.

The green light winked on, and he waved them out. Each man stepped into space, like commuters exiting a subway train. Will watched them, checking distances, making sure no one came close to fouling the other. They wouldn't. They were experts, but it was his mob. He used his wrist-mounted navigational computer and calculated glide angles and rates of descent. He was fractionally off course, and he adjusted his body until he was heading straight for the LZ.

The descent was long and cold, and when the parachute opened with a jerk, he felt a distinct sense of relief. The bitter, Helmand night would seem warm compared to the howling, freezing winds they'd passed through high in the sky. He was thinking so much about being warm he almost missed it. Then the ground came up, and he jerked on the lines to alter his approach until he could step down to the sand. One by one, he watched the other three men appear beside him.

They'd landed next to a waterway, and the water level was high. Each man stowed his gear and prepared for the next phase of their infil. It was time to link up with Lieutenant Nolan. It was then the wind changed, and they heard the shooting in the distance. He weighed the options. He'd decided on a slow, clandestine approach. Nolan could be in trouble and involved with that shooting they'd heard. It was tempting to go charging in toward the source of the gunfire. He'd decided to do it the other way, the

sure way, the sneaky, Navy SEAL way. Creep up on the bastards, and let them have it before they even knew you were there.

They were watching him, the other three SEALs. They knew his dilemma, had weighed the options just like him, and they were unsurprised. When he gave the order, they just nodded and moved off.

"Men, we're gonna get wet."

\* \* \*

Nolan grabbed the girl's arm and dragged her through the roof hatch, out into the open. He could hear rifle fire from inside the clinic as they fought back, struggling to hold off the attack.

*Who is in there, still fighting? That Marine, for sure, with the AK-47, but it's not enough, not by a long way.*

He could hear the sharper, higher pitched crack of an M-16 so assumed Highcloud was still fighting. He hadn't heard the Barrett. No distinctive, deep bellow of the .50 caliber rounds as they left the muzzle. He wondered what had happened to Oz and Amy. Has they been overwhelmed by sheer numbers of enemy fighters? It seemed the most probable explanation.

A head appeared through the roof hatch, followed by the barrel of an assault rifle. He swung the PK machine around and let loose a three-shot burst. The man screamed, and he started to fall back. Before he disappeared, Sister Maria grabbed the barrel of his weapon to stop it falling back inside the clinic alongside the body. She snapped out the magazine, inspected the load, and gave him a triumphant grin.

"It's full. He hasn't even fired it. What do you want me to do?"

He was fighting to hide his astonishment. "Are you telling me you're prepared to use one of those?"

"I am. I learned to shoot a few months back. They organized a marksmanship competition at a Kabul outdoor range, and someone bet me I couldn't do it."

"With an AK-47?"

"You bet."

"Jesus Christ, you're a nun."

Her grin widened. "I doubt the Lord Jesus would approve, but you should remember I'm not a nun. Not yet, anyway, I haven't taken my final vows. Until then, I can do pretty much as I please. Tell me, whom do you want me to shoot? I don't want these bastards to murder all of my patients."

At that moment, a second head appeared in the roof hatch. Nolan pointed. "Him."

She nodded, aimed the rifle, pushed the selector to burst mode, and fired several rounds that took the man in the face. He was already exiting the hatch, mouth open in triumph. Blood spurted from the wound where she'd hit him in the neck. So much blood there was little doubt she'd smashed the carotid artery. Nolan stared at her for a moment, transfixed by this beautiful nun turned doctor who'd turned again into a determined shooter. Then he had his hands full.

A hail of bullets whistled past them, and some chipped stone from the flat, concrete roof. He hit the deck, lay prone, and tucked the butt of the PK into his shoulder. More bullets spurted past them, and he heard her cry out. He looked around, but she waved it away. "I'm okay. It was just a graze."

"Can you keep that hatch covered?"

"As long as I have bullets to shoot, yes."

He smiled and then pulled the trigger. Men were on the roof of the cafe opposite where until recently Oz had positioned himself with Amy. They weren't there. The rooftop had acquired new tenants. A half dozen shooters, some firing down at the front of the clinic. Which meant at least one of his men was still there, and holding. The remaining two targeted the clinic roof. The first burst knocked one of the shooters back, and he was dead, or as near dead as made no difference. The second man still firing at them took the hint and dived behind the body of his dead or dying comrade.

The 5.56mm round of a PKM is a superb piece of ordnance, allowing soldiers to carry more bullets for the same weight as a much less number of 7.62mm rounds. For good reason, it is much lighter. For the same reason, it lacked some of the penetrating power of its heavier cousin, and when he let rip at the target, the bullets slammed into the body, but none hit the target, the rifleman behind. He needed a heavier round, and the answer came to him. There was already a 7.62mm assault rifle on the roof.

"Maria, how're you holding back there? I need you."

*I need your rifle would be more accurate.*

"They've backed off for now. I wounded another one, and they haven't tried again."

"Good, crawl over, and keep your head down."

The shooter across on the cafe roof was staying behind the dead body. He poked his head out several times, snapped off a shot, and ducked back behind cover. The bullets whined harmlessly overhead. One gouged concrete a meter away, so there was little danger. Not yet. The problem was, sooner or later, he'd get lucky. Maybe he'd select rapid-fire mode and spray bullets around them, which meant he'd hit someone. He had to put stop him, and soon. After that? He was still working on it.

She joined him after a few seconds. He could smell the heady scent of perspiration and healthy young female. Even the strong antiseptic overlay changed little. She was an intoxicating girl, in many ways. Clever, brave, resourceful, and yet...throwing her life away to join a convent. It was almost enough to make a grown man cry. Then again, was it throwing her life away? He'd made a decision to commit to the SEALs, was that so very different, dedicating your life to a cause, to a service? However, yes, it was different. It didn't put the brake on normal human relationships.

"What do you want?"

"Your rifle."

He took the AK, and she held the PK machine gun, with the bipod unfolded for stability.

"What do I do?"

"Nothing."

"I can't wait around and do nothing. Tell me how to shoot this thing."

He leaned over and made sure the selector was on single shot. An excess of ammunition was something they didn't have. "Okay, use it the same as the AK-47. Point, aim, and shoot."

She nodded, closed one eye, and aimed at the rooftop opposite. A squeeze of the trigger, and the shooter, who'd just popped his head up, screamed as the bullet almost took off his ear. "Like that?"

"Just like that, but keep your head down. It's too pretty for some raghead to put a bullet in."

She looked at him for a second and then concentrated on her shooting. Nolan switched off from the girl and focused on the task he'd set himself. It wasn't an easy shot. The AK-47 is not an accurate rifle for long distance

shooting. He had no illusions about shooting through the dead body either. The best he could hope for was to target the limbs or the neck, in a place where the shooter was hiding behind. If he could hit him, the man would rear up in pain, and he could send a follow-up bullet or two to finish him. He hunkered down and stared hard at the distant target. Something moved.

*Yes, it has to be. Dead bodies don't move.*

Below the neck, he glimpsed fabric, a man's robe, or even a turban. The 7.62mm bullets would go straight through the soft tissue of the neck. The trick was getting it right. He stared hard through the iron sights, watching and waiting. The movement came again after Maria fired a single shot that embedded itself in the roof close to the body. The man had flinched.

*You'll do more than flinch, motherfucker. You came here to attack a clinic. You'll need more than a clinic when I've finished with you. A morgue would be about right. Provided I get this right. If I miss...okay, don't think about that. What did Master Yoda say, there is no try? Yeah, well, you're not here right now, my little Jedi knight.*

He sighted on the neck, held the aim, carefully selected three-shot burst mode, and squeezed. The bullets cracked out, and the body jerked. A fraction of a second later, a man leapt up from behind the body. The piercing scream of agony traveled across to their roof. Nolan squeezed the trigger again, and this time, he had no problem finding something to hit. A grown man, a full size target, and three bullets slammed into him. The screams ended, but now he'd attracted the attention of the man's pals. All of a sudden, the four men who'd been firing into the clinic turned their attention to Nolan and Maria.

Bullets whistled and whined all around them, and she shot back. He grabbed her arm. "Forget about them. We're leaving. Keep low and follow me."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere but here."

He switched to full auto and sent a hurried burst that caused them to dive for cover. Then he was fast crawling across the roof of the single story building. He reached the edge and looked down at the narrow alley below. It was empty, and he shouted for her to follow him down. The shooters had

recovered fast, and bullets peppered the roof they'd just left, but when they'd dropped down to ground level, they were out of sight of the enemy.

He ran to the end of the lane and looked out, in time to see the first of the men running down the stairs. He was pointing in their direction, and two of his pals came after him. Nolan turned to the girl. "They're coming, run!"

They hurtled along the lane, the failing light saving them from certain death. Darkness had fallen in a matter of minutes, and racing through the shadows made them a difficult target. They were in a race, and every few seconds, a hail of bullets would whine and ricochet around them. Their one chance was to reach the waterway and cross the narrow bridge. They could hold off an army once they were the other side, which meant less for Highcloud and Oz to deal with.

"The bridge," she shouted.

He'd been looking back, waiting for a chance to send a bullet at the men pursuing them. Something to slow them up, but they'd got wise to his tactics. Two were still following them, but they were more cautious, not breaking out into the open, waiting until they could see the way was clear. More ominously, he heard footsteps; men running along the street parallel to the one they were following, heading to cut them off before they reached the canal.

He put on a spurt and shouted, "Faster, we're nearly there."

She stopped and pointed. "We're too late, Nolan! The bridge, look!"

Somehow, a hostile had got there ahead of them. Anticipated what they were doing and found a shortcut. He waited, shielded by the metal girders of the bridge. There was no way across. They couldn't get a shot at him, and if they tried, he'd blast them. They were done. Behind them, an assault rifle cracked. He searched for, and found, the nearest cover available to them, the canal. The steep, shelving bank of the waterway would give them some cover.

The enemy stopped shooting, and Nolan crept back up to the top of the bank. He looked out and ducked his head down. The man on the bridge had a clear shot, and they'd positioned another shooter at the side of the building closest to the waterway. Stalemate. Whichever way they went, they were in trouble. The steep angles meant the man on the bridge couldn't get a shot at them unless they tried to move away, in which case they'd be in full view, and he'd fill them full of holes. The same went for the guy waiting beside

the building. If they put their heads up, he'd blow them off. Yet they couldn't stay where they were. There was still shooting coming from the area around the clinic, so it was obvious Highcloud and Oz were still fighting. At least, someone was.

"What're we going to do?"

She was staring at him with her huge, liquid eyes. To his surprise, they showed no fear. Maybe she trusted in her God to keep her safe. Maybe it would work for her, it hadn't worked for many others who'd put their faith in God in the past. The bullets found them, just the same.

"I don't know. It's dark now, but the moon is lighting everything up. If it goes behind some clouds, we can make a move. Try to work our way around the other side of the village."

She looked up. "There aren't any clouds."

"Have faith. There'll be clouds."

She stared back at him. "I do have faith, but there still aren't any clouds. What if..."

She stopped. There was movement. Two men briefly showed themselves, and then ducked down. They'd sent reinforcements to flank them, and then kill them.

"We have to move. It's going to be difficult."

"Move where?"

"Into the water."

"Okay, if you..."

She stopped. A vehicle had just driven across the bridge and turned around to face them on the opposite bank. The headlights came on, and they were bathed in a blaze of light. Then the shooting started again. He snatched her hand and dived into the water. It was nothing more than a temporary respite. The man on the bridge had moved position and was firing into the water. The current was slow, not fast enough to carry them out of trouble. They had one option left, and they took it. He pushed her head under the water and went with her.

Minutes later, they surfaced underneath the bridge and out of sight of the headlights. It was impossible for the shooter on the bridge to target them. Maria was spluttering after he'd dragged her head under to avoid a long burst of machine gun fire. He'd felt the spent lead hitting them under

the water, its force expended. It had been a close thing, too close, and they had a long way to go before they were out of trouble.

She turned her dripping wet face to him. "What now?"

*We die, is the obvious answer.*

"Next they'll come down the sides of the bank to start shooting at us. We have minutes at best." He looked up at the bridge, measured angles, and looked at the distance to the other side. No go, they'd never make it. Their remaining option was a long, underwater swim. He could make it, although the hostiles may track them if they could see the shadows of their movement from the surface. She wouldn't. He'd gone through Hell Week, the final week of BUD/S training, and could travel a long way underwater. She wouldn't make it half way.

"Can we do anything about it?"

He nodded. "We're reduced to a single option, and that's to attack. We'll swim to the bank and charge them down."

Her mouth dropped open. "They'll kill us before we even get close."

"They may. Then again, we may get lucky, and their bullets all miss."

Her eyes flashed with comprehension. "This is it, isn't it? We've got about as much chance as winning the lottery."

"About that. I'd hold that gun up and keep the water out if I were you."

She was still holding the PK and saw he had the AK held high, and she lifted it clear. Water poured from the mechanism. "Will it fire?"

"Maybe. It should be okay. They built those Soviet guns to be idiot proof. We have to move. Let's go. Try to make the opposite bank, and when we get there, roll onto the bank."

She nodded. "Nolan, I'm frightened. I don't think we're going to make it."

"We'll make it. Let's go."

They dived under the black water again and struck out for the bank. The swim was short. The canal wasn't wide, and they crawled up the sloping side. They made the first two meters, and then stopped as a bullet smacked into the mud next to them. He looked up, and the shooter was standing on top of the bank, his gun aimed down at them. He was smiling, his mouth open, and teeth exposed. He took his time, like a cat playing with the mouse he captured and is doomed to die a horrible death.



He thought about bringing the AK around and snapping off a shot, but another man appeared at the top of the bank. Two assault rifles pointed down at them, and then the voice called out, cruel, harsh, and filled with satisfaction.

"Infidels, you have five seconds. Say your prayers, and if you have any sense, say them to Allah the merciful."

He hesitated. He wasn't going to go down without trying, and yet he knew they had no chance. Fight, and they'd die. Surrender, and they'd kill them.

*Still, I might take one with me. A pity about the girl, but no camel jockey will ever show compassion to a woman. Females are for raping, cooking, and cleaning house. Giving birth to more soldiers in the endless battle against the entire world, for the ascendancy of the Prophet, they're also disposable.*

He tensed and counted down the seconds. There were three to go, then two, then one, and he swung up the AK in a last, despairing attempt to turn the tables.

## Chapter Eight

*CNN International News: Has the war started already? Claims and counter claims have been made about an air battle over Kashmir. The Pakistanis claim to have shot down seven enemy aircraft. The Indians say this is nonsense, and will produce the wreckage of a Pakistani fighter they shot down with one of their missiles. Whatever the truth, all eyes are on the armored columns queued up at the border, waiting for the order to invade the territory of their respective neighbor. Meanwhile, the White House has issued a statement saying they will not get involved in what is a local dispute. Asked about using U.S. Special Forces to locate and bring to justice the men responsible, they said it was out of the question. The spokesman said, 'Watch my lips. No, repeat, no U.S. troops, Special Forces, or otherwise will get involved in this dispute.'*

The gunfire was shattering, and in a reflex action, he took hold of the girl, held her to him, and leapt backward toward the water. At the same time, he became aware of dark, black shapes emerging from below out of the depths. His subconscious at first wondered if there were crocodiles in the water, but no, they didn't exist in Afghanistan. Then he knew when he saw the first man step onto the bank, firing a weapon he knew better than most. An HK-416, preferred assault rifle of Special Forces worldwide, and in particular, the U.S. Navy SEALs. Bravo had arrived.

He watched the unmistakable figure of Will Bryce, his Master Chief, charge up the bank, spitting short, accurate bursts at the hostiles. Three more divers appeared and emerged from the water shooting. The two men who'd been trying to kill them went down first. The other three SEALs poured a hail of gunfire across the canal, to hit the man on the opposite bank and the shooter on the bridge.

It was all over in seconds, and the first man out ripped off his goggles.

"Boss, I reckon that's what you'd call the nick of time."

"You came to get us out of this? How come?"

Will shook his head. "We're here for something else. Are you both okay?"

"I think so, yeah."

He was coming to terms with the shock of near death and the sudden, unexpected rescue. He'd been in some tight spots during his time in the Service, but they didn't come much tighter.

Maria fixed Will with a curious gaze. "Who are you?"

The big, black Master Chief grinned. "I guess you'd call us the cavalry, Ma'am."

Nolan managed to collect his thoughts. "Will, this is Dr. Maria Engstrom, she runs the clinic here." Bryce smiled and held out his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Doc."

He gazed back at Nolan, and his eyes said it all.

*How did you pick up a girl like that in the middle of a battle?*

He was still holding her hand.

"She's also a nun."

He dropped the hand as if it was red hot. "Uh, yeah, okay."

Nolan glanced around for the other three SEALs who'd come in with Master Chief Bryce. He needn't have worried. Will knew his business. They were out watching for signs of further attack. "The battleground is in the village, Will. Some of our people are holding out in the clinic."

"Our people?"

"Jim Highcloud's up there. A bunch of wounded Marines from Dwyer in the clinic. Oz is there, too. Oz Brennan, you remember him?"

"Sniper, he left the service. Some kind of a health problem."

"Something like that. Let me meet the guys, and we'll work out our next move."

"I have patients in there as well." They turned to regard Maria, "We have to help them, if it's not too late."

Nolan nodded. "We will."

They crossed the bridge, and he shook the hands of each of his Bravo operators. "Brad, good to see you, John-Wesley, Vince, you, too. We were gonnas before you arrived. It's never been better to see you."

"You, too, Lt."

"Boss, I need a word."

He looked at Will. "What is it?"

"You know this part of the world is erupting in chaos, even as we speak."

His brow furrowed. "How serious are we talking?"

"Nuclear serious."

"Shit. Okay, let's hear it."

He explained much of what Nolan had missed. It all came down to the raid on the school. If they didn't get the person, or persons responsible, the tanks would roll, and it was possible the missiles would launch. "We have a name, Akram Khan. That's why we're here, to grab him out of Dwyer."

"Akram Khan!" Nolan stared at him, "If it's all down to him, let's clear this village of insurgents and go get the bastard."

Will smiled. "It's your call. You're in charge."

"I thought this was your operation."

"Not anymore. You call it, Boss. That's the way it works."

"Okay, we'll go in an hour before dawn. Kill these bastards, and then we can go home."

\* \* \*

Khan waited in the truck, guarded by two of his men. The attack had failed. He knew that much when the sole survivor rushed back.

"What is it, Sami?"

"Sir, they're all dead."

"All of them? What about the men who attacked the clinic? Some got inside. I saw them go in. I ordered them to kill everyone they found."

"Dead, all of them."

"And the ones who were next to the canal?"

"Dead."

He wanted to smash the messenger in the face with the butt of his rifle. "How can they be dead? It was just a man and a woman who escaped over the roof. How could they have killed my best fighters?"

"I don't know, Sir. One moment they looked as if they were about to kill them, and then...something happened."

"Something happened?"

"Sir, it was like devils, sea devils. They came out of the water and killed our people."

Khan lost it and punched him in the face with his fist. "You moron. They weren't sea devils. They were Special Forces. It's a technique they use. If we..."

He stopped speaking.

*Special Forces, they're here. Well armed, well trained, men in black, men who bring silent death to my country. Sometimes, it is not so silent.*

He shouted for his driver. "Get us out of here, back to Dwyer. This is important news I have to convey to Commander Tarzi. Sami, stay here, and keep watch on what these infidels do. Find out where they go. As soon as you know anything useful, report to me."

The boy's mouth opened and closed several times, like a beached fish. "Stay here? But, they'll kill me if they find me."

"Then make sure they don't find you."

"Yes, Sir. How will I contact you?"

