

Blood Brothers

Six, #1

by Charles W. Sasser, 1942–

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



To the brave men and women of US Special Operations

Chapter 1

Jalalabad Military Airbase, Afghanistan

Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer Richard “Rip” Taggart had gone over the brink too many times—seven deployments, or was it eight? Into Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa... If you were at the Command—US Navy SEAL Team Six—there was always a war, and always a call for America’s elite counterterrorism unit in a world on its way to Hell.

The red rim of the sun struggled to climb above the distant Hindu Kush and shine on Forward Operating Base Fenty at the military airport in Jalalabad. Down on the city’s outskirts, where the Kabul and Kunar rivers junctioned, harsh winds out of the fires of Hades hissed off the Laghman Valley, rattled old tin cans, and flapped laundry hung out on wash day. Winds that had blown on the camel caravans of the old Silk Road centuries ago tugged at Rip’s desert cammies and popped the flaps of military GP medium tents like distant rifle shots.

Taggart’s eyes stood out in a sharp face parched by the desert sun. They were hard and faded to match the flint of the Afghan sand. He was a lean and wiry man, like a ferret or a bearcat, with the determined bearing of an epic hero. No expression crossed his face or entered eyes that reflected comets of white phosphorous and streams of fire from A-10 fast movers working out on some enemy target in the distant mountains near the Khost-Gardez Pass into Pakistan. The scene of chaos and violence was glorious in an all-too-tragic sort of way. It was a familiar sight when men were pissed off at each other and God was pissed off at everybody.

Explosions rumbled like distant thunder. Smoke clouds, tinged pink by the new sun, capped the target area.

Fuck ’em all and let God sort ’em out.

Taggart sucked in a ragged breath, the palm of his hand resting on the butt of the H&K .45 holstered on his hip. Nobody at the airport went unarmed, no matter that several thousand US troops—Rangers, 10th Mountain, Army Special Forces, Air Force, Afghan soldiers, CIA, members of the International Security Assistance, a handful of Navy SEALs—operated against the Taliban and al-Qaeda out of Jalalabad. In Afghanistan, you were always behind enemy lines.

A woman's voice, incongruous above the muted din of distant battle, penetrated Taggart's haze. He recognized it as that of Lena Graves coming from the nearest GP tent. When she and Joe "Bear" Graves weren't talking on Skype, they were writing each other letters.

"I told Bob—you know, the youth minister?" Lena was saying through the technological marvel of Skype. "I told him to have the kids' choir sing in the fellowship hall. We sold a hundred and fifty cupcakes in an hour."

"That good?" Graves's heavy voice responded.

"It's great. A hundred was the best we've ever done."

Taggart referred to the ready availability of communications with home as "domesticating the battlefield." He turned suddenly and strode purposefully toward the cluster of tents forted behind a maze of concrete HESCO barriers and concertina wire. He went past the team tent, pushed aside the flaps of the joint operations center and entered.

Inside the "team room" tent, the other members of what had been designated Foxtrot Team of White Squadron for tactical control purposes enjoyed downtime with a mixture of familiar banter, grabass, and scuttlebutt. Senior Chief Taggart was the leader, the "team daddy." Their team had been together a long time and formed bonds closer than brothers. When your life depended on someone, you knew him to his core. You knew who he really was, warts and farts and bad breath, who his wife and kids were, the name of his first hometown love, the make of his car, the date of his birth ...

Four members of the team—Graves; Ricky "Buddha" Ortiz; Alex Caulder; and Armin "Fishbait" Khan, all in their thirties—hung out in the tent in various stages of undress and bodily hygiene, a condition accepted in combat zones as "relaxed grooming standards."

These four along with Team Leader Taggart and Beauregard Jefferson Davis "Buck" Buckley, currently the FNG—fucking new guy—composed "the team."

Naval Special Warfare (NSW) was a remarkably small, elite force of less than 2,500 active duty shooters, along with about 600 SWCC (Special Warfare Combatant-Crew) whose purpose was to clandestinely deliver SEALs on-target into dangerous, denied areas and exfil them again. The force consisted of eight SEAL teams, not including SEAL Team Six. Odd-numbered teams worked on the West Coast out of Coronado, California, and were responsible for ops in that hemisphere; even numbers operated out of Little Creek, Virginia, and took missions in that respective hemisphere.

A team commanded by a navy commander consisted of a headquarters element and eight operational sixteen-man platoons. Platoons further broke down into eight-man squads or four-man fire teams.

SEAL Team Six, or Navy Special Warfare Development Group as it was officially known, was completely independent of the others and dedicated exclusively to

counterterrorist activity. It functioned pretty much on its own in whatever configuration a mission demanded. SEALs were a “force multiplier” in Pentagonese. Insert a half-dozen SEAL Sixes into a clandestine environment and they brought down more fire and brimstone on the enemy than a full company of conventional regulars. Taliban hajjis swore the mountains of Afghanistan were alive with the sound of SEALs.

While Taggart was the daddy who called the shots for Foxtrot, Bear Graves was his second. Two inches over six feet, lean and mean, he was the team’s responsible older brother, the core of implacability and inner quiet. When he moved, it was like he was coiling or uncoiling, a rattlesnake always ready for action.

Now bare-chested and barefooted, Graves sat on a canvas camp stool pulled up in front of the computer Skyping Lena while he disassembled and cleaned his H&K416 carbine. Lena looked out at him from the screen. Ortiz, the team’s irrepressible younger brother thought she was one “beautiful *mujer rubia*.” She was lithe with bright blonde hair that gave her the air of a romantic heroine.

“What was Pastor Adams’s sermon about?” Graves asked her.

She seemed to peer into the tent, taking into account her husband’s other family, his brothers.

“Greater love hath no man than this,” she quoted from scripture, “that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Bear glanced up. “John, chapter 15, verse 13.”

“Right.”

She hesitated. A mysterious smile touched her lips, like a secret was trying to break free. Her blue eyes seemed to glow from some inner excitement. She stood up on her end of the camera. She wore jeans and a shirt. The camera went wide angle to reveal the Graves’s living room back in Virginia Beach, a look into “the world” and a universe away from Bear’s hot, Spartan surroundings.

“Joe, those names we were talking about?”

Graves nodded as he focused on his carbine, his hands moving automatically to reassemble it. He slid the bolt open, inspected with his thumb the chamber for excess oil, rammed the bolt back home, and released trigger tension. When he looked up again, Lena held up a sonogram that filled the screen.

“Well,” she said, drawing out the moment. “Well, Joe, meet Sarah.”

Caught by surprise, it took him a moment to make the connection. He stared at the embryo image of “Sarah.” A daughter! His swarthy face slowly cracked into a huge grin. He sprang to his feet, waving his rifle in his exuberance. This would be their first. They had been trying to get Lena pregnant for several years.

“Hey, everybody! It’s a girl! We’re having a little girl!”

Alex Caulder was kicked back in a ragged incliner playing Xbox on a huge, flat-screen TV while Khan, an Afghan American from New England stood over him, watching with mild interest. Both switched their eyes toward the screen and Bear’s prospective daughter.

“Happy for you, Bear,” Caulder drawled. He was a sharp, angular eccentric with a sarcastic sense of humor. “Me, I’d give mine back if I could.”

“You don’t mean that,” Buddha Ortiz scolded mildly. “Children. That’s what it’s all about.”

"Oh, no?" Caulder shot back. "I mean it." But he grinned and winked to show he *might* be bullshitting.

Buddha was tall and lanky, dark-haired, with a long handsome nose and the brooding good looks of a Latin Jimmy Dean from the old Turner Classic Movies. While he in no way resembled his namesake, he had the Buddha's patience as he sat cross-legged on the tent's plywood floor brewing yerba maté, a long, involved process involving gourds and a pestle. His bunk area displayed photos of his wife Jackie and their two kids, Anabel and Ricky Jr.

Bear Graves touched the screen with his fingertips. Lena touched it back from halfway around the globe.

"I've got to go. I—" he said, choking up with wonder and love.

The sonogram came up once more before the screen went black.

"Wait a sec, Bear," Caulder said with pretend seriousness, playing his unruly Dennis the Menace role. "How long you been over here? You sure that kid's yours?"

Graves ignored him, not willing to give up the moment. "We're naming her Sarah," he said.

"From the Bible. Abraham's wife."

Bear rolled his eyes. "Here it comes—"

"Yeah. Abraham was a player, man. Dude had like five wives. My man Abe was all about hitting it."

"You're going to Hell, you know that?"

Caulder shrugged and grinned. "Metaphorically, right? Because we know that down below us is just a ball of spinning rock and hot magma. And, anyway, with all we've seen go down over here, hard to imagine your God coming up with anything worse."

Bear continued to stare at the black screen, fascinated by the news he had just received. "God made children and wives," he said. "That's good enough for me."

He shook his head in wonder, letting the sweet name play off his tongue. "Sarah. *Sarah*. My daughter!"

"Sarah's a fine name," Buddha agreed. "Sarita. Sounds good in Spanish too. You'll like being a father, Bear. Gives you ballast. Keeps you upright through the storm."

Caulder wasn't ready to give up poking. "Says the dude who takes two days to make tea out of dried grass..."

"It's not tea, *pendejo*. It's maté, and it's got twenty-four vitamins and minerals, fifteen amino acids, and a shitload of antioxidants."

"Yeah. Red Bull for taco heads."

"It's South American. You don't know shit."

Caulder returned to his Xbox, musing, "I did know a Sarah back in Coronado. Best pole dancer I ever saw."

Ortiz and Fishbait both shot him a *What the fuck's wrong with you?* look.

"What?" Caulder mimed, feigning innocence.

The tent flap suddenly blew open to reveal Buck Buckley. Dark wavy hair and the cynical twist of his lips gave him the appearance of some hipster *Miami Vice* undercover cop.

"Rip wants us," he announced. "In the JOC. *Now*."

That ended the banter. Bear slung his rifle across his back, Buddha doused his maté flame, Fishbait looked around for his weapon, and Caulder shrugged indifferently. Buck turned and they followed him out of the tent. This could mean only one thing. Back into the breach, Horatio.

Chapter 2

Jalalabad Military Airbase, Afghanistan

A number of tent cities dotted the airfield. With impromptu names like Snake Town or Sandy City, they quartered the various military units in wooden barracks and a few modern buildings mostly constructed of mud or concrete. SEALs, though, homesteaded in their own little corner of the airfield due to the secrecy of their missions. Civil Air had been driven completely off the airport to allow the military to move in shortly after 9/11 when President George W. Bush sent over Special Operations Forces to chase down Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

Only a few steps separated the team tent from the JOC. Bear Graves paused between the two in the gentle morning sunlight while the others continued. His mind remained on Lena and the news about Sarah. He couldn't get over it—a daughter, his daughter.

He gazed out over the city that sat about five clicks away. It was modern in some ways, ancient in others, as brown and gray and tan as the rest of this country. A lungful of hot air brought with it the distinctive smells of sand and hot tarmac, of wind off the mountains and the fragrance of distant barnyards. Air assets working over the target in the mountains earlier had pulled out, leaving only an oily cloud hovering on the horizon.

Afghanistan had been crossed, captured, destroyed, and rebuilt numerous times in its long brutal history, situated as it was at the crossroads of conflict. One of the world's least-developed countries and completely landlocked, it shares borders with Pakistan on the east and north, with Iran on the west, three former Soviet republics on the north, and China off a little gooseneck in the far northeast.

The Soviets in 1979 had been the country's most recent invader. After they withdrew with their tails tucked between their legs, and after 9/11, the United States moved in to chase al-Qaeda terrorists and support the Mujahideen of the Northern Alliance in their civil war against the Taliban.

The basic way of life in Afghanistan had changed little in hundreds of years. Bear hadn't known many really poor people back home, at least not like this. Everywhere were little dark-skinned kids in baggy cotton pants, men and women wearing dirty robes, men clad in turbans and women in short shawls. Many of them looked sullen and resentful at being forced to accept war and soldiers as the way life was.

Brother and sister might have a change of clothing and a "Sunday" pair of shoes or sandals. Otherwise, most went barefooted all summer. Out behind the family's mud hovel might be a pole corral or a field fenced in with sticks and posts where a

skinny mule or camel existed with some sheep or goats. The more well-to-do might own some cows. Often, four or five families went in together to purchase an old rattletrap Toyota pickup for transportation and use on their farms.

Remarkably, though few people claimed many possessions, almost everyone had a cell phone stuffed underneath his robe or in his baggy trousers. Cell phones for Taliban fighters was an essential part of their armament. It was how they kept track of American troop movements and operations.

Bear considered how fortunate he was that Sarah would be born in the United States of America instead of a place where many infants died before they were a year old due to the shortage of medical facilities, and where most of the rest grew up in abject poverty and war.

He became aware of Caulder shouting, “Bear! Get your ass in here!”

The clan gathered in the TOC tent, which was crowded with a couple of big-screen TVs, white briefing boards, maps on three-legged stands, a cork board displaying photos of bad-guy high-value targets, or HVTs, and four navy support techs pounding on computers. Taggart stood spread-legged behind a field table as White Team gathered close and took canvas stools to wait for the briefing to begin.

For a few minutes the team chief flipped through images on the table featuring atrocities committed by Taliban and al-Qaeda—IEDs exploding in an open market, torn bodies strewn about in the wreckage; a family beheaded in their mud hut because Daddy was suspected of being an informer; a village chief hanging upside down from a tree with his throat slit and blood streaming onto the ground...

It wasn't enough that terrorists slaughtered; they had to advertise it, photograph their work and distribute prints as a warning to others.

With his lean face set, his lips a grim knife slit, his entire body a tense portrait of righteous fury, Taggart held up a colored photo of children slaughtered in a schoolyard. Vultures perched on the roof of the little mud schoolhouse, necks craned and patient.

“Look at this,” he grated out. “Every activity in this stinking province, that shitbag al-Muttaqi's been behind.”

He exchanged the photo for one of a dark-skinned, jackal-faced man who appeared to be in his early forties. He didn't have to identify him. Hatim al-Muttaqi. SEALs had been chasing his murderous ass for the past five years.

Three years ago, al-Muttaqi was responsible for the deaths of ten SEAL Six operators over in Wardak Province. Taggart had known some of them since BUD/S—Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training. They were brothers to every man inside the TOC tent.

MH-60 Blackhawks had inserted the SEALs in a raid on a house where insurgent leaders headed by al-Muttaqi had gathered to plot. As it turned out, informers in the village learned of the raid and warned al-Muttaqi and the others. The SEALs landed into a trap. A bloody L-shaped ambush wiped out most of a troop in one of the biggest single losses in SEAL Six's history.

The primary target, al-Muttaqi, not only got away that night but again three days later when he escaped a US air strike on a compound where he was hiding. Intel began to suspect he had inside sources that were tipping him off.

Taggart glared at the terrorist's photo. “We just picked up SIGINT from a village up in Kunar,” he revealed. “He's surrounded by civilians—so drones and air

strikes are out. We're working up a CONOPS now. Command wants us to take a shot."

His cold eyes swept the team. "*Tonight*," he added.

Caulder appeared skeptical; hell, he was always skeptical. "You know how many times we've rolled snake eyes with this guy? He could be tipped off by farmers, could be a courier, could be Fishbait's cousins."

"They're all my cousins," Fishbait badgered back. "That's how this tribal thing works."

Bear Graves was already coiled for action. "What do you think, Rip?"

"You know what I think."

"Yeah. Let's do it."

Caulder appeared to be considering. He shrugged and threw up his hands. "Screw it. I'm in."

Buddha Ortiz sipped maté he had succeeded in heating up and brought with him in a gourd cup. A connoisseur never drank it from a canteen cup. "Yeah, okay," he said. "Nice night for a walk. But Bear's got some news first. Bear, tell him—"

Graves stood up, a proud papa-to-be. "Lena and I, we're having a baby," he blurted out.

