

SEAL TEAM BRAVO: BLACK OPS

RAID ON AFGHANISTAN

By Eric Meyer

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CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

Chapter One

It was a long, slow crawl through stinking, dense jungle, but this was their element. They'd done it enough times before to know that the jungle was neutral. It favored neither friend nor foe, but only the skilled and the bold. This was familiar territory, the thick, rancid stench and myriad noises of insects and small animals as natural to them as any coast or harbor. As familiar an operating environment as the huts, towns and villages that lay further inland. They'd trained to operate in any and all of them. Their current mission was taking place in Northern Nicaragua, part of their regular AO, Area of Operations. The foliage was dense; thickets of bush and vine pulling at their legs, trying to hold them back. The rank stink of rotting vegetation was almost overpowering, the decay that ate at the jungle and coated the nostrils with its foul, cloying odor. Large insects snapped at every piece of exposed flesh, and snakes slithered away in silent fury as the two men invaded their natural habitat. The men glanced to the side when they heard a rustle, but it was only a small animal, frightened away from its home, its normal habitat, by the intruders. Overhead, in the jungle canopy, birds sang, whistling and warbling, but so far none had screeched a screaming protest that would sound the alarm to the enemy camp ahead of them.

The two Seal Team Seven snipers, Chief Petty Officer Kyle Nolan and PO1 Vince Merano carried identical rifles, but these were no ordinary rifles. The men both carried the MK11 Sniper Weapon System, a modified Stoner SR-25, developed for their unit, the Navy Seals. Already its legend was growing. A precision semi-automatic sniper rifle that operated like an M16 or M4A1, but it could deliver a

heavy 7.62mm match round out to 1500 yards with no loss of accuracy. The two men were Seals, both veterans of the Navy's elite Special Forces unit, men who constantly trained to maintain the peak of operational fitness and skill. Their mantra was that of Special Forces the world over. 'The more you sweat in training, the less you bleed in battle.' They were ready for any mission; any mission where their leaders deemed it necessary to apply extreme deadly force. And for Navy Seals, deadly force was their trade, their sole trade. Nolan used a hand signal to draw his partner's attention to a sentry who was partially hidden by a thickly foliated tree, two hundred yards ahead.

Vince Merano waved an acknowledgement, and they crawled forward through the soaking undergrowth. When they were within fifty yards of the wire fence that surrounded the compound, they stopped and seemed to melt into the foliage. Another sentry came into view, but he was as oblivious to their presence as the first man. Outside of the wire and to the right of the compound, an area of about a hundred yards square and containing a few decaying wooden huts, a narrow river drifted sluggishly past. On the far bank, the oily, green water was bordered almost to its edge by thick, shadowy vines and vegetation.

The snipers glanced at the river and satisfied themselves it was well enough screened from the compound. Besides, the guards were looking in the opposite direction where there was a gate set in the fence. Sometimes they looked away out into the jungle and in the direction of the two snipers, but the ghillie suits hid the Seal shooters from view. The suits were miracles of camouflage; irregular patterned material with strips of jungle colored cloth sewn on to a mesh outer, and pieces of leaf and branch attached to the mesh. Even their heads were draped with a swathe

of camouflage material. Their faces were painted a nightmarish blend of jungle colors, so they became one with the jungle itself, dark, silent, and invisible. Chief Nolan checked his twenty to make certain they were invisible, and that they blended perfectly with the surroundings. He was satisfied, and he touched the comms key. His voice was a bare, whispered murmur.

“Bravo Three in position. Two sentries sighted. We’ve got them covered. You’re clear, Bravo One.”

“Roger that.”

They waited, five minutes, ten minutes. Nolan checked his camouflaged combat watch. It was almost time. He looked sideways at Vince. “Any time now.”

“I hear you,” Merano murmured in reply, as he looked back at the Chief. He grinned to himself; he was looking forward to the start of the action. The Chief was the best, tough and resourceful, and the best buddy you could wish for in a fight. Underneath the camouflage, Nolan was tall, at least six-one, and lean, with the kind of features some people called chiseled. Otherwise, his face had few unique features. Indeed, most people saw him as bland, which suited him perfectly. Until they got to know the hard, fighting qualities of the man behind the conventional suburban facade. Nolan’s face was average, true, although the strong chin and blue eyes, as hard and clear as cut diamonds, were a hint that the owner was anything but normal. His thick, dark brown hair was kept short at the front, so there was no danger of it falling over his eyes while he was shooting. He kept it longer at the back. Like most Seals, it was considered good practice to be able to blend in anywhere as a civilian, rather than a buzz cut marine. Nolan had become a chameleon; able to adapt and blend in with any scenario, to slip in unnoticed, to

kill, and to slip out again just as unseen. His personality was as chameleon-like as his appearance. One moment a fierce and savage warrior, a fearless and skilled leader of men, and when he got home a kind hearted and loving husband and father. The consummate professional, and for those who knew him, he was America personified.

The first sign was a small ripple that disturbed the murky water, a ripple that made the thin coating of algae swirl in random patterns. Then another ripple appeared, and another. A dark, jungle camouflage hat appeared above the surface, and then there were eleven more. The twelve men of Bravo One waded ashore almost without a sound and deployed into a defensive line. Nolan glanced over at the sentries, but they showed no sign of any alarm. Nothing had disturbed them. That was as it should be; they'd heard nothing because there was nothing to hear. He whispered into his microphone.

“Bravo One, in position and clear.”

“Roger that. Bravo Two is ten minutes out.”

“Copy that.”

They waited as the minutes ticked by. There was the sound of an approaching vehicle. It was one of the old, Soviet-built trucks the cocaine growers used to transport their product, a battered, mud-brown Zaporozhets. Brought into the country when the Soviet Union was still foolish enough to make the attempt to gain a foothold on the American continent, the truck was like its country of origin; tired, old and clearly not far from complete breakdown. The sentries swiveled their gaze to check out the new arrival, but there was no cause for alarm as this was standard operating procedure. The truck, pouring a stinking cloud of dirty smoke from the

exhaust that poked out above the cab, carried a driver and a passenger. It stopped at the gate, and a man came out of the guardhouse, an M-16 assault rifle on his back, to unlock the chain and allow entrance to the compound. He shouted a cheerful greeting as the passenger opened the truck door and climbed down. The passenger was dressed, like the gate guard, in loose, faded jeans, battered ankle boots, a multi-hued shirt and a straw trilby hat bent out of shape by years of misuse. Nolan watched the events unfold through the Leupold Vari-X Mil-dot riflescope. He smiled to himself as the guard went through the motions, swinging open the wood-framed wire gate, and all the while smiling at the newcomers. Then the guard recognized the man in front of him as a stranger. His face creased in alarm, and he started to unsling his rifle, but too late. Even though Lieutenant Talley had used cream to darken his pale skin for this operation, pale, green-tinted eyes dominated his face, and firm determined lips that rarely creased into a smile. Perhaps the Latino guard saw through the makeup and made him as a Gringo. Or maybe he just recognized the expression. This was clearly not a man who worshipped siesta and mariachi music. This passenger was a serious hombre, a man in a hurry, a man who meant business. And that normally meant a Norte Americano. He would have been right. Lieutenant Talley was a man who was very serious about getting his platoon in and out of their assigned missions with minimum casualties. He rarely failed. Talley was tall, narrow, and long-limbed, with curling, dark brown hair. When he spoke, he chose his words carefully. He was always meticulous, and always made sure he said what he meant and meant what he said, and his men understood that. Except that he didn't speak Spanish, not very well. That was no problem, for he spoke another language that this guard would

understand perfectly, the language of death.

He carried a pistol, a Sig Sauer P226 with a sound suppressor, held down by his side. Almost casually, he lifted his arm, fired twice, and the double tap threw the guard to the ground. The truck driver, his skin also darkened with face cream to look more Latino, stepped out of the cab. He had his Heckler and Koch HK416, also fitted with a sound suppressor, held ready. Carl Winters, PO2, Petty Officer Second Class, was the unit's Special Reconnaissance Scout. That is, when he wasn't dressed and made up as a Nicaraguan truck driver, or out drinking with the guys in the local bars. He was a good-looking guy, of average height and weight, five nine, one sixty, and with a thin and gangly body; almost like a collection of sticks.

Whatever it was, the women seemed to go for him, despite his face that bore the scars of childhood acne. Maybe it was the mother instinct they felt. With a small bow-shaped mouth, Winters looked more like a kid fighting teenage angst than one of America's warrior elite. It was an impression he fostered and encouraged. His eyes were startlingly green, topped by shaggy dark eyebrows, and a Kennedyesque shock of thick black hair that he had to fight to keep within even the loose regulations of the Navy Seals. He'd had to work hard to look even remotely Nicaraguan. Nolan watched for any threat to Talley and Winters, but there was no need to shoot just yet. He could see movement in the compound now; people going about their normal business, but so far no one had noticed anything amiss at the gate. Talley and Winters dragged the body into the guard hut and boarded their truck to drive across the beaten earth, heading further into the compound. They parked next to the wooden huts, where intel had reported the hostages were being held, and waited. They were ready; all units were in position. Nolan made a final

visual check and was about to give the final go-ahead when the operator of the Predator drone circling high in the sky above them called up.

“Be advised, Bravo. Four SUVs inbound, ten miles north of the compound, ETA twenty minutes. Vehicles are fully manned, assume hostiles.”

“Roger that.”

So that meant around sixteen armed men were heading their way. It cut their operational window in half. They had to kill the enemy and start moving the hostages out to the extraction point inside of ten minutes. Any more time, and they'd be caught in a firefight with the new arrivals. And if any of the hostages were killed, the mission would be a bust. Nolan weighed the options. It was doable, and that was good enough for the Seals. It had to be good enough. He keyed the microphone.

“Bravo One, this is Bravo Three. Sixteen hostiles inbound, twenty minutes. We are a go, repeat, we are a go.”

“Bravo One, acknowledged.”

Bravo Two, the two men in the truck, acknowledged a second later. Nolan whispered tersely at Merano. “Let's take 'em.”

They took aim, each firing once. The sound-suppressed shots were barely audible, but the two sentries both collapsed to the ground as the 7.62 rounds smacked into them; the meaty ‘thump’ of the bullets striking flesh made more noise than when the shots were fired. Both snipers made a final check through their riflescopes, and both muttered ‘Clear’ to each other. Nolan keyed the microphone.

“Bravo One, go now.”

He watched the twelve dark shadows as they ran forward, cut the wire of the compound, and began the assault. Then it started to go wrong. A man walked out of a hut carrying a metal pail, probably just a cook, but it was enough for the mission to start to unravel. He saw the attackers and dropped the bucket.

“Alarma, alarma! Los…”

Merano took him with a single round before he got out another word. But the damage was done. Men started running out of the huts, carrying a motley collection of handguns and assault rifles. An exchange of fire started between the two sides. The once peaceful clearing was scarred with the passage of bullets that buzzed across it like a horde of angry bees. Bravo One opened on the run, hurling a barrage of bullets down on the hostiles. The enemy was armed with American M-16s, a couple of 9mm Ingrams, even an Uzi, as well as a variety of handguns. More ominously, one man carried an M-60 light machine gun. But so did Bravo One, or more specifically, the platoon mustered an M60E3, the lightweight machine gun used mainly by Special Forces.

Nolan keyed his mic. “Watch those guys. There’s an M-60 in there.”

A quick reply, “I’m on it,” satisfied him that the hostile shooter’s career was almost over. He and Merano went about their deadly business, and before the enemy fully realized the extent to which they were under fire, they managed to pop seven of the hostiles. But there were still fifteen or so more who took cover behind an old truck, Talley and Winters’ Soviet-built truck, the Zaporozhets.

The Lt and the PO2 quickly edged away from the truck to get clear of the hostiles sheltering and shooting from behind it. They moved quickly to find a position from where they could return fire and keep out of the line of fire so that

the rest of the platoon could go to work. The shooter with the M-60 was blazing away into the jungle, but his shots were wild and ineffective. The defenders were pinned down by intense fire from Bravo One, while Bravo Two sniped from cover out in the jungle. All the machine gunner could do was keep his head down and fire blind. The squad was using modern HK416 assault rifles; hard-hitting, accurate weapons fitted with the 40mm AG-C/GLM grenade launcher. Bravo One started popping grenades from their launchers. The enemy went down under the murderous fire as Bravo One joined Bravo Three, firing as they moved in to search the compound. The hut they suspected held the prisoners was first. Carl Winters knocked off the heavy padlock with a single shot, a 5.56 mm round from his HK416, and the door swung open. He walked into a scene from hell.

The four hostages had been kept inside without adequate food or water for fifteen days, ever since drug smugglers ambushed their aid convoy. The hut stank of urine, excreta, vomit, and decay. The business of smuggling drugs paid high wages, but selling middle class kids back to wealthy parents could pay even better. And these kids had parents with plenty of money to pay ransoms. Except that they'd made a mistake. The parents had more than just money; they had political clout. The niece of the Secretary of Defense and the granddaughter of a Southern states governor, they were the wrong Americans to play games with. There were plenty in the US government who decided enough was enough. Time was when Americans could travel the world without fear of attack from foreign bandits who thought they were easy prey. That had changed as kidnappings and murders increased, but the days of easy ransom were about to come to an end. The defenders were well armed, that was true, and well resourced. But the US had them

outgunned and outclassed in every department. When the prowling Predator drone located them, the mission had been launched at short notice; A HAHO, High Altitude, High Opening night drop from a blacked out C130 Hercules, forty miles out from the enemy compound. They'd glided in under their 'chutes and landed with full equipment, Bravo One and Bravo Three to an LZ three miles from the compound; Bravo Two to a ramshackle gas station ten miles out. They'd 'appropriated' the old truck to use for the final approach, and to exfiltrate the hostages for the first stage of the return journey.

"Jesus Christ, these kids are in a bad way," Zeke Murray, the improbably named half-Mexican communications specialist murmured. "Why the hell didn't they give them something to eat and drink?"

They were all sick. Thin, to the point of emaciation, their skin covered in boils and sores. Their eyes were wide and fearful. They lay on makeshift cots of rags and straw. In the corner, there was an old metal bucket, and the stench made it obvious it was their only sanitation. The hut was dark, and there were no windows or ventilation, just dark, wooden walls. The men had to work hard to stop themselves from retching. One of the four prisoners, a girl, managed to speak. Even behind the blood and filth that coated her face, and the fear that she obviously fought to overcome, they could see she was a young woman accustomed to wielding a certain power and authority. She was also very pretty, or would be when she was cleaned up.

"You're American?" she said, her face filled with hope and wonder.

Murray nodded. "As apple pie, Ma'am. Would you identify yourself?"

"Laura Cunningham, I'm..."

“I know who you are, Ma’am. And these other three, you know them?”

“We’re together. They were with me when those people stopped our SUV.”

“Okay, that’s fine. We’re taking you out of here.”

“I’m not sure we can walk far. We’re all pretty far-gone. They...”

“Not a problem, we’ve got transport to take you out of here. Can you stand up and walk out? The truck’s outside.”

The four filthy, ragged, and emaciated young people stood up. When the door of freedom beckoned, it was a powerful incentive to haul ass. Lieutenant Talley poked his head inside to look, then walked in.

“Is everything okay in here?”

“All good, Boss. The kids’ identities are confirmed. They’re coming out now.”

“Roger that. We’re running low on time, so get them loaded. We’ll make a final sweep of the compound and move out.”

Talley went back out into the compound and found his men.

“I want everyone loaded in that truck and moving out inside of three minutes.”

He keyed his mic. “Chief, did you get that?”

Nolan, waiting out in the jungle with Merano, acknowledged. He was about to stand when he saw a movement. It was just a shadow in the corner of the compound, inside the window of one of the larger huts. But it was enough.

“Lt, target inside the compound, on your ten, hiding inside a hut. He’s thirty yards behind you. I’ll take him.”

“Roger that.”

Talley slipped behind the cover of a stack of logs. The shooter ducked down, using the wooden wall as cover. It looked like some kind of a dormitory, but the

building was old, with gaps between the wooden planks of which it was constructed. Through his Leupold Vari-X, Nolan watched the movement of shadows in the tiny gaps in the boards. He murmured to his partner.

“You see him, Vince?”

“Yeah, I’m on him.”

“Okay. He’s carrying an M-16, so I don’t want to take any chances. Three rounds each, on my count. One, two, three.”

There was no emotion, no drama. Just the gentle squeeze of the trigger, almost a reflex as muscle memory took over. Guided by the unconscious brain, the precision weapons spat out their almost silent message of death. The wooden side of the hut was splintered into a gaping hole by the heavy 7.62mm rounds, and in the gap created by their bullets, they saw their target pitch over and fall to the ground. Neither man felt any emotion. These men had declared war on Americans. America had decided to defend itself, at last.

“Target is down, Lt. We’re coming in.”

“Roger that.”

They stood up, and around them the jungle seemed to panic as the wildlife became aware there were two interlopers in their midst. Nolan looked at Vince Merano, walking just ahead of him. The PO2 had been his shooting partner on more missions than he could count. Of Italian-American descent, Vince was almost a caricature of a Southern Italian immigrant. He was short and built like a wrestler, which in fact he had been as a youth. He had a classically defined body, yet endowed with just that extra bit of muscle in all the strategic places. He had a face that was well formed, but perhaps overly rough hewn, as if perhaps he’d gone one

too many battling rounds during his early days as a keen amateur wrestler. He still had a Mediterranean tan, with dark-brown eyes under heavy brows, and a low forehead almost totally hidden by a thick wave of hair, so black it was almost blue. When people talked of Mafia soldiers, of made men, they could think of someone who looked like Vince Merano. This suited him fine. Off duty, who would take him for a member of America's elite and highly secretive Special Forces, the Navy Seals?

The men walked carefully towards the compound, balancing the need for haste with the necessity to watch carefully for any as yet undetected signs of enemy activity. But there were none, they were all dead. They reached the truck and piled in with the other Seals. Two of the men, the first-aid specialists, were tending to the wounds of the freed hostages. The others were reloading and checking their weapons. There could still be at least one more hurdle to cross before they reached safety. They heard the confirmation on the commo.

"Bravo, this is Creech. Your hostiles have disappeared under the jungle canopy, but they've been joined by three large trucks, and estimated to be carrying sixty plus personnel. Assume armed. Sorry we have no further updates, but if the view clears, we'll get back to you."

"Roger that," Lieutenant Talley replied to the Control Center based in the Nevada Desert at Creech Air Force Base.

The smuggler's compound was at the end of a long, narrow jungle trail, and there was no other way out. The truck was necessary to take out the hostages, who were in no shape to walk far. A firefight with seventy or more enemy was not part of the mission brief, not with innocent lives at stake. Talley looked around and came to a fast decision.

“We’ll park the truck just inside the entrance to the compound. Carl, you’re dressed for the part, so close the gate and open it for them when they’re in sight. Brad, you take the wheel, keep the engine running. As soon as the last hostile vehicle is inside, floor the gas and we’ll get out of Dodge. Carl, when the truck starts to move, you get aboard. We’re going to try to outrun them, so I want you all ready with grenades.” He checked his watch. “Okay, the exfiltration is set for a half hour from now. It’s going to be cutting it fine, so, Brad, hit it as soon as Carl is aboard.”

“I hear you, Boss,” PO2 Brad Rose replied.

The unit dandy, Brad was slightly below medium height but powerfully built. His hair was thick and shaggy, but he kept it under control with a range of hair products that must have stretched his pay to the limits. It hung to his shoulders, which was long even by Seal standards, and he held it in place by a thonged leather headband. Brad had fine, almost delicate features that he'd once tried to camouflage by growing a mustache and beard before the Navy made him shave them off. When they walked into a bar, it was Brad that most girls made a beeline for.

He climbed aboard, scanned the panel and started the truck’s engine, then turned the vehicle to face outwards towards the gate. Nolan and Merano positioned themselves at the rear of the truck’s bed, ready to fire on any pursuers. The rest of the men made one final check of their weapons, laid out their grenades ready for use, then ducked down as they heard the sound of approaching engines. The SUVs came into view. The first was a Hummer H2, in jet black and chrome, looking as out of place in the jungle as a sailing boat. It was followed by a Toyota Land Cruiser and two badly dented Ford Explorers, and all of the seats were filled.

Behind them came the trucks, the beds crowded with armed men. Without the guns, they would have resembled an Arizona farmer's truck, collecting illegals to pick his crop. Carl Winters kept his head low as he opened the gate, and the vehicles roared through. The Hummer screeched to a halt in the center of the compound, and the others lined up either side. Brad had already gunned the engine, and the truck lurched forward. Carl leapt for the tailgate and willing hands pulled him aboard, just as the door of the Hummer opened, and a man in a cream linen suit and tropical Panama hat stepped out. Nolan and Merano, already sighting through their scopes, saw him size up the situation in a split second and start shouting orders, but then their truck veered around a corner, and he was lost to view before they could line up a shot. Talley checked his watch. Seventeen minutes to exfiltration. It was going to be close. He shouted to Rose at the wheel.

“Keep that pedal to the metal, sailor. We don't want to miss our flight!”

He saw Brad nod his understanding, and then he keyed the mic.

“This is Bravo, on our way to extraction point. This will be a hot extraction, repeat hot extraction!”

“Hear you, Bravo. Understood, hot extraction, we'll be there.”

The truck heeled over and almost overturned as they rounded a sharp bend on the track, and then the road straightened. For more than a mile the track was bordered by solid jungle. There were no openings, no gaps, and no bends, nowhere they could get out of sight of the pursuing enemy.

“Keep sharp, they'll come into view in a few seconds. Be ready with those grenades.”

The pursuing vehicles roared into sight. One of the trucks was first, and the

men crowded on the bed were firing at them. Bullets started to zing all around their truck. Almost casually, two of the Seals, Dan Mosely and Will Bryce dropped grenades off the back of the truck, and they rolled onto the track where they lay, waiting for the pursuing truck.

Dan watched anxiously, his surfer's eyes screwed up as he measured distances and angles. Blonde haired and blue eyed, he was the image of a California beach boy. Dan was tall, tanned and muscular, after spending every off duty hour searching for the perfect wave in the California surf. The son of wealthy parents, he could have chosen any career he wanted, like the brokerage position his father offered him. But he only had one ambition, and Dan was a man who put every ounce of effort into achieving his ambition. He wanted to be a member of the US Special Forces, the best of the best. And that was the Navy Seals. He was the complete opposite of his partner, Will Bryce, who'd fought his way out of the Detroit ghettos.

Bryce had a strong, crag-like profile with big bones and a jutting chin under a powerful, almost regal countenance. Strangely for an African American, he had gray eyes, an undoubted throwback to his ancestors. He stared out under thick, bushy eyebrows topped by wiry black hair. When people stared at Bryce, they saw a man of strength and authority, a man who carried his inner strength and power like an aura. Moseley and Bryce, white and black, rich and poor, the men were the best of friends on and off duty. They were Seals.

At the last moment, the driver noticed the deadly objects lying in the road. They smiled as they saw his eyes widen and watched the instinctive turn of the steering wheel as he went to brake and swerve, but a bullet from Nolan's SWS

smacked into the center of his face, killing him instantly. His dead foot jammed down onto the gas pedal, and the truck hurtled towards the grenades. When they exploded, the vehicle flipped over in a shower of fragments, hard metal and soft body parts. Some of the men managed to escape the wreckage, but Nolan and Merano went to work; their methodical, accurate, semi-auto fire joined by the assault rifles of Bravo as they poured fire onto the panicking hostiles. The second truck stopped to pick up survivors, but now they were warned, they weren't about to fall for the same trick. They followed at a slower rate while the men on board poured out a lethal hail of fire at the Seal's wheezing old Zaporozhets. The Russian engine roared along gamely, despite the dense cloud of smoke that poured from the exhaust on the cab roof, yet the pursuing vehicles followed them doggedly.

"Now would be a good time to speed up," Talley shouted down to Rose.

"This track's pretty rough. If we turn over, we'll be in a worse state," the PO2 shouted back.

"It doesn't get worse than this, Brad. Hit it!"

They hung on grimly as the bouncing, lurching motion of the truck increased, and at times the old vehicle nearly left the track altogether. Nolan and Merano were still firing, but it had become ineffective; the vibration and movement were too much for any accurate shooting.

"Sorry, Boss, it's just not possible." Nolan shrugged. "All we can do is to keep their heads down."

"Not your fault, Chief. Keep at it. At least they're not getting any nearer. And their shooting is lousy."

At that moment, a stray shot took out a slice of the truck body, leaving a ragged

slot an inch wide and eight inches long, next to where Talley held on to the side. To his credit, he didn't even flinch, he just grinned. "Most of it, anyway."

"Boss, they've got an RPG," Vince shouted.

Nolan squinted down his scope. "Yeah, I see it. Looks like a Soviet RPG-7."

It wasn't good news. The RPG-7 was a simple steel tube, forty millimeters in diameter, weighing fifteen pounds. The middle of the tube was wood, wrapped to protect the user from heat, and the end was flared to assist in blast shielding and recoil reduction. Sighting was fairly basic; usually an optical sight with a back-up iron sight, but at short range and in broad daylight, it was academic. Even a close hit would damage the truck badly enough to end their chances of reaching the extraction site.

"Can you take him?" Tally's voice was still calm, but every man knew the importance that hung on his question.

"I guess so. If Brad could slow for a few seconds, it's a done deal."

Tally shouted the order, and the truck slowed. They watched the missile shooter stand higher as he prepared to take his shot, then Nolan and Merano each emptied a clip at him. They carried ten rounds in each clip, and twenty heavy, match rounds spat out towards the RPG operator. A quarter of them, at least five, hit him, and they could see chunks of cloth fly off his uniform as the heavy slugs tore his body apart. He was thrown back and sideways off the truck. His finger connected with the trigger, and a rocket soared uselessly into the air.

The two snipers quickly reloaded as Talley shouted at Rose to speed up again. The truck resumed its lurching, pitching motion as they sped towards the rendezvous. The following vehicles had drawn closer now that they knew the Seals

were going too fast for accurate shooting, staying just outside of a range that would allow the use of the grenade trick again. Once more, Talley checked his watch, estimating times and distances. He keyed his mic.

“This is Bravo. ETA to LZ four minutes, repeat four minutes. Fifty plus hostiles in hot pursuit, say again, fifty plus.”

“Roger that. We’re ready for you, Bravo.”

A Seal muttered. “They fuckin’ better be, or we’re toast.”

Talley suppressed a grin and started making final checks. Then he shouted orders over the noise of the engine.

“We’ll slow fifty yards before the LZ. I want ten men to drop off and form a defensive line. Well, take ten men of Bravo One for that honor. The rest of you, start transferring the hostages the second we reach the slicks. Look sharp, this is going to be tricky. If we start a full scale war down here, the local Federales will start swarming like flies around a turd.”

“Yeah, lookin’ for their payoff from that honcho in the Hummer,” Carl Winters grunted.

Talley keyed the mic. “This is Bravo. Two minutes out. We’ll form a defensive line and hold them off while the hostages get aboard.” He had to shout above the roaring noise of the truck’s engine.

“Negative, Bravo. I say again, negative. Two gunships are waiting to cover the exfiltration. They need a clear field of fire.”

“Understood.” He checked his watch and took a quick look at the trail ahead. “One minute. Belay the order for the defensive line, Will. Just get ‘em aboard the helos.”

“Copy that.”

Only seconds later, they roared out of the heavy jungle foliage into a wide, open space. There was a range of low hills in the distance, but for half a mile the ground was relatively flat and covered with low, thick scrub. A few trees populated the landscape, but for the most part it was a perfect landing ground for rotorcraft. Four hundred yards ahead, they sighted the two Blackhawks on the ground, the ‘slicks’, their rotors turning slowly. The two camouflaged UH-60s had been transported in a Lockheed C130, the same type of transport aircraft that had ferried in the Seal platoon. The replacement for the venerable and iconic UH-1, the Huey, the Blackhawk was faster, better armored and carried more personnel and armament, powered by its two General Electric T700 turboshaft engines. Hovering in the sky like birds of prey above the Blackhawks were two McDonnell Douglas Little Birds, the tiny aircraft that had proved invaluable to the Special Forces. Unlike the standard MH-6 variant that carried four soldiers, these were the AH-6 attack model. Gunships. Each of them carried a thirty mm M230 Chain Gun, designed to shatter enemy materiel. The Little Birds hovered now, like hungry hawks searching for their prey. They were not to be disappointed. Brad Rose screeched to a halt next to the waiting Blackhawks in their distinctive irregular pattern camouflage. The men jumped down and almost threw the hostages out of the truck bed and across to the waiting helos. Chief Nolan and PO1 Merano crouched behind the stopped truck, sighted their rifles and waited while the Team finished climbing aboard. The enemy vehicles appeared suddenly, and the two snipers got off six rounds apiece before Talley shouted.

“That’s it, men, get aboard, leave it to the Little Birds.”

One of the Blackhawks was already climbing, and the two snipers ran to the other craft and leapt aboard as the pilot engaged his collective. The heavily laden helo began to lift off the ground. The cabin was a litter of men, equipment and weapons. A door gunner was stationed at either side, calmly searching for targets. The hostiles had halted, and men were piling out. One held another RPG and was already leveling it ready to fire. Scores of gun barrels pointed upwards towards the slicks, yet incredibly they hadn't seen the Little Birds hovering, waiting to fall on them. They started to shoot at the slicks, and several shots banged against the fuselage of the second and lower machine. The door gunners elevated their barrels and began to press the triggers, but they were unnecessary. The AH-6s swooped like avenging angels of death. The monotonous cacophony of the miniguns began to make the ground tremble. The incoming fire still peppered the slicks, and a few bullet holes ventilated the bodies of the slicks, but the fire dwindled as the enormous weight of fire squashed the opposition. The engine of the second Blackhawk coughed as a vital component took a hit, but the engine kept running. The Seals had started shooting too, pouring fire back at the hostiles through the open doors, but they stopped shooting as the miniguns scythed through their targets. The missile shooter fell back; his body a broken, bloody ruin. Like casualties of a First World War charge against entrenched machine guns, the surviving hostiles were swept away in the hurricane of lead that poured down a rain of ruin upon them. The firing died away. The Seals watched, satisfied that this mission was finished. Except that it wasn't. The Hummer H2 had stopped fifty or so yards away from the main body of men and outside of the arc of gunfire. The door opened, and a man stepped out and watched the slicks and gunships as they

climbed higher in the sky.

There was no question in any of their minds. This was El Jefe, the man in charge. Even at a distance, they could make out his linen tropical suit and the straw Panama hat. He stared up at them, his expression unreadable at this distance. Chief Nolan still held his sniper rifle in his arms, and he looked at Talley.

“Lt?”

The Lieutenant nodded. “Take him down.”

Nolan pointed the rifle downwards, his mind working out angles, wind direction, the changing altitude and position of the slick. There were so many variables that only a computer could work it all out; or a world champion class sniper. He sighted down the Leupold riflescope and placed the crosshairs on the man standing next to the Hummer. Then he moved the target point slightly to make allowances for the difficult shot. The slick had stopped ascending as Talley had spoken to the pilot and asked him to hold her steady. He spoke to Nolan. “She’s holding, Chief. All yours.”

“Roger that.”

He fired. The shot clipped the target in the shoulder, but as he started to spin around, Nolan corrected and emptied the rest of the clip into the man. They watched him go down in a crumpled, bloody heap.

“All right! Yeah!” The men clapped him on the shoulder. Merano was looking the scene through his own riflescope.

“I read it as six hits, Chief. He ain’t getting up from that one.”

“Nice shooting,” Talley complimented him. “These bastards will think twice before they take Americans as hostages again.”

“Fuckin’ A,” someone shouted.

There were murmurs of approval. Not all missions ended well, and not all ended without casualties in the platoon. This one could be held up as an example of good planning and good execution, with help from a little luck. And they could all go home to their families, at least, until the next one. Kyle Nolan finished checking and reloading his MK11 Sniper Weapon System. Then he lay back against a bunch of canvas packs and tried to relax, and to still the surge of adrenaline that had sent his pulse rocketing. The Blackhawks would rendezvous offshore with an aircraft carrier, and the Seals would have the chance of a night’s sleep as it smashed through the seas on its full-power cruise back to California. The helos crossed the coast west of Managua and within thirty minutes were walking across the heaving deck of the USS Ronald Reagan, the Nimitz class flattop that would take them back to the Naval Amphibious Base Coronado, California. Nolan had only one thought now it was over. After a shower and change of clothes, a hot meal and a few hours of sleep, he’d be seeing Grace, his wife and mother of his two wonderful kids, Daniel and Mary. The family for whom it was all worth it, whose home and security it was worth fighting to defend. Like all Navy Seals, he had two families, on the one hand, Grace and the kids, and on the other, the service he had enlisted in. He’d give his life for either, and if there was one thing that CPO Kyle Nolan worried over, it was ever being forced to make the choice between his two families. Not that there was any reason to, they were separate, so that he lived two lives, two marriages; one with Grace and the kids, and one with the Seals. He fell asleep, content that the mission had concluded with a successful outcome. He was warmed by the hot meal provided by the five star cooks of the USS Ronald Reagan.

* * *

Someone was shaking him awake. He opened his eyes, momentarily confused, and looked at the gray-painted steel walls of the cabin. The sound of the nuclear powered steam turbines reached his ears, and he remembered where he was. He checked his watch; he'd only been asleep a short time. His eyes focused on Lieutenant Talley, staring down at him.

What the hell was that expression?

“Chief, you’re needed on the bridge.”

He was instantly alert. There was no reason to ask why. The bridge of a nuclear powered aircraft carrier was no place for idle chatter.

“On my way.”

He swung his legs out of the cot and pulled on his camos and boots. He was about to tidy his hair when Talley said something out of place.

“That’s okay, Chief, there’s no need for ceremony.”

But when you went on the bridge of one of the mightiest warships in the world, there was always a need for ceremony. It was then that he knew, and his stomach turned to ice.

Dear God, No! Don’t let anything happen to them!

“Is it Grace, or the kids?”

Talley put his hand on his arm. “Take it easy, Kyle. They’re waiting to talk to you.”

Nolan roughly shook off the hand. “Tell me, Boss. Now! What is it?”

Talley sighed. “It’s Grace, your wife. They’re firing up one of the Blackhawks to

expedite your return to San Diego.”

“What happened?”

“I’m sorry, Chief. She’s dead. They say it was a drive-by.”

“In San Diego? That doesn’t make any sense. Are you sure they’ve got the full facts?”

Talley nodded. “Yeah, it’s certain. Come up to the bridge, they’re waiting for you. Leave your gear. We’ll attend to that.”

In a daze, he followed his officer up the series of ladders, gray painted steel walls, past pipes and electrical conduits; groups of sailors bustling past on any of a hundred different tasks. As if it was normal. He wanted to shout at them. ‘It’s not fucking normal. It’s anything but normal. My wife, the mother of my children, she’s dead.’ As he climbed the steps, he thought of his mission, to save other people’s kids. And while he was in the field, they’d murdered his wife. When he stepped onto the bridge, they were waiting for him. Senior naval officers, the Admiral, the Skipper and his XO, the Chiefs who manned the ship’s control systems and kept her on course and on mission; they were all there. All silent, with eyes for him, yet when he stared at them, they averted those eyes. As if in a dream, or a nightmare, he heard the XO giving him the details.

“We’re all so sorry, Chief. The local San Diego PD are investigating, and our own NCIS is keeping a watch on what they’re doing, trying to find out who’s responsible. There’s no motive yet, and it seems just a senseless drive-by. Maybe part of a turf war between drug gangs, but we’re not sure. It only happened a few hours ago. The helo is spooling up now to take you home.”

Nolan nodded. “The kids?”

“With your wife’s parents, their grandparents. They’re fine.”

“Thank you, Sir,” he acknowledged the officer, a Naval Captain. For the first time in his life, he forgot to salute as Talley touched him on the shoulder and led him to the flight deck to the waiting Blackhawk. He had to keep his mind on what he would face when he got back.

They killed my wife, murdered Grace!

Chapter Two

He knew now that hell was not that noisome hut that held the prisoners in the Nicaraguan jungle. Hell was the here and now. John and Violet Robson, Grace’s parents, had moved into the bungalow to take care of the kids, during the time of adjustment. But that adjustment never came, not for him. The Team were regular callers, taking him out drinking and carousing, anything to help him forget. But after only a few days, he’d had enough, enough of their sympathy and their well-intentioned efforts to assuage his misery. But that was not the worst. Whenever he got home, John and Violet would welcome him with false smiles of reassurance. It was the kids, of course. They blamed him. He’d even overheard them once, talking to Violet.

“Why wasn’t Dad home to look after Mom when those gangsters shot her, Granma?”

“He’s in the military, darling. He has important duties to take care of.”

“More important than looking after Mom?”

She hadn’t replied. How could she? He didn’t know the answer himself. But on

that occasion there'd been a knock on the door, and Vince had come to take him out for a couple of hours. They sat in the dark shadows of Popeye's, a popular bar with the local sailors. It was a crummy dive, in fact so crummy that it gave dives a bad name. Peeling paintwork, torn upholstery on the bar stools, and enough dust on the shelves to blow up a sandstorm. But it was familiar and friendly, and run by former Master Chief Art Winkelmann, a Vietnam vet who'd served on a carrier in the Gulf of Tonkin. He knew about Nolan's problems and knew there was no easy solution. Except for the booze, and that was only temporary. And booze itself brought its own problems.

"What is it?" Nolan asked his partner.

Vince hesitated. Then he plunged in. "We're worried about you, Chief. You're coming apart at the seams. When are you coming back to the platoon?"

Nolan downed his fourth shot. "Doc says I'm not fit for active duty, not yet. Sort of Post Traumatic Shock, some shit like that."

"You're as fit as me or any of the Team, Kyle. Well, you used to be, before you started looking at life through the bottom of a shot glass. You're ruining yourself, just drinking yourself into the ground."

Thank Christ he doesn't know all of it. Not the bad part. Not the blackouts! He'd started to lose parts of his life. Where he'd been, what he'd done. He wasn't ruining himself; the damage was done.

Nolan fixed him with a cold stare. "You here to criticize, Vince? You're wasting your time. I've heard it all before. Grace's parents give me the eye everytime I get home and they smell the booze on my breath. Even the kids get snotty when I walk in the door."

"Can you blame them? Jesus Christ, Kyle, they lost their Mom. They need you."

Nolan crashed his hand down on the chipped woodwork of the bar, sending the last few flakes of varnish into the air.

“Dammit, Vince, I lost my wife. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

He felt the tears begin to form in the corners of his eyes. Tears he’d only shed in the dark, lonely hours of the night, sleeping in the big bed, smelling Grace’s perfume that still lingered in the room; the scent of her body, the spicy musk of a fit and healthy young woman that he always associated with her. But it was fading. Along with the reminders of her as John and Violet quietly packed away some more of her personal things.

“They need you, Chief.”

“Who the fuck needs me? The kids? Bravo Platoon? Who needs me, what the fuck about my needs?”

Merano stared at him coolly. After a long silence, in which the whole bar seemed to be holding their breath, he replied. “You’re a Seal, Chief. You deal with it. That’s what we do, that’s what we signed up to do.”

Behind the bar, retired Master Chief Winkelmann, owner of the bar, carried on polishing the glasses as he nodded approvingly. It was the right answer. It was the only answer. Nolan’s shoulders slumped, and he pushed the remainder of the Bourbon away. Eventually, he looked up.

“Yeah, that’s what I signed up for, Vince. But I’m finished, washed up. I’m handing in my papers.”

Now it was Merano’s turn to be silenced. His expression of shock turned to one of serious thought, and then he shook his head. “You’re kidding me, right? No way would you ever leave the service.”

“I’m sorry, Vince, but I’m not kidding. I want out. I think I’ll take the kids and move away. Start again someplace new.”

“Where?”

Nolan hunched his shoulders. “I dunno. Montana, maybe, I could breed horses or something. After all, it’s a healthy environment for the kids.”

“Montana! They don’t have any fucking coastline, for Christ’s sake. It’s a patch of earth and mountains. Montana is a landlocked state. Jesus, you may as well head for Nebraska!”

“Yeah, exactly.”

He wasn’t aware of getting home that night, and he knew he must have blacked out somewhere along the line. So Vince knew, he must have brought him home. He weathered the storm of John and Violet’s tight-lipped expressions and went to bed. In the morning, while he was sat eating a late breakfast, he saw John nod to Violet, and she disappeared into the kitchen.

“We need to have a word, Kyle.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“You know you have two kids who live here with you?”

He felt his anger begin to rise. “Yeah, of course I know. I’ve done everything for those kids, always have, and always will.”

“We know that, Kyle. But have you looked in a mirror lately?”

“No!” he snapped. It was true, for he didn’t want to see the face of the man that had been a thousand miles away when they fired the shot that killed his wife. He called NCIS and San Diego PD each day, but they still had no leads. Except that the shot had come during a particularly vicious turf war between two prominent

drug lords. But there was no proof, and no new leads.

“You look like a failure,” John said quietly.

Nolan started to reply, but his father-in-law held up his hand. He was a short, plump man; a real estate broker before he retired with enough wealth to keep him and his wife in comfort for the rest of their days. He looked the part, and even this early in the morning, he was well groomed, polished and well presented in casual Ralph Lauren chinos and coat, Egyptian silk white shirt, and hand crafted loafers. At that moment in time, Nolan hated him.

“No, I don’t suppose you can. But don’t you think your kids care about having a father who looks like a bum? Take a look. See what kind of a person their friends see when they come calling.”

He stood up angrily and stormed out to the hallway where there was a full-length mirror. He avoided it each time he went past, but now he stood and looked at it hard. He was shocked. The man there was not someone he recognized. The hard, ramrod posture had slumped to a beaten stoop. His eyes were red rimmed, and half closed against the morning sunlight. His clothes were stained and soiled, and he realized he hadn’t changed them for the past few days. A noise made him turn. John had joined him.

“It isn’t you, Kyle. Not the man my daughter Grace married, not the father of Daniel and Mary. Where is that man?”

His shock soon turned to anger. *What did this man know about loss?*

He swiveled to face John Robson.

“That man is standing here, trying to deal with a shitty situation. If you don’t like it, fuck you! I’m going out.”

He drove his Chevy Camaro downtown, parked on the street, and opened the glove box. Inside was a Glock 9mm, a personal weapon. He picked it up, checked the load, and held it for a long, long time until he lost consciousness. It was one occasion when a blackout was a blessing. Afterwards, he decided he needed another drink. Talley and Merano found him in a bar two blocks down from Popeye's. He was slumped on a stool, trying to forget. They took him home and spoke to John and Violet, but he never learned what was said.

That was two weeks ago, and now things had gotten worse. Whenever he went into the house, the conversation died. Even the kids were silent over dinner, and before he went out, he took them to one side.

“What gives, you two? We don't seem to talk anymore.”

Daniel, the elder looked away. Mary, with the innocence that was typical of a child, dived straight in. “It's not the same, Dad. Not since Mom died.”

He tried to put a brave face on it. “I know it's tough, but you're the same. I'm the same, so…”

“No, you're not the same!” Daniel was staring at him through eyes screwed up against the tears that were trying to force their way through the lids. “You're different. I don't know why, but it's like you went away when she did. You're a stranger, Dad. You don't spend time with us, you're, you're…nothing!”

He jumped up and ran up the stairs to his bedroom. Nolan was dumbfounded. Mary was sobbing, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“It's okay, honey, he doesn't mean it. I'll take care of you.”

She stared at him. “No you won't! Don't you see? You couldn't take care of Mom. You were away somewhere, and they killed her. How the fuck can you take

care of us?”

“Mary! Don’t use language like that!” He could hardly believe what he’d heard.

“Why the hell not? You’re never here!” she stormed.

“But, honey, I’m here now. I’ll take care of things.”

“You go out all the time, and you smell like a bar, Dad. You know that some people say you’re becoming a bum? What’s a bum?”

He was rooted to the chair, shocked, and disbelieving.

“I’ll explain another time. You’d better go and do your homework.”

“Mom used to help me with my homework.”

“Well, I’m not your Mom, am I?”

He could have bitten off his tongue as he said it. He tried to make amends, chatted about school for a few minutes, and packed her off with a peck on the cheek. Then he went out.