Khan sighed and pressed a satphone into his hands. "Use that if you have something useful to report. Press button one. It will connect to another phone I have in the camp."

The boy looked shamefaced. "Sir, which is button one?"

"You can't read? Idiot! It's this one." He put his finger against the plastic key. "Make sure you don't lose it or damage it. And whatever you do, don't press button number nine."

"I don't know which one that is."

"That's just as well. Driver, let's go!"

He didn't feel safe until they were halfway across the dark desert. Even then, there were concerns. The accursed drones often struck at night. It was time to drive all of these foreigners out, so men like him could do as they wished in their own country. He looked out the window, watching and waiting for any shadow that appeared backlit against the clouds, dark against the moonlight. Only when they drove through the gates of Dwyer he felt safe in the bosom of his own people, safe enough to go around to the back of the truck and open up. The man climbed out and stretched his arms and legs. The man he'd found wandering in Garmsir, the man who could change everything.

"Where are we, Akram? Is this Dwyer?"

"It is. You'd best cover your clerical collar. You can understand the men will not be happy to see a Christian priest in their midst."

The priest smiled. "I don't care whether they're happy or not. What happens next?"

"That depends on Tarzi. We will see him now."

\* \* \*

They'd gone, and the village was empty. After a cautious check of the stone houses and back alleys, it was obvious they'd left town. They linked up with Highcloud, still guarding the clinic. After the ritual backslapping, Bryce and Highcloud calmed down to take stock. Nolan had another task to undertake. "Where's Oz? And how about Amy, did they make it?"

Highcloud glanced up in surprise. "Oz, sure. When the shit hit the fan and they got inside, he appeared like from nowhere. The corridor was hot with lead as the hostiles advanced toward the back, and that wounded Marine was shooting at them. I gather you'd got out onto the roof with the Doc, and I couldn't get back inside to fight them off. There was one almighty crash, and Oz came through the back door. He almost got his stupid head shot off, and started blasting at them with that monster rifle of his. Took down three of them, and the rest ran."

"Where is he now?"

"In back, chatting to the Marines. They reckon he's some kind of a hero for saving them."

Nolan thought about that and nodded. "They're right. He is a hero."

He walked along the corridor, down to the end. The door was open, and men were laughing and shouting. He walked into the room, and Oz looked up. He had his arm around Amy, and his smile faded. "I heard shooting, and for a while, I thought we were going down."

"It was close. Everything okay in here?"

The Marine who'd taken the rifle, First Sergeant Alejandro Ramirez, nodded his head. "A-okay, Lieutenant. Did you hear what this guy did? Bullets were coming down that passage so thick and fast it was like a hailstorm. The ragheads were all over us, and he comes busting through the door with that cannon and shoots the shit out of them. Damn, that man knows how to shoot a rifle. He deserves a medal."

"I concur. He deserves more than a medal, and I'll see he gets something." He glanced back at Brennan. "I mean it, Oz. What you did was

exceptional."

He made a cutting motion with his hand. "It was nothing."

While they were talking, Maria slipped into the room, and without a word began examining the wounded Marines. Nolan struggled to take his eyes off her, and he replied to Brennan. "They should never have let you go when you left the service. Amy, you okay?"

"I'm with Oz, so yeah, I'm okay." She smiled at him, and her expression said it all, as did his when he returned the look.

Nolan sighed. This wasn't going to be easy. "Oz, we're not done here."

"Not done?"

"Four of my Bravo operators arrived and saved our skins. They're here to grab a guy, Akram Khan. He's the one who started the trouble between India and Pakistan. He's hiding out at Dwyer, and if we don't get him, we're looking at a war that'll make Operation Enduring Freedom look like a Saturday night gang shootout."

Brennan flinched. It was during Operation Enduring Freedom he'd suffered the trauma that caused him to leave the U.S. Navy. His face was white. "It's all coming back?"

"In spades, yeah."

He looked at Amy, and something passed between them. It was hard not to notice his right hand shaking and the rigid stance of his body. Oz was a man in turmoil, tormented by what had happened before. He was also a man braver than most. A man determined to overcome his fear.

He stared back at Nolan. "In that case, I'm in. If you can use another sniper, that is."

"We have Vince Merano. He'll be with us. I mean, if you want to sit this one out."

"No! This time, I want to finish it. Put a stop to these bastards, once and for all. We have to do it if Amy and me can ever have a life together. Finish these bastards before they tear this country into shreds. Besides, two snipers can cover two angles. Make sure we don't miss the bastard."

"Count me in."

First Sergeant Alejandro Ramirez had a look on his face that left no one in any doubt. "I'll show these amateurs how a Marine can shoot straight."

"What about your wound?"

He shrugged. "I've had worse. The Doc here fixed me up, so I'm good to go. Ain't that right, Maria?"

She finished inspecting the dressing of an unconscious man on the floor. "Yes, I think you are good to go, Sergeant. If you have any problems, I'll be along to take care of you."

The room descended into silence. "You what?" Nolan wasn't sure if he'd heard right.

"You need me for this sorry bunch you're taking along. If you think I'm about to discharge my patients, you've got another think coming."

*Patients? I thought it was just Ramirez she was taking care of.*

"Maria, this is a military operation we're planning. If we..."

"There's another reason. Father David Clark, he's missing, and that means they've taken him. I cannot sit here and do nothing when the representative of the Holy Father in Rome is in mortal danger. I have to see this through."

"But, you're a nun. This'll be one hell of a fight, and we may not even survive. Believe me, it'll be no picnic going to that place."

She shook her head and gave him a slight smile. "I'm not a nun, Nolan. I'm just a doctor trying to do my best for the people I care about."

Her eyes carried a world of meaning, and he couldn't work it out. Not with this girl, she was an enigma. He nodded his assent, knowing it would make no difference what he said. She was that kind of girl. Will led his troopers out into the village to cleanse it of any hostiles and came back into the clinic after fifteen minutes with a prisoner.

"We caught this guy, Boss. They left him behind with a satphone to spy on us, says his name is Sami."

They were in the reception area, and an orderly had come out of hiding and brewed coffee. Nolan regarded the man with interest. Just a kid, and he looked terrified. "Who do you work for?"

He shook his head, and then Maria appeared and translated. "He says his boss is Akram Khan."

"THE Akram Khan? The man who bombed the school?"

She spoke to him again, and he looked sheepish. "He says yes, the same Akram Khan."

"He was there, wasn't he?"



"Yes, he was." She spoke to him, and he replied at length. "He says he is ashamed of what they did, but Khan was paid to do it by his brother. He is a government minister in Kabul."

"The government?" He glanced at Will. "We need to call this in. They'll want to collect this guy and take him to Coalition HQ for a cozy chat."

He nodded. "I reckon so. I'll contact Jacks right away. The good news is the village is clear. We'll hunker down and get a few hours' rest before we go into Dwyer. We should leave two hours before dawn, is my estimate."

Nolan took a second to work out the distance. "I concur. We'll post a single sentry and a man to guard the prisoner. That should be enough. Before he settles down, we need a good description of this Khan, so we know who to hit. Maria, would you talk to him about that? He seems ready to tell us everything. Ryder, you're guarding him, look after her."

"Copy that."

She smiled and nodded an acknowledgment. He found a place to bed down. Moments later, he was dozing off inside what appeared to be a linen cupboard. He'd made a pile of old, threadbare blankets for a bed. It wasn't easy to ignore the stench emanated from them. The door opened, and he raised the pistol in his hand. Her odor came to him, but this time it was different. She'd done something to herself. He could smell soap and the faint tang of cologne. It was musky and suited her well. It also did something for his libido. It did a lot for his libido. He fought down the emotion as she knelt beside him.

"I thought you might want company." Her voice was a gentle whisper.

At first, he was too staggered to speak. When he opened his mouth, all he could think to say was to repeat, "But, you're a..."

"A doctor. Nolan, I'm also a woman, and so far, I'm not a nun. Maybe I never will be. I've seen you looking at me several times. I thought you wanted me."

*Do fish swim in the sea?*

"Yeah, of course, but..."

"So take me. I'm yours. Tomorrow, we may all be dead. Isn't that right? This operation you're planning into Dwyer, it could be a one-way trip."

"Well, I dunno about that. You see, it all depends."

"Yes or no." Her voice was commanding, filled with the authority of a doctor. He gave it to her straight. "Yes. It could be a one-way trip."

"So screw me. Let's at least go into this with a smile."

He reached for her. "If you say so."

"Doctor's orders. May I undress you?"

"Uh, sure."

"Then you do the same for me."

A pause. "I will, yeah."

Her body was magnificent, everything it had promised from under the shapeless hospital scrubs she now wore, and much, much more. The toned, hard muscles of an athlete, with a covering of the smoothest skin he'd ever touched.

"You keep yourself in trim."

"Mm, I try to. Do you mind if I..."

"Nope."

She took hold of his penis, and it was as if a high voltage wire had touched him. He groped down her flat stomach, between her legs, and found her sex, warm and slightly damp. He slipped a finger inside her, then another, and felt her stiffen. Then she relaxed as he stroked her innermost places. "Ahh, yes, right there. Mm, I was right about you, Nolan."

"In what way?"

"You're a good lay."

"It's nice to know I'm useful for something."

"Hey, we just started. You've got a long way to go yet, cowboy."

They kissed, and he tasted her sweet mouth, probing with his tongue, still working to contain his astonishment.

*A nun, well, kind of. In the middle of the Afghan badlands, hours before an operation. Maybe she's right. We could be going to our deaths. In which case, why not?*

He slipped inside her, felt her gasp with pleasure, and they were screwing. He struggled to prolong their lovemaking by putting the coming battle at Dwyer to the forefront of his mind. It worked, and he was able to prolong the bliss for as long as he could. She came, screaming at first, and her fingernails dug into the muscles of his arms. She pushed her face into his chest to muffle the noise. Then he came, too, panting with sheer exhilaration and release, knowing he'd just experienced something beyond

wonderful. They lay together, not speaking, and soon, her regular breathing told him she'd fallen asleep. It was as well. She'd need to be fast enough to think on her feet in the morning. He knew he wouldn't sleep, his brain was buzzing like crazy. Then someone was shaking his sleeve.

He stared into the face of Will Bryce. "Yeah, what is it?"

"Time to go." He hadn't noticed her, not at first. Then his gaze fell on Maria, resting on him, "Uh, I guess you can wake her up."

"Give us five minutes."

"Copy that, Boss."

"And wipe that damn smile off your face, Master Chief."

"Roger that."

He left, and he gently shook her awake. "It's time to leave. We have a long, fast hike through the night."

Her eyes were dreamy with sleep, but she grinned. "We'll get there."

*What does that mean? Whatever it is, I don't care. I had a vision, and when I woke up in the morning, it was real. It doesn't get more special than that.*

They trekked fast across the patchy sand and rubble-strewn ground. It was close. Dwyer was a mere ten clicks from Garmsir. Six miles, give or take, and they made it a half hour before the first rays of dawn streaked across the sky. A narrow gully ran across the desert like a dark spear, an irrigation ditch, for those times when there was water to fill it. The bed was dry, for which they were thankful. In the distance, the camp was in darkness, with no more than two oil lamps lit, one inside and one at the gate. It was obvious the Taliban had failed to restart the generator to restore electricity.

Nolan's unit waited five hundred meters out, while Vince Merano checked out the target through his starlight scope.

"Two guards on the gate. They look relaxed, half asleep. Wait, they're smoking, has to be the local weed. Shouldn't be a problem. There's nothing moving inside, not that I can see."

"You can take the sentries?"

His reply was a soft chuckle. "You're joking, Boss. They won't know what hit 'em."

"Okay, wait for my order. One thing, you're Catholic, right?"

"Sure."

"We're pretty sure there's a priest in there, a Jesuit, Father David Clark. We think they grabbed him from the village. Be careful who you shoot, especially this guy."

"Something special about him? Not that I'd target a priest, but you sound worried."

"It's his relation in Rome."

"Rome, you mean the Vatican? What is he, some kind of Cardinal?"

"Higher."

A pause. "Shit, you mean he's..."

"Yep. So take it easy. The same goes for you, Oz, and you, Sergeant Ramirez. I guess you're Catholic, too, that gives you an extra incentive to double check what you're shooting at."

Ramirez shook his head in disbelief. "Madre de Dios, a relative of the Holy Father. My soul would be in eternal hell."

Maria was beside him, and she put her hand on his shoulder in a reassuring gesture. "I think we'll all go to hell for what we've done on this earth, Sergeant Ramirez. Let's just say it would be for a little longer if you hit Father David."

He gave her a nervous smile. "I understand, Sister."

"It's Doctor. Not Sister."

"Doctor, yes." He darted a quick glance at Nolan, who tried not to look guilty.

*They all know. That's for sure. Fuck 'em. It was worth it.*

He looked at Will, who nodded. "Okay, you all know what to do. Ramirez, work your way around to the north, Oz, you and Amy take the south. All of you keep your heads down. Do not shoot anyone until you're sure of the target. There could be upward of a hundred men inside that compound. The moment the shooting starts, they'll be buzzing around like angry bees."

"I'm going inside first. I have to find Vernon."

He looked at Highcloud. "It's not a good idea, Jim. If they catch you, they'll skin you alive."

"Sure, I know. Don't worry, I'm a SEAL, remember. I do this for a living."

"Yeah, but..."

He was gone, stealing across the dark surface of the ground that lay between the gully and the main gate. All they saw was the occasional shadow as he worked from cover to cover. Nolan nodded to Merano. "Take the shot."

"Copy that."

His rifle spoke twice. At five hundred meters, it was an easy shot for a marksman like Vince. The first .50 caliber bullet from the Barrett M-107 hurled the furthest sentry backward. While the body still flew through the air, the second bullet struck. The sentries were nothing more than a crumpled, lifeless heap, and Nolan got to his feet.

"Let's go, and keep it quiet. Snipers, get into position, Will, bring the rest of the men, and we'll see if we can't locate this Khan. If anyone gets a bead on him, he goes down. Watch out for the priest. We need to get him out. And remember, Jim's in there somewhere. We can't help him. We have a priority target, but we don't want to make things worse for him. We stay together, fight as a single unit. Vince, you know what to do. Cover us, and try for Khan."

"Copy that."

"If we strike lucky and nail the bastard, we can get out before the serious shooting starts. Ryder, if the snipers don't see the target, you know what to do."

He looked as concerned as if he was about to go for a stroll through the local park. "I know."

"And Highcloud?" Will's look said it all.

He paused for just a second and sighed. "We bring him out, no matter what."

They rose from the gully and raced across the ground, taking the same route as Highcloud. The Indian had disappeared. He moved like a high-speed ghost across the flat, open ground. With no sentries to sound a warning, he would be inside by now, looking for the cell housing the prisoners that had escaped the slaughter at the camp, but were captured by their brutal conquerors.

As they reached the unguarded gate, he reflected it would take a miracle for them to escape with their lives.

*At least Maria is back with Vince.*

As he had that thought, he caught sight of her slipping along beside him.

*Shit!*

He opened his mouth to protest and shut it again. Any untoward sound would unleash the hounds of hell. They reached the gate. He paused and swore. The place was still. No, that wasn't right, someone was moving around. A few seconds later, they came into view. Two men carrying open wooden crates, which gave off steam. A meal for the fighters, and he nodded to Will, who touched the transmit button and whispered into the mike. Once again, Vince's Barrett spoke, and once again, the heavy caliber bullets punched the enemy to the ground.

His orders to Oz and Ramirez were clear. No shooting until someone else opened fire. Their weapons were unsuppressed, and they'd wake the entire camp, which was still asleep. If he'd hoped to find the Taliban leader wandering around, he was disappointed. There was no one, save the guards they'd killed on the gate. They had one chance left, and that was to go from hut to hut and root out the bastard. He nodded to Ryder, who slipped in first and promptly vanished. He went into the center of the camp, leaving Will and Brad to circle inside the perimeter fence. Maria followed him, and he was unable to stop her, not without waking the camp.

They stepped over the bodies of the two dead cooks and went in deeper. There was little doubt about the whereabouts of the camp leaders. Two prefabricated buildings in the center, a truck parked outside one. He crept toward it and drew his combat knife. He'd borrowed a suppressor for his Sig from Vince, but even a sound suppressed 9mm makes a noise. A blade doesn't. He put his hand on the door handle, and before he opened it, a dark shadow materialized from darkness as if the black night has taken form. Ryder. He pointed to the building, and then to himself, at Nolan, and to the other building. The meaning was clear. The man inside was his. Then he went in.

Nolan gestured to Maria, and they went to the other building. He put his hand on the door, gently opened it, and walked through. A man stumbled into him with a curse, and in that instant, he knew he'd hit the jackpot. Akram Khan, in the flesh. Without doubt, he'd been going to take a leak. He was naked from his bed, wearing only a set of stained cotton trews. His mouth opened, and in a flash, Nolan flipped the knife and slammed him

with the hilt. As the man gave out a gargling, strangled sound, he hit him with his fist, a hard left hook. He followed him down and hit him again and again, until he was out.

"You didn't need to do that," Maria flared, "He was already unconscious."

"Tell that to his lawyer. We're out of here."

He slung the unconscious man on his shoulder, and they exited the building. Ryder was leaving the other hut, and they crossed to meet each other."

"I got one of them. He was guarding the door, but it wasn't Khan." He spoke in a whisper, but his eyes said more. Pupils dilated in moonlight, and his body tense, as if he were sexually aroused.

If Ryder was correct, and he wasn't often wrong, the Taliban commander who occupied that hut was around somewhere. They'd worry about him later. The question was what to do with his prisoner. Kill him, or take him back? Either way, it was fraught with problems.

"This is Khan," Nolan patted the body on his shoulder, "All we need now is to find Highcloud and get out of here. Call Will, tell him we have the main target."

He looked around the still deserted compound. It was silent, and it had been too easy, much too easy. Ryder spoke into his mike and then rejoined him.

"They got him."

"Highcloud?"

"Both of 'em, as well as about eighty other prisoners. They've been holding them in a storeroom. It was so hot and crowded they didn't have room to lie down to sleep. Stacked like cordwood, he said. They're bringing them all out."

"You what?" He didn't believe what he'd just heard.

*Eighty prisoners? Impossible. And yet, what choice do we have?*

"They'll need weapons," Ryder intoned, "That many men will make a noise and wake the camp. If we can find the armory, we can clean up this nest of vipers."

"Are they up to it? They may be too weak to fight."

Ryder shrugged, and once again, his eyes glazed over. "If a man has gone and served other gods, and worshipped them. If it be true, shalt thou

bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing. Thou shalt stone them with stones, till they die." He gave him a slight grin, "I reckon those Marines are good Christian folk penned up in that place. If it were me, I know what I'd do. They will fight. We just need to find where they store the weapons and give them the tools to do the job."

Whatever the biblical justification, Ryder was right. They'd fight after what the Talibs had put them through. Besides, they couldn't leave them. He stared back at Ryder. "Tell Will to keep the Marines quiet, and we'll look around for the armory. Soon as we find it, we'll issue the men with guns, and they can get some payback for what happened here."

John-Wesley nodded and spoke into his mike. Then he looked back at Nolan. "Before we go, that guy on your shoulder is starting to come to."

"Deal with it."

Ryder slammed a hard fist into his head, and he went quiet. "Done."

"It's time to locate some guns. These bastards are sure to wake up soon. Move out. It's time to shoot some rags."

He was aware of Maria's disapproving look, but he ignored it. Taking care of folks was her business. His business was killing them. They found the armory a few meters away from the leaders' huts, a steel container. It was unlocked. The insurgents kept their guns ready for instant use. When they swung open the steel door, they had everything they needed. AK-47s, AKMs, several pilfered M-16s, and even a heavy DShK, the Soviet built 12.7mm heavy machine gun. In the corner, a small stack of RPG missile launchers, and in the center of the steel room, wooden boxes of ammo.