Rip took a moment to absorb the news, as though searching to tap into something inside he might have lost going to war for so many years. Finally, he forced his thin lips into the semblance of a smile. "That's great, Bear. Good for you."

"We want you to be the godfather."

Taggart looked uncertain. "I'm honored, Bear. But, Jesus, me? What do I have to do?"

Buddha had the answer. He lifted his gourd in a salute. "I'll cover the God part, Rip. You just show up with candy and presents."

Bear laughed and dug out his cell phone. "Let's get a picture for Lena."

"New guy, you take it," Ortiz suggested to Buckley as the six members of Team White, prepped for tonight and ready to take on all comers, jauntily crowded around Taggart with their arms and legs around one another in some kind of rendition of frat night at the U. Buckley shot the selfie from arm's length.

Graves would later make copies for everyone that showed the team members smiling and cutting up in high excitement. All except Rip Taggart, who stared solemn-faced into the lens, his lips pressed thin, his eyes like agate.

Chapter 3

Kunar Province, Afghanistan

Kunar Province, "Enemy Central," was one of the toughest sectors in-country to target the Taliban. Rarely did US or ANA troops venture into this hostile region and not end up in a fight. The geography was more suited to goats than men. The

lower Hindu Kush was a maze of mountain peaks and narrow valleys with steep sides that served as formidable natural obstacles. Insurgent groups had used it for centuries. When the Russians invaded in 1979, they refused to enter this area with any unit smaller than a mech infantry company.

Taliban were an especially hardy lot, just as cunning at fighting in the Afghan mountains as the Apache had been in the desert mountains of Arizona and New Mexico. Give a Taliban a rifle, a baggy pair of shepherd's trousers, and a pocketful each of mutton and bullets, and he was ready to run with the wolves.

Caulder was skeptical about their chances of capturing al-Muttaqi. "He's like the Road Runner cartoon. The coyote chases him with all that fancy shit from Acme, but he always goes *Meep! Meep!* and gets away."

Under cover of darkness, during that bewitching hour after midnight, MH-60 Blackhawk helicopters inserted a troop of fifteen SEALs on a makeshift landing zone on the downside of a ridge south of the targeted village where, according to a source, al-Muttaqi was staying. SEALs consisting of Taggart's team of six men, Delta team, and a Quick Reaction Force unassed the helicopters and the birds jerked back into the black air.

By military standards, the SEALs looked like vikings on a raid with their longish hair, beards, and mismatched uniforms. Employing stealth and cover techniques, the small force followed a faint goat trail up the ridge and through a narrow gorge with steep rocky sides. High above, all but invisible in the night sky, an AC-130 Spectre Gunship, radio call sign *Reaper One-One*, flew overwatch with its 40mm cannon, its 105mm howitzers, and its thermal imagers and sensor pods. It was said that with such sophisticated equipment a tech at the panel could not only locate a gnat on the ground but could determine its sex as well.

SEALs traveled light. "Light is right," or "travel light, freeze at night." Most carried rifle magazines, frag and thermobaric grenades, water, GPS unit, compass, and radio. Each man wore protective ballistic body armor and carried a sidearm and a suppressed H&K416 5.56 rifle that allowed easy maneuvering in an urban environment, which meant in and out of doorways and rooms and through hallways. Buckley's assigned weapon was a heavy MK48 7.62 machine gun that, if the feces hit the oscillator, made the difference between kicking ass and getting ass-kicked.

Each man also wore state-of-the-art panoramic night-vision goggles attached to his helmet. His rifle was equipped with lights, a laser, and optics.

The narrow gorge up the ridge deposited the silent SEALs through a saddle slightly above the targeted village. The settlement appeared quite peaceful through the greenish glow of NVGs. It consisted of a cluster of closely-packed central buildings around a town square. Buildings were constructed of stone and mud and seemed to merge into the surrounding valley walls.

The target building where al-Muttaqi was believed holed up was a simple two-story structure with a regionally typical flat roof and a courtyard circled by additional small buildings. A faint light glowed through a window of one of the outbuildings, probably supplied by a kerosene lantern. Otherwise, the village lay in pitch-blackness, as though it were without power. Rolling blackouts were common in the area.

Taggart's team wended its way downslope toward the village on a walking trail that led through a copse of wood, across a small stream and past an orchard. The support and backup element set up security at the edge of the village to cover withdrawal, while a roving team went wide behind the targeted house to nab any squirter who might try to escape the back way.

Bear Graves felt his heart thudding in his chest as his team penetrated the darkened village and made its way through an alleyway toward al-Muttaqi's compound, hugging buildings to either side of the alley to stay in deeper shadows. Nothing got the blood pumping faster than creeping into an enemy compound, sometimes directly into rooms where enemy fighters were sleeping.

They emerged from the alley to cross a vacant lot that served as a graveyard for abandoned vehicles—a rusting Hilux truck, a Toyota jacked up on its rims, a couple of station wagons with glass salvaged as windows for nearby dwellings. Ahead and across a dark street lay the compound walls. A small gate covered by a bed sheet led into the courtyard beyond.

Taggart signaled for Buckley to drop off and cover the compound with his machine gun. Exfil would be through the same gate. Buck nodded and slipped in among the vehicle wreckage.

On point, Graves led the way across the dusty street while his eyes constantly scanned the compound walls for movement. Detecting nothing that threatened, he cautiously swept aside the sheet that covered the gate and peered inside the courtyard.

His rifle's IR laser probed two guards asleep in the midst of a litter of trash and tools and old car parts, their AK-47s lying nearby within reach. One slumped on a rock with his head in his arms on his knees. The other sprawled on the ground next to him, legs spread and his back leaning against a rusty engine block. Snoring.

Good. They must be guarding something, which meant an active, occupied hole.

Bear's laser spotted the top of the first guy's lowered head, the dot settling on his cranium. He felt Taggart press his shoulder. He nodded in response.

Sayonara, motherfuckers.

With a double tap of the trigger, he dispatched the two men one after the other to Paradise where, presumably, they would be awarded martyrdom and seventy-two virgins each. They died almost without a sound, a result of brain shots. The walls of the compound and the enveloping night muffled the suppressed *Thump! Thump!* of Bear's rifle and the meaty smack of the impacting bullets. The night returned to normal sounds.

Bear could almost hear Taggart's unspoken approval: *Fuck 'em! Fuck 'em all!*

Bear had noticed for some time a real bitterness in the team leader, a bitterness that went beyond just the war. Something that seemed to be eating out his core.

Chapter 4

Kunar Province, Afghanistan

Outside the walls in the dead car pile, Buck Buckley barely heard the silenced reports of Bear Graves's rifle taking out the two sentries. He took that as a cue to dart across the street with his machine gun to reestablish vigil inside the compound where he could best cover his guys as they busted into the house. He hit the ground inside the bedsheet-covered gate, eyes darting through the liquid green of NVGs as they searched for hostile movement. He spotted two dead men, but his eyes moved on from them to the house itself. His heart pounded with excitement and tension, but his hands and nerves were steady.

His five teammates moved in a battle stack along the side of the house toward a door just ahead, their lean, swift forms advancing like a perfectly synchronized machine. He watched them crouch past a window illuminated from inside by a dim light and approach the door, weapons ready, every move coordinated. They had rehearsed such tactics a hundred times—no, a *thousand* times—in the Kill House at the Command in Virginia.

Taggart tested the door and found it locked. He gave Buddha Ortiz a quick signal.

Ortiz attached a breaching charge to the door in a way that would explode its energy toward the inside where overpressure would be more dynamic. He set it, stepped away, and flattened his back against the wall with the rest of the team.

A loud blast accompanied by a flash of fire shredded the wooden door and blew it off its hinges. Smoke billowed. Surprise had also been blown. The entire village would know they were here now. Speed replaced stealth—get in, get the job done, get out again.

Move! Move! Keep moving! Like a deadly ballet, swift and violent, every man functioning through training, experience, and raw instinct.

They cleared the lower floor in explosive movements. Bear Graves brought up rear security as Caulder, Ortiz, and Fishbait rushed up a stairway behind Taggart to the second floor where they entered a long, darkened hallway. Behind them a small window overlooked the courtyard at one end of the hall while a ceiling-to-floor curtain closed off the other end. The curtain fluttered before a fighter armed with an AK-47 yelped something in Pashtu and jumped out from behind it. Taggart dropped him with two quick shots before the guy had a chance to use his weapon. The body crashed to the floor, on its way down overturning a chair with an empty water bucket on it. The bucket rolled clanking down the hall.

The door to the nearest bedroom was open. Taggart, Caulder, and Graves covered it while Ortiz and Fishbait quickly cleared the other rooms. There were only two other doors. One led into a storage room and pantry, the other to a bedroom that appeared to have been recently used but was presently unoccupied.

That left the large master bedroom. Taggart entered first, his NVGs revealing to him three beds and a closet. The bed was stacked with bloody corpses. He identified two small children and a man, all three brutally and freshly slain.

Graves's voice suddenly rang out. "Drop it, asshole!"

A fighter crouched like a trapped feral animal in the far corner with one arm around a young woman in a white nightgown-like affair, holding her up in front of him as a shield. A knife at her throat kept her frozen in terror, her eyes wide and terrible with fear as seen through NVGs.

SEALs expertly side-stepped out of each other's field of fire, their eyes focused on the rapidly developing drama in the corner. It didn't last long. Islamic terrorists lived by a code of martyrdom that stated in stark terms that if you went down, you took everybody you could with you.

Wicked steel flickered as the cornered terrorist's blade slashed across his hostage's jugular, almost decapitating her. Black blood fountained. He let her body slump to the floor; a dead hostage was of no value.

The SEALs immediately opened up a cone of fire. Bullets striking flesh and bone resonated louder in the confines of the room than the muted staccato of silenced weapons. The killer died on his way to the floor where he lay unmoving next to his sacrificed victim. The metallic odor and taste of more fresh blood filled the room.

Caulder took out a laminated photograph hanging on a cord around his neck and bent over to compare it to the dead fighter's face.

"It's not Muttaqi," he reported.

Graves stood over the bed where the man and two children had been slain. One was a little girl of about three, the other a boy a year or two older. Their throats were slit. The dead woman in the corner must have been their mother. This was apparently the family that lived here.

"Guys, check this out," Graves said in somber voice.

Blood pooled in the sag of the grass mattress and slowly absorbed into and through it. Dripping blood tapped eerily on the floor beneath the bed. Graves thought again of Sarah as he pulled the bloody blanket over the father and his two little dead children. The others watched him in a moment of silence.

They had witnessed scenes like this before. Based on the four dead Jihadi inside and outside the house, al-Muttaqi and some of his men had likely been here. Once discovered, they went into a frenzy of revenge, apparently assuming the family members had informed on them. Murdering them served as a warning to others of what happened to snitches.

And al-Muttaqi had escaped again.

Rip's entire frame vibrated with rage over the killing of the family, his face flushed and both fists clutching his weapon. "Fucking damned savages."

He turned, slung his rifle, and stalked to the corner where he snatched the blade from the dead fighter's hand. He straddled the body and bent over, his back to the room. Graves wasn't sure what he was doing.

"Rip?"

Caulder was the first to realize what was happening. "*Rip!*"

Ortiz caught on. "Oh, man. Hey, don't do that shit—"

Caulder stepped toward his friend and team leader, hand outstretched. Too late. The awful wet, ripping sound of a scalp departing its skull filled the room.

Chapter 5

Kunar Province, Afghanistan

Taggart stood with his head lowered, glaring at the dead Taliban next to the dead woman, the terrorist's fresh scalp dangling from one hand, knife in the other.

Caulder recovered first. He laid a hand on Taggart's shoulder. "Jesus! Get it together, man."

Suddenly, a false wall crashed down. It had been so well-concealed that the SEALs overlooked it in their sweep of the bedroom. A fighter broke from behind the crumbling wall and made a mad dash across the room and dived headfirst out the second floor window, vanishing into the darkness.

"Got a squirter!" Ortiz exclaimed.

"That's gotta be Muttaqi." Taggart tossed the bloody scalp aside, exchanging it for his radio. "Two-Two, this is Delta One. We've got a squirter. Could be our HVT."

The backup team chief came up on the air immediately. "*Delta One, this is Two-Two. Stand by...*"

A long minute ensued while the team waited.

"*Delta One. Reaper has eyes on. Squirter moving northwest. Reaper One-One has sparkles. He'll take care of it.*"

Taggart headed for the hallway. "Let's go."

Lights were coming on in houses all over the village. There hadn't been a blackout after all, merely frugal homeowners conserving energy late at night. The team had poked a sleeping hornets' nest—and al-Muttaqi remained at large and on the run.

Buckley with his machine gun rejoined the team as it cleared the target area and pushed down-village in the direction the squirter had fled. The SEALs moved rapidly but cautiously in the "low-ready" position, rifles stuck to their shoulders, index fingers close to triggers but not on them, thumbs brushing weapon safeties, ready to bring weapons to life. Muscles tensed as the operators scanned from side to side and slipped along cement-block walls that surrounded many of the houses.

Suddenly, someone out ahead among the houses shouted something in Pashtu over a megaphone. That produced enemy contact in a sudden eruption of close-by gunfire. The SEALs went to "shoot, move, and communicate" as they methodically fanned out to cover the battlefield. Red AK tracer rounds streaked through the night, seeking flesh.

An RPG exploded nearby, seeming to split open the universe. It exposed the SEALs for an instant in white light as they advanced using available cover. Their lasers created an eerie light show visible only through NVGs as they probed and danced in a pincushion of white that hunted targets, and found them.

Enemy Taliban fighters seemed to have occupied the village and were now attacking in full force. They were everywhere, like a hill of disturbed ants.

Caulder plopped to his belly behind a woodpile while he methodically picked out targets through his NVGs and eliminated them one by one.

Bear Graves took a look around the corner of a concrete wall and spotted a hajji darting across the street ahead, firing as he ran. Graves's laser red-dotted him. He squeezed and the guy went down and skidded on his face in the narrow dirt street. It was like shooting a jackrabbit in Texas.

From farther up the road came the gunning roar of a truck engine and the grinding squall of worn-out brake pads as the truck skidded to a halt. A machine gunner in the bed of the small Toyota truck opened up with the heavy-throated,

rhythmic coughing of a DShK anti-aircraft gun belting out two-inch-long slugs. A burst chewed across Graves's concrete wall, stinging his face with shattered sand and gravel. He dropped to his belly to make a smaller target of himself while he returned fire.

Nearby, Buckley joined in with his heavy machine gun, but the truck had stopped among trees and partly behind the end of a compound wall, making for a bad angle to target it. The big gun kept chugging out death and destruction, its muzzle shooting fire like from a flame thrower.

That sonofabitch has to go—or we're all chopped steak.

Graves linked with Caulder and Buddha Ortiz to take out the gun. They skirted down Bear's wall and the house it enclosed in order to flank the enemy weapon. Caulder took point.

"Tell Buck to hold his fire," he said.

Ortiz relayed the message via helmet radio. Buck's MG fell silent. Caulder and his little band spotted the partially concealed truck in trees on the other side of a narrow village street. The Toyota pickup, called a technical, bounced and squatted on its shocks as the big AA gun continued firing up-street past Graves and his group toward Taggart and Buck. The overheated machine gun barrel glowed red in the dark.

Caulder nudged Bear. Before Bear could stop him, the impatient member of the team bolted across the street to rush the enemy machine gun from its blind side. By the time the enemy soldiers spotted him, they were too late to swivel their gun to face the threat. Caulder was upon them, his H&K spitting death. He took both gunners out of commission. One of the guys sprawled alive but dying alongside the Toyota. The other was already dead and draped over the side of the pickup, blood dripping. Caulder stopped to catch his breath, gasping as he burned off adrenaline. The wounded guy stopped thrashing about and gave up the ghost.