Somehow, he’d known it would come to this; almost from the moment he had the news about Grace. He slid onto the seat of his Camaro, leaned across to check that the Glock was in its place, and drove away. He didn’t call in at Popeye’s. Instead, he drove across to Mission Beach and parked where he could look out at the waves breaking gently on the sand. In front of him was a line of palm trees, framing the view of the bay, and on the water a late sailboat skittered home before nightfall. He took out the Glock and examined it. What else was there for him? The kids hated him, that was obvious, and he was an unwanted visitor in his own house. He’d lost the physical and mental edge of perfection that enabled him to do his job, and worst of all, he’d lost Grace. So that was it, he’d lost everything. He cocked the action and held the gun in his lap. Was it a coward’s way out? Yeah,

maybe it was, but it was also the only way out. He slid off the safety and put the gun in his mouth. A delicious feeling of release washed over him. Wherever he was going, maybe he'd meet Grace there, be able to touch her, smell her, talk to her. And if there was no afterlife, he wouldn't know, would he? He thought of his wife. She was well named; Grace, graceful, fragile looking as a ballet dancer, but as strong and beautiful. A sudden thought flashed into his head.

They killed my wife. And they're still out there. Unpunished.

So it wasn't all over, maybe there was something to live for; one of the oldest, most fundamental motives in the world. Before he went, he'd find out who was responsible, and make them sorry they'd ever been born. If he were to die, he'd make certain they'd die first. Yeah, revenge. If it was all he had left, so be it. He'd work that angle until he'd taken justice for Grace, and then he'd be ready to bow out. He safed the weapon and put it back into the glove box. It was time to go to work.

He drove to the San Diego office of NCIS, an anonymous, gray stone Federal building close to the Naval dockyard. A female petty officer sat behind a desk and gave him a look of alarm as he walked in. She put one hand on the phone, ready to call for the cavalry. Nolan understood, and he made a mental note to clean up his act. He needed these people to take him seriously if he was to get their help.

"Chief Kyle Nolan, PO. I need to see the duty officer."

She held out her hand, a dubious expression on her face.

"Let's see some ID, Chief."

He handed over his wallet. She examined it and keyed the computer in front of her.

"What's your business, Chief?"

He hesitated, but this was the Navy, and she'd need to pass on a reason. "My wife was murdered. I need to find out if the Navy is investigating, and how far they'd got."

Her expression changed in an instant. "I'm real sorry about that, please accept my condolences. I'll get Lieutenant Commander Evers right away."

She ushered him into an interview room, a small, windowless cubicle with a battered desk and a chair either side. On the ceiling, a small camera was pointed at him, listening, watching, and recording. He waited fifteen minutes before the door opened and a black officer walked in. Nolan stood to attention. He was still Navy. The officer nodded him to a chair and shook hands.

"I'm Lieutenant Commander Evers. How can I help you, Chief?"

Nolan told him about the shooting that had happened while he was on a mission. "I want to know if NCIS has looked into it, and what's been uncovered."

Evers shook his head. "We were told about your wife's murder when it happened, but it's San Diego PD business. When I heard you were here, I gave them a call. A Detective Summers is looking into it, but she says there's nothing new on the case."

Nolan stood. "In that case, I won't waste your time. I'll go down there and speak to this detective and find out what they have got." He held out his hand. "Thank you for your time, Sir."

Evers nodded. "You're welcome. If anything does come up that we can use, let us know, and we'll follow it up."

Nolan left the room and walked out of the building, acknowledging the smile from the PO on the desk.

He drove into San Diego and parked outside the modern, zigzag shape of the new police headquarters. He'd often driven past the old PD building, which looked like a mission church, and more a place to save souls than to damn them. But now it was largely abandoned, and it was in this modern edifice that he hoped to find the answers he was looking for. The greeting from the desk sergeant was even more remote than from the PO at NCIS. He indicated a chair at the back of the station and told him to wait. A half hour later, he was still waiting when two cops walked in, a man and a woman. One of them mentioned the name Summers, so he stood up, and crossed over to them.

“Is one of you Detective Summers?”

They both stared at him. He recognized the look of contempt, as if he was some kind of a felon, maybe a street bum. He was getting used to it. The woman nodded. “I'm Summers, what can I do for you, Sir?”

She was slim and pretty, he'd give her that. No way was she his image of a hard-bitten police detective. Detective Summers was also rather short, and he guessed petite would be the word to describe her best, fresh-faced, a sprinkle of freckles across her nose, dark eyes and medium length brown hair with a natural wave. She wore a blouse over faded jeans and a cropped tweed jacket that was barely long enough to hide the gun in the holster at her belt. When he looked closer, he could see a scar on her face, just above the right eyebrow. Knife wound, maybe, but it was longer than a regular knife slash, and probably a gunshot that had grazed her skin. She'd covered it with a little make-up, but the scar was too deep to be completely hidden.

“Chief Petty Officer Nolan, Ma'am. I'm here to ask about progress on the

investigation into my wife's murder."

She looked him up and down. Then she sighed. "Come to my desk, Chief, and I'll tell you what we've got. Which will take less than a minute."

He followed her through the detectives' room and sat down in front of a desk where she indicated. She sat behind it, took out a file, and read through it.

"Grace Nolan. Killed with a single shot from a 9mm slug, probably an Ingram. Confirmed DOA at the local infirmary. Forensics report no leads, nothing to go on. We pulled in the usual suspects, talked to the locals, but so far, there's nothing."

"That's it?" he shouted. He banged his fist on the desk, and several heads turned to see if the detective needed help. "My wife was killed and you've got nothing?"

"I'm sorry, Chief. It's often the way when these things happen. Everyone develops amnesia after a drug-related killing. Anyone that witnessed the crime either forgets or disappears."

He picked up on something in her voice. "You say it's the way it is for a drug-related killing. So it's nothing new, then you must suspect who was behind it."

She nodded. "Yes, I suppose that would be true, but we have no evidence."

"Who was it?"

She shook her head. "That I can't tell you."

"Ma'am, if it was your husband, wouldn't you want to know?" he asked her quietly.

She closed her eyes for a second. "My husband's dead, but yes, I guess I would."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

“No, that’s okay.” Her expression had changed, and there was sympathy and understanding there. “Look, I get off shift in less than an hour. My car is in the shop. How about I bum a ride home, and maybe we can talk?”

“Okay. We could go for a drink if you like, make it easier to talk.”

She grinned. “Not with you looking like a bum, Chief. Sorry, but you ought to take a look in the mirror. No offense, but you’ve had a hard time, and it shows.”

I don’t give a shit about the way I look. I just need a name. A target.

He waited in the street, parked under a streetlight until she emerged from the precinct. She saw him straight away in the Camaro and climbed in. He looked across at her.

“Where do you want me to drive?”

“I’ll take that drink you offered first. I could do with one. Find a decent bar, no forget that, they tell me Popeye’s is where you Navy guys drink.”

“I thought you said I look like a bum?”

She chuckled. “You do, actually. But it’s dark, so I guess no one will notice the way you look.”

He started the engine and drove away. “You checked me out, didn’t you?” It was the only explanation for her change of heart.

“Yeah, I did. I needed to know who I’d be riding with. You’re a Frog.”

So she knew the jargon. How could she not know it, a cop in this town?

“Yeah, I’m a Seal. Or I was, but I’m on sick leave right now. I don’t know if I’ll be going back.”

She nodded, but didn’t reply. He parked close to Popeye’s and they went in. At least he didn’t feel out of place in such a sorry looking bar. He found a booth in a quiet corner, and they sat down. When he asked what she wanted, she said a beer,

so he ordered two Buds. It would make a change from his normal order of hard spirits, but he needed a clear head for this conversation. He looked at her when Art had gone to fill the order.

“Okay, what’s the deal with Grace’s killer? Do you have a name, or any suspicions about who did it?”

She nodded slowly. “This is confidential, right? If they found out I was giving you a name, they’d have my badge.”

“Sure, I’ll never tell anyone where I got it. What’s the name?”

She sighed. “Okay, he’s an Afghan immigrant, at least, the guy who’s behind the shootings. His name’s Mohammed Gul. His outfit is muscling in on the Latino gangs who’ve run the local drug scene up to now. He’s well connected back in Afghanistan, and he gets a lot of Afghan product into the town. He sends his shooters out to look for the local Latino dealers and pop them right there on the street. Then he moves in to take over their territory. I’m afraid your wife was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We’ll never know for sure who pulled the trigger, but it was Gul who ordered the shootings.”

“Where does he hang out?”

“You have to leave this with us, Chief. You can’t go starting a vigilante war.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess that would worry the PD. Don’t worry, I’ll find him. It’s Kyle, by the way, and thanks for helping me out.”

“That’s okay. My husband was Navy, before he was killed. I guess I’m just a sucker for a sailor. I’m Carol.”

“Was it Iraqi Freedom?”

She inclined her head slowly, and he saw her eyelids close momentarily. “He

was in the Gulf, intercepting smugglers and pirates. He was in a bar one night with his buddies when a suicide bomber hit them.”

“So he got it like Grace, the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I guess, except he was military. They know what chances they take when they sign up. Grace was a civilian. It’s a different deal.”

“You got that right. Look, I have to know where I can at least speak to this Gul. Where does he hang out? Don’t worry, I don’t plan on anything stupid.”

She gave him a skeptical look.

She knows I’m lying. Maybe she wouldn’t be unhappy to see someone cap this Gul.

Finally she nodded. “Okay, I’ll tell you. He’s got a place in an old warehouse on City Heights. That’s where he does most of his business. The place is well protected, and you can believe me, Gul employs a lot of soldiers.”

“What about his home, where does he live?”

“Saratoga Avenue, he owns a big house, almost a mansion. It stands on a large lot, surrounded by a high wall and razor wire. You can’t miss it,” she laughed. “The locals call it Fort Kabul.”

“Guarded, of course?”

“Of course,” she grinned. “Guys like Mohammed Gul attract enemies the way shit attracts flies. But he travels a lot, so you won’t find it easy to locate him.”

“He has another enemy now. I’ll find him.”

Nolan looked up and groaned inwardly as a group of men approached their table.

“Move over, Chief, make room for the guys. Who’s your new friend?”

Detective Summers looked up and saw what Nolan had seen, PO1 Vince

Merano, along with a half dozen members of Bravo Platoon, Seal Team Seven.

Nolan gave them a weak smile. “Hi, Vince, meet Detective Summers, San Diego PD.”

They all shook hands as he introduced her to the guys.

“So what gives, what’s this all about?” Vince asked.

“We were just discussing the progress of the case,” Nolan said quietly. “Grace’s murder.”

“Yeah, we heard the last bit,” he nodded grimly. “And I overheard the name. What are we going to do about it?”

Carol Summers got to her feet. “Look, I’m out of here. I can’t be a part of this discussion. Besides, I need to get home.”

Nolan jumped to his feet. “I’ll take you. I said I’d see you home.”

“No, no, you stay with your buddies, I’ll get a cab. I don’t live far from here. But hear this, all of you. This is police business. You will not, repeat, not use vigilante tactics against this guy. We’ll get him. Don’t worry. One day, sooner or later. In the meantime, stay away from him. I’m serious. If I see you taking potshots at this guy, I’ll run you in myself.”

There was a chorus of catcalls and laughs.

“You can run me in anytime,” Vince chuckled. He held out his hands. “Here, put the cuffs on, or do I put them on you? How do we play this?”

She went bright red, surrounded by so many fit, tough, young men. She realized she was keeping company with the finest that America could produce, the best of the best.

“Hey, cool it, guys,” Nolan shouted into the hubbub. “Detective Summers’

husband was a squid, and he got hit during Iraqi Freedom. She's one of us."

They fell silent. Vince looked suitably chastened. "My condolences, Ma'am, and my apologies."

She managed a small smile. "That's okay, but remember what I said, leave Gul to us." She looked at Nolan. "Chief, call in and see me tomorrow. I'll see what I can look out from the files, and try and get some momentum on this case."

"Sure, I'll call in."

Their eyes met as he watched her walk towards the door. Two men stood up to block her way. They were both big men, large, and well muscled. Dockyard workers.

"Hey, Babe, you don't want to waste your time with those guys. How about you spend some time with me and my partner here? What are you drinking?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, guys, but I'm leaving."

"Hey, I offered you a drink. Don't insult me by refusing, what are you having?"

"I said I'm leaving," she repeated.

He put his hand on her arm. "The fuck you are, darling. You're gonna sit down and have a drink with me and my buddy here. If you've got time for those Navy pukes, you've got time for us."

She was still shaking her head, but the other man took hold of her other arm, and they started pushing her toward their table. It was as far as they got. One moment, the men were standing over Detective Summers, threatening her, and the next they were gasping in agony on the floor. Will Bryce stood over one of them, Dan Mosely over the other. The two Seals had barely appeared to move. One second they were walking casually toward the door, as if they were leaving, and the

next, they stood over the two dockyard workers. People were staring, trying to connect up the moves, as if they'd been fooled by a stage conjurer's trick. Which maybe they had.

"You'll get up and apologize to the lady," Bryce said. His rumbling voice was calm, but his body language and black face were cold as ice. They left the dockyarders in no doubt that he was a serious man; one they should listen to, and whose words of iron they should respect. The men stood up, nursing their bruises.

"Sorry, Ma'am," they both mumbled.

"Louder!"

"We're real sorry, Ma'am," they blurted desperately, shouting out loud.

"Now get out, and don't come back!"

They slunk out, like two whipped dogs. Carol Summers stood and smiled at the two men.

"Thanks, guys. I owe you one."

"No, Ma'am, you don't. They want to come in here. They treat ladies with respect. If they don't, they soon learn the lesson. The hard way, if necessary."

She chuckled. "I can see that. But thanks, anyway."

She left the bar, and the Seals watched her as she walked through the door, her hips swinging slightly.

"That is some woman, Chief," PO2 Carl Winters said to Nolan in an admiring tone.

"I wouldn't know. How did you find me?"

"Art called us."

Nolan looked across at the bar owner. Yeah, he would. He looked on the Frogs

and Squids that frequented his bar like they were his own kids.

“Okay, what did you want? I was about to go home.”

“We want you.” It was Vince who spoke. “When are you coming back? The platoon isn’t the same without you.”

He looked at his Italian American sniper partner. Vince was dressed as always when he was off duty, faded blue jeans, a military T-shirt, brown leather A2 flying jacket that looked as if it had gone twice around the world in the cockpit of a biplane, and a pair of Alden walking boots, the iconic 405 Indy boots. He always swore he was wearing them before Raiders of the Lost Ark was released. Nobody was sure who was telling the truth.

“I don’t know, Vince. I’ve got some business to attend to first.”

“Would this be business for a MK11 Sniper Weapon System? You planning on a little unofficial target practice, Chief?”

Kyle smiled coldly. “I may look into it, yeah, maybe. Someone has to answer for Grace’s murder. But it’s my business.”

“No, Chief, you’re not doing it on your own. You know if you get caught, you could go down for life? Why don’t we put our heads together and work something out? We’ll get this guy, but let’s do it together.”

“We’re with you,” Carl added. “All the way.”

He looked around at the others, Brad Rose, Dave Eisner, Dan Moseley and Will Bryce. Their glances were a testimony to the platoon’s determination to stick together.

“I appreciate that, guys, but…” Nolan faltered, not knowing how to deal with the unexpected show of support.

“Yeah, there is a 'but',” Vince added. “But not the one you’re thinking of. We’re shipping out, so this has to go on the back burner until we get back.”

“Shipping out where?”

He looked around, but no one was within earshot. “Afghanistan. It’s a mission that’s been in the planning stage for some time. There’s a group causing a lot of trouble for our guys over there. They want us to take care of them.”

“Vince, I’m out at present, you know that. I’ve got things to…”

“They took out most of Charlie Platoon, these motherfuckers.”

Nolan stared at him, and his blood chilled. “Charlie, how come? Those guys are the best.”

“They reckon there’s a mole somewhere in ISAF, could be a Westerner or an Afghan. They’re not sure. He passed info to the insurgents, and they bushwhacked them. They’re bringing the survivors and the bodies back now. Bravo is needed over there to hunt these bastards down and kill them. Before we finish them, we’ll get them to talk about the mole, and then we can take him down. But we have to have you with us, Kyle. This’ll be a tough one. It’s all hands on deck.”

Nolan thought furiously. He remembered how close he’d come to blowing out his brains. Now he had something to fight for, revenge. The guys of Charlie Platoon were, like Bravo Platoon, like brothers. Yes, they had to be revenged. But he had unfinished business here. He thought of Grace, and he needed another drink. Several more drinks.

They killed Grace, murdered my wife.

“Vince, guys, I know it’s important, but…”

“Kyle, listen.” It was Will Bryce; the black PO2 who carried power and gravitas the way a sheriff carried a gun. His strange gray eyes stared at the Chief. “This

business in Afghanistan, it's vital. No one hits the Frogs and gets away with it, no one! And the business with your wife, we'll take care of that when we get back. She was family, and we'll never forget that. Never! But first things first. These bastards in Afghanistan are killing our guys, and they have to be stopped." He brought his fist down on the table, so hard that the glasses jumped an inch in the air and beer spilled out. "Stopped permanently. There's no room for crying off. We've got to go in there hard, do the job, and finish them. And we need you on board to help us do it. You're coming back, Chief. You have to, you're a vital part of the unit."

They waited for him to process the data in his brain. Finally, he nodded.

"Okay. When do we leave?"

* * *

After Nolan had left, Carl looked at Vince Merano, Nolan's fellow sniper.

"What do you think? You saw him have one of these blackouts. And look at the way he's putting the sauce back, he's killing himself. The Chief could be a liability if anything goes bad in the field."

"What do you mean, 'goes bad'?" Vince replied, his voice cold.

"You know what I mean. He's the number two man in the platoon. If he blacks out at the wrong time, it could jeopardize everything. He even tried to off himself, we all know that." He realized that Vince wasn't taking it well. "Fuck it, Vince, we're Navy Seals, not a bunch of chow pushers in the galley of a carrier. You know what it's like. We leave nothing to chance. And the Chief's blackouts sure are a big question mark."

“He’ll be fine, Carl. Believe me, I know him better than anyone. Maybe he’s not firing on all his cylinders, but he’s the best we’ve got.”

The other men nodded their agreement, and Vince relaxed, but only slightly.

I hope to fuck that’s true, what I just said to them. If it isn’t, some of them may not be coming home, and it’d be me to blame.

* * *

The hardest part was breaking it to the kids. The next morning, they somehow sensed that something was different. Their father had changed overnight. He had a determination in his eyes, like he used to have. When he moved, it was with the old, springy step, as if he was always about to step off the ramp of a C-130 and parachute down into action. He’d even shaved and combed his hair!

“I need to talk to you kids.”

They sat around the table. He could feel John and Violet in the kitchen, knew they were listening.

“I have to go to work.”

Their faces fell. “You’re supposed to be sick,” Daniel objected.

“Yeah, I know that, Dan. I was sick, but now I feel better.”

“Can’t you stay with us a while longer?” Mary pleaded, in that plaintive, little girl voice she used to wheedle her way around him.

At least she wasn’t swearing any more, he grinned to himself.

He shook his head. “Listen, kids. You know about Afghanistan, the war over there?”

They nodded their heads. All American kids knew that. He should have

realized how stupid he sounded, asking them if they knew. Christ, he'd been out of touch the past weeks.

“Right, a bunch of our guys got killed, and they need us to find them and deal with them. I have to do this, to save the lives of my friends and buddies.”

“Are you going to arrest them and put them in prison?” Mary asked.

He couldn't look at her, couldn't lie. But Daniel supplied the answer.

“Dad's a Seal, you stupid girl. Seals don't arrest the bad guys. They kill them.”

“Is that what you're going to do?” she asked.

“Is that what I should do, kill the bad guys who are murdering my friends and other Americans?”

She nodded solemnly. “I guess so, if it's the only way to stop them.”

He was relieved that she didn't fully understand the concept of killing, only enough to know that it put an end to things.

“But what about Mom?”

“Yeah, honey, I haven't forgotten Mom. When I get back, that'll be dealt with.”

“Are you going to kill the motherfucker who did it, Dad?” Daniel asked, staring at him intently, waiting for the answer.

Nolan gulped at the language. But he let it go. He knew it was important to his son. He just couldn't think of the right answer. John and Violet walked quietly into the room. They were staring at him, waiting for his answer too. He couldn't lie. Not to them, they were Grace's parents, not to the kids either. They were Grace's kids. But he couldn't tell them the whole truth either.

“Dan, I promise you that the guy responsible for your mother's death will be punished. And I mean punished severely. I can't say any more.”

The motherfucker's going to die, and you can take that to the bank. I just can't tell you, not right now.

But his eyes told them what he meant. He saw Grace's mother, Violet, break into a smile. "I'm glad, Kyle. We're all glad. People like that don't deserve anything good. Make him suffer the way he made our little girl suffer."

He looked at her and at John. "I will deal with that man. I make that promise to you all."

He reported back the next morning. Talley welcomed him warmly and was gracious enough not to ask what had changed his mind. Neither did he enquire about his mental state. He took it for granted that Nolan had suffered after learning of his wife's murder. Now he was back on deck. They were due to ship out the next day, and he endured twenty-four hours of almost constant sweat as he worked to reach a peak of mission fitness. Out on the Marine Corps Air Station at Miramar, the long distance firing range, he found where the lost weeks had really taken their toll. He'd been shooting in the high nineties, and a perfect one hundred was by no means unusual. He kicked off with a low nineties score, and after three hours of work and sweat, fighting to control the muscle reaction, the breathing and the mental control that are the essential tools of the Seal Sniper, he'd scraped into the upper nineties. But only just. After Vince Merano fired off a perfect hundred, he grinned at Nolan.

"You're getting past it, Chief. Don't worry, I'll show you how it's done when I've finished shooting my round."

Kyle chuckled. "In your dreams, Vince. This is a touch of the Jack Black shakes. Another day or two to leech it all out of my system, and I'll be back up in front. And you'll be right behind me, where you should be."

“You’ll need to put some effort in, Chief. While you were carousing, I’ve been putting in some real work. You’ve got a way to catch up.”

Nolan nodded, pleased. What he needed was this. The shared companionship, the knowledge that they were about to go into harm’s way, the challenge of performing at your best, and of honing your skills to the razor edge of perfection; to aim at the very top, where no man could aspire to be your equal. They fired off a couple more twenties, and he kept above the mid-nineties. But Vince was right. He had a way to go, but he’d get there. He had to. He had to carry out the prime function of the military sniper. To ‘Reach out and touch someone’. Both in Afghanistan, where there were men who’d staged such a cowardly ambush on Charlie Platoon, and then back here, in San Diego. Despite what Carol Summers said, Mohammed Gul was a dead man walking. His time would come soon. He looked up as he realized that Vince was calling to him.

“Hey, Chief, that was the Boss. They’ve moved us up, so we’re leaving in two hours. We have to get back. And Chief…”

“Yeah, Vince?”

“You used to be great, the platoon looked on you as invincible. Do you mind me saying something?”

“What is it, Vince?” He quelled his anger, and reminded himself that Vince was a friend, not an enemy.

“Knock off the sauce, eh, partner. It’s killing you.” He grinned, to ease the tension. “And besides, you’ll never beat my scores if you keep knocking it back.”

Nolan nodded. “Copy that.”

He smiled an acknowledgement that he hadn’t taken any offense and began

emptying his rifle. He'd done enough for now, and he'd started to pick up the rest of his skills for when he was back in the field. When it was for real.

But would that be soon enough? Did he have enough time? Or would he let them down when it counted?

* * *

He watched as the security guard opened the door and entered the room. He looked around the opulent setting, the polished mahogany table, with chairs drawn up ready and crystal decanters and water glasses. He glanced around space, ignoring the silk hangings, the artworks that were placed in strategic positions to underline one single fact. The people who used this room had access to immense wealth or power. Probably both. He kept his AK-47 held ready for use, but saw nothing untoward. He looked fearfully at the man waiting patiently outside the door, and nodded.

“It is all clear, Sir.”

The man ignored him, entered the meeting room and stood impassively at the head of the table, as if in a trance. He had a serene look in the hooded eyes, and a look that to those who knew him spelled one word. Danger. He was heavily built, and he moved with a loose, ungainly walk. His face was broad and surprisingly unlined, despite his obvious age, but his skin bore the stigmata of severe childhood acne. Thick drooping brows hovered above shadowed eyes of a startling bright green hue, strange in an Afghan; the throwback to some previous invader strain, without a doubt. His black hair was cut short around the back and sides but worn full on top in defiance of any known style. He was dressed in a cream linen suit,

slightly ruffled, over hand-made tan suede desert boots. The effect was of an adventurer or explorer gone to seed. Yet this man was a politician, which perhaps made him more of an adventurer than those who adopted that probing and uncertain lifestyle. He looked at the men around the scratched woodwork of the ancient carved table, noting their expressions, fear, respect, in some. Hate in others. Yes, it was expected. He sat in the throne-like carved chair that was reserved for the most senior man at these proceedings, and the rest of them sat in their places. This being the Afghan Ministry of Defense, that man was him; Major General Faramarz Azizi, Afghan Minister of Defense, head of the entire armed forces of Afghanistan.

“Well?”

One word, but they all knew what he meant. What was wanted, who had succeeded and who had failed. Who would look for promotion, and who would fall. Or worse. He listened to their reports, nodding and shaking his head automatically. His secretary interpreted his moods, and made short notes on his pad. Finally, he dismissed them all, tired of their chatter, and of their failures. And despite what they called them, failures they were, all of them. There were precious few successes. No matter. He dismissed his secretary and stared down the table at the man who remained.

“Abdul, my friend. To business, what have you to tell me?”

Abdul Walid was expressionless. He went through his report, checking it off from memory item by item. He was an imposing, theatrical figure in Afghan dress, white robe with full sleeves, baggy trousers, and laced soft leather boots. His hair was a tangle of black snakes. A large drooping black moustache almost hid the full

red lips that were themselves barely visible above the top of a full, black flowing beard. The eyes were fierce and cruel on either side of a syphilitic nose. His hands were decorated with gold rings, and one of the hands rested on the curved dagger, that no amount of persuasion could make him give up when he entered the Ministry. To anyone who saw him, they would know instantly he was a man who had killed, many times. And would kill again, for his was a warrior. The title on his ministry pass said, 'Senior Tribal Liaison Officer'. But his tasks were to carry out General Azizi's wishes, whatever they were and no matter how bloody. For Azizi was a man with a mission, a mission that only the two men present knew in full.

"Business is good, General. Shipments of product are up and continue to rise, and the Americans are content to leave us alone while they fight this stupid war."

"Good, good. And the Americans, do they suspect anything?"

Walid grinned, drawing back his thick lips to display a black gap in the row of white teeth.

"They suspect nothing. They are still looking into the matter of their Special Forces that were killed. I do not believe they will allow the matter to go away until they have answers."

Azizi nodded. "They are sending in replacements to continue the mission."

Walid looked up sharply. "And you have allowed it?"

"The President himself gave permission. I had no influence in the matter. It will be up to you to make certain they find out nothing."

"Perhaps they could meet the fate of the other unit. I could arrange another ambush."

Azizi looked thoughtful. "We must be careful. They are not fools, and it could

establish a link that will lead directly to this office. I would suggest you assign an officer to them who knows what to do. If he could lead them into a hopeless battle that resulted in their deaths, it would be better than a simple ambush.”

“It could mean a lot of our fighters will be killed. These Special Forces are not easy to kill in open battle.”

Azizi shrugged. “So? They must take their chances. And we must be patient, Walid. Everything we are working for will come to fruition.”

“It will be as you say, Minister.”

Chapter Three

Nolan watched the starlit landscape speed past through the narrow Perspex window, mile after dreary mile of barren plains and rock. They were flying in a specially modified helo, a Chinook MH-47E, adapted for both day and night operations. Outwardly, a regular helo, this aircraft had upgraded engines, aerial refueling capability, and terrain following and terrain avoidance radar. With its modified integrated avionics and multi-mode radars, it gave the Special Forces platoons infiltration and exfiltration capability. The capability to strike hard, kill the enemy, and get out fast before they even knew they'd been hit. He looked away and surveyed the men. They all sat in that relaxed way that is common to Special Forces the world over. They'd trained to the peak of perfection, and now they were going to put the lessons into practice once more. They were not men to harbor doubts about their abilities, men like Vince Merano, the second unit sniper. Lieutenant

Talley, the tough, competent platoon commander. PO2 Will Bryce, underwater demolitions specialist, a man who moved and struck with the stealth and power of a cobra. PO3 Dan Mosely, the California beach boy who turned his back on the boardroom to pursue the career he loved.

Chief Nolan thought back to the past few weeks when he'd hovered on the fine line between life and death. And these men had trusted him and brought him back to life. When they said a Frog was married to his unit, to his career, they were right. Without them, he couldn't have pulled through. But with these men, united, there was nothing they couldn't do; like now.

They were flying towards an LZ ten miles out from a village on the Afghan and Pakistan border, the famed Hindu Kush range of mountains. When the helo was ten miles out, they'd make a low altitude drop with the aircraft shielded from the target by the mountains. Landing was not an option. If the enemy heard a Chinook land, even this modified version still made a lot of noise, the enemy would be alerted, and they'd disperse. All they'd hear tonight would be a passing aircraft, nothing more. The target was a town named Adasabad, close to the mountains and next to the border with Pakistan. Intelligence had discovered that a bombmaker was making the trek into Afghanistan with a large cargo of IEDs constructed ready for use; the deadly Improvised Explosive Devices that caused so many casualties to the ISAF forces, the International Security Assistance Force led by NATO and established by the United Nations Security Council. They'd asked SOCOM, the US Special Operations Command, to assist them with this one, because of the potential danger to so many of their troops from the devices. But there was another reason for this mission. The man waiting for the consignment of IEDs was on the

ISAF most wanted list, Gemal Rahimi. The man was wanted for a number of serious war crimes, most recently the murder of two American soldiers he'd taken prisoner. The beheading had been a hit amongst those people who got off from that kind of thing. The platoon had watched it as part of the mission brief. Afterwards, there was a long silence, and each of them had considered how they'd like to deal with the butcher responsible.

“Coming up to target zone,” the co-pilot's voice sounded in their headphones. “Five minutes to drop.”

Talley stood up. He was dressed and equipped like the rest of them; camouflaged MICH 2000 lightweight ballistic half-helmet, and his face almost invisible under the camo cream painted in a nightmarish pattern. Camouflaged uniform, webbing stuffed with weapons and equipment, lightweight cross-country boots, and a parachute strapped to his back. There was no reserve. On a LALO drop, if the main 'chute didn't open; there was no time for second-guessing. It made for a great deal of care when packing their 'chutes. His assault rifle, the HK 416 was slung across his chest, and strapped to his belt his Sig Sauer, P226, the Navy Seals' nine-millimeter pistol of choice. Strapped to the helmet was his night vision device, and at the side of his mouth the microphone of the unit's comms system. The Lieutenant made a final check of the navigational computer strapped to his wrist.

“You know what to do, each check your partner. Chief, would you do me the honors?”

Nolan nodded, crossed to the Lieutenant's side of the cabin, and checked his gear, front and back. He turned around, and Talley did the same for him.

“It’s good to have you back, Chief,” he murmured, pulling hard at the webbing straps to check their security.

“Thanks, Boss,” Nolan replied, embarrassed. He checked that the aircraft intercom was switched off and changed the subject. “That Afghan guy, do you trust him?”

Talley looked up the fuselage. At the other end of the cabin was their Afghan liaison officer, Major Abdul Siddiqi of the Afghan National Army.

“I dunno. He seems okay, but I had a word with SOCOM about him. I was that worried. He was assigned to ISAF, who put him with us for this mission. His family is well connected inside the government, and they want to make a good impression with the Americans. He’ll probably wind up running a Pizza Bar in Los Angeles.”

“Or blowing one up,” Nolan said quietly.

“Yeah, maybe. But he’s from this region, so we should be able to make use of him.”

“Right. Did he have anything to do with Charlie Platoon before they were ambushed?”

“No, I checked that one out. He was in the States on a training exercise at Bragg.”

Nolan grunted. “Has he ever done a LALO drop?”

Talley shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Two minutes,” the jumpmaster was standing by the ramp, which was slowly lowering to the full-open position. Talley and Nolan went to the rear of the cabin, next to the ramp, and looked around to check on the men. Major Siddiqi was in the

middle of Nolan's stick. In case he had second thoughts, there were men behind him who would give him any necessary push. Stick was the technical word for their formation; lines of men ready to jump from an aircraft. But in reality, when they jumped this time, it would be in a disciplined, staggered group. The technique was known as LALO, Low Altitude Low Opening. It was a very dangerous insertion technique, and different from a normal airborne drop in that the aircraft flew at a low altitude of about 500 to 600 feet. Due to the rate of descent, if the main chute failed, there was no time to deploy a reserve chute. The insertion method was used when, as now, the troops had a better than average chance of being detected during their descent. They'd all done this kind of drop many times before. Except for Major Siddiqi.

The inside of the Chinook was black as the entrance to hell. And hell was what they were taking to the enemy. They'd switched to night vision goggles, the new panoramic PNVG which doubled the field of view by using four 16 mm image intensifier tubes. The goggles were issued to ground attack A-10 Thunderbolt pilots, and to the AC-130U Spooky aircrew, as well as a selected few of the Special Forces. Including Bravo Platoon.

"Green light, go."

They stepped off the ramp without undue haste. It was more the relaxed movement of a body of men, almost as if they were stepping off a bus. But each man was already preparing, looking ahead, choosing his space, looking for a piece of ground to drop onto. Both Nolan and Talley gave a quick glance backwards to see if Siddiqi had hesitated. But he had no chance for second thoughts, the platoon shuffled to the ramp and stepped off, and the Afghan major went with them,

caught up in the tight mass of men. Automatically, Nolan was pulling the cord to release his 'chute and surveying the ground beneath him, as well as looking around for potential problems. A collision with another Seal, especially on a night drop, could be fatal. Within seconds, he saw the hard, rocky ground coming towards him. He bent his legs and glided in for a landing that kept him on his feet. He kept moving, unsnapping the 'chute, bundling it out of the way, and bringing up his HK416 assault rifle to the ready position. Then he knelt and waited as the others came down around him and assumed similar positions of watchfulness. Through his earpiece, he heard Talley.

“Chief, where are you?”

“Kneeling next to the cairn of rocks. I’ll stand.”

When he stood, Talley saw him and walked over. “The GPS looks good. We’re in the right place. Have you seen the Major?”

“Not yet, I’ll go look for him.”

When he found him, Brad Rose and Will Bryce were rolling up the cuff of his pants.

“What’s up?”

“Ankle sprain,” Brad replied. “Will’s about to strap it up for him.”

Nolan swallowed an angry comment.

SOCOM should have seen this coming and not sent an amateur. They never learned the cardinal rule. It was fatal to mix politics with military operations.

In the green glow of the night vision goggles, he could see the Afghan’s face was screwed up in pain. He knelt down.

“You’ll need to walk about ten miles to the target, Major. We need to be there before dawn, so you’d better swallow a whole heap of painkillers.”

“I don’t think I can walk at all. The pain, it is bad.”

“Yeah, so are the enemy, real bad, and they’ll skin you alive if they find you. Petty Officer Rose will have a bunch of pills and drugs to help out. He can inject straight into your ankle, and it’ll numb the pain.”

He turned to Brad. “You need to hurry it up. We’re moving out in three minutes.”

“Roger that.”

He left them with the Major and went off to round up the platoon. Three minutes later, they were hurrying across the hard, uneven ground in a long, snaking line, using their PNVGs to steer away from rocks, potholes, and other obstacles. His earpiece clicked. “Chief, the Major wants a word.”

“Roger that.”

He dropped back to the center of the line where Siddiqi was hobbling along with difficulty.

“Mr. Nolan, I need to stop and rest for a short time. The man I asked refused my request, but it is essential that I…”

“That answer is no, Major. You can rest as much as you like after you’re dead. We can’t fall behind schedule. If the platoon doesn’t reach the target on time, the whole mission could fall apart.”

“In that case, I will take a rest and catch you up later.”

Nolan took out his Sig Sauer P226 and started screwing on the sound suppressor. Siddiqi watched him.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t want the enemy to hear the shot, Major. I’ll shoot you, and we’ll hide

your body in the rocks. It's the best I can do."

"What! You're not serious? I am an officer in the..."

"You're a pain in the ass, Major, and a liability to this mission. If we leave you and the insurgents pick you up, they'll find out we're here and what we're doing. We can't allow that to happen. I'm sorry, but there's no option."

They were still walking at a good pace, though not as fast as the platoon, and they were dropping back. Siddiqi looked across at Nolan.

"I will do my best to keep up."

"That's good news, Major, but you'll need to speed up. We're already falling behind. Understand? There're two choices."

"Yes, I will do my best to stay with the platoon."

When they caught up with the main group, some of the other men had overheard the conversation and were grinning at Nolan. Siddiqi saw them. He confronted Nolan.

"Would you have done it, Chief? Killed me?"

"Sure, that's a dumb question, Major. You keep moving now."

But they only made a few paces.

"Freeze."

The single word of command came from PO2 Dave Eisner who held point. They froze.

"Guy moving across to the front. May be a herder, something like that. There's goat shit all over the ground. I've got him covered. If he keeps moving, he'll be out of our way in a few minutes. I can take him out if you want, Boss."

Talley considered the option for a few seconds. "No. Let's give him a few

minutes. He may be a civilian.”

“Roger that.”

They held their positions, frozen in immobility. Under low light conditions, such as the dim, starlit landscape they were crossing, they would be invisible, unless they moved. Eventually, Eisner came back on the commo.

“He’s outta the way. Moving off from us now.”

Nolan checked his watch. They were just past the half way mark and making good time. He dropped back to check on Siddiqi.

“You okay, Major? Do you need more painkillers?”

“Not yet, thank you, Chief Nolan. That goat herder, would you have killed him?”

“Sure we would.”

“But he’s an innocent. He doesn’t deserve to die.”

“They never do, none of us do. We have a mission, and that’s what matters, nothing else. Who lives, who dies? That’s something to think about afterwards.”

“Even if the lives lost are your own?”

Nolan stared at him. “They often are, Major.”

They reached the outskirts of Adasabad a half hour before dawn, and the platoon made certain they were in deep cover. Their position was half mile from the town, and invisible under a camo net that was covered by a mix of branches and loose scree. Talley reported in with the secure encrypted commo while Vince Merano surveyed the town through the Leupold riflescope.

“It all looks quiet. Nothing moving. No, wait, there’re a couple of guys and a donkey. That’s it, no obvious hostile threat.”

Right at that moment, a loudspeaker clicked on, and a voice began wailing as the Muslim muezzin began the call to prayer for the faithful from a tower near the edge of town. Maybe the call was for the not so faithful too. They all had painful experiences of Islamist fighters. What separated the ragheads from regular soldiers was their willingness to kill innocent men, women, and children, for no good cause or purpose. Except to commit murder. For them, it was enough. In the West, people used demonstrations to make a political point. The Islamists used indiscriminate murder.

They all watched Major Siddiqi. He was a Muslim too, so what would his reaction be to the muezzin's call? But the Major sat quietly, making no move to fall to his knees and wave his ass in the air the way they did.

Maybe he was in too much pain, Nolan reflected. It was strange, though, that he had no reaction at all. What were his politics, his beliefs?

"Okay, men, you can get some sleep," Talley murmured quietly. They'd unstrapped the night vision equipment, and some were checking and double-checking their camo cream. Daylight was the danger time, when it was much easier for the enemy to catch sight of a threat.

When Nolan awoke it was bright sunlight. For a few moments he thought he'd had another blackout. Where the hell was he? But he realized he'd only been sleeping, a real, healthy, exhausted sleep after the hard grind of preparing for the task ahead. He got his thoughts together, and started to prepare for the mission. Some of the men had taken Afghan costume out of their packs and changed into the unfamiliar garb. The rest were still sleeping. Unsurprisingly, with the huge quantity of weapons that each man carried, they looked like any insurgent warrior, draped with weapons and ammunition belts and carriers. Maybe they carried a few

more weapons than the average Afghan fighter, and maybe those weapons were more modern than most of the locals carried, but the difference was marginal. Close up, they'd be spotted straight away, but when they got close up, it would be the kind of fighting they'd trained for, quick and silent. Lieutenant Talley, dressed as an Afghan warlord, a huge, curved knife in his belt, called the men around for a briefing.

“I want us all wearing Afghan costume, so make yourselves look as ethnic as possible. Will, you're gonna have to disguise that black face of yours.”

PO2 Bryce nodded. “I've brought a shemagh. I'll wrap that around my face. I reckon that should do it.”

“Yeah, that's good. Anyone looks too white or too black, do the same. The closer we can get to looking like these characters, the better. We'll lie up here until twilight, then we're going in.”

“What are the RoEs, Boss?” Vince Merano asked.

Nolan glanced across at him. With his dark, Mediterranean skin and Afghan pakul hat, he would almost pass for a Mujahideen almost anywhere; until he spoke in English or Spanish, his second language, and with a strong, New York accent. But it would be better if no one saw him close up. Nolan and Merano's jobs were straightforward. Find a sniper stand, and as soon as the action looked about to start, kill the enemy, starting with the commanders. Talley looked at him.

“Nothing too complicated, Vince. The town is Taliban through and through. Just bear in mind that some of the women and children will be non-combatants, although many of them won't be. Other than that, it's open season. They're all enemy fighters.”

Nolan looked at him. “You’re saying most of the women and children are Taliban?”

Talley nodded. “Yeah, they’ve learned to kill Americans almost since birth, but I guess not all of them. Some of those women are reputedly training for suicide missions, some of the kids too. Use your judgment, that’s the best you can do. If they look like a threat, take ‘em out.”

Merano and Nolan swapped a glance. It was the kind of order that could lead to a world of pain afterwards when questions would be asked. They both indicated their understanding. Both knew they would shoot anybody or anything that threatened their buddies. And that included women and children, so if these Afghan civilians wanted to live, they should veer sharply away from anything that might indicate they presented a clear and present danger.

“I’m going to spend some time going over the ground with the riflescope,” Nolan grunted quietly to Merano. “I want to be sure where everything is before the shooting starts.”

“Anything I should worry about?”

“Nah, I just to be on the safe side.” He left them to find a stand on the edge of their camp where he could overlook the town. Something about the mission bothered him, and he couldn’t put his finger on it. He remembered the old adage, ‘Act in haste, repent at leisure.’ Ever since Charlie Platoon had been hit, the Brass was burning for revenge. This mission was worthy in its own right and would be some repayment for the deaths of the men of Charlie Platoon, as well as a body blow to the enemy. But in his opinion, the planning for the operation had been too quick and too neatly packaged. And there’d been too much Afghan involvement.

Maybe they were on the up and up, and maybe not. He had his own maxim, 'Revenge is a dish best sampled cold.' He pulled on his ghillie suit over the tribal robes, threaded with pieces of scrub taken from the ground around where they lay. He was invisible as he surveyed the broken ground that lay between them and Adasabad.

* * *

Major Abdul Siddiqi watched the Americans, these Navy Seals, as some moved around purposefully, preparing for war, and the others slept underneath their camouflage nets. His ankle hurt like hell, but he knew that they were right. If he'd been left behind and discovered by a Taliban warband, wearing the uniform of an Afghan National Army officer, he could have been skinned alive. He suspected they would not have shot him if he'd insisted on being left, and that the threat had been made to save his life. These were strange people. No matter how much the Afghans shot at them, bombed them, and generally did their best to drive them out of the country, they persisted in carrying out what they saw as an essential mission to save the Afghan people. So they had saved his life, despite the fact that he was leading them into a battle that they must lose, even with their obvious military prowess. He wondered where the warband would meet them and initiate a firefight that would obliterate them. It was almost a blessing from Allah when he'd hurt his ankle as he'd hoped to stay away from the engagement altogether. Now he would have to rely on the ambushers recognizing him and not shooting at him. He'd no

idea what they had planned, only that he was to make certain these troops approached the town from the south, which they had. They were infidels, certainly, but he could see they were good men. Honorable men, professional soldiers much like him, although he acknowledged their obvious superiority in all things military. Still, it was a pity they had to die in a battle that must look convincing. It was the will of Allah.