"There's enough here to start a war," Ryder murmured.

"That's what we're gonna do. Tell Will to bring the Marines over here, and they can help themselves. Make sure they don't make a sound."

"Copy that."

Will joined them a few minutes later, leading the first of the released prisoners. They were in a shocking state, emaciated, ragged, and filthy. Yet most had the look in their eyes that told him they would fight. They were the descendants of the men who'd landed at Iwo Jima in February 1945. Men who fought in what some said the fiercest battle of World War Two. For five weeks, they took terrible casualties, until that iconic moment when they raised the flag on Mount Suribachi.



Half starved, many wounded, some even barefoot, they carried the memory of that epic battle in every pore of the bodies. Whatever the outcome, they would fight. These men had lost almost everything. Save for pride in the Marine Corps.

He caught Will's eye. "Assign five men to hand out the guns. We don't want them making a lot of noise inside this tin can. We'll split them into four platoons, twenty men apiece. Put them at the center of the camp and work out to the perimeter. Remember, we have snipers outside, so any leakers won't be much of a problem. No wait, there's a DShK in there. Assign four men to carry it outside the main gate and set up a crossfire. That should take care of it."

"Copy that. Brad's coming in now with the rest of the Marines, one moment."

He spoke to the Marine next to him, a Captain in ragged uniform. "You heard that? My name's Nolan, by the way, Lieutenant, U.S. Navy."

"I did. We'll get right onto it. I'm Fisher, Captain, U.S. Marine Corps." He looked at Nolan, "And thanks. We thought we were finished."

"We're not out yet."

Fisher stared back at him. "We are out, Lieutenant. We're fighting men, U.S. Marines, not caged animals. We have an enemy to fight. We're Marines again."

He nodded. "Understood."

Akram Khan chose that moment to start coming to, and Nolan put him down. "You stay close to me, you hear? I want you in front where I can see you. They want me to bring you back dead or alive, and I don't give a shit which way it goes. You savvy?"

"Yes, I see. They may kill me if..."

"I told you, alive or dead, I don't care. Now shut it and behave."

At that moment, a door to an adjacent hut opened. A man walked out, yawning, and peering into the darkness through sleep filled eyes. Ryder spun on his heel, raised his right arm, and his knife flashed through the night to embed itself in the man's chest. The throw was good, and yet the victim had a chance to open his mouth wide and scream a warning before blood bubbled from his ruined chest. Ryder ran to stop him, but it was too late. The damage was done. They could hear voices as men woke up, alert to the threat from inside their camp.

He glanced around and estimated they'd given guns to about twenty of the Marines. The rest were still queuing up for them. It would have to do.

"Will, forget the need to quiet. It's time to kick some ass. Get the message to Vince to alert the other two snipers. Tell 'em we're in business."

"I'm on it."

He pushed Khan in front of him and dragged Maria behind the steel armory container. In a reflex action, he slammed a fresh magazine into the breech of a newly acquired M-16. He had the Sig tucked into the holster, a Makarov 9mm pushed into his belt, and spare ammo in a canvas bag, together with two Soviet grenades. Maria had her AK-47, and he reckoned she'd need it before this fight was over. Gunfire crackled around the camp, and more men swarmed out of the prefabricated huts. Two Afghans appeared in front of him. Maria screamed, and he shot them both with short bursts from the M-16. He could see more of them darting through the shadows of the early dawn.

So far, nighttime had been their friend, but now it was getting light. If the figures were right, and two hundred Talibs were inside this compound, it would be one epic fight. He pushed her head down as a stream of bullets parted the air around them, and he looked into her eyes. Wide, with the pupils dilated. She wasn't defending her clinic and her patients, not this time. This was war, and she wasn't ready for it. That wouldn't cut it. If she didn't start shooting, the enemy sure would. More men poured around the corner, half dressed, rudely awakened from sleep, but fully alert and armed. He fired, and one went down, but more flung themselves into the attack, and they were within seconds of being overwhelmed.

"Shoot! Kill the bastards before they kill us."

She came out of her frozen immobility, raised the AK, and pulled the trigger. She emptied the magazine in one fast burst, but it was enough to slow them. Then more men skidded around the corner, and a bunch of the newly released Marines came from behind to join them.

Bullets whined across the space between the two opposing groups, and he shoved her to the sand, along with Khan. A second later, the frustrated and angry Marines charged. He watched a man race toward the Talibs and slam into the nearest man, still firing his assault rifle. By a miracle, he survived the angry swarm of bullets that hissed and spat around him, and as

his trigger clicked on an empty chamber, he set about beating the man to death with the butt of his rifle.

A Talib raised his rifle to kill him. A burst of shots from the advancing Marines ripped into his guts, and then another fighter leapt at him, waving a pistol. Nolan shouted a warning. The Talib slipped on the blood of the first man who'd died and fell backward. The Marine jumped on him. They both disappeared as the two groups of men merged in a bloody, struggling mass. Blood spurted, men screamed defiance, and the shooting died away as they were either too close to each other or out of ammo with no time to reload.

At that moment, the sun flooded the new day and highlighted utter chaos. Nolan tried to make sense of the brawling, but it was impossible. Americans and Afghans were joined in a whirling, bloody, screaming melee. The sand was littered with bodies, and they formed makeshift barricades that some of the Talibs sheltered behind as the Marines tore at them, ripping the corpses from their path to take the fight to the enemy, to kill.

He realized Will had joined him. Together with Brad, they stood shoulder to shoulder, punishing the enemy with calm, short bursts. The insurgents edged backward, and when their ranks started to thin, he heard more firing outside the gate. First, single shots as the snipers began their deadly business, and then as more Talibs attempted to break free, the heavy machine gun the Marines had deployed spoke. It delivered a single message, and that message was death. Within minutes, the Talibs began flooding back, and the mass of hostiles facing them became greater.

The Talibs, though still in shock, were trying to regroup. Their gunfire intensified as many opened fire from a distance, uncaring whether they shot friend or foe. Some of the new enemy went down, and he realized Vince had shifted his aim and was selecting targets inside the camp. A dangerous business with a .50 caliber sniper rifle, but it worked. Except Vince couldn't shoot enough of them, and they came to a sudden decision. Fifteen or twenty men came at them, howling and blazing away with their rifles.

Three more Marines fell, but they were giving back as good or better than they got. Whoever was in charge of the group, and he assumed it was the Captain he'd met earlier, had organized his men into a defensive huddle. A line of eight or nine men lay on the sand, shooting back at the enemy, and behind them, more men knelt, firing over the top of them. More sniped at

the Talibs from the shelter of the prefabricated huts. When a fighter went down, another raced to take their place. They called it attrition, fighting to achieve the greatest body count as a way to victory. It could work, but the butcher's bill afterward was always terrible.

It was more like a battle between Redcoats and Revolutionaries during the War of Independence; lines of men drawn up to deliver shattering volleys of musket fire. If he'd seen a young officer with saber drawn, shouting orders for his men to reload, aim and fire, he wouldn't have been surprised.

Maria had managed to reload, and she fired a quick burst at a pair of fighters who'd detached themselves from the main group. They were trying to crawl nearer using the dead bodies of their fellow fighters as cover. She hit the nearest, and the other leapt to his feet to run back. Nolan finished him with a double tap from the M-16. He was about to target another three who were drawing near, crawling along the sand, when Maria shouted.

"Nolan, it's him. Father David! Tell them to stop shooting before he's killed."

"What the fuck! We can't cease fire, they'll kill us."

"No, you can't kill him. You know who he is."

The Jesuit appeared at the edge of the battle and stood in the lee of a hut, partly hidden by Afghans who surrounded him. He was waving an arm at the Americans, almost as if he wanted them to surrender.

*Impossible!*

And then they heard his shout, and it wasn't impossible. Father David wasn't alone. A bunch of Talibs surrounded him, and their guns were aimed at his belly. His mouth was moving, yet over the noise of the battle, they couldn't hear him. Then the shooting died away, and his voice rang around the center of the camp.

"Stop. Listen to this man. They will kill me if the fighting continues."

A man stepped out, and there was no doubt in their minds that this was who ran the place. He had the look of a veteran fighter, with a long scar reaching from his left eye and running diagonally across his nose to the corner of his mouth on the opposite side. His lean, hard, and desiccated body testified to a man who'd spent a lifetime conducting hit and run attacks; a man of the mountains, and of the sands, a cruel killer.

"My name is Tarzi, and I command here. You want your priest alive? Then you will drop your weapons and surrender. Or do you think your government will thank you for allowing a man close to the Catholic Pope to die?"

*How the hell does he know about Father David's relationship to the man at the top? There's something wrong here.*

"I guarantee your safety if you surrender. I will allow you to travel to Kabul, and you can go home to your families in America. If you keep fighting, the priest dies, and I have more than enough men to kill all of you. It is your choice, and I will give you five minutes to decide. After that, the shooting starts, and you all die."

Clark nodded vigorously. "This man speaks the truth. Listen to him, and stop the killing."

"Bullshit," Will Bryce rumbled, "Boss, something about this setup stinks."

"Damn right. What's the priest up to? Surely he doesn't believe what he's saying. He must know these people, and what they'd capable of."

Nolan glanced around him as men stood frozen, undecided. It was insane. The priest's voice was filled with authority, commanding, peremptory. Even the Talibs had stopped and were watching the man Tarzi, waiting for the order that would release them once again to the killing.

Ryder hadn't reappeared, and he wondered where he'd got to, and if he was alive. Will stood alongside him, together with Brad. They'd worked their way through the camp to join him and lend support to the thickest of the fighting. Maria was behind, where he'd pushed her out of the line of fire. Next to her, Akram Khan lay on the sand, semi-conscious, as if someone had hit him again to keep him quiet. Probably they had.

Twenty meters away, an Afghan abruptly screeched with rage, ran at them, and fired a half dozen shots at the Americans. A Marine fell to the ground, riddled with bullets, and then a Talib, their leader, aimed his pistol and shot his own man dead. Silence descended again. Father David walked to the dead fighter, and a number of fighters walked with him. Making sure he didn't make a break for it.

*Or are they guarding him?*

Nolan was struggling to make sense of the bewildering situation, when the priest leaned over the body of the dead Talib, murmured a few words,

and crossed himself. Then he looked directly at Nolan. "This shouldn't have happened. You saw Tarzi's reaction, so you know he is sincere. Make the right decision, and end this senseless slaughter."

Behind him, men growled their anger. The Marine Captain joined him. "Hell, we're winning this Lieutenant. We can finish them."

He spoke quietly. "I know that, and there's no way we're giving in to this bastard. Wait. Give it a minute or two. Are your men ready?"

"You bet your ass they're ready."

"Okay. Captain, there's more at stake here than the outcome of this fight. I'm trying to stop a war."

"A war? Which war?"

He recalled they'd been incarcerated since the increase of tension between the nuclear powers of India and Pakistan, which meant they knew nothing. "I'll talk to you later."

He turned to Will. "We need to make up our minds. If we start shooting again, the priest dies."

"Remember why we're here," the Master Chief replied, "We need to get Khan back to our people so they can show him off. Hold it, Vince is calling in." He listened for a few seconds, "He's in position to take out some of these Talibs. He says he has a shot at the main man."

"Tarzi? You think that would take the fight out of them?"

He shrugged. "We don't have too many other options."

He thought for two seconds and nodded. "Take the shot."

A fraction of a second later, the Barrett bellowed from outside the camp. Inside the camp, Father David Clark, SJ, relative of the Pope, the head of the Catholic Church in Rome, pitched forward. It wasn't an enemy bullet. The massive kinetic force of the .50 caliber bullet punched him to the ground.

## Chapter Nine

*CNN International News: Violence escalates between the two squabbling nations in Asia, and artillery has fought more than one duel across the border regions. Inside Kashmir, Muslim rioters looted and set fire to houses in a predominantly Hindu area. The Indians responded with tear gas, and some say their police used live rounds to control the violence. In India, several mosques have been torched in an apparent gesture of retaliation. Meanwhile, the Vatican has stepped in, and the Pope has repeated his request for religious leaders to speak out against the violence. None have replied.*

It must have been five seconds they stood there, unbelieving. Their sniper had shot down a relative of the Pope, Head of the Vatican, believed by tens of millions to be God's representative on earth. He saw the man named Tarzi open his mouth to shout an order, and it needed little imagination to know what it would be. He got there first, before they recovered from the shock of seeing their trump card blasted into bloody ruin. He'd worry about the repercussions later, talk to Vince, find out what happened, and why he hit the wrong target. For now, he had business to attend to.

"Fire! Hit the bastards before they start shooting."

They blazed away at the insurgents, and for a time it looked like they were winning. The bearded and turbaned fighters fell back under the withering gunfire of the Americans. Nolan led from the front, pressing the hostiles back, always back, herding them toward the gate. He had three snipers out there, Vince, Oz, and Ramirez. By now, they'd have bunched in the position where they could get the best sight of the enemy, and that was in front of the main gate. Incredibly, the Talibs hadn't returned fire, still recovering from their shock, and then the next shock rocked them. The snipers, pouring single, well-aimed shots into their midst, wreaked havoc, and some Talibs began to run.

He was exultant. They'd almost done it. Grabbed the main target, and when they got him back to Kabul, the two nations preparing for war could

stand down. The Marines were going home, those of them who'd survived the initial onslaught. He would also take back a memory, a memory of a gorgeous and enigmatic girl. He had no illusions. She had an agenda that wouldn't fit with that of a serving SEAL. He looked back at her, clutching her rifle, remembering when she'd shot her first man on the roof of the clinic.

*Not the actions of a would-be nun. Time will tell.*

The enemy fighters were melting away, like flakes of snow on a warm day. Those who'd streamed from the gate had run into more than the snipers. The Marines were keeping up a disciplined fire, and the screams of the wounded echoed around the camp. He glanced at Captain Fisher.

"I need an accurate count of your men and the numbers of wounded. I'll call in some Medevac helos to get them out first, and Black Hawks for the rest of you."

"You're coming back with us?"

He nodded. "We have business in Kabul."

"You said something about a war."

"Correct. We're trying to stop one from starting." He glanced at Will. "Contact SOCOM, tell them what we have here, and put some helos on standby. They'll need a temporary garrison to guard this place until it's back up to scratch."

"Copy that, I'll pass it all on to them. We did well, Boss. Mission accomplished."

Nolan felt a shiver travel down his spine as the Master Chief spoke those two words. He could recall the arrival of President George W. Bush on the flight deck of the carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. He'd touched down in a Lockheed S3 Viking, and proudly displayed on the superstructure of the carrier was the banner proclaiming 'Mission Accomplished.' It wasn't. That was in 2003. Years later, the fighting was still going on inside Iraq, although they'd caught the main target, Saddam Hussein.

He grimaced. "It'll be mission accomplished when we've stopped the war, Will. We have a long way to go yet. The first task is to get this nasty shit back to Kabul. Second, we have to convince them he's the genuine article, and third, our people have to persuade them to stand down. It's not so easy, not when you're geared up for war. Nations have always found it



damned hard to stand back and pretend nothing happened. So, yeah, I'd say the mission is part way through so far."

Bryce gave him a glum look and took out his encrypted satphone. Moments later, he'd connected with SOCOM at Kabul, and Nolan had time to check the prisoner, the reason for them being here. He'd come to and stared back at him with a mixture of hate and terror. Then he spoke.

"What will they do to me?"

He shrugged. "Put you on trial, I guess. If you're found guilty, you'll hang."

"I can help them."

"Help who? The kids you murdered?"

He waved an arm, as if to dismiss the question as irrelevant. "The politicians, the men who want justice."

"How would you manage to do that? You're beaten, Khan. The game's over."

"It isn't over, American. You haven't got the man responsible for the killing."

Nolan stared back at him. Maria joined him and stood so close they touched, and he could almost taste her. "Are you saying you didn't bomb the school?"

He bared his teeth in a terrible caricature of a smile. They were blackened, half no more than stumps. Dental care was lacking when you spent your life on the run, dodging the efforts of the Army and cops to bring you to justice. "No. I bombed the school. I won't deny it. But it was just a job, nothing personal. I can give you the name of the men who paid for it to be done."

"Why did they want it done?"

Khan's smile widened. "To start a war, of course."

Maria leaned down, her face screwed up in horror. "Who in their right minds would want to start a war for no reason?"

He looked at her, then dismissed her as of no account, and looked back at Nolan. "There was a very good reason. However, I will not name names unless you can give me guarantees."

"Guarantees of what?"

"They won't execute me, and I get a reduced sentence."

"It's not gonna happen."

"In that case, you will never know who paid to kill those children."

Nolan sighed and gestured to Will. "I need SOCOM back on the radio. This is high level stuff, above my pay grade."

Will nodded, and two minutes later he passed him the satphone.

"This is Brigadier General Greg Armstrong. I'm in command of SOCOM Kabul. Who's this?"

"Lieutenant Nolan, U.S. Navy SEALs. Sir, we've retaken Camp Dwyer, and I imagine you're arranging for helos to pick up our people."

"It's all organized, Lieutenant, so you don't need to worry. It's like a hornets' nest here. They're getting every rotary craft off the ground that can fly and sending it to Helmand."

"That's good to know, General, but we have a situation here."

"Go on." He sounded wary. 'Situation' was a word that usually went together with another word. Politics.

He explained about Akram Khan's offer of information in exchange for no death penalty. Armstrong listened in silence while he outlined it, and took no more than five seconds to decide. "Make the deal. If he starts shouting his mouth off during the trial, it could all start again. You know the Paks have crossed the border into Indian Kashmir?"

Nolan went cold. It had started. "I didn't know, no, Sir."

"Yeah, they're blasting the crap out of each other, but so far, it's a local skirmish. We've managed to persuade both sides not to escalate any further. However, there are still two divisions of troops on each side, and if they send reinforcements, well, let's not go there. Talk to Khan, and find out what he has. Get back to me the moment you know."

"Yes, Sir."

He handed the satphone back to Will and returned to Khan. "You've got a deal. Talk."

The Afghan shuddered in relief. No doubt his thoughts had been focused on that long drop to oblivion. "It was my brother, Kabir Khan, who contacted me to take the contract. He's a Minister in Kabul."

"I get that. Why bomb the school? That's what I don't understand."

His face assumed a crafty expression. "I found out by accident when I overheard Kabir talking to another man, a Westerner. This man wanted a huge influx of troops and money into Afghanistan. The idea was they'd

provide security and bring in the massive donations of cash that always follows to rebuild ruined infrastructure. Like his gas refinery."

"Gas refinery? You mean the one they wrecked at Qala-e-Naw?"

He grinned. "Exactly. I understand his company is about to go broke. He needs the government to fund the rebuilding of the plant and provide a permanent security force. The way to do that was to start a war."

"By killing scores of children?"

Khan shrugged. "They were worthless Hindus." He smiled, his mouth a cruel slash in his face, "Nobody cares about Hindus."

It took a huge effort not to ball his fist and smash the guy's remaining teeth down his throat. "I need a name. This Westerner, who is he, and what's the name of the company?"

A few minutes later, and he had most of it. He called Armstrong to pass it all on to SOCOM. The General didn't sound too surprised.

"An energy company, yeah, I can believe that. Some of those execs are slimy bastards, always hanging in the shadows, calling the shots, and handing out the bribes. We've had more than a few occasions when newly arrived companies decided not to continue with the bidding process for mineral exploitation rights. Some of those outfits always seem to win the plum contracts. Good work, Nolan. What we need to do now is find which one of them it was and grab him. The helos are en route even as we speak, and they'll bring everyone back to Kabul. I dispatched a convoy of troops and APCs. They'll arrive at Dwyer about the time you're ready to leave. Call in when you arrive. I want to hear it all first hand."