Graves, followed by Ortiz and then Taggart, ran up to him. "*Really*, Caulder?" Bear said.

Caulder managed a weak grin.

"Gonna blow it," Buddha warned, indicating the AA gun and producing a thermobaric grenade.

Graves and Caulder trotted on down the AO while Taggart remained behind with Buddha. The din of battle was rapidly dwindling throughout the village. The fight, what there was of it, was a typical Taliban operation in which the Taliban dusted up things for a few minutes and then got the hell out of Dodge.

A voice from the circling AC-130 Gunship crackled over the command radio: "*Foxtrot Delta One, Reaper One-One. We have two squirters 150 meters out. Maneuvering toward the northwest gate.*"

"Reaper One-One, we copy that," Graves acknowledged. "Request containment."

An infrared spotlight, invisible except through NVGs, beamed down from high out of the black sky. A cone of greenish light tracked a pair of enemy fighters skulking through the village intent on making their escape. Ahead of them rose the rustic village gate, and through that and beyond lay refuge in the mountains.

"*Thermobaric out!*" Taggart's voice intruded into the net moments before Ortiz's grenade detonated in a savage blast of fire that consumed the Toyota, the DShK, and the two bodies.

Reverberations from the blast still echoed through the village when Caulder and Graves glimpsed two fleeing IR-illuminated figures darting across the street ahead on their way to the arch and escape. At the same instant, Reaper's 40mm Bofor cannon opened up with a high much-magnified crackle of doom. There was nothing invisible about the stream of heavy-caliber tracers that all but disintegrated the village archway and sent the fleeing fugitives scurrying into hiding. Graves lost sight of them among some parked or abandoned cars on the roadside.

"Squirters are static at this time," the unemotional voice from the sky informed the SEALs.

With hostile fire having all but ceased, Taggart and the rest of the team joined Graves and Caulder and fanned out to advance on the gate and the two men who had gone to ground somewhere in the vicinity. Chances were that one of them might be al-Muttaqi.

Through his NVGs, Caulder detected a fighter crouched in a residential alcove off to the right flank drawing a bead on Graves, the nearest SEAL to him. Caulder pivoted and fired just in time to drop the hajji.

Graves nodded his thanks.

The pair proceeded, scanning the area ahead. Graves spotted movement behind a parked car.

"Got 'em," he radioed.

"He armed?" Caulder responded.

"Yeah. He has something in his hand."

Bear planted his IR spot on a piece of the enemy visible behind the car. He pulled. Take chances and he wasn't going home to Mama and Sarah. The silenced rifle spat a Thump! into flesh. The fighter screamed in pain and fell.

A second fighter wearing traditional shepherd pants and a long shirt appeared and rushed to the aid of his comrade, who lay squirming in the dirt clutching his thigh and howling in agony. He might have been dead before he made two steps in the open had not his entrance been preceded by a cascade of English from the wounded fighter.

"Wait! Wait! I'm an American."

What the fuck!

The terrified young fighter on the ground thrust his empty hands into the air while his buddy froze in place. The wounded man couldn't seem to get out his bona fides fast enough. He sounded desperate.

"I'm from Michigan, man. Fucking Michigan. What about you guys? I know I should like the Pistons, but I'm a Lakers fan. I love Kobe. A lot of people don't, but I do. Haters gonna hate, right?"

The man appeared to be in his late teens, early twenties. He continued his urgent patter as Caulder and Graves rolled up their prisoners and patted them down for weapons. Graves shoved the uninjured man to his knees in the dirt next to his wounded comrade and forced both to clamp their hands behind their heads. Blood soaked the wounded one's trousers. Tears rolled down his cheeks as Caulder checked their faces against his photograph of al-Muttaqi.

"Not him. Not this one either."

He gestured at the uninjured fighter who so far had not uttered a word. "What about him?" he asked the chatty wounded one, indicating his frightened comrade. "He a Pistons fan?"

"Him? He's just a raghead driver. Don't speak English."

"Where's Muttaqi?" Graves asked him in a threatening manner.

"I don't know, man. They don't tell me anything. He was supposed to be here. Maybe he heard you guys coming."

"You the one that killed those kids?"

"No, man, not me. It was Abdul. Something personal. You know how these hajjis are. Hey, my leg's hurt bad. Where's a medic?"

He wept full-bore in a combination of pain and fear.

"So why'd you run?" Caulder asked him.

"I was scared. Your guy, he went all Geronimo in there."

So this was the one who busted through the fake wall and jumped out the window?

"You saw what he did. Man, I just want to go home. Please? Please?"

Pure terror. Like he thought he might be scalped next.

His eyes shifted and widened as the rest of the SEAL team caught up. "No! Wait!" he shrieked.

The double tap of a silenced H&K416 splattered Graves's face with blood as two holes spotted the crying young fighter's forehead. His head jerked back violently while his body crumpled forward to the street. Taggart's rifle shifted to the other fighter, the laser beam spotting his forehead. The man glared back at Taggart, unflinching, his face twisted with hatred.

Caulder sprang between the two of them. "What the fuck?" he demanded.

Taggart calmly pushed his NVGs up onto his helmet, revealing his face in the crackling firelight from the village gate.

"He was a threat."

The surviving prisoner continued to glare at the deadly American as though consigning every feature of the lean face to memory.

"He surrendered, Rip," Caulder objected. "He's an American."

"No. He's not."

Buddha Ortiz intervened in the standoff by moving between them. "Let's take this one in."

"Won't make a damned bit of difference," Taggart growled. "He'll be out in two weeks."

Caulder held his ground. *Something is wrong with Rip. Really wrong.*

"This is so fucked," Taggart said, turning away and stepping nonchalantly over the fresh corpse.

Caulder wasn't ready to let it go. "Bear, you saw that. You—"

"Rip's right," Bear retorted. "He was a threat."

That was the way it was, the way it would be reflected in After Action Reports. You never left a brother behind, and you took care of each other. *You were the team.* It was *the team* against the uncivilized world.

That settled, Fishbait Khan came up and broke out his digital camera to capture the scene for intel purposes. SOP—standard operating procedure. The prisoner wasn't al-Muttaqi, but he would have to do. After Fishbait took all the

pictures he needed, he pulled a black bag over the prisoner's head to blind him and zip-tied his wrists behind his back. He lifted the captive to his feet and joined the team around Taggart as they headed, still alert, through the village arch and to a pickup by Blackhawks up in the pass.

Alex Caulder remained behind alone with the dead fighter for a few moments, standing over the body, staring down at it.

Chapter 6

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Three heads broke the gentle morning lap of the Atlantic against the beaches of Dam Neck Naval Base about five miles south of the downtown resort of Virginia Beach, Virginia. Virginia Beach was home to the navy's Fleet Combat Training Center and SEAL Team Six—1,700 acres of marshes, coastal beaches, and sand dunes, with 3.2 miles of some of the most stunning beachfront on the east coast. The heads in the brine, each encased in black rubber and wearing swim goggles, seemed to stare out at the land, like the first would-be amphibians struggling to emerge from the primordial muck.

Something about the ocean, the “cradle of life,” attracted a certain breed of man. Back during the era of JFK, the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, crusty old Roy Boehm, the first commander of newly commissioned SEAL Team Two, and therefore the First SEAL, used to ask the rhetorical question, “Why did God have to put the land so near the water?”

The swimmers in the Atlantic sank out of sight as smoothly as dolphins, leaving no trace on the surface, not even bubbles from their re-breather air tanks. Moments later, they reappeared in shallow surf and removed fins and goggles before stalking ashore in glistening black wet suits, laughing and poking at one another as brothers will who have been together a long time and survived both wars and each other.

Ahead of them, another group of SEALs completing their morning swim looked back. One of them playfully snatched up a handful of sand and chunked it back at the others. That resulted in a brief sand fight between the two forces before the aggressors broke off and fled for safety, whooping and bursting with laughter.

Bear Graves, Buddha Ortiz, and Alex Caulder, carrying their fins and tanks, continued up the sand toward the cluster of the SEAL base. Harder lines in their faces made them appear older than they had that night in Kunar Province when Senior Chief Rip Taggart ... But none of the team ever talked about that. What happened had happened, and it was over.

Ortiz ribbed Caulder good-naturedly, as though taking up a previous conversation. “That time in Mosul, we gave those talks on something we thought was important. Bear, you did the new NVGs, I did ten ways to use Tabasco on MREs, and Caulder—”

He broke up at the recollection. Graves took over in his dry voice, sotto voce. "He did *Why Are We Here?* And you still don't know. You are such a fricking hippie, Caulder."

"I wasn't asking to get an answer," Caulder defended, wearing his mischief like Dennis the Menace. All he needed was a cowlick to complete the transformation. "See, the problem is, you don't think out of the box. That's why every time we go fishing you never catch anything. You think like a fisherman. You need to think like a fish."

Graves fake-punched Caulder on the arm. "You think like a fish," he said. "Look where it's got you."

"Brother, where I am is right where I need to be."

"Whatever that means."

Caulder grinned and trotted up a dune to stare back at the ocean. Ortiz followed. The PT formation ran on past. Waves lapped at the shore. The eye of the fresh sun gave its approval to the ocean by sprinkling it with sparkles.

"The ocean, man," Caulder approved. "It's the same content as amniotic fluid. We come out here, it's like going back to the womb."

Ortiz nodded. "I'm going to miss this," he said cryptically.

Caulder shot him a look. *What's that mean?* But he said, "Right on. We don't want to miss this."

He glanced back at Graves. "Bear, stop with the busy shit. Look around you."

Graves finished peeling off his wet suit top. He shook sand from it and joined his fellow swimmers on the dune.

Men like them were the product of worldwide turmoil and constant warfare against terrorism. The rise of Islamic radicalism in the Middle East and the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1980 had provided the catalyst for the creation of the navy's own elite counterterrorism force. SEAL Team Six was the navy's answer to army's Delta Force. "Let the pussy army have Delta," rumbled Commander Dick Marcinko, who built, trained, and commanded the original Team Six. "We'll target maritime objectives—tankers, cruise ships, military assets like navy yards, aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines ..."

Since then, Six had become a multifunctional SpecOps force with roles that included high-risk personnel and hostage extractions and other specialized missions, not all of which included water. In fact, most missions were so far from salt air that the only time SEALs tasted ocean water was when they stood down at Dam Neck for up-training. Marcinko's "maritime environment" had evolved into a new definition: "A maritime environment is anywhere we have water in our canteens."

Caulder on the dune was in one of his Bohemian surfer phases when he was enthralled by sun on water and the taste of the breeze from the Atlantic. "If I didn't know better," he mused, "it'd almost be enough to make me believe in God."

"God has to love you whether you believe in Him or not," Graves said, his tone tinged by a slight bitterness. He turned away. "And it's the ocean. It's not going anywhere."

"You'll be praying for me, though, right?" Caulder said. "I'll take whatever voodoo I can get."

Ortiz snorted, amused. "You two are like moscas, you know. Flies on shit. Never gonna change."

He followed Graves off the beach. So did Caulder after a moment and a last glance back at the Atlantic.

SEAL Team Six was officially commissioned in October 1980 and set up shop in two "chicken coops" located fifteen yards behind SEAL Team Two headquarters. Both buildings were WWII-era wooden structures, forty feet wide and eighty feet long, built on concrete slabs. They had previously been used as a Navy Wives Club and a Cub Scout den.

Six HQ had been structurally improved since then, but it was still basically the same as always. Six remained out of public sight and mind until Uncle Sam needed a specialized job done that no one else in the military could handle—terrorists hijacking a cruise ship in the Med, Americans kidnapped in Somalia, a commandeered nuclear device in Europe ...

Bear Graves, Caulder, and Ortiz left wet footprints on the floor from their rubber dive booties as they made their way down the hall past the Command Center to the large Cage Room in the rear.

"So, Buddha," Caulder was saying. "This thing for Anabel. We need to dress up?"

"Don't wear your Jesus sandals, if that's what you're asking."

"They're Birkies, brother."

Each man was assigned his own secure steel-wire cage in the Cage Room where he stored his personal weapons and mission gear. SEALs had the best go-to-war equipment available—high-tech Gore-Tex parkas and boots, parachutes, climbing gear, helmets and goggles, backpacks and ballistic nylon soft luggage, Kevlar armor, snow skis, scuba, camouflage for every environment ... Their weapons were likewise high end—Sig Sauer 9mm pistols, MK48 machine guns, 50-cal sniper rifles, H&K submachine guns and combat rifles with and without suppressors, stun grenades, C-4 explosives, radio-controlled remote detonators, personal drones ... and an annual ammunition training allotment larger than that of the entire US Marine Corps.

Caulder's cage contained an Xbox, a comfortable recliner, and a beer cooler. Ortiz decorated his with 8x10 photos of his wife, Jackie, and their daughter and son. Bear's remained Spartan with no personal touch beyond a single framed enlargement of his wife, Lena. As a prank, one of the guys hung a stuffed mackerel in Fishbait Khan's cage.

Buck Buckley had missed the morning swim—something about a stopped-up toilet—and now sprawled on the floor of his cage reading a paperback novel. He closed the book and joined the others in changing into today's work clothes. It was their day at the shooting range, which meant jeans and boots and ball caps.

"So, Buddha, it's your party," Caulder said as they changed. "*Fifteen*, Buddha. Can you believe Anabel is fifteen? What are you even doing out here, *viejo*? You should be selling yerba maté on a beach somewhere."

"Your daughter's fifteen too, in case you don't remember."

"Hey, but I had her when I was twelve. You're like what? Fifty now?"

Ortiz flipped him the one-finger salute. "We all get old, amigo."

"Not me. I'm going to live hard, die young, leave a beautiful corpse."

"I can see two of three coming true," Graves drily interjected.

Caulder flipped *him* the one-finger.

A dark-skinned African American in his mid to late twenties attempted to enter the Cage area unnoticed. He was Ivy League in appearance, clean-shaved, hair cut short, muscular, with huge gear bags slung over broad shoulders. He carried himself with an air of dignity and authority, although clearly uncomfortable at being the stranger.

Buckley looked him over. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"That's Robert Chase," Bear Graves said and pointed directions to the new guy. "Take the empty cage there."

"Thanks."

Senior Chief Graves, now the team's senior man and team daddy, had checked the new man in yesterday on a transfer from SEAL Team Two. The team watched as Chase dropped his gear in the middle of the empty cage.

Caulder assumed his sly Dennis the Menace look. "That cage? I don't know, Bear. Didn't end so well for the last guy."

Buddha joined in the ribbing. "Or the guy before that. Something about a claymore."

"And a dolphin," Caulder added.

Chase's expression remained implacable. "This is the new guy scene where you give me shit, right?"

Caulder and Ortiz threw each other the *Who us?* Buckley took over the hazing. "Didn't know your kind could swim," he observed.

Chase half-grinned. "Hadn't heard that one before."

Graves broke it up. "Chase, draw us some beers from the team room. Our mugs are on the wall."

"You do know our names, don't you?" Buckley asked.

Chase looked puzzled. *Was this shit for real?*

"Part of the job, kid," Caulder said.

In the team room, the New Blood assumed bartender duties behind the bar that extended across the end of a large converted industrial space. A parachute canopy in camouflage hung stretched across part of the ceiling. A full-size porcelain nude with her legs spread lit up the area with a lightbulb between her legs. A variety of memorabilia ranging from photos and pin-ups to commandeered foreign weapons decorated the walls.

Bear seated himself at the far end of the bar where, with a series of unnoticed nods, he assisted the newbie in successfully distributing the mugs to their rightful owners. Graves got the one marked BEAR. Ortiz received BUDDHA. Buckley got BUCK.

"I knew you'd be good for something," Buck chided him. "Hey, Buddha. Did you know the three things Americans love the most start with 'M?' Mmmmm—*money*. Mmmmm—*mother*. Mmmmm—*pussy*."