* * *

Talley checked his watch, and looked at the sky, twilight. The time when it is neither night nor day, but a confused period when vision was at its most difficult. He made a quiet call on the encrypted satellite commo.

“This is Bravo. In position.”

A short hesitation, then the voice came through loud and clear.

“Your mission is a go, Bravo.”

“Roger that. Any change to the mission brief?”

“No change. Proceed as planned.”

“Roger. Bravo out.”

He turned to the men. They were all waiting.

“That’s it, we head straight in on the track Major Siddiqi indicated. We’ll just walk straight in like we own the place.”

“I don’t like it.”

He looked at Nolan. “What don’t you like, Chief?”

“Heading straight down that track with no cover. We should approach across

the broken ground to the east, and curve into the town from the other side.”

“What’s the ground like over there?”

“It’s doable. There are a couple of goat paths that I identified. We could approach unseen.”

Siddiqi leaned forward, his expression troubled. “That is a bad idea. If we slink in, they will assume we are the enemy and open fire on us. It is essential that we go in openly, like genuine insurgents.”

Talley looked thoughtful. “You’ve got a point, Major, but so has the Chief. Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll approach out of sight, and come in from the other side. But when we’re in the town, we’ll show ourselves and walk around openly as if we do belong there, until we find the target.”

“I don’t like it,” Siddiqi muttered sulkily.

“I hear you, Major. But we’ll do things my way,” Talley replied in that quiet, firm voice that cut off all argument. “You all have the photo of Gemal Rahimi?”

They nodded.

“Do we have any ID on the bombmaker?” Vince asked.

Talley shook his head. “We’ll have to play that one by ear. No one has ever seen him, but we all know what to look for. We’ll capture a couple of the fighters and question them. We all know what kinds of questions to ask. Some of them are bound to know who he is. It’s critically important we get both of them, this Rahimi as well as the bombmaker, and send confirmation that they have both been terminated, that answer you, Vince?”

The sniper nodded. “Yeah, sure, Boss.”

“Good.”

Siddiqi felt angry, more with his own military, than the Americans. They had set up this mission, and he was more and more convinced it was ill conceived. If the Americans didn't follow the plan and go straight down the track into the town, the major firefight they'd planned on taking place wouldn't happen. There was no mistaking their hard, ruthless commitment, and competence. That wasn't his business, though. What was his business was staying alive, and if his people found out that he'd failed to persuade the Americans to attack as planned, they'd be livid with anger, and Rahimi didn't leave failure unpunished. He'd be so furious that his own life would be in serious danger. Yes, if they turned on him, he'd likely receive a bullet in the back of the neck. He began to re-evaluate his plans. It was the Afghan way to offer allegiance to both sides, and then make a final decision when the tide of battle was clearer.

“I think I know who the bombmaker may be.”

They all looked at him sharply.

“Why didn't you say anything before, Major?” Lieutenant Talley looked at him keenly. “How come you're only mentioning it at this late stage?”

Siddiqi looked at the faces staring at him. Americans were generally friendly and outgoing. But right now these men looked anything but friendly. Their faces wore expressions that he'd not seen before. Hard, cruel stares, like those he'd seen on the faces of the worst of the Taliban fighters. Yet these were like no Taliban fighter he'd ever encountered. They were hard, implacable, totally dedicated and committed to the military craft, yet oddly capable of a compassion that was unexpected. There was no sign of any compassion now. Yet he suddenly felt an emotion that he'd never thought possible. He liked these foreign warriors, and he

felt guilty that he was part of a plan that could result in their deaths. He realized they were all still staring at him and muttered an answer.

“It only just came to me. I hadn’t realized the significance of something I’d seen.”

They all nodded, but he could see they were less than satisfied with his weak answer.

“Describe him to us, Major,” Lieutenant Talley murmured icily. The Lieutenant was armed like the rest of them, he carried his HK 416 assault rifle and a Sig Sauer P226 tucked into his belt. He held the rifle loosely, but he’d turned towards Siddiqi, and the body language was eloquent, as was the implied threat.

Siddiqi took a breath. He’d never read the bible and knew nothing of Jesus’ disciples, or the events that led up to the capture and crucifixion of Christ. If he had, he would know how closely his own character resembled that of Judas. He now had to betray his own side, not for thirty pieces of silver, but to save his life. He had to help the Americans succeed with this operation, and kill those men who would surely swear revenge when he failed to carry out his side of the Rahimi’s plan. He looked back at them and tried hard to meet the suspicious gazes.

“It is not a him, it is a her. A woman. Her name is Gulpari Hotaki, but I do not know what she looks like. She always wears a blue burqa. I am told this is a mark of her dedication to the faith.”

“How will we recognize her?” Vince Merano asked quietly. For him, target recognition was a priority.

“She is very tall, as tall as some men.”

Vince sighed. “So let’s get this straight. If we see a tall person in a blue burqa,

the target is a go. Am I right, Boss?”

Talley nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, I guess so. Yeah, if you see a woman answering that description and who looks a threat, kill her, or any other woman who is showing interest in military ordnance. You okay with that, men?”

They all nodded.

“Right. Let’s get the show on the road. Chief, you and PO Merano can give us cover, usual formation, leapfrog behind us so that we’re always covered by at least one sniper. When you get inside the town, both of you find a stand someplace near the center and look for targets. The rest of us will split up into four teams of four and take out as many hostiles as possible. We need to hit them before they know we’re there, so keep the noise down. And remember, the main targets are Rahimi and this tall woman, this bombmaker, Hotaki. ”

He pointed to the tower from which the muezzin had called the faithful to prayer that morning. “That’s our rally point. It’s close to the edge of town. If everything goes to plan, we can withdraw from there in cover and call in the slicks. And if we hit problems, it’s a good defensive position. Any questions before we go in?”

There were none. “Okay, let’s go.”

Merano watched them leave and thread their way along the narrow goat path. He looked around at his partner, Nolan.

“Kyle? Kyle! What the fuck’s up? You okay?”

Nolan abruptly regained consciousness.

Where the hell had he been? Christ, not again!

“Yeah, I’m okay. Why?”

Vince looked at him, unconvinced. “You need to move out.”

The light was bad, and they did look exactly like an insurgent battle formation. There was nothing to suggest otherwise. The snipers had removed their camouflage ghillie suits and were dressed like the others, in Afghan tribal dress. Talley had positioned the Afghan Major in the center of the line again so that he was boxed in. Nolan wondered about that Major, as they all did. Was he a spy, or was he on the level? They'd soon know when they reached the town and found whether the enemy was lying in wait for anyone coming along the main trail. He got to his feet, feeling his legs wobble slightly.

“Yeah, I’ll get going now, Vince. See those rocks, about one hundred yards ahead? I’ll hit the dirt there. Give me a half minute and then come forward.”

“Hear you.”

He went forward. The going was not too hard where centuries of sure-footed goats had carved a trail through the hillside. When he reached the rocks, he settled behind a large boulder, sighted his rifle, and waited. Two minutes later, Vince slid down beside him. He was about to take his eye off the scope when a tiny movement caught his eye. Down near the track, close to the town. There was a dark stain on the earth, evidence of a gully of some sort. Yes, the movement had come from there. He stared again, but there was nothing now, an animal of some sort? Maybe a boy and a girl from the town, out for a bit of fun away from the prying gaze and religious vengeance of the Taliban, or the enemy? He turned to Merano.

“Vince, over there, about two hundred yards from the town. There’s a gully. Got it.”

He heard the rustle of cloth as his partner adjusted his position.

“Yeah, I see it.”

“I thought I saw movement. Nothing now, but keep an eye on it. I’ll go forward another hundred yards.”

“Roger that.”

He got up and went forward again. When he reached some cover, a broken stone wall that once had demarcated a farmer’s field, the crops long destroyed, he sighted again. The platoon had almost reached the town, and he realized they were lagging behind. He glanced at the gully again through his scope, but it was devoid of any movement. Vince came up again and dropped down.

“We’ve fallen behind, so I’m doing the next four hundred yards in one go. Watch that gully.”

“Roger that, Chief.”

He went at a fast jog along the narrow path until he reached a point on a rise just short of the town. He could see clearly the platoon deployed just outside the town. They were crouched behind the wall of one of the larger houses. His earpiece clicked.

“Chief, we’re in position to go in. How does it look?”

Nolan thought about that dark scar on the ground, perhaps three hundred yards from their position. It could be nothing, a stray goat, a pair of terrified lovers, or a warband in company strength. He had to make a call.

“Suspicious area three hundred yards to your north west. Could be nothing, but I can’t be sure.”

“Okay. You and Merano, can you cover it from the tower?”

He looked up. “No problem.”

“Right. Go straight in. We’ll rally on you when we’re done.”

The Lieutenant clicked off. Nolan called for Merano.

“Vince, we’re going straight to the tower to cover them from there. Any more movement?”

“All clear. I’m on the way.”

He reached the tower and crouched next to a door that he tried and found to be locked. The tower jutted up from a stone built complex, part of which was clearly a mosque. He saw Vince approaching as he looked through his PNVG equipment. A few minutes later, his fellow sniper came up next to him.

“How do we get into this place?”

Nolan nodded at the heavy wooden door. “This looks like the entrance. I tried it, but it’s locked.”

Vince grinned and fished inside a small pouch fixed to his belt. He took out a set of picks and started work. Less than a minute later, the door swung open, and they started up the stone stairs, careful to keep the noise to a minimum. When they reached the top, they were in what would have been a bell tower in a Christian church. But here there was room for the muezzin, a tin loudspeaker and a microphone for him to use for the call to prayer, plugged into a battered old weatherproof amplifier. They deployed their rifles, the sophisticated MK11 Sniper Weapon Systems. The rifles had been heavy to carry, but now they would come into their element. With the QD sound suppressors, the twenty round box magazines would enable them to keep up a rapid, yet almost silent rate of deadly accurate fire.

“I’ll cover that gully, Vince. You look after the town,” Nolan murmured quietly.

“I’m on it.”

The platoon had disappeared, merging with the normal evening life of Adasabad. A few people could be seen moving around the dark streets. They were all men, and all armed, most with the Kalashnikov AK-47 or the Chinese clone, the Type 56 rifle. A couple of men carried RPGs mounted on their shoulders. There was little noise, no shouts, and no drunken outbursts. They knew that Muslims drank alcohol when it suited them, but so far there was no evidence of it here. Probably the supplies hadn't reached town. There were only quiet groups of men walking along, talking quietly, some illuminated by the oil lamps that a few houses had lit.

This is Taliban country, Nolan thought, so maybe there really was no alcohol, no music, and no fun. Except for the leaders, when they're out of sight of the masses, of course.

Their cruelty and sexual excesses were the stuff of legend. Nolan swiveled around to sight on the gully. Still nothing moved, yet he had an eerie, sixth sense about it. There was something there, and it wasn't two Afghan kids playing doctors and nurses. His ears picked up the distant, faint 'pop' of a silenced handgun, then another and another. The platoon had gone into action and had begun systematically destroying the Taliban. He heard the 'clunk' of Vince's rifle as he took out a target inside the town, but then he had to forget about the growing battle in the town. The gully had come alive. He saw a dark shape move over the ground, then another and another. Like shadow ghosts, they flitted across the broken ground. All headed toward the town. He blinked. He'd been reminded all of a sudden of the blackout. It was how it began, dark, shadowy shapes in his mind. But these were not in his mind. He shook his head to clear it and clicked the commo.

"Heads up, hostiles approaching the town from a position two to three hundred yards to the north west. No count yet. I'll let you know when I can see

more.”

Talley’s voice came back. “We’ll manage here, so both of you better stay on those hostiles.”

“Roger that.”

Vince had heard too. He brought his rifle over to a position a few feet away from Nolan and sighted in at the enemy outside the town. Ghostly green shapes were moving across the open space between the gully and the town, and the snipers had yet to fire. Once they started shooting, the enemy would scatter.

“Wow, there’re more than a few of those bastards looking for trouble. What’s the plan, Chief?”

“Give ‘em another fifty yards, and see how many appear. That’s close enough, and then we hit them. I’ll take the lead element. You take the rear, see if we can stop them splitting up.”

“Ready when you are.”

They watched and waited. The night vision equipment made it possible to see everything, in strange, almost surreal shades of green. When Nolan estimated they were all out in the open, he made a rapid count and called up Talley.

“I make it thirty or thereabouts, Boss. Opening fire inside five seconds.”

“Roger.”

The enemy reached a high point on open ground about one hundred and fifty yards from the town. Nolan squeezed the trigger, sighting on a man who was the obvious leader. He carried a map case, and in a country where most could not even read, let alone use a map, it was a giveaway. There was a soft ‘clunk’, and the man pitched forward. Immediately, Nolan continued the business he was trained for.

His breathing controlled, he sighted and fired on the inhale and exhale, a machine-like rhythm. He'd knocked down eight men before they fully realized what was happening to them, and Vince had killed a similar number at the rear of the column. Then all hell broke loose. These were no greenhorns, and when they knew something was wrong, they immediately went to ground and started searching for the source of the incoming fire. No suppressor is one hundred percent perfect, and the QD was only designed to eliminate sound. Everything possible had been done to suppress the muzzle flash on the SWS, but still there was a slight giveaway pinpoint of light every time the weapon fired. The enemy noted their position, and now it was time for the snipers to start taking the heat. Shots clipped the stonework of the ancient tower, sending slivers of brickwork ricocheting around their heads. Worst of all, the shooting was like claps of thunder, and every shot an announcement to the hostiles inside the town that the enemy had arrived. The Americans were here! Nolan sighted on a missile shooter that popped his head up, but just as he fired, a bullet hit the stonework right next to his eyes, causing him to blink and ruin his aim. When his vision cleared, it was in time to see the flash as the rocket ignited.

“Incoming RPG, take cover!”

They both dived down low as the rocket bored in toward them. It ignited on the floor below, causing the tower to shake with the tremendous blast. Both men looked down at a crack that had appeared in the floor of the tower.

“Keep shooting,” Nolan murmured to his partner. “There’s plenty more of them. We have to keep them out of the town and away from the platoon.”

They picked off the last of the visible targets and left eight more bodies on the

rocky wasteland outside Adasabad. In the streets below, they could hear the beginnings of a major firefight as the platoon finally ran into a fully alerted enemy. And worse, the incoming warband had disappeared from sight, and their tower had ceased to be a target, for now. Evidently, they'd found a way to get into the town out of sight of the shooters in the tower.

"We're done here," Nolan called across to his partner. "Let's get down and join the party."

"Suits me, I think this place is about to go," Merano called back.

An ominous 'crack' announced the widening of the gap in the floor, and they felt the building start to sway.

"Get out, now!" Nolan shouted.

They almost fell down the stairs and through the solid wood door at the base. Out in the street, they were immediately plunged into a wild firefight. Dan Mosely and Will Bryce whirled as they ran out but held their fire when they recognized their own men.

"The Boss is in trouble," Will shouted. "Last we saw they were pinned down by a strong group of ragheads."

"We'd better go help them," Nolan replied. "Lead the way in. Any casualties yet?"

He asked the question casually, but it was what they dreaded, under fire, behind enemy lines, and facing overwhelming force. And they had an unbroken rule; everyone had to get home, dead or alive!

"So far so good, but it can't hold, we've got a real live one here."

Will Bryce fired a single shot just as a man came out of a doorway, carrying an

AK-47. He was thrown back. They ignored the body and ran on.

“What about Rahimi and the woman, the bombmaker? We need to locate them and take them out, otherwise the mission’s a bust.”

“No sign of either of them, but me and the guys are still looking.”

Nolan grunted an acknowledgment and ran on into the middle of a furious firefight. As they turned a corner, they came across Dave Eisner and Zeke Murray crouched behind an old truck, firing on a group of hostiles who were shooting at them from the cover of a low, garden wall. The air was filled with the noise of gunfire, bullets going every which way, and they crouched down with their buddies.

“What’s the problem? Why hasn’t someone taken them out with a grenade?”

Nolan shouted over the noise.

“The guys with the launchers are back with the Lt,” Zeke answered. “It’s too far to throw. We could try and get around the back of them.”

He nodded. “Okay, you do that. I’ll stay with Vince and work at them from here. But we need to hurry, there’re more hostiles on the way.”

“I hear you, Chief. Let’s go, men, we’ll circle behind them.”

The two snipers set up a stand and watched through the night scopes as Eisner and Murray ducked behind a stone hut, disappearing as they wormed their way towards the shooters. Nolan thanked their lucky stars that the ragheads had so far not been able to utilize night vision devices, although some had been put to use against the ISAF forces. He saw a head rise above the garden wall and picked him off, seeing the head snap back as the 7.62mm bullet hammered into the skull. A hand came up, reaching for something the man had left on the wall, and Vince

drilled a neat hole through it. That would stop the man from firing a gun for several months. They fired off more shots, but it was to keep the enemy occupied while Dave and Zeke got into position. Then the wall erupted in a chaos of smoke and broken stone. The Seals had got close enough and thrown in grenades. Two more explosions erupted, sending more smoke and debris up into the air, and the sounds of battle in the small part of the town rose to a crescendo of screams and shouts. A large portion of the wall was down. Nolan nodded to Merano.

“Let’s go, we need to finish them and move on.”

They jumped up and ran forward, pulling out their Sig Sauer P226s on the run. This would be close-in action. It was no place for a long rifle. Dave and Zeke were already there amongst the survivors, finishing off the last of the resistance with single shots from their HKs.

“You done? We need to push on a find the Boss,” Nolan snapped out as he looked around for any more targets. But there were none.

“Yeah, all finished here.”

“Right, let’s go.”

The Seals ran towards the sound of the shooting. Lieutenant Talley was hunkered down inside a stone building, some sort of a merchant’s store; sacks of grain and dry goods were piled everywhere. The Seals were firing out of the small windows, which made perfect firing slots. Talley looked up as they ran in.

“Have you seen Major Siddiqi, Chief?”

Nolan shook his head. “Not since the attack started.”

“He was sheltering behind the well just off the main square when the firing got bad. A group of insurgents moved in, and we had to pull back, but they were all

around his twenty. I'm worried he may have been taken prisoner. The poor bastard."

The two snipers stared at him. Vince replied. "Or he's gone over to them."

"No, I don't believe that. You know that all of these Afghans play both sides against the middle, and Siddiqi's no different from the norm. But these people will give him a hard time. We have to assume he's a prisoner, but we've got more problems. Creech sent over an unarmed Predator drone. They've sent a message that a further force of fighters, about fifty or sixty men, is on the way here. They're due to arrive shortly."

The Predator drone was an invaluable reconnaissance platform. The General Atomics MQ-1 Predator was used primarily by the United States Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency. Designed in the 1990s for reconnaissance and forward observation roles, the Predator carried cameras and other sensors. Some had been retrofitted with armament, but sadly not this one. Powered by a Rotax engine and driven by a propeller, the Predator could fly up to 400 nautical miles, loiter overhead for fourteen hours, and then return to its base. Armament could be useful at times like this, but it reduced the TOT, the Time Over Target.

"How shortly?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"Shit."

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly, Chief. We need to pull out of here."

"No luck with Rahimi or the bombmaker?"

"No, no sign of them. We'll need to regroup and try again. But not now, we don't want to have to fight a pitched battle."

“Any chance of them sending a Reaper to help us out?” Merano asked him.

The MQ-9 Reaper was the more modern armed variant of the unmanned drones. A 950 horsepower turboprop, giving it a maximum speed of about 260 knots and a cruising speed of 150-170 knots, powered the aircraft. The MQ-9 could be, and normally was, armed with a variety of weaponry, including Hellfire missiles and 500-lb laser-guided bomb units.

“Not tonight. They say there’s nothing in the area, and nothing they can get in the air soon enough to help out. We’re on our own, so we’ll pull out and work out a new plan.”

“That won’t be easy now that they know we’re here,” Brad Rose grumbled.

“That’s why they send in Navy Seals, Brad,” Talley told him grimly. “The others do the easy stuff. We do the impossible. Now let’s get out of here.”

Two of the men surveyed the area behind the grain store and pronounced it clear.

“Carl, you and Brad use the M320s, and give us some cover while we pull out,” Talley ordered.

“Smoke grenades, Boss?” Rose looked surprised.

“No way, high explosive. I want as many as possible dead, not temporarily blinded. Give them four rounds apiece. The rest of you put some lead in there, and give them something to occupy their minds. As soon as the last grenade explodes, we’re out of here.”

The two Seals loaded the first two grenades, pointed and fired. M320 Grenade Launcher Module was the US military's new single-shot 40 mm grenade launcher system. The grenades sailed unerringly towards the target, and before they

exploded, Winters and Rose had reloaded and fired two more grenades. The enemy defenses crumpled into rubble, and the snipers were able to go to work, blasting at the confused and demoralized Afghans as the Seals made their run to a new defensive position. The rest of the Seals poured on the gunfire, and the hostiles took serious casualties from the intense fire before they were able to run for cover. Talley jumped up as the last grenade left the launcher.

“That’s it, we’ll head back to the tower, or what’s left of it, and exfiltrate along that goat path. Move!”

They ran, their legs pumping as they literally sprinted out of the center of town, away from the battle to their first destination. When they reached it, the tower had indeed completely collapsed. Talley urged them on.

“Keep going. Snipers, give us cover, and fall back behind us when it’s clear.”

“Roger that.”

“I’ll take the first stand,” Nolan shouted, dropping behind a rock barely large enough to use for cover.

He watched the town, but so far their rapid exit had taken the enemy by surprise. He looked around and saw that Vince had gone to ground, and he stood up and ran back. They leapfrogged behind the platoon, giving it cover from any pursuit, but there was none. Finally, they reached the position where Talley had decided to pitch camp, three miles out from Adasabad. It was far enough away not to attract attention, but near enough to spy on the town. The camp was a shallow cave in the side of a low range of hills. The cave was just a small, dark, jagged opening, set into the broken rock and dirt of the hillside, about three feet high and four feet wide. It went into the hillside to a depth of about twelve feet, which was

enough to shelter them while they regrouped. Nolan clambered through the entrance and sat down. Already the men were checking their guns and equipment. He sighted his scope on the main track that led to the town. A large group of insurgents was running along it at a fast pace to join the fight for the town, unaware that it was over, for the time being.

“Chief, we need to prep for the next stage. Chief, are you okay?”

Nolan glanced around as Talley spoke to him. He realized he’d lost it, yet again.

Dear Christ! Not now, not here.

“Kyle, you were out of it just then, what happened? It was like you were having one of those blackouts. What’s going on?”

“I’m alright, no problem. What were you saying, what stage is that, Boss?”

“Hold it down, Chief. I’ll maintain a temporary base here while Vince locates a stand from where he can take out targets of opportunity.”

“Right. And me?”

“I want you volunteer to lead a small team to locate Siddiqi and bring him back. That’s if you’re okay.”

Nolan stared at him. “I’m fine, but you’re not serious? We don’t even know yet that the bastard wasn’t double-crossing us.”

“Even more reason go and get him back. He’d be a rich source of intelligence. But if he is on the level, you know our rules. We never leave one of our own. You know that, Kyle.”

Nolan glanced at him. The use of his first name again was a ploy, to make a point.

“I don’t know, Boss. We could get hit badly and come out with nothing. It’s

not a good one.”

“I’ve established contact with Creech, direct. They’re putting a pair of Reapers into the area. You’ll have plenty of support to hit these bastards. Think about it, it’s,” he looked at his wristwatch, “it’s coming up to twenty three hundred. If you think it’s a go, you’ll need to move out at zero two hundred.”

“Back to Adasabad.”

“Yes, back to Adasabad.”

Nolan turned away. He had to convince Talley that it was crazy. If it was one of their own, sure, but Siddiqi? No way.

And if he has gone over to the other side, he won't be giving any intelligence to anyone, I'll rip the fucker's throat out.

Chapter Four

They were dozing when the noise of someone approaching brought them to full alert. Will Bryce was on sentry duty, and he put his head inside the cave.

“Heads up, it’s only some old guy coming towards us from the direction of the town. He doesn’t look like a threat, but who knows? He’s about five minutes out.”

They had one thought. Suicide bomber. Why else would a lone man be heading towards a body of armed troops? And how could he even know they were there? Bryce had read their minds.

“He seems to know our exact position, but how in hell he found our twenty, I’ve no idea.”

Will went back outside, and they crawled out of the entrance and fixed the

approaching figure with their night vision goggles. He walked straight to their position, right up to the cave entrance, and stopped.

“My name is Abraham Dur. I watched you come here after the battle in the town and followed you. I am here to help.”

They gaped at him. Dur was short, almost tiny. In a country where men were shorter than Americans, he was exceptionally short, maybe five feet tall. And incredibly old, the men thought he had to be at least eighty. Which in this country meant that he was probably in his forties. When he spoke, he showed a pair of gums; he'd lost all of his teeth. He was dressed traditionally in Afghan costume and a pakul hat, much like they were, except that his clothes were little more than rags displaying the evidence of frequent repair. His lined face and leathery skin were shriveled, and his sunken cheeks were a marked contrast to the piercing, blue hawk eyes. Eyes that watched them and weighed up what they saw. Old he may have been, but he was no fool.

“You couldn't have followed us,” Talley snapped back. Then he realized something even stranger; the man was speaking fluent English.

“What's going on, Mr. Dur? What do you want?”

“I want you Americans soldiers to help me. My granddaughter is held prisoner inside the town. I would like you to rescue her.”

Nolan smiled inwardly as he watched Talley try to make sense of this development. The poor old guy was trying to save his family. Then his smile faded. If the guy wasn't on the level, and if he presented a threat, he would need to be dealt with. Best not to get too sentimental.

If he gives me the order to cap him, I'll have to put bullet in his brain. It wouldn't be the first time.

“I’m sorry about your granddaughter, Mr. Dur,” Talley continued. “But we’re fully occupied with our own problems. Maybe you’d better come inside the cave and explain yourself.”

Because if we don’t like what we hear, buddy, you won’t be leaving here alive.

He nodded at Eisner and Rose who’d taken up a position behind the man to stop him fleeing. They expertly searched him for weapons and herded him to the cave entrance where he went inside. He was so short that unlike them, he didn’t need to duck through the entrance. They followed him in. He sat cross-legged on the ground and waited. The man looked very frail, and yet maybe he had something about him; a second inspection suggested that he had a certain dignity, and more importantly, some steel in his backbone. And something else, something that was more than the vulnerable exterior revealed. This was no fool. Talley sighed.

“Okay, what’s the story? First of all, how did you follow us out here?”

The man shrugged. “It was not difficult. I have lived here all my life, and apart from the main track that comes into the town, there are only four or five paths that you could have used. I left through the cave system underneath the town. It surfaces about a mile back from here.”

The men exchanged glances. This was interesting.

“Would you like something to drink?”

He looked at Nolan and grinned, showing pink gums where his teeth had once been.

“That would be most gracious, thank you.”

One of the men passed him a flask of water, and he drank heavily.

“Thank you. You wish to know how I can speak your language? That is easy. I worked as a translator for the Soviets when they were here. I spoke Russian because of relations I have in Tajikistan. They sent me to Moscow where I learned English so that I could be of use to them with interrogations of CIA spies. They expected the Americans to invade and take up arms on behalf of the Mujahideen, but of course, they were beaten before that was possible.”

“We never intended to invade,” Talley said, with a trace of irritation. “That’s just a load of Soviet crap.”

Dur shrugged. “Maybe so, but they thought it was so. Or at least, some of them did. But you want to know why I have come to you tonight. My granddaughter, Najela, she is only fourteen years old. When the town mayor knew that he would have an important guest, he took her from her family to be given to this man as a gift.”

“Would the guest be Gemal Rahimi?” Talley stared at him, unsure of how to deal with the unexpected arrival of the elderly Afghan.

Dur inclined his head. “That is him, yes. He has already arrived in the town, and my granddaughter will be presented to him this evening. I want you to rescue her for me. Although they will be on the alert after your failed attack.”

The men glanced at each other. The old guy didn’t pull any punches.

Talley ordered Eisner and Rose to watch him while he went outside the cave to talk with the men. He looked at Nolan.

“What’s your opinion, Chief?”

“We could use that info on the cave system he mentioned. It may be the only real way to get back inside the town and complete the mission. They probably

won't be expecting us, although they'll still be watching. My guess is they'll assume we're long gone."

"Yeah, that's my thinking, we could sure use that underground approach if he's on the level. Have you thought about Siddiqi? I won't make it an order, but I'm not happy to leave him to be butchered."

Nolan thought fast. In truth, it was unpleasant to even consider leaving the Major, unless he was a spy. But if he did have a foot in the Taliban camp, he deserved summary justice. A bullet.

"I'll take a look at it, Boss. This intel from Dur about the tunnel changes everything."

"Yeah, it sure does. So it's a go?"

Nolan nodded reluctantly. "Okay. If we go in through this cave system, we go as one group. It may be possible to roll up the whole town in one clean sweep if we can catch them with their pants down."

Talley nodded. "That's my feeling. Let's go back in and talk to Dur."

The elderly Afghan was still sat cross-legged, watched over by two Seals. Both had their Sig Sauers out, but the guns were held at their sides, not pointing directly at Dur, as if he wasn't being held under armed guard. But there wasn't a man in that cave who didn't know the truth, Dur included. Talley sat down next to him.

"We're sympathetic to your granddaughter's problem, Abraham. We may be able to help. Tell me, do you know of a woman in the town, a new arrival? She's making bombs for the insurgents."

"I know this person, Gulpari Hotaki, yes. She came in from Pakistan, and she's here to discuss a new weapon."

“A consignment of IEDs, yes, we know about those. We understand she brought the components with her. She’s there now, is she?”

“She was there this evening, so she would still be there, yes. But excuse me. She did not bring a consignment of IED components. Gulpari Hotaki was involved with the Pakistani nuclear program, and the insurgency recruited her. I understand she is here to discuss the arrangements with Rahimi for the construction of a bomb.”

There was total silence for a few moments. A couple of ‘Jesus Christ!’ and ‘Fuck that!’ expressions were murmured into the silence.

“You mean a nuclear weapon?”

“That is correct. The plan is to construct two of these weapons and then use them against the centers of opposition to the Taliban. I would guess that would be Kabul itself, and Bagram airbase just outside of Kabul. They are very proud of these new devices, there has been much talk and celebration.”

“You’re sure of this, Abraham?”

Dur nodded. “Of course. The leaders talk of nothing else but the plan to finish the war with one stroke. It is called Plan Salah ad-Din, after the great warrior Yusuf ibn Ayyub…”

“Who beat the crusaders in the Holy Land, yeah, I got it. Okay, I have to call this in. Wait there, Abraham.”

Talley used the encrypted satellite link to call the ISAF headquarters in Kabul. Within minutes, he was connected to Colonel Eugene Waverley III, an intelligence officer. The officer was less than happy to be dragged out of bed in the middle of the night.

“A nuke? Are you outta your fucking mind, Lieutenant? We’ve heard nothing about this at intelligence. Are you certain this guy isn’t feeding you a line?”

“I can’t be sure, Sir. But if I had to bet on it, I’d say the info is pretty good.”

“I see. I need to talk to some people. Can you hold your position? I’ll get back to you inside of an hour.”

“We’ll be waiting, Sir.”

Brad Rose took out a spirit burner and made tea, the traditional Afghan hospitality for visitors, and passed a mug to Dur. He sat chatting to him while the others listened, but although the old Afghan was a mine of information about the town, he knew little about Plan Salah ad-Din, other than the name. He shrugged at Brad as they asked him.

“It is pair of powerful bombs which they plan to build. That is all I know.”

“But surely it will cause tens of thousands of deaths. That’s not war, it’s mass murder.”

Abraham shrugged. “As Allah wills it. I know nothing of these things. Cannot the Americans respond with these bombs, only bigger?”

“No, Sir. That would just result in more deaths. Tell us about this cave system.”

So he did, describing the underground network of tunnels that led underneath the town.

“They were used when the Russians were here. The Mujahideen launched a great number of raids using them, and the communists never knew what hit them.” He smiled as he was talking.

“But you were on the Russian side, Abraham, a translator. You sound as if you supported the Mujahideen during the Russian occupation.”

“That is only natural. The Russians were the invaders, and the Mujahideen were defending our country.”

“But you worked for the Russians.”

Another shrug. “A financial arrangement, nothing more. I worked for the Russians, but I am an Afghan.”

“What about the Americans? Don’t you feel the same way?”

“You Americans support a President elected by the Afghan people, even if there are those who believe the election was a fraud. I support only Afghanistan. The Americans, the Taliban, I can only assess what they do for my country. If they cause damage, as did the Russians, they are my enemy. If not, well, we shall see.”

Damn, that’s a pragmatic approach if ever I heard one.

Nolan was almost grinning at the man’s refusal to give a committed answer. When the bullets start to fly, whose side would he be on? They’d only know when the shooting started.

The call came in after fifty minutes. Nolan checked his watch, and it was zero one thirty. Talley asked Carl Winters to take the Afghan civilian outside and made sure the rest of the platoon were listening in. Then he answered.

“This is Bravo.”

“I’m in a difficult position, Lieutenant. I’m not sure how to advise you.”

“What you mean, Sir.”

“I’ll spell it out for you, Lieutenant!” The Colonel’s voice was sharp and hard. “I’ve put what you said to the very top. No one is prepared to take this one on board. It’s too far-fetched, very far-fetched. You’ll have to deal with it yourself. Make the decision and go with it.”

The men stared at each other. It was hardly believable, and yet, it was

happening to them. Nolan understood straight away. This was a hot potato, too hot to handle. Someone needed to call it, one way or the other. There would need to be a confrontation, probably involving the Pakistan government, the Afghan government, and naturally the American government. The person who made the wrong call would be the one who was offered up as a sacrifice if anything went wrong. Maybe there was substance to what Abraham Dur had said, and the men of Team Bravo were sure convinced. But the bureaucrats played a different game. Watch and wait, take credit if things went well, and put the blame elsewhere if they didn't. He heard Talley speaking again.

“We'll go in and do our best to take out Rahimi and this bombmaker. That'll complete the mission we came here to do. As for the rest of it, we've identified the bombmaker as a Pakistani national, a Ms Hotaki. She worked for the Pakistan atomic energy program.” He paused, but the Colonel refused to bite. “If we pick up any intel, we'll pass it up the line, Sir. But the materials for making the bombs may not be in this town. That could present a problem, and I'd prefer to have some operational support on this one, to make sure we cover every possibility.”

“And you shall have that support, Lieutenant Talley. The Reapers are overhead, so you can call them in anytime you need them. But if you think I'm calling in a bombardment squadron of B-52s to flatten the town, or airdrop a brigade of paratroops outside the walls, you've got another think coming. Keep us posted, and let us know if you need any more advice. Out.”

“I wasn't aware he'd given any advice, the fucking chair polisher,” Zeke Murray snarled. “This mission is going downhill at a fast rate of knots. Fucking nukes, what the hell next, biological warfare?”

Talley gave him a small smile. "I agree with you, PO1. And when a mission goes bad, who do they call for? The Navy Seals."

As one man, they shouted, "Hooyah."

Talley nodded. "So let's go to work."

He called outside for Abraham Dur to come back in, leaving Winters out on sentry duty.

"Abraham, it'll be dawn in a few hours. It would be best for us to lay up here through the day and wait for the heat to die down. They'll be a little skittish after all that shooting. If you would explain this cave system to us, we'll plan an assault for tonight, when they're asleep."

"No! I will not do it."

They stared at the old Afghan.

"I don't understand," Talley said in a tone of bewilderment. "I thought you wanted us to go in there and deal with these guys, to save your granddaughter."

"That is correct, Lieutenant. But Rahimi is to take her later today. Tonight will be too late. She will be dishonored. If you will not go now to save her, I will leave you and go on my own."

"Then you'll be killed, Sir."

Dur gave him a thin-lipped smile. "If Rahimi takes my granddaughter's maidenhead, I will already be dead, dishonored, my family name dust. Tonight is too late."

Talley looked around at the men. "It could mean walking into a hornet's nest if we go in daylight."

Will Bryce looked at him. "Boss, no one but a crazy fool would try and get in

there during the day, especially after what we've just done. They'll be sore as hell."

"So you're against it?"

Bryce shook his head. "Hell, no. I'm saying it's the last thing they'd expect. Especially if the old man here can lead us through this cave system."

"We don't get down into the caves until we're much nearer the town, the entrance is about a mile from here. It means we'd have to get there before dawn, it's cutting it real fine," Nolan observed.

He moved his legs to ease the ache in his muscles, thinking about the waste of the days spent drinking and doing nothing when he should have been training. Now he was paying the price. He felt his mind wander again and jerked it back.

I hope to Christ I don't get another blackout. If it happens while we're in the middle of the assault on the town, people are gonna get killed.

He gave Talley a meaningful look. "And there's something else, Boss. We need to redefine the mission in the light of this new intel. It seems to me we have a whole heap of new objectives, would you care to spell out to us the priorities?"

"If there're fissionable materials in that town, we need to destroy them," Talley said at once. "But we need to kill Rahimi and this Hotaki witch."

Bryce stared at him. "And how the fuck would we know how to identify that kind of nuclear stuff, the 'fissionable materials' you called them? I don't recall they covered that in training, Boss."

Nolan nodded his agreement. "That's true. But it's not the materials, it's the person who puts them together we need to kill first," he pointed out. "But whatever you decide, Boss, we need it spelt out before we go in."

The Seals started to bicker about the primary mission objective. Talley held up his hand to halt the discussion.

“Now hold on there. It’s as the Chief says, we’ve got a heap of objectives here, and we need to tighten them down. What’s the number one priority? The bombmaker?”

There was a silence. Dur broke it. “If you want my help, you must make my granddaughter your first priority. Otherwise, I will go alone.”

The Lieutenant sighed and finally nodded his acceptance. “Very well, in return for your help, I’ll assign some men to go with you, Abraham. Their mission will be to rescue and safeguard the girl, Najela, and if possible, take out Rahimi.” He looked at Dur. “I assume Rahimi won’t be far away from her?”

“That is correct, Lieutenant. She is being held in the same building.”

“Okay, then, Bryce, Rose, Eisner and Mosely, that’s your task. Next, Chief Nolan is correct. The bombmaker, a nuclear physicist I guess, who builds the bomb. That’s the main target.” He looked at Nolan. “So I reckon that’s your job, Chief. Talk to Abraham and find her twenty. You know what to do, kill her. Take Zeke and Carl with you. The rest of us will take a look around for that nuclear stuff, so our best bet is to take a couple of prisoners and get them to talk to us. And all of you, remember to keep an eye out for Major Siddiqi. I want him out of there. Don’t leave him for those animals.”

Dur looked up. “If you take Taliban prisoners, I doubt they will tell you anything about the location of the bombmaking materials, Lieutenant. They hate Americans with a passionate intensity. The last thing they would do is give up any secrets.”

Talley looked cold. “You’re wrong there, Abraham. They’ll tell us what we need to know, believe me. They’ll tell us. The last thing they’ll do is die.”

There was a chilled silence in the cave as the Seals contemplated what had to be done to prevent a possible nuclear holocaust. The philosophers could endlessly debate the morality of torture as a means to an end, from the safety of their heated offices and comfortable armchairs. Navy Seals had to live in the real world. He turned and looked at Merano.

“Vince, I want you to find a stand inside the town as soon as we get in there. Make it a priority. I guess the tower’s out, now that it’s destroyed. You’ll need to do the best you can and cover us as much as possible. Make sure you have sight of our exfiltration route. We could be coming out under fire. I guess we’ll need every bit of help we can get by the time we pull out of there.”

“There’s one thing more, Boss,” Nolan murmured. “The main force. Who’s going to take care of them? We each have target specifics, but there are a lot of hostiles in that town, and they’ll need to be contained if we’re to achieve our objectives.”

“Yeah, I know that, Chief. I’m calling in the Reapers. We’re humping a couple of LTDs. I’ll arrange for my group to paint the hostiles. The Reapers can do the rest.”

LTDs, laser target designators, were used by Special Forces to call in air strikes. These man-portable devices fired a laser beam at the target, causing a reflection that a suitably equipped aircraft or in this case, UAV, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, could detect. Bouncing the beam off a target was known as 'painting the target'. The Reapers would do the rest.

“Vince, are you carrying an LTD?” he asked Merano.

The sniper nodded. “In my backpack.”

“Good. The Reapers give us a lot of firepower. They’re sure to have a few missiles up the spout when we’re exfiltrating. I want you to direct them onto anyone that seems to be coming after us. If it’s hot, I’d sure like to think we had a couple of Hellfires on our side.”

“You got it, Boss. I’ll set it up as soon as I reach the stand.”

“Good.” He looked around for Kyle Nolan.

“Chief, I’d guess you ought to take the first two groups in. We’ll watch your back and follow you in. Zeke, make sure you guard Abraham well. We need him. You know what to do.”

“What about the timing of this op?” Murray asked. “What did you have in mind?”

Talley looked uneasy, but he managed a small smile. “That one’s easy. When the Reapers hit, finish up and get out fast. The same goes for you, everyone, including you, Chief. Believe me, we’ll be right with you.”

Nolan nodded as he got to his feet and shouldered his MK11 Sniper Weapon System. It wasn’t the perfect weapon for the kind of fighting they were about to engage in, but Seals didn’t carry cartloads of ordnance to choose from. Their specialty was improvisation. And if he did need something more along the lines of an assault rifle, he’d soon arrange for a donation from one of the hostiles inside Adasabad.

“Copy that, Boss. Okay, let’s go. Abraham, would you care to show us where these caves are?”

The Afghan stood. “The path leads to the east of this hill, and we will be able to approach the town out of sight.”

He walked away, and the men followed him. The Afghan nimbly made his way off the hillside and across the broken, rubble-strewn ground, as easily as if it was a sidewalk back home. Nolan walked right behind him, carrying his Sig Sauer with the suppressor in his hand, pointed downwards. But there was a bullet chambered ready, and the safety was off. They assumed Abraham Dur was okay, but you never knew.

“Your officer, he does not seem happy,” Dur said after they’d covered the first few hundred yards.

“He’s okay,” Nolan grunted.

“I think not. He does not believe this operation will go well.”

That made Kyle think for a few moments, and he chuckled at Abraham.

“You’re pretty observant for an old guy, Mr. Dur. I’m not sure you’re right. We’re trained for this kind of stuff, and it generally pans out well. I guess the problem is that there are so many objectives, and it’s hard to plan for every eventuality.”

“My granddaughter must come first.”

“Yeah, we got that bit.”

“Will Lieutenant Talley keep his word?”

“He’s a Navy Seal, Mr. Dur. He’ll do as he said.”

They lapsed into silence and continued walking silently along the path. They’d dropped into a deep cut in the ground, probably an ancient watercourse in the days when Afghanistan was more fertile, and the natives were preoccupied with growing crops than fighting wars against foreign invaders. They made rapid progress across the ground and soon came to a narrow crack in the rock at the end

of the gully. It was barely a foot wide.

“This is it?” Zeke exclaimed. “Are you sure it’s the right place?”

Dur grinned. “I’m sure. There was an earthquake, many years ago. When the ground stopped shaking, this opening had appeared. Some children who were braver than the others went in and followed it through. They found that it led to an ancient water system that used to feed the city, actually a series of tunnels.”

“Right, we’d better strip off our equipment and squeeze through, it’s the only way,” Nolan told them. “Let’s get to it.”

They stripped off their gear, wormed their way through the opening, and they were inside the cave system. They switched on their flashlights and were relieved to see that the system opened out into a useable tunnel high enough to walk through without stooping.

“Turn off the lights,” Nolan ordered. “We’ll use our night vision gear. We don’t want to warn them we’re coming.”

Dur watched while they pulled on the goggles and strapped on their gear. Dur led off again. He seemed to have his own night vision system, or maybe he just knew every bump and turn inside the tunnels. Nolan and the other two men followed him.

“Do you enjoy what you do?” the old man asked.

The Chief almost tripped in surprise. “What kind of a question is that?”

“I asked because I sense a great sadness in you. As if you do not like what you do.”

Nolan recalled the time he’d learned of Grace’s death. “I like what I do, Abraham. I’ve just had a few problems lately.”

“It is the will of Allah, Mr. Nolan. I have also noticed that sometimes you appear to be a long way away, almost as if you are in a trance. It is because of the sadness, I have no doubt.”

Jesus, it's still happening, even this old guy noticed! I need to watch myself.