"Yes, Sir."

He had one matter to attend to before he could wrap things up in Dwyer, something that couldn't wait. He recalled the snipers and took Vince to one side where they could talk quietly. He took Maria with him, so she could interpret the Catholic stuff.

"Okay, Vince, tell me why you shot and killed the Pope's relative. How come you missed the target and let him escape? Why you caused a rift between America and the Vatican that could last for the next fifty years?"

Vince heaved a sigh. "It wasn't him."

"Excuse me?"

"The guy I shot. He wasn't a Jesuit priest, so he couldn't be who he said he was."

"How could you know from five hundred meters out?"

"He crossed himself."

"Yeah, he did. As I recall, priests do that a lot."

"Not the way he did it. It was an Orthodox move, the hand went right to left, not left to right."

"So?"

"Boss, it couldn't happen. You're not Catholic, but crossing yourself is like walking and breathing, not something you'd forget, or do wrong. That priest wasn't Catholic. He was a fake, an impostor. I could see he was trying to cook up some deal, and I had to act fast. It was all I could do before you walked into a trap."

He shook his head. "I still don't believe it." Vince started to object, but he held up his hand, "No, I believe what you're saying. What I don't get is the rest of it. If he wasn't the genuine article, who was he, and what was he doing? More to the point, where's the real Father David Clark?"

He glanced at Maria, who'd listened to the exchange with growing astonishment. "Uh, listen, you're into this Catholic thing, and you met Father David. Do you have any ideas about who he could be, and what he was doing?"

Her eyes clouded in thought. "There's one possibility that comes to mind. They wanted to kill me."

"Kill you? Why?"

"It was after the explosion at that refinery in Qala-e-Naw. They brought in some men for emergency medical aid. You may not be aware, but when a patient is recovering from an anesthetic, they can be in a lot of distress and confusion. They're apt to ramble and babble about anything and everything. I heard one of them talking, and I was so worried about what he was saying I wrote it down. It sounded important."

"What did he say?"

She took a deep breath. "This isn't easy for me. I have a doctor patient relationship that's supposed to be confidential. It's not so different to the seal of the confessional. In fact, he was so feverish, he thought he was talking to a Mullah."

"Yeah, I get it, but thousands, tens of thousands of lives are at stake here. What did he say?"

"He had a second cousin who worked for the refinery. This guy answered the telephone switchboard and often used to listen in to the conversations. This cousin was a secret Catholic convert. Although you must realize he could never let the Muslims know, or they'd have killed him. He heard a man giving instructions for the bombing of the school, and he told his priest about it, he was so worried. With good reason, I understand he died when the plant blew up. He also told his cousin, and when he was groggy, he poured it all out to me. I didn't believe him, so he showed me a letter his cousin wrote to him, which I left on my desk in the clinic. Afterward, I discovered someone had taken it. Although at the time, I assumed it was a genuine mistake, perhaps a cleaner thinking it was scrap paper."

"You think it was stolen."

"Yes, I do now. Someone saw it and realized they could sell it to the man named in the letter."

He stared at her, willing her to remember the rest of it. "The name, can you remember it?"

"Yes. Adnan Kovac, he's the Chief Executive of Afgas, the refinery owner. If he bought the letter and found out this man had passed the information about his involvement to a third party, he'd take action against that person to safeguard his secrecy. My guess is he had Father David Clark killed, and the killer assumed his identity to come after me. Dear Lord, it's hard to believe. He was so convincing. Your man was clever to notice he wasn't genuine."

"Yeah, that was a good call."

She was looking up at him. "Nolan, what happens next?"

"Next? The helos arrive, take out the wounded, and then more will come to transport us back to Kabul."

"I meant about us. Or had you forgotten?"

"No, I hadn't forgotten. I couldn't forget." He spread his hands in despair, "What can I say? We're in the middle of a flare up that could become a real live shooting war."

"Say you won't walk out on me."

He sighed. "Maria, I won't walk out on you. Okay? We'll get to Kabul and work out what we're gonna do from there. But you need to realize this is an unusual situation. You're a nun..."

"I'm not a nun. Nuns take a vow of chastity."

"Okay, that rules you out, then, almost a nun. I'm a U.S. Navy SEAL. We're like oil and water."

"We can work something out."

"You mean a special dispensation from your convent?"

She laughed. "I doubt that. Nolan, I have to get back to my clinic before too long. Tell me you'll come with me. I don't know what I'm going to find there."

He knew how it would be at Garmsir, and he also knew she wouldn't like what he told her. "The place will be overrun, Maria. Those Talibs we kicked out of here, they'll be dragging their wounded away, and the first place they'll think of is a medical facility ten clicks away. Garmsir will be a Taliban village by the time we get there."

She pulled a face. "That could take some time. My patients will need me before then."

"They won't."

"They won't need me? Why not?"

"Because they'll be dead. That's the way they work in this neck of the woods. I'm sorry, but face facts. Until that village is sanitized, you can't go back. Besides, there's something else you may not have thought of. If Kovac was prepared to murder the real Father David Clark, and send a killer to come after you, I doubt he'll give up now. On the chance you haven't told anyone yet, or even worked it out, he'll still want someone to put a bullet in you."

She shivered. "First a priest, and now a nun. What kind of a man is he?"

"You said you weren't a nun."

She grinned at him. "True, but I doubt it would make any difference to that man. Nolan, what can I do?"

"About the convent?"

She punched him on the arm. "About Adnan Kovac."

He'd been thinking the same thing, and he had a single answer. "You leave him to me."

Will strolled across to join them and handed him the satphone. "It's Admiral Jacks. He talked to General Armstrong, and they're liaising on the next stage of this operation."

"The next stage?"

"Getting the prisoner to Kabul, and persuading India and Pakistan to pull back. We're also in process of rounding up the fighters who escaped. There's no point in leaving them alone so they can come back again. Jacks got together with Armstrong and pressured CIA. They've got a Predator drone circling the area. It's an unarmed recon job, and they're spotting for a bunch of Navy flyers coming in from one of our carriers."

"That's good." He took the handset, but before he could speak, the ground trembled as a flight of F/A 18s swooped over low, heading east and following the track of the escaped Taliban. Someone, a Marine, let out a rebel yell, and a few men cheered. Nolan grinned. They'd been through hell, and fought back hard to kick the camel jockeys out of real estate that rightly belonged to the U.S. Marine Corps.

He put the handset to his ear. "Nolan here, Admiral."

"Was that the Navy I just heard fly past?"

"Yes, Sir. F/A 18s, they're going after the Talibs who got away."

"Good news."

He paused as the jets screamed in for the attack. They unloaded their missiles and ordnance about five clicks from Dwyer, in the direction of Garmsir. The roiling explosions tore through the air, sending shockwaves over the camp, and then they went in for a second pass. This time, it was cannon fire from their M61 Vulcans, punching six thousand 20mm rounds every minute into the enemy ranks. He glanced at Maria, and she was white faced, staring into the distance toward Garmsir. He knew what she was thinking. Will they get them all?

*No, they won't. Some will get behind cover into the narrow gullies that thread through the desert; hiding in irrigation ditches, behind rocks, or even below the bodies of the dead.*

He was aware of Jacks voice talking to him, and he turned his attention to the satphone. "Admiral, you were saying?"

"The prisoner, Akram Khan. There's no doubt about his identity? You know what's riding on it."

"He's the right man, yes."

"Okay. Things are moving fast. General Armstrong sent a squad to kick down the door of Afgas in Kabul, looking for this Kovac. Guess what?"

"He'd gone."

"Right, the bird had flown. Armstrong's men leaned on one of their execs and discovered he'd lit out for Qala-e-Naw. Whether he'd heard the game was up, we don't know. What we do know is we have our hands full dealing with the Paks and the Indians. Afghanistan is in danger of an invasion, and..."

"You mean the Indians?"

"Both sides. The Indians are screaming for blood, and the Paks are looking to defend their Muslim neighbor, or so they say. What it means is we had to send everything we had to patrol the border, and I need someone I can trust to take down this Kovac."

"You want us to go to Qala-e-Naw?"

"That's right. It's more of a police action than a military operation. It shouldn't be a problem. You'll have a couple of security guards to deal with, no more than that. Arrest him, and bring him back, that's all I'm asking. Then we can draw a line under this sorry business. Apart from the other thing."

"Other thing?"

"The Deputy Defense Minister, Kabir Khan. We can't touch him, not yet."

"Why not?"

"Politics, Nolan. You're in Afghanistan, and you know what that means."

"The fix is in."

"I'm not in a position to confirm that. The Pentagon would go ape. I'll leave it to your imagination."

"So what is this, the bastard gets away with it?"

A pause. "There may be another solution."

"What did you have in mind, Admiral?"

"A New Orleans solution."

"Ryder. The one man who could go in, kill him and get out again, in total silence. The man who moves like a wraith in the night."

"I concur."

"You don't think there'd be an objection in that quarter?"

He smiled. John-Wesley had two priorities in his life. Religion ran a close second, but first was the love of his blade. If he hadn't joined the U.S.



Navy SEALs and found an outlet for his killer instincts, Nolan had always opined he'd have taken up a career as a hitman. The United States was spared a dangerous criminal when Ryder joined up.

"No objections, no, Sir."

"Very well, I'll leave it in your hands. Personally, I saw the pictures of those children in the Indian school. The idea that anyone who took part in it gets away with it is abhorrent. However, I can't order you to take this on, as you're still official on sick leave. If you prefer, I can talk to Master Chief Bryce."

"There's no need. I'm in."

"Roger that. I'll make one of the Black Hawks available to you. They'll carry your men back to Bagram where you'll have a chance to resupply. You won't have long. I want you to turn around within two hours and head down to Qala-e-Naw before this bastard Kovac has a chance to get away. Do you foresee any problems maintaining that schedule?"

He could foresee a ton of problems. They were exhausted, spent, and they needed a night's sleep, time to recover. Then again, a hot meal, a hot shower, fresh weapons, and ammunition; it would make a difference. "We'll manage."

*We always do. That's what they pay us for.*

"Then it's done. Call me if you have any problems. Jacks out."

He ended the call and passed the satphone back to Will. "We're heading back to Bagram."

He shrugged. "Where else?"

"We're turning right around and heading to Qala-e-Naw."

The grin faded. "You're shittin' me."

"Nope. In and out job, and grab this Kovac guy. Tonight."

"Fuck."

"Yep."

The Black Hawks touched down, and a crew chief called across to him.

"Nolan? Lieutenant Nolan?"

"That's me."

"This is your ride, Sir. If you'd get your people aboard, we'll get airborne again."

He smiled to himself. The guy didn't enjoy spending too much time in enemy territory. He couldn't blame him. "We're on the way."

They climbed aboard the helo, and he noticed it was no standard Black Hawk. The crew chief saw the direction of his gaze. "She's the MH-60K. I guess you noticed they fitted her with a few extras."

"You're the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment?"

He nodded. "Guilty as charged." The crewman leaned forward and they shook. "Marine Staff Sergeant Jerry Hendriksen."

Nolan shook. Hendriksen was leaning on the .50 caliber door gun and gave it an affectionate pat. "Bessie here gives us something of an edge when we're close to the ground, but we have more surprises in store for your local T-men. Terrain Following Radar, which means we can fly inches off the ground and sneak up on the bastards. M-130 chaff and flare dispensers, to screw with their missile guidance systems. Hell, we can even refuel in the air," he pointed to the long probe that extended from the nose.

"You're taking us on to Qala-e-Naw?"

"That's what they tell me."

It made sense. The helo was fast, quiet, and well armed against threats from the ground. He'd no idea what defensive measures Kovac would deploy. Whatever it was, his craft would give them a good chance of surviving whatever they threw at them, until they hit the ground. Then it was up to his men, and it'd be a hard and bloody fight to reach the target.

Nolan was last to board, but he hesitated, watching the other rotary craft. Hendriksen gave him an anxious look. "Sir, we're ready to go."

"I'm not. I intend to see the rest of them in the air before we leave." He saw the man's horrified stare, "It'll take no more than a minute, and these guys have gone through hell."

His expression changed. "I see what you mean. I'll tell the pilot."

Two minutes later they took off, and the pilot put on speed. It happened when they were still close enough to feel the blast wave. First, the long shadow as the cruise missile approached at close to supersonic speed, yet not breaking the sound barrier so as to create a massive noise enough to alert the target.

The helo shook, rose a hundred meters in the air, and dropped like a stone. The fuselage tipped almost on its side, and the pilot fought the controls to bring it back to an even keel. The impact point was in the exact

center of Camp Dwyer, and the newly arrived Marines were still on the sand outside the perimeter. Smoke, debris, and sand formed an impenetrable cloud for several minutes, while the pilot held the UH-60 in the hover. When the cloud had cleared, they could see the Marines scattered across the ground, but there was no evidence they'd suffered any injuries.

Inside the perimeter was a different story. The demountable buildings, storehouses, gates, fences, everything had vanished, blown to the ground. They waited long enough to see the Marines start to get to their feet, and they breathed a sigh of relief. The pilot continued on course for Kabul, and Nolan was still thinking about its implications when the crew chief spoke.

"That had to be a Nirbhay cruise missile."

He glanced at him. "Indian?"

"Yep. And non-nuclear, else we wouldn't be here. It amounts to a virtual declaration of war." The crew chief grimaced, "It won't be long now before they start."

"Copy that."

*Who told them about Akram Khan? That was an attempt by the Indians to kill him. I get that, but the real question is how did they know he was here? Always assuming Khan was the target, which seems most likely. The Indians have good reason for wanting him dead. If we'd still been in the camp, the blast would have wiped us all out. The priority now is to find out who dropped the dime.*

\* \* \*

Adnan Kovac stepped out of his personal helicopter, a Bell 427 with eight seats upholstered in soft leather to his personal specification. He'd insisted the fuselage be painted in the distinctive livery of Afgas, although as he turned to look back at the aircraft, he wondered if he'd made a mistake. The bright blue and yellow that had been a badge of pride now felt like a target.

He'd heard about the capture of Akram Khan, and although he wasn't certain the trail would lead back to him, had decided to make sure. The trip to inspect progress at the natural gas refinery was legitimate, and it had aroused no comment when he announced his plans. Kovac was a man who liked to cover all of his bases, and what had surprised them was his decision

to fill the helo with security guards. Not company security men, but the six people he'd brought in from outside, contractors, in the parlance of current day Afghanistan. Anywhere else in the world people called them mercenaries.

Two men had alighted first and were covering the area with their guns, M4-A1s, making sure the area was clear for their principal. Having them along gave him confidence. They were ex-Special Forces. Spetsnaz. The brutal Russian soldiers trained to emulate the exploits of Delta Force, the U.S. Navy SEALs, and the British SAS. He'd investigated their background and decided they were more than good at what they did. Better than their Western counterparts in many respects. They had one specialty that set them apart, few, if any, qualms about killing.

Murder was a tool of business, little different to finance, banking, and construction. Provided it didn't cause you to lose any sleep at nights, it was just a way of doing business. The trail from Akram may lead to Kabir Khan, which gave him a measure of confidence. Kabir would fend off any inquiries with blanket denials of any involvement. There were no witnesses, nothing written. Except for what was in his briefcase, and that never left his side. As for Akram, he'd serve a few years in an Afghan jail, and then he'd be free.

Yet if he was honest with himself, he felt nervous. Too many people had reason to hate and despise him for what he'd organized. If they did suspect him, they'd come after him, and that could be a problem; hence the ex-Spetsnaz mercs. If the Indians came after him, or the Americans sent in an arrest squad, it would be a one-way trip. He grinned to himself. He'd done everything right. It was just bad luck that guy had got left behind in India and spilled the beans. A few months, a few years, and it would all die down, and he'd start to make money again. He had a few ideas, and these mercs had given him a few more. If a man was prepared to commit murder to achieve his ambitions, what better place than Afghanistan?

The two mercs gestured to him. It was all clear, and he started walking toward the prefabricated site office he'd sent down ahead of his visit. Nearby was an RV, a full size Thor Palazzo motorhome. Powered by a massive Cummins turbocharged diesel engine, the inside was fitted with every comfort, as befitted the Chief Executive of a major company. With a sumptuous lounge, complete with luxurious leather sofas. The finish was

genuine walnut throughout, with solid brass fittings, except in the bathroom where he'd insisted on gold plating. It was the perfect accommodation for the busy businessman. It also had a few extras.

They'd stiffened the suspension to allow for the installation of armor plating in the main living area. The cab converted to four bunk beds for his security team. Four beds for six men, there would always be two on watch, no less, during the dark hours of the night. When dawn arrived, the guard would change, and there would always be at least four men on duty. Six, if the situation demanded it. They could always sleep later.

He glanced around the site, and what hit him first was the dismal lack of progress. A man was running toward him, and he recognized Chuck Mason, the Canadian engineer in charge of rebuilding. At least, he was supposed to be in charge. The guy slowed and reached him with a red face, bathed in perspiration.

"Mr. Kovac, this is unexpected. If you'd told me you were coming, I'd have made sure everything was ready for you."

He stared at the man, hating him for his failure. The man was a loser, overweight, unfit, and if his red face was anything to go by, he'd brought along a secret stash of booze.

"Like you'd have the reconstruction in hand, is that it?"

Mason had the grace to look away, embarrassed. "We've had our share of problems, Boss. I told you we should have imported American or European labor, but you said you wanted to do it on the cheap. These Afghans, you know what they're like. They don't want to work. They steal everything that's not nailed down, and when I do get them working, they stop to say their stupid fucking prayers."

"Is that right?" He looked around again, his gaze slow, penetrating, taking in every detail. "One week."

"Excuse me?"

"One week. Then you're fired. If I don't see real progress in seven days, you're out, and there won't be a penny in compensation. No salary, no travel allowance, nothing. You'll be standing right here with your suitcase, wondering how you can hitch a ride out of Afghanistan."

"But, you can't do that. I have a contract."

"In seven days' time, the contract ends."

"No, that's not possible. You can't change what we agreed on."

Kovac switched his gaze to the mercenaries standing guard close to him, and then back to Mason. "Contracts have a way of ending all of a sudden. Fatally. Accidents, you know that kind of thing."

The engineer's jaw dropped open, as he understood the full import of what Kovac was saying. At first he looked angry, as if he was going to argue. A second later, he slumped. It was impossible to work for Afgas without knowing what this man could do.

"Seven days, Mr. Kovac, and you'll see real progress, I promise. I'll drive these lazy thieving bastards 24/7, but one way or the other, they'll do some real work."

He nodded. "Seven days. That's it. Don't test me, Mason. I'm not playing games here."

"No, Sir, Mr. Kovac."

He hurried away, and Kovac smiled. It was so easy to manipulate men. All he needed was to apply the right tools. He strolled back to his guards and watched them unloading wooden crates from the cargo hold of the helicopter.

"What is this stuff, spare ammunition?" He cracked a smile, "I'm not anticipating a war here."

A merc grunted a reply in accented English. "RPGs."

"Excuse me?"

"RPGs and a few other goodies. Surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles, for use against aircraft, vehicles, and armor."

He regarded the man for a few moments. Like all of the former Spetsnaz troopers, he was hard faced, expressionless; wide shoulders, narrow hips, and biceps stretching the sleeves of his shirt, like a bodybuilder showing off to his pals. There was something about him that screamed danger. More than the physique, he decided it was the eyes. Like the eyes of fish on a slab, cold and lacking any vestige of humanity. He'd chosen well. If they sent anyone against him for the school bombing, these men would send them away in body bags.

"I see. Prepared for anything, huh?"

"Yes."