They all waited for Caulder to get his mug before proposing a toast. Chase gave him the cup marked RIP instead of ALEX.

"Where'd you get that?" Graves demanded.

"From the rack. I couldn't find Caulder's."

The mood in the room suddenly changed, became almost hostile. Ortiz stood up. "Put it back," he ordered, with a hard undercurrent to his manner. "No one uses that cup, understand?"

"I, uh, didn't know."

"Now you do."

Chapter 7

Nigeria, West Africa

Taggart! Taggart, get up."

Rip Taggart's eyes opened to the pounding on the flimsy wooden door. He lay naked on a low bed in one corner of the single-room hovel, looking up at a rusted tin roof through bleary eyes. He watched a green lizard scurry out through the open gable at the conjoining of the roof and the plaited grass walls.

"Taggart?"

He grimaced wryly as he turned over to get up and his bare legs nudged another pair of bare legs. Speaking of conjoining. The African woman beside him was young, tall, slender, and so dark her skin glistened even in the morning shadows of the one-window bungalow. She groaned and turned over on her belly with her bare butt in the air. He rose on his elbows and looked at her. *Now where did I find her...?*

Screw it. What difference did it make?

"Be with you, Keith," he called out as the pounding on the door persisted.

He had one hell of a blistering hangover. He rapidly blinked red-rimmed eyes to ease the blur before he got up and staggered to the bathroom. The bath was actually part of the same room, merely a stool, sink, and shower partitioned off in one corner. He splashed water on his face and grimaced at his reflected image in the cracked mirror.

The hard eyes had turned hollow. The hunter still lingered somewhere in his features, but it had aged from his "team daddy" days. He looked *haunted*, like a lone creature wandering in a wilderness on the far side of the world, fleeing some secret past that pursued him.

He pulled on khaki trousers, a matching short-sleeved shirt with epaulets, an olive-colored bush hat, and a protective vest. He slung his go-bag over one shoulder and cast a quick look back at the prostitute. She had turned over again on her back and lay with her legs spread wide, snoring with her mouth open. Damn! He hoped she was gone by the time he returned.

Slamming the door behind him, he adjusted his sunshades and climbed into the passenger's seat of the tan Land Rover that waited for him outside with Keith at the wheel.

Keith was from somewhere in the South. Florida or South Carolina. He was light-skinned compared to most Nigerians, in his late twenties maybe, with short-

cropped hair and wide, muscular shoulders. He made a good partner in a bar fight. He favored Taggart with a broad smile.

"You look like shit," he greeted.

American rap blared from a radio station over in Abuja. Most Nigerians spoke English as a national language on top of several regional native dialects.

"Turn down the music," Taggart grumbled, massaging his aching head. "So, how are we saving the world today?"

Keith turned down the radio volume. "Public relations," he said. "Do-gooder oil company breaks ground for new girls' school."

Taggart nodded, remembering now. He and Keith, glorified security for SyncoPetro, which had funded the new school, were escorting company big shots to the site in order to publicize the event for home consumption. Since the rise of Boko Haram, executives of foreign oil interests went nowhere in-country without guns like Taggart and Keith to protect them.

Boko Haram, suspected of having links to ISIS, waged a shadow war against government as it sought to abolish the nation's secular system and replace it with Sharia law. It had been on the prod big-time with terrorist attacks not only in Nigeria but across the northern continent since it kidnapped 276 Nigerian schoolgirls a couple of years ago. So far, it had killed or maimed over 25,000 people. Most of the kidnapped schoolgirls had not been seen since.

Keith reached into the Rover's backseat and tossed ballistic plates to Taggart for his vest.

Rip shook his head. "I'm good."

"You're not a SEAL anymore, Taggart. So you follow orders. And orders say we're supposed to look like we know what we're doing. Put them in."

Taggart ignored him. "What's the comm plan?"

"The comm plan is, you charge your cell phone."

Rip retrieved a cell from his vest and checked it for charge. A photo appeared on the screen. It was the one Buckley snapped of Team White members that morning in Jalalabad before the raid into Kunar Province to snatch al-Muttaqi. Taggart stared at it a moment, then clicked it off.

As Keith maneuvered the Land Rover to their designated staging area at the edge of Edo Village near Benin City, Taggart rummaged through his go-bag and fished out loose 9mm rounds. He pressed them into an empty clip and palmed the clip into the butt of his Sig Sauer pistol before re-holstering it. Lastly, he delved back into the bag and produced a mini-flask, which he stuffed into a vest pocket.

"Lose that," Keith scolded, annoyed. "Jesus, act professional. And have an Altoid. Take the whole can. You smell like the floor of a biker bar. When I was in the First of the Ninth, we never put up with shitbirds like you."

"Yeah?" Sarcastically. "I heard you guys were really squared away."

A second Land Rover was waiting for them among Africans bustling about among mud-and-wattle native huts. Men either went bare-chested in the heat or they wore short, full jackets over cotton shorts or trousers. Small, round knitted caps covered their heads. The women in their full robes and scarves or turbans reminded Rip of colorful birds.

A Nigerian driver patiently sat behind the wheel of the other vehicle. Three white Americans came out of a bungalow and got into the car—Terry McAlwain, a gray-

haired, middle-aged oil executive; Nick Rogers the PR guy, who by his looks might have once been an NFL linebacker; and Sean, a weenie dick who carried video equipment.

Keith flipped a hand at the other driver. *Ready?*

As the two Rovers pulled out onto the unpaved road, an African lurking in the shadows of a nearby hut pulled out a cell phone and spoke softly into it. "*Sayishain.*"

They are coming.

Chapter 8

Nigeria

A green parrot perched in a banyan tree outside a newly-constructed four-room schoolhouse in farm country a couple of miles outside Edo Village squawked out-of-synch to the enchanting melody of thirty African schoolgirls inside the building singing *Ose Ayo*, a Yoruba tune led by a young African teacher.

*Ose ayo
Abeh adeh o
Ayeho...*

Voices trailed off into girlish giggles.

"That was beautiful, girls. Thank you."

"Thank you, Teacher Na'omi."

"Let's begin with our daily reading. Esther, are you prepared?"

"Yes, Teacher Na'omi."

"Excellent. We can't wait to hear. Please."

Twelve-year-old Esther, wearing a white blouse and a short plaid skirt, the school's new uniform, walked to the front of the class and began studiously reading the opening paragraph of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness..."

Outside, a group of younger schoolgirls playing on a hard-dirt playground looked up as two Land Rovers pulled up in front of the school. Na'omi heard them and her gentle face set into disapproving lines.

"Esther, you keep reading," she instructed. "I'll be right back."

"It was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the Winter of Despair ..."

On the schoolyard, Taggart's partner Keith unloaded some shovels from the Rover's open hatch while Rip inserted armor plating in his vest and retrieved a stubby M4 carbine from his go-bag.

"I told you," Keith railed. "No long guns. We're at a school."

Taggart shook his head in disagreement, but kept his mouth shut. He returned the rifle to his bag and looked up in time to see the teacher rushing out of the schoolhouse in the manner of a hen protecting her brood. Her school uniform of white blouse and plaid skirt revealed a length of flashing mocha-colored leg. Almond-shaped eyes fired anger.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded.

Nick the PR man tried to explain. “The ground-breaking for your new school. SyncoPetro wants to give back, not only with job-creating economic investments, but here. With the future.”

Na’omi’s eyes raked the intruders one by one. “I was very clear when I accepted your offer—and I’m grateful, thank you—but there was to be no publicity.”

She spoke excellent English with a trace of accent Rip took to be British.

“It’s dangerous for you to be here,” she scolded. “Can’t you see the graffiti?”

She stepped to one side and waved a slender hand to where another teacher was busy with a bucket of soap and water scrubbing last night’s offerings of insult and abuse from the school’s walls.

No schools for girls...

Death to the infidels and their whores...

McAlwain, the gray-haired oil executive, attempted to calm the teacher. “It’ll only take a few minutes, young lady,” he reassured her. “We’ll be gone. And one of my colleagues is here to discuss some security arrangements with you. So you’ll feel safer.”

He indicated Taggart with a nod. Cued, Rip stepped forward. “Miss, if you’ll just give us a look around, I could suggest some precautions—”

She angrily turned her back to him and shrugged off the soothing hand McAlwain placed on her shoulder. Nick, the athletic-looking PR man, passed his boss a new shovel. McAlwain glanced at the teacher and turned away to pose with the shovel for Sean the videographer, who seemed surgically attached to his camera.

“Like this?” McAlwain asked. He smiled big for the camera and posed with his foot on the shovel.

“Could we get a couple of girls in this shot?” Sean requested.

“I’ll get ’em,” Nick offered.

“No!” Na’omi objected. “You all have to leave. Now.”

She rushed at McAlwain, her face flushed and her dark eyes narrowed in fury. Rip stopped her. She knocked his hand away.

Taggart might have been hungover and a burned-out shell of his former self, but something remained of the elite SEAL he had once been. He stiffened suddenly, warned by instinct. He turned to scan the surrounding forest. Had he really heard the padded rustle of feet, the creaking and clanking of military hardware?

Seeing the look on Taggart’s face, Na’omi also froze and stared into the jungle, her anger dissipating into uncertainty.

An ominous quiet settled over the schoolyard. Even the green parrot ceased squawking.

Chapter 9

Virginia Beach

At the cemetery, Joe “Bear” Graves refused to get out of the pickup. He leaned forward over the steering wheel and stared into the morning sun, past his wife and the rows of tombstones. Lena, both sad and lovely in black lace and a full dress, her blonde hair done up for young Anabel Ortiz’s *quinceañera* celebration, reached across the seat and gently touched his elbow. She understood. Tears glistened in her eyes as she opened her door and stepped out.

Also dressed for the *quinceañera*, Joe remained rooted in place, eyes averted, unable to endure his wife’s pain as she walked slowly among the headstones with her flowers and placed them on a tiny grave. She stood there a moment, head bowed.

SARAH GRAVES
OUR LITTLE ANGEL
DECEMBER 15, 2014–APRIL 25, 2015

She returned to the GMC and the two of them drove in pained silence to St. Mary’s Catholic Church where Ricky Ortiz and his wife Jackie prepared to celebrate their daughter Anabel’s fifteenth birthday, her *quinceañera*.

Traditionally in Latino communities, a girl’s fifteenth birthday marks her transition from childhood to young womanhood. The custom originated in the ancient Aztec culture where, at age fifteen, boys became warriors and girls were viewed as mothers of future warriors. As a warrior himself, Buddha Ortiz considered the ceremony appropriate. It was a very formal affair, both solemn and at the same time an occasion for rejoicing.

Bear and Lena joined a small crowd of SEALs and other guests at the church altar. *The Team* were all there—Ricky “Buddha” Ortiz, of course; Buckley and his wife Tammi; Fishbait Khan, unmarried; the new guy Robert Chase, also single; and Caulder, the divorced father of one daughter. Caulder wore an impish grin and a suit and tie to match his black Birkies. He displayed a silver scepter in one hand and an eye for the hot blonde guest whose name he learned was Kelly.

Anabel looked gorgeous, with her black hair and long legs like her mother’s, and wearing a soft blue pastel formal with her long hair done up in a bun. Jackie Ortiz stood with her hand next to her husband’s where they could touch readily. She glowed with pride through tears of joy. Their son, ten-year-old Ricky Jr., “R.J.,” possessed her other hand.

Three girlfriends with Anabel wore more simple dresses as not to outshine her on her special day. Jackie thought they shone like flowers in a spring rain. The four teenage friends suppressed giggles as they appeared before the priest, who had guided and cared for his flock for nearly a half-century. He bowed his head as a signal for the gathering to bow theirs.

“Loving God, we thank You for Anabel, who today celebrates her fifteenth birthday. May she grow in wisdom, knowledge, and grace. May she love her family and be faithful to her friends. Grant this through Christ our Lord.”

He nodded as a signal to Anabel, who, anticipating it, opened her eyes. She spoke in a clear, strong voice while Jackie, Ricky, and even her little brother R.J. watched with love and pride.

“Heavenly Father, I thank You for calling me to be your daughter through baptism. Mary, Mother of Jesus, I dedicate myself to you—and to help those in need, give strength to the weak, comfort the sorrowful, and pray for God’s people. With God’s grace I commit myself to serve my brothers and sisters all my life. May all who seek your help experience your unfailing protection. Amen.”

As godparents, Graves and Lena stepped forward. Smiling, Bear draped a saint’s medal around Anabel’s neck. Lena offered a rosary. With a wink, Caulder handed Anabel the scepter and stepped back to snap another wink at Kelly, the hot blonde. Ortiz and Jackie positioned a tiara on their lovely daughter’s head. Tears of joy and pride appeared on Jackie’s cheeks.

Lena squeezed Bear’s hand and dabbed at tears of sadness for her own daughter, Sarah, who would never have a fifteenth birthday.

Afterward, the celebration moved from St. Mary’s to a nearby banquet hall packed with people, tables of food around a dance floor, and good times. Buddha Ortiz—“Ricky” in this setting—hoisted a fine new pair of high heels to draw attention as he presented Anabel her first “real woman” shoes.

“Today,” he announced in a voice choked with emotion, “you wear these to remind us that you are now a woman. But, Anabel—”

He drew a deep breath to bolster himself.

“But, Anabel—you’re still my little girl. My baby.”

Anabel patted his cheek. “Hold it together, Daddy. You can do it.”

He knelt at her bare feet and, with deeply felt affection, struggled to place the high heels on tiny feet that, not so long ago, it seemed, had been even tinier.

Chapter 10

Virginia Beach

Ricky Ortiz shuffled slow-dancing with his daughter across the floor of the banquet hall beneath colored revolving spheres. Caulder made a mock gesture of asking Graves to dance. Bear rolled his eyes. The two men headed for the food table laden with shrimp, oysters on the half shell, burritos, tacos—and fried chicken and gravy for, as Caulder phrased it tongue-in-cheek, “the rednecks and ethnics among us.” Tammi Buckley, Buck’s petite wife, paused at the serving table to cast a critical look at Caulder’s footwear.

“Nice sandals,” she said, deadpan.

Caulder looked past her to where Kelly, the hot blonde, returned his attention. “They’re Birkenstocks,” he corrected her, “and I’m in love.”

Bear scoffed good-naturedly. "That's not your brain talking. But it never is."

"Hey, she's a vet."

"Oh, yeah? What branch? Marines? Army?"

Caulder reached a ladle for some kind of green sauce. He sniffed it, made a face, and returned the ladle. "A horse doctor, man. She's got class."

Tammi expressed her own observation. "I'm not sure if I'd call it class, but if it works for you—"

She spotted Jackie Ortiz and Lena Graves across the room. The two women were watching Ortiz and Anabel dance when Tammi joined them.

"Anabel is so beautiful," Lena was saying.

"You guys should try again," Jackie suggested to Lena. "It's time."

Sarah was only four months old when she died. A congenital crisis, the doctor said. Women of the team rarely brought up the baby; Lena's pain was still too fresh.

Lena glanced away. "I don't think Joe is ready."

"They never know what to do," Jackie said. "You have to tell them."

Tammi giggled. "Like Buck would listen?"

A small silence ensued while the women watched Ortiz and Anabel dancing, broken when Jackie Ortiz said, as though the other two should know what she was talking about, "I'd been telling Ricky for years that he had to get out. It's finally sank in."

"What finally sank in?" Lena asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, what's up?" Tammi chimed in.

"The job with GSS. The interview's all set up," Jackie answered before she realized by their expressions that neither woman knew what she was talking about. "Ricky didn't tell them?"

She shouldn't have been surprised. The guys were like brothers to him. Breaking the news was a lot like asking for a divorce.

"Joe's going to take it hard," Lena said, finally comprehending.