But the old guy meant well.

“It's Kyle.”

Dur nodded. “Kyle. You know that these things happen for a reason that is often incomprehensible to us mere men. It is God's plan for us.”

For some reason, Nolan found himself irritated by the man's assumption.

“It was the will of a bunch of drug dealers, Abraham. My wife was killed during a turf war between Mexicans and Afghans, fighting for control of the Californian drugs trade.”

He thought of Grace, his wife, mother of his kids.

The bastards killed the mother of my kids. When this is over, I'll make them pay. That won't be the will of Allah. It'll be the will of Kyle Nolan!

“Did you find the men who did it?”

“Not yet, no. But I will.”

Dur chuckled. “So it is here in Afghanistan, the blood feud. You will hunt these men down and kill them?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Good.”

They walked on through the tunnels, and Dur continued chatting about Afghanistan, and the blood feud.

“We believe that revenge is honorable, my friend. We have a saying, ‘He who cannot revenge himself is weak. He who will not is contemptible’. For if you do not

revenge yourself on the man who has wronged you, why would he not commit the same act again, if he has nothing to lose?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it all in hand, Abraham.”

“That is good. You say it was an Afghan who was involved?”

“That’s right. Mohammed Gul. He’s a big wheel in the drugs trade.”

“But I know this Gul. If it is the same man, he has vast holdings of poppy fields in the west of the country, near the Iran border. He is very, very rich. Gul is always trying to recruit young men from all over the country to work for him, as soldiers, couriers, even farmers. Do you plan to kill him?”

“Yes, I do. I’m sorry, I guess I’ll put a lot of Afghans out of work.”

“It is not the kind of work they need, my friend. The wages he pays them are not welcome. Drugs and death, which is all they will see for their efforts. I will not weep when he is dead.”

Nolan didn’t reply. Since Grace’s death, there’d been that black void in his heart; in the place where before he’d felt the normal human emotions, love, hate, happiness, fear, whatever. Now he didn’t feel anything, and he knew that the killing of Gul would not put things back the way they were. But it was one important step on the road to recovery, and he had two kids who needed him to travel that road and discover their father again. For some strange reason, he thought again of Detective Carol Summers. How did she deal with the death of her husband? But thinking of her made him feel he was disloyal to Grace’s memory. Maybe there’d be time later to consider Carol Summers. She sure was pretty.

“I can help you, if you wish.”

Kyle kept walking. He almost laughed to himself, although he wouldn’t

humiliate this old man by openly smiling at his words.

“I’ll deal with him myself, in my own way, Abraham. But thanks for the offer.”

Dur was silent for a few paces. Then he stopped, and they almost bumped into him. He stared at Nolan.

“If we survive this affair in the town, I may be able to help you find where this Mohammed Gul is, and you can kill him. We will talk again after this is over. But I would ask a favor.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“Gemal Rahimi. If we find him before the others, I want him for myself.”

Nolan shivered slightly. He didn’t want to speculate on what Dur had planned for the Taliban commander. “We’ve got a job to do, Abraham, to find the bombmaker. But yeah, if we do run into him, he’s yours.”

Someone needs to cap the guy, and if Dur wants to do it, that’s not a problem.

“Good. I wish to make a very special death for Rahimi.”

Nolan didn’t reply. He noticed that a chill atmosphere had spread to the other two men. Cruelty and brutality were sometimes tools of their trade, to be used only when necessary. But they all knew what the elderly Afghan planned would be something entirely different. Zeke Murray murmured, “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Chapter Five

The end of the tunnel loomed in front of them, and light spilled into the rocky cave from a flickering lantern set in a room overhead. There was a hole in the roof and an old, rotting ladder led upwards.

“We may as well take off the night vision gear. We won’t need it now,” Nolan muttered quietly. “Where are we?”

Dur smiled. “This is my home, up there and through that opening. This hole appeared when the earthquake hit. There were other openings to the tunnel system, too, but I told no one of this. We have a saying, ‘Give up the smallest part of a secret, and the rest is no longer in your power’.”

“You seem to have a saying for most things,” Carl Winters grinned.

Dur nodded. “It can be difficult to survive in this country, where so many have tried to kill or enslave us. We think of these maxims as a set of rules to live by.”

“Do they work?”

Dur grinned. “Only sometimes.”

They climbed the ladder and found themselves in a large room, dimly lit by the light of a rusty oil lantern. The glass was broken, and the breeze made the flame dance around inside. The three Seals ran to the bare windows and looked out. It was early dawn, and they were at the end of a narrow, beaten earth street of about twenty stone houses. They could see the town square at the end of the row of houses, a ghostly display in the chill dawn.

“We’re near the center of the town?”

Dur nodded. “Yes. Gulpari Hotaki is in a house at the end of this street. Do you see the building next to the square?”

They all nodded. It was larger than the rest of the houses.

“It is the Mayor’s residence. She is the guest of honor.”

“Okay, we’ll take it from here. Weapons check, let’s get ready to rock and roll. As soon as the others come up, we’ll move out and take this witch out.”

They checked their rifles, taking out the clips, inspecting the loads, and snapping them back in. They all carried the Sig Sauer P226 automatic with sound suppressors, and apart from Nolan, Heckler and Koch HK416 assault rifles fitted with flash suppressors. They also carried grenades and fighting knives. They looked down as the rest of the platoon started ascending the ladder. When they were assembled in the room, Nolan and Talley went over the plan for the assault again. Talley nodded and looked at Dur.

“What about your granddaughter, Najela?”

“There is a similar house to the Mayor’s residence at the opposite side of the square. She will be in there.”

“And Rahimi?”

“He should be there too, waiting for his reward. Most of his fighters will be quartered in the market. It is a covered area to the west of the town, four hundred yards from the square.”

“Got it.”

Talley got on the encrypted comms, and they patched him through to Creech. He told them exactly what he wanted.

“We’ll light up the targets for you, so far we have one definite. There’ll be others, and we’ll call them in as they appear. Give me a few seconds. I’ll have the first coordinates ready for you. We’ve got a situation here. There’re a lot of hostiles in this town, so when you start shooting, keep hitting them until you’re sure they’re

destroyed.”

He called up Vince Merano. “This is Talley. There’s a large market building to the west of the town, about four hundred yards from the square. Can you see it from your position?”

There was a brief pause, and then Merano came back. “Yeah, I have the target in sight.”

“Can you patch through direct to Creech? Light it up, and then keep an eye on the way things develop. They’ll have their birds circling the town. As soon as the shooting starts, give them the order to shoot. They can take out the market building first, then hand them targets of opportunity as they arise. If we need anything else taken out, we’ll go through you, so you’re our main point of contact.”

“Roger that.”

Talley had a last look around. They were still wearing their Afghan dress, and during the night hours may, just may, have passed as locals. It was early dawn, and the light was still poor. Providing anyone who came across them was myopic or had been drinking heavily, they may pass muster. He reminded them that these Taliban types did not drink alcohol, not officially, anyway, so they couldn’t count on the enemy being drunk. But they smoked opium, and it was cheap and plentiful. He looked at the faces of the Seals and grinned.

“Let’s hope they’ve all been smoking their product. I still reckon we look like a bunch of Navy Seals in drag. Best to try and keep out of sight.”

They smiled at the comment. There was a certain tension in the way they held themselves. Yet the tension was purely physical, it was a way of psyching up their bodies ready for action, getting the adrenaline flowing. Their expressions were

anything but tense; they were relaxed, even serene. This was what they'd trained for, what they'd sweat blood for. Brad Rose grinned as he summed it up for all of them.

"This is better than surfing."

"Hooyah!"

Talley nodded at Nolan. "You go first, Chief. Good luck."

"Yeah, we'll see you at the rendezvous point."

Nolan stepped out into the street, and Dur was alongside him. Carl Winters brought up the rear. As they walked forward, they chatted quietly, trying to appear normal, at least, at a distance.

"Can you really help me find Mohammed Gul, Abraham?" the Chief asked.

The old man smiled. "Ah, you can smell the sweet fragrance of revenge, Kyle. Yes, I will do my best. I believe he travels a great deal, inside Afghanistan and to America. I even have a cousin who works for his organization. When the time comes, if Najela is safe, and if we survive this day, I will lead you to him."

"How can you accept a member of your family working for someone you know has brought such misery to the people in this country?"

Dur laughed. "You do not know my country at all, do you, Kyle? We are a nation constantly beset with enemies, both from inside and outside. It has been so for many centuries. If you are to survive inside Afghanistan, you must have influence in all camps. That is our way, and always has been."

"You mean you have family inside the Taliban?"

"Of course I have," he grinned. "Before the split between the tribes of the Northern Alliance, I fought and shed blood for the people who would become the

Taliban. At one time, I was in line for a post in the government when they took power after the Soviet withdrawal.”

“What happened?”

Dur pulled a wry face. “The Taliban happened. They brought in their strict interpretation of Sharia law, even though many Muslim leaders were critical of their strict interpretation of Islamic law. They were brutal towards the women, too. Their repression went too far, much too far, and after I made my views clear, I left the movement. If I had stayed, they would have killed me. I have often wondered why they let me live, knowing how I disagreed with them.”

They walked on, Nolan wondering how anyone could survive such a crazy and precarious lifestyle as was required in this country. He jumped as Dur put a hand on his arm, where had he been? He’d been drifting.

Dear Christ, not now! Stay with it, Nolan.

“We are there, Kyle. This is the house.”

The men looked at their target. It was a large house by Afghan standards, with maybe five or six bedrooms, and space on the first floor for a living room, kitchen and an official reception room. Two men stood outside, black turbaned, and armed with AK-47s.

“You will need to remove the guards. If they suspect we plan to attack, they will start shooting.”

Nolan gave him a wry smile. “I kind of figured that one out, Abraham. Carl, Zeke, do ‘em, but not a sound. The bombmaker has to be taken out. She could change the whole balance of power in this part of the world if we let her slip away.”

“Roger that,” the two whispered replies came. The two men slipped forward. They moved skillfully, making use of cover and shadow, and watching every

movement of the guards, who never even saw the two Seals coming. They died where they stood, and their bodies were dragged away into the shadows.

“Let’s go,” the Chief said quietly to Dur.

He led the way into the front door, and Carl stood outside, watching their backs while Zeke fell in behind them. They arrived in a spacious entrance hall, the walls covered in rich tapestries, and the furniture covered with exquisite pieces of art.

“I will wait here,” Dur said abruptly.

Nolan stared at him. “I don’t think so, Abraham. We’ll keep together.”

Was he up to something, maybe give a warning to these people? Or was it something else? Maybe the guy wanted to loot, another ancient Afghan tradition? Probably.

“We’ll stay together. Where is this woman likely to be staying?”

“On the second floor. There is a guest room at the front of the house. The Mayor has the room in the center, and there are two guest rooms, one either side. She will be in one of those.”

“How do you know so much about the house?”

He grinned. “Before the Russians came, I was the elected Mayor of Adasabad.”

Nolan raised his eyebrows in surprise. No wonder the guy was so unhappy. He’d sure had a few bad breaks.

“Right. Let’s get up there and find her.”

They went quietly up the stairs, and it was as the elderly Afghan had said. There were three bedroom doors at the center of the front of the house. Nolan used a sign to indicate that Zeke should wait. He signaled to Dur and at Zeke. Wait here! Even to Dur, the meaning was clear. Then he tried the bedroom on the right,

turning the handle quietly and peering in. Someone was asleep in the bed, one person. He drew his combat knife and edged nearer. It was a man. He could see the beard. He stooped down and wiped the razor sharp blade across the neck. Paradise was about to have another visitor knocking on the door. He crept silently back out onto the landing and indicated the center door. When he peered in, he almost got caught. There was a man and a woman on the bed. They were in the act of having sex, but it was strange. They thrashed at each other, writhing and pawing at each other's bodies, yet they uttered no sound. This was Afghanistan, after all, unmarried couples could screw their brains out, just do it on the quiet. He backed out and peered inside the last bedroom. It was empty. Shit! He closed the door and looked at Zeke and Abraham, and shook his head. She wasn't here. Or was she? A sudden thought came to him. Of course! The bombmaker, Hotaki, was fucking the Mayor. Obviously, the guy had a broad interpretation of hospitality. He looked at Zeke again, and put his mouth close to his ear.

“She's in bed with the Mayor. They're screwing each other.”

Zeke grinned. “Interesting. We'll take 'em both.”

“Yeah, but they're awake. Well, obviously.” Both men grinned. Nolan held up his Sig Sauer. “Two shots apiece. We need to get it one hundred percent right.”

Zeke nodded. “Copy that.”

They heard a huge groan from inside the room. Evidently, it had been too much for one of them to wait any longer. It sounded like a man's voice. The Mayor.

“Let's do it.”

Abraham Dur watched with interest as they swiftly unsafed their pistols. Nolan nodded to Murray, and they stepped inside the room. The man on the bed lifted his

head to look up in annoyance at the two intruders. His mouth opened to take a breath, ready to make a shout of protest, but it was the last breath he would ever take. Zeke's two shots took him down, one in the body, the other in the head, and he was flung back in a shower of blood. Murray looked at Nolan, waiting for the shot, but the Chief had stopped and was staring at the woman on the bed. She was white, an American or a European. Who the hell was she? She lurched away from the spray of blood that dowsed her from the dying body of the Mayor, who was twisting in his death throes, and stood up. Naked.

"Who the hell are you?" Nolan hissed at her.

She glared back at him, but her eyes were filled with fear.

"My name is Gulpari Hotaki. You're obviously not Taliban fighters, so who are you? American Special Forces, I imagine. You're here to kill me?"

They could see her fear was receding. Yet her reaction was unexpected. Something wasn't right here. She sounded almost relieved. Nolan raised his gun, but something made him pause.

"You're working to create a nuclear weapon for these people, is that right?"

She hesitated for a few moments, and then nodded. Nolan tightened his finger on the trigger, but something nagged at the back of his mind, his dead wife, Grace. She looked like her, very much like her.

How the hell could he shoot her? It would be almost like shooting Grace.

Zeke Murray glanced at him.

"What's up, Chief? We don't have much time. Shoot the bitch and let's move out."

"Yeah, wait a moment, Zeke." He turned back to the woman. "What are you

doing here, Ma'am? From your accent, you sound American. Why are you working against your own people?"

He watched her eyes mist over.

Shit, she's about to cry! She doesn't look like a tough guerrilla fighter.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. You may as well shoot me now. It will be best for all of us."

"I don't take orders from strangers, Ma'am. I asked you why you're a traitor to your own people."

She slumped back and sat on the edge of the bed. "I had no choice. I am Swedish, not American. My father is Professor Benjamin Bergmann, the nuclear scientist. He came to Pakistan from Sweden on a scientific exchange program and was kidnapped. I was with him. I always work alongside him. He refused to help these people develop a weapon, even if it meant his torture and death. So they forced me to do the work for him, or they would subject him to the most appalling agonies before they killed him."

Nolan worked to digest the information. Something didn't ring true, but his thoughts were clouded by the resemblance to Grace. Zeke was staring at him angrily, with justification. He should have just shot the bitch, and yet...

"Your name, Hotaki. It's Afghan Islamic, so you must have married one of them."

She nodded, her expression bitter. "Yes, I did. They forced me to change my name after I was married. It was part of the deal, so that they would have a greater hold over me. My husband, so-called, is back in Pakistan."

"Chief?" Zeke was standing by the door, his Sig Sauer held ready, pointed at the woman. "You want me to do her?"

“No. Go down and guard the front with Carl. I’ll be down in a few moments. I’ll deal with the girl.”

“Copy that.” Zeke lingered for just a few moments, his expression anxious, then left the room. Nolan could swear he muttered something like, ‘Hope he doesn’t go flakey on us now.’ He looked at the woman. She stared back.

“Are you going to kill me?”

She didn’t sound worried. It was as if she’d come to the end of a long, hard road, and a road that would end in her death. A death she would welcome. And he thought he understood.

“Your father. If you die, you think they’ll let him go?”

She shook her head. “No, they’ll never let him go. Not as long as they think they can get what they want from him. He will refuse, and they’ll probably kill him. But at least he has the strength to resist. I don’t have that strength, and I cannot bear to think of him being tortured to death. I would prefer to die, so complete your mission, soldier. Pull the trigger.”

“I’m sorry it has to be this way. But you know that we can’t allow them to get hold of a nuke.”

She grimaced. “I know that, but in the long term it will make no difference. Gul has raised enough money to fill their coffers, so he’ll just buy what they want from someone else. The Russians, maybe, or a rogue Chinese outfit.”

“Mohammed Gul, the drug baron? You know him, too?”

She looked wary. “Yes. You know him?”

“I know of him. That’s the second time his name’s come up. So he’s behind all of this?”

She shook her head. “He’s not the man in charge, no, but he’s near the top. He’s their banker, and his drug deals raise the money to pay for their weapons, everything from AK-47s to the atomic weapons program. They forced me to come here to meet Gemal Rahimi to discuss the final requirements for the weapon. Obviously, it can’t be dropped from a B-52, so it will need to be disguised so they can transport it to their target.”

“Who is the man in charge?” Nolan asked.

“I don’t know, really. Only that he is highly placed inside the Karzai government.”

“Right. And this guy?”

He indicated the bloody body that lay beside her. She laughed bitterly.

“He was just the last in a long line of them who raped me. I am glad you killed him. Thank you for that.”

They both looked at the window as the sound of shots broke the silence of the dawn.

“We need to get out of here,” Nolan exclaimed. “They’ll hit this place with a Hellfire missile, now that the shooting’s started.”

“Aren’t you going to kill me, soldier?”

“No, you’re more useful to us alive. Besides, if what you say is true, you’re not the enemy, so there’s no reason to kill you.”

Unless there’s a chance of you being captured by the enemy, and then you’d have to die.

“We need to move fast. We haven’t much time left. Get your clothes on.”

He followed her through a connecting door into the next bedroom. She gave him a hard glance as he stared at her. Then she grimaced as she realized the

absurdity of her position. She was already naked, and he'd found her being screwed by the man they'd killed, so there was nothing left to hide. She pulled on heavy, long woolen knickers and a matching vest. Over that she donned a voluminous blue burqa so that her face was only visible through a narrow mesh square in the hood that enveloped her face.

"Pretty, isn't it?" She bent down and pulled on a pair of sandals. "I'm ready."

"You don't have a briefcase or a purse, something like that?"

He couldn't see her expression behind the mesh, but her voice was bitter. "I am the wife of an Islamic militant. I do not have possessions. I am a possession."

"I was thinking of your scientific stuff. It could be useful to our intel people."

She tapped her head. "Since I was a child, I have possessed an eidetic memory. It's all here."

"And you'll tell our people whatever they want to know about this program?"

He could see her face move behind the blue mesh, and her eyes fixed him with a hard gaze.

"Yes, I will. Of course, you will need to arrange to get my father out, in case they persuade him to continue with my work."

"I guess they'll want to do that in any case. There is another alternative."

"What's that?"

Nolan didn't reply.

"Oh, I see."

"Yeah. Now let's go, we're running out of time."

"But..."

A huge explosion nearby rocked the house. Nolan grabbed her and started to

hustle her down the stairs. But coming through the front door was a group of armed men, he stopped counting at twenty, but they were filling the entrance hall.

“We need to go out the back way,” the woman shouted.

She dragged him through a side door of the hallway, and bullets chipped at the brickwork as he went through. They ran outside of the house and sheltered in an alleyway across the street. Two men appeared, and he snapped off two shots from his Sig Sauer that sent them diving back inside the house for cover. He pushed the woman down out of the line of fire and unstrapped his MK11 Sniper Weapon System. This was too much work for a pistol. Then he checked his inventory of grenades; he had four in his webbing. He laid them out ready. If they came in a rush, he’d need more than a sniper rifle to hold them. But it would be a close run thing.

* * *

Vince Merano perched in his stand at the top of the town mill, in a tower that was almost as high as the mosque tower had been. He had a perfect view of most of the town. When the first shots rang out, he had already lit up the town market with his LTD. He pressed the button that patched the targeting information to the command center in the Nevada desert, outside of Las Vegas, and to the Reaper drone that circled overhead.

“Creech, this is Bravo. Target is lit, do you have it?”

“Affirmative, Bravo, on your order.”

“The shoot is confirmed, that’s a go, Creech.”

“Copy that.”

He watched the sky. The drone was invisible, but he noted the flash of flame as the Hellfire ignited. The Hellfire, AGM-114, was an air-to-surface missile developed primarily for anti-armor use. It had multi-mission, multi-target precision-strike capability and could be launched from multiple air, sea, and ground platforms, including UAVs. The Hellfire missile was the primary 100lb-class air-to-ground precision weapon of the armed forces of the United States, reliable, relatively cheap, and very, very effective. This one was fitted with the metal augmented charge, MAC, the 18lb shaped-charge, optimized for blast fragmentation. Seconds later, the Hellfire struck the market slightly off center, taking out three quarters of the structure and leaving the remainder a blazing ruin, filled with the shrieks of wounded and panicked fighters. But he knew that many of them were not wounded.

“Creech, Bravo. Hit it again.”

“Copy that.”

The voice, so many thousands of miles away, was calm, as if he'd just sent in an order for pizza. But seconds later, another flash seared the sky, and seconds after that, the market erupted in more misery and death as the Hellfire's high explosive, metal augmented charge filled the air with thousands of slivers of metal; ending any chance of the Taliban fighters being able to live to fight another day.

“Creech, Bravo. Target is destroyed. Stand by for further targets.”

“Copy that, standing by.”

He shifted his area of focus to look for the next target. He'd seen Nolan, Murray and Winters disappear into the large house at the side of the town square.

They'd be out by now, so it would be worth taking care of it to cover their tracks. He used the LTD to fix the coordinates and called in the order.

"Creech, Bravo. Confirm new target is lit."

"We confirm, waiting for your fire order."

"That's a go, Creech."

"Copy that."

Another flash in the sky, the short journey of the missile, and the house erupted in tangle of broken stonework, timber, wrecked furniture, and the inevitable consequence of war; bodies. He could hear the screams as the building disappeared in a haze of smoke, dust and flame.

"Creech, Bravo. That was a hit, stand by."

"Roger that."

Vince moved position so that he could sweep almost the whole town with his rifle scope. He saw movement and made ready to shoot down anyone who looked as if they may be armed, or otherwise present a threat. But it was Lieutenant Talley and the rest of the men moving from house to house, and obviously searching for anything that may be connected to the nuclear program. Then he spotted another movement, maybe a hundred yards behind them. It was more a change in light and shadow, in the gloom of the scabrous alleys and streets that made up the town. But any movement was a threat. He squinted down the barrel of the scope and looked for the faint variations in light that could mean a clear and present danger. He surveyed the area where he'd seen the movement. Yes! Four men were hiding in the shadows, and the distinctive banana-shapes of their assault rifle clips were a giveaway, Taliban, and almost certainly maneuvering to shoot up Talley's group.

Vince checked the range and glanced around at the wind. After the three explosions from the Hellfires, the winds had changed as the raging heat of the fires and explosions played havoc with the air currents. He decided it was within bounds. The shoot was not so far that he needed to worry. The range was well within the capabilities of the flat trajectory of the 7.62 mm rounds fired by the SWS. He chambered a round and calmed his breathing, adapting to the calm, almost Zen-like way of the world-class sniper. Then he fired.

* * *

Talley jerked around as he heard the ‘zip’ of an incoming silenced round, followed by the meaty ‘thunk’ as it found its target. There were four men behind him, emerging from a doorway across the other side of the narrow lane. Except that now there were three, as one man fell to the ground, blood streaming from a bullet hole through his head. The other three lifted their weapons to shoot, but at that moment, Zeke and Carl came running around from the front of the now-destroyed house, firing from the hip with their HK416s; the remaining three fighters were mowed down by the concentrated fire from the 5.56 rounds. The two Seals ran up to him, followed by Nolan with a woman in a burqa. What the hell was that all about? Talley ignored her, checked that his men were covering the area for further threats, and then leaned forward to add his gun to the fight. He saw a group of fighters across the square setting up a machine gun. If they succeeded, the whole balance of the battle would change. He turned to his men.

“We need to take out that gun, follow me. Let’s go!

He charged across the square, his men following him, firing from the hip. Nolan watched them go and watched the Afghans die even as they struggled to assemble their gun.

“Are you okay, Chief?” Zeke asked Nolan, trying hard to keep his expression neutral as he fired a glance at the woman. He looked back at Nolan, unsure about him.

Did you have another of those blackouts, Chief? What the hell am I going to do about that? And that woman, it's the fucking bombmaker. Are you insane? Jesus!

“Yeah, I’m good, thanks. That must have been Vince who took out the first one. He’s over there someplace, in that tower, some kind of a mill.”

“When are you going to take care of the woman? You have to sort her out now. You have to kill her.”

Nolan understood, and he was right. Except that things had changed. He shook his head. “It’s not a simple one, Zeke. I need to talk to Talley, and he may need to put it up the line, maybe even to Washington.”

Murray came closer to him and spoke quietly, so the woman couldn’t hear. “That wasn’t the order, Kyle. They told us to kill her.”

“I know that. But she has information that could well decide them to change that order. I’ll talk to Talley when we join up.”

“If the insurgents get her back, it would cause a real problem.”

Nolan stared at him. “If there’s any chance of that happening, she dies. Clear?”

Murray nodded. “It’s your call, Chief.”

“Yeah, it’s my call. Any doubt, kill her.”

They looked across the square. Smoke from the Mayor’s house swirled around,

blotting out sight of many of the houses. When the smoke cleared slightly, they could see a large house, or maybe a warehouse, across the other side. While they watched, a gun barrel poked out of a window. Nolan focused his binoculars and swept the lenses around the building opposite. There was no sign of Talley or the rest of the platoon, but they could all hear the firing. He called up Talley on the commo.

“Boss, this is Nolan. Do you need our help?”

“We’re okay, Chief, what’s happening over there?”

“Vince called in a Hellfire missile on that house, and we got out just before it hit. We found Hotaki.”

“You took care of her?”

“That’s a negative, Boss. She’s European, a Swede. The woman’s a hostage, not an enemy.”

He quickly explained how they had a hold on her through her father. And that she had information that could help the Americans to finish off a dangerous element of the insurgency.

“You know what to do if there’s any chance of them getting her back?”

“We all know that, Boss. It’s a done deal.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to headquarters later and see what they have to say. But it’ll have to wait for now, can you join us over here?”

“Yeah, we’ll come around the outside of the square, in case there are snipers.”

“We’ll keep an eye out for you.”

They skirted around the edge of the square and finally ducked inside the building where Talley and his men were waiting for them. The first floor was

covered in corpses. The Seals had killed all of the defenders. Nolan counted eleven. Talley glanced at Gulpari Hotaki.

“Ma’am, you’ll need something else to wear. You won’t keep up with us in that outfit.”

“I have nothing else, Lieutenant. These are the only clothes I have.”

Talley looked at Brad Rose. “We saw some clothes upstairs. Take the woman and get her changed into a shirt and pants. Something she can run in, if necessary.”

“You wish me to dress in men’s clothes?” The woman was aghast. Then they heard her laughing. “I’m sorry, I have been a prisoner of these people for so long, the idea was very strange. Of course, I will change into men’s clothes. I doubt my husband will ever see me wearing them, and if he does, there is nothing he can do to me now.”

When they’d disappeared up the stairs, Nolan turned to Talley. “Have you found anything yet? Any nuclear materials?”

He shook his head. “That’s a negative. We need to keep searching, but we had to take out this place first. They were starting to snipe at us from inside the building. It’s clear now. We’ll ask the woman about it when she comes down.”

He was about to go on when a new voice cut into their eardrums.

“Bravo, this is Creech. We have sight of a new group of insurgents moving towards the town, count approximately fifty plus, repeat fifty plus. ETA your position in thirty minutes.”

“We need to be out of here in twenty,” Talley snapped out. “We still have most of our mission to complete, if…”

He looked up as Gulpari Hotaki came down the stairs wearing men’s tribal

clothing. White pants, a long white shirt and black waistcoat. On her feet she wore American canvas combat boots and her hair covered by a turban she'd wrapped, rather elegantly, around the top of her head. She looked part Afghan tribesman, and part beautiful European woman.

“That’s better, Miss Hotaki. You’ll move much better in those clothes.”

She smiled shyly. “Thank you, Lieutenant. I feel better.”

He nodded and turned back to the men. “The priority is to find Rahimi and take him out, along with the rest of the bombmaking materials. We’ll spread out and search as much of the town as we can.”

“You’re looking for our store of materials? I can lead you there.”

They looked at Hotaki. “You’ll do that for us?”

“Of course, Lieutenant. I would be more than pleased to see them destroyed. I would guess you will find Gemal Rahimi there, or nearby. He will be more than anxious to protect them, but it will be well guarded.”

“That’s our job, Miss Hotaki. If they’re not well guarded, they don’t need the Seals.”

She nodded. “Very well, follow me. But please, my own name is Agnetha Bergmann. I would prefer that you call me Agnetha, now that it seems my so-called ‘marriage’ is over.

“Sure, Agnetha. Lead the way.”

Nolan watched her. Now that she was recovering from her shock and fear, and had real clothes on, she'd changed. She reminded him a lot of Carol Summers, not that he'd seen Carol naked. Yet the San Diego detective had dark hair and dark eyes; this girl had blue eyes and blonde hair. All over, he'd noticed when he first

saw her. Yet both women were slim and pretty, and both possessed an obvious intelligence and bravery. Carol to patrol the rowdy and sometimes deadly streets of the naval town, and Agnetha to survive the hell of captivity and forced marriage to a Taliban member. Yes, it was more than their bodies that were similar. They were both clever and tough, his kind of women. He felt a stab of guilt as an image of Grace appeared in his mind. He forced himself to deal with the job in hand. Talley pulled him to one side and spoke quietly.

“She could be real useful to us, Chief.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t want to keep repeating myself, but remember, the first sign that we might lose her.” He drew the edge of his hand over his throat.

“I got it, Boss.”

“Yeah. Don’t forget it.”

Talley took point with Agnetha to give him directions, and the rest of the men assumed a loose formation that would keep them out of trouble if the enemy hit them without warning. Nolan fell in at the rear to cover their twenty. Twice, they heard a ‘zip’ and a meaty ‘thunk’ as a silenced sniper round hit its target. Proof positive that Vince was still at work, watching over them. They walked along the narrow street. There was no paving; it was just beaten earth. Then they turned into an even narrower lane, but this surface was paved with cobblestones.

“It belonged to the local pharmacy,” Agnetha explained. “The chemist did good business in the town until the Taliban arrived. He put down these cobblestones and had plans to pave much more of the town, to make it usable during heavy rainstorms when the mud becomes impassable.”

“What happened to him?”

She pulled a face. “The same as happened to everyone else who tries to drag this country into the modern world. The Taliban murdered him and stole his building to use as a bomb factory.”

Nolan waited with Zeke Murray at the end of the cobblestoned lane to cover Talley’s group as they ran forward and into the house. It was a tense moment. The lane looked like a perfect ambush spot, high stone walls either side, and a path about thirty yards long leading to the house. But they made it. The last of Talley’s men got inside, and the shooting started.

“I don’t like it,” Nolan murmured to Zeke. “If the defenders are watching for an attack, they could be waiting in ambush and hurt our guys badly.”

Both men stared at the house. And both saw movement at the same time. The building had three floors, and on the top floor a face looked out, saw Nolan and his men below, and jumped back out of sight. He reappeared a few moments later, but this time he had a rocket launcher. Nolan propped the barrel of his SWS on the stone wall and sighted in on the man. A single shot would kill him but would not destroy the launcher, which another man could pick up and use. He whispered to his partner.

“Zeke, we need to hit the launcher and the raghead. I’ll take the guy. The moment he’s hit, I want you to put the launcher out of use.”

“Roger that.”

Zeke stood next to him, his HK416 propped against the stone wall so that the two Seals were side by side.

“Set?”

Zeke nodded. “That’s affirmative, Chief.”

Nolan made a final check of the scores of different elements that made for a perfect sniper shot. Windage, breathing, a whole shitload of converging angles, elevation, even such infinitesimal factors as the relative humidity and air pressure; all of which he could only guess at. But long experience meant those guesses were generally spot on the mark. He squeezed, and the silenced round took the missileer directly in the forehead. As soon as Zeke heard the soft ‘thunk’ of the bullet, he opened fire with his HK416, a sound-suppressed three-shot burst that ripped into the breach of the RPG launcher. Man and weapon fell back inside the building. Neither would play any further part in the fighting inside Afghanistan.

Two more Afghans put their heads out of the window to look outside and see what was happening. While Zeke covered his back, Nolan put a double tap through each man. Then they waited while Talley’s men blasted their way through the building.

* * *

Talley’s group heard the crash of the falling body and missile launcher upstairs, then a small scream of pain and two more crashes; the unmistakable sound of falling bodies.

“I reckon the guys outside are taking care of business for us,” Will Bryce remarked laconically.

Talley nodded. “Get the men moving. We need to search this place and finish up before that new force gets here.”

He glanced at Agnetha who was standing near the doorway, hesitating as if she was nervous about entering.

“We need your help, right now. Where would we find these materials, Ma’am? We don’t have much time.”

He nodded at Nolan who hustled her inside.

She grimaced. “Oh, yes, of course. There’s a basement room, right underneath this building. If you lift that rug at the end of the room, you’ll find a trapdoor. The stairs lead down into the workshop where all of the equipment is kept and worked on.”

“Okay. Will, you stay here. I’ll go down there with Agnetha and Carl. We’ll set a charge to destroy it all. Carl, lift that rug, let’s take a look. The rest of you men, fan out and see if Rahimi is hiding anywhere.”

PO2 Winters ran over to the end of the hallway, lifted the rug, and grinned. “Well, lookee here, these boys sure have something to hide.”

He lifted up the trapdoor. There was a light switch set into the wall at the top of the steps that led down. He switched on the overhead lights and descended into the room, Talley and Agnetha followed.

“Jesus H Christ!” Winters stopped and stared. The room was large, as large as the ground area of the house itself. Every part of the wall space was covered in shelves and racks, and each shelf was neatly labeled in Arabic script. In the center were desks and laboratory worktops and a number of machines that were not immediately identifiable.

“What does it all mean?” Talley asked the woman.

“It’s a multi-purpose facility,” she explained. “On the benches they put

together the mechanisms for the IEDs, mainly they make the detonators here. The shelves are used to store the explosive components, mostly C4. Over there is the uranium for the fission device we have been working on.”

“Would that be this Plan Salah ad-Din we heard about?”

She nodded tiredly. “Yes, that is correct. Plan Salah ad-Din, they call it. I call it mass murder.” She went on to describe the store of explosives. “The C4 is an explosive that could easily be molded into any desired shape. It is also used as a precursor for nuclear detonators. The material could be pressed into gaps, cracks, holes and voids in buildings, bridges, equipment or machinery. Similarly, it could be inserted into empty shaped charge cases of the type used by military engineers. She saw their shocked faces and completely misread them.

“Plastique is very stable and insensitive to most physical shocks. It cannot be detonated by a gunshot or by dropping it onto a hard surface, so you don’t need to worry,” she smiled. “It does not explode even when set on fire or exposed to microwave radiation. Detonation can only be initiated by a combination of extreme heat and a shockwave, such as when a detonator inserted into it is fired. That is what they make here, the remote detonators for the charges.”

“Ma’am, that’s very interesting. I was more interested in the uranium.”

Chapter Six

There was total silence in the basement as he said the single word, Uranium.

Agnetha Bergmann glanced around the room to a strong, steel cabinet.

“The uranium is safe enough. It’s stored in that cabinet, inside a shielded case. There’s nothing that can result in an atomic detonation. We hadn’t got that far yet, thank God.”

Talley gave a relieved sigh. “Thank Christ for that. Carl, set the charges. We’ll destroy this place as soon as we’re clear.”

“Right, Boss. I’ll embed the charges in the plastique. That’ll make it go off with a bang.”

“It’ll destroy the town,” Agnetha said with a worried tone. “A lot of people will be killed.”

“I guess it’ll dent the Al Qaeda and Taliban membership some. The uranium, what effect will it have?” Talley asked.

She stopped and thought about that one while Carl started to distribute his charges. Her expression was grim.

“It will create a radioactive cloud that will envelop the town, so we will need to evacuate everyone before the charges go off.”

“Is that right? So if the main explosion destroys the town, there’ll be no one left for us to worry about.”

She was shocked. “Lieutenant, that is inhumane. These people deserve a chance to live.”

Talley was calm, but his words fired back at her like a burst of machine gun fire.

“They gave up that chance when they did everything they could to kill American soldiers, Ma’am. It’s not my job to help keep the enemy alive, and as I understand it, this town is a Taliban stronghold. Is that correct?”

She inclined her head. “Yes it is, but…”

“There’re no buts, Ma’am. My mission is to wipe out the enemy’s fighting capability, and I won’t do that by lending them a helping hand when there’s big trouble coming their way. If I were you, I’d worry about something else.”

“What is that?”

“Your father. What will they do to him?”

She said nothing, but her frightened eyes were sufficient reply.

“Carl, finish up here, we’ll be in the hallway. Set the charges for one hour.

Then come up and set a charge that’ll bring the house down first over this basement. Time it for about twenty minutes. That’ll stop them from disarming the main event when they get here.”

Winters smiled. “You got it, Boss.”

He went up the stairs, and Agnetha followed him. She gasped when she saw the body that lay on the floor.

“Who is that?”

He’d been badly beaten, his face a mass of bruises. Siddiqi was moaning softly. Dave Eisner was bent over him, giving him an injection of painkillers. He looked up at Talley.

“We found him locked in storeroom, Boss.” He shifted his gaze to Agnetha.

“He’s one of ours, Ma’am, an Afghan Army officer, Major Siddiqi. He was supposed to be our guide, but they captured him. This is what your friends did to him,” he fumed.

“I’m so sorry. They’re no friends of mine,” the Swedish girl responded bitterly.

“What have they done to his face?”

“They beat him badly, probably to get him to talk.”

She shuddered. “My God.”

“There ain’t no God here. I doubt there ever was in this shithole. What are we going to do with him, Boss?”

“He comes out with us. You know the way we work.”

“It won’t be easy. He’s badly hurt, so it’ll be hard to move him anywhere.”

“We’ll carry him. See if you can find something to use as a gurney. As soon as we’re clear, I’ll call for a Medevac.”

“Roger that.”

Brad Rose and Dan Moseley hurtled down the stairs and into the hallway.

“There’s no sign of Rahimi. It looks like he got clean away when the shooting started.”

“Right, we need to get out of here. We’ll work out the next move when we’re clear. This place is going up like a Fourth of July celebration.”

Carl Winters stood up from where he’d just finished planting his charges.

“You’re right about that. I’ve placed a small satchel charge in the first floor, and I can detonate it remotely when we’re clear. The main charge goes up in,” he looked at his watch, “fifty-eight minutes exactly. And it’ll be big, Lieutenant.”

Talley nodded. “Right.” He touched the switch on his mic. “Chief Nolan, any activity out there?”

“Not a thing. They’re either dead or hiding.”

“Okay, tell Vince we’ll rendezvous on him in about five minutes. We’re clearing out of Dodge. There’s about to be a big bang.”

“How big?”

“Let’s just say that in less than an hour, this town will be just a hole in the ground. A hole in the ground that’ll glow green.”

“You found the uranium?”

“Oh, yeah, we found it. We’re coming out now. You ready, Dave?”

Eisner looked up from where he’d been fashioning a makeshift gurney from a blanket and two ceremonial spears that had been displayed on the wall.

“I’m ready, but I’ll need help.”

Brad stepped forward. “I’ll take it.”

They lifted the gurney. Thankfully, Siddiqi had collapsed into a coma and made no sound. Talley led the way out, and Agnetha and Dan Moseley brought up the rear. Nolan and Murray joined them as they exited the building. They grinned at each other as they caught sight of Dan’s hair. Part of it had slipped out of the pakul he wore on his head, exposing the California blonde locks. He was as unlikely an Afghan as ever walked the plains and mountains of this country. When they were clear, Carl called a halt. He looked at Talley, who nodded. He hit the switch on the remote detonator, and the outer walls of the house started to collapse. It was a beautifully set charge, small and perfectly placed. There was little drama, just a ‘crack’, and the building shook. The walls slowly crumpled as the house imploded, the roof fell on top of the rubble. Carl nodded in satisfaction.

“It’ll take ‘em a time to dig down to that basement. They’ll likely start as soon as they get here, so that should interesting,” he checked his watch again. “Forty-six minutes exactly.”

“Nice job, Carl. Let’s move, everybody. We’ll pick up Vince and get the hell out of this place.”

Carl suddenly saw the men carrying Siddiqi on the gurney, and checked out his face. He shook his head. "Jesus!"

Vince Merano watched their arrival at the mill. When he was satisfied the situation was secure, he left the top of the tower and ran down the steps to meet them as they came past.

"All set, Boss. Are we outta here now?"

Nolan's voice interrupted. "Abraham Dur, where is he? I haven't seen him since we were at the Mayor's house."

Everyone shook their heads.

"Maybe he went out the way we came in?" one of the men asked hopefully.

Talley nodded. "That must be it. He wouldn't have realized that we don't need to make such a big deal of going out underground now that they're either dead or running. We'll head for the cave we jumped off from. Let's hope we meet him there. I've checked the wind direction, and we'll be upwind there, provided we're outside of the immediate blast radius. The cave will give us some shelter from the fallout too."

"We said we'd help him with his granddaughter," Nolan objected. "We failed to keep our word, so I'm betting he's still inside the town, looking for her."

Talley stared at him. "Chief, there's a uranium-laced explosion timed to go off in just over a half hour. It's the equivalent of a dirty bomb, and anyone inside this town is going to die."

"Give me ten minutes. Let me see if I can find him," Nolan asked. "I'll meet you at the cave."

The Lieutenant sighed. "I'm not happy about it, but I see where you're coming

from. Call me in ten, and tell me you're on your way out.”

“Roger that.”

Nolan started back at the double, conscious that he was running straight into a fireball timed to go off soon. He ran along the beaten earth streets of the town. Everything was silent after the firefight with the insurgents. No bystanders stopped to stare, no women in blue burqas looked around from their work; there was nothing. No children playing, not even any birds sang. He smiled to himself. In this part of the world, a bird that made its presence known was likely to end up in the pot, so birdsong was a short-lived occupation. A man stepped out of a doorway, yawning as if he'd just woken from a long sleep, but it was more likely opium. He carried an AK-47 loosely in his hand, and dulled with the drug, he only saw the running man as a fellow Afghan. He nodded at Nolan.

“Assalaam, alaikum.”

Nolan nodded a casual greeting as he drew his Sig Sauer and shot him through the heart in one swift motion. He ran on, not even pausing to check the man was dead. There was no need, if he wasn't now, he sure would be soon. He reached Abraham's house and stopped outside. There was the sound of voices from inside, raised voices.

He peeked in through the open door. Two men were in the room, Abraham, and a man he didn't recognize, an Afghan. He was shouting at Dur, and the old man was shouting back, yet the unknown man was holding a gun on him, an AK-47. A one sided conversation. The armed man had his back to the door. Nolan unsafed his Sig Sauer and waited until the voice rose to a heated shout. Immediately, he crashed through the door and in a smooth, continuous motion,

had the man disarmed and pinned to the ground. He looked up at Dur.

“Abraham, this town is about to explode. If you stay here, you’ll die. What was the argument about?”

“He is one of Rahimi’s men. The dog has taken my granddaughter. He said that if I gave them information about you Americans, he would make sure she was released.”

“Did you tell him what he wanted?”

Abraham spat on the floor. “That dog? Why would I do that? I owe them nothing, and I do not believe they would release her, anyway.”

“Come with me, Abraham. We’ll do our best to release her.”

Dur stared at him, his face dripping contempt. “I recall you said the same thing before, yet you did nothing.”

“Not true, Abraham. We’ve scoured the town for Rahimi and for her. If she was anywhere to be found, we’d have rescued her.”

He felt bad about lying to the old man. In truth, the girl had always been a low priority. And yet if they’d found her with Rahimi, they would have freed her. The important factor now was that the elderly Afghan bought his story and came out from this death trap. Finally, the old man nodded.

“Very well, American, I will come with you, and we will find my granddaughter. I have one task to complete here before I go.”