He waited, but he made no further explanation. These guys may be muscle-bound killers, but he'd hate to spend any time socializing with them.

"I'm leaving now to inspect the refinery."

"We will come."

"Yeah, good. I'm expecting around twenty cops to turn up pretty soon. They're local Afghans, out to earn an extra few bucks guarding this place. The thing is, when you see cop uniforms come through the gate, don't open fire."

The Spetsnaz stared back at him with his cold fish eyes. "We do not need cops."

Kovac sighed. "Listen, pal. I'm running things here, and I say we need a few extra men, in case anyone turns up and tries anything stupid. They'll be our first line of defense, okay? Cannon fodder, while your men do your stuff. Their job is to guard the refinery, like security guards. Your job is to guard me. Savvy?"

The man chuckled a grating laugh empty of humor. "Cannon fodder, yes, I like that. Very well, we will no doubt find a use for them."

Two guards went ahead, and two followed behind. The other two stayed close to the helicopter, unpacking their weapons and ammunition, as well as the missiles.

*Good, they have everything covered. Now I can concentrate on what I do best, making money.*

\* \* \*

They continued the journey to Kabul in the Black Hawk Admiral Jacks had assigned for their use, Nolan and his four troopers, First Sergeant Ramirez, and Oz Brennan. He sat with Amy the whole way, and he was pleased for them. Something had changed for Oz during their epic operation from the makeshift airfield in Pakistan to the savage action to take back Camp Dwyer. He'd lost something and gained a hell of a lot more.

Lost his aircraft, the Cessna Caravan that was the whole of his charter freight and passenger business; a million dollars give or take change, the market cost of those things. Would he ever be able to replace it? Not in a million years. It was a seat of the pants business. It'd cost him everything he owned and could borrow to set it up. Even if he could smooth over the ruffled sensibilities of the Pakistanis, there was no way he'd get that kind of ante together again.

On the other hand, he'd gained something else. Amy for sure, they'd enjoyed a casual relationship before, but now what they had was special. Forged in the heat of battle, they were now linked as if by steel shackles. No way were they going to be parted. He'd gained something else, and maybe that had made his mind up about Amy. The shakes. The PTSD. The constant looking over the shoulder, twitching, and wild-eyed nervousness that reduced him to little more than a bum; a terrible fate for such a man, a man rated with the best of men who'd ever gone into battle for the U.S. Navy SEALs. The trials and tribulations of his abandonment in enemy territory had disappeared. Oz was back.

He smiled, happy for his old friend. Then he turned his thoughts inward.

*What about me? Not too bad for a lieutenant on sick leave.*

A half dozen helos clattered along behind them, laden with the rescued Marines. Okay, they weren't all helos. Two were Bell Boeing V-22 Ospreys, as well as a pair of Black Hawks like the craft they rode in. The Marines had pulled out all the stops and sent in everything they had to bring back their men.

It had been a heavy price. Too many had died, both when the camp fell, and when they fought back against the Talibs. Yet a price that had to be paid. Now they were going home. The Marines were going home. The SEALs weren't done. The operation to pick up Adnan Kovac was on the face of it straightforward. Yet if he'd learned anything from his time in the Navy, it was that nothing was that straightforward.

He closed his eyes for a few moments and felt the urge to find somewhere where he could grab an hour or two of sleep. When he opened them, Maria was staring at him. He shook his head to clear it. "What?"

"You look all in."

"I'll be fine."

She nodded and smiled. "How long will it take us to reach Qala-e-Naw after we land in Kabul?"

"Us?"

"We've come a long way, Nolan. I want to be in at the end when we finish this."

"That's not possible. This will be an official U.S. Military operation. It's not like it was back at Garmsir. Now we've got you out safe, there's no



way I'm taking you back in harm's way. Besides, you have something else you'll need to attend to."

Her eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

"Like a relation of the Pope in Rome, who is lost and presumed dead inside Afghanistan. They're gonna raise, pardon the pun, holy hell when they find out. We don't even know where the body is, not yet. No one knows. There's a chance it may never be found. Unless..."

"Unless?" She watched him keenly.

"Kovac. It had to have been his doing. Chances are he'll have all the answers."

She gave him a sweet smile. "Which means I need to be with you when you go down there. As a representative of the Vatican, I have to monitor what has happened so I can report back. This wasn't some rural parish priest. I'm sure he'll tell me if we ask him in the right way."

"You mean with a gun stuck in his face?"

A grimace. "I didn't mean that."

"With a guy like that, there's no other way."

"Well, if it comes to it..."

"If it comes to it, I don't need you."

She was silent at first, and all they heard was the clatter of the helicopter rotors and the roar of the turboshaft engine. She came closer to him and held his hand. It was dark in the cabin, and he prayed the other men hadn't noticed. She was trembling, and he felt guilty.

"Nolan, you don't understand."

"What don't I understand?"

"I have to be there. I need to tell the Vatican Curia I did everything possible to locate Father David. There's something else."

"Uh, huh."

"I want to be with you. When this has ended, we could wind up at opposite ends of the earth. I don't know where they'll send me next. I imagine it's the same in the SEALs."

He nodded. "Yeah, something like that." Inside, he felt saddened. He assumed she'd decided to take her final vows, "So it'll be goodbye. Period. You're becoming a nun."

She chuckled, and it sounded musical, like the gurgle of a brook as it wound its way toward its destination. "No, I've decided not to take my

vows. Sorry, Nolan, but next time we sleep together, you'll have to put up with a mere mortal. It won't be a real, live nun."

He knew his face was glowing bright red, and he was thankful for the noise of the helo that made anyone overhearing what she said impossible. Even so, some of them were looking in his direction.

"Er, that wasn't what I was thinking."

"Hmm. Anyway, I've made the decision to work as a lay doctor. That means I'll still be working for the Vatican or one of their organizations, but I'll be a civilian, so to speak."

"Uh, right."

"I'm coming with you. If you won't take me in the helicopter, I'll hire a car and drive down there. I have to be in at the end."

He didn't reply. He was trying to work out how to dissuade just about the most stubborn woman he'd ever come across. It came down to a simple question. He cared for her more than he could believe. Maybe even loved her, he felt that strongly. The question was, how best to keep her alive? Because one thing was certain, he'd been thinking about Kovac as the conversation with Maria went on. He'd come to the conclusion a guy like that wouldn't leave himself exposed. When they went into Qala-e-Naw, hot lead was going to fly. The guy would have heavy protection, and it was almost certain he'd hire local cops to do his dirty work for him. In which case, what would be her best chance? Driving through the battle-scarred country alone, in an SUV? The alternative was to arrive in a U.S. Military helo, outfitted with autocannons and accompanied by Special Forces.

## Chapter Ten

*CNN International News: The scale of the violence is almost out of control. Satellite surveillance has shown even more troops and armor massed at the border, and the number of skirmishes between aircraft of both sides is increasing almost by the hour. Despite the Vatican again calling for peace, there is no sign that anyone is listening. Our Asian commentators state that war is virtually inevitable. The question is not if, but when. Then there is the other question on everyone's lips. Will they use nukes, and who will be the first to launch?*

He reclined on the couch of his RV, sipping a cold beer. He had a good view out the window and could see the Spetsnaz setting up their defenses. They were thorough, that was for sure. The missile launchers were interesting, long tubes, not unlike certain components of the wrecked refinery. He'd seen them pointing them upward, scanning the skies, checking out the target acquisition systems. The leader of the mercs, Leonid, told him they were Strelas. Strela, the Russian for arrow, NATO called them something different, SA-7 Grail. The name didn't matter. They'd take down a helicopter or a low flying aircraft with ease.

Kovac wasn't too happy about bringing down an aircraft, especially a military one, although not because of the potential loss of life. Soldiers earned their pay by risking their lives in battle, and if they died, he couldn't give a shit. No, the real issue was what their bosses would say if he started shooting down their precious multi-million dollar machines filled with toy soldiers, although he'd already worked out a let-out.

This was the scene of a terrorist attack against his company's refinery. Who was to say the terrorists hadn't come back? No one. He'd spoken to Leonid about his concerns.

"My friend, if you do happen to shoot down a Coalition aircraft; make sure everyone aboard is dead, you savvy? We don't want witnesses to go back to Kabul and start blabbing."

Leonid shrugged. "If you want them dead, Mr. Kovac, we'll kill them. It makes no difference to us, as long as you pay us what we agreed."

"The money's in the bank. You don't need to worry about that."

"In that case, any visitors are as good as dead."

He grinned. "Excellent. Excuse me. I need to get on with my meal. I don't want to keep you from setting up your...whatever it is you call them."

"Strela." The voice was harsh and flat. It reminded him of a robot he'd seen in a film. That's what this man was, like all of the Spetsnaz. Robots. Killer robots. More important, they were his killer robots. That's what made all the difference. The man closed the door and left him alone. He inspected the pre-frozen gourmet meals in the well-stocked freezer and chose an exotic Hungarian goulash. A few minutes in the microwave, and it would be ready to eat. At more than a hundred dollars a pop, it had better be good. He'd had them flown in from Paris, specifically to stock the RV. Now there were just the pleasant choices to make, first, the wine.

The wine cellar, in fact a refrigerated and insulated cupboard, produced a fine vintage wine. All that remained was the dessert. He moved to the two-way radio and called Chuck Mason. The man sounded terrified.

"Yes, Mr. Kovac, what can I do for you, Sir?"

"I need company."

"Company? What, you mean like..."

"A woman. Pretty, and young."

"Yes, Sir. You mean now?"

"Now. Someone who can keep her mouth shut. And make sure she is young."

"Young?"

"Young. You get my meaning, Mason?"

"Yes, Sir. I'll get right onto it."

"You have ten minutes."

He put down the microphone, opened the fourteen-year-old wine, and tasted the aroma. Perfect. If the girl he brought were as good as this wine, it would be an interesting evening. Provided she was no older. He liked his wines to be vintage. Not so his women. Mason would get his ass moving, now he knew the alternative. As far as any outside threats, if anyone arrived to try something stupid, his Spetsnaz would blow them away. A few weeks, and everything would be restored to normal.

*Normal means profits. Profit is king, if a few people die along the way, who gives a shit?*

\* \* \*

The respite at Bagram had been all too short. A shower, a change into fresh, borrowed MARPAT camos, and a hot meal. Armstrong gave them the use of the briefing room, and Vice-Admiral Jacks came on screen.

"You look good, considering what you've been through. Nobody wounded?"

"A few scratches, Admiral. Nothing more."

"Good, good. For your information, neither side has stated their willingness to pull back. They all smell a rat, and they don't believe Akram Khan is the major player in the school bombing. People are asking what would be the motive. They want the man at the top, and they don't believe that is Khan."

"It isn't Khan, Sir."

"I know that, but how do they know it? So far, they haven't named names, although it won't be long before something comes out. Someone's handing them information, Nolan. Jesus Christ, we've had him back here for less than an hour, and the Indians have announced they want to arrest the man who made it all happen. It's like we've got a leak, and if we don't plug it, this war we thought we'd stopped will still go ahead."

"It's understandable. They want someone to pay for those dead children."

"Of course they do," he snarled. "I know that. We all know that. Problem is, if the Paks and the Indians declare war, where's it going to stop? When the nuclear missiles start flying, and Lord knows how many more kids are killed, burned to a crisp?"

"Admiral, we need to identify and plug that leak before anything else gets out."

Jacks looked tired. "Yeah, I hear you. It has to be done, and soon. They're still staring each other down and threatening invasion. There've been a few cross border raids, armor, dogfights, and some aircraft have been lost. So far, its containable, but we need to be able to tell them we have this guy Kovac. As for the Minister in Kabul, we just have to pray no one ever

finds out. At least, not until your man Ryder has taken care of that piece of business."

"Kovac could still cause a lot of trouble. It would be better if he never made it back."

Jacks shuddered. "God alone knows what'll happen when you bring him in. They'll put him on trial, and what he says could send shock waves across this part of Asia. He'll name names, and the wrong words could start the armor rolling. If they hear that government officials were involved, then all bets are off. Up to and including the nuclear option." He sighed, "We're not out of the woods yet, Nolan."

"You're assuming it ever comes to a trial."

Jacks' head jerked up. "I copy what you're saying, Lieutenant. Another New Orleans solution."

"It could be arranged."

He shook his head. "I don't like it, don't like it at all. Once is enough, and it could avoid a nasty entanglement with the Afghan government. Another one is a step too far."

"I hear you, Admiral. What about support over the target area?"

This time he smiled. "Good news. I persuaded CIA to spare one of their drones to circle Qala-e-Naw. Drones are like gold now, as you may imagine. They're all up monitoring the borders, looking for any sign enemy armor has crossed. However, there's a Reaper already on station, and it'll stay there all the time you're in the target area. General Armstrong will assign a liaison officer, and he'll keep you in the information loop. As soon as we finish this conversation, I'll connect you to the live feed."

"That's good to know, Sir. Anything else?"

"Spetsnaz."

"Excuse me? I thought they went home when the Soviets threw in the towel."

"They did. Some of their people have taken jobs as private contractors, and I don't blame them. Russian wages being as bad as they are. NSA has picked up signal intercepts that suggest Kovac has a security team of former Spetsnaz with him, so be careful. Those guys can play rough."

"So can we, Sir. We'll keep an eye out for them."

"Yeah. That's about all, no, wait. The Pentagon had an enquiry from the Vatican, of all people. One of their people, a Jesuit priest, Father David

Clark, went missing in the area around Garmsir. Did you happen to come across him?"

"Yes, and no."

"Yes and no? What the hell does that mean?"

"We encountered a Jesuit priest, but he was a fake. The real David Clark is dead."

"Dead! Do you know who he's related to?"

"I do, yes."

"Christ, tell me what happened."

It's a long story, Sir. We don't know how they murdered David Clark, not yet. Only that Kovac was behind it somehow."

"Kovac again, the bastard. That's another crime to lay at his door. What happened to the fake priest?"

"An accident, Sir. A .50 caliber accident."

A pause. "Copy that. So we can tell the Vatican their man isn't coming home."

"Correct, Admiral. You can also tell them we don't yet know where the body of the priest is buried."

"That's not gonna please them. Okay, we'll deal with that one at a diplomatic level. However, you have a clear idea of what's at stake, so I wish you luck."

"Thank you, Sir. One more thing, if this drone is armed, why not hit him with a Hellfire missile? No more Mr. Kovac, end of argument."

Jacks shook his head. "They won't go for it, Nolan. They need a body, alive or dead. A mess of unidentifiable blood, tissue, and bones won't cut it."

"A body, right. We'll take care of it, Sir."

"Yeah, and watch out for those Russians."

"Yes, Sir."

"Good hunting, Jacks out."

The screen went blank, to be replaced by a grainy image taken from about two thousand meters. The Reaper was prescribing lazy circles around the wrecked refinery, and they could clearly see the RV sitting a few meters away. A hundred meters away, the Bell 427 executive helicopter was stationary.

He shared the briefing room with the people who'd come back with him from Dwyer. Will Bryce, and the three other SEAL operators, Brad Rose, John-Wesley Ryder, and Vince Merano. First Sergeant Ramirez had returned to his regiment, but Oz Brennan had insisted on coming along to the end. Amy was sitting next to him. He'd argued they didn't need the former SEAL sniper to come along. What worried Nolan was that his newfound confidence would desert him if things went wrong. He got nowhere.

"You don't understand, Nolan. You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

"This bastard Kovac is responsible for the loss of my aircraft, my business, and just about everything I ever owned. I want payback. I want to see an end to this bastard, period. He owes me, big-time."

"You want compensation?"

Amy answered. "You're damn right we want compensation. If there's anything of value we can seize."

"Like the helicopter," Oz added, "That would be enough to get me back in business."

"His Spetsnaz may not agree to you stealing his ride."

"We'll make 'em agree."

He grimaced. "It may not be so easy. Let's stay focused on the target. Kovac."

Ryder decided to take an interest. "How do they want him served up, Boss? Alive or dead?"

Nolan swallowed a grin. He knew the SEAL was already tasting blood. "We have to bring back a body, that's the sole imperative. As for the rest, it doesn't make a deal of difference."

His lips formed a cold grin. "Show them no pity. Do not spare them or shield them. You must put them to death. Your hand must be the first in putting them to death."

"Something like that, John-Wesley. Something like that."

A truck arrived to transport them to the helipad, and they climbed into the back. The ride out was quiet, each with their motives for making the trip. John-Wesley, his motive was to kill, to soak the blade of his huge combat knife in the blood of an enemy. For Oz, it was something else. Revenge, payback, call it what you like, and the chance to recoup his



business. Nolan had no idea about the price of a Bell 427, but he had a good idea it would be enough to buy a decent used Cessna 208. Enough to give him and Amy a life together, more so since he'd recovered from the PTSD that had haunted him for so many years. The Oz Brennan sitting opposite him was not the same man who'd taken off from Chaman in Pakistan. He had an idea Amy would make sure he stayed just the way he was.

Highcloud was silent. He'd taken his brother Vernon direct to the sickbay at Bagram, and the word was he was going to recover. Dehydration and malnutrition were the most serious of his problems, and he'd soon recover. Like Oz Brennan, Jim Highcloud bore a grudge. Nolan wasn't sure if it was against Adnan Kovac for starting the trouble that set Afghanistan alight, or the Taliban for their unwarranted cruelty. They'd packed his brother into a steel storage container along with eighty Marines, locked the doors, and left them. Probably he wanted it all. Kovac and the Taliban. That was fine with SOCOM, and Admiral Jacks had given him the nod to go on the operation.

Maria was also silent. After she'd repeated her insistence on seeing it through, going along at least as a medic, they'd kitted her out with an armored vest. A Gallet half helmet perched on her head to offer some protection. She also carried a radio boom mike like the rest of them so she could stay in contact. The armorer at Bagram had refused to issue a weapon to a civilian. On the other hand, they'd brought enough guns back with them to leave her with a Makarov 9mm. She still managed to look like a school kid playing cowboys and Indians.

His mind wandered to the leak. First, they'd tried to kill Akram Khan with a cruise missile. Why, when they were bringing him back to face trial? Who stood to gain from it? The Afghans? No way, the last thing they wanted was for the Indians to cross their border and start yet another ruinous war. The Pakistanis? He doubted it. Sure, they had a grouse with the Indians over Kashmir, but then again, they were Muslims. If it weren't over Kashmir, they'd have a grouse with the vast Hindu nation over something else. And if not the Hindus, they'd find someone else.

The Paks had made attempts to start a war with India in the past. The most recent was in 1999, when their troops crossed the frontier into Indian Territory in the region of Kargil. The Indians pushed them back, and after huge international diplomatic efforts, they pulled back over the border.

However, the cost of Pakistan's wars had devastated the country's economy, so the chances they wanted to start another war were slim.

This left India. It was India who'd learned almost within minutes of the existence of the man who'd paid for the bombing. India had the most to gain from a protracted conflict. They would devastate Pakistan, and if they stopped short of a nuclear exchange, they'd come out the clear winners. It all made sense, except for a single factor. Who was reporting back to the Indians?

There was another factor he chewed over. Would they do the same with Kovac? Did they know his whereabouts? If so, the target area could be hotter than they realized. There were so many questions, and he suspected the place to find the answers was Qala-e-Naw, where it all started. To find out, all they had to do was survive.

He had a sudden thought and smiled. He was supposed to have been sick when this all started, when he volunteered for that trip to Helmand. He'd forgotten all about that Punji trap, as if the prospect of action caused the adrenaline to course through his body and flush out the poison. He needed only to fight through a unit of Spetsnaz bodyguards, avoid another Indian cruise missile, uncover a traitor feeding info to the Indians, and bring back Adnan Kovac for trial. Any or all of them could kill him. The trick was staying away from the bullet with your name on it.