Stern-faced—the woman could be tampered steel when she had to be—Jackie marched straight onto the dance floor and herded her husband aside, gesturing to Anabel that she should rejoin her friends. Buddha was about half-buzzed—and not on yerba maté.

"Isn't this a great party?" he enthused innocently.

"It could be better."

That tone. It was her pissed-off voice. "Baby, what's wrong?"

Jackie was too angry to speak. She just glared. That was when it dawned on Ortiz.

"I'm going to tell them," he hedged. "I promise."

She found her voice. "Today, Ricky. You tell them today."

"You think now's a good time?"

From the sidelines Lena watched with some amusement as Jackie raked her husband over the coals, employing hand gestures and, by the looks of it, bursts of appropriate Spanish. He apparently attempted to placate her by asking her to dance. She refused to be deterred. Rigid as a steel rod in a breeze, she merely pointed a stiff arm and finger toward Graves and Caulder, who were still at the serving table sipping spiked punch and exchanging war stories.

"Now's a good time, Ricky," she said.

She watched him go, then smiled to herself. She loved this guy in spite of his flaws.

"Your true love's about to leave. Why aren't you making your move?" Bear was saying to Caulder, meaning Kelly the blonde, when Ortiz joined them, looking sheepish and properly chastised.

"Real estate is about location, dude," Caulder said. "This, my married friend, is about timing. Watch and learn."

Bear snorted and turned to Ortiz. "Congratulations on Anabel's *quinceañera*," he said. "That was really something."

"Yeah," Caulder concurred. "Anabel turned out pretty well. Considering..." He chuckled slyly, leaving the rest of the gibe to the imagination.

Buddha was a man with a mission, assigned him by his wife. "Guys," he managed. He looked off into the distance. He looked at Caulder's Birkies. "Guys, there's no other way to say this. I'm getting out."

The news caught Bear by complete surprise. He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Buddha plunged on. "Anabel got accepted. At the dance school. I can't float the tuition on my E-8 paycheck."

It finally occurred to his friends what he meant.

"Besides," Buddha said to soften the shock. "I'm sick of you guys."

Caulder played it back. "It's mutual."

As Lena predicted, Graves wasn't taking it easy. "You can't just quit on us."

"Bear..." He didn't know how to say it. "Bear, it's time. I'll make sure the new guy, Chase, is good to go, but that's it. I'm done."

He hesitated. "Dance with Anabel, Bear. She'll be mad if you don't."

"I don't dance." His words came out as cold and hard as a bayonet in the gut.

"Well, hell, I do," Caulder decided with a good dose of fake cheer. "Let's get the party started."

He signaled to the DJ and the music stopped. Buckley accepted his cue and took the stage and the mic. "It's that time, folks. Come on up, Buddha. Bear. Caulder. Fishbait."

The four headed to the microphone, Graves reluctantly and still steaming from Buddha's unexpected betrayal. Ortiz took his place next to Buck, looking a little uncomfortable after what had just transpired. Buckley, who still didn't know about Ortiz, had found his element and was putting on a show.

"We're going to do this right," he announced, making the mic squeal as laughing guests crowded the stage. He tapped the mic a couple of times with his forefinger and continued. "Anabel, you stand there." He pointed. "And, Jackie, you come up too."

He waited until they complied.

"Okay—Dad and Uncle Bear and Uncle Caulder. The Three Amigos. Here we go..."

Fishbait Khan had rustled up a guitar. He hit a beat, nodding his head and tapping his foot. *Da! Da! Da Da Da...!* Buck broke into full voice with *My Girl*.

I don't need no money, fortune or fame...

“Buddha, you’re up—“

He passed the mic to Ortiz, who gamely dropped to one knee to serenade his daughter.

I got all the riches, baby, one man can claim...

Anabel beamed with delight.

“Brothers, join in!” Buckley encouraged.

Caulder was ready. He was always ready. He dragged Graves forward. Bear mumbled the chorus, not yet prepared to accept Ortiz’s disloyalty. Giggling happily, Anabel joined the trio of Caulder, Graves, and Ortiz.

*Well, I’d guess you’d say, what can
Make me feel this way?
My girl, my girl, my girl...*

Lena Graves watched, overcome in the emotion of the moment. God, she loved these men, their wives, their children. They were all part of the team, wives too, and children, not just the men. Why couldn’t it remain the way it had always been, before what happened to Sarah, before this thing with Rip Taggart, whatever it had been, and before Jackie and Ricky decided they must leave?

And she loved her burly hero husband. Perhaps it was time after all. Maybe they should try to have another baby.

Chapter 11

Nigeria

Na’omi, her senses overcome by anger, detected nothing unusual coming from the surrounding forest. She resumed her verbal assault on the SyncoPetro intruders and on Rip Taggart in particular. She knew how dangerous it could be for her girls to be seen associated in any way with foreign infidels. All Boko Haram required was an excuse, any excuse, to commit new atrocities. There was whispering in the village, rumors that the threatening messages on the schoolhouse walls were not the result of mere vandalism. Na’omi had to get rid of the foreigners quickly. The lives of her girls could be at stake.

“You’re the problem here,” she scolded fiercely, moving in on Taggart. “Not the solution. You steal our oil and exploit our people and tell us it’s for our own good—”

Much of Taggart’s adult life had been spent in waging war against terrorists in so many different places he would have to check NavPers and his personnel file to list them all. A SEAL learned to trust his instincts—and his instincts warned him now that everything was not right.

“Why don’t you look at me when I talk to you?” Na’omi raged. “Are you even listening to me? I won’t be silenced. Not even by you.”

Rip looked at her. “You’re giving me a goddamn headache.”

Na’omi looked Taggart up and down in disgust. “You smell like a hungover drunk. I should never have taken your bloody money. I—”

Taggart knew how to handle uncooperative men. You knocked their dicks in the dirt. But a woman? A woman was different, *meaner*. She went for your balls.

Keith grinned at the two of them in amusement. He hadn’t Taggart’s instincts, and the others were too occupied with the videographer filming the “ground-breaking” to pay attention to their surroundings.

But the woman seemed to know danger. She just didn’t know how near it was.

Rip ignored her and turned his attention back to the jungle, scanning the treeline.

“Get the girls inside,” he ordered.

“What?”

He thrust his face at hers, eyes narrowed, sharp jaw set, thin lips grim as they repeated the words in urgent, uncompromising tones. “*Get the girls inside!*”

Too late. He heard the muffled sounds of feet in quick motion. Out of the trees erupted an armed band of Islamic savages wildly firing AK-47s. Rip’s gun hand streaked for the 9mm holstered at his belt.

Two attackers shouting and laughing and wearing black balaclavas to conceal their faces took off toward the little girls caught by surprise on the packed-earth playground. The children scattered, screaming in terror. One of the ambushers caught up with a smaller girl and swept her up under one arm to carry her off as his personal prize. Rip drilled him through the head with a round. The attacker went down. His little would-be victim fled after her classmates in a wild retreat to the safety of the schoolhouse.

Taggart turned his attention to the mad horde now rapidly closing in on him and the other SyncoPetro representatives. From the corner of his eye he saw Sean the videographer fall, his body jerking as bullets riddled him. Keith cried out as another blistering fusillade dumped him.

Rip took a knee to cut down his target profile, thrusting his body between the incoming gunfire and the teacher. Methodically, he began tapping out forerunners in the charging mass as dispassionately as if he were back in Virginia training in the Kill House. Bullets snapped and cracked past his head and popped geysers of earth out of the bare ground around him.

He seemed to be making headway against the attack—some shooters were already running for cover—when his pistol jammed. He jacked on the slide to eject a damaged cartridge casing. The lull in his defense emboldened the attackers. They charged him like a pack of hyenas on an injured buffalo. He could almost smell their fetid breath, hear the whistling of their rabid lungs, see hate in their eyes.

They opened up full-auto with AKs. Blows that felt like sledgehammers driving steel punched Taggart in the chest, knocking him backward and down. He lay where he fell, arms spread and his eyes staring sightlessly into the African sun.

Chapter 12

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Bear Graves recalled when the SEAL Kill House was a bunker made out of old car tires to absorb live fire and a “Shoot-Don’t Shoot” scenario with pop-up targets. The new facility, which must have set Uncle Sam back a few mil, was a compound the size of a mall supermarket with fifty-two rooms and enough space for four squads to train independently. It had mock houses, mosques, churches, a bank, a supermarket... They were all so realistic they could have been transplanted from some suburban neighborhood.

Rooms were designed with authentic-looking “Hollywood” Styrofoam walls of rubber and steel to absorb bullets and stop ricochets. Realistic-appearing man targets mounted on tracks “sprinted” across rooms, “returned fire,” and “dived” for cover.

“The only difference between urban combat and the Kill House,” Bear explained to Chase, “is that, in there, the bad guys don’t shoot back at you and everybody walks out after it’s all over and has a beer.”

Buddha Ortiz, who handled explosives for the team, had Chase down in “the pit” working on laying a breaching strip charge on a steel door. He was being faithful to his word of bringing the FNG online before he turned in his Trident. Graves and Alex Caulder observed training from up above on a high-flying trail of catwalks. Since the SEALs were currently out-of-combat and in the process of up-training while awaiting new mission orders, they had undergone a metamorphosis in appearance. Clean shaves, haircuts, pressed digital combat uniforms, and rough out boots reasonably brushed were now the standard uniform of the day.

Buddha, with the the patient manner of Mother Teresa, instructed Chase in the finer points of blowing a door to provide forcible entry. The tall man, now the youngest and newest on Bear’s team, finished placing a charge on the door’s vulnerable spots and looked to Buddha. *Anything else?*

A jerk of Buddha’s head and the two men backed off to crouch behind a steel safety partition. The resulting explosion echoed up to the catwalk. The steel door blew inward and off its hinges. Ortiz evaluated the results while Seabees from the base Construction Battalion hustled in to re-hang the door.

“You’re a college boy, right?” Buddha offered. “So you know that for every action there’s an equal and opposite reaction.”

“Newton’s Third Law of Motion.”

“*Es muy excelente*,” Ortiz mocked. “So what you had here was too much reaction, okay? You’re using an ax when you should be using a scalpel. Try another one.”

They switched to a fresh door down the way while Seabees worked on this one. Up on the catwalk, Bear Graves seemed less than pleased. “New guy’s not gonna cut it,” he predicted.

“A dozen oyster shooters says you’re wrong,” Caulder challenged.

Chase below began applying a smaller charge on the next door while Buddha supervised.

“Stop!”

“What? I dialed back the charge.”

“It’s not just about power. It’s about placement. Think about the breaching problem, and read the door.”

He waited for Chase to *read* the door. Chase looked puzzled. How the hell did you *read* a door?

“Well?” Buddha prompted. “Read it.”

Chase had had enough of this bullshit. “Just tell me what I did wrong, Ortiz, and I’ll fix it.”

Long-suffering, Mother Teresa patience worn thin, Ortiz dropped his head in resignation. His face went slack. “You figure it out, smart guy. Smart *dead* Harvard guy.”

He left to join Graves and Caulder on the catwalk, leaving Chase to work through the problem himself.

“Laying it on a little thick, aren’t you, Buddha?” Caulder chided. “The kid’s good, way better than you. ‘Course that wouldn’t take much.”

Buddha ignored the jab and turned to Graves. “He’s still got some habits from his old team, but I’ve got two more weeks. I’ll have him ready.”

Graves eyed him. There had been a wall between the two of them since Anabel’s *quinceñera* and Ortiz revealed his plans to quit the team and the navy.

“You’re really going through with it?” Graves pressed.

“Got the papers to sign—”

“So sign them. Sign them and get the hell out.”

There was no tough SEAL humor in the team leader’s response. Graves really *was* pissed.

Ortiz shrugged. “Whatever you say, boss.”

He had to do what was best for Anabel and the family. He departed the Kill House without looking back, leaving Bear to deal with Caulder. You could always depend on the team’s hippie for sarcasm.

“That was good, Bear. Real motivational. You want Buddha to change his mind and stay, you need to show him some love.”

Down in the pit, another explosion interrupted further conversation. Chase looked up to the senior SEALs in the catwalk for approval. They didn’t seem to be paying attention.

“Bear,” Caulder said, “I wasn’t talking about those cheap-ass rubbery oysters you like either. I want the sweet salty beauties from Canada.”

Later, alone in the Cage Room, Buddha Ortiz opened an empty duffel bag in his cage and let it fall to the floor at his feet. Shoulders slightly stooped as though beneath an invisible weight, he let his eyes rove to the adjoining cages belonging to his teammates. He looked at Caulder’s Xbox and his recliner, at Fishbait’s mackerel, and at the near life-size Buddha in turquoise that Fishbait had picked up somewhere as a joke on Ortiz’s nickname. Down there at the other end, Bear Graves had moved in to Rip Taggart’s old habitat.

With a sigh, he selected a pair of field boots and stuffed them into his duffel. He had two weeks to go and he was out of here. It was time to start packing.

He took the boots out and replaced them on the shelf. He was so absorbed in the process and distracted by his thoughts that he failed to notice Graves entering the cage. When he became aware of the team leader's presence, he found Bear silently watching him. Neither man knew how to get over the wall between them.

"Uh, Ricky..."

Bear never called him *Ricky*. "Uh, Buddha..." he corrected.

Graves let the silence between them ride for a few more moments.

"Uh, Ricky, listen. You've been at the Command a long time. A long time. With me. And, uh, well. It's because of that... I mean, because you're leaving..."

Ortiz made it easier for him. For both of them. "We've been through a lot together, Bear. I get it."

Buckley's loping through the cages relieved both of them their discomfort. He stuck his head in. "Commander wants all shooters in the briefing room," he announced.

Graves and Ortiz exchanged a long look. It wasn't too late for Ortiz to change his mind. Buddha turned away and rooted himself in the cage while Bear followed Buck. Buddha stood alone surrounded by equipment he would never use again—and by memories.

Chapter 13

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

SEAL Team Six was divided into color-coded squadrons. Each assault squadron further broke down into three troops, each of which was then partitioned into teams of various numbers according to mission requirement. The presence of three squadron commanders in the large Command briefing room, including Commander Atkins, White Squadron's CO, provided a clue that this was no routine gathering of the clans. Something big was up. Every Team Six Operator not on mission had been summoned. Some wore casual clothing, as though having been pulled off liberty. Others, like Robert Chase, were geared up and sweaty from training.

Fishbait Khan and Buck Buckley dropped their cell phones into a cubby outside the door and went in to find empty chairs with Bear, Caulder, and Chase. Buddha Ortiz had changed his mind about attending. He arrived late and slipped unnoticed into a seat near the back of the room.

The intelligence officer assigned to conduct the briefing, Lieutenant Camille Fung, planted her tiny spit-shined boots in a no-bullshit position next to a large screen. An attractive Asian American in her late twenties, she was all starched out in pressed workaday cammies and not intimidated by the room full of testosterone. Her eyes swept the large gathering.

"Okay," she began. "The last hour we've seen several apparently coordinated attacks. One a movie theater in Istanbul..."

She nodded at the stand-by techs. The image of a theater consumed by flames appeared on the screen.

“On an army training facility in Jakarta...”

The screen switched to a scene in which Indonesian Army cadets were dragging other cadets from a pile of smoldering rubble.

The next click produced smoke pouring from an official-looking building. “And last, our embassy in Tanzania, Africa. These weren’t junior varsity Jihadists with suicide vests and surplus AKs. These were like Paris 2.0—small teams using state-of-the-art gear and with a highly organized command and control.”

On a side screen appeared a shot of two fighters clad in typical baggy black and masks. They were waving a black flag with green lettering in front of the burning embassy.

“Lieutenant Fung?” Commander Atkins asked for the benefit of the gathering. “Do we know whose flag that is?”