“You’d better make it quick. We’re running out of time.”

“It will be quick.”

He drew the long knife he carried in his sash and pushed Nolan away from the prisoner. The Seal let him do it, killing an unarmed man was distasteful, yet they

couldn't leave the guy here to warn the approaching fighters. Dur slashed once, across the man's neck, and blood spurted on the floor. He turned to Nolan.

"I am finished here. We can go."

They hurtled down the old ladder into the tunnel. Nolan almost carried Abraham along. He'd checked his watch, and they had less than five minutes before all hell broke loose. He wasn't too worried about the explosion, not down in the tunnel where they'd be protected from the worst of the blast. But the uranium, that was a different matter. Whatever the deadly material touched would receive, in effect, a death sentence. They ran on, Abraham was tiring badly, showing his age. Dur grumbled and moaned that it was too fast for him, he was an old man, and he needed more time. Nolan ignored him. Time was the one thing they didn't have. They reached the end of the tunnel and squeezed out into the open air. Hundreds of yards ahead lay the cave and safety, yet when he checked his watch, there was less than two minutes left before the countdown reached zero, and the bomb exploded. They were running along the narrow gully; ahead was the open patch of ground they'd need to cover to reach the cave. He dimly realized Talley was calling him on the commo.

"Chief Nolan, what's your twenty?"

He threw Abraham to the bottom of the gully and keyed the mic. "This is Nolan. We're several hundred yards from you, but it's too far to make it. The old man is about finished. We're in a kind of shelter, so we'll have to ride it out here."

"If you're sure, Chief."

"Yeah, I think we'll be fine."

"Wait one, Chief," Talley added. After a few seconds, his voice returned.

“Agnetha says to cover your bodies with loose earth, dust, anything, just to block the worst of the radioactive dust if any of it reaches you. It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing. You can shake the dust off after, and hopefully any of the radioactive particles that land will shake off with it. That’s assuming that any comes near you, you never know. The wind is blowing south, so you could well be fine.”

“Acknowledged, Boss. We’re going to ground. Out.”

He relayed the instructions to Abraham who shrugged fatalistically at first, but when Nolan reminded him he’d be no use to his granddaughter dead, he started throwing loose sand and dust over his clothes and exposed skin, both men trying to burrow down into the ground. Lastly, they buried their heads, up to the eyes and nostrils. Then the town erupted.

* * *

The platoon was sheltering in the cave, and they watched the beginning of the explosion as smoke and flames flew up into the air, followed by the massive blast.

“Everyone, down, close your eyes!” Talley shouted.

They threw themselves flat as the enormous quantity of explosives in the basement store went up, sending out a monstrous pressure wave that destroyed all before it. Chunks of masonry were hurled hundreds of feet into the air, and a huge cloud of smoke and dust completely enveloped the town in a dark and sinister fog. They gave it several minutes to allow the worst of the effects to die down. When they looked again, the town resembled Berlin after the bombing during World War Two. Some buildings still stood, but only just. Everything was smashed and broken,

and no one was in any doubt it would be a long time before Adasabad could be made habitable. Talley made way for Agnetha to look out at the destruction. She'd shelved her earlier objection about unnecessary loss of life.

"Good!" she murmured quietly. "I hated that place. Because I am white, they treated me like a slave, every single one of them. The only product they ever manufactured was death."

"It sure came back to them in spades," Talley grinned. "We've no way of knowing if those reinforcements had arrived when it went up, but I'm betting they had. There's no way we can go down and do a body count because of the radiation."

She nodded. "I wouldn't advise it. The uranium was an unknown quantity. It could have a lengthy half life."

"How long? I thought that a nuclear explosion would devastate a wide area, at least downwind."

"Lieutenant, you have confused this with a nuclear detonation, which it most certainly is not. Radioactive materials escape from an atomic bomb when it explodes, and they are basically the broken particles of the uranium atoms. They have become new radioactive materials, called fission products, which are created by the splitting of uranium atoms. There are hundreds of them with different chemical and biological properties. You see, most of them did not exist in nature before the advent of nuclear technology, and their effects can be very bad, terrible. That is what the Taliban wanted me to produce for them, a fission weapon. This, however, is not a result of nuclear fission. I guess it is what is known more as a 'dirty bomb'. It is a radiological weapon that combines radioactive material with

conventional explosives. The purpose of such weapons is to contaminate the area around the explosion with radioactive material, hence the attribute 'dirty'.

Although that was not your intent, that effect is exactly what happened. The ground will be sewn with particles of uranium that will dissipate over quite a short period of time. Several months would be my best guess. It depends on a number of factors, rainfall, winds, and suchlike."

He nodded. "Okay, I'll make contact with our people and advise them of all that. I would guess they could probably use the existing telemetry on the drones to monitor the radiation. In the meantime, Adasabad will be a no go area for our people."

"There's no sign of Chief Nolan," Will Bryce interrupted, getting to his feet. He held binoculars in his hand and put them back to his eyes, scouring the ground in front of them. "I hope to Christ he didn't get caught in that lot."

* * *

He realized that he'd lost it again. The old man was looking at him, his face expressionless, but the eyes said it all. The elderly Afghan had noticed that he'd blacked out at the time of maximum danger.

What was in his eyes? Was it pity, sympathy, or something else. Contempt?

He'd just have to ride it out. Nolan stood up, shaking off the dust and earth that had covered him, some of it scattered by the explosion. The dust seemed threatening, evil and poisonous, as if it was some kind of deadly bacteria that had spread in the wind. Which in a way he guessed it was. It could sure do just as much damage as deadly bacteria if it had combined with the uranium dust. There was no

way of knowing, not until they managed to get some Geiger counter readings, or whatever they used these days. He helped Abraham to his feet, and the old man looked across at what used to be his hometown.

“What caused such terrible damage?” he asked, his voice trembling with awe and emotion.

Nolan explained to him the vast quantity of plastique stored in the basement was the direct cause of the damage, but the uranium dust was the long-term worry. He didn’t understand; the Chief could see that. All he saw was another example of the awesome power of modern military technology to intrude in and ultimately destroy the primitive lives of the local people.

“It would have been better if you’d never come,” he growled. “Since the Russians arrived, and then the Taliban, after them the Americans, we have had nothing but death and destruction. Now this.”

“It wasn’t the Americans that caused this,” Nolan countered. “It was Afghans. The Taliban and al Qaeda. They are the people who kidnapped your granddaughter.”

“Yes, you are right. When we find them, American, I want to kill every one of them we find.”

“I can’t see anyone arguing with that sentiment,” he replied with a grin. “Let’s go back and rejoin the platoon. They’ll be wondering if we’re glowing green.”

“Glowing green?”

“It’s nothing, just an old joke. Radiation can turn some things green.”

Abraham nodded, but it was clear he still didn’t understand. Nolan helped him up. The old man was even more tired, that much was obvious. They started to

walk to the cave, and minutes later they rejoined the platoon.

They rested for an hour and watched and waited to see if any enemy fighters had survived the explosion, but nothing moved in the vicinity of the town. Talley called ISAF headquarters to give them an update, and his first point of contact was Colonel Eugene Waverley III.

“Tell me the status of your mission, Lieutenant,” were his first words. “I’m under a lot of pressure here to report positive results.”

Talley explained what they’d achieve so far. If he expected any appreciation for their efforts, he was to be disappointed.

“So you haven’t got very far, Talley. This Rahimi character, he’s on the run together with his fighters. You haven’t killed the bombmaker, and your Afghan liaison officer has been seriously wounded.”

“Tortured, Colonel, not wounded.”

“Whatever. And you’ve destroyed an Afghan town in the process. They won’t be happy in Kabul. Not happy at all. It sounds to me as if you’re not really up to the job. Not what we’d expect from the Navy Seals, is it, Lieutenant?”

Talley was silent. Right that moment, he’d given anything to get his hands around the Colonel’s neck and squeeze it tight.

“I think you need someone to advise you in the field. At the moment, the search for Gemal Rahimi is most important. We have to know that he’s dead. You’d better finish that bombmaker and follow Rahimi. Find out where he went and finish him off.”

“No, Colonel. I’m not giving the order to kill the bombmaker. She’s a…”

“Lieutenant, that’s direct order.”

“I can’t do that, Sir. I don’t believe that order is legitimate. If you wish to carry out an illegal order, you’ll need to do it yourself, Sir.”

“Lieutenant, you listen to me, you’ll,,,”

“The answer is no. If you wish to insist, you’ll need to put it in writing, and I’ll consider it.”

Now it was the Colonel’s turn to be silent. Talley waited for a response. It came a couple of minutes later.

“I believe Rahimi will be in the Hindu Kush. It’s the traditional hideout of both Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and we have intelligence that may point us in his direction. Move north east along the road to Asmar and halt two miles south west of the town. We’re sending out an advisor to assist you with the ongoing operation, and we’ll evacuate Major Siddiqi as the same time. Make sure you’re at the new coordinates inside of two hours. Out.”

Talley explained their situation.

“So what’s the deal, are they replacing you?” Nolan asked, incredulous. “They ought to pin a medal on you. We’ve knocked out a massive threat to ISAF security and got the ragheads on the run. Dammit, the body count alone must be in excess of a hundred insurgents, maybe double that. And we’ve almost destroyed their nuclear ambitions.”

Talley shook his head. “It doesn’t mean a thing to that damn fool Colonel. All he can think of is the mission objective. The stupid, blind bastard can’t see how everything has changed. We didn’t kill Rahimi, instead we let him escape, and we haven’t murdered the bombmaker.”

Agnetha looked up, startled. “That colonel wants me dead? I was forced to help

them, do they not understand?”

Talley swallowed hard, he'd shouted out in his frustration something that would have been best left unsaid. “This guy only understands the original mission objectives. He can't see how it had to change when we found you in Adasabad and learned of the nuclear program.”

“In that case your officer is a very dangerous man. You should remember they still have my father, which means that they have the potential to make a bomb. If they can persuade him, of course.”

Talley stared at her. “I thought you said he'd refuse to help them.”

“That is true. But now that I am free, think how much pressure they'll put on him. They'll torture him, and they'll certainly make sure he never finds out I've escaped, so they can threaten to do the most terrible things to me as well. I'm not sure now he'll be able to resist. He's an old man, and everyone has their limits.”

Talley knew that for a fact. It was a well-known aspect of interrogation and torture that a man could only hold out for so long. Everyone gave in eventually, no exceptions. He looked around at the platoon. They were tired, exhausted even. But there was still much to do, they were Navy Seals.

“Men, we need to saddle up and move out to meet up with this new guy they're sending out. We'll have to do our best to persuade him that this nuclear threat was real, and it still isn't over.”

“Lieutenant!” Nolan called out, as they were getting ready to move out. “I know I speak for all of us. You've done a damn good job leading this mission, damn good, and we'll make sure they know it when we get back.”

Talley smiled. “That's appreciated, Chief. The support of a Seal platoon is

worth a hundred of these chair polishers. Let's move out."

Four of the men took a corner each of Siddiqi's gurney. Talley placed Agnetha alongside it so that she could keep an eye on the sick man.

"A woman's touch, Ma'am. It's worth a deal of conventional drugs."

She gave him a tired smile. "I will do my best for him."

Nolan brought up the rear and was joined by Vince Merano. They walked along chatting quietly. "That was a nice job you did back there, taking out those hostiles. It was good shooting, Vince. Saved us a lot of grief."

Merano grunted. "It was easy stuff, Kyle. The fucking politics are the hard part. What do you reckon they're saving up for us next?"

"As the Colonel said, we'll be chasing down this Rahimi character. As it happens, I believe it's a good call. We can tie up the whole set up, kill Rahimi, and hopefully release Professor Bergmann. As long as they have him, there'll always be the danger of them restarting their attempts to make a nuke."

"Kyle, I must speak to you!"

They looked around to see that Dur had come alongside them. "My granddaughter, she will be wherever these men are. If we find them, we can release her."

Abraham Dur had deliberately fallen back to speak to them. "I can help you again. I am sure I can lead you to where this Rahimi has taken my Najela. To their base."

Nolan smiled at the old man. In truth, he felt exhausted. The ill effects of his weeks of too much booze and too little exercise had taken their toll, and the blackouts weighed on his mind every waking moment. There was no way he'd

admit it to anyone, even though he knew the platoon were worried, some of them angry. The old Afghan had recovered from his early exhaustion and was keeping up the fast pace as if he was a fit twenty year old. Maybe he should share some of his enthusiasm, even though he doubted the value of what he was suggesting.

How the hell could he know?

“We’d appreciate that help, my friend. I haven’t forgotten the promise to do our best to recover her.”

“You may not have, American, but I think the others do not remember the promises they made. I will never give her up, no matter what happens to me. Never!”

“I’m sorry, Abraham. The mission is not an easy one, and we’ve hit more than our share of problems. As well as that, the mission brief changed when we came across that nuclear project.”

“I have problems too. But when you need me, I will be here. You know the price for my help.”

Dur quickened his pace and caught up with the rest of the platoon, and for a moment, Merano and Nolan thought he was going to tackle Talley about the failure to free his daughter, but he just came alongside the litter and said a few words to Siddiqi. The Major was awake, but his words were slow and tortured. Literally. Finally, they reached the coordinates for the rendezvous and fanned out to form a defensive perimeter. All they had to do then was wait. The road from Adasabad to Asmar was a narrow, beaten track, barely wide enough to allow passage for a single truck. But where they’d arrived, south of the town, the road widened into a narrow circular plain, roughly five hundred yards in diameter, the ground covered in small boulders and shale. It was desolate and deserted. There was no noise, no birds

sang, no vehicles moved along the road, and no goats or sheep moved around the sparse plain, for they would have been noticed by the sound of the bells they wore around their necks. In the distance, to the south east, the looming mountain range of the Hindu Kush provided an awe-inspiring backdrop to the plain. To the west lay a low series of rolling hills, and to the other side of them lay the cities of Jalalabad and Kabul.

Abraham Dur was the first to hear the incoming aircraft. He stood and looked up at the sky.

“A helicopter comes from the south. It is strange, not a sound I am familiar with.”

They looked up, and less than half a minute later, his assessment was confirmed, a strange aircraft flying south from the direction of Kabul. Vince Merano was surveying the sky with his riflescope, and he identified the newcomer. It was no helicopter.

“It’s an Osprey. Jesus H Christ, I haven’t seen one of those in action before now.”

The two rotor aircraft finally came into plain view, and while they watched, its wings rotated, bringing the huge twin propellers up above the machine so that they could convert the fixed wing aircraft into a helicopter. The Osprey hovered over them, and the downwash from the rotors was like being in the teeth of a full-blown hurricane. They took shelter from the hail of stones and dust that the aircraft kicked up, until it finally descended gently to the ground. Nolan noticed the rear ramp was open, and inside a gunner sat behind an M240 machine gun, traversing from side to side as he searched for possible threats. The M240 was a belt-fed, gas-

operated medium machine gun firing the 7.62 NATO standard cartridge. The M240 had proved itself to be a reliable and hard-hitting weapon, used in vehicles and as a door gun in rotorcraft. The Osprey, the Bell Boeing V22, was fascinating, a tilt-rotor aircraft with both a vertical takeoff and landing and short takeoff and landing capability. It was designed to combine the functionality of a conventional helicopter with the long-range, high-speed cruise performance of a turboprop aircraft. At least that was the theory. The aircraft was large and impressive, looking almost futuristic. It had a longer range, much longer, than helicopters, and was much faster too. It could carry around thirty troops, getting them in and out of trouble faster than anything else in the air. Yet they all knew of its safety record. Too many of the new aircraft had suffered failures and crashed, and the loss of life was becoming apocryphal in the legends of the US military.

The engines shut down, and the powerful downdraft ceased. A squad of four medics rushed down the ramp, and Talley pointed them towards where Siddiqi lay on the gurney. Behind them an officer ambled down the ramp and walked up to where Talley and his men were standing. He was short, unusual for a marine on active service. His uniform was the standard American camouflage, MARPAT, a digital camouflage pattern in used by the USMC. It replaced the Camouflage Utility Uniform, and the pattern was formed by a number of small rectangular pixels of color. In theory, it was a far more effective camouflage than standard uniform patterns because it mimicked the dappled textures and rough boundaries found in natural settings. Not all of the marines on active duty were enthused about the new design, but this officer was clearly not one of them. His uniform was beautifully cut, the polished boots looked handmade, and on his belt he wore a regulation holster.

But the gun was anything but regulation. A Desert Eagle .50 caliber, sometimes used for special purposes by Special Forces, but this marine officer was not Special Forces. He wore the tabs of a full colonel on his collar, and before he opened his mouth, they knew exactly who he was, and that he had come to take over the mission. He took his camo hat off to wipe the sweat from his face, and they noticed he was almost bald. He had just a small half circle of blonde hair around the back of his head. Pale skinned, with freckles and a blonde mustache to distinguish his face; he could only be one man. He opened his mouth to speak.

“I am Colonel Eugene Waverley. I have been assigned to get this mission back on course.”

He surveyed the platoon with a sour face. “I know you’ve had a hard time of it, but I expect to receive some respect when…”

He was cut off before he finished as the Osprey began the start up procedure. There was a loud backfire from one engine, and black smoke partly engulfed the Colonel. The noise from the second engine was deafening, enough to prevent him speaking, and the downdraft from the swirl of the rotors covered him from head to toe in fine dust. He scowled as he waited for the aircraft to take off. Finally, the Osprey winged its way into the sky, and the plain went silent again. He continued.

“When a senior officer is present, I expect to see some respect accorded to my rank.”

He stared at the platoon, and they stared back. If he expected Lieutenant Talley to order the men to salute or stand to attention, he would be disappointed. They worked hard not to grin, but they’d been here before. Abe Talley had been a marine sergeant before he attended OCS, the Officer Candidate School, located at

Naval Station Newport, Rhode Island. He'd graduated with honors in every subject, and his career in the Navy Seals had been a foregone conclusion. But he'd seen both sides of the coin, so to speak. From the perspective of a ranker and an officer, and he hadn't always liked what he'd seen.

“Colonel, what the hell are you doing here?”

Waverley stared at him, unbelieving. “Lieutenant, you don't seem to understand the way military command works.”

“And you, Colonel, don't seem to understand the way the Navy Seals operate out in the field. Do you want to know what military courtesy we're going to show you?”

“Why don't you, Lieutenant Talley,” he replied in an icy tone.

“Looking at you, you're obviously not trained in this kind of SpecOp, behind the lines fighting. I don't know exactly why you're here, but I'd guess it's a last ditch attempt to get yourself a general's star by hitching your coat tails to a Seal mission. As you are here, we'll do our best to keep you alive, and that's by no means certain. An officer like you, with little experience of this work, is going to slow us down, and the chances are you won't make it back. All I can say is we'll do our best to keep you alive. Even though the chances are you'll die. Sir!”

He paused for effect, and the men tried even harder not to smile. Waverley had gone pale. Talley continued. “In the meantime, we need to know our orders because chances are you won't be alive for long, and we don't want you dying without telling us our new mission objective.”

Waverley was mute. It was clear that Talley had hit the nail on the head. He'd seized the opportunity to volunteer and come out here, hoping for a glorious

opportunity to advance his career and gain his first star. It was a mistake. Seal missions sure earned a deal of admiration, at least, when they were successful. But it was admiration that was earned after years of hard work, sweat and blood; and always a number of casualties. The Colonel finally recovered.

“Alright, Talley, we’ll forget the bullshit. I may not be the fittest officer in the country, or the best shot, and I admit I’m angling for promotion. But I’m not such a dumbass, as you seem to think. I’ve seen my share of action in the past, so I won’t get in your way. I have a deal of intelligence for you, and this neck of the woods is my specialty. Maybe we got off on the wrong foot, so let’s start again.”

The men relaxed. The Colonel would be a passenger, no question. But if he cooperated, that may be something different. Talley held out his hand.

“That’s a deal, Colonel. What have you got for us?”

Waverley took his hand and gave him a brief smile. He took a map out of his pack, together with a sheaf of documents. The map covered the area of the Hindu Kush, the mountain range that loomed behind them to the south east.

“We believe that Gemal Rahimi has gone to ground in these mountains, so…”

He stopped, as Abraham Dur collapsed into fits of giggling. It was a peculiar sound, but enough to put the officer off his stride. He looked at Dur.

“Who is that man? What is he doing here?”

“He’s an Afghan local, Colonel. He’s been helping us out with local intel.”

“Would you ask him what his problem is?”

Talley nodded at Nolan. “Chief, have a word with him.”

Nolan took him to one side. “What’s up, Abraham?”

“That man, he said that Rahimi is in the Hindu Kush. That is very funny. For

hundreds of years, those mountains have been the traditional hiding place of warlords and bandits operating between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Of course Rahimi is there, where else would he be? But it would take ten thousand men a lifetime to find him.”

Nolan stared at the clever old Afghan. There was something else. His expression was innocent, but something lay behind it.

“You know where he is, don’t you?”

He gave a small shrug and delivered a smile, screwing up his gnome-like face. “I am certain I know where my granddaughter will be. And yes, she will be with Rahimi, after she is given to him.”

Nolan pulled him over to where Waverley and Talley were talking. He ignored the Colonel.

“Boss, Abraham says he knows the whereabouts in the mountains Rahimi is likely holed up.”

Both officers looked at the old man.

“And where exactly would that be, Sir?” Waverley asked him.

Abraham smiled. “With my granddaughter.”

The Colonel sighed and raised his eyes upwards, as if he was dealing with a simple peasant.

“He wants her back, Colonel,” Nolan said before Waverley could sweep him aside. “What he wants from us in return for giving the location of Rahimi is a deal to get his granddaughter back.”

Waverley looked back at Dur. “Are you sure you can take us to his base?”

He nodded. “I am sure, but only in return for your promise to bring back

Najela.”

Waverley nodded. “Well, yes, we can do that.”

“Colonel, I have not met you before, but know this. A blood promise is a blood promise.”

“Yeah, okay.”

But Dur wasn’t finished. “In Afghanistan, we take a blood promise seriously. A blood promise concerns the life of a family member. Failure to keep your word, unless it is impossible to prevent it, means that your own blood will be spilt.”

“Now look, Sir,” Waverley began to bluster. “I assure you that the US military always keeps its word.”

“I am not concerned with the US military, only with you.”

He stared at the Colonel, who turned away, muttering about impudent natives. Nolan took Dur to one side.

“I guess you’re sore about us not getting Najela out of that town.”

“I know it was not possible. The enemy was too strong, and they took her away before you had a chance to reach her. It is not always possible to keep a blood promise, American, but in this country, it is best to remember that we take these things seriously.”

“If she’s with Rahimi, we’ll get her back, Abraham. If it’s humanly possible, we’ll do it.”

“I know that you will. It is that new man I do not trust. But because I believe you, I will help you once more.”

“So where is he, my friend?”

“Bring me the map. I will point it out to you.”

They hovered over the map that was pinned on the ground with small rocks to keep it still. He couldn't read maps in the conventional way, but they pointed out local towns, peaks and landmarks. Abraham pointed towards a small village up in the heights of the Hindu Kush.

“Here, this place is called Naveh. It is close to the frontier so that they can slip across to either side at will. His camp is just outside Naveh, about three miles away, so close that it is almost on the border.”

“How do you know this?” Talley asked him.

“I went up there once with a donkey train, carrying supplies to his camp. At the time I needed money to buy food, and they were looking for men to load and unload the donkeys. The place is very well hidden and well fortified. It will not be easy to get in there. Even Bin Laden and Mullah Omar stayed there for some time without being discovered. When we get near, I will show you the exact location.”

“We should assemble an Airborne Battle Group to go in there,” Waverley said thoughtfully. “If it's as tricky a target as you say, we'll need overwhelming strength to take it. I'd estimate a couple of thousand men should do it.”

“As soon as a force of that size starts to assemble, they will guess the target and disappear,” Dur said. “It will not work.”

“Is their intelligence that good?”

Dur grinned. “You use Afghans to do the menial work around your bases and airfields. Do you think that some of them do not report back to the Taliban?”

Waverley reddened. “I suppose so. Perhaps a drone strike,” he mused.

“If my granddaughter dies, you die. Besides, they are hidden in caves. A missile attack will not kill them.”

“Colonel,” Talley interrupted. “We’ll have to go in and do it the hard way. It’s just us. Otherwise, I suspect we will not even get the location out of this man. We have an assault team here. We can call in transport to an LZ close to the location and hit them before they even realize we’re there. It’s what we do.”

He stared at the map, seeing the markings that indicated the treacherous mountain they would need to assault.

“It won’t be easy getting there. I doubt a helicopter can land anywhere nearby.”

“Can you borrow that Osprey again, the V-22?”

Waverley nodded. “Yes, of course. I’ll ask them to take the woman back to Kabul too. I’m sure they’ll have some questions for her. But as for the mission, you know they can’t land the Osprey on a steep mountainside. It’s a clever concept, but not that clever.”

“We’ll use airborne rappelling, Sir. If the aircraft stays in the hover, we’ll descend to the ground on ropes. We’ve had a lot of experience and training in that technique. We’ll need a pilot who knows what he’s doing, of course. But it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“They’ll see the drop,” he objected.

“Not at night. And if there’s a wind, the sound will cover any aircraft noise from the enemy.”

Waverley looked paler than ever. “So let’s get this straight. You plan on a night rappel from a hovering Osprey, over a mountainside at night, and in high winds.”

“Exactly, Sir. We’ll manage.”

“And this man?”

He was looking at Dur, and he had a point. How the hell could they get an elderly man down a rope in such nightmarish conditions? It was Nolan who came up with an answer.

“We can winch him down, like the way we let down our supplies. It’s slow, but if it’s only one man, we can do it.”

Waverley coughed. “Ahem, well, I’ll be with you, of course.”

They gaped at him. “Sir,” Talley spoke firmly. “You haven’t trained for this. Just getting down onto the mountain will be tough, if not next to impossible, and the assault on Rahimi’s camp will be no picnic. I’d sit this one out if I were you.”

Waverley was ignoring him. “I’ve done rappelling before, naturally. I was younger then, but it shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“At night, onto a mountainside, in the middle of a gale?”

He shrugged. “It won’t be easy, no, but I have to do this.” He could see their eyes boring into him. “You think I’m just some chair-bound desk warrior, don’t you? All my life I’ve been good at the deskwork, it’s true, the behind the scenes stuff, and now it’s time to get my star. I’ve missed out on most of the combat experience that other officers had. Don’t you understand? I have to do this. It’s not just the promotion, I know the way you Special Forces see people like me. You should realize that you rely on the kind of information that we get to you men in the field. I need to get this mission under my belt, so there’s no argument. I’m going.”

“You could get yourself killed, Colonel.”

He smiled. “Then I’d be out of your way.”

“Or you could get the rest of us killed.”

He shook his head. “That won’t happen. And there’s one more thing, gentlemen. The reason why they asked me to come out here and talk to you, the reason that I have to go.”

“What’s that, Sir,” Talley asked.

“When you called in with that report of nuclear materials, it was quite by chance that I was the duty intelligence officer, and I answered the call. But my area of responsibility in Afghanistan is to assess any potential proliferation of nuclear threats. I have expertise in planning operations for tactical nuclear weapons, and I also possess detailed knowledge of their triggering systems. I have to go in with you and see what they have.”

They were silent as they digested the Colonel’s words.

“You’re serious?” Talley asked. “It really is your field?”

“It is. You know that the Brass have one big concern that overrides all others. Broken Arrow.”

Nolan looked up. “I thought Broken Arrow was when of our own nukes accidentally detonates.”

Waverley shook his head. “Not quite, not these days, Chief Petty Officer. It is a significant risk to the US if any nuclear weapon should accidentally detonate or go missing, for whatever reason. A weapon could be lost when the vessel carrying it crashes, for example. As you know, we call it a Broken Arrow scenario, and it’s the most serious military incident, short of all-out nuclear war. But things change, and the definition now broader. For example, if these insurgents got hold of fissionable materials, or indeed a complete ready-made weapon, the risk to us is similar. We don’t give a rat’s ass where the stuff came from. It’s preventing them from using it,

and getting it back, that counts. They've tasked me to prevent it happening. So when this job came up, you could say that for me, it was the right thing at the right time, even though I was very skeptical at first. Our intel had not reported any kind of a nuclear program inside the country, and that's why I wasn't inclined to believe you at first with this Plan Salah ad-Din nonsense. Or rather, I thought it was nonsense at first. Listen, I'll contact Bagram and ask them to make arrangements for the Osprey to be assigned to us. They'll give us what we want, believe me. I'm classifying this as Broken Arrow, and a lot of people will be watching us very carefully when I report in."

"There's one more thing, Colonel," Nolan stopped him. "You know they have a canary?"

"A what?"

Talley smiled. "It's what we call a hostage, Sir."

"Oh, I see. And?"

"The hostage is this lady's father. Professor Benjamin Bergmann."

"Bergmann? THE Benjamin Bergmann?"

"Yes."

"Oh, my, God. Bergmann could give them everything."

Agnetha had joined them. "My father will not give in easily to torture, I promise you."

"But if he does? What then?" He stared at Talley. "Lieutenant, we have to get this man out of there. And if it can't be done, you know what to do? The safety of the Western World could depend on it."

Talley nodded reluctantly. "I know what to do, Sir."

“You had your orders for the bombmaker, Lieutenant, and you failed to carry them out, as I recall.”

The young officer took out his Sig Sauer P226 and cocked the action. He handed it over to Waverley, who took it and held it loosely.

“If you’re that determined to carry out the order, she’s here right now.” He turned and pointed to Agnetha. “Kill her, Colonel. That’s what you wanted me to do, isn’t it?”

Waverley handed the pistol back. “Maybe you were right,” he muttered. “Perhaps because she was a hostage, I made the wrong call there, Lieutenant.”

“And because she’s a citizen of an Allied country?”

“No. Because she’s more use to us alive. In my world, the world of nuclear weapons, there are no enemies or allies. Only threats, to be neutralized if they become a clear and present danger.”

They had four hours to wait for the Osprey to return. Apparently, there was a problem with the interconnected prop shafts. The Bell Boeing V-22 was living up to its reputation as an unreliable aircraft, despite Pentagon attempts to prove otherwise. The V-22 squadron's former commander at Marine Corps Air Station, New River, had been relieved of duty after allegations that he instructed his unit that they needed to falsify maintenance records to make the plane appear more reliable. But it was an indication of the problems the Marine Corps had in getting the aircraft approved. Three officers were later implicated in the falsification scandal, but it was not the end of the troubled aircraft’s problems. It had also been discovered that the Osprey was incapable of autorotation to make a safe landing in helicopter mode if both engines failed. A Pentagon's testing source said that if the

Osprey lost power while flying like a helicopter below 1,600 feet, emergency landings were not likely to be survivable. A nice way of saying that engine trouble at lower levels resulted in the aircraft becoming a death trap. The Marine Corps worked hard to keep the Osprey well maintained and flying, and they checked the working parts minutely after every mission.

While they were waiting, Agnetha Bergmann came and sat next to the men, who were busy checking and rechecking their weapons and equipment. She spoke to Nolan.

“I thought I saw you do all this earlier, checking your weapons.”

“Yeah, we did. This environment is pretty hard on weapons and gear. The only way to stay alive is to keep up the checks.”

She was silent for a moment. “I sense a sadness in you, Kyle. Have you lost someone recently?”

He was about to say no, but for some reason he decided he wanted to talk about it. The others had drifted away, attending to their own affairs, and he was alone with her.

“Yeah, my wife, a few weeks ago. She was killed while I was away on a mission, just like this one.”

“I’m so sorry, that’s awful. What about children?”

“Two kids, they’re with the grandparents.”

“They must miss her a lot. You must miss her a lot.”

“That’s right, I do. Every waking moment.”

They were silent for a few moments. Then she moved nearer to him, and when she spoke, it was a murmur.

“Would you do something for me? You know they’re taking me back to Kabul, presumably for debriefing.”

“That’s right, they’ll have a lot of questions for someone who was at the heart of the Taliban nuclear program.”

“I’ll be happy to tell them anything I know. But when you get to this camp, Rahimi’s camp, there’s a chance my husband may be there. After all, he works for Rahimi. That is why they tied me to him.”

“Anything’s possible, Agnetha. You want us to get him out?”

“No, I want you to kill him.”

Nolan was stuck for a response. “You’re asking me to assassinate your husband? Can’t you just get a divorce?”

She laughed bitterly. “Most Muslim women dare not ask for a divorce. Thousands of Muslim women and girls are stabbed, burned, or maimed every year by husbands who believe they have brought them shame by being unfaithful, or seeking a divorce which they see as the same thing. If such a wife is killed, the crime becomes an honor killing.”

“An honor killing?”

“Yes, it’s an irony. Islamic society purports to shelter women, yet often condones all kinds of savage violence against them in the name of male and family honor. If my husband, Seyid Hotaki, is still alive after your attack, I would spend the rest of my life worrying and wondering if he was coming after me for revenge. The only way I can be safe is to know that he is dead.”

Nolan was still lost for words. Finally, he said, “Look, if I see this guy with a weapon in his hand, I’ll kill him. And if I don’t, one of the guys will do him. But if

he's unarmed, I'm sorry, but it wouldn't be possible to kill him. That's not what I do, what any of us do."

"Then I will have to be content with that. If you see him, you will know him. He's tall, very tall. About six feet six, with a big, black beard. Seyid has one feature that sets him apart more than his height, though. He wears a black eye patch. He lost an eye when a missile hit the convoy he was traveling in. He has sworn revenge on the West ever since. All he lives for is to kill Americans and Westerners, nothing more."

Nolan nodded. "I'll keep an eye out. He sounds like a nasty sonofabitch."

"He is also a sick-minded, perverted rapist."

The Chief didn't go down that road. The potential for embarrassment was too great.

Agnetha moved away and chatted with other members of the platoon, and he was left on his own. He took out his combat knife and a stone and began sharpening the blade, a soothing activity when under stress. Nolan carried a Ka-Bar, the classic and traditional Marine Corps bladed weapon. The iconic military fighting knife featured a seven-inch blade made of high carbon steel, hardened to resist breakage under severe pressure. The blade featured a razor sharp cutting edge, and a secondary edge above the prominent swedge, all hand honed and polished. He let his mind drift off, thinking of the good times with Grace and the kids. Once more his thoughts shifted to Carol Summers, the plucky San Diego detective. Would it be disloyal to Grace's memory if anything ever developed in that direction? Probably not, she wouldn't want him to spend the rest of his life in isolation, but that was something to consider for the future, if Carol was interested

in him, and if he ever got back. He knew that Talley hadn't fully explained the dangers of dropping into Rahimi's mountain lair to kill him and rescue Professor Bergmann. The journey in the V-22 Osprey would be a nail biter, as the reliability problems of the revolutionary aircraft were still an unknown. The night rappel would be fraught with danger, dropping down a rope from the rear of the Osprey in high winds when the aircraft would be unstable and hard to control. The LZ would be on an exposed mountainside, and they would be assaulting a facility about which they had almost no intelligence, only the word of the elderly Afghan. There'd been no indications that the Taliban or Al Qaeda had a camp in that area. It was all an unknown. It was also quite possible that Rahimi had the place rigged for demolition if he thought it was about to fall. That would be something to watch for, and he made a mental note to talk to the men about checking for mines and booby traps. And then there was the problem of exfiltration. They could drop down a rope onto a mountainside but not up it. SAR, search and rescue, employed simple techniques of winching personnel up into a helicopter, but a whole platoon on a windswept mountainside, when they might be under fire? It wasn't going to happen. It looked like it was going to be a long, cold walk back afterwards. He heard a loud noise and looked up to see the Osprey moving into the hover as it completed its long flight from Bagram to pick them up for the mission. The light was fading as night crept over the countryside like a heavy tarpaulin. It was time to lock and load, and time to finish Gemal Rahimi.

And Mohammed Gul, if he's anywhere in the vicinity, he's going down. It's just a question of when. And his boss, too, whoever that is. They're dead men walking.

Chapter Seven

They were wearing the tribal clothes they'd been in since they'd gone into action. Except for Waverley, who resolutely refused to change out of his camouflage uniform.

“This is official military uniform, Lieutenant. If the enemy captures me wearing this, I will be protected under the Geneva Convention, which I cannot say for you and your men wearing those Afghan clothes. You could be shot as spies.”

“Colonel, the Taliban and Al Qaeda never signed the Geneva Convention,” Talley replied with a smile. He neglected to add that American military uniform was so hated and despised by the insurgents that wearers could not expect to enjoy any kind of easy captivity. A quick death was the best a prisoner could hope for, yet most were subjected to appalling treatment. The jumpmaster came through from the flight deck.

“The Captain says we're ten minutes to target, Sir.”

Talley nodded. Waverley gave the crewman a black look for not offering him the info first, but he said nothing. They were all watching and wondering how he'd cope with the night drop. They checked their own gear, then each other's. Abraham said he'd be okay dropping down a rope in the dark onto a mountainside, and they'd no reason to suspect he wouldn't be up to it. He'd shown himself to be incredibly fit, with the strength and endurance of someone half his age. He'd given the directions to Rahimi's camp as best he could, and they'd calculated an LZ that would be approximately three miles away, and on a slope that would shield the

aircraft noise from the enemy.

“I cannot say more until we are on the mountainside, and I am able to recognize the ground. Besides,” he’d smiled at them, “without me, you will not be able to find this place. I would not wish you to leave me behind.”

Talley smiled back. “We wouldn’t dream of it, Abraham.”

“I need a gun, Lieutenant.”

He nodded. “I guess so, it could be hot down there. What did you have in mind?”

“A pistol, like the one you soldiers carry, the one with the large barrel that makes the bullet almost silent.”

“A P226 Sig Sauer with a suppressor? That’s a close quarters killing gun, my friend.”

Nolan smiled. At least the old guy knew about guns; the Sig Sauer P226 was the preferred weapon of most US Special Forces, and for one reason only. When you needed to kill someone who was nearby, there was nothing better.

“I plan to do my killing at close quarters.”

After they’d rooted around the stores carried in the aircraft, they found him a Beretta 92FS, the official service sidearm of the United States Military. Fortunately, this one was fitted with a heavy silencer. He seemed satisfied as he eagerly checked the load, sliding out the clip and peering at the mechanism with what was clearly long experience of weapons. He was an Afghan.

“Three minutes,” the jumpmaster intoned.

Talley leaned across to shout to Nolan. “Look after Waverley. Despite everything, he could be the key to this mission. We need his expertise to evaluate

what we find in that place.”

“I’ll do that, don’t worry. He says he’s done this before.”

“Not like this he hasn’t. Just try and stop him falling off a cliff.”

Nolan looked across at Agnetha. Someone had lent her a quilted parka to wear against the cold winds that swirled inside the cabin through the open ramp. She looked up and smiled.

“Take care,” she shouted.

He nodded. “See you back at Bagram.”

The forward motion of the Osprey eased, and the propellers screamed for lift in the thin air as the wings rotated, turning the aircraft into a helicopter as it prepared to go into the hover. The noise, which before had been bad, was now deafening. There were four coiled ropes fastened to a beam over the ramp. They stood up, and the first four men took a hold. The jumpmaster heard something through his earpiece and tossed the line over the side. Simultaneously, he looked across at them.

“Green light, go, go, go!”

There wasn’t time for conscious thought. Talley and Nolan were in the first group, together with Merano and Rose. Nolan was second in command, in case Talley met with an accident; the odds were not good on this kind of a rappel. Merano would set up a sniper position and cover them while they deployed. Waverley came next, sandwiched between the next four Seals, and Abraham was squashed inside the last squad. It was an operation they’d done many times before, and generally without mishap, even at night. Except that the winds were higher than anything they’d encountered before. And they’d not done this from an Osprey

V-22, where the massive downdraft from the twin rotors meant a drop through hurricane force winds. The ropes swirled, twisted and intermingled with the winds that swept the mountaintop; winds that were a powerful force impossible to counter.

Nolan was thrown across the snow-covered rocks by the force of the gale. He could see he was tumbling towards a dark, deep, shadow that could only be a chasm. He flinched as fire burst through his leg as it snagged on a rock, but he ignored it. He also ignored the agony that swept through the rest of his body from the huge demands he'd made on it over the past few days, and the blackness that threatened to swallow him during these past weeks since that terrible day. What was necessary was to stop his tumbling over the edge. There were two rocks close together, and as he was dragged over them, he frantically unslung his SWS rifle, using it to jam between the rocks so it acted as a grab bar. His arm was almost torn from his socket with the force of the gale, but the rifle held. Then the mountainside started to fade, as his mind started to lose it.

No, not now, if I lose it now, it's all for nothing!

He fought to regain full consciousness, and slowly it started to come back to him. He could actually see his rifle was bent with the force of holding his weight against the fall, but it had stopped him. If he'd gone over the side, he wouldn't have needed the rifle anyway. He ducked behind the rocks and started to crawl back to where the rest of the platoon had dropped. It was chaos; sheer, bloody chaos. The Osprey had ascended two hundred feet to remove the effects of the rotor wash, but the damage was done. He found Talley, and thankfully, he was unhurt. The Lieutenant was down on his knees like the rest of them, crawling around to check on the damage to his platoon. He turned as Nolan crawled up to him.

“Any injuries, Chief?”

“Only to my rifle. I’m okay. How’s everyone doing?”

“So far, there are four men missing. And Waverley is dead.”

“Jesus Christ! I thought he was vital to assess the technical side of this operation.”

“That’s right, he is. Or he was, but we haven’t got him. He slipped on the line and came down the last twenty feet upside down. Broke his neck, and there’s another problem. Abraham is injured.”

“Damn, how bad?”

“Dave Eisner is looking at him now.”

Both men looked around the area they’d dropped into. The bleak mountainside covered with snow in many places, and in some parts the fierce winds had scoured the snow from the rocks, so they stood out of the white carpet, like so many rotting teeth. The howling gale made it hard to move and even to breathe properly. The moonlight was dim with only a quarter moon, and it was difficult to make out any distinctive features of their location. It was also bitterly cold. They crawled over to a sheltered spot twenty yards away where they’d dragged the elderly Afghan. They could see immediately he was in a bad way. Eisner looked at them and shook his head.

“How do you feel, Abraham?” Nolan asked the old man.

He tried to smile, but his teeth were gritted against the pain. “I am fine, American. Just a scratch, I think. But up in these mountains, it is the kind of scratch that I will not recover from.”

“Nonsense, we’ll get you out of here and to a hospital. You’ll be fine.”

“No, I will not be fine, American. I will never leave this place.”

Nolan and Talley exchanged glances.

“We need to know where the camp is, Chief. Ask him if he can still lead us there, he trusts you. Tell him we’ll carry him all the way. I’ll talk to the Osprey. They need to report back about Colonel Waverley, and we’ll need a fresh set of orders now that he’s gone.”

Nolan looked at his officer. “Boss, if we try to get him to show us the location of the camp, it’ll kill him. Any movement will kill him, come to that. We need to get him medevacked out of here.”

“He’s dying, Chief. You know that. Don’t you think he’d rather go, knowing that he’s helped us to destroy the people who took his granddaughter? There’s a good chance we might even get her back. Wouldn’t you want to go knowing you’d achieved that?”

Nolan nodded. “I’ll talk to him.”

He walked carefully back over to Abraham, trying to avoid slipping on the icy mountainside. “My friend, we need to know where Rahimi’s camp is. Are you still able to help us?”

Dur tried to move his head, but the pain was too much. He closed his eyes, and his lips moved. Nolan put his head closer to listen.

“Yes, I will help you. But I must have your solemn word that even though I will die here, you will lead my granddaughter to safety.”

“We’ve already promised that.”

“Yes, but now I will not live to see that promise kept. I must know that you will not fail me.”

“You have my word, Abraham. We will free your granddaughter.”

“Then I will lead you to his camp. Can you help me? I cannot walk.”

“Sure, we’ll fix up a gurney and carry you. Thank you, Abraham. You can be sure we’ll kill the folks who took Najela and bring her home.”

“In that case, I shall die happy,” he murmured, but then he slumped into unconsciousness. Nolan looked at Eisner. “Can you fix him up enough to get us there?”

“Yeah, I’ll give him some morphine for the pain, and a shot of something to bring him back to consciousness. But I doubt he’ll last long, not up here.”

“Okay, do your best for him.”