\* \* \*

This was a great day for Captain Rashul Dev, commander of Cobra Flight, Indian Air Force. He flew his French built Dassault Mirage 2000 like a veteran, and the other pilots in flight of six Mirages were no less skilled. They'd all experienced the limited cross border raids authorized by their government, and so far, the attacks on enemy armor and airfields had been successful. Most succeeded, he corrected himself.

He'd lost two pilots from his flight of six, downed to enemy missiles. The replacements came from another flight, reassigned after a severe mauling during a previous air battle over Kashmir. This time, they would take their revenge. Indian radar had picked up an incoming flight of four Pakistani F-16s. They'd be on a mission to bomb and strafe airfields close to the Indian border. It could even be the start of the war. The war they'd all

waited for, the chance to deliver a mortal blow to the Muslims. To make sure they never again made a cowardly attack against his country.

The mission was to intercept the Paks, and the plan was a good one. They were flying low, below the peaks of the mountains that separated the two countries. The controllers had confirmed there were no AWACS command and control aircraft monitoring activity in the area, which was surprising. If the incoming aircraft were intent on bombing a target inside India, they'd need AWACS support. Without Airborne Warning and Control Systems to seek out hostile threats, they'd be vulnerable to an ambush. Just like the one they planned.

The answer came to him. His flight was keeping low to stay off enemy radar, the Paks were doing the same, and flying without AWACS support aloft so as not to tip off the enemy about their intentions. It must have been a ground station, a mobile radar tracker, which had picked them up. Tucked away in the Kashmiri Mountains, the Paks wouldn't have known they were there, and using passive radar, or even the more primitive sound detectors, they'd have gone unnoticed. The enemy would suffer for that miscalculation.

He glanced to the side and satisfied himself the rest of his flight was keeping station. They were, and he smiled to himself. Someone was about to get a big surprise up their Muslim asses.

\* \* \*

Captain Wasim Aziz flew his F-16 Falcon straight and very low level, heading toward his assigned target. The target was a police headquarters. Pakistani Intelligence, the brutal and dreaded ISI, Inter-Services Intelligence, had cleared it. They insisted the Hindu officers who worked inside the building were guilty of encouraging attacks on Muslims inside Kashmir.

Despite their reputation, he had no reason to disbelieve the reports. Neither did he have any qualms about destroying the target. His sole misgiving was the approach, without AWACS support. It would take no more than a single mobile radar van to pick them up, and the Indians would fall on them like a pack of wolves. It wasn't an idle worry. The mountains of Kashmir could hide a thousand such vehicles. All it needed was a chance

sighting, and the mission would end in clouds of air-to-air and ground-to-air missiles. He switched off his mind to the possibility and flew on.

They were thirty klicks from the target when the threat-warning indicator sounded for the first time, shrill in the cockpit. Automatically, he glanced at his radar screen, and his guts churned. Missiles, six of them, their vapor trails stark against the clear blue of the Kashmiri sky. He hit the transmit button.

"This is Scimitar leader, incoming missile alert. Take evasive action now! Break, break, break!"

At the same moment, he flung his F-16 over in a tight turn, swerving to port and instantly correcting as his nose tipped, and he came within meters of hitting a low hill.

*Dammit, that was a rookie's mistake. I forgot for a moment how low we were flying.*

He pulled up, increased speed, and looked for an escape. The missiles were closer and behind them. He could see the tiny specks that were the hostile aircraft. Six of them, which meant he was outnumbered. He glanced around for the rest of his flight, and they'd scattered. Two were visible, but one had gone high in an attempt to increase speed and use altitude and tight maneuvering to shake off the missiles.

*The fool, he should have stayed low and hoped the missile's homing system would lose lock in the ground clutter.*

Lieutenant Malik Ashraf was a good flyer, but his combat experience was limited. He panicked, pulled back on the stick, and clawed for height. The missile exploded a few meters from the roar of his turbofan at maximum power, like a magnet for the missile's seeker head. A second later, Ashraf's aircraft disintegrated in a cloud of hot metal fragments, mixed with burning jet fuel. There was no ejector seat. He'd left it too late.

Captain Aziz hit the transmit button. "Scimitar One to all aircraft. We just lost Malik, but the mission continues. I repeat, we continue to the target." He checked the head-up display, "We're twenty kilometers out. Stay low and don't let the missiles get lock. As soon as you've unloaded your bombs, do not try to reform. Make your own way back to base and..."

He hadn't noticed the missile lift off the launcher less than eight hundred meters away. He was flying fast and low, and by a stroke of bad luck he'd flown right over an air defense installation. With the current

heightened state of alert between the two nations, it was inevitable it would be manned 24/7. Too late he noticed the flare of flame and plume of smoke that marked the missile's track.

As the weapon exploded, his last thoughts were of the missile specifications. It had to be an Akash, a medium range weapon with a one hundred and thirty pound warhead.

*Will any of my pilots survive now we've stumbled over the missile site?*

He didn't have time to reach any conclusion as everything went black.

\* \* \*

"Scratch one hostile," Captain Rashul Dev said, almost to himself. He'd been transmitting at the time, as one of his pilots, Kumar Kotak shouted, "The next one's mine."

"Take it easy, Kumar" he snapped a reply, "Those Falcons carry a sharp sting. Wait, something exploded down there. They're dumping their ordnance, which means they're heading home."

"I'll be careful. Tally ho!" he exulted, in an odd echo of their British RAF forebears. His Mirage dived to the attack, pursuing a fleeing F-16. They were on an intercept mission, which meant their Mirage attack jets carried no bombs. Just Matra air-to-air missiles, and if they used all of those, there was the .30 caliber rotary cannon.

Dev watched Kumar swoop on the fleeing F-16, and then he launched the first missile. It locked on the F-16's exhaust and began to overhaul the Pakistani jet. The enemy pilot was good; he gave that much to him. He launched a Matra missile, but the Pakistani twisted away. The enemy aircraft roared into a corkscrew turn, and his speed bled off. At the last moment, he pulled out from the spin that almost took him into the ground. The missile lost lock, and he kicked in his afterburners to head home. It made no difference. It was too late.

Kumar followed him down, and his blood was up. Closer, closer, he used the superior speed of the Mirage to close the range until he was almost ramming the enemy jet. The F-16 tried everything, twisting, turning, climbing, diving, but they were flying low. Tree hopping at ground level limited his options. At three hundred meters, he opened fire with the .30 caliber DEFA 554 rotary cannon.

The heavy shells chased into the fuselage of the Pakistani fighter, and at least one found the pilot. It looked as if he'd died instantly. The nose of the F-16 tipped over, ramming into the ground at a speed of almost one thousand miles an hour. Kumar zoomed up into the sky, and at five thousand meters, snapped his aircraft into a victory roll. Captain Dev grinned.

*It's strictly against regulations, but what the hell! Fighter pilots are different.*

"Nice shooting, Kumar. Good work."

"Thank you, Captain. There's one left, do we pursue?"

Dev glanced at his map display. They had forty kilometers to fly to reach the border, and it was almost certain the surviving fighter was nearly there. He still had to negotiate the Indian air defenses, but he had a good chance. Kashmir was a wild, desolate, and mountainous land, and they'd just been unlucky flying over a surface-to-air missile battery. It could be they'd run into more Paki fighters, and they had plenty of missiles left on the hardpoints.

"That's affirmative. We'll follow him to the border, and if we don't find more targets, we'll return to base."

The five pilots acknowledged, and he swung on the new course. He led them to a safer altitude, and after several minutes, they saw the border below them. On the Indian side, scores of tanks parked at the side of the main highway, the main route into Pakistan. Most were Indian manufactured Ajeyas, copies of the Soviet designed T72, but manufactured inside India. He looked closer. At the head of the column were ten larger tanks, T90s, Bhishmas, again made in India from Soviet designs. When the armor crossed the border, the T90 main battle tanks would carve a path through the Pakistani defenses like a dagger through paper.

On the other side of the border, a long line of T-80 main battle tanks was stationary, waiting for the order to move out. He knew they'd built them from a hotchpotch of Russian and Chinese designs. Which meant the Indian T90s would turn them into so much scrap metal. His threat warning screeched. He was well inside the range of the Pakistani air defenses. They'd done enough, more than enough.

"Follow me, men. We're going home. We'll leave it to the armored units to put some more Pakistani scalps on the scoreboard."

Lieutenant Kotak's voice came over the radio. "Captain, I still have Matras on my hardpoints. We could take out some of those tanks, give our armored units an easier time."

He chuckled. "Negative, Kumar. The war hasn't started yet."

"When will it start, Sir? How long?"

He thought about the skirmishes between both sides that were escalating by the hour. "Soon, my friend. Very soon."

## Chapter Eleven

*CNN International News: There are just hours to go before the Indian deadline expires to hand over those responsible for the school bombing. Both parties have taken offensive postures, and even more troops are headed toward their respective borders. So far, Afghanistan has refused to give any indication whether they intend to side with their Muslim Pakistani neighbors. Unofficially, the Taliban leadership has indicated their enthusiasm to join any battle against the Indians, whom they term 'infidels,' a familiar name to those American soldiers who served in Afghanistan. State Department and NATO sources have refused to give a definitive comment. It makes little difference to what the world can see unfolding. War is considered inevitable, bar a last minute miracle. Even the Vatican, after repeated calls for peace, has made no further comment. The reason for this silence is not known at this time.*

Jerry Hendriksen went into the cockpit and came back moments later. Nolan prayed to anyone who might be listening that the pilot didn't take his eyes off the instruments. They were flying so fast and low, there'd been the odd time when he was convinced the wheels missed the ground by fractions of an inch. Another few pounds of pressure in the tires, and they'd have it. At least, it looked that way.

"We're fifteen klicks out, you ready to disembark? I mean, you know there're hostiles down there, these Russians they talked about."

"I heard, and yes, we're all ready. Do you know what defenses they have in place?"

"The feed from the drone showed some kind of missiles in the target area. Small stuff, SAM-7s, something like that. That apart, the most they have is assault rifles. No sign of heavy machine guns, at least, not that we can see."

"SAM-7s? We can avoid those?"

He looked thoughtful as he leaned against the breech of the .50 caliber. "We can fire chaff and flares from our dispenser, but the big advantage is we



come in low, fast, and quiet before they get a chance to get a target lock."

"Can't you take them out first with a drone strike? There has to be something in the area."

"That would be a good plan. Problem is, after we pinpointed them, they moved them to another location. They've hidden the launchers somewhere, and we don't know where. If they launch a missile, we'll have to rely on our defensive systems. The good news is once they launch, we'll know where they are."

"What else do we have to face?"

He grimaced. "Yeah, it could get interesting. We have a few surprises for them. So don't worry about it. Oh, yeah, the surveillance showed more men moving into the target area."

"More Spetsnaz?"

"Negative, they look like cops, about twenty Afghan policemen. Intel figures they're moonlighting as site security. Nothing to worry about."

Nolan was worried, very worried. They were going up against a unit of Spetsnaz. Now there'd be twenty armed policemen working for Kovac. As long as the MH-60K was in the air giving them support, they'd be able to fight on more or less equal terms. If the helo went down, they'd be in shit so deep they'd never get out. Then there was the ball-breaker. If the Indians somehow got wind of Kovac's whereabouts, another cruise missile could end it all.

"Ten clicks," Hendriksen's voice came into his headset, "Pilot said he's going to land behind a low hill, half a klik from the target area. That would be where the RV and the helo are parked. As soon as you're all out, we'll take off and support you from the air."

"It's appreciated."

He knew what it was costing the crew of the Black Hawk. It took a brave man to fly a helo into the teeth of a Russian surface-to-air missile system. The 160th were all brave men. The United States Army 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) employed the bravest and the best. They could retrofit as many bolt-on goodies as they wanted. When the shit hit the fan, they would still be in the air, flying a lumbering, vulnerable rotary craft. It would need all their courage and skill to stay alive.

"Five clicks," Hendriksen intoned, "Stand by for disembarkation. We'll want to make it quick. The skipper wants you moving out before the wheels touch the ground."

"Copy that."

He glanced around at his unit. They caught the look and nodded. They were ready. They always were. Jim Highcloud, tall and menacing, the American Indian SEAL who wanted a savage revenge for what they'd done to his brother. Then there was Oz Brennan, sitting with Amy. He nodded at Nolan, and he looked good, fierce and determined. Amy didn't notice. She seemed lost in thought. No doubt worried she could lose her boyfriend, right when she'd found the real Oz Brennan, and they'd fallen in love.

*We have to do this and get out alive. I have to get them all out alive. They all have too much at stake.*

The MH-60K was still hugging the ground as it approached Qala-e-Naw, and the edge of the wrecked refinery came into sight. The helo swerved behind a low hill, maybe ten meters high, but enough to block the line of sight of any missiles that came their way. They went lower and lower, and the Black Hawk hovered inches above the ground. Hendriksen was urging them out, but he could have saved his breath.

First out was Vince, who raced up the small hill to drop flat and cover them with his Barrett Light Fifty. Will followed, and then Ryder, who darted around the side of the hill and disappeared into the maze of wrecked pipework and machinery. Nolan was wary, and Will and he adopted a defensive stance as the rest clambered out. Maria was last, and the second she left the fuselage the Black Hawk soared up a few meters into the sky and flew away, staying low.

He was about to move toward the executive helicopter, the Bell 427, their first objective. Prevent the target from escaping, bottle him up in this place, and then grab him. Once they'd overcome the threat of the Spetsnaz.

*Where are they? We came in low, too low to check out the enemy positions. So far, there's been no shooting. Is it possible they're not here? No, the Bell helicopter and the RV are the other side of this hill, so Kovac is not far away. That means the Spetsnaz aren't far away either. Now we have the Afghan cops to consider. I just wish I knew why they're not shooting. If they...*

The missile launch interrupted his thoughts. A trail of smoke and fire reached into the sky. The missile was intended to impact the Black Hawk and tear it from the sky, to crash back to earth in fiery ruin. The pilot reacted fast, hitting the automatic flare and chaff dispensers. A cloud of aluminum poured out behind the helo. He threw it into a tight turn to bring the exhausts from the massive turbofans away from the missile's seeker head. The missile exploded in a cloud of chaff. Meanwhile, the helo turned away and flew off at maximum speed and minimum altitude.

At the same moment, Vince's Barrett bellowed from on top of the hill.

"It looks like we're in business," Master Sergeant Bryce said, his tone laconic. With some reason, except for one factor, they weren't squaring up to insurgents with varying degrees of training and discipline. These were Russian Special Forces, men who prided themselves on skill, strength, and brutal fighting techniques.

"They'll try something unexpected, Will, so watch these bastards," he retorted. "Take Highcloud with you and go to the north side of the hill. I'll take Oz and go the other side."

"Copy that." He glanced at Highcloud. "You ready, Jim?"

"As ever was."

They moved away, and he glanced at Oz. "Time to move out. Ladies, you stay right here."

"But..." They chorused the objection together, and he'd been waiting for it.

"No buts. Listen, there's a firefight going on out there. The agreement is you stay here and provide medical support."

"Nolan..." Her voice carried an urgency he hadn't heard before.

"What is it?"

"Please, take this. It will keep you safe."

He looked at the handful of beads with the crucifix attached. "Why? This is important to you. I'm not even Catholic."

Her eyes pleaded with him. "For me, please take it. Be safe."

He didn't have time to argue, and he stuffed the rosary into the pocket of his camos, with a mumbled, "Don't expect me to start praying."

She was smiling. "I won't."

"Right. Okay, keep your heads down and hope we don't take any casualties. Let's go, Oz."

Brennan nodded and followed him. The two women glared at them but stayed put, and he reached the side of the hill where he could get a better look at what they faced. They crawled out into the open, wary of an ambush from the Russian operatives, and it all became clear. They'd walked into an ambush, or as near as made no difference.

The Russians had lined up a machine gun on the side of the hill. They knew he'd have no choice but to come from that direction. Bullets chattered overhead, and then the gunner corrected his aim, and the lead churned up the ground around them. Nolan pulled back fast, but he'd seen the next piece of cover, a collapsed stone storage shed. He looked at Oz.

"The place is about forty meters from here. If we wait for the gunner to switch mags, we'll have a chance. We have to close the hostiles and flush them from cover. We have to give either Vince or the crew of the helo a clear shot at them. I'll go first. You cover me. Soon as I get there, wait for my signal."

"Copy that."

Oz sounded relaxed and confident, a good omen. Nolan waited, his body tense, ready for the mad dash to the next cover. Oz poked his rifle out from cover and fired off a few shots. The machine gun fired again, and more bullets lashed around them. He waited, and then the moment came as the gun fell silent. The gunner had to be changing mags, had to be. It was now or never. He ran.

Forty meters, thirty, twenty, ten, he was almost there, when the gun fired. He made a flying leap for cover, bruising his body against the broken stone, and then he was hugging the ground. He caught his breath, and a second later realized he wasn't alone. A half-second more, and a soldier leapt at him. The man was huge, his body packed with hard muscle, and he came at Nolan with a combat knife.

The blade missed him by a fraction as he swerved to avoid the blow, but the man needed no knife. He dropped the blade and his hands came up to grip him in a bear hug with his two massive arms. His superior weight pushed Nolan to the ground. He was fighting for his life as the man squeezed harder and harder. He was smiling and shouting something in Russian. Nolan felt his brain becoming more confused. He tried every trick in the book to break the man's hold.

Then he tried one that wasn't in the book. He couldn't reach his pistol and had dropped his assault rifle, but his hands were squashed between both bodies. He reached down, cupped the man's balls, and then squeezed. He put every ounce of effort into that hold, and his reward came a second later when the Russian's grip slackened. His opponent let go as he moved his hands down to rip away the iron vise that held his testicles. Nolan freed his other hand, brought it around in a curving move, delivering a hard left hook to the Russian's chin.

He may as well have punched a concrete wall. The Russian gave out a slight grunt, and then slashed at him with an underhand knife strike.

It crashed into his guts, weakened by the Punji poison several weeks back, and Nolan recoiled in pain. The Russian sensed his advantage and followed up with two hard jabs. He was confident, although he stood sideways on to protect his genitals from another attack.

He stood back and reached for his Sig tucked into the holster on his belt. The shooting further away had intensified, and from the corner of his eye, he saw another surface-to-air missile arc through the sky. It must have missed, for seconds later, the MH-60 soared high into the sky, still trailing flares and chaff. Hendriksen was standing behind the .50 caliber door gun. He directed his fire a hundred meters from where Nolan fought for his life with the Spetsnaz. There were men there, scattering for cover under the heavy machine gun fire.

They didn't all make it. Four uniformed men, Afghan cops, lay torn to shreds by the massive bullets, and then he had to work to save himself. Too late, the Russian caught him with a leg sweep that toppled him. He stood over him, grinning. He heard the Russian curse, loud and clear, "Yob tvoyu mat, Americanski!" The meaty hand grabbed for his pistol holster to pull out an automatic and finish him. The shot was loud, so loud it rang around the scrapyard of the destroyed refinery. He sensed the searing, terrible pain of the bullet that would end his life. He knew it would be more than any doctor could repair, but at least there was no pain.

The huge Russian toppled onto him and drove the air out of his lungs. Blood and tissue spattered over him from the massive wound where Vince's .50 cal sniper bullet had taken out a good chunk of his chest. There'd been no chance of a shot while they tussled. Merano could have hit the wrong

man. Once the Russian climbed to his feet, celebrating victory, he became a target. He stared down at the body and translated the Russian's last words.

"Fuck you mother, too, Russian." He waved a hand in the direction of the hill, and then took a fast look around. The MH-60 was half a klick away, pouring shattering bursts of bullets at the position where the cops had gone to ground. They'd not chosen wisely.