Fishbait Khan beat her to the answer. “*La-eelah ella lah wa Muhammed rah-sool el lah.*”

“I love it when you talk dirty,” Buck whispered.

Fishbait grinned and translated. “It says, ‘There is no God but one God—Muhammed is the Prophet of God.’ Pretty standard. The green color, though. That’s different.”

“That’s correct,” Lieutenant Fung confirmed. “We’re getting chatter about a new organization. Could be an ISIS affiliate, could be al-Qaeda, could be independent. We’re building a profile. Bottom line, these guys appear to be well trained with a degree of coordination we haven’t seen before.”

She nodded at Commander Atkins. He strode to the front of the room. He was a tall, rugged-looking officer in his forties with a crewcut and a grave expression. A scar clipped across his chin.

“All right. There’s one more thing,” he announced. “Apparently unrelated. Twenty-four hours ago, armed men assaulted a girls’ school eighty miles northwest of Benin City, Nigeria.”

Techs clicked through a series of photos showing the aftermath. The first displayed a small four-room schoolhouse with a bell in a forest clearing, like something from *Little House on the Prairie*. Inside the schoolhouse were overturned desks and small, contorted bodies of pre-teenage African girls with their white blouses and plaid skirts soaked in blood and carnage. Outside on the playground were more bodies, at least one of which appeared to be a white man. Nearby on four blown-out tires sat an abandoned Land Rover with the windows shot out and its engine scorched by fire.

“Hostages were taken,” Commander Atkins revealed. He identified each of a number of photos as they flashed on the screen in sequence. Presumably, they were taken by terrorists at the scene to exploit for political and propaganda purposes. ISIS and its affiliates were notorious for filming their beheadings, executions, cage drownings, burning of live victims on crosses, and other horrors for presentation to social media. In some sick way it assisted in their recruiting efforts.

“A teacher and a couple dozen school girls,” the commander said of the first picture.

A young woman looked brave and defiant as she attempted to shield her terrified students from unseen gunmen.

"They killed this American security contractor and a videographer at a media event organized at the school by an American oil company."

The camera lens zoomed in on two bodies—a large black man and a white man, both young and sprawled faces down in pools of blood on bare soil.

Bear Graves's eyes narrowed. This was getting to be one fucked-up world.

"They captured an oil exec and a PR man," the commander continued. "And I've got some bad news. They also captured—"

A flood of outrage consumed the room as a photo of Senior Chief Richard Taggart blossomed on the screen. Blood stained his lean face. He glared unflinchingly into the camera with raw hate and contempt. Commander Atkins identified him for those few who did not know him.

"Richard Taggart, a former troop chief at this command. Who apparently was working for the same private contractor. As of now, Rip has not been ID'd as a former SEAL Team Six operator. I don't have to say how much personal danger that would put him in. Nor how much a security risk it would be, knowing what he knows. Any reporters come sniffing around the beach, keep your lips buttoned."

"Who has him?" Bear Graves wanted to know, his voice trembling with anger.

Atkins turned to Lieutenant Fung. "Boko Haram? Right, Lieutenant?"

"Kidnapping school children is one of their MOs," she noted. "Boko Haram doesn't mess around. They killed more people last year than ISIS did."

The five SEALs from Taggart's old team—Bear, Caulder, Khan, Buckley, and Ortiz, the latter who was still unnoticed at the back of the room—sat frozen in place, the compressing of their lips and the fierce look in their eyes manifestations of the fury building inside them.

"We're tracking an HVT," Lieutenant Fung went on. "He's a courier with intimate knowledge of Boko Haram operations. SIGINT has him headed to a meeting in the Lagos area."

Commander Atkins returned to his seat, but remained standing next to it, facing the deadly quiet of the room full of SEALs.

"White Squadron," he said, "we're on the hook for this one."

Bear Graves saw the mission developing. The courier might well know where Boko Haram was taking Rip Taggart and the other hostages. He shot to his feet, fists clenched at his sides. "Skipper, my team wants this mission."

"I've already tasked you with it. You guys are on a short leash while we develop the target packages."

The commander surveyed the hardened faces of the men looking at him. He was proud of them. Damned proud. Not a man in this room wouldn't risk and even lay down his life for a brother.

"All right, men, that concludes the briefing. Bear, your team is on a one-hour recall until further notice."

Chapter 14

Nigeria

Rip Taggart had no idea where he was when he came to, except that he seemed to be jouncing around on a hard moving platform bound for—*Hell*? He always figured he'd get there sooner or later. But on a truck? Did ol' Satan have a fleet of *trucks* to transport his consignees?

His chest hurt like sin itself, which was how he decided he was probably still alive after all. Every beat of his heart transmitted electric shock waves of pain throughout his system from the bullets that had pounded into his torso. He owed Keith one for insisting he insert Kevlar plates into his protective vest. Except Keith was likely dead. Rip had seen him fall during the attack on the schoolhouse.

A desperate cry from somewhere near yanked him to full awareness. "No! Don't!"

He looked around and determined he was locked in one of several small steel-wire cages stacked inside of what appeared to be a shipping container apparently being transported on the back of a flatbed truck. Dust swirled inside the cages, cutting visibility. All he saw at first were boots sticking out the open hatch of the adjoining cage. The boots were toes down on the floor and scrabbling for purchase.

A woman's scream rent the dim atmosphere. Rip attempted to spring to his feet, except his cage was only about three feet in height. He was crammed into it with his body bent into a compressed pretzel.

"Stop!" he shouted for lack of the ability to launch a more aggressive response.

He banged his fists on the cage, making as much racket as he could. The wide door of the container opened at the back, letting in more light. The frightening outline of a very large demon armed with a crossbow and a flashlight took a step into the container.

The flashlight beam searched the interior and settled on the man with the boots who was now attempting to scramble out of the cage and to his feet. The demon coolly charged his crossbow and fired a bolt that pierced the transgressor's skull from back to front, releasing a torrent of blood that caused the unseen woman inside the cage to scream louder than before.

Other guards with flashlights rushed in. "*Kuramande shima buron stambin*," the demon said to them in a voice that seemed to rumble from the black depths of a cave.

Flashlight beams revealed Na'omi crouched in terror at the farthest end of her tiny cage. The demon planted a size twelve boot on the dead man's neck and jerked the bolt from his head. Others dragged the body away. By the sound of it, they disposed of him by dumping the corpse off the back of the truck.

The giant glared at Taggart, who looked quickly away rather than challenge him. Right now he was at a disadvantage.

"What did he say?" Rip asked Na'omi when the guards re-locked her cage door and left.

"He's saving me for his boss," she replied in a small, numb voice.

The wild ride continued with only the sound of tires grinding in dust and gravel and the whistle of wind past the steel shipping container. It was still daylight but the sun was low when the truck stopped. The man with the crossbow and, Rip now saw, a shaved head the size of a pumpkin, oversaw the transfer of Rip and

Na'omi from the container to one of two other dusty trucks waiting by the side of the road. The other prisoners from the schoolhouse had already been delivered, presumably in a previous shipping container, and were bunched in the road. The little girls from the school, more than a dozen of them, held each other in tears. Terry McAlwain, the SyncoPetro oil executive, his athletic-looking PR man Nick, and their African driver stood separately, their posture rigid with fear.

"Aiya aiya so suro matu kuraye duro ikkowo," Crossbow ordered.

Guards separated out a majority of the little girls in their school uniforms and herded them toward one of the trucks with high, slatted sideboards.

"No!" Na'omi protested. "Where are you taking them?"

Other guards wearing what appeared to be some sort of mixed-khaki uniforms grabbed her by the arms and hair and hustled her onto the other truck, along with the five remaining schoolgirls. Taggart, McAlwain, Nick, and the driver Hakeem were likewise thrown bodily onto the truck. The tailgate slammed. Several armed guards hitched themselves onto the sideboards for the rest of the journey.

Instinctively, Taggart clocked his surroundings for future reference. There wasn't much to see—a narrow rutted road winding through forest at an intersection with no sign of nearby habitation. The only significant landmark he managed to record mentally before a guard blinded him by bagging his head inside a burlap bag was a distant gas bleed-off flare from what he assumed to be an oil refinery.

All prisoners having been appropriately separated and secured, the two trucks drove off with them in separate directions.

Chapter 15

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Standing on an hour's recall meant the team must be ready to move within an hour after notification of an op. There would be no running home to kiss the wife and kids good-bye or call the bank about an overdrawn check. When the 999999 code came up on a cell phone, it was time to make one of those calls dreaded by every SEAL wife.

Honey... Honey, I won't be home for dinner.

Tonight? Oh, God. Be careful. I love you. I'll pray for you...

Bear Graves and his team departed the briefing room and headed directly for their cages to begin preparations for the call. Buddha went with them. He hadn't turned in his papers yet, which meant he remained a member of the team and therefore subject to deployment.

Bear scooped onto the concrete floor of his cage scuba gear, boots, helmet, bush hat, ruck, GPS, field gear, ballistic plates and load carriage, NVGs, knife, handgun... Gear for any situation or enemy possibility. He would winnow it down to mission essential gear once he received the target package.

He pulled up a stool and sorted through the pile. His mind wasn't on it. He kept thinking about what Taggart must be going through in the clutches of those bloody bastards in Africa. He and Taggart had been together a long time, a decade or more. Bear owed life itself to Rip.

In Iraq, back during one of Graves's first mission with Taggart, the team was tasked with infiltrating enemy-held Mosul to rescue a US Marine taken prisoner by an al-Qaeda bunch of Iranian-backed ragheads headed by a ruthless sonofabitch named...

Damn! Bear thought he would never forget that name... *Umar al-Gama.*

They located the Marine in a cellar where he was hanged by the neck from the ceiling like a butchered hog. His penis had been sliced off and stuffed into his mouth. His captors had also carved the phrase *Allahu Akbar* deep into his chest with a knife. They chopped off his fingers and nose and ears and feet before they hanged him.

That sonofabitch al-Gama caught Bear dead to rights during the op. Bear was a trigger pull away from being dead when Rip exploded out of nowhere and took the round intended for Graves in his gut. Although wounded, Rip wasted the bastard, pumped an entire clip of doom into the guy that tore him up so badly that his seventy-two virgins in Paradise weren't even going to look at his sorry ass.

No greater love hath a man than that he would give his life for a brother.

Rip and Bear together became the soul of the team, its heart and guts. Brothers in arms. Blood brothers.

Caulder entered the cage. "Bear, you all right?"

Graves held a dive mask in his hand. His knuckles turned white. His hands shook.

"I didn't know Rip was in Africa," Caulder said. "Did you?"

From his cage, Buddha recognized the tension building up in the team leader.

"Maybe we should talk about this later," Buddha called out.

Too late. Bear sprang to his feet and slammed the dive mask against the floor with such force that it shattered. The next moment, he had Caulder by the throat and up against the steel-mesh wall of the cage.

Caulder offered no resistance. He hung limp in the vice of Bear's massive grip. A vein in his temple throbbed; his face turned purple.

Buddha attempted to force himself between the two men. "Whoa! Whoa! Bear, let him go," he recited in a soothing tone. "Let him go, Bear. Let him down. Hey, hey. Look at me, Bear. Look at me."

Graves blinked. His eyes focused again and he looked around.

Ortiz continued in the same calming tone. "It's not his fault, Bear. It's not anyone's fault. It just *is*."

Bear seemed to shake himself inside. He released Caulder and his arms dropped to his sides. Caulder kept a wary eye on the larger man as he began coughing to catch his breath.

"We're gonna fix it, Bear," Buddha crooned, like talking a child down from a tantrum. "That's what we do. We're gonna bring him home."

Graves stalked out without a word and disappeared in the direction of the team room. Puzzled, Chase turned to Buckley.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

Chase had heard talk, but never the full story. Only that something had transpired one night in Kunar Province among Taggart, Bear, and Caulder. AARs—After Action Reports—said what happened—and that was the way it was going to be, officially.

Buck suspected Ortiz might know what really occurred, that there had been some kind of cover-up. But Buddha wasn't talking either.

"We don't get to know, do we, Buddha?" Buckley probed.

"Get to know what?"

"What really happened in Afghanistan. Why Rip got out so fast afterward."

Caulder massaged his throat. "Rip got out because he had personal problems," he croaked through his bruised larynx. "His wife left him and cleaned out his bank account."

Buddha moved in on Buck, his demeanor brokering no compromise. "You got it? That's what happened. That clear enough?"

Chapter 16

Virginia Beach

The Annual Virginia Beach 15K was coming up in three weeks. Lena Graves was training for it. Breathing deep and regular, she completed her daily run, jogging the last hundred yards past almost-identical rows of houses that lined the wide street in Cedar Crest, the off-base subdivision where a number of married SEALs and other navy personnel lived. She whipped a kerchief from a loop of her running shorts and wiped perspiration from her brow as she approached the cul-de-sac where her husband's pickup sat parked in the drive. She saw him with a hose watering a flowerbed of petunias and marigolds that extended along the front of the porch.

His mind wandered through a thousand-yard stare that looked right across Lena. She was a woman hard to overlook too, what with her trim athletic figure, sun-browned limbs, and wisps of blondish hair escaping from around the edges of her Giants baseball cap. She paused on the lawn and watched him a moment, concern stamping a crinkle between her eyes.

Water running from the neglected hose in Bear's fist overflowed the flowerbed and pooled around his boots. Lena gently removed the hose from his hand and cut off the flow.

"It's about Rip, isn't it?"

Graves focused. After a moment, he nodded.

"Jackie told me. You'll be leaving soon?"

"Looks like it. Don't know when."

She rested a palm on his cheek. "Go inside and clean up. We'll eat in half an hour."

Still distracted, his mind on Rip, he washed up and returned to the living room. He had really screwed the pooch in his unfortunate confrontation earlier with Alex

Caulder. Taggart as team leader would never have lost his cool like that, not with a teammate.

Lena was a neat, well-organized person whose living room displayed it. Everything had its place. He found the TV remote where it was supposed to be and powered up the TV. His eyes lingered a moment on the family photo next to the TV—Papa, Mama, and Baby Sarah made three—before Fox News Channel caught his attention with footage about the American hostages seized in Nigeria. It identified the three by name: Terry McAlwain; Nick Rogers; Richard Taggart. So far, Rip wasn't being exposed as a former SEAL.

Lena had prepared a roast for dinner with potatoes, onions, carrots, and gravy. It was his favorite meal, but he barely noticed as Lena and he settled together at the dining room table. He couldn't let it go from his mind about Rip, although it was the last subject he wanted to discuss with his wife.

"What were your splits?" he asked Lena to make conversation.

"Seven-minute miles."

"Not bad."

She sounded unsure. "I'm just not feeling ready for this race."

"You're gonna be great," Graves encouraged her. "You're good at everything you do."

Lena brightened with a thought. Only half-teasing, she said, "Why don't you run it with me? I'd like seeing you in spandex."

"That'll be the day."

Lena took his hand while he said grace, his shortened version: "Bless this food to our use, and us to Thy service. In Christ's name. Amen."

Lena lifted her head. "You know what I'm praying for?" she asked.

Uh-oh. He saw in her eyes what was coming. They had been through this territory before. But, Lord, not again, not tonight. Graves attempted to head her off.

"That bathroom door is sticking. I could re-hang it."

"Forget fixing the door. It's been almost a year, Joe."

It seemed like it was always like this. He felt the lingering sadness in the room from their loss.

"Those triathlons, working on my masters—Joe, it's not enough."

She inhaled sadly and pushed on. "Remember how many kids you told me you wanted? Four, Joe. Four. Now, I'll settle for one. I need a baby. So do you."

Graves was no longer hungry. He stared at his plate. She refused to be sidetracked, seemed determined to settle this before he deployed again.

"And with how long it took us before ..." she reminded him. She brightened, her mind made up. "Joe, I'm making an appointment—with a specialist."

"Those doctors," he protested. "We can't afford it."