Eisner nodded. They felt the increased downdraft as the Osprey began to descend.

“What the hell’s he doing?” Dave asked. “I’m trying to keep this guy alive. They’re not helping by blasting a gale in this direction.”

Nolan crawled off, fighting the hurricane force crosswinds and the violent downdraft, to where the platoon was grouped around a rappelling rope dropped by the aircraft. Six of the men were holding on grimly to stop it being blasted skywards by the turbulence. Talley was watching them, talking into the mic to someone on the bird. The Chief saw someone rappelling down the rope. It was inexpertly done, so it looked as if they’d sent down one of the crewmen from the Osprey to make up the numbers. Shit, they didn’t need that. Every single one of the Seals on the mountain was highly trained to carry out this kind of mission. They didn’t need a passenger. The figure reached the bottom of the rope, and the men grabbed him and pulled him down to the surface to stop the wind and downdraft sending him

spinning into a chasm. Nolan crawled over to see the new guy, except that it wasn't a guy.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Agnetha looked up from where she'd been pulling off the harness. “They said your nuclear expert was killed, so I volunteered to take his place and check out the technical side of the facility.”

“You shouldn't be here!” Nolan exclaimed. “You've no right coming down on this mountain. This is a military operation, and a damn dangerous one. We don't need civilians to take care of. We've got enough to do as it is.”

She flared at him. “I have every right to be here, my father is held hostage by these people, or had you forgotten? And besides, who will evaluate the installation? Do you know what can be destroyed, or what can be removed? Are you an expert in fission weapons?”

“You won't do anyone any good, least of all your father, if you're killed,” he snapped back. They glared at each other for a few moments, and then he left her and went to check the deployment of the men. They were on a mountainside in the middle of a raging storm, but it didn't mean there weren't any hostiles around. He found Vince Merano. He'd climbed a few feet to a shallow niche in the rocks and was using his night vision gear to sweep the area.

“Anything?”

The sniper shook his head. “Not so far. I've swept the whole area, and there's nothing.”

“Okay, I'll go post the lookouts on the other side. I guess we'll be moving out in about ten minutes. Time is not on our side. We have to try and find this place

before dawn. You can see a long way in the daylight up here, and if we're spotted, we could lose this bastard. Rahimi is sure to have an escape route, and he could slip away if he thinks we're onto him. If he does that, he'll blow the facility, and they'll just start again someplace else."

"Who was that who came down from the Osprey?"

He told him about Agnetha.

"That's crazy. I thought she'd got away safe on the bird that brought us here."

"Yeah, me too." He noticed his friend's concern for Agnetha was more than just casual. "You're keen on her, Vince, aren't you?"

He sensed rather than saw his friend redden. "She's a nice girl. Yeah, she's okay."

"I'll try and make sure nothing happens to her."

"Thanks, Kyle, I'd appreciate that."

Nolan walked away. The hurricane force crosswinds were not so dangerous now that the Osprey had left. The strong winds had eased too. When he looked back, Vince was gazing towards Agnetha. Well, well. He wondered did the girl know she had an admirer.

Dave Eisner managed to rig up a lightweight gurney they'd dropped from the Osprey, and Abraham was as comfortable as they could make him, strapped to the fragile litter. A pole stuck up in the air with a drip bag. Nolan glanced at Talley.

"You think we'll manage to carry him this in these conditions?"

"We have to, Chief. It's that or we're lost." Talley shouted for Dave and the other three men to prepare the litter. "Pick it up, we're moving out."

They started across the mountain, but there was no need for directions; the

only route was a single path that led in one direction only. They were heading for an escarpment about five hundred yards away. The route was uphill, and the wind picked up again halfway there. Agnetha stumbled along behind the gurney, followed by the squad bringing up the rear. When they reached the ridge, they were all of them frozen with the bitter cold and biting winds, and yet the search for the camp had barely started. The effects of sub-zero temperatures, and the desperate fight just to keep moving in the teeth of the treacherous winds, sapped the strength and energy of all of them. They halted briefly while Talley consulted Abraham.

“We need to know where to go, Mr. Dur. Do you know where we are?”

Abraham’s eyes were closed. Talley looked at Eisner. “Dave, can you get him to wake up? We have to know where we’re going.”

Eisner shook him gently and bent down to look at his eyes. He looked back up, shaking his head.

“He’s dead, Boss. He ain’t telling us anything.”

All eyes were on Talley. They were on top of a mountain, in the middle of nowhere, and with no idea of where their target lay.

“I’ll contact base, see if they have any intel that may help us. You men better dig a hole in the snow and bury him, poor bastard.”

Five minutes later, the mission was as good as over. Talley was in despair.

“They can’t do anything for us at all. They’ve overflowed this area many times, yet they’ve never been able to get a fix on a single transmission that might triangulate to a possible target. There’s nothing that remotely resembles a camp or facility. Nothing.”

“Infra red?” Nolan asked. “That might show something up.”

Heat sensing technology was commonly used to find targets and was part of the mission profile of the reconnaissance and attack drones. But Talley shook his head.

“I asked, but there’s nothing.”

“I may be able to help.”

They all looked at Agnetha as she stood up from where she’d been slumped down in the snow, exhausted. Talley glanced at her.

“How can you help us? I thought you’d no idea where this place was.”

“That’s true. I’ve never been to their facility, but I’ve heard them talking about it often enough. Maybe I’ve picked up some clues, I don’t know, something that may fix a location. It’s worth a try. Can you contact your intelligence people direct, and I’ll give them every name I picked up, every hint and clue. Perhaps they can pinpoint a location from that. It’s their job, isn’t it? Aren’t they supposed to be intelligence people?”

Talley nodded. “It’s worth a try. I’ll get on to them.”

He keyed the mic and explained he needed the call relayed through to Military Intelligence, ISAF Headquarters, Kabul. It took half a minute to get through, but the sound was crystal clear.

“This is Major Knowles, ISAF Intel, Kabul. How can we help you?”

The voice was strange, a cut-glass English accent. Talley explained that he needed to pinpoint a location from chance names and words overheard in a conversation. The Major was doubtful.

“It sounds like a parlor game, Lieutenant. But fire away, and I’ll see what we can do with our computers. Oh, wait a moment, and I’ll get a line through to GCHQ

in England. They're the experts in this sort of thing. It might work better if your person talks to them direct."

For twenty minutes, Agnetha thought hard to recall every name she'd ever heard while her captors were talking. All the time they were getting colder from the inactivity, too cold. The men knew they'd have to start moving soon if they were to survive the night on the mountain.

"I'm sorry, that's about all I've heard," she concluded despairingly. "Oh, there was one word, a name I think, possibly a girlfriend of one of the fighters, Avizeh. But that's..."

"Did you say Avizeh?" The English operator's voice was sharp with interest.

"Yes, that was it. One of the men was talking on the phone. I'm sure that's what he said."

"It means 'the necklace'. It's a girl's name, but it's also something that came up on a SIGINT intercept. Hold on, I'll check it out."

Signals Intelligence, SIGINT, was intelligence derived from intercepted signals from cell phones, radios, and other electronic communications systems.

The GCHQ operator came back to them. "Yes, here it is. The Necklace, it's a string of huge rocks that form a circle on a plateau about five miles from your position. We located the place several months back and ran several satellite overflights. But there were no signs of life there, I'm afraid, so it may not be what you're looking for."

"Could there be a cave system in that area?" Talley asked him.

"Well, yes, of course. After all, Tora Bora is in the same mountain range, and that's where Osama bin Laden had his hideout after we came looking for him."

“Okay, can you let us have the exact coordinates of this place?”

“I’ll get on to it right away.”

“It could be the place,” Nolan murmured to Talley. “But if it isn’t, five miles in these conditions will be as much as we can manage, and we’ll be finished. That’s assuming that Agnetha even makes it that far.”

And if it looks like she won’t make it, we have to kill her.

“I know that, Chief. But it’s the only shot we have. If it doesn’t pan out, we’ll need to arrange for exfiltration and see about putting together another mission to find these characters.”

“By which time they could be long gone. If they blow the facility and move into Pakistan and go to ground, we’ll have problems getting to them.”

Talley nodded. “That’s true, but I’ve got a good feeling about this place. These bastards have always gone to ground in these exotic mountaintop hideouts. Didn’t Hitler have some kind of fallback position in the mountains in Southern Germany?”

“I think it was the Obersalzberg, the center of the Alpine Redoubt or something like that. Turned out it was all bullshit anyway.”

“Tora Bora wasn’t bullshit, Chief.”

“Let’s hope this ‘Necklace’ place isn’t either. It’s a long walk home.”

“Copy that. Let’s assume it’s the place and go in accordingly. I’m going to call up for a couple of IR passes from any Predators or Reapers they have in the area. You never know, if they check out the surrounding area, they may strike lucky. That’s assuming that there’s anything to display an IR signature on this godforsaken mountain. We’ll get moving in the meantime. We need to assign someone to escort the woman. It’ll be a long, hard, and dangerous trek for us, let alone her.”

“I’d suggest Vince Merano for that job, Boss.”

Talley looked at him sharply. “Vince? Is it like that?”

“I reckon so, or at least it’s developing that way.”

“Okay, he may as well take care of her. We’re a long way from getting out of here. The weather is bad enough, but if it worsens, we’ll have even more problems.”

They started marching across the snow, leaving behind two bodies buried in the snow, Waverley and Abraham Dur. Talley had carefully marked the coordinates of the bodies so they could be recovered later. They stumbled on in frozen silence, until they reached a point two miles out from Avizeh, The Necklace. They stopped for a brief rest, and a signal came in from Creech Air Force base in Nevada.

“We vectored a couple of UAVs to overfly your twenty, and we got a small IR return on those coordinates, Bravo. It’s a very small return, so it could be something, or could be nothing.”

“What kind of a return?”

“It was quick, just a few seconds. We had a Reaper overflying at extreme range, and they picked up something that could have been a person up there, maybe a sentry. But it could also have been a large animal. Sorry, that’s all we’ve got. Whoever or whatever it was got down under cover.”

“Can you keep those Reapers on station for the next few hours? We don’t know what we’re up against here.”

There was a pause before the reply came back. “We have one UAV available to remain on station. She’s an MQ-9 with sufficient fuel to stay with you. She’s armed with four Hellfire missiles and two 500 lb GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided bombs,

so we can put those munitions where you want.”

“Understood, Creech. If this is the place, we’ll be making the assault inside of two hours, so stand by.”

“Copy that, Bravo. If you find you need more strike power, there’s an AC-130 about a half hour out from your twenty. I’ll order the pilot to vector onto your position and stand by. Those babies pack a lot of killing power.”

The Lockheed AC-130 gunship was a heavily armed ground-attack aircraft variant of the C-130 Hercules transport airplane. The Spectre was armed with one Bofors 40mm autocannon, and one 105 mm M102 cannon. Powered by four Allison turboprops, they could travel long distances and stay loitering over the battleground for long periods. When they were called in to attack, the cannon and artillery fire was devastating.

“You better hope we’re on the right track,” Will Bryce smiled. He’d come up to join them while they formed the plan for the initial assault. “We’ll have some pretty awesome firepower on our side. We just need someone to shoot at.”

Talley nodded. “We’ll find them. I know we will.”

They had their first piece of luck a mile from the target. The MQ-9 Reaper loitering over the target area had narrowed its focus to the immediate area of The Necklace. Creech Control Center called in another stronger IR return, and the platoon immediately took more precautions against being seen. Chief Nolan took the point and went from cover to cover, minutely checking the ground ahead through his night vision goggles before calling the platoon forward. He’d taken Colonel Waverley’s rifle, an HK 416 that the officer had drawn for the mission. Waverley wouldn’t have any more need for it, he’d reflected at the time. It wasn’t a

sniper rifle, but if a long rifle was needed, Vince Merano could be called up from his escort duties at any time. A few minutes later, Nolan called Talley. He'd sighted the enemy!

"Boss, could you send Vince forward. There's a sentry up ahead, about three hundred yards. He's inside what looks like a natural pillbox, and he has vision over the whole area. There's no easy way to approach, not in a short time."

"Copy that, Chief. He's on the way."

Minutes later, Vince slid down beside him in the shallow recess he'd scooped out of the snow. Merano focused his Leupold Vari-X Mil-dot riflescope on the pile of stone up ahead.

"Yeah, I see him. He doesn't seem to be using night vision."

"He's probably smoking dope to keep warm. If he used night vision, he'd be having green nightmares."

"Right. I can see his face, but it's going to be tight. If he moves, I could miss."

"I'll be ready. If that happens, I'll make a direct assault on his position."

Merano looked at him dubiously. "That'd be risky, Kyle."

"Not as risky as him calling up his buddies."

"Yeah. I'll make sure I don't miss. Okay to take the shot?"

"Hit it."

There was almost no sound from the quiet, suppressed barrel of the SWS. Vince fired once, twice, and the distant figure was thrown back. Both men jumped up and ran forward to the observation post, but they needn't have worried. Both bullets had taken him in the face and killed him outright; his AK-47 assault rifle was lying on the ground, unfired. There was no sign of any communications equipment

in the post, no radio, nothing except an ordinary satellite phone.

“So the poor bastard had to drop the dime if he saw something he didn’t like,” Vince noted. He grinned. “It could be a problem if he’d gone to voicemail.”

“It could be a problem anyway. These things don’t work so well in the kind of weather they get in these mountains. Some of the time the conditions are so bad, especially during heavy snowfalls, they don’t work at all. I’ll keep this. Our people will want to analyze this little gadget. There could be a world of information on the memory chip.”

Nolan stashed it inside his pack, then turned to Vince.

“We need to push on before they realize we’ve taken out their sentry. At least this proves we’re in the right place. I’ll call Talley.”

The Lieutenant came on the commo. “Good work, both of you. Chief, see if you can locate the entrance to their base. We’ll stay two hundred yards back. We don’t want to warn them with a crowd. Call us when you have a visual on the entrance. When we know exactly where they are, I intend to use a standard assault team formation. You and Dan Moseley are the designated shooters. I’ll send Will Bryce forward. He’s the breacher, and Dave Eisner is to stand by as the paramedic. Vince, keep them covered with the long rifle. I want someone to watch our backs every moment.”

There was a grumble from Dave at the announcement. “Damn, Boss, I’ve done my stint of nursemaiding. I’m losing my killing edge.”

“Hey, Dave, we thought the nursemaiding was your killing edge,” someone muttered over the commo.

“Quiet, all of you. Zeke, you’re on the commo. Carl, as soon as we get in there,

start planning the demolitions. The rest of you, follow me, and remember, the Professor may be inside, as well as Najela, old Abraham's daughter. Agnetha will go in with the main force. She has an important job to do, so both you shooters make sure she's covered. Try not to kill any friendlies. We don't want any blue on blue accidents. That's it, let's go."

* * *

Fifteen thousand feet above where the Navy Seals prepared their assault, the AC-130 gunship flew steadily towards the target area. Captain Jeremiah, The Prophet, Edwards scoured the long mountain range they were flying over, using his array of instruments, radar, and IR packages to 'see' through the dark sky ahead and the cloud cover that blanketed the Hindu Kush. Edwards owned the nickname The Prophet, but it wasn't just because of his Old Testament first name. He was very tall and thin so that when he climbed into the aircraft, he had to contort his body to fit into the confined spaces.

"We're gonna need to go down and eyeball that place if they call us in. There's no way we can stand off and shoot, not in this visibility."

Lieutenant Pete Towns, the co-pilot, leaned across and nodded an acknowledgment. Unlike his captain, he was short and rather inclined to be slightly overweight, probably due to his appetite for the hot dogs he burned through whilst pursuing his mania for NLF during every off duty moment. But it didn't affect his flying skills, which were on a par with his skipper's. Almost.

"We're flying over a pretty awesome mountain range, Cap. The boys back in

the fuselage would prefer we don't fly straight into some peak. Like you say, the visibility is crap."

"Did I ever tell you the time I flew a Piper Seneca along the Grand Canyon in a rainstorm?" Edwards grinned.

Pete groaned. They'd heard it, a score of times. Usually, when their captain wanted to make some point.

"I don't remember. What about it, Skipper?"

"Visibility was crap, and I managed to fly out of there, it was like flying along the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel, with the lights off. We have to get sight of what we're shooting at, Pete. We'll have to use the night vision gear."

Towns nodded and pulled on the goggles. They flew on, and when they dropped down low, he'd be ready to take the controls, his vision ready adapted while the captain pulled on his own low light gear. Edwards clicked on the internal comm system.

"This is the Captain. We have a possible fire mission. We'll be operating at more than ten thousand, so make sure your oxygen is on stream. There'll be a mix of friendlies and hostiles, so when you shoot, make sure you know what you're hitting. We'll be using the Bofors, so keep the heavy stuff in reserve. On your toes, everyone, the word from the top is this one's real important. And I mean REAL important. Someone mentioned the possibility of a Broken Arrow scenario if we mess up."

Pete Towns stared at him. "Holy shit!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought. If we're assigned a target, I want it pasted, and I mean pasted. You got that, you guys on the Bofors?"

“Copy that, Skipper.”

He grunted contentedly. They were as ready as anyone could be who was about to start pouring it onto an unknown enemy amongst the peaks of a five hundred mile long mountain range. Edwards had a bad feeling in his guts. He was at the controls of one of the most lethal aircraft in the world, yet the mountains below were infinitely more dangerous than anything made by man.

Dammit, Broken Arrow! Now that's something.

Chapter Eight

Nolan and Dan Moseley waited either side of Will Bryce, who'd found a hefty chunk of rock to use as a ram. They'd crept quietly up to the circle of rocks and discovered that on the south side there was a narrow track, barely wide enough for donkeys. At the head of the track, between two particularly large boulders, the path ended at what seemed like a dead end, but a third boulder concealed the entrance. It was perfect camouflage, and a first class hiding place for the insurgents and their bomb factory. From there, they straddled the isolated border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and could resupply the operation from the south, ready to launch operations in the north, and into Afghanistan. There was space in front of the cave entrance for the three of them to assault the door side by side. The door itself was solid, made of hardwood and looked like oak. Will inspected it minutely, pressed against it, and then found his boulder.

“This'll do the trick. Just be ready when it gives.”

They both nodded. They had their HK416s ready, and both men had a full

complement of grenades tucked into their packs. The Afghan clothing was not ideal for the kind of operation they were going into. They needed the multiple pockets, straps, and webbing of conventional American military uniform. But it was all they had, and besides, it could give them a split second advantage when it came to close quarters fighting. Bryce took a step back, took a firmer grip on the boulder, swung it back then leapt forward, swinging the heavy rock to collide with the door using maximum force. The heavy oak didn't splinter, but the force sprung the iron catch, and it swung open. Nolan and Moseley charged through, safeties off, searching for targets. Right in front a man was dressed in warm clothing, carrying an AK-47, and walking towards them. His mouth was open wide with astonishment; probably the change of sentry for the man they'd shot. Nolan double tapped him, and the guy fell back, blood streaming from two wounds to the chest and head. They ignored the body and ran past into a wide tunnel that went deeper into the cave system. Will Bryce was close behind. He'd swapped the boulder for his HK416, and they could hear the main group under Lieutenant Talley entering the cave system behind them.

* * *

Gemal Rahimi watched as Professor Bergmann used heavily shielded gloves to lift the uranium out of the container and into the shaped warhead charge he had ready. The man had resisted at first, and privately, Rahimi was impressed that such an elderly man could be so brave as to resist torture for week after week. When they'd heard of the debacle in the town below, he'd given the order to increase the

treatment, and they'd gone to work with knives and cutters. After the professor had lost four of his teeth, wrenched out with pincers, four of his fingernails, and two entire fingers, he'd given in. They'd had no choice. With the woman gone, they had to persuade him to cooperate, or they might as well kill him. They didn't inform him that she'd escaped. Instead, they'd threatened to go to work on her fingers. Benjamin Bergmann was right handed, so they'd been careful to only dismember the digits of his left hand, but even so, Rahimi could see him flinching as the pain prevented him from doing anything at more than a slow pace. So far, he'd been working non-stop for the past fourteen hours. They'd had to accelerate the whole process, now that they'd lost such an important captive. Rahimi cursed his fighters once again for allowing her to escape, and for forcing him to concentrate his operation here on this bleak, freezing mountaintop. The facility here was not so advanced as the one in the town, and it had only been intended as a last ditch backup if disaster hit the main laboratory. The radiation shielding was insufficient to protect the workers against long-term radiation. He smiled to himself. Long-term was not a term that applied in the case of the people working in this place, and he reminded himself not to spend too long in the vicinity of the deadly materials. He had to keep himself healthy for the nuclear jihad he planned to unleash when they were ready. He looked up and frowned. The Professor was removing the material, not inserting it.

“What are you doing?”

Bergmann turned, his face pale and strained. “I, I thought it was inserted wrongly. It needs to be removed and replaced. The alignment, it is all wrong. If we…”

“Leave it! Or perhaps you would prefer to finish working without two more of the fingers from your left hand, or something worse, your toes, maybe? Believe me, Professor. You can sit down to work if you wish. You don’t need to stand.”

“Do as you wish!” Bergmann flared. “I’ve had enough. I won’t help you anymore.”

“I can arrange for the torture to begin on daughter, if you prefer, and she’d be nothing more than a pain-wracked, living corpse by the time they’ve finished. It’s up to you, Professor.”

“No, no, don’t do that. I will do as you wish.”

Rahimi watched him pass the container to one of the half dozen assistants working with him, all local men, recruited for the duration of this project. They were all held in this mountaintop facility until the job was ended, and all doomed once the radiation seeped through their bones and killed them. They would find a place in Paradise, he reasoned, so they had nothing to fear. He picked up the complicated electronics-arming package, plugged it into the diagnostic package, and read the details of its internal programming. A noise alerted him, and Rahimi looked up. He’d heard something out of place, and it sounded as if it had come from the entrance. Probably those damn Pakistanis he’d recruited to carry supplies up here on their donkeys. They were always arguing, usually over money. He’d go and sort them out. Perhaps if he killed one of them, they’d quiet down.

* * *

Nolan and Moseley ran past a cave that stank of manure, obviously the donkey

stables. It was the only way they'd get stores and equipment up this high. They heard a movement, a shuffling sound from the dark and noisome side cave. Moseley went left, Nolan to the right, and they leapt inside, guns ready. All that stared back at them was a long line of donkeys, maybe twenty of them, tethered to the wall of the cave. There was no human there, no attendant. Moseley, an animal lover, went up to the nearest animal. They were in a pitiable state, their bones showing through their hides, and running sores on their backs evidence of mistreatment.

“Don't worry, guys. We'll pay 'em back for you,” he murmured.

“Dan, we need to move!” Nolan pointed out in a quiet murmur. “We haven't got time for that.”

“Poor bastards.”

Dan followed Nolan out to the main tunnel that led into the cave system. Bryce waited for them, his eyes fixed on the dark recesses from where trouble could come at any second. At that moment, Talley and the rest of the platoon joined them, Agnetha was right behind him. Talley nodded at Nolan.

“I've left a couple of men to watch our backs, so we're clear to take this place down. Remember, Agnetha is here to uncover intelligence about the extent of their nuclear program, so don't destroy anything without her say so.”

“What about personnel?” Brad Rose asked. He was with Carl Winters and three other Seals who were to clear any hostiles so that Carl could plant his charges.

“Kill 'em all,” Talley said firmly. “Just watch for Professor Bergmann and Najela. That's it. Anyone else isn't leaving this mountain.”

“Copy that.”

Brad led them further into the cave system, and the rest of the men spread out to make a search. They were about to move out when an iron hatch swung open at the side of the tunnel. A startled face looked out and then disappeared back inside. Before he could slam the hatch shut, Will picked up a piece of rock and jammed it in the opening. With the hatch prevented from closing, Nolan ripped out a grenade, armed it, and tossed it through the narrow gap. The explosion shook the tunnel, and the rock trembled beneath their feet. Before the vibrations ceased, Nolan and Moseley were through the hatch, and Bryce followed them. They ran along a low tunnel, maybe five and a half feet high. They had to duck to stop banging their heads against the rock ceiling. The sub-tunnel ended at a room carved out of the rock, some kind of dormitory. The cave was about twenty feet long, six wide, and lined with bunk beds built on wooden frames. The dim light came from a rusty oil lamp hanging from one of the frames; maybe someone's reading light. Some of the men were scrambling out of the beds, and three of them were armed with AK-47s. The rest of them, maybe twenty or twenty-five, weren't obviously armed, but they had no way of knowing who was clutching a handgun at their side in the gloom. They opened fire. The short bursts of fire cut through the bunch of men. Nolan and Moseley targeted the obvious threats first, the men with the AK-47s. The Seals advanced into the room, cutting down the hostiles as they frantically tried to regroup. In the far corner, a group of four fanatics grabbed assault rifles lying next to their bunks and tried to deploy them, but Will Bryce was covering, and they went down in a hail of full automatic 5.56 mm gunfire. Nolan made a quick inspection of the room and shouted, "Clear!" They ran back to the tunnel. There was no sign of Talley and the main group, but the thunder of gunfire

echoed through the caves, and they ran along the tunnel to lend their support.

Talley had run headfirst into the main body of fighters who guarded the camp. There were more than a dozen men armed with a variety of automatic and semi-automatic weapons. AK-47s, AK-74s, the more modern Russian variant, and even a couple of M-16s began firing, and the Seals had to leap behind cover. Brad Rose ripped out a grenade and shouted, "Fire in the hole!" before tossing it in the direction of the enemy and ducking back inside cover. He wasn't entirely successful, and a bullet slammed into his side before he was safely out of the line of fire. He grunted as the pain ripped through him, but then he forgot about it. This was not the time or the place to seek medical attention. The grenade exploded. Talley jumped up, shouted, "Charge!" and led them forward. Most of the hostiles were down, wounded, and a couple dead from the explosion, but not all. Two men waited, and as he appeared, jumped out, and started to fire. The man behind Talley screamed as a bullet took him in the chest. He went down with blood pouring from him. The other hostile was cut down before he could correct his aim. A score of bullets shredded his body, and the corpse dropped to the ground. One of the men looked at the wounded Seal.

"Leave him, we need to finish this!" Talley shouted. "Keep moving. We have to find where they're assembling the bomb. Go!"

The squad rushed past, and more fighters pouring out to defend the complex were cut down even before they could fire a shot. Talley followed the men down the tunnel until they came to the next obstacle. Another heavy door, like the outer door, but this one had a half dozen firing holes built in, and the defenders were ready. The Seals ducked back inside cover as a hail of gunfire came from inside the

door. They were lucky. The defenders had opened fire too quickly, and Talley's men were able to duck out of the line of fire in time. But they were twenty feet from the door behind a bend in the tunnel, and with no cover between them and the door. Nolan and the other two men came up to join him. Talley glanced at them.

"We've hit a brick wall, Chief. They've got themselves dug in behind that door, and we can't get near it without being hacked down by the defenders."

"Is there any other way in?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it. We have to do it from the front."

"What about Carl? He could toss his charges at the door. That'd bring it down."

They looked at the demolitions man. Carl shrugged.

"I'm carrying five M67 frag grenades. They're anti-personnel, of course. They were intended to destroy the enemy's technicians if we found any. I guess if we don't use 'em, we won't even get to the technicians."

"Remember, my father is in there someplace, and he is a hostage," Agnetha said from the rear of the group. She'd picked up a pistol from a fallen enemy fighter. It looked like a Russian made Nagant M1895. Wearing Afghan men's clothing, she looked almost as warlike as the fanatics they were hunting. Talley turned to face her.

"We haven't forgotten, Ma'am. But this is a battle, and in battle there are casualties. Until we get to him, he has to take his chances."

She nodded. "I understand. Just be careful, he's an old man."

"We will. Carl, use the M67s, we're wasting time here."

Winters prepared the grenades, linking two together to form a more powerful charge.

“When these babies blow, the pressure wave is going to be something awful, so we’ll need to retreat down the tunnel as far as possible.”

“How much time will we have?” Nolan asked.

“I’m setting them for ten seconds. Any less, and we won’t get clear, any more and it’d give them time to come out and disarm them, or use them against us.”

“We can make the stables in that time.”

Talley looked blank. “Stables, as in horses?”

“As in donkeys. They’re back there. We’d be shielded from the main blast.”

The Lieutenant grinned. “That works for me. Do it, Carl. The rest of you, move back fast. When Carl starts to run, he doesn’t want a bunch of rubbernecks in his way.”

“Copy that,” Winters grinned.

The Seals ran back the way they’d come. Nolan led the way and then turned into the stable cave. The donkeys moved nervously at the unfamiliar people invading their space.

“Flatten out against the wall behind the doorway,” Nolan ordered. “It’ll shield us from the blast.”

As they were moving into position, they heard Carl’s shout, “Fire in the hole!” There was the sound of his running footsteps, and then he dived into the donkey cave, just as the frag grenades exploded. The pair of explosive charges sent a shock wave that reverberated along the tunnel, smashing into the Seals and almost bursting their eardrums. A hail of metal fragments and chips of rock whistled past them, followed by flame and smoke from the explosives. The charge had started a mini-tornado that surged through the tunnels, sucking the air from their lungs. The

Seals didn't wait. They were already moving when Talley shouted, "Hit them. Hit them now before they recover!"

They reached the door, or what had been the door. The grenades had demolished it, and behind it there were the bodies of eight fighters who'd been caught in the blast. They went straight past the corpses, and one of them moaned. He was still alive, and a Seal put a round in his head without even slowing. They ran on, and the tunnel opened out into a wide cave, a huge, underground space. Around the walls were benches piled with instruments and machinery, and in a corner a group of what were obviously technicians, cowered. Nolan, Moseley and Bryce ran up to them and checked them over. They were all unarmed.

"Hands over your head," Bryce bellowed at them. "Lay flat on the floor, and then don't move! That's if you want to live."

He didn't need to repeat himself. There were nine of them, and they instantly lay down and stayed still, their hands over their heads. Talley looked them over, but he was puzzled. The main players weren't there. No Gemal Rahimi, and no Professor Bergmann.

"Where is he?" he shouted at the men.

One of them glanced at a steel closet fastened to the wall.

"Keep them covered, Will."

He ran to the closet, covered the opening with his Sig Sauer, and looked inside. It wasn't a closet; the door led through to another room.

"What is it?" Talley demanded. "Where does it go?"

The technician who'd signaled it opened his mouth to speak. "It is the main..."

“Shut up!”

One of the prisoners sat up and glared at him. “Do not tell these people anything. American dogs, they will die if they do not leave this country. I tell you…”

It was as far as he got. Will Bryce casually shot him with a single round from his HK416.

“Take no notice, my friend. The Seals are in charge here, not Mohammed. Tell the officer what he wants to know.”

The man gulped. “It leads to the main administration complex. They keep the prisoners there, too.”

“Which prisoners?” Talley stared at him intently.

“The old man and the girl. The man is a professor, and Gemal hopes that he will help us build…” He stopped, realizing that things had changed. “I mean. He did hope that he would help.”

“How did they persuade him? I understand he refused.”

“We, they, they tortured him. Please, do not shoot me! I am only a technician. I am not a fighter.”

“That’s okay, buddy. We’re not going to shoot you.” He looked at the Seals. “Nolan, Moseley, take the point, see what’s through there. Remember, there are friendlies in there. If they’re still alive.”

“And Rahimi?” Nolan asked.

“Make sure he can’t do anyone any more harm. Fry him.”

“Roger that.”

They cautiously went through the steel door. It led through a short, narrow tunnel. Six feet further in, the tunnel opened out into a well-lit room. Nolan led the

way and reached the end. He poked his gun barrel into the room, and a shot cracked out.

“Rahimi, there’s nowhere for you to go. You’re finished. Give up the prisoners and we’ll let you live.”

“Talley said to finish him,” Bryce whispered.

“Yeah, I just lied. Won’t make any difference to him. He’s done for whichever way it goes.”

Rahimi’s voice came back to them.

“Come on in and take them, infidel scum. I’ll never surrender them to you. Never! I will die first!”

Nolan was priming an M84 stun grenade. When it was ready, he pulled the pin and waited. The M84 was known as a flashbang. Upon detonation, it emitted an intensely loud bang and blinding flash of more than one million candela and 170–180 decibels within five feet of the explosion. It was sufficient to cause immediate temporary flash blindness, deafness, tinnitus, and inner ear disturbance. With a second to detonation, he lobbed it into the room and turned away. Moseley had seen the M84 and was ready. He covered his ears and crouched out of the line of the blast. The grenade went off instantly. Both men jumped up and ran into the room, covering the inside with their assault rifles. The explosive had done its job, and they recognized Rahimi. He’d caught the full force of the blast and was kneeling on the floor, trying to favor his ears and eyes that had taken the full impact. Next to him was a radio transmitter, lying broken and useless. Nolan dragged him to his feet.

“The prisoners, where are they?”

The man shook his head. “No, no, I will not tell you.”

“It’s okay,” Dan called to him. “There’s a locked door here with a barred opening. I can see them inside.”

Nolan took a zip tie out of his pack and fastened Rahimi’s hands behind him. Then he jerked him towards the door and watched while Dan tried to open it. It was locked. He looked at Rahimi.

“Where’s the key?”

The man shook his head. Dan shrugged. “I’ll do it the old fashioned way.”

He held the barrel of his Sig Sauer against the padlock and pulled the trigger. The weapon coughed once, and the bullet punched out the mechanism of the lock. Moseley dragged open the door, and they went in. A woman was crouched over a man who lay on the stone floor. She stood up and looked at them; her face masked with fear.

“Najela?” Nolan asked.

She nodded.

“Your grandfather sent us here to rescue you. We’re taking you home.”

Her expression cleared to one of relief. “I thank all of you for coming. Where is Grandfather?”

Nolan was silent for a few moments. Then he shook his head. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. He didn’t make it.”

She shed a few tears, but wiped them away. “I understand. You will need to look at this man, he is very ill.”

“Is that Professor Bergmann?”

“I think so, yes.”

There was a cry from the entrance to the room as Agnetha came through to find her father. She looked down at him, and her face was a mix of concern and anger.

“Look at him. He has been tortured. My God, his hands, they cut off his fingers!”

They looked horrified at the old man’s left hand where two of the fingers were missing, as were the nails of the remaining fingers. She looked around at Rahimi.

“You did this?”

The man shrugged. “He refused to cooperate. He had a choice.”

She still clutched the revolver, her arm raised, and her finger tightened on the trigger, but Nolan was faster. He shoved Rahimi to one side and grabbed her hands, his hand clamped over the trigger. She struggled and shouted.

“Let me go, I want to kill him.”

“Agnetha, not now. Believe me, there’s a long queue of people would like to cap this character. Take care of your father, and we’ll decide what to do with him later.”

Her expression cleared, and she nodded her understanding. “You’re right. But this man will have to pay for what he’s done, sooner or later.”

“He will.”

They both whirled as a man charged into the room from a doorway they hadn’t noticed before. A huge man, six and a half feet tall, with a black beard and black eye patch. He was about to pull the trigger of his AK-47 when he suddenly saw Agnetha.

“You!”

She didn't reply, and this time no one interfered. She said one word.

"Seyid."

Then she pulled the trigger. His eyes widened, and he dropped the assault rifle. She pulled the trigger again, and again. Then Nolan put his hand over the gun and stopped her.

"Agnetha, what are you doing? Who was that?"

But he already suspected the answer.

"My husband. I just divorced him."

Rahimi watched it all happen, his eyes glistening with fanatical madness as he started shouting.

"You don't understand, you Americans. You think you have won, but you are wrong. Even now I have an army on the way to destroy you, all of you. And this facility will be rebuilt and go into operation in a few months. So you can kill me, go ahead. You will all be dead shortly, and we will kill the rest of you before the year is out. You are finished here, finished!"

His voice rose to almost to a scream. Nolan dragged him away and back through the narrow entrance to find Talley and the rest of the men.

"Boss, Rahimi here reckons they've got reinforcements on the way."

Talley looked concerned. "Do we know how many?"

"He says an army."

"They will kill..."

Rahimi slumped to the ground as Nolan's blow caught him on the head and knocked him unconscious to the floor. Nolan didn't look repentant.

"He was getting on my nerves, Boss. We need to get back to the surface and

signal headquarters. Maybe they can get one of the reconnaissance birds over to take a look.”

Talley nodded. “Good plan, Chief. Where’s Dan?”

“He’s back in there, with Agnetha and her father. They tortured him.”

“Bad?”

“Pretty bad, yeah.”

“Okay, I’ll take a look at what’s going down. You’d better take Will Bryce with you and go topside, see if you can get through to our people and get some intel on this ‘army’ he reckons is on the way up. Which side of the border would they be coming from?”

“Got to be Pakistan. If they were inbound from Afghanistan, our people would have spotted them.”

“That could be a problem. The Pakistanis have put a ban on our UAV overflights. See what you can do, and check in on Vince Merano, he’s keeping an eye on things up there.”

Nolan nodded, Bryce joined him, and they started back up the tunnel entrance to the surface.

They found Vince hunkered down behind a pile of broken rocks, twenty yards from the tunnel entrance where he could cover anyone who came near.

“Anything moving?”

Vince shook his head. “Not a thing. How’s things in there, is Agnetha okay?”

“We got them all, no problems. Yeah, she’s okay, but you’ll need to stay sharp. Rahimi said there’s an army of fighters on the way here. It could be we’ve bitten off something bigger than we realized. Will, would you set up the comms and try and

contact headquarters. We'll see what they have to say. We could do with some eyes in the sky here."

Bryce nodded and deployed their lightweight encrypted commlink. He erected the tiny folding dish, switched on the set, and the mesh rotated to point at the nearest satellite.

"This is Bravo, this is Bravo. Authenticate."

"Authenticated Bravo, reading you loud and clear."

"Request confirmation of our coordinates, and aerial reconnaissance to search for possible hostiles en route to our position."

There was a pause as the operator checked the coordinates. "Bravo, you are within a mile of the Pakistan border. Current restrictions prevent UAV overflights over the border. We can only check out the Afghan side."

"Negative, likely hostile approach will be from Pakistan. Is there anything else you can use?"

"I'll check with our intel people. Standby."

While they waited, they watched the first fingers of dawn start to thread through the sky.

"It ain't gonna make it any easier," Will murmured. "Daylight will put a lot of advantages back to the enemy."

"If there are any," Nolan reminded him. "We've only got Rahimi's say so."

"I've been out here thinking while you guys went in there. This is so important to them, so they must have some kind of backup in case of attack. I'd put my money on a unit being held in reserve, probably a good few of them. Do you think they got a call out?"

Nolan nodded. “Rahimi probably, he’d been using a radio when we threw in the flashbang.”

Vince shrugged. “Then my guess is we’ve got trouble on the way. I reckon me and ole Betsy here are gonna see some action real soon.”

Nolan smiled. “I think we’ll need more than that if they send an army. We’d better hope they’ve got some aerial assets around. We’re sure gonna need them,” Will concluded.

At that moment, the encrypted commlink came to life.

“This is Bagram Control, do you read, Bravo?”

Will clicked the mic. “Bravo, reading you five by five, go ahead.”

“We received your request for assistance, and we have an AC-130 Spectre that should be available. We’re attempting to get permission from the Pakistanis for an overflight. The aircraft should be with you in about a half hour. Stand by for next contact from the aircraft.”

“Roger that, Bagram.”

“What the hell does ‘should be available’ mean?” Vince asked.

“They’ll get here,” Nolan said. “They have to. They won’t leave us without air cover.”

No one replied. Politics was a funny game. If the Pakistanis said no, they wouldn’t be the first outfit to be left hanging. They waited in the cold, silent dawn. Nothing moved, save for the wind that still blew strongly. Then the commlink came back to life.

“Bravo, we have a negative from the Pakistanis. I say again, a negative.”

“Will, let me have it,” Nolan exclaimed. Bryce handed the comms to him, and

he clicked the transmit button.

“Bagram, this is Bravo. We have a situation here. Broken Arrow. I say again, Broken Arrow.”

“Standby, Bravo.”

They waited again. “Fucking hostiles will be on our backs by the time they get their shit together,” Vince snarled. “How much longer this time?”

In the event, it was only a minute.

“Bravo, confirm Broken Arrow.”

“Confirmed, that’s affirmative Broken Arrow,” Nolan replied.

“This is Colonel Phil Weathers, USAF, Bagram. We understood you resolved a possible Broken Arrow earlier. What’s going on, Bravo? You know something we don’t? You seem to be uncovering some heavy ordnance out there in the boonies.”

“This ties in to the previous operation, Colonel. They have a second laboratory right here, up in the Hindu Kush Mountains. And unless you want a fucking mushroom cloud over Kabul during the next few weeks, you’ll send that Spectre out to give us a hand.”

“Hey, take it easy, soldier. We’re doing our best. Are you serious about that mushroom cloud?”

“I’m Navy, not Army. And I’m one hundred percent, Sir. It’s a genuine call.”

“Jesus Christ. I’ll go and…”

The commlink disintegrated as a bullet hit it. The sound of the shot was loud in their ears, and all three Seals dived behind the cover Vince had prepared for his sniper stand. Another shot rang out, and then a fusillade of single shot and automatic fire.

“The fuckers are here, Chief,” Bryce muttered. “At least now we’ll be able to count them.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Nolan looked at him with a worried expression. “A pity we just lost communications with Bagram.”

“Aren’t they sending that Spectre?”

Nolan shrugged. “I’ve no idea, Will. You’d better let the Boss know that we’ve got a situation up here.”

Will ran to the entrance, ducking low to keep out of the bullets that zipped all around them. Vince was already shooting. He’d ducked into his stand and was picking out targets and knocking them down with single shots. There were plenty of targets. Nolan made a quick assessment, and there had to be maybe three hundred fighters who had come into view. The first wave had taken cover behind some nearby rocks and was sending devastating bursts of fire at the Seals’ position. Talley rushed out of the tunnel entrance, followed by a half dozen of his men. They made it to cover and the Lieutenant crawled over to Nolan.

“What’s the situation, Chief?”

“It’s looking like crap, Boss. They shot out the encrypted comms, so I don’t know whether they’re sending any help for us or not.”

“Numbers?”

The firing was increasing in intensity. “I’d go out on a limb and say at least a couple of hundred. These guys mean business, Lt.”

“Yeah, I guess they do.” He shouted over at Brad Rose, who was sheltering nearby. “Go and tell Carl to hurry with those charges, Brad. Then get everyone out of there. Leave one man guarding the prisoners and Agnetha and her father. We’re

in a tight spot here. And see if anyone down there has a satphone or any way of contacting the outside world.”

“Got it.”

PO3 Brad Rose dashed off, jinking from cover to cover until he disappeared into the tunnel entrance. The Seals had deployed around their position and were starting to return fire. But the enemy was all around them, and there were just too many. They quickly realized they faced the problem of Special Forces the world over – they were too lightly armed and carried little ammunition. It meant that a prolonged firefight against an enemy outnumbering them in any great numbers could only have a single adverse outcome. Nolan shouted to Will. “We need more ammunition. Check around the cave and see if there’s anything we can use. Grenades or RPGs would help.”

“So would a miracle,” Bryce muttered as he ran off. More of the Seals emerged and deployed. They had a dozen men returning fire, accurate, single shots that in most cases caused damage. But the muzzle flashes from the rocks that hid the enemy betrayed the huge force that was attacking them.

“They’ll hit us head on soon,” Nolan shouted to Talley. “Once they realize how thin we’re stretched, they’ll come straight at us.”

Talley nodded. “I guess you’re right, I’ll…”

He ducked down as a bullet chipped pieces of rock that sliced into his head. Blood streamed down his face, but he waved away help.

“I’m okay. Everyone keep firing, and make sure that your grenades are ready to use,” he shouted. “It won’t be long now.”

Brad Rose came out of the tunnel entrance and crawled across. He carried a

pair of AK-47s and a box of ammunition clips.

“I found these. There may be more, but I thought you’d need them soonest.”

Talley nodded at Nolan, who checked the loads and threw the assault rifles to two of the Seals who were reduced to using their Sig Sauers.

“I saved the best until last,” he shouted over the noise and took a satphone out of his pocket. “The battery strength shows charged, so we may be able to use it.”

Talley grabbed the phone. “Good work. Keep firing, and be ready with grenades if they try to rush us. I’ll try and get through to Bagram on that thing.”