During the construction of the refinery, they'd brought in prefabricated stone buildings to house machinery, tools, and to create storage facilities. This particular stone structure had collapsed in the blast several weeks before. What appeared to be a useful staging position from where men could shoot behind adequate cover.

The .50 caliber machine gun mounted in an MH-60 was unimpressed by a heap of thin slabs of concrete. The M2 had been in use longer than any other small arm in the American inventory, with the possible exception of the .45 ACP M1911 pistol, coincidentally also designed by the redoubtable John Browning. The massive bullets each weighed around two ounces. They could chew through concrete, metal, and hardened oak as if they were no tougher than papier-mache. They also chewed through the flesh and bone of the Afghan cops.

Nolan turned his attention away from them, watching for the bigger danger, the Spetsnaz. Two more surface-to-air missiles launched from a tangle of steel wreckage about a hundred and fifty meters from his position. Fire and smoke roiled the sky, as the deadly Strelas arced upward toward the helo. Flares and chaff poured out from behind the Black Hawk. The pilot arrowed away at high speed, and once more the close proximity to the ground, together with the decoys, confused the seeker heads of the missiles. Neither missile scored a hit, but it was a matter of time before one got through.

A burst of firing came from the other side of the hill, Will's position, and together with Highcloud, they put down a barrage of fire that stopped the avalanche of Russian bullets. Vince kept up a steady drumbeat of sniper rounds from on top of the hill, and for a few moments at least they'd gained the initiative. He keyed his mike button. "Oz, get here now, while they're behind cover. Move it!"

He waited almost a minute before the sniper pounded across the narrow strip of open ground and flung himself down beside him. Nolan

stared hard at him, and his eyes were dilated. Amy had become his rock, and without her, some of the newly found edge he'd acquired had slipped.

"Are you okay?"

Brennan sucked in air. "Sure, I'm good. What're we doing now?"

"Hunting Spetsnaz. You see that wreckage?" He pointed in the distance where he'd seen the source of the shooting. "That's where they are, so that's where we're going. I need Highcloud to cover us from that side. If a Russian shows even a fingernail, blast it. Is that a Roger?"

"Sure."

"Good. I'll arc left and come in from the side to give you a clear field of fire." He hit the mike button. "Bravo Two, this is Bravo One. You see their position?"

"Copy that, Bravo One."

"Bravo Four, Vince, you see 'em?"

"Yep."

"Okay, as soon as we move, pour it on. Bravo Three, Ryder, where are you?"

A curse came into his earpiece. "Boss, I'm real sorry. It was a deep shaft, covered by loose girders and planks of wood. One of the bastards got in close. He nearly nailed me with a machine gun. When I dived for cover, it all collapsed, and I fell in. It's about six meters deep, and I'm working on a way out of here. Give me a few minutes, I should make it."

"Copy that."

He looked again. The shooting hadn't resumed. It was then or never. "Let's go!"

He catapulted to his feet and raced out into the open ground. At the same time, he saw Will charging across from the opposite side, and then the shooting started. Highcloud had an M249 light machine gun, and he peppered the Russian position with 5.56mm bullets. Vince Merano and Oz Brennan did what they did best. Surgical shooting. Aimed, precise and accurate, and the screams of the men they hit evidence they were punishing the enemy.

His lungs were red raw as he pumped his legs and arms, racing over the debris-strewn ground. He made it halfway when they started shooting. Two bullets thumped into his armored vest, and another tore a chunk from his helmet. A fourth bullet sliced through his camo pants, tearing a strip

from the flesh on his leg, and then he tripped. It was an accident. A loose chunk of metal lying on the ground, and it tangled his legs and threw him down. At the exact moment, the Russians decided he'd got near enough.

The machine gun opened up, and bullets churned the ground around him. Some whistled through the air above where he'd fallen, and he pressed his face into the ground. The machine gunner stopped, shifted his aim, presuming Nolan to be dead, and walked fire into where Will was still running at high speed toward the enemy. There was no chance he could make it. The shooting was too close, too accurate, and then he saw the big Master Sergeant go down.

He hadn't tripped. He'd felt the impact as at least one bullet hit him, and then he'd disappeared, lying amidst the debris and rubble. There was no way he could get to him, and besides, their best chance was to finish what he'd started. Kill the Spetsnaz. Then he heard Highcloud's voice.

"Will, are you okay? I saw you go down."

"Hit me in the leg. I'm strapping it up with a dressing, but I ain't gonna be winning any hundred-meter dash, not for the foreseeable future."

"Copy that. Stay right where you are."

A deep, bass chuckle, "I don't have a choice. Lt, what's your situation?"

"I'm okay, Will, but I need to get..."

He didn't get to finish the sentence. In a mad, crazy act of astonishing heroism, the crew of the MH-60K decided on a dust off. A casualty evacuation under fire, and the Black Hawk bored in from the south, hugging the ground and curving in, so the chaff and flare decoys formed a thick curtain between the rotary craft and the missile shooter.

They launched a Strela. It exploded inside the chaff cloud, and another missile chased a bunch of flares to its doom. The helo landed meters away from Will, and he saw Hendriksen dive out of the door and race to his position. He was strong, or maybe it was the adrenaline kicking in under fire. He lifted the big man onto his shoulder and ran with him to the helo. Another crewman had taken over the Browning .50. When the Russians began to target the crewman with the casualty on his shoulders, the big .50 caliber bullets walked into the machine gun, and it fell silent as the crew dived for cover.



Hendriksen tossed the wounded SEAL into the helo and dived through the door. A split second later it took off, skidding low across the sky spouting chaff and flares, moving away from the Russians. No more missiles followed, and he wondered how many they had left. He had no choice but to keep going now their attention was diverted, and he bounded to his feet and began running.

The Spetsnaz position was fifty meters in front of him when he skidded to a stop and flattened his body into a narrow slot in the ground, which looked as if it had held a small pipeline. Incredibly, they hadn't noticed his gut-searing run and were concentrating on a duel with the snipers. The machine gun sent sheets of bullets after the fleeing helo. They all missed, and the gunner switched his aim. Now he was aiming at Merano positioned on the top of the hill. His aim was good, too good. He heard a shout, and it was Highcloud.

"Vince is hit. I'll lend him a hand and take his place. Nolan, what gives down there?"

He was about to reply when he heard a small noise ahead of him. He froze and listened. Someone was coming toward him, a Russian, no question. They'd seen him go to ground and were sneaking along the narrow slot to get to him. The trench was narrow, enough for a single man to squeeze through, but no more. If he stayed where he was, the Russian would be on him.

At the side of his hiding place there was one chance of getting a jump on the Russian. A chunk of machinery at the side of the trench, he'd no idea what it was. Some kind of a pump or a filtration system was his best guess; a nightmare jumble of metal parts, but one that offered cover. He crawled out of the gully into the center of the machinery and waited. The faint noise became louder, and then he heard a man's labored breathing as he came nearer.

Nolan drew his Sig and sighted on the slot where the man would emerge. And waited. Nothing happened. The noises ceased, and the deathly quiet surrounded them like a blanket. Highcloud had stopped firing. The Russian gun had also fallen silent. It was eerie, just the sound of the wind coming in from the north, from Turkmenistan.

*Where is he? What's happened?*

He was tempted to crawl back and go looking for him, but he gave it a few more minutes. The guy was cautious. That was understandable. The noise came again, fabric clothing, someone moving along the trench toward him. He looked to the south, away from the refinery, startled. The noise came from the other direction. The bastards had flanked him. They knew where he was. He couldn't alert Oz or Highcloud to give him cover. All he could do was take both of them, a kind of reverse ambush.

Gently, he slid out of the wreckage, changing his position. The person moving from the south came nearer. He recognized the camos with a shock. MARPAT. A second later, they crawled into view. Maria, she'd disobeyed his order and come after him. She was crawling into a trap, and he couldn't alert her, couldn't call a warning into her earpiece; the enemy was too near. Yet still out of sight. He did the one thing he could do, aimed at a chunk of twisted pipework a few meters away, and fired two shots.

Her head bobbed up, startled, and she saw him. He put his fingers to his lips and signaled for her to wait. A minute went by, and then another. At last, he heard the almost silent, scraping of cloth on rough ground. A hand came into view. Nolan took aim. A hand would have to do, and he fired three shots. Two rounds tore the hand into splintered, bloody ruin, and the man jerked it back. Too late, Nolan was on his feet, racing along the ground, and he was in front of him, half in and half out of the trench. He'd put aside his assault rifle and was nursing his wounded hand, whimpering in agony and watching appalled as blood poured out onto the ground.

To his credit, he reacted like lightning when he saw the SEAL standing over him and dived for his weapon. Nolan shot him, two shots in the chest, and a third in the forehead. Then he jumped back and a hail of lead parted the air around him. He'd almost forgotten the Spetsnaz wasn't alone. He snaked over to Maria, who was hugging the ground as bullets whistled all around her.

"What're you doing?" he hissed, "You're supposed to be the medic, not out here looking to get your head shot off."

"I thought you might need some help. At least two bullets hit you, and it looked as if you were wounded."

He tapped his vest. "Same as the one you're wearing. Stops a bullet every time."

"Oh, I didn't realize. You know there are two more of them out there. We were watching, me and Amy."

"What about the cops? Any of them still around?"

"No, they left in a hurry, and they dragged the dead and wounded away with them. It's just the two Russians and the other man."

"Other man?"

"He's short and bald. Thickset, and he looks very strong, like a wrestler. Well-dressed, too, civilian clothes, I'd say he's the boss."

"Adnan Kovac, it has to be."

"The man who paid for the school bombing in India? Isn't he the one who started all of this?"

Nolan considered his answer. "What started it all was the raid that destroyed this place, in the center of the most violent country in the world. Kovac made it a thousand times worse by playing politics with people's lives, starting with those children. Our objective here is to bring him back, preferably without losing any men."

"Or women?" she smiled, "I'm sorry, Nolan. I thought you were hurt."

"Forget it. You say you saw them close to this position?"

She appeared lost in thought and didn't answer the question. "Kovac, would he have ordered the death of Father David Clark?"

"The Jesuit? Yeah, it's almost certain. Then he organized the fake David Clark to go after you. He thought it would be best to finish off any witnesses to what he'd done."

"Yes, I see that."

"Right. How far away did you say they were?"

"I didn't, but it's about one hundred meters. The helicopter and the RV are about a hundred and fifty meters away, and they're hiding somewhere in between. What're you going to do?"

*Kill the two Spetsnaz and take Kovac back with us. At least, that's the plan.*

"You wait here. I'm calling in support."

"But..."

She started to rise, but he pushed her back into the narrow trench. "I said wait here!"

She glared at him. He ignored her and keyed the mike button. "Jim, do you have sight of the executive helicopter?"

"Flying whorehouse," he chuckled, "Yep, I see it. The RV is there, too. No sign of any activity."

"Roger that. The enemy's hunkered down about fifty meters closer to your position. Can you see anything?"

A long pause, and then he replied. "There's no sign of people, but there are several places they could be hiding. Yeah, I see what looks like a small compound for their fire services. Meter-high earth walls, and there're a few extinguishers tossed on the ground outside. If I were looking for cover, I'd...hold on. Someone's inside, taking a look-see with a riflescope. No, it's not a scope. It's hard to make out from here, but I'd say it's the optics of a SAM. Boss, they're getting ready to shoot at the Black Hawk when it comes back."

He'd forgotten about the helo that brought them in, but now he heard it, coming in fast and low from the east. The helo that had risked everything in a dust off to pick up Will Bryce in a move that displayed more courage than he could remember. It reminded him of archive footage he'd seen of the Vietnam War. Hueys, UH-60s, the forerunner of the Black Hawk; swooping over the dense green jungle in a clatter of rotors to snatch wounded men to safety, often under heavy enemy fire. Now they were coming back, and he had to warn them. He tried their frequency.

"This is Bravo One to Night Stalker MH-60, do you copy?"

The answer came a second later. "Glad to hear you're alive and well, Bravo One. We're on the way back to scout out the enemy and see if we can't hit them again. If it gets too hot for you down there, we'll pull you out on the next pass."

"Negative, I say again, negative. The enemy has at least one SAM deployed, and they're searching for a target right now."

The voice sounded puzzled. "We don't read anything on our threat warning screens."

Nolan had wondered why they didn't pull out when they lost their rentacops. At first he'd assumed the Spetsnaz were overconfident. Then he put it together in a flash. With the loss of the man in the trench, the two troopers Maria and Amy had spotted inside the fire bunker would be all they had left. They'd started by outnumbering his small team, and now the odds were reversed. Of course they wanted out, although they couldn't

leave, not yet; couldn't take-off in their shiny Bell helicopter. Not until the Black Hawk was down, making the Night Stalker's helo their prime target.

He heard the pilot come back to him. "Bravo One, we may have a problem. We're kinda low on decoys here. We've been throwing 'em out like confetti on the Fourth of July. Way I see it, we're gonna have one shot to get you out of there."

"We're not leaving until we have what we came for. When we go, Adnan Kovac comes with us."

"I hear you, Bravo. What do you want us to do?"

He thought his answer with care. They needed the power of those .50 caliber door guns. The problem was the Strelas. Powerful missiles, waiting to reach up and rip the Black Hawk from the sky, the risk would be too great. The Night Stalkers wouldn't survive. He had no choice. There was a single way to handle the threat. The way they'd trained him. Sneak in, kill the enemy, and get out fast. At least, that was the theory.

"Hold your position. Do not show yourselves before I confirm the destruction of the missiles. You try an approach, and they'll blow you out of the sky."

The pilot didn't sound too happy. "I don't like sitting here while you guys to all the work."

"There's no choice. Wait for my call, copy?"

"Yeah, copy that, Bravo. And good luck."

He ended the call and looked at Maria. She'd taken out the automatic they'd given her at Bagram, the heavy Makarov 9mm. "Whatever you're planning to do with that, forget it. I'm going to take out those missiles, and I'll get Jim and Oz to cover me. Wait here, otherwise you'll get in the way of the snipers."

Her gaze was stubborn. "I came to help you, not sit around like some housewife waiting at home for her husband to finish work."

He sighed. "Just this once, Maria, do what I say." He fixed her with a gaze, "You mean a lot to me. Much more than you could realize."

"I know," she murmured. Her eyes glazed for just a second, and he puzzled about what he'd seen there, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

He waited for her to say more, but she just stared at him.

"Okay, keep your head down." He keyed the mike button, "Oz, Jim, I'm going in. Give me what cover you can."

"Copy that."

Almost as his finger left the button, they started shooting. Highcloud's M249 was like a buzz saw, spitting 5.56mm bullets around the enemy position until it stopped firing. One man raised his head for a fraction of a second. Oz parted his hair with a well-aimed shot from the SR-25. Well-aimed, but it still missed. He catapulted to his feet and ran, boots pounding across the broken metal mixed with small chunks of rock. He made it halfway, and then leapt for cover as the machine gun opened up again; walking in a line of bullets showering a hailstone of lead that almost had him.

They'd suckered him, the Spetsnaz trooper showing himself on the other side of the bunker, a calculated risk that had paid off. While they were concentrating on him, the other man, the machine gunner, had moved position. They'd know the man who had crawled out to kill Nolan hadn't made it, and they expected him to turn up any moment. Now he knew where to look, he could see the barrel poking out of a small slot in the side of the bunker. Like a rookie he'd nearly fallen into their trap. Like the Punji trap, it was designed to catch the unwary. They'd almost succeeded, and had the gunner drawn an accurate bead on him before he opened fire, he'd be dead. Instead, his aim was off, and he'd walked the shots into the target, giving him time to take cover.

It was stalemate. There was no way Highcloud could cover him, the angles were all wrong. He needed Brennan if he was going to get out of this alive.

"Oz, I need you now. You see my position, twenty-five meters before the bunker. There's a firing slot in the side of the bunker. That's where the gunner is shooting from, do you see him?"

He waited. Nothing. "Oz! Where are you? Come in."

Nothing.

*Could he have been hit? Or has he fallen back into the depression and despondency that tracked him all the way out of Afghanistan, and which the return to the country had shaken out of him.*

He tried again.

"Oz, come in. Anyone, have you seen Oz?"

Amy replied first. "Nolan, what's going on? Have you reached the target?"

He told her what had happened. Then, "Where's Oz?"

"He's okay."

He was about to ask her more when she ended the call.

Too late, she'd gone. There was something strange about that conversation. How come she was using the radio? When they left Bagram, Maria had a headset, as did Oz. The SEALs, including Highcloud, had headsets.

*There was no radio issued to Amy. So how come she's using one?*

He put it out of his mind and worked to puzzle out a way to get to the target, a way that wouldn't result in them filling him full of holes. They beat him to it. He got a glimpse of one of the Spetsnaz leading a civilian toward the Bell helicopter. It had to be Kovac, and while there was at least one Russian between him and the target, he was stymied.

*What are they doing, taking a chance going up against the MH-60? Would they be that stupid? Surely not!*

He tried to line up a shot, but it was impossible through the tangle of wreckage. Then he tried Oz. Same as before, no reply. Next, Highcloud and Vince, there was no reply from Vince, but he raised the Indian.

"Jim, where is Merano?"

"I've got him. He took a bullet, but he'll be okay."

"Copy that. Can you see Kovac and the Russian, they're walking toward the helo?"

The reply was immediate. "I see them, but I can't do anything about it, Lieutenant. I ran out of ammo, and all I have left is a handgun. At this range I may as well spit at them for all the difference it would make. What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Hold your position. We need to find a way to get to them."

"What about Oz, where is he?"

"Oz is, er, unavailable. Leave it with me. I'll find a way."

He crawled inch by inch, moving toward the target. First, he'd deal with the Spetsnaz trooper, the man covering their getaway. Then he could rush the two men about to board the helo. He didn't understand, why leave a man on the ground? He didn't think they'd seen him, and he got nearer and nearer. He cursed as a sliver of aluminum snagged on his headset. He went

to free it and dropped flat when a long burst of machine gun bullets hissed overhead.

*Okay, change of plan. The guy's seen me. It'll make it more difficult, but not impossible.*

He keyed the transmit button, but nothing happened. When he'd ducked down, he'd ripped away the headset boom and so lost contact. Another curse, and he kept moving. The sound of two Pratt and Whitney turboshafts spooling up rent the air. Next, he saw the helo vibrate as they brought it to life. He still didn't get it. How could they expect to avoid the Black Hawk, which would pursue them away from the danger of missiles, and either shoot them down or force them to land?

He crept nearer, and now the man was close enough to rush him. The Spetsnaz looked around at the Bell 427, and Nolan took the opportunity. He rushed him, and as the man turned, he pulled the trigger of his Sig and pumped two bullets into him. Both smacked into his vest, although the impact was enough to drive him back. He fired again, but the man was lightning fast and rolled behind the low earth wall of the fire safety compound. Nolan went after him, in time to see him disappear behind a low wall. He started to shoot back, and he had no choice but to duck out of the line of fire.

He knew there was no time left before they helo took off, but he still couldn't work out what they were planning. Then he saw the warhead of a Strela poke over the top of the wall, just an inch or two, but it was enough. And then it all came to him. They weren't going anywhere in the Bell. It was bait. When it was airborne, the Black Hawk would come boring in and shoot it down. Except all they'd get was a missile for their pains. Between him and the Spetsnaz was a flat, neat stretch of open ground. No way he could get near him, and then the Bell took off. They'd lost. There was no way he could warn the Night Stalkers, and they were about to fly into a trap. His men would go back to Bagram in body bags. Kovac would get away, and worst of all, the Indians would wait no longer. It was war.