She clasped his hand. "It's not about the money."

"It will be," he countered.

They had had a baby girl. They lost her. He wouldn't chance it again.

"Joe, we have to move on. Sarah would want that for us. For you."

He turned his head away to hide his emotions. A lot of big, strong men of his caliber confronted danger face-on, shot it out with bad guys, parachuted behind

enemy lines, swam with sharks... But they became sniveling cowards when it came to matters of the heart.

"Look," Lena suggested. "Go out to your workshop. Get out those plans for the crib you built for Sarah. It's time to build a new one. Your hands, they'll know. They'll know it's the right thing."

Her mind was made up.

"And that appointment? I'm going to be there. It'd be nice if you were there too."

After dinner, a tense affair during which Bear picked at his food, he thought to placate her by at least making an effort in his garage woodshop. Besides, he wanted to be alone. He stared at plans he had designed in building Sarah's crib back when Lena and he were so excited they couldn't stop talking about their dreams for the expected new arrival. Those dreams had died with Sarah.

He took a breath, put on his goggles, selected a length of walnut, placed it in his table lathe, and filled the garage with its grinding whir.

He completed his second crib leg and was aiming down the length of it, checking for flaws, when Alex Caulder entered. He wore faded jeans, his Berkies, and a contrite expression.

"Lena said you were out here," he explained, then hesitated as though he wasn't sure how he would be received.

Graves said nothing. Caulder looked more uncomfortable than ever. Needing something to do with his hands, he picked up a wood chisel and tested its edge with his thumb. With it, he indicated the length of wood on Bear's worktable.

"What're you working on?"

Graves concealed plans for the crib by turning the page facedown. "Separation gift for Buddha's leaving," he said.

"That's funny. Lena said you were going to start a new crib. That sounds like a good idea. You need to talk to her more. She—"

Graves cut him off. "What's on your mind?"

Caulder stiffened and braced his arms on the edge of the table. He leaned toward Graves. "Look, Bear. I'm as mad about Rip as you are. So I'm not taking your shit personal."

"You should."

Caulder seemed miraculously to transform from the team's unruly Bohemian brother with his Dennis the Menace cowlick to team sage. "Rip crossed the line," he said. "He lost his self-control."

Graves dug in. He didn't need Caulder's bullshit tonight. "The only line I care about is the one between good and evil. And Rip was on the side of good."

Caulder shook his head in disbelief. "You've seen all you've seen and you still think things are that simple?"

Bear refused to budge. "You betrayed your team chief. You might as well have gut-shot him."

Caulder was just as intransigent. He met Bear's hard gaze with one of his own. "I didn't tell Rip anything he didn't know himself. That's why he left."

He paused.

"And, Bear, if you ever lose it like he did, I'll do the same to you."

"That's where we're different."

"That's just one way."

He paused to let that soak in before he changed tack. “Bear, if Rip’s still alive, we’ll get him,” he said gently. “We got to work together, Bear, so we will. You got my back, I got yours. But ...”

He ran his thumb over the sharp edge of the wood chisel. “But you ever come at me again, you better finish the job.”

Both men bristled, the confrontation escalating, becoming more dangerous. They faced off, Caulder with his chisel, Bear with the length of walnut. Things were going bad fast.

Then, Caulder grinned unexpectedly and defused the crisis. “Want to go get a beer?”

Graves refused to be appeased. He returned to work. “Can’t right now. I got to work on this.”

Chapter 17

Virginia Beach

SEAL teams had a penchant for sticking together, even off-duty. Ricky Ortiz, restless, paced his living room floor at Cedar Crest. His house in the subdivision was within walking distance of the Graves’s. He dialed a number on his cell phone while he idly flipped through news channels searching for anything new on Rip.

“It’s Buddha,” he said into the phone. “Any updates?”

Caulder had none.

“Yeah, I’m sitting tight,” Buddha said. “That’s all I’m doing.”

Jackie entered the room with a baseball bat balanced on her shoulder. Ricky Jr. lagged along behind wearing a Little League uniform patterned after the Cardinals. It was game night.

“Ricky, why are you still here?”

Huh? Had he forgotten something?

“You want to be part of things, right?” she scolded. “So? Anabel? Her dance class? You said you’d pick her up.”

She clapped her hands sharply. “Move! Move! Move! You’re going to be late.”

Was this what he could expect after he turned in his papers?

He arrived at the New Stars Ballet School just as the class was about to wrap it up. Proud upscale moms dressed appropriately for their status filled the studio. Ortiz looked around; he was the only male present, probably the only male within ten miles of the place. A SEAL at the ballet! He felt about like a chicken at KFC.

Pretty little students in tights, short ballet skirts, and those funny stub-nosed shoes pranced around the stage. Ricky spotted Anabel. His heart filled with pride and his entire attitude changed. His daughter was the absolute picture of grace and beauty—just like her mother. She spread her arms in an elegant curtsy to close the set. Moms burst into enthusiastic applause as they rushed forward to claim their daughters.

"Perdoname... Perdoname... Perdoname..." Ricky murmured as he made his way to the front through all that giggling feminine flesh. He hugged his daughter, feeling more than a bit self-conscious in such an environment. He beamed at her nonetheless.

"That was amazing," he enthused. "Anabel, you've gotten so confident."

Anabel handed him her change-of-clothing bag. "You didn't even see me. Where's Mom?"

"I thought I'd pick you up. Want to get some ice cream?"

She gave him a reproving look. *Where had he been all this time?* "I'm lactose intolerant," she reminded him. "I have been for a while."

"You're *what?*"

She saw his startled expression and softened. "It's all right, Daddy. Come on. We'll get sorbet."

Chapter 18

Virginia Beach

Life had to go on as normally as possible while the team waited on recall. Twenty-four hours after the Command briefing on Rip Taggart's abduction in Africa, Ricky Ortiz prepared for his 0900 meeting with GSS, Global Structure Security. The outcome of the interview determined his future—and the future of his family. Jackie seemed confident that he already had the position; GSS could never find anyone more qualified to head its department of security services.

Ricky was nervous nonetheless; the last time he was in this position was when he applied for SEAL Six. He couldn't decide if he was on edge because he might not get the job—or because he *would* get it.

Still in her long nightie, Anabel planted herself cross-legged in the middle of her parents' bed while she texted a girlfriend and tried not to laugh at her mother attempting to button her dad's shirt collar. Not often did a SEAL—soon to be *former* SEAL—dress up for an occasion. The last time Ricky put on the dog was for Anabel's *quinceñera*. He gagged and gurgled, comically pretending Jackie was choking him. She finally gave up and pulled up the knot of his tie.

"Leave it unbuttoned," she directed. "The tie covers it."

Anabel giggled. "Too much Taco Bell."

Rick pointed a finger. "We'll see how much you laugh when I pawn your iPhone to pay your tuition."

The doorbell rang, startling Anabel so that she jumped.

"I'll get it," R.J. called out from the living room where he was watching cartoons.

Ortiz drew on his suit jacket and found it snug underneath the arms. Anabel giggled again. He ignored her and started to button his jacket until he caught Jackie about to laugh too. He decided to leave the coat open.

"Now, remember to ask about the tuition plan," Jackie reminded him. "Does it cover both Anabel and Ricky Junior?"

"You told me already five times."

She corrected him. "No. At least six."

She patted him on the head, as she might have done R.J. At that moment, Bear Graves lumbered into the bedroom with wiry little R.J. He smiled a greeting at Jackie. Her face tightened. She knew this man too well. He didn't give up easily.

"This a bad time?" Graves asked, sensing the tension.

Jackie gave her husband *that* look. "Is it, Ricky? A bad time?"

She was determined that nothing stand between the family and Ricky's accepting the new job at GSS. It meant a *normal* life with dinner on time, Daddy's being available for Junior's Little League games, and, most of all, no more long absences while her husband went chasing terrorists and leaving the children to grow up without their father. That was no way for a family to live, never knowing when Daddy left if he would return alive or not.

Ortiz eyed Bear; he knew why he was here. He looked back at his wife, torn between the two.

"This'll just take a moment," Graves apologized to Jackie.

Ricky chanced another long look at Jackie. *It'll be all right*. He led Bear out onto the privacy of the back deck where morning sunlight speckled them through the branches of the great live oak.

"That necklace I made for Anabel, she like it?" Bear began awkwardly, hesitating to get to the point that brought him here, even though Buddha surely already knew.

"Won't take it off," Buddha said just as awkwardly. "I picked her up from dance class—" His voice trailed off, leaving an opening.

Bear wedged into it. "Hey, I gotta ask you. You sign your separation papers yet?"

"I was about to..."

Bear looked him over. Buddha was all decked out in a suit and tie—and it wasn't for another day at the Kill House. Graves determined he might as well go for it.

"Buddha, we can't get Rip if you're not there with us. The new guy Chase, he's not ready. And, uh..." He forced a laugh. "And I don't know if I can stand Caulder's bullshit without you."

Ortiz took a long minute responding. Inside, Jackie watched them through the deck windows, sober-faced and afraid of the choice her husband might be compelled to make. It was either her and the family, or the brotherhood. Ricky always said she was the better part of him. The next few minutes determined if that was so or not.

"Bear, I don't have a choice," Ortiz said. "The deposit for Anabel's school is due next month. I've got to take this job."

"Look, I know this is a tough call for you," Bear conceded. "But one more time. That's all I'm asking. One more time."

Ricky looked at Jackie watching through the window. He couldn't turn down Bear, but Jackie was his wife, for God's sake. Bear nodded, as though to himself. He turned and walked off the deck and around the side of the house to his truck.

Ricky Ortiz took a deep, bolstering breath and made sure his tie knot covered his unbuttoned shirt collar before he entered the interview room at GSS. A man of about fifty sat behind a mahogany desk. He was dressed in a gray suit and a gray

tie with gray hair and a gray indoor face. Ortiz shuddered involuntarily. Was this him in fifteen years or so?

The gray man flapped a hand toward a chair arranged directly in front of his desk, in the prisoner interrogation position. A flat-screen TV turned low droned on from a mount on the wall to one side. The interviewer wasted no time in getting down to business.

“As you know, Mr. Ortiz, our teams are based on SEAL principles. But of course not with SEAL salaries. You’ll be very pleased with your take-home pay. I would suppose your clearance is up to date?”

“Of course.” Buddha restrained himself from running a finger underneath his collar. It was choking him. “About the benefit package?” he asked. “I hear you have a tuition assistance plan?”

“Correct. For approved educational institutions.”

From the corner of his eye, Buddha caught a photograph of Rip Taggart that suddenly appeared on the TV screen. The streamer below read: HOSTAGE IDENTIFIED AS FORMER MEMBER OF SEAL TEAM SIX.

Buddha felt like he’d been kicked in the gut. *Oh, merde!*

“So when can you start?” the gray man asked.

Chapter 19

Virginia Beach

Alex Caulder’s ruck, helmet strapped to the outside, lay tossed onto an armchair missing an arm near the front door of his ramshackle cabin on the beach. It contained his go-to-war gear prepared to be snatched up on his way out the door once he received the one-hour recall. Grab weapons from the Cage Room and he was armed and dangerous.

Two vehicles sat parked on the sand out front of the cabin. The beach itself served as a driveway. One vehicle was an ancient psychedelic-painted VW bus revived from the 1970s, the other, Caulder’s vintage purple-and-red Ford Bronco with the top sawed off. They complemented each other in a weird way. Where else could you have found such buggies parked together except in front of a run-down Cape Cod-looking fishing shack, gray paint peeling from it like scabs from a wound? A surfboard rested upended to one side of the single entrance, balanced on the other side of the door by fishing rods thrown across an old car seat with rusted springs.

The first time Buddha Ortiz had come with the team for a cookout, he marveled at how much the shack reminded him of a miniaturized version of the haunted house in the old Psycho movie. There was even a “Bates Motel” down the road.

The lair inside also matched Caulder’s free-spirit persona. It had two rooms, a living room and a bedroom, with the kitchenette on the enclosed end of the back porch deck. The living room was cluttered with climbing and diving gear, books strewn about at random, posters on the wall, and old-timey vinyl record albums

for the record player with its needle arm and spinning disc plate. The décor matched the twenty-one-inch TV set from the 1960s.

Tibetan prayer flags hung on a line across the open ceiling. A full-mount snarling black bear stood guard in one corner over a sofa draped in a parachute canopy. The Grateful Dead howled from the record player, proving that it worked.

Caulder's preferred method of sweating out recall was to sweat it out in bed—and not alone. Sweat-out noises issued from the cabin's single tiny bedroom, accompanied by the Grateful Dead and the crash of the incoming tide in the background. Kelly, the hot blonde from Anabel's *quinceñera*, had her long legs latched around his waist in a death grip that wouldn't let go. The bed came equipped with bedsprings Caulder had picked up cheap at Rob's Second Hand Store. They creaked and crackled in disjointed, athletic rhythm.

His cell phone sounded *Charge!*

Not now! Not now!

Still, he rolled off the blonde to check it out. He looked surprised and started searching for his jeans.

Kelly laughed. "Are you coming or going?"

He slapped her playfully on her bare bottom. "Reminds me of Einstein—you know? His theory of infinity? Infinity is the time between when you come and she goes."

Kelly made a face. "I don't get it."

"Get dressed. I'm late."

Twenty minutes later he roared up at the county courthouse in his Bronco with the hole in the muffler. He was too late for the hearing he had forgotten about. His ex-wife, Erica, and their fifteen-year-old daughter, Dharma, were leaving the judge's chambers where Erica was petitioning for an increase in his child support. Erica was also a blonde. Blond was his favorite color. Except Erica's blond came tempered with a stick of pure mean.

Dharma had gone gothic since Caulder last saw her. She came out of the courthouse garbed out all in black, including black lipstick and hair dyed coal-black. Everything black except for a skunk stripe of bleached white through her hair. She ignored Caulder as he trotted up the courthouse steps toward them.

"Congratulations, you owe me money," Erica greeted him, her streak of mean coming out. "And if you don't get current on your payments, that's called contempt of court."

She turned to their daughter. More mean came out. "Dharma, this man is your father. In case you don't recognize him."

"Why didn't you wait for me?" Caulder complained.

Erica sniffed. "We'll just add it to everything else in her life you missed. And, by the way, your lawyer quit."

Caulder's cell buzzed, a distinctive sound dedicated to only one source. He glanced at the screen anyhow. A group text appeared: 999999. This was it! The recall! It was going down.

"Dharma, that's his dog whistle," Erica explained. It was one of the reasons they divorced. "Now, watch your father disappear."

"I'll take care of this," Caulder promised, indicating the courthouse.

"Sure you will, Alex." She had heard all his bullshit before.

Dharma regarded her father with an unnerving clinical detachment, but also with curiosity, as he raced down the stone courthouse steps and roared off in his purple-and-red Bronco in a haze of exhaust fumes.

Chapter 20

Virginia Beach

The big gray-and-mottled C-17 on the eight-thousand-foot runway at NAS Oceana had its turbo engines “burning and turning” and its ramp dropped to onload teams and support for SEAL Team Six. Personnel responding to the one-hour recall were already climbing aboard the aircraft when Bear Graves arrived at the airfield, an OD duffel slung over one shoulder, dragging another up the ramp. Caulder, Buckley, and Fishbait soon joined him, likewise laden.

Bear took a seat in the webbing with his team where he could see out through the open ramp to the fenced-in parking area beyond the flight line.

“Fucking media,” he grouched. “Outing Rip like they did. Who the hell told them?”

Caulder, who looked like a hard day’s night, dropped down next to Bear, the canvas conforming to his skinny butt. “It was bound to come out. Doesn’t change anything for us.”

“What it means is we better get our asses in gear or pieces of Rip are gonna be hanging from a bridge somewhere.”

A flight of sleek F/A-18 Super Hornets streaked down the runway and out over the Atlantic before nosing straight up into a blue sky unmarred by cloud. Naval Air Station Oceana was a Master Jet Base, one of the largest and most advanced in the world, whose primary mission was to train and deploy the navy’s Atlantic Fleet strike force squadrons.

Bear checked his watch. It had been three-quarters of an hour since call-up began. He glared out past the open ramp, as though daring Buddha Ortiz not to show up. So far there had been no word from him.

Robert Chase boarded. Other than Buddha, he was the last of the team. He dropped his gear on the loading pad and flashed one of his grins. This would be his first combat mission with Six and Senior Chief Graves’s team.

“Chase,” Bear grumbled. “You got the initiators?”

“Four kinds. The—”

“What about the Nonel?”

Graves had never had to double check Buddha.

“Hey, Bear,” Caulder interrupted. “Cut the kid some slack. It’s not his first day at kindergarten. And we got to go wheels up. Give them the word.”

Graves checked his watch again. “He’s gonna come,” he said, as though saying it made it true.

“Let it go, Bear,” Caulder advised. “We’re all on our own paths, and Buddha’s path is out of here.”

Graves burned him with a look and resumed his vigil over the ramp. A ground crewman driving a hydraulics cart sped past and out of sight.

Ricky Ortiz's blue minivan pulled onto the fenced parking lot off the flight line with Jackie at the wheel. Mama wasn't happy.

"It's just till we get Rip," he promised. "I owe him."

"You owe *us*, Ricky. This school—Anabel's dreamed about it since she was six."

Ortiz cast an anxious glance at the C-17. It was about ready to move. He got out of the car and gathered up his go-to-war gear.

"I know, I know," he tried to appease his wife. "It'll all work out."

He felt like shit, like a bad husband, a bad dad. But he'd feel even worse if he deserted Rip and the team when they counted on him.

"How? How, Ricky? How's it going to work out? You going to sell Ricky Junior? You spent our savings on the *quinceañera*. And don't say you'll sell the house, because our mortgage is underwater."

He reached to take her quickly into his arms before the plane got away. She pulled back.

"*Calmate, guapa*," he soothed. "I'll take care of it when I get back. That's what I do."

"That's what you're *supposed* to do—take care of us. But you're not doing it."

She stormed back into the van. She sat rigid behind the wheel, fuming. Ricky leaned through the open window. She turned her head.

"Tell the kids I'll be home in a week. Maybe less."

"You tell them, Ricky."

"Hey." He reached and tilted her chin toward him. "I love you."

She softened, tears glistening on her cheeks. "Come home to me, Ricky."

"I always do."

A Marine stood guard at the gate. Ortiz looked back once. Jackie remained at the wheel, not looking at him, just glaring straight ahead out the windshield. He clambered aboard the C-17 and dumped his gear with the rest. Graves and Caulder shared a quick look, but otherwise pretended to ignore Buddha until he settled into the middle row with Fishbait, Buck, and Chase, across from Bear and Caulder.

"You're late," was all Bear said.

"Are we gonna do this or just talk about it?" Buddha returned.

Graves suppressed a smile. He knew Buddha would come, just knew it.

The ramp closed, engines screamed, the C-17 lurched and began moving. Jackie Ortiz now stood outside the family minivan in the parking lot and watched the plane climb into the air and head east out over the Atlantic. She watched until it became a speck and finally disappeared into the distance, a woman sending her man off to war. Tears on her cheeks reflected sunlight.

"Ricky? Ricky, come back to me."

Chapter 21

Tanzania, Africa

The hangar at the far end of the Kilimanjaro Airport in Tanzania was reserved for special clients, such as those who had arrived over the weekend and were now preparing to depart on a private Embraer Legacy 650 jet chocked outside the open hangar door in the full African sunshine. Men clad in digital desert camouflage and wearing Black Watch caps or scarves rushed about loading gear onto the sleek blue-and-white aircraft.

To a man, they were a scary, tough-looking bunch that no one would want to encounter in the dark. Or spot near an American Embassy, a hotel in Jerusalem, or a train station in Paris. They were all young men and two women, a mixture of Middle Eastern types and Africans. The co-leader of this band of cutthroats was a proven fighter in his late twenties, a Chechen named Akmal Barayev. A man of middle height with a long, full face, a tight crop of curly black hair, and a swarthy complexion, he made his bones with al-Qaeda when he was sixteen years old and was currently assisting ISIS and Boko Haram expand across Africa.

He removed his combat vest and tossed it to another fighter who hustled past carrying a black-and-green flag inscribed in Arabic symbols. A ruthless smile touched Barayev's lips. His mission in Tanzania had been a great success. Two days ago, flags like that one had flown at the bombed-out American embassy in the capital city of Dodoma. Sixty infidels had perished in the conflagration.

Two young women wearing traditional hijabs and four fighters were busy packing up computers and portable workstations in one corner of the hangar. Barayev stalked over and stood behind a tall, rather skinny man with bushy eyebrows who sat cross-legged on the concrete hangar floor staring at a TV monitor. Barayev knew little about Michael Nasry other than that it was rumored he was an American and that he and their superior, Emir Hatimal-Muttaqi, were tight. As co-leader, Nasry was in charge of "The Game," which utilized social media to recruit jihadists from around the globe.

Michael leaned forward, scowling fiercely, as a news feed came up on the monitor showing a battered and bruised American identified by the streamer below as a former member of SEAL Team Six. Nasry studied that lean face. There was something familiar about it.

Suddenly, it came to him. His mind flashed back to Afghanistan and a night in Kunar Province. Gunfire sputtered from various quarters. He and his brother Omar, pursued by American SEALs hunting al-Muttaqi, attempted to escape through the village archway and into the mountains. Fire from above blocked their flight. Omar took a bullet in the leg and went down howling in pain and fear.

Michael could have kept running and possibly escaped. Instead, he went back for his brother, who had been taken prisoner and was weeping and begging for his life. He would never forget that night—the tap of a suppressed carbine that slammed a bullet through Omar's skull while he was on his knees pleading.

Nor would he forget the shooter who stood there as cold as glacier ice and calmly pushed NVGs up onto his helmet to reveal his face. That face was the same as the one now appearing on the screen. It seemed Boko Haram had taken him hostage. By the looks of his face, his captivity would be far worse than the weeks

Nasry spent as a prisoner of the Afghan Police after the Americans killed Omar and took Michael captive.

Akmal Barayev caught Nasry's reaction to the screen and leaned over to peer at the image.

"Who's that?" he asked in Arabic.

Nasry was wrestling with his emotions and unable to respond immediately. Finally, quivering from rage and in a voice edged with raw hatred, he replied, "That is the man who killed my brother."

Chapter 21

Dubai

Michael Nasry did get around. He laughed—which he rarely did—whenever Akmal Barayev referred to him as "the Caliphate's most well-traveled warrior of Allah." Travel was one of the perks of moving in Emir al-Muttaqi's gloried circles.

Michael now sat in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, planted in front of a hotel computer playing an old-school video game. He wore a headset as he perched on the edge of his chair and, black eyebrows scowling, enthusiastically thrust and jabbed a game controller at the wall-mounted screen where a colorful cartoon character with a big ax and an even bigger head had crashed and frozen at a dead end in a magical world. Gaming was essentially Michael Nasry's only source of relaxation and escape from the violent real world he inhabited.

"Take your time," he chided the ax man as the character remained in limbo.

English was his first language, although that night in Afghanistan his brother Omar told the SEALs he was merely a raghead driver who didn't speak it. He might have been American-born but, with his Middle Eastern looks, a checkered keffiyeh and a white robe would have turned him into a desert Arab sheikh.

The hotel's wide window overlooked Dubai's waterfront with its iconic futuristic skyscrapers. Included in the skyline was the world's tallest building, the Burj Khalifa. Dubai's hotel rooms were rated as the second most-expensive in the world.

Nasry, Barayev, and their entourage of busy little Jihadists occupied adjoining suites where they pounded relentlessly on laptops in their efforts to recruit warriors for Allah from around the world to build the New Caliphate. The secret to success in "the Game" entailed locating on social media—Facebook, Twitter, etc.—the disaffected of the world, the lonely, the restless, the rootless, those searching for *meaning*, and converting them into eager martyrs-in-waiting. Social media was like a great supermarket for Jihadi recruiters. Nasry was the acknowledged expert in the field.

"Michael? Some assistance?" a voice in English called out from the adjoining suite.

Nasry tossed his game controller on the bed but kept his headset on as he moved to the other room where the six young recruiters who had accompanied

him on the private jet from Tanzania were typing furiously. Two of them were women. It was acceptable in the UAE for men to dress Western, which they generally did, but women had to be protected in their modesty with head coverings and hijabs.

"Talk to me," Nasry invited the man who had summoned him.

Instant messaging windows on the recruiter's laptop opened to a Facebook selfie displaying an unattractive teenage girl with a sorrowful expression, buck teeth, and acne. "Marissa Wyatt, Oregon, USA," the recruiter said. "Seventeen years old. Three months in development. Her grandmother is telling her to cut contact."

"Where are you on the script?"

"The script isn't working."

"You make it work. Give me a lead."

"She likes soccer, but she can't play. She's an asthmatic."

Michael analyzed the situation, nodding thoughtfully before coming up with a solution. "She wants to be on a team," he pointed out.

The recruiter sorted through his workspace and produced a sheaf of papers. "That's in the script," he acknowledged.

"That's in the script. So what do you sell?"

"Camaraderie. Purpose. Opportunity for leadership—"

Nasry cut him off. "*Family*, dude. Always bring it back to *family*. Okay, what else?"

"We set up her Twitter feed. Make her feel important."

Akmal Barayev appeared in the doorway wearing slacks, loafers, and a light blue button-down shirt that offset his black hair and swarthy complexion.

"We're ready," he announced.

Nasry held up a finger. *Wait*. He scrolled through Marissa Wyatt's profile on the recruiter's laptop. "Look at all the selfies," he noticed. "Tell you what. Send her an Alex Morgan jersey, a Nikon DSLR camera, and forget about Grandma. She's not going to be an issue."

The big-headed cartoon character with the ax *blurred* in his headset. Dude must be ready to continue his quixotic quest. Akmal followed Michael back into the other room where Nasry checked the game screen before he suspended play in order to take the call from al-Muttaqi.

"You've seen the news?" Nasry asked him through his headset.

"Of course," al-Muttaqi replied in English. "Everyone here is very pleased with the embassy. Are you prepared for the next phase?"

Luggage on the bed had been opened to display the contents of high-tech camera gear. Michael nodded at Akmal—*Everything's good*—before he took up the thread of a previous conversation with al-Muttaqi.

"I was talking about the American soldier," he said, and felt his jaw tighten. "The one Boko Haram picked up."

"Along with the American oil executive. Yes, I've seen it."

"I want him," Michael insisted.

"You must avoid distraction," the Emir admonished. "Dubai is our priority."

"This will be bigger than that," Nasry countered, not giving up.

"Dubai first. Then we talk," al-Muttaqi compromised. And with that his end of the line went dead.

Michael removed his headset.

“What did he say?” Akmal asked.

Michael brought himself back to the present. “He says we’re on.”

Chapter 23

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Rip Taggart in the back of the military-style deuce-and-a-half truck sweltering in the heat and dust boiling up from the rutted dirt road bound for—destination unknown. Although the Kevlar plates Keith insisted he use had undoubtedly saved his life, his chest still felt like he had been kicked simultaneously by John Cena and a Missouri mule. Pain stabbed through his body every time the truck hit a bump or he had to cough against dust swirling around him.

Blindfolded by the burlap bag, Taggart held on through the rough ride and depended upon his ears to tell him what might be going on around him. He heard some of the little girls whimpering while Na’omi tried to comfort them. McAlwain, Nick Rogers, and their driver Hakeem remained quiet except for an occasional grunt because of a particularly rough stretch of road.

Apparently the truck was part of a small Boko Haram convoy. Vehicle engines gunned and popped both behind and ahead, punctuated frequently by soldiers cheering and shouting in high spirits over the capture of the young girls. Nothing but horror and abuse awaited Na’omi and her students. Boko Haram had a reputation for rape, plunder, and slavery.

After a passage of time Rip judged to be about an hour, the vehicles slowed and halted with a cacophony of worn brakes. The truck’s tailgate dropped to allow debarkation. By that time, Rip had managed to rid himself of the hood and now got a first look at their destination.

They had stopped in what appeared to be an abandoned village surrounded by jungle growth. It consisted of a couple dozen tin-roofed, wooden, or mud-and-wattle huts long in disrepair. A ragtag collection of guerrilla-type soldiers shouted and thrust their weapons overhead in celebration of a “victory.” They prodded captives from the truck with a generous employment of rifle butts and herded them through a gauntlet of whistling, barking men who were already making selections and offering bids for the teacher and her five little girls. Na’omi could have had no illusions about what lay ahead for them.

Rip observed that the other male captives—McAlwain, Nick, and Hakeem—were still bagged and blinded as they were shoved and pummeled through the mob toward one of the huts. A guard noticed the bag over Taggart’s head was gone. He jabbed a rifle butt into Rip’s belly, doubling him over. Another guard pulled a fresh burlap covering over his face. Blindfolded again, suffering from his injuries, now gasping for breath from the latest assault, Rip realized he had little choice but to bide his time.

A guard named Chido barreled out of one of the huts, raging mad and throwing his considerable weight around. Agitation drove him on a beeline toward the male captives.

“Shin dan wo?” he demanded in Kanuri.

He began ripping off hoods. Terry McAlwain, the mild-appearing grandfatherly sort, blinked in the equatorial sun. Nick Rogers, his features distorted from fright, seemed to be rethinking his public relations career. Hakeem remained bagged and blinded since he was a black African and therefore did not meet the description of who Chido was looking for. Off came Taggart’s hood.

Taggart stared back at a large man whose smooth skin, eyes, and build reminded him of former boxing champ Sugar Ray Robinson.

“Rumma ya shi donyi suro TB ye,” Chido shouted triumphantly to no one in particular.

You see? The one on television!

Rip held his ground with a tight-lipped glare.

“Special soldier,” Chido accused. “More of you come. Come for you.”

Rip’s old combat survival instincts sharpened. His head swiveled as he absorbed his tactical environment. The isolated and abandoned village appeared to have been reoccupied by a horde of brutal terrorists. The best he could determine, his situation added up to one end: He was *screwed*.

Chido grabbed Taggart by the throat, drove him to his knees, and jammed the muzzle of his AK-47 savagely against Rip’s temple. Taggart stoically accepted the attack. *Fuck him*. A warrior might not always choose the time and place of his death, but he could choose how he faced it.

He waited for the bullet that would end it. In a strange way, he almost welcomed it. He felt sunshine warm against his face. A breeze ruffled through his hair. He heard a monkey chitter somewhere in the trees.

Suddenly, the demon who killed the man on the truck with a crossbow for attempting to rape Na’omi appeared. He and the one called Chido sounded as if they were quarreling over Rip’s fate.

“He’s dangerous. Highly trained. I should kill him now. It would be better for everyone,” Chido raged.

“You kill him and I don’t get paid. So it’s not better for everyone, is it? We wait for Aabid. He decides,” Quayum the demon argued back.

Chapter 24

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Taggart landed facedown on the hard-packed dirt floor of a hut that had been converted into a holding cell. The door slammed and was padlocked. He couldn’t say much for hospitality and customer service. He sat up and looked around.

Steel rebar driven into the floor in bars divided the 20x20 hut into two separate cages. Dust-speckled sunlight filtered through cracks in the walls and fell in

narrow streamers over Na'omi and her girls, who were huddled together behind the bars on one side of the room. McAlwain, Nick, and Hakeem shared the other cage with Taggart. A door in the rebar between the two cells was chained and padlocked.

Rip heard Boko Haram shooters, a rowdy, undisciplined