He dialed the number he knew from memory for headquarters in Coronado, San Diego. It took a full minute before he was able to convince the rating on the switchboard that it wasn’t a hoax, and from there things started to happen. To give the Navy credit, it took them just over five minutes to patch him through to the USAF Colonel, Phil Weathers, in Bagram. He sounded puzzled.

“What happened, Bravo?”

Talley explained about the bullet in the encrypted commo.

“So you’re using a satellite phone belonging to the enemy?”

“It’s that or nothing, Colonel. Besides, the guy who owned it is dead, so he won’t be listening in. When those hostiles make a frontal attack, and it won’t be long before they decide to come at us, we’re toast. We need that Spectre.”

“Since we lost contact, he kept on the same heading, and he’s been circling over your position. Can you see him?”

Talley looked up. “That’s a negative, Colonel. Cloud base is pretty low. I’d guess no more than three thousand feet.”

“Right. He’ll be watching the action on infrared, so standby, and I’ll talk to

them.”

Talley waited a half-minute, and then a new voice came on.

“This is Major Brenner on unspecified mission over Eastern Afghanistan.”

Talley nodded. They were talking on an unencrypted phone, and one that belonged to the enemy. Whatever he said could be overheard, and maybe even recorded. Even so, the risk was slight.

“This is Lieutenant Talley, Seal Team Bravo. Can you see us, Major?”

“That’s affirmative, Lieutenant. We have a dozen shapes on infrared, around two hundred yards from a larger force we estimate to be about two fifty to three hundred. They’re the hostiles, presumably.”

“That’s an affirmative, Major. Can you help us out?”

“We sure can. We’ll do a low level pass for a visual confirm, wait one.”

The roar of aircraft engines sounded above the howl of the wind, and a four engine aircraft swept low overhead at about a thousand feet, then disappeared back up into the clouds. Talley heard the pilot speaking on the satphone again.

“We have visual confirmation, Lieutenant. We’re starting our attack run now. Keep your heads down.”

Talley shouted to the men that the aircraft was about to make its run, but just then they heard the shouting of hundreds of men. The insurgent fighters had come to the right conclusion and decided that the best defense was offense. Besides, if they mingled with the Seals, it would make it impossible for the Spectre to differentiate between friend and foe. Their position became a nightmare of incoming rounds, bullets chipped piece of rock and earth, and some found their targets.

“We have a man down, medics!”

“Brad’s down, he got hit. I think he’s okay, but he needs attention!”

The firing intensified as the fighters ran closer. They were little more than a hundred yards away, and almost too close for the gunship to target them.

“We have to pull back,” Bryce shouted. He was firing furiously using an AK-47 that someone had brought out of the tunnel. His HK416 lay uselessly on the ground, he’d fired off the last clip and it was out of ammunition.

Talley looked around at his position. Several men had been hit, and the incoming fire intensified even more as the enemy gained confidence with every step they took closer to the Americans.

Then the Spectre soared in for its second pass, the attack run. And everything changed.

Chapter Nine

Winds and storms had scoured the mountains for thousands of years, making minute alterations to the terrain with each passing year. But no storm had the fury or ferocity of the man-made storm that fell on the mountaintop, and on the attacking Taliban fighters. The single General Dynamics GAU-12/U Equalizer was a five-barrel 25 mm Gatling-type rotary cannon. The Equalizer cannon was based on the mechanism of the GAU-8/A Avenger cannon, but firing a new NATO series of 25 mm ammunition. Operated by a 15 hp electric motor, its rate of fire was limited to 1800 rounds per minute in order to conserve ammunition and reduce barrel

wear on the AC-130 Spectre Gunship. Each bullet was an inch in diameter and over five inches long, and weighed close to half a pound. The effect of the electric Gatling gun was literally devastating; a heavy, metal storm that fell on the attackers. With an effective range of twelve thousand feet, the Spectre's cannon was firing at less than a thousand feet as it made a low pass. The pilot set the AC-130 in a tight circle, and the computerized guidance system kept the cannon on target. There was no need to deploy any of the aircraft's secondary armament. The Seals stood and watched, for the incoming fire had died away as the hostiles died. They died where they stood, or hid under cover, or tried to run. But there was nowhere to run, and the massive fire smashed into their forces, shredding them to a mangled ruin. The Spectre finally disappeared into the clouds. Talley heard the pilot speaking again on the satphone.

“This is Brenner. We've got plenty of ammo if you can find us a target.”

Talley smiled. “Thanks, Major, but I think that did it. There's a bad case of lead poisoning up here. I think we're out of trouble.”

“Glad to be of assistance. You take care now.”

“Yeah, we owe you one, Major.”

“That suits me. We're always good for a Bud.”

“You've got it. Have a safe flight back.”

Talley signed off and got back to Colonel Weathers in Bagram.

“We're about finished here, Colonel. We'll blow the place and come home. Can you arrange transport? What about that Osprey?”

Colonel Weathers didn't answer for a few moments. When he did, his voice was somber. “I'm afraid that won't be possible, Lieutenant. We'll send a Chinook.

We have your position. Can it land where you are, or do you need to move someplace with a usable landing space?"

Talley looked around. There was a flat area with just a few rocks. They could clear those in a few minutes. He passed on the details to Weathers.

"Very well, the helo will be with you inside a half hour."

He ended the call and looked at Nolan who was standing near.

"Chief, we need four men to check the bodies and make sure there aren't any of 'em faking. Then we'll need another four to clear that space. They're sending a Chinook."

Nolan nodded. "That'll about use all our available personnel. Carl is finishing the charges inside the complex. I gather that Agnetha is still there, and she's keeping an eye on both Rahimi and her father."

"All? How many did we lose?"

"Six dead, three wounded."

"Shit! We'll need to get them ready to go out on the Chinook."

"Yeah, the bodies are all out in the open. The wounded are lying over there, near Vince, behind cover. Dave Eisner is attending to them."

Talley nodded. "I'll go and see them. Chief, would you attend to those other things. I'll talk to you later."

Nolan nodded and went to attend to his tasks. Talley went over with a heavy heart to inspect the wounded. Brad Rose was in a bad way. The burst had clipped him across the top left shoulder, four bullets that sloped down towards his right side. They were small, high velocity bullets, probably from a Soviet made AK-74. They hadn't noticed the lower wounds at first, as they were drenched with blood

from the first hit just below the shoulder. But the lower wounds were horrific, fluid was leaking out of the lowest one. The Seal was unconscious, and Dan had just finished injecting morphine to ease the pain.

“What’re the chances?” Talley asked.

“If that helo can land at a hospital with a top flight ER room, we might just save him,” Dave replied. “But it’s not looking good. He could go into cardiac arrest at any moment.”

“Is there anything you need?”

The PO2 looked up, the scar on his face etched particularly vivid from the strain of their recent battles. “Just the ER room, Boss. There’s nothing else can help him.”

Talley nodded. “I’ll get on to them and see how they’re doing, as soon as I’ve finished here.”

He checked the other two wounded, they were both in a bad way, but their wounds were not life threatening, not yet. As he walked over to the bodies, he heard the sound of a pistol shot, then another. They were finishing off any of the hostiles who were either faking or not yet dead. To leave the wounded on a hostile mountainside would be cruel, and getting treatment impossible; and to leave the unwounded behind to hit them again from behind, an act of martial folly. Nolan returned.

“It’s all being done, Boss. You want me to bring out Agnetha and her father?”

“Yeah, now would be a good time, and Carl, too. He should be finished.”

Nolan walked into the complex. It was now silent. Inside, Agnetha waited with her father who was sitting on the ground, moaning softly from the pain of his

wounds; and Rahimi. She had the pistol held on Rahimi, and Nolan gently pushed it to one side.

“I need a word with him, so keep that gun out of the way.”

She smiled. “Sorry, I was just making sure he didn’t try to escape.”

Nolan noticed that he had several bruises on his face that hadn’t been there before, but he made no comment. He had business of his own, and chances were that he might add to those bruises. Rahimi was sat with his back against the tunnel wall, an uncomfortable position with his hands bound behind him. He knelt beside the prisoner.

“Who provides the organization and resources for all this?” He swept his hand around the tunnel complex.

The man laughed. “I’ll see you in hell, American! You’ll never get anything from me.”

Nolan nodded. “Yeah, okay. We’ll see.”

He turned as Carl appeared. “I’m all done here, Chief. She’s set to blow anytime we want. I found a remote triggering mechanism. When we leave, I start the countdown, and she’ll blow in fifteen minutes.”

“Right, go and join the others, Carl. I’ll be out soon. Would you take the Professor with you?”

“Sure.”

He helped the old man up and shepherded him to the entrance. The cave seemed very quiet, abandoned, with a feeling of desolation. Nolan looked at Agnetha.

“You want to hurt this guy?”

She nodded vehemently. “More than anything you can imagine.”

“Right. I’ll go out and check that everything is ready to leave. You can start by cutting his balls off.”

Nolan took out his huge, heavy, razor sharp combat knife and handed it to Agnetha. She took it and looked at it reverently. “You will let me do this?”

“Sure. I want you to cut off his balls, and if he still won’t talk, you can take him apart piece by piece. We’ll take what’s left of it back to Bagram and bury him in the body of a pig, preferably one that died from a nasty disease.”

Rahimi’s face betrayed fear for the first time. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, I think I would. I’ll be back in five minutes. If you talk, I’ll let you go.”

“You’re bluffing,” the man said as Nolan walked away. He didn’t wait five minutes after he heard the first of the screams. When he reached them, Rahimi was moaning softly, blood was bubbling out of his torn crotch. Agnetha intercepted him.

“I couldn’t do it all,” she whispered. “It was vile, disgusting. It means descending to their level.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. As long as he doesn’t realize that, let’s see how he’s doing.”

He crouched down. “It’s up to you. Either you tell me, or what’s left of you will be buried inside a diseased pig.”

Tell me, you bastard! I need to know the name of the man who runs this outfit. Whose fund raising operation through running drugs resulted in Grace’s death?

He used his Sig Sauer to strike Rahimi in his wounded crotch, and he screamed again in terrible agony. The man mumbled something, and Nolan leaned

down to listen better.

“Faramarz Azizi, he is a Major General and minister in Karzai’s cabinet. He has an assistant, Abdul Walid, and between them they lead the Taliban faction inside the government.”

“Which portfolio does Azizi carry?”

“Defense.”

“Yeah, now that explains a lot. Azizi and Walid, got it. Where does the money come from? What’s the name of the guy who provides the money to pay for it all?”

“Mohammed Gul, may you rot in hell.”

“Yeah, I thought you might say that. I just wanted confirmation.”

“You said you’d let me go.”

“That’s right, I did.”

Azizi and Gul, two corpses that’re still walking. Not for much longer.

He took the knife back from Agnetha. With two quick strokes, he cut through the tendons of Rahimi’s ankles. Then he stood up and took Agnetha’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“You said you’d let me go!” he screamed from where he lay on the blood-covered floor, trying to move his useless legs.

“That’s right. Help yourself, buddy, you can go where you like.”

Score one for Grace. It’s a beginning.

They waited for a few minutes until the noise of the Chinook announced the arrival of their ride. They loaded in the wounded and the dead bodies. The rest of them climbed in as the ramp started to close. Carl Winters triggered the time delay detonator as the helo was lifting off. Just before the ramp slammed shut, Nolan was sure he could hear a shrill, terrified scream coming from inside the tunnel complex.

Or maybe it was just the wind. They climbed for height, the rotors clawing their way upwards through the thin mountain air. The explosion, when it came, was almost an anti-climax. They'd traveled several miles, and there was a faint 'pop' in the distance. A cloud of smoke poured out of the mountaintop. Nolan looked at Talley, and both men nodded. Mission accomplished. The Lieutenant went forward to the cockpit.

"Where are we headed? One of my men is badly wounded. We need to go to the best ER in the Kabul area."

The pilot, a captain, glanced at the tired, disheveled character still wearing filthy Afghan tribal dress. "That's tough. The best ER is in Kabul, the military hospital, but we're going straight back to Bagram, Lieutenant. Those are my orders."

He pronounced the word 'Lieutenant' so that the junior officer was in no doubt as to his lower rank. Talley just nodded. "Your co-pilot is currently in control of the helo, Captain, that right."

The officer nodded. "So?"

Talley screwed the barrel of his Sig Sauer under the man's chin. "I've got a proposition for you, Captain. I've got several men who can fly one of these helos, so we don't need you. I can toss you out and fly directly to Kabul, or you can fly us there."

The Captain shouted at his co-pilot. "We're heading for Kabul, Chuck. The Military Hospital."

The man looked across. "You sure, Captain? There's no helipad there."

"Land on the fucking car park, just get us there! And radio ahead. Tell them

we've got a serious casualty coming in. We'll need a medical team on standby, and they can clear a space for us to land."

The man looked at his senior officer, looked at the Seal with the pistol, then nodded.

"You got it."

The Captain looked at Talley. "I could have you court martialed for this, Lieutenant."

"Yeah, you could, Captain. But then every Seal in the country is going to be gunning for the man who was too mean to take their wounded comrade to the hospital and save his life. How would you rate your chances?"

They locked gazes for a few seconds. Then the Captain snarled, "Fuck you, Lieutenant."

Talley nodded tiredly. "I'm just too tired to care, Cap'n."

Two hours later they landed in Bagram, after completing the detour to the military hospital in Kabul. At the side of the main runway, they saw the reason for the absence of the Osprey. The wreckage of the twin rotor aircraft lay in an untidy pile, swept clear following a failed landing. After they'd seen to the dead and injured, Talley and Nolan, as the senior men, were directed into an anonymous office at the far end of the airfield, sandwiched between two cargo hangars. When they went inside, a full colonel waited behind a desk. They both came to attention. He nodded.

"At ease, Gentlemen. Take a seat. I'm Colonel Weathers." They waited for him to speak. "First of all, my congratulations on a mission that seems to have gone according to plan."

“Except for the men I lost,” Talley interrupted.

The Colonel nodded. “Yes, sorry about your men. Are you certain about the nuclear threat, it was real?”

“We have Miss Agnetha Bergmann and her father, Professor Bergmann, both nuclear scientists rescued from that complex. Yeah, we’re certain, and they’ll confirm it.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to them later. We need to find out who the hell paid for all of that stuff. It would have cost millions; hundreds of millions of dollars to pay for the materials to even start to build those nukes. The bribes alone to get hold of weapons grade uranium, is almost beyond belief.”

“I’ve got a name,” Nolan told him. “Before he died, Gemal Rahimi told me who was behind it. It’s the Defense Minister, Major General Faramarz Azizi.”

“Azizi! You’re sure?”

“I’m positive. Rahimi told me just before he, well, before he died.”

Weathers looked at him sharply. “You killed him?”

“No, Colonel. Like a good captain, he went down with his ship.”

Weathers looked puzzled, but didn’t pursue it. “Yeah, okay. Azizi could be a problem, a huge problem. Hamid Karzai isn’t going to like us taking down his Defense Minister.”

“Does he have to know?”

Weathers looked skeptical. “How could it go down otherwise?”

“I was thinking along the lines of an accident.”

The Colonel nodded thoughtfully. “Afghanistan can be a dangerous place.”

Nolan caught a ride out to the city and found his way to the military hospital.

He'd borrowed some clothes. The marines had lent all of the Seals a set of Marpat camo fatigues apiece. It was a relief to get out of the stinking rags that the Afghan robes had become and dress in the more familiar US uniform. And it was just as well, they'd have been less than happy about letting someone dressed like a local beggar into the gleaming hospital. Brad Rose had come out of emergency surgery and was in the recovery room. He was awake, and even managed a smile when Nolan came in to see him.

“How do you feel, Brad?”

“Like shit, Chief. Did we do it, did we finish those bastards?”

“Yeah, we finished ‘em, and that place is toast.”

Brad nodded and slumped back down, exhausted with even the effort of those few words. Finally he looked up. “What about Bravo, did we lose any?”

“We lost six, Brad. It was nearly seven, but you’re going to be okay.”

“Six! Jesus Christ, that’s losses of a third.”

“We’re Seals. It’s what we do. Shit happens.”

“Yeah. Until it happens again.”

He drifted into unconsciousness. Nolan made a vow there and then. It wasn’t going to happen, not again. No matter what it took. He left the ward, walked out of the hospital, and bumped straight into Lieutenant Talley.

“Boss! I didn’t know you were coming.”

“I came to find you, Chief. Let’s find a bar and have a quiet word. Somewhere where there are no ears to listen to what I have to say.”

“About what?”

“Azizi. He goes down.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

An hour later they made their way back to Bagram with the rough outline of a plan in place.

* * *

The helo landed in the desert, one hundred and fifty miles west of Kabul. Major General Faramarz Azizi stepped out, followed by his aide, Abdul Walid, and the troops lined up snapped to attention. Walid cut the usual theatrical figure in glistening Afghan ceremonial dress. His hand rested on the curved dagger as he followed the General, and if Azizi made any of them nervous, Walid made them doubly so. The hard, dark eyes in the lined, leathery face that had seen every horror ever perpetuated by man, screamed killer. The officer in command of the company, Major Omid Jalili, walked with the General and his aide, and Azizi inspected his men.

“What have you lined up for me today, Major?”

“It’s an assault on a suspected insurgent arms convoy, Sir. The enemy is approaching from the east, and my men will deploy close to the road in hidden trenches we have dug ready for the drill. I have arranged that you will accompany the convoy, so you will be able to watch the action from the best vantage point.”

Azizi considered for a few moments. Was this major reliable? Yes, he should be. Jalili was the second cousin of his brother’s nephew. The information he had was that Jalili was totally reliable. But still...

“Have you double checked that the weapons are loaded with blanks?”

“Yes, Sir, of course.”

“Do it again. Abdul, go with him and make sure.”

“Yes, General.”

A half-hour later, Azizi and Walid were in a Humvee heading toward the convoy’s start point. When they got there, there was an assortment of old civilian trucks, just as the Taliban would use to transport arms. His driver positioned the Humvee in the center of the ‘rebel’ convoy, and the group of trucks started their engines and drove off. He asked the driver of the Humvee, an Afghan Army sergeant, who was in charge of the trucks?

“I don’t know, Sir. It was supposed to be a platoon from our unit, but they were called out for an operation, and another unit took its place.”

Azizi grunted, perhaps he should find out more about this new unit. He took his security seriously. But time was running short, and besides, he was tired. He just wanted to get this over with and get back to Kabul. He thought about his new girlfriend, Amina; so young, and yet so skilled in the arts of lovemaking. Perhaps he would spend the whole night with her. He hadn’t planned to, but this exercise was tiring, and he was entitled to some reward. He looked around the dark, steel, utilitarian interior of the American made jeep. Then he thought of his ministerial Mercedes limousine. Yes, he deserved a reward for putting up with this level of discomfort.

“We’re nearing the ambush site now, General,” the driver called back to him.

“Very well. Keep your eyes on the road, and make sure you don’t collide with any of the trucks.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He looked at Walid. “Abdul, tomorrow we must talk. This Special Forces attack has set us back badly. Can we recover quickly enough?”

“We’re working on it, General. But it will be at least two years before we have a facility up and running again. And we need someone to run it, of course. Someone who knows how to build these weapons.”

“Cancel my evening appointments. We will talk tomorrow. Find someone who can work for us, and prepare a plan of how to get them here. Bribe them, kidnap them, kill their relatives, I don’t care how you do it.”

“Yes, General. It will be a pleasure.”

It happened quickly. The Afghan Army Company leapt out of their prepared positions and opened fire on the convoy. A truck rolled across the highway, blocking it so that the convoy was trapped. Another truck came up behind to prevent any escape back the way they’d come. Machine gun fire and single shots from assault rifles roared continuously as the ambushers busily fired their blank loaded rifles at the convoy. The men in the civilian trucks fired back.

It was well done, Azizi thought. Some of the ambushers were going down, shot by the return fire from the convoy. *Very realistic.*

“Is that blood on those men, Abdul? Are they using live rounds?”

Walid peered out through the window. “I believe it is, General. Yes, they are firing back with live rounds.”

“I’ll find the man responsible for this and have him shot,” Azizi snapped.

“Driver, move around to the front of the convoy, and stay out of the line of fire.”

The driver fed gas to the pedal, but as soon as he moved, there was a crunching noise as a truck came alongside the Humvee and blocked it. Another

truck came along the other side and blocked it, too. There were trucks to the front and rear, and they were trapped. Azizi looked out of the window, the Afghan Company was falling back in disarray, and most had dropped their useless weapons and were running to a nearby range of hills; anywhere they could shelter from the gunfire.

“Get outside, Walid, and find out what is happening,” Azizi snapped.

“I can’t, General. The truck that is blocking us makes it impossible to open the door.”

“Try the other side, man.”

“It is the same both sides.”

Azizi looked out of the window and saw a man in Afghan robes carrying a metal box. The man ducked underneath the Humvee and then crawled away, without the metal box. Then Azizi knew. He shouted to the man who was crawling away.

“You! Stop! Do not do this. I am the Minister of Defense. I can give you anything you want.”

The man turned and stared at him. In a shocking moment of truth, Azizi saw it was an American.

“I know you can, Minister. In fact, we’re counting on it.”

“Quick, man. What do you want? What is your price?”

The General saw that there were more men looking in at the occupants of the Humvee. They were all dressed like the first man, and all were American.

“The price is you, General.”

They started to walk away. A few seconds later, the floor of the vehicle erupted

in a hail of hot metal as the bomb exploded.

* * *

Bravo Platoon watched dispassionately as the wreckage of the Humvee burned.

Talley turned to Nolan.

“I think we just tied off a loose end, Chief. Maybe we can go home. I reckon the job’s finished.”

“Yeah, maybe, maybe not.”

“There’s someone else?”

“This Mohammed Gul, he’s the last link in the chain. The guy who organizes the drug shipments to the US.”

“How’re you going to find him? Big time dealers like that are not always easy to locate.”

“He operates all over, even in San Diego. I reckon I’ll wait for him to come to me. I have unfinished business with that character.”

“If he’s the guy behind Grace’s killing, we all want a pop at him. Kyle, listen to me.” Nolan waited for him to continue. The use of his first name meant that it was personal business. “Don’t shut us out, Kyle. I’ve got a feeling there are a lot of our people who’d like to see that character pushing up daisies, only they can’t act until they can prove anything in a court of law. But we can handle it differently, like we did here.”

“Boss, I know you mean well, and I appreciate it,” Nolan replied. “But this is…”

“Different?” Talley interrupted him. “I know that. If it was my wife, and he was behind killing her, I’d feel the same way. I suggest we make a deal.”

Nolan gave him a suspicious glance. “What deal?”

“We help you pin this bastard down. And when we go in, his ass is yours. No arguments. But we can do a lot more together than you can on your own. For starters, I can access classified intelligence materials that may help us track his movements. But together we can take him down, and remove one mean motherfucker from the planet. We’ll do it quicker and better than you ever could on your own.”

He stared at Nolan, who shifted his feet, kicked a small rock away, anything to gain time to think. Then it came to him.

“You think I’m still fucked up from that period after Grace died, when I went off the rails?”

Talley wouldn’t lift his gaze. “You want the truth? Yeah, I do. These big time drug dealers are no easy target, and a lot of them are better armed and better trained than the insurgents here. Look at Mexico, they’re outgunning and outshooting the Federales and winning the drugs war. You’ve not been the same, Chief. You think we haven’t noticed you losing it occasionally? We’ve covered for you, don’t worry, but this could be biting off a bit more than even you can chew. You’re still not at one hundred percent fitness. Let us help.”

“I don’t need the fucking help,” Nolan fumed. “I’m doing this on my own, for Grace.”

“No! Here’s the deal. I made enquiries about this Gul.”

“You what?”

“Yeah, I knew you’d want to go after him. Listen, Kyle, I just lost six men, and if Brad hadn’t pulled through, it would have made it seven. As it is, he’s out of action for a few weeks, recovering from his wounds. This Mohammed Gul, he travels around with a whole pack of bodyguards, at least ten at the last count, Mexicans, Columbians, and a couple of Afghans. These guys shoot first and ask questions afterwards. The DEA has made a couple of attempts to take him down, and a few of their guys have been killed as a result.”

“I can take him.”

“Yeah, like I said, here’s the deal. I want you to spend a week with us at the Kill House. We’re due to go through the refresher course anyway. I want you to put in some time there and get yourself fit again. If they pass you okay, you can take down Gul, but we will help you.”

“I’m not as fucked up as you think, Boss.”

“Maybe, maybe not. You’ve worried me more than a couple of times, Kyle. You’re not like you used to be.”

Nolan thought back over the past few days. He knew he wasn’t a hundred percent, and he’d been close to blacking out on more than a few occasions. It was almost certainly brought on by stress, resulting from the death of his wife and his subsequent ruinous lifestyle. But even running at seventy or eighty percent, he could still take down the murdering drug trafficker. He shook his head. “I don’t need it, Boss. I can take him as I am.”

“In that case, Chief Nolan, you’re out of the platoon unless you join us for the refresher. I can’t afford to carry a passenger.”

“Passenger! Are you for real?”

Talley grabbed him by the shoulders. “Look, for God’s sake, Kyle. You’re our brother. Just for once, stop being a hard ass and let us be with you on this. We need you, Chief. You’re the glue that holds the platoon together. But you need this, so please do it. Do it for us, do it for the guys who didn’t make it. No matter how good you are you can always be better. True? The more you sweat in training, the less you bleed when the shit hits the fan. Right?”

Nolan grinned. “I guess so.”

“Please. Do it, for them, and for us. And for Grace.”

He thought about it for several minutes. Then he nodded. “Okay.”

Chapter Ten

They’d been back a week, and the Kill House was booked for the following day for the start of what promised to be a week of hard work and sweat. He was sat at the bar in Popeye’s, nursing a glass of beer. He looked around the walls, the peeling paintwork, and the old photographs, many of them signed. Fit, young men, holding a variety of weapons, the photos taken in a variety of theaters around the world. How many of them were dead, buried in some long-forgotten hole at the corner of some ancient battlefield? Like the six members of Bravo Platoon; except that they’d got full military honors and burial in one of the few places left at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego.

Had he put the mission at risk? He couldn’t answer that, he honestly didn’t know either way. What he did know is that his life had hung on a threat recently, first by

his own hand, and then during the recent mission to Afghanistan that could have gone either way. Maybe he was lucky. Yeah, a Seal needed luck, and plenty of it. In spades! He felt sure he'd get some answers in the coming week, and by the end of it be ready to take on Gul and his hired guns.

“Can I join you?”

He whirled to see Detective Carol Summers. Her cute freckled face was smiling faintly as she waited for his reply.

“Sure, of course. How's it all going, Detective?”

“It's Carol, or did you forget, already? And it's going fine.”

“Yeah, Carol, sorry. What'll you have?”

“Same as you.”

He called over to Art Winkelmann. “Another two, Art.”

The two foaming glasses arrived, and Art retreated to give them some space.

“What's going down?” he smiled at her.

“I guess I should ask you the same question.”

“What do you mean?”

She eyed him calmly. “I'm a cop, Kyle. You think I don't know what goes on around here? Six Navy Seals interred in Fort Rosecrans, that means something serious has been gone down to incur such heavy casualties in a small, elite unit. I know that you and your buddies have been away, so clearly you've been involved.”

“I can't talk about it,” he replied quietly. “You know that.”

“I do,” she nodded. “But you must have been in a tough situation for it to go that bad. That's no secret.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess you're right. It was pretty hairy.”

“Afghanistan?”

He shook his head. “Classified.”

“Right. So now you’re back, will you be here for some time?”

“We’ll be training for the coming week, over at Twentynine Palms military base. After that, I’m due some leave, and I’ve got a few outstanding matters to attend to.”

“So you’re going to the Kill House.”

He grinned. “I guess that’s no secret around here either.”

“No, if you’re a cop you get to know these things. Kyle, these ‘outstanding matters’, I’m not blind to what you’re trying to do. Let me help you.”

He smiled. “Why is everyone always trying to help me?”

“Because your friends are your friends, and they don’t want to see you run into problems. I gather your platoon have offered to help you with Gul.”

“I never said anything about Gul.”

“You didn’t need to. I knew you wouldn’t rest until you’d paid him back for your wife. It’s against the law, Kyle.”

“Yeah, so is killing people and dealing hard drugs.”

She stared at him for a few moments. “Would you do one thing for me?”

“Why would I?”

“Because I’m your friend, Kyle. I like you a lot, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Now it was Nolan’s turn to be silent. Finally, he looked at her through hooded eyes.

“I like you too, Carol, but it’s too soon for, you know...”

She nodded. "I know what you mean. I just want to keep you safe, that's all for the time being, anyway. This thing I want you to do, it's not much. I want you to let me know before you go looking for him."

"Who?"

She smiled. "You know who."

"Why would I let you know? You're a cop."

"Because I can tell you where to find him."

His eyes widened. "For real?"

"Yes. Our police computers keep a track of the movements of people like him. We cross reference with just about everyone, from the airlines to NSA intercepts. You name it, and we access and use it."

"This information, you know what I want to do with it. It's illegal in your world."

"I know that. I just want to keep you safe, that's all."

He turned to stare into her dark brown eyes. "I'm a Seal, Carol. Keeping safe is what I do."

"What about the guys in Fort Rosecrans?"

"That's the luck of the draw. When the shooting starts, people get killed."

"And I want to be sure you're not one of them. Will you call me?"

He nodded. "I'll call you, it's a promise. And thanks."

"Okay, I have to get to work now. I'm working through the night on a case that came up. Some girls working in a downtown brothel, we're trying to break up a white slaving operation. It's routine stuff, but these characters don't work daylight hours."

“It sounds dirty and dangerous.”

She grinned. “Nah, not these perps. The biggest danger is catching HIV, and believe me, we all take precautions on that score. So give me a call when you get back.”

“It’s a deal.”

She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Take care, Chief Nolan.”

He felt slightly embarrassed but pleased at the same time.

Easy does it, Kyle Nolan.

“You too, Detective Summers.”

* * *

The Kill House was, well, killing. For five days, Nolan sweated out the last of the crap he’d ingested into his system during the dark times. On the first day, they were assaulting the site of a potential nerve gas attack, an abandoned minimart. At first, it was going well. Nolan led his squad into the building, which was filled with tear gas to blind the ‘terrorists’ and enable them to overcome them and disarm the weapon they threatened to explode. They were equipped with gas masks, the M45 Gas Mask with fitted VPU, or voice projection unit. The M45 protective mask was the primary gas mask of all special operations forces in the US armed forces, offering incredible protection from chemical and biological threats. It was also very claustrophobic, not normally a problem for a Seal trained in underwater warfare.

“Secure this room,” he called out to his squad. “I’ll take a look into the next room. There’s no sign of the hostiles, but it's possible they may be in there. Will,

cover me.”

“Roger that.”

He rushed through, his weapon ready to open fire on any hostiles he found there. But the room was empty, except for a few battered chairs and an old wooden table. Smoke from the tear gas swirled around and made visibility a problem. He looked around and saw the stairs in the corner.

“Will, I’m going up.”

“I’m right behind you, Chief.”

He hurtled up the stairs and halfway up started to feel the old familiar feeling, everything was starting to go black. Please God, no, not now. But the Gods of war were not favoring him that day, and he woke up a half hour later, lying on a gurney and being tended to by an anxious medic.

“He’s awake.”

Talley came over. “You had us worried there, Chief. You gonna be okay to carry on?”

“It’s nothing. I’ll be alright in a few minutes.”

“This is a training mission, so yeah, you’ll be fine in a few minutes. In the field, you wouldn’t have those minutes to play with, you’d be dead.”

He stared at Talley, but there was nothing he could say. It was true. In the field he could have been killed, and even worse, let the platoon down. He made the only reply he could make.

“I’m sorry, Boss. It won’t happen again.”

Talley nodded. “I know that. I’ve increased the training to two weeks, to make absolutely sure. We can all use with some sharpening up anyway.” He checked his

wristwatch. “You’ve got ten more minutes, then get your gear back on, we’re going in again.”

When he finally got to sleep that night, he at least had the satisfaction of knowing that the blackout hadn’t reoccurred, despite several more hours of increasingly hard training, most of it wearing the respirator. He slept, for the first time, a dreamless sleep, and a sleep in the knowledge that maybe the worst of the demons were gone. During breakfast, Talley stood at the board placed near the dining table.

“This is the exercise for this morning. A Mexican gang of people smugglers has crossed the border, and they’re on the run after they were spotted by a recon helo. We need to round ‘em up. We’ve got a team of Deltas in from Fort Bragg, so look sharp. They’ll be looking to show us a trick or two.”

“What’s so special about these people smugglers?” Will asked him. “It doesn’t sound like anything we’d get involved in.”

“They took a hostage. The scenario is that after they ran, they came across a US congressman who was doing the rounds of the border fence. They’re threatening to kill him if we get anywhere near. When folks elect a representative, they don’t expect him to be kidnapped by these thugs. In real life, they’d call us in, or the Deltas, maybe. It’s too hot for the local SWAT teams. They’re not trained to operate outside of the urban environment.”

They drove out into the desert, and Talley briefed them before they made the assault on the ‘hostiles’.

“Remember, they’ve got a hostage, a VIP. So keep it tight, and make sure no one gets hurt, especially the congressman. Who, by the way is a real live

Representative from Arizona. He wanted to see how we'd handle something like this, so we offered him a front row seat. They're holed up in an abandoned gold mine, and our job is to rescue the hostage and kill the kidnappers."

"Kill them? What about giving them a chance to surrender?" Zeke Murray asked.

They all groaned, but Will Bryce answered the question first.

"The Representative is from Arizona, Zeke. He'll want to see a tough stance taken with these desperadoes. Besides, we've got a reputation to maintain," he grinned.

"Hooyah," a dozen voices shouted. Talley smiled. They were a first-rate fighting outfit. He hadn't received the replacements yet, and he knew they'd have to be way above average if they were to fit well into the Bravo Platoon way of doing things.

"There's one more thing, men. To make it a bit tougher, we'll be wearing respirators the whole time. We don't want these Deltas to think we're a bunch of pansies."

"Jesus Christ, Boss, the temperature will be over a hundred out there."

"Yeah, I know. So look sharp, and make this work."

Nolan felt a sinking feeling in his guts. The last time he'd passed out had been while he was wearing the M45 Gas Mask. He'd been okay afterwards, but was it going to happen again? Was Talley doing this deliberately, some sort of test to see if he was up to it? Well fuck him, he'd show him he could do it, out and back, all day and every day. A test, yeah, he'd show him.

The going was hell. They crept from cover to cover across the desert until they

were positioned outside the mine buildings. It was hard keeping the lenses of the masks from fogging up with the intense perspiration they generated, but it had to be done. In real life, if these characters were using chemical weapons, they'd have no choice. The Deltas were pretty casual, and as yet they showed no sign of having sighted the Seals. Then Nolan saw an airshaft; a hole in the ground two feet across, protected with planks of rotting wood. He nodded to the other three men in his squad, Carl Winters, Will Bryce, and Dan Moseley.

“We can go in this way. They won't be expecting us.”

“It's a tight squeeze,” Will said doubtfully.

Nolan grinned. He was a big man, but not that big. Fortunately, they couldn't read the grin behind the mask.

“You'll be okay, Will. If you get stuck, we'll pull you through, like cleaning a rifle barrel.”

“Fuck you,” he snarled. But there was an amused slant to his eyes behind the mask.

“Okay, let's go, I'll be first down there. Carl, you're the back marker.”

The ladder that led down the shaft was rotten, and twice he broke rungs as he put his weight on them. Disaster came when he was twelve feet from the bottom of the shaft, and a third rung broke unexpectedly. When he hit the next one, it broke too. He fell the last ten feet, which would not normally be a problem. But five feet from the bottom a piece of steel stuck out from the side, the remains of some old machinery. He caught his right arm in it, and the arm was stuck for a few seconds. Then he felt something give, and he tumbled the last few feet to the bottom. But he couldn't use his right arm, the pain shot through him when he tried to move it. Will

struggled down next and did his best to examine the arm.

“I think it’s broken, Chief. You want me to lead them in for the assault.”

Nolan gave him the go ahead, despite his disappointment.

So much for the test.

He swapped with Carl Winters and took the back marker, using his left hand to hold his weapon. In the close quarters of the mine, they all had sound suppressed Sig Sauers. Loaded with blanks, in this case. They came across the Deltas with their backs to them and guarding the entrance to the mine. The rest was easy, and they subdued them, freed the Congressman, and called in the rest of the platoon. Talley and Bryce went with him to the base hospital at Twentynine Palms and watched as his arm was X-Rayed and put into plaster.

“It’s a simple break, Chief Nolan, so you’re lucky. A couple of weeks, and you can remove that plaster, but you’ll need to be careful for the next few months. If you do anything too active, that break won’t heal properly.”

“I’m in the middle of a training exercise, Doc. I need to be able to keep going,” Nolan objected.

“The exercise is over for you, Chief. You’re officially off-duty as from now, so don’t even think about trying to go back.” He looked at Talley. “You’re his officer?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Lieutenant, this is a direct order. This man is not to go back on active service of any kind until I sign him as fit for duty. Is that clear?”

Talley nodded. “Got it, Doc.” He turned to Nolan. “Come on, Chief. We’ll get you home.”

They dropped him off at his house. The kids were with Grace’s parents, John and Violet, at their place, so he had the place to himself. When he walked in, the

sound of his footsteps echoed around the house. It was an eerie, empty sound, and almost as if, yeah, as if it was haunted.

Grace, I need you so much. Look at me, a useless cripple. I'm not even fit to avenge your murder.

He checked in the closets to see if there was a bottle handy, but his search came up dry. His in-laws were ahead of him. He smiled to himself. Maybe they were right, too. He went into the kitchen and single handed, brewed himself some coffee. Then he sat down, thinking. He was short of the use of his right arm, which was true. But he still had his left, and there were plenty of times he'd used it to shoot with.

No, I'm fooling myself. Dear Christ, I'm finished!

"Hi, the door was open."

He looked up. Carol Summers stood there.

Christ, she was pretty. That's some girl, for a cop.

"How did you know I was back?"

"A couple of guys from the platoon called by and let me know. Said you might need someone to make you a coffee." She looked at the mug of hot coffee next to him. "I guess not, though."

"No, but thanks all the same. I can make you one?"

She smiled. "That'd be nice, thanks."

She followed him into the kitchen. "So what are you planning to do next?"

He got the pot boiling and added the ground coffee. "I don't know." He held up the arm, lowering it as the pain overcame him. "How the hell could I take on someone like Gul, surrounded by a small army of mercenaries, and probably mostly former Special Forces trained?"

“You feeling sorry for yourself, Kyle?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the way you asked that question. Why not turn the emphasis around?”

“I still don’t get it.”

“What I mean is, ask yourself the question. How would you do it?”

He looked at his arm. “It’s impossible with this.”

“So you’ll just sit here and get bitter and start drinking all over again.”

“No!” He grinned to take the sting out of the single, shouted negative. “What I mean is, I’m past that.”

“Right. Gul’s coming to San Diego, and he’s due in two days time. You didn’t call, and I thought you’d want to know.”

He didn’t answer at first, couldn’t answer. Just hearing the name sent him into a killing rage. He finished brewing her coffee and led her through to the living room.

“Tell me about it.”

She nodded and sipped the coffee. “There’s a shipment coming in. We gather it’s huge. Only problem is that we don’t know where it’s coming from, only that his distributors are on the alert to pick up at least twice their normal amount of product. There’s so much money at stake that Gul wants to be here to oversee it, and make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“How will he get here, which airline will he fly?”

She smiled. “You’re joking, this is Mohammed Gul. He uses his own Gulfstream. He’ll land at San Diego, and his people will escort him to the main distribution point. And no, we don’t know where that is, so we won’t be able to

make arrangements to ambush him.”

“What about your department, are they planning to follow him?”

She shook her head. “San Diego PD, the DEA, none of them is interested. They say they have a watch on his known contacts, but so far he’s done nothing to warrant a major bust. There’s no probable cause to swear out a warrant, he keeps himself clean.”

“That’s crazy! Don’t they know what kind of thug this is? He’s a walking one-man crimewave. Drugs, terrorism, you name it.” He looked at her hard. “And murder!”

Carol Summers grimaced and shook her head. “Not according to the databanks. He doesn’t show as any kind of criminal, nothing proven, anyway. And you know how State and Government departments work. Strict rules of evidence, and in the case of Gul, there’s not much of that. In fact, there’s none.”

Nolan nodded. “Okay, thanks for the heads up. I guess I’ll take it from here. What’s his ETA at San Diego?”

She smiled. “Oh no, Mister. No way. If you’re going after Mohammed Gul, I’m going with you. You’ll need help, and I’m not about to see you killed.”

“You’re a cop,” he objected. “You could lose your badge if anything goes wrong.”

She looked him in the eyes. “And if anything goes wrong, I could lose someone who’s starting to mean a lot to me.”

He stared at her. “I told you, Carol, it’s much too soon.”

She smiled wearily. “Look, we’ve been through this. It’ll happen when it happens. I assume you do like me?”

He nodded.

“Good. I feel that same way. In the meantime, let’s try and keep you alive.”

In the end, Nolan surrendered. He needed her information, which was true enough. And he also needed her added gun. He was without the use of his broken arm, yet there was no time to wait for it to heal. They agreed to meet at her house in two days time, at eight in the evening. They’d just have to play it by ear and follow Gul to wherever he was going. After that, well, they’d see. As she left him, she gave him a friendly peck on the cheek.

“That’s just one on account. There’s more later if you play your cards right.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll handcuff you, and we’ll see where it goes from there.”

He felt himself redden, and she left without another word.

Forty-eight hours later, he parked in the street and knocked on the door of her house, a Craftsman style bungalow in one of the older suburbs of San Diego. He walked into the living room and received a shock.

“Hi, Chief. How’s the arm?”

Vince Merano, his sniper and opposite number, was just walking in from the kitchen with a mug of coffee. Lieutenant Talley was sitting on the couch, and Will Bryce, Dan Moseley, Zeke Murray, and Dave Eisner were sprawled around the room.

“What are you up to? What’s going on?”

Carol Summers took his arm and explained. “I called them, Kyle. I hope you don’t mind, but we couldn’t do this with just the two of us.”

“Hey, just because of my arm, don’t…”

“Chief,” Talley interrupted. “We’re your family. When you go into harm’s way, anywhere there’s a clear and present danger, we go with you. That’s the way it works. Besides, this Gul character was behind that trouble in Afghanistan. If we don’t stop him, he’ll just do it all over again. And you know what that means. His drug money gets a lot of our boys killed.”

Nolan looked at their faces. All he saw was calm resolution. And determination.

“You’re all crazy, you know that. You could all lose your careers, your pensions, everything.”

Talley nodded. “We know what’s at stake. But we’re going, and that’s an end to it. So let’s get down to the bottom line, how are we going to play this?”

Nolan sighed and nodded. “Okay, thanks for all your support. Gul’s Gulfstream is due to land at eleven thirty tonight, San Diego International Airport.”

“Right opposite our base on Coronado Island,” Vince grinned. “That’s as good as sending out a challenge.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Nolan went on. “The problem is that we don’t know where he’ll go from there. We do have one lead. Carol found out that he recently bought a yacht, one of those millionaire’s floating booze palaces. He has it moored in the yacht harbor at San Diego. Again, that’s opposite Coronado. If he stays on the yacht, and it’s a fair bet that he will, we’ve got a good chance of taking him.”

“I took the liberty of bringing along a chart, showing the exact mooring spot,” Detective Summers told them as she produced a large nautical chart. “I’ve made a notation to show where she’s tied up. I thought it might be useful. There’s something else I picked up too, a plan of his boat which we managed to purloin

from the ship's architect. It's amazing what just a mention of the Patriot Act will achieve."

They looked closely at the large-scale chart.

"It'll be straightforward if he goes there," Talley nodded, pointing at the harbor. "Any ideas on the number of his bodyguards?"

"Usually ten," Carol replied. "There's no reason to suppose this time will be any different."

"Hold it," Nolan interjected. "You're forgetting something. If he doesn't go there, we'll need to trail him."

"I think PO1 Merano has got some ideas on that score," Talley told him. He looked at Nolan's fellow sniper. "Vince, tell him."

"It's a gadget they've been working on. Basically, a tracker that's fitted into a small missile and fired from the 40mm AG-C/GLM grenade launchers we fit to our HK 416s. The round hits the target vehicle at low velocity and sticks to the bodywork. I'll find a good stand close to Gul's hangar, and as soon as I see which vehicle he's using, I'll fire the tracker. So wherever he goes, we'll not be too far behind."

"That's great. Just one more thing, when we do corner him, he's mine. Clear?"

They all nodded at Nolan. Lieutenant Talley spoke for all of them. "He deserves what he gets for all the bad things he's done, and you deserve to take him out for Grace. We'll just be there as backup, Chief."

"It'd be better if you ran the operation, Boss. More like the way we usually handle things. Let's keep it business as usual."

Talley nodded. "I'd be glad to do it that way. Okay, here's the way I see it.

There are eight of us, including Detective Summers.”

“Carol,” she emphasized.

He nodded. “Sorry, Carol. In the event that they go to the yacht, and it’s a good bet, I want two men to get into the water off Coronado and swim to the boat. They can approach from underwater and secure the vessel from the rear. Zeke, Dan, you men okay on that?”

“Sure thing.” They both nodded.

“Good. That leaves six of us. We’ll follow in two cars. I’ve got my Jeep Cherokee here, but I reckon the Chief’s Camaro is a bit conspicuous for this job.”

“I’ve got a Chevy Suburban out front,” Will told him.

“That’s great. We’ll split three men to a car for now,” he looked at Carol.

“Sorry, two men and a…”

“I’m okay with being one of the guys, Abe,” she grinned.

“Right. Three men to a car, and we can follow Gul’s car to wherever he’s going. We can use a simple Smartphone app to monitor the tracker, nothing special there. I suggest we move into position. It’s dark now, and we’ll be able to work undetected.” Talley started to collect the documents together.

“Boss, there’s just one thing we’re not clear about.” Vince Merano waited for him to stop and look back at him.

“What’s that, Vince?”

“As I see it, the Chief is going to nail this Gul character.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“What’re the RoEs for the rest of them, these bodyguards, I mean,” he looked at Carol. “We’ve got a cop along and all. We need to be sure.”

“I’d like to answer that,” Carol Summers answered him. Talley nodded for her to go ahead. “As far as I’m concerned, these people present a major threat to US security. I wasn’t entirely joking when I mentioned the Patriot Act. I gather that Mohammed Gul is financing terrorism in Afghanistan, I assume that would mean the insurgency?”

“That’s right, Ma’am,” Talley replied.

She grinned at the ‘Ma’am’. “In that case, they’re legitimate targets, all of them.”

“Carol, in this kind of mission, we’d call them by a different name,” Talley said to her. “If what you’re saying is what we’re thinking, we call them kills. Then there’s no room for misunderstanding.”

She thought for a moment. Then she nodded. “They forfeited all rights when they colluded with Gul to kill US servicemen. I agree, they’re kills. No argument.”

“That’s it then, no more questions?” Talley looked from man to man. “Right, we have weapons and equipment in my Cherokee. Will, you got anything useful in your Suburban?”

Will Bryce smiled. “Yeah, I brought along some ordnance, thought it might be useful, a few HK416s and plenty of clips, and a couple of spare grenade launchers with a batch of missiles. We’re all carrying our sound suppressed Sig Sauers, so I reckon we’ve got enough ordnance for the job.”

“Good. Let’s do it.”

A half hour later, they were parked close to San Diego International Airport. Zeke Murray and Dan Moseley were at the Seal base on Coronado Island, ready to swim across if Gul went to his yacht, or to jump in Zeke’s Corvette and follow if Gul

went someplace else. All they needed now was the main player to arrive on stage.

At eleven thirty, right on time, the Gulfstream G100 touched down and taxied to the private hangar at the far end of the airport. Gul had arrived.

Chapter Eleven

They climbed out of the vehicles and Vince went under the perimeter wire. He carried the HK416, fitted with the grenade launcher. It wasn't a job for the SWS sniper rifle. Instead of a lethal grenade, the launcher was loaded with the tracker charge. He found a stand close to the hangar and adopted the stillness that is the mark of the successful sniper. In effect, he became one with his surroundings so that the camo net that covered his head and rifle, and the ghillie suit, looked no different from the long grass he lay in. In the day, he was impossible to detect at more than twenty yards. At night, he was totally invisible. He watched the steps unfold from the executive jet, and four men came down them. They were all armed, and each man carried an HK MP5K, the short machine pistol that was deadly at close range. They would all carry hand weapons under the coats, that was a given. He touched the mic button to call the main party outside the wire.

“Parties disembarking. Four men, carrying MP5Ks.”

“Roger that.”

Then Gul came down the steps. He was a man of about forty years old, fit and tough looking. On his arm he had a young girl, maybe sixteen years old. She looked to be Oriental or Asian. She was tiny and beautiful.

The fruits of crime, Vince reflected.

Gul wore a five thousand dollar overcoat. The night was slightly chilly. The girl wore a silk suit that hugged her figure as if it had been hand made for her by a Paris couturier, which it probably had. Six more men followed him down, all armed with the same MP5Ks as the first four bodyguards. Vince called it in and then waited to see how they'd drive away. Two cars came around the corner of the hangar and stopped, a Mercedes stretch limo and a Jeep SUV, obviously a chase car for some of the bodyguards. Just before they halted, the scream of a passenger jet howled across the field. It was a perfect cover for the tiny noise his tracker would create when he fired. He pulled the trigger, and even though he was right next to the launcher, he had trouble hearing it over the scream of the jet. He keyed his mic.

“Tracker in place on the limo.”

“Roger that.”

He started to crawl back to the perimeter wire. It was time to rejoin the squad and see where Gul went. The next part was going to be interesting.

Talley was sat at the wheel of his Jeep Cherokee, watching his Smartphone screen. Vince opened the door and climbed in the back. Nolan watched him from the front passenger seat, and he sat down next to Carol Summers and Will Bryce.

“Any problems?”

Vince shook his head. “None. Are you receiving a signal?”

Nolan replied. “Yeah, the Boss is watching them now. The tracker's working perfectly. They're on the move.”

“I don't suppose they're moving towards the harbor?”

The Chief nodded. “So far, so good.”

“Come into my parlor, the spider said to the fly,” Carol Summers added, putting a smile on their faces.

Talley passed his Smartphone to Nolan. “You take it, Chief. I’m going to start up and follow. Let me know if their direction changes, but for now I’ll assume they’re headed for the yacht harbor.”

“Roger that, Boss. Time to let Zeke and Dan know?”

“Yeah, that’s an affirmative. It’ll give ‘em time to get into the water. Remind them they need to disable the yacht’s screws. I don’t want Gul taking off all of a sudden.”

“They know that, but I’ll tell them.”

He keyed his mic. “Bravo Two, this is Bravo One.”

“We hear you Bravo One. Strength Four.”

“Understood. Target appears to be heading for the yacht. The Boss says you can move out. Take out the screws first.”

“Roger that, Bravo One. Bravo Two, out.”

Talley drove out of sight of the Mercedes Limo and the SUV right behind it. “It looks like we didn’t need that tracker, Chief. It has to be the boat.”

“That’s good news. We’ll park out of sight, wait for them to go aboard, and then drive into the harbor as if we’re just another bunch of rich boatowners.”

“Will the guy on the gate go for it?”

Carol showed the Lieutenant her badge. “He’ll go for this. Police business should cover it.”

He nodded. “Remind me to take a cop along on our next mission.”

In the event, they drove straight into the yacht harbor without even being

asked to stop for their credentials. Vince climbed out to recon the yacht basin. He came back ten minutes later. Gul's people were all inside the boat, out of sight.

“Except for the one guy on watch. He's the only hostile I can see. Doesn't look like he's using night vision either, so we should be able to take him.”

Talley looked at Will. “You up to it?”

Bryce nodded. “Yeah, he won't see my big black ass until it sits on his head. Give me a few moments. I'll let you know when the job's done.”

Talley turned to Vince. “Set up a stand where you can cover us, Vince. We may need cover to get us out of here in a hurry if anything goes wrong.”

Merano nodded and loped away. Even with the HK416, his accuracy was devastating. Will stepped out of the car. He was wearing dark clothing and a knitted watch cap. With his black skin, he was almost invisible as he disappeared onto the pontoon that stretched out into the harbor like a long finger. Gul's huge vessel was the only one moored to it, so Will had no fear of bumping into an unsuspecting owner. The Seals saw the occasional movement as Bryce flitted past an overhead lamp, but it was like watching a ghost. If they hadn't known what to look for, they would have missed it. And for sure, the guard on Gul's boat wouldn't know what to look for.

* * *

Will reached the side of the boat, a one hundred and twenty foot ocean going motor cruiser. The guard was up on the flying bridge, which allowed him a three hundred and sixty degree view of the surrounding harbor. And blocked off a view of

the lower parts of the boat, from where any threat was most likely to materialize. He inched across the boarding ramp and hid behind the companionway that descended from the flying bridge above. Then he tapped the ladder twice with the barrel of his Sig Sauer. Footsteps sounded above, and a pair of legs came into view as the guard cautiously worked his way down the ladder to check out the noise. There was no need for a shot. Bryce used one huge arm to clamp around the man's neck. He hauled the man toward him and hit him hard on the head with the pistol. The body sagged. The man had lost consciousness quick enough that he didn't have a chance to cry out. Will hauled him behind the ladder and put both hands on his neck. A quick twist, a quiet snap, and the guy's bodyguarding days were over. Permanently.

“Bravo One, this is Bravo Three. Guard is down. No sign of further surveillance. I'm waiting under the ladder to the flying bridge.”

“Copy that, we're on the way.”

He watched them walk along the pier as if they owned the harbor. Five people, four men and a woman, out for a quiet stroll and returning to their multi-million dollar yacht. At one point, he thought he heard a splash around the rear of the vessel, and he smiled. He'd have to speak to Zeke and Dan. It was sloppy, as they shouldn't have made any noise at all. Then Talley and the others were walking up the gangplank and onto the boat. Quickly, they joined him in the shadows and started to remove the guns from the duffel bags. Will checked the magazine of his HK416. He was ready.

* * *

Nolan nodded to Will as they reached the darkness under the ladder. He gripped his Sig Sauer P226 tightly in his left hand, waiting for Talley to give the order. He'd thought about the choice of weapon, but when the action started he knew the pistol would be more suited to the close fighting on a yacht than a more cumbersome assault rifle. Besides, carrying a rifle presented a novel set of problems for a man with a broken arm. He recalled what Vince had said about the MP5Ks. It made sense to use such a short-barreled weapon. Little longer than a pistol, they'd be ideal for fighting in this kind of shipboard environment. He mentally shrugged. He didn't have machine pistol, so he'd have to make do with the Sig Sauer, which was itself a fine weapon. Earlier in the day, he'd armed himself with another, more basic weapon. He'd struggled to bend a steel rod from his workshop into the rough shape of his broken arm. Using heavy-duty glue, he'd fixed the rod along the inside of his arm, and then wrapped more plaster and bandages around it. He'd looked in the mirror, and it didn't look any different, just an arm in plaster. But if he swung the arm, it would do some damage. He looked around as Talley started to speak.

“According to the architect's plans, the owner's suite is underneath and slightly after of the main bridge. Chief, you go there with Carol. It looks as if we have accommodation forward and aft, so I'm guessing half the guards at either end. I'll go forward with Dave. I want Will to check out the aft cabins. We'll...”

He stopped, and they swung up their guns as a slight noise sounded close by. It was Dan and Zeke, wearing wet suits. They'd abandoned their tanks, masks and fins, and now they clutched HKs like the rest of them. They nodded to Talley. “All

done, Boss.”

“Good. Zeke, you’ll come with me. Dan, go with Will. He’s taking out the aft cabins. Chief, you want to go first?”

Nolan nodded. He looked around at Carol, and she gave him a small grin to indicate her readiness. Then he led the way through the main door into the superstructure. They were inside the main control room, and at the rear was a wide staircase that led down to the owner’s suite. They edged slowly down. At the bottom was a wide hallway, and in front of them, the door they wanted. Nolan listened at the door. He could hear someone speaking. It had to be Gul. He checked that Carol had her weapon ready, a Sig Sauer with a suppressor they’d lent her for the night, gripped his gun, and pushed the door open. He stepped in and came face to face with Mohammed Gul.

The man looked up. He was sitting on the bed, almost naked, just wearing shorts. The young girl was with him, lying down completely naked. At first, the drug lord looked irritated.

“Get out, you have no business being here.” Then he saw the pistols, and his eyes widened. “Who are you, what do you want?”

Nolan closed the door behind him. “Get up, Gul. Your girlfriend can get off the bed. Tell her to go hide in the bathroom.”

Gul spoke to her in a guttural language, and she got up and to a door that led off the cabin. Carol stopped her with a gesture of her pistol and checked it. She nodded to Nolan.

“It’s just a bathroom.”

The girl went in, and they heard her slide the bolt across. Gul glared at them. If

he thought they were here to kill him, his fear was well hidden.

“What do you want? If it’s money, I have plenty. Name your price to get off my boat before you get hurt.”

He looked at the door to the cabin and Nolan grinned. “You’re wasting your time, Gul, they’re not coming. Your people are being taken care of, even as we speak. You’ll be the next.”

“But why? I am a simple businessman. Tell me your name, and let us see if we can come to a deal.”

“Yeah, why don’t you hear my name? It’s Kyle Nolan. It won’t mean anything to you, will it?”

Gul shook his head. Nolan stepped forward, gripped his hair so that he couldn’t move back further, and pushed his pistol up into Gul’s mouth.

“You didn’t know my wife’s name either, it was Grace. When your men killed her in a drive-by shooting, she wouldn’t have meant anything to you. And I guess you didn’t know me, Gul, because if you did, you’d know I always pay my debts, always.”

“Kyle!”

A single word, whispered from behind him. The girl, still naked, had a small pistol pushed into Carol’s back. She’d come out of the bathroom with a weapon that had been concealed in there.

“Drop the gun!” Carol opened her hand, and it fell to the floor. The girl stared at Nolan. “Drop the gun and let Mr. Gul go, or I kill her!”

No one moved for what seemed like an eternity. Then Gul smiled.

“It seems we are at something of an impasse, Mr. Nolan. You kill me, and your

girlfriend dies. Why don't you just get out of here, and I'll forget this ever happened?"

Nolan ignored him. He was listening to the faint sounds of sound suppressed weapons that came from nearby. Gul's bodyguards had MP5Ks, without sound suppressors. So the Seals were cleaning up, all except him. He cursed his stupidity in not allowing for the possibility the girl could be more than just a whore. He looked around the cabin. It was well lit with large portholes. He could see the harbor quay clearly, and something else.

"Okay, Gul, we'll do it your way. You and Carol can edge slowly around. Carol comes to me, and you can go towards the girl. Let's do it. Make it slow, real slow."

The girl covered Carol as she moved around the cabin walls and nearer to Nolan. Gul moved away from him and nearer to the girl, and so the intricate dance proceeded. Impatient, the girl moved towards Gul until they stood together. The Afghan stood behind her and gently took the gun from her hand. He gave Nolan a triumphant stare.

"Now, put down the gun!"

Nolan looked at him. "Don't be stupid, you try anything, and I shoot her."

"So? You shoot her, and the girl takes the hit. Why should I care, there's plenty more where she came from?" The girl gave a small cry of alarm, but he just gripped her tighter. "Hurry up, put it down, or I start shooting."

Nolan ignored him. He relaxed, and the next step was as inevitable as the commercials that followed a TV episode. Gul smiled, gripped the girl even tighter, and raised the pistol. And died, as the bullet came through the porthole, fired from Vince Merano's HK416 that the Chief knew would be out there and covering their

asses, as ever. The girl screamed as she was showered with broken glass and blood, but she had no intention of giving up easily. She ducked out of sight of the porthole and lunged for the pistol Gul had dropped, sweeping it up in a fluid, practiced motion. Kyle stepped forward and hit her with his broken arm, grunting with the pain. The blow sent her staggering away across the cabin. She smiled, forgetting the sniper that had murdered her boyfriend. In full view of the porthole, she raised the pistol to shoot and died as Vince put a double tap into her. One shot into the body, the other into the head. She collapsed on top of Gul in an obscene parody of a loving embrace. Nolan relaxed slightly until he heard a burst of fire from above.

“Let’s get out of here,” he shouted at Carol.

She scooped up her gun, and they went out of the cabin door and up the stairs to the bridge. Talley was there with the rest of the Seals. He whirled as they approached.

“All done?”

Nolan nodded. “Yeah, Gul’s toast. Vince took him from outside.”

“Dead is dead, Chief, but we’ve got a problem. Two of the guards managed to get away, and they’re on top of the flying bridge. I doubt Vince can see them. They’ll be lying flat, probably behind cover. And they’re not amateurs either, they’re damn good. They won’t be easy to kill.”

“Why don’t we strike a deal? We need to finish this quick before there’s any real trouble.”

He talked rapidly to Talley, who nodded his agreement and called Vince on the commo. Then he shouted to the men outside on the flying bridge.

“You men, this is going nowhere, and the cops’ll be here soon. How about a

deal to get out?”

“Our boss will have you killed. We’re not about to make a deal.”

“Your boss is dead, along with his girlfriend, and the rest of the guards. All we want is to get out.”

There was a pause. They were obviously discussing it.

“What’ve you got in mind?”

“We’ll walk off the boat, half of us. When they’re clear, they’ll cover the second group who will leave. Then you can take the boat and get away.”

Another pause, and finally the man shouted down.

“Alright, it’s a deal. Walk off slowly.”

“Yeah,” Talley shouted back. “And make sure you hold your fire. Anyone shoots, and we’ll be over that flying bridge no matter what, and you both die like the rest of your friends.”

“We got it. Now move, before the cops come!”

Nolan led the first group while the others who remained held their weapons ready to leap up to the flying bridge and start shooting at the first sign of trouble. But there was none, the truce held.

“Will, you and Zeke get behind one of those iron bollards, and cover the Boss and the others as they come out. You got the launcher?”

“We both have.”

“Right, load for bear, on my word.” He keyed the mic. “Bravo Three, you copy?”

“Bravo Three, copy.”

“Load up the launcher with HE. The target is the flying bridge. Don’t shoot

until my say so.”

“Copy that.”

Talley came out with Carol and Dan Moseley. Once again the truce held, and they reached the cover with Nolan’s group. The Lieutenant looked around.

“We’re all back, Chief. This is the last stage. I reckon it’s your call.”

“Yeah.”

They watched the luxury yacht at the end of the pier. In the darkness, the superstructure hid the carnage that had covered the interior with blood so that it still looked smooth, powerful, and expensive. There was the noise of an engine starting up, then another. The two remaining guards were getting ready to leave. One of them ducked down and cast off the fore and aft ropes, then jumped back on board. They heard the sound of the reverse gear being engaged, and the engine revolutions increased as they tried to get the craft moving out to sea.

“She ain’t going anywhere,” Zeke muttered with quiet satisfaction. “Not with both her screws lying in the mud at the bottom of the harbor.”

Talley nodded. “Good job. Chief, now might be a good time.”

“Yeah, I reckon so. Bravo Three, you there?”

“Bravo Three, affirmative.”

He looked at Will and Zeke. “Ready?”

They both nodded.

“Fire, hit that flying bridge, everything you’ve got.”

The night was lit up with enormous flashes as the grenades landed on target, three shots, and then three more to make sure. The flying bridge was well alight, and in the blaze they could see the ruin of twisted metal that was all that was left of

the proud steering position. Already, the blaze was spreading to the rest of the yacht. Then there was an enormous explosion, and it seemed to lift the superstructure clean off the hull. The whole craft bucked up in the water, and then settled down. It was clearly sinking.

“We had some plastic left over from the underwater job,” Zeke explained. “We passed the engine room, and I planted a charge next to the fuel tanks. I thought it might give us a bit of a show.”

“Time to go, gentlemen,” Talley said to them. “I think we’re finished here.”

“One thing’s for sure, Gul ain’t coming back,” Will grinned. “You happy now, Chief?”

Nolan shrugged. “Yeah, and no. It won’t bring Grace back.”

The big black PO1 glanced at Carol. “That’s true, but I think there’s someone who might help to make things easier.”

Nolan felt himself flushing. “Will, it’s not that simple.”

“Tell that to Gul. He found out the hard way. You go and live your life, Chief. Do you think Grace would have wanted it any other way?”

“Let’s go,” Talley ordered. “I hear sirens. The cops are on the way.”

It was Carol Summers’ turn to redden with embarrassment as she ran along behind them, fleeing the wrath of her colleagues who were turning out to investigate the source of the bullets and grenades. It wasn’t everyday that a multi-millionaire’s toy burned out in the San Diego yacht harbor. The city fathers would be less than happy that their showpiece boating haven had turned into a clone of Sadr City, downtown Baghdad.

Chapter Twelve

She'd always wanted to see Afghanistan, a country that had a reputation for being as colorful and intriguing as it was violent, cruel, and oppressive. Nolan thought back to the way their relationship had developed several weeks before. The kids, Daniel and Mary, had been as adaptable as kids are the world over. Especially, when their father explained that his new girlfriend would not replace their mother. Carol had told them that she was there to honor their mother and to do as much as she could in her name. It took less than a half hour before the three had become firm friends. After they'd gone to bed, Kyle and Carol sat drinking cold beer in the living room. A soft jazz piece played on the stereo. It was a peaceful and idyllic way to spend an evening.

“You have any trouble with the kids?” he asked her eventually.

She shook her head. “Only the one thing. They asked me if I would ever arrest you if you did something wrong.”

“What'd you tell them?”

“I said that if you were bad, I'd have to put the handcuffs on you like anyone else.”

He smiled. “I guess so.”

“And you know what, Kyle Nolan?”

“What?”

“You've been bad. Shall I show you how I handcuff my suspects? Or would you prefer to show me?”

He laughed. "Are you always this forward with the criminals in your life?"

"Only one criminal, Mister. Now take me to bed and fuck the living brains out of me. I've been waiting long enough." She paused, and looked serious. "Kyle, only if it's okay."

He thought for a moment, and his look was equally serious. Then his face split in a smile. "Bring the cuffs, let's go."

He'd gone back on administrative duties, but his active service was off limits for the next six months because of the arm. In the event, Carol decided they needed a vacation, 'to get to know each other'. They'd discussed where to go. He'd hung back at first, but in the end had to admit that he'd like to just see Afghanistan, and visit the country as a civilian, not as a Seal.

"I'd like to see it too," she enthused. "Especially, as it's a country you've seen a lot of service in. I guess there weren't many good memories."

"No, not too many. But maybe there were one or two good things." He thought of Najela, the granddaughter of Abraham Dur. The old man had died in the effort to save her from the clutches of the Islamist warlord Gemal Rahimi.

"There's someone I'd like to see. She's a girl we brought out of the enemy camp, and she'd been kidnapped as a present for the warlord."

She closed her eyes. "Jesus, what kind of people are they?"

"No one you'd care to meet on a dark Saturday night. But they're the minority. The vast majority of Afghans are just ordinary folks trying to get on and survive in a hard land."

They flew out a week later and landed at Kabul International Airport. At first, it felt strange being 'In Country', yet without a mission and without even a sidearm.

They had a twenty-minute drive to the Kabul Serena Hotel, a modern building that so far had avoided the suicide bombers and mortar attacks that blighted the Afghan capital. Nolan left Carol in the hotel suite while he went to a pre-arranged meeting with a friend, a fellow Seal who was serving a tour in Afghanistan. They met at the back of a downtown bar, and the PO1 handed him a package. They exchanged few words, and Nolan left to return to the hotel. Carol was in the shower, so he checked out the pistol he'd obtained, a Colt Caliber .45, M1911 model. The PO1 had supplied it with two spare clips, which gave him a total of twenty-one rounds, seven in each clip. He tucked the pistol into his belt, and put the clips in his coat pocket as Carol emerged from the bedroom. She raised her eyebrows.

“Do you think you might need that?”

“This is Afghanistan. Who knows? But if the shit hits the fan, I'd like to think I could defend us.”

“Kyle, I thought we were here for a vacation,” she objected.

“We are. But everyone carries guns here, even the mailman.”

She sighed. “Okay, but let's try and steer away from the trouble spots. What have you got lined up for us?”

He explained about Najela and Abraham Dur. After they'd left, she'd gone to Jalalabad to live with relatives. Her parents were both dead, after they'd repeatedly protested to Rahimi about his abuse of their daughter.

“I just want to go and visit, see how she's doing. It'll be a chance for you to see the countryside between Kabul and Jalalabad, and we'll take a look around that city too.”

The journey to Jalalabad was not what she'd expected. They had a hired SUV, a

Toyota Landcruiser, and they occupied the center spot sandwiched between an Afghan Army Humvee and an American Infantry Stryker Armored Car; the hatch battened down, and the turret constantly swiveling as the gunner inside searched for targets. The convoy was a mix of civilian vehicles, supply trucks for the NATO ISAF forces, and Army escorts. The Afghan Army officer had reassured them that the road had been checked that morning for IEDs.

“It is completely safe, and you will enjoy your visit to the lovely city of Jalalabad. My brother-in-law runs a restaurant there. Here’s his card. He’ll give you the best meal in the whole of the city. Tell him I sent you.”

Nolan thanked him and tossed the card as soon as he’d gone.

“Do we have to travel like this?” Carol asked, looking at the grim array of armed and armored troops.

“It’s the best way. The Taliban and Al Qaeda are not too fussy where Westerners are concerned. If we were on our own, the chances are they’d start shooting, or more likely they’d take us hostage. You wouldn’t like spending a couple of years as the guest of the Taliban until someone decided we’re worthwhile enough to ransom. Besides, I don’t think a burqa would suit you. Blue’s not your color.”

“Definitely not,” she said adamantly.

After that, she made no more comments about the security.

Jalalabad was filthy, noisy, and dusty. They found Najela in the kitchen of a large house on the outskirts, and Nolan introduced her to Carol. Her relations had given her a job as a cook. She came out of the kitchen with a tray of cold drinks, fresh lemonade, and they sat in the garden. She looked fine. Well dressed and with

little of the half starved, terrified waif she'd been when they rescued her not too long ago.

"How do you like it here?" Nolan asked, anxious about her working in such a lowly job. But he needn't have worried.

"They are good to me. I have my own room, and they give me a wage. That is more than most women in this country have, so I feel fortunate. And you, Chief Nolan, have you recovered from your ordeal in my country?"

She was perceptive. It had been something of an ordeal, and a risk too, with the possibility of a blackout at any time. He suddenly realized that the blackouts had stopped totally; the death of Mohammed Gul had been a catharsis for him. But not a total catharsis, and it was good news about the blackouts. It was a part of his life he'd sooner not revisit. He looked back at Najela.

"I'm fine, yeah, good. But back to your own situation, is everything okay here for you? No problems?"

She hesitated. "Well, there is one small problem. An old friend of yours has been bothering me. He is the soldier who commands the City Defense Force. He wants me to, well, to spend time with him, and I do not like him. He seems to think that because I was Rahimi's whore, I could be any man's who wanted me."

Nolan was alerted. If there were someone who knew about Rahimi's personal arrangements, he would likely be an enemy. How else would he know?

"Who is he, this soldier?"

"His name is Siddiqi, Colonel Abdul Siddiqi." She saw Nolan's expression change. "You do know him?"

He nodded thoughtfully. "If it's the same man, yes. He was with us as a guide

on a mission before we got you away from Rahimi. He was a major then, and he was injured during one of our missions.” He grimaced. Tortured would be more correct than injured. But he didn’t need to go into that with Najela.

She described the man, and Nolan nodded. It was without doubt the same man.

Carol gave the girl a warm smile of encouragement. “Would you like Kyle and me to have a chat with him if he’s bothering you?”

Her eyes lit up in alarm. “I’m not sure that would be a good idea. He has friends in the local insurgent groups, the Taliban. If he tells them that two Americans have been interfering, they may well make my life very difficult. They can come down very hard on single women.”

Nolan absorbed her objection for a few moments. It seemed that Major, now Colonel Siddiqi, had connections to the Taliban. That was interesting, and it tied up with something he’d been told when they finished the mission to destroy the bombmaking facility on the mountain. Agnetha Bergmann had taken him to one side as they landed at Bagram.

“Mr. Nolan, that officer who was tortured.”

“Yeah, Siddiqi, what about him?”

“I’ve seen him before, with Gemal Rahimi.”

“Okay,” he’d nodded tiredly. “I’ll mention it to our intel people.”

He’d reported it to a disinterested Army Intelligence officer, who promptly filed and forgot it. As did Nolan, until Najela mentioned Siddiqi and a possible Taliban connection. That had brought Agnetha’s previous comments back to him. He thought back to that mission, and remembered the reason why Bravo Platoon

was detailed to take the mission in the first place. Because of the ambush and destruction of the previous Seal platoon sent to take out Rahimi. An ambush could only have been the work of a traitor. He looked at the young Afghan girl.

“Najela, I will talk to Siddiqi, but I promise you he won’t know that we’ve spoken to you. All I can say is, he won’t be bothering you again.”

She looked worried, but grateful. “I hope you will be careful. He is a very dangerous man.”

“We’ll be careful, don’t worry.”

They stayed chatting another half hour and left.

“She’s a frightened girl, that Najela,” Carol observed as they drove away.

“Yeah, you can’t blame her. They killed her parents, as good as killed her grandfather, and kidnapped her to be the whore of a warlord. It’s amazing she hasn’t lost her mind. A lot of women have gone crazy in this country. Two and a half thousand women or girls attempt suicide every year, due to domestic violence and just plain poverty and hardship. Social disorder, loss of loved ones, displacement, food insecurity, illiteracy, drug addiction; they’re a massive problem here. And there’s a lack of access to any healthcare services, partly as a result of the unending wars. All told, they reckon there are nearly two million women and girls in the fifteen to forty age bracket that have severe depression. So if Najela has kept sane, she’s one of the tough ones. She’s a survivor, and she’ll get through it.”

“Unless this army officer takes advantage of her.”

“Siddiqi, yeah. Carol, listen. I have to see this guy. Can you find a restaurant or a hotel, someplace to stay for a while?”

“You’re joking, Chief Nolan. I’m not a member of your platoon. If there’s

business to be done, I'll do it with you, we do it together. Besides, I'm a San Diego cop. I've had plenty of experience of dealing with you military types. San Diego can be a rough town on a Saturday night."

"If you're sure you'll be okay?"

"Yeah, I will. But like you, I don't like going unarmed. Is there anywhere in this town I can get a gun?"

He grinned. "Jesus Christ, Carol, you're some cop. You want me to obtain an illegal weapon for you?"

She didn't return the smile. "Yes, I do. I want to stay alive, and it seems to me in this country that means going armed."

He nodded. "Okay, let's go see what we can sort out for you."

If she was coming with him, things could cut up rough, so a weapon was maybe a good idea. No, it was definitely a good idea.

They got a cab into the downtown area. It was mid-afternoon, and although much of the place was closed, Nolan found what he was looking for. The meanest, nastiest looking bar imaginable, and in Afghanistan that was something. The bartender brought them drinks, and Nolan indicated a seat.

"I want a word, buddy. Do you want to make some big money, fast?"

The man's eyes lit up. "Sure, yes. What do I have to do?"

"I need a pistol, and I need it in the next half hour."

The man shrugged. "Sure, what kind of pistol?"

Carol goggled. It was as if Nolan had asked him for saw to cut down some timber. This was supposed to be a war zone, and yet illegal weapons were clearly easy to obtain in a country where almost every man seemed to carry a gun. No

doubt a timber saw would have been more difficult.

“I need something light, small, a Glock 17, something like that.”

“One moment, I will ask.”

He went back to the bar and used the phone. A few minutes later he was back.

“One thousand dollars, US.”

“Five hundred, that’s all I’ll pay, and I want a spare clip and ammo.”

“Seven fifty.”

“Done.”

Ten minutes later they walked outside with the barkeep. A woman stood there, wearing the traditional blue burqa. She produced a package wrapped in dirty brown paper from under her robe. Nolan turned his back to the street and checked inside the package, handed over the cash from his wallet, and the gun was theirs.

“We need to get back inside the bar. You can ask to use the bathroom, and hide the gun in your purse. Then we’ll go and see our good friend Colonel Siddiqi.”

They found him in the Afghan National Army barracks just off the main square. At first, the sentry wouldn’t let them through, but Nolan assured him they were old comrades in arms. He pressed a ten dollar bill into the man’s hand from his almost exhausted supply of dollars, and the sentry sent for a messenger, an army private, to take them to the Colonel’s office. When they walked through, the door the office was empty. But they heard noises coming from a nearby room, accessed through another door behind the large, imposing desk. The messenger walked across and knocked on the door.

“Colonel Siddiqi, Sir, there are two people to see you.”

“Tell them to fuck off!” he shouted. “I’m busy. I’m in a meeting.”

“But Colonel, they are Americans.”

There was a short pause. They could hear a female voice, pleading with him, crying. Then the sound of a blow, like a fist striking soft flesh. Then he spoke again.

“Tell them I will be out in a few moments. My meeting is ended.”

They waited, and the Afghan Army private watched them nervously, obviously overawed to be in his Colonel’s office with two foreigners. Finally, the door opened and Siddiqi emerged. His face was flushed red with exertion, and he was tucking something into the back of his pants, presumably his shirttails. His eyes widened when he recognized him.

Was that a look of fear? Yes, probably. This bastard has a lot to answer for.

Colonel Siddiqi put on a confident smile and held out his hand. The Seal ignored him, and the Afghan officer scowled.

“You’re doing well, Colonel,” Nolan greeted him. “Congratulations on your promotion.”

“Yes, thank you, I have been fortunate.” Siddiqi started to relax. Then he realized the private was still in the room. He gave him a hard stare. “Get out.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The man stumbled away. “Now, what can I do for you, Sergeant Nolan?”

As he waited for a reply, Siddiqi strapped on his Sam Browne with his pistol holster.

“It’s Chief Petty Officer Nolan,” he corrected him. “I’m Navy, not Army.”

“Chief Petty Officer, yes.”

“Who gave you your promotion, Colonel? Was it Mullah Omar?”

Siddiqi smiled. “A joke, yes, very funny.”

“Why is it funny? You work for him, don’t you? For the Taliban?”

“No, of course not. I am a commissioned officer in the Afghan National Army.”

“Yeah. When we landed at Bagram, after we got off that mountain, Agnetha Bergmann talked to me about you. You were a friend of Gemal Rahimi, weren’t you?”

The Colonel didn’t reply. He looked nervously around his office, perhaps for an escape route.

His chance came when someone knocked on the office door and started to open it. Siddiqi didn’t wait. He darted back through the inner door and slammed it shut. They heard the key turning in the lock. The man who’d just entered was a sergeant, and he carried a Russian made Kalashnikov AK-74 assault rifle slung on his shoulder. He gave them a suspicious look.

“Who are you? Where is the Colonel?”

Nolan nodded at the door. “He’s in there, buddy.”

Then they heard Siddiqi’s shout from behind the door. “Sergeant Faheem, kill them! They are assassins, here to kill me. Shoot them, quickly!”

The Sergeant unslung his rifle, but before he could level it, Nolan had his pistol out.

“Don’t even think about it, buddy! Put the rifle on the floor.”

Faheem looked desperately around him for a way to fight back, then lowered the rifle. But at the last minute, he swung it back up, and tried to loose off a shot. He was too slow, much too slow. Nolan’s response was automatic. He fired twice, and the man fell to the floor, already dead from a bullet to the heart when the second bullet entered the brain.

“Shit, that’s done it. I need to get to Siddiqi before they charge in here.”

“I’ll hold them off,” Carol said grimly. “You just finish your business with that Afghan bastard. Did he really cause the death of a whole platoon of Seals?”

“Yeah, it looks that way. Watch yourself, they won’t be long getting here.”

She nodded, and he launched himself at the door. The lock splintered immediately, and he fell through and almost lost his footing. Siddiqi was clambering out through a window at the other end of the room. He ran to head him off, but the Colonel had a head start, and he jumped onto a metal fire escape and started to ascend. Nolan went after him. When he climbed out, he could see the building was four stories high, and already Siddiqi was almost at the roof. The man popped a shot at him from his service automatic, but it was wild, and Nolan ignored it. He went up the iron steps at a run, and when he reached the roof, he went over at speed, rolling to the side to avoid being a target.

It was as well he was careful. Siddiqi was waiting for him, hiding behind an air vent positioned in the center of the roof. Nolan’s wild, rolling entrance to the roof threw his aim, and that shot went wild too. Siddiqi stood up and started to run, but the Seal was on his tail. He reached the edge of the roof and stopped. Then he smiled and tossed the gun off the roof. It clattered to the ground four stories below. A Soviet Makarov automatic, Nolan noted absently. The Russians had left tens of thousands of them in Afghanistan.

“I’m unarmed, Petty Officer Nolan. If you shoot me now, you will be tried for murder. Even if you get out of this building, my men will tear you apart. You have to back off.”

“No way, Siddiqi. You’re working for the Taliban, and you’re going to have to

pay for that. And for the Seals you sent to their deaths when you betrayed them.”

He tucked his gun into his waistband. The guy was toast. He had too much American blood on his hands. Seal blood, at that. But he’d have to appear to kill himself, so that it could be argued later it was a suicide. It meant Nolan would have to ‘assist’ the Colonel to jump off the roof. But he was going down, one way or the other.

Siddiqi spread his hands. “You do not understand how it works in this country, Sergeant Nolan. If a man is to survive, he has to spread his loyalty between both sides. Otherwise he will be killed.”

“It’s Chief Petty Officer Nolan. And there’re plenty of Afghans who hate the Taliban and what they’re trying to do to destroy this country. They’re not all traitors.”

“Then they are fools,” Siddiqi scowled. “When you Americans have gone, what will be left? Afghans, that’s who! And most of them sympathize with the aims of the Taliban, and so that is the way to survive.”

“By betraying your comrades and sending them to die!”

The Colonel scowled. “They took their chances. If I hadn’t done what I did, someone else would have killed them. All of you foreigners who come here, that is your fate. You should know that. Now get off this roof and leave me alone, otherwise I will order my men to kill you.”

* * *

Carol Summers went outside the office onto the parade ground and found a place

where she could stand in the doorway of a storeroom opposite. She needed to cover Nolan's back, and she wouldn't do that if a platoon of Afghans stormed in and took her prisoner, or killed her. A movement up on the roof caught her eye. It was Siddiqi, standing on the edge, shouting at someone. It had to be Nolan. So far, incredibly, no one had come to investigate the shots. Maybe they'd put it down to a training accident, or someone popping off at a target. After all, this was Afghanistan. As she watched, Siddiqi gesticulated, and she heard some of his shouted words even from down at ground level. Then her eyes narrowed. He was pulling out a gun, tucked into the back of his waistband. She was certain that Nolan couldn't know about it. Christ, what could she do? It was a long shot, a very long shot. Then she remembered. In the office, that sergeant had dropped an AK-74. That kind of assault rifle would have the legs to take out the Colonel, no question. She ran across the bare earth of the parade ground and into the office. Carol shuddered at the body of the sergeant that lay there, so much death. It seemed to be the fate of this country to literally paddle in the blood of its citizens. Everyone that arrived here soon became tainted with the foul taint of murder and killing, for whatever reason. She picked up the rifle and ran for the door, checking the safety as she went. She moved it to fire and selected full auto. She'd fired one of these once before, a captured weapon on the police firing range. Mexican drug dealers and people traffickers liked to carry heavy firepower, and it helped to know the capabilities of their arsenals. She hurtled across the ground until she saw she still had a clear shot of the Afghan on the roof. As she put the weapon to her shoulder, Siddiqi jerked out the gun and aimed it. She squeezed the trigger, and the army barracks echoed to the sound of a full clip of bullets, thirty 5.45 mm slugs, fired on

full auto. She wasn't counting, but she reckoned at least ten hit Siddiqi, and he spun around as blood and shreds of his uniform flew off his body. Incredibly, he still wasn't dead. He teetered around and seemed about to fall forward onto the roof. Then a hand appeared and gave him a gentle push. Nolan! The body fell through the air and hit the ground with a meaty 'thunk'. She stared at it for a few seconds, but then realized that she was wasting valuable seconds. This was no time to be frozen into immobility. She was a cop! They would be here soon, and she was literally holding the smoking gun. She ran back across the open ground and into the office. She put the assault rifle in the still-warm hands of the sergeant and took out his pistol, a Makarov. She put two rounds into his head for good measure and then put the gun on the desk. Just in time, the door ripped open. An Afghan military policeman stood there, and his rifle was leveled directly at her.

“What is going on here?”

“The sergeant, he shot the Colonel up on the roof, and I followed him in here. I managed to wrestle the gun out of his holster, and I shot him to stop him killing any more officers. I'm a cop back in America, and I knew it was the only way to stop him from killing a lot more of your men.”

He nodded and proceeded to cuff her. He knew that the inquiry into the death of a senior officer was well above his pay grade, and the best he could do was to secure the scene. Later, the process of investigating into the shooting would begin and other, more senior people could put the questions to her. A few minutes later, Nolan walked into the room.

“What's up, what was that shooting? And why is my girlfriend handcuffed?”

The military cop looked at him suspiciously. “Where were you when it all

happened?”

“I was in the john. It must be the water, I had to go.”

They weren't believed. Their story was too shambolic to be true. But when evidence of Siddiqi's double dealing was found in his wall safe, in the shape of a list of contacts of a number of known local Taliban warlords, they were more interested in the new intelligence than in how he had died. Nolan took Carol Summers back to Kabul in the rented SUV. They travelled with the next available escorted land convoy. It was over. Nolan could finally put to rest the ghosts of those who had been involved in his wife's death. Now he could really grieve, and start to rebuild his life. They reached their hotel suite, ordered a meal, and showered and changed while they were waiting for it to arrive. Afterwards, they sat watching the satellite news on the television.

“There's nothing about the killing in Jalalabad,” Carol murmured.

“Did you expect there to be? It's nothing for this place. It happens every day.”

“I guess. It still seems, well, pretty bad.”

He nodded. Then he realized something. “You've never shot and killed anyone before?”

She shook her head, shyly. “No, I've avoided it up to now. You know, as a cop, I was proud of my record, too.”

“Yeah, you should be. But sometimes people need to be killed. People like Siddiqi and people like Mohammed Gul. By the way, I haven't thanked you properly yet.”

“For what?”

“For saving my life, of course. You're a real warrior, you know. I'd have you in

my platoon any time, Carol Summers.”

“Do you have women in the Seals? Not that I’m thinking about it,” she added quickly. “I just wondered.”

He shook his head. “Not doing the stuff we do, no.”

“Good.”

“What? Why good?”

She grinned. “Because it means you keep your mind on the job, and your eyes on the enemy, not on some glamorous bimbo in camo paint.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. How can I really thank you?”

“You mean after you’ve screwed the eyeballs off me tonight?”

“Yeah, after that.”

“I want to go home, but not the way we came. I’d like to travel east, across the Pacific. Break the journey in Hawaii, and take a week or two to get over this business. Will your kids be okay with that?”

“Suits me. The kids are not expecting me back for ten days anyway, so there’s no problem. And I’m not due on active duty for a couple of months at least. I can use the arm, but it’s not enough for the Seal medics yet. Not unless it’s something real important, and they need every man on deck.”

“In that case, you’re all mine.”

He held up his arms and she came to them. A few minutes later, he unclamped his mouth from hers and led her into the bedroom. It was only later, while she lay sleeping in his arms, he was able to go over about the past weeks and months in his mind; the missions, Grace’s death, the men who hadn’t come back, and now Carol. It was then that his phone buzzed with an incoming text message. He felt cold as he

got off the bed to look at the screen. He'd programmed that particular sound for when a message came from Coronado, from Seal Headquarters. As he activated the phone, he thought about what he'd said, the prophetic words he'd used earlier; they'd only contact him for something real important, something that was all hands on deck. He started to read the message, but in the back of his mind he was already wondering how to break the news to Carol that the stopover in Hawaii was a no go. He acknowledged receipt of the text and climbed back into bed with her. At least they had a short time, just a few precious hours, before the flight left back to San Diego, the flight that would take him back to the bosom of his family; his other family.

He couldn't deny them, couldn't refuse. He was a Navy Seal.

THE END