## Chapter Twelve

*CNN International News: America mobilizes! Despite previous denials, the State Department has conceded the need to reinforce its ally, Afghanistan, in the coming conflict. Asked about the chances of avoiding a war, a spokesman was quoted as saying, 'We haven't given up on peace just yet, but we're advising American nationals to leave the country as a matter of urgency. We have also begun evacuating our Embassy personnel. The Pentagon confirmed its state of readiness will remain at Defcon 2, and U.S. troops have been recalled to base to be ready for deployment to Asia.'*

The roar of the turboshafts hid the approach, but he sensed someone behind him. He turned fast. It was Amy. She was wearing the headset she'd used to speak to him, and he assumed she'd taken it from Brennan.

"You shouldn't be here. Get back and find Oz. He may need your help."

She shook her head. "I know where he is, and it's too late to help him."

"Too late?"

"A cruise missile is on the way, and this place is about to go up in flames."

"I don't get it. Which cruise missile?"

"A Nirbhay."

"A Nirbhay? That's an Indian weapon."

"That's correct. They triangulated on me and launched a few minutes ago."

He stared at her, astonished. "I don't get it. You're a Pakistani. How could you..."

"I'm an Indian," she snarled, "Indian, I'm Hindu. You can't understand how much I suffered at the hands of the Muslims, until I pretended to be one of them. That's when I decided to help my country by giving them information."

It all became clear. The missile that hit Camp Dwyer, moments after they'd left. She'd ratted them out. "You're working for them."

"That's correct, yes I am. You don't understand how much I suffered at the hands of those Muslim bastards before Oz came along. Rapes, beatings, insults, it was terrible. He was good to me, and he protected me, but I'm an Indian, and I have to do what is right. I deserved to help my country get back at them."

"They want to kill Kovac."

She nodded. "You know what he's doing. His helicopter will have to land to pick up the remaining man. The cruise missile is due to strike in about ten minutes, and if it's anywhere near, the blast will tear his helicopter to pieces. He'll die, yes. We'll all die, and I'm happy to sacrifice my life to rid the world of the child murdering vermin."

"You intended to kill us all just to get one man."

She shrugged. "It's a price worth paying. You can't stop it, so you may as well accept it. The missile is on the way. No one can do anything."

At that moment, a movement a few meters away diverted his attention. A head popped out of the center of a pile of twisted metal.

*Ryder!*

He'd forgotten him during the fight, and now he remembered he'd tumbled into a deep shaft. The Russian saw him at the same moment and clawed out a weapon, a big automatic. He popped off a couple of shots, but John-Wesley had already dropped back down the shaft, out of sight.

Nolan fired twice. The big Russian dodged away, disappearing behind yet more of the twisted metal that littered the site. He was still carrying the Strela. At that moment, the Bell 427 took off. He bounded toward Amy and grabbed her arms.

"I need your headset. I have to warn the helo."

She shrunk back and shook her head. "You can't warn them. I want them to bring down the Black Hawk so that Kovac's helicopter lands to pick up the Russian. They'll be on the ground at the exact moment the missile hits."

"Give me that damned headset."

She tried to twist away. "You're wasting your time, Nolan. You're going to die here. We all are. Why don't you relax and accept it?"

He wrestled the set from her and put it on his head, in time to hear Oz's voice. "Nolan, are you there?"

*It wasn't his headset she'd taken. If not his, then whose?*

He held onto her arm while he spoke to Oz. "I'm here, what happened?"

"I'm sorry, something hit me. I think it was a ricochet. I was unconscious for a while. I don't know how long."

"Copy that. Get down here, I need you."

He sounded mystified, but he replied automatically, "Roger that."

Amy still stared at him, a haughty glare, until he asked the question. "What happened to Maria?"

She looked away. "She overheard me talking to my Indian contact. She said she would warn everyone to get clear before the missile hit. She also wanted to report it all to the Vatican. I couldn't let her do that. I had no choice. I'm sorry."

He was shaking his head, not believing the words. Sure, there was something she was missing. "She was reporting back to the Vatican?"

"From the beginning, yes. She was already in Afghanistan, working at the clinic as a doctor, so why not?"

"I don't believe it! A Vatican spy, no!"

Her laughter was bitter. "Why would I lie, minutes before our death? It's true."

His mind was reeling with an information overload. None of it was possible. It couldn't be happening. "You killed her!"

"She wouldn't hand over the headset. Yes, I killed her. I had to do it to help my country get revenge." Her voice was almost a whisper. Nolan forced down his bitter anger and despair. There would be a time. Later. He hit the transmit button.

"This is Bravo One to Night Stalker, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear. Hey, we were wondering what happened to you. Don't worry about it. We're about to head after a helicopter that just took off."

"Negative, do not go after him. It's an ambush. The helo took off to lure you into the sky. There's a guy waiting down here with a Strela to blast your ass the moment you appear in his sights."

"You're sure about this?"

"Certain. Listen, there's a cruise missile inbound. You need to clear the area ASAP. Stay low, and find a decent sized hill to hide behind."

A pause. "I hear you, buddy, but what about you? A cruise missile, Jesus, it'll take over that wreckage and turn you guys into mincemeat. You want us to get you out of there?"

"Negative, the moment you come near, the missile will hit you for sure. There's a chance we'll survive this, so come looking for us afterward. We may want a ride home."

"Okay, we'll do it your way. What've you got down there, a nuclear fallout bunker?"

"Something like that."

He ended the call, contacted Highcloud, and told him to speed it up. All the time, his brain pounded with the agonizing loss of Maria, nun, doctor, and amorous love, the perfect girl in every way. He couldn't even go looking for her body. There wasn't time.

Brennan arrived first and stared in dismay at Amy's strained face. "What is it?" When she didn't reply, he looked at Nolan. "What's going on?"

"Ask this murdering bitch of yours."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Oz, I'm so sorry. I..."

Brennan stared at her, uncomprehending. "Your killer girlfriend is spying for the Indians, and she called in a cruise missile to kill us all."

He grinned as he shook his head. "Okay, what's the punch line?"

"Ask her why she killed Maria, and why she's trying to kill us all."

Nolan was shaking with fury and had to work to calm himself. He wanted to find the body, wanted to grieve for her. Wanted to take revenge, but it would all have to wait.

She pulled Brennan to her, and spoke quietly and urgently. When she'd finished, he was white faced and pushed her away. "Oz!"

"Is it true? You killed her?"

"Yes," she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

His expression was cold, and his whole body shook. "Forget it!"

He pushed her away, and Highcloud gave him a puzzled glance as he turned up with Vince across his shoulders. "What gives? I heard you talking to the crew of the Black Hawk. Does that mean we're done for?"

"Maybe." Nolan crawled over to the top of the shaft where he'd seen Ryder's head emerge. "John-Wesley, you still down there?"

"Depends who's asking," came the reply. Nolan looked over the top, and he was clinging to a tangle of metal beams about three meters below

the surface.

"We have a cruise missile about to impact this area. If we're on the surface, we die. There's shelter down that shaft, if it's deep enough."

A pause. "Why don't you come on down and take a look."

"On the way."

Highcloud went first, and Nolan gestured to Oz. "What about her?"

He shook his head. "She called it in. She can deal with it. You can go first, Lieutenant. I want a last look at her face."

He nodded. "Make it quick."

He climbed down hand over hand and joined Ryder. They lowered Vince down to the bottom of the shaft and then started down. He shouted up to Oz.

"Make it fast. That missile's about to hit."

"Give me a minute. I'll be there."

There was nothing more he could do, except rage about the loss of Maria. He wanted to go outside and murder someone, preferably her killer. The missile would take care of that, but it wouldn't salve the wounds. It was like the Punji trap again, the poison that infected his system. There was a difference; this would take a long, long time to heal.

There was something else. He'd trusted Amy, like he'd trusted that nurse back at the Heathe N. Craig Joint Theater Hospital. Trusted them with his life, and now Maria was dead, murdered by Amy. Even more, she tried to kill them all, could still succeed. That missile could hit at any moment.

Thinking of the blast reminded him, and he cupped his hands. "Oz, get down here! Now!"

There was no reply. He heard him talking to Amy on the surface, the sound echoing down the shaft, and he knew the truth. He wasn't coming down. The betrayal had been too much, and he'd made his decision. He would die with his betrayer. He'd loved her so much he couldn't stand to part from her, couldn't stand to see her die; his sole remaining option, a pact of death. Then the missile hit, and the world turned upside down.

\* \* \*

He afterward found out the Black Hawk came back for them. It survived the blast by racing away at high speed and sheltering behind a distant range of

hills. Even so, the shockwave caused them one or two bad moments. When they landed back at the refinery, they had a hard time finding them.

After some thought, they tried the radios, with no result. There was one still functional headset after the blast, which belonged to Ryder. It was unfortunate the sole person with a working radio had suffered serious eardrum damage and couldn't hear the call. The Night Stalkers landed and spent two hours sifting through the wreckage. All they found on the surface was a metal briefcase. It looked strong enough to survive a major explosion, and it had, apart from a few dents. Nolan heard them searching and shouted from beneath the scrap metal that had woven itself into a dense, almost solid roof over what would have been their tomb.

They got them all out and carried them to the helo. Will was strapped to a gurney, and he struggled to get up. The crewman, Hendriksen, held him back.

"You take it easy, Master Chief. Let's not tear open those stitches and dressings I fixed up for you."

"I'm okay," he growled.

"Sure you are. Just like that place down there."

They were already in the air, and Nolan could look out the open door and stare at the chewed up metal. What the Taliban had failed to destroy the first time, the Indians had finished with their missile. There was no sign of the Bell 427, or the Luxurious RV. Like the rest of the place, they'd disintegrated, along with their owner. He sat in the jump seat and felt his mind starting to drift. They woke him when they reached Bagram, and it all flooded back. He wished they'd left him alone.

The first night in the hospital was not good. He felt remorse for the way he'd fallen into the trap and knew he should have done better. In the early hours of the morning, the shift changed, and things began to look up.

Like before, she was dressed all in white, with the rank tabs on her uniform dress. First Lieutenant Clara Barton, U.S. Army gave him a smile. "You're back. I brought you this. They fetched it out of Qala-e-Naw. The crew of the helicopter thought it might belong to you. I'll leave it at the side of the room."

He grimaced. "Thanks, but it's not mine."

"I'll leave it anyway. You came back for more of what we have to offer, is that it?"

He didn't think she meant the medical stuff, so he muttered a nondescript reply. Just in case.

Her gaze became stern. "This time, you stay with us until you're fit. I've checked your blood results, and that poison is still not out of your system. You need a week here, and not a day less."

"Clara, I don't think I..."

She put a finger on his lips. "Lieutenant, shut it. Do you trust me?"

He stiffened, thinking of when they'd almost lost their lives in the fiery hell of Qala-e-Naw.

*I trusted Amy, and look how that turned out. I trusted Maria, and she was reporting back to the Vatican. Then again, she worked for the Vatican, so what did I expect? If the Pope gave her a direct order, to whom should she listen? God's representative on earth, or a junior SEAL lieutenant. No contest. In the end, she was doing what was right. I just wish she'd told me before she died.*

He looked up into Clara Barton's deep, blue eyes and admired her clear, smooth skin. He was lost. "Sure I trust you."

She checked her watch. "In that case, move over, we have a little time. Trust me, I know you're up to it."

He didn't feel up to it, not right then. All the same, the girl was female dynamite, so who was he to argue. He drowned in the blue depths of her eyes and heard himself saying, "I trust you."

\* \* \*

The armor had retreated from the borders, and the infantry had returned to barracks. Aircraft still patrolled the skies, but they stayed inside their own territory. The emergency was over.

Kabir Khan felt a sense of triumph. He'd weathered the storm, although it hadn't been easy. They tried to pin some of the blame on him, but he'd denied it. Just because his brother was involved, didn't spread the guilt to his family. After a great deal of wheeling and dealing, they absolved him of any blame. If blame needed to be attached, it fell on the Defense Minister for security failings. The word was, the President would quietly sack him in due course, and the top job would go to Khan.

He left the armored glass window up, although he'd have enjoyed feeling the fresh air on his skin. Today he was visiting a military base in Kunduz, over a hundred kilometers to the north of Kabul. He'd decided to fly, until yesterday, when an insurgent rocket brought down a military helicopter close to the center of Kabul. His bodyguards advised him to drive, and so twenty-four hours before departure, they arranged for this convoy.

Three Toyota Land Cruisers, heavy on the springs with their additional armor plating. At the head of the convoy, a Humvee with a mounted autocannon crewed by Afghan troops, with a similar vehicle in the rear. Enough to make short work of any ambush. He relaxed against the leather of the upholstery and smiled. By some miracle, he'd avoided the fallout from Akram's failed operation. Of more importance was the fact there were no documents linking him to the school bombing. He could relax.

He was mistaken.

\* \* \*

The contents of the battered briefcase were a gold mine. Nolan opened it two days after Clara brought it into his hospital room. It was mostly in English. Straight away, he realized he was in possession of evidence that would bring down the Deputy Defense Minister. Kabir Khan was finished, along with a bunch of oil and gas executives.

He decided to leave the executives. On reading the documents it wasn't clear how much or how little they knew. Not so Khan, who'd actively recruited his brother to carry out the evil deed. He talked it over with the other men from his unit. They were all recovering in the Heate N. Craig Joint Theater Hospital. Battered, bruised, some like him bandaged like Egyptian mummies, but they were alive. They were unanimous. There was no point in forwarding what they had to the Afghans. The documents would disappear, and Khan would walk free.

The tip came in suddenly, a text message advising him to check his email. He retrieved his laptop and connected to the Internet. Several minutes later, he was reading the message. Khan would be travelling to Kunduz the following day. He'd be vulnerable. If they wished to deal with him, there was a way. They wouldn't need to kill him. The Indians would



take care of that. Their part in the operation would be minimal. Although devastating.

He dressed and left the hospital to visit an old friend serving as a quartermaster inside the SOCOM compound. He took a deal of persuading, and the promise of a case of bourbon whiskey to brighten up the off duty time in this dry land, but he came out with what he wanted. Clara chided him for escaping her watchful eye, but he told her he'd arranged a picnic; a chance to give him and the other men from his unit a respite from the hospital, something to aid their recovery. She was suspicious, but then she brightened, and even offered to bring along some off duty nurses.

"It's not often we get a break from this place, so they'll be pleased to have a chance to lighten up. You said you're bringing three of your men. I'll grab three of our nurses."

"Make it two. One of my men is, well, different."

"Gay?"

He laughed. "Don't say that to him. He's a bible thumper. Kind of."

They drove south out of Bagram on the road to Doshi. The AH76 was also the highway that connected Kabul with Kunduz. Close to Doshi, they left the road in their borrowed SUV and headed to a small plateau about a klick off the highway. It had once been a Buddhist monastery, before the Taliban dynamited it, but it was still a beautiful spot.

The girls spread out the food, and they began to eat an early lunch. Ryder was quiet, uncomfortable with the chatter of the women, and several times Nolan heard him mumbling what sounded like biblical imprecations. Then he excused himself and climbed up to a small rock shelf until he was out of sight.

"Why did he take his pack with him?" Clara asked.

He shrugged. "He's a bit weird at times, Ryder. Who knows?"

John-Wesley made certain he was unobserved from below, unstrapped his pack, and removed the contents, a laser target designator. Then he settled down to wait. It wouldn't be long.

Below, Nolan wondered about that email, giving him this time and place. He checked the metadata, and found although it had routed around the world, it originated from Europe. Italy, Rome to be precise. There was little doubt that whoever had sent it had a formidable intelligence service, a worldwide intelligence service.

*CIA, maybe, the Russians, or the SVR, no, none of them is that good.*  
He put it out of his mind.

What difference did it make? He trusted the source. That's what mattered, what was important, knowing whom to trust, as well as whom not to. That's what made all the difference. Trust.

\* \* \*

Captain Rashul Dev enjoyed his work, and flying at low level made it even better, a real thrill-a-minute ride. The target area was close. His HUD, head up display, instructed him to make a fifty-degree turn to port. He obeyed and popped up to three thousand meters. He pulled back on the stick, and his Mirage 2000 responded like a racehorse, zooming up into the sky.

\* \* \*

He saw the convoy approaching in the distance and switched on the LTD. With his eyes glued to the optical sight, he positioned the red beam on the center vehicle and held it there. A second later, a beep announced the designator had locked on, and the target was lit. All that was left was to wait.

\* \* \*

Captain Dev heard the signal in his headset and watched the bright pip light up on his targeting screen. He was almost at the optimum range. It would be impossible for the target to avoid the missile, but he still held it a little longer. Just to be sure. Then he thumbed the fire button, and the aircraft lurched as the AM.39 Exocet missile left the rail. The Exocet weighed almost fifteen hundred pounds, with a warhead of three hundred and sixty pounds; enough to take out a main battle tank, and more than enough for a single SUV, armored or otherwise. He watched the trail of smoke as it arced down to the target. The laser designator provided by an unknown operator on the ground kept it on track. He assumed it was Indian Special Forces.

*It couldn't be anyone else, could it?*

The missile hit the target dead center. He smiled as the Land Cruiser vaulted into the air. It was already a smoking ruin when it crashed back to the highway. Then he cut in his afterburner and set course for home. It was done.

\* \* \*

"What was that?"

The nurses were craning over the ledge to view the massive explosion that had destroyed several vehicles on the highway.

"IED is my guess," Nolan said, "Pretty big one, too."

"They'll need medical attention. We should go to their aid," Clara gasped.

He put up a hand to stop them. "Negative, ladies. SOP in this country, when someone ambushes a convoy, you wait for the troops to arrive and make the area safe. They'll need a mine-clearing team to make sure there aren't any more IEDs."

The nurses reluctantly agreed to hold off, and they watched and waited as an Afghan Army helicopter arrived and began disgorging troops. Almost unnoticed, Ryder rejoined them. He gave the SEALs a nod. "The Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee. Thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them. Thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them."

Clara gave him an odd look. "What does that mean?"

Nolan grinned. "I told you he could be weird at times. Don't worry about it."

"I don't know. He's up to something."

"He's fine, not a problem. Trust me?"

She looked at him and nodded. "Okay."

Inside, he felt better. He'd crossed a line, from bitter anger to the knowledge he'd done everything that could be done. Alone, he walked to the edge, took a small object from his pocket, and tossed it over the side. The Rosary landed and lodged on a thin rocky outcrop, overlooking the devastated vehicles below, which was as it should be.

## Afterword

The man put the telephone down, climbed to his feet, and walked out to the balcony. He'd agonized over the decision to take action, and even then, he'd wrestled with his conscience. It was strange in the end, the way it worked out. God's instruments had been a Hindu pilot, as well as a Christian who worshipped Voodoo. There was also more than one atheist, and at least one Catholic.

The decision was his to make, and his alone. He hadn't made it out of the need for revenge, or so he'd told himself. It was to scourge at least part of the evil that beset a troubled land. Killing a man was a terrible thing, but sometimes, terrible things had to be done. The evidence was buried deep in the Archives, so deep it would never emerge. No, if anyone were called to account, it would be him, though not in this life.

A bell tolled in the distance, and he recognized the sound of the Angelus. A nun appeared at his side. "It's time."

He nodded, took a last look down at St Peter's Square, and then allowed her to lead him to the chapel where he would say Mass. He would include a few cryptic words for the soul of the man who'd died on the other side of the world. The fact he wasn't a Christian, despised and persecuted Christians, made no difference. Would it be enough? It would have to be. Perhaps it may even be more than he deserved, although it wasn't for him to make that judgment.

He arrived in the tiny chapel and arranged the hosts just so. Then he regarded the faces of his congregation, four priests and two nuns waiting for him to begin. Unlike them, he was the one person in the room who didn't wear black. His robe was white.

"In the name of the Father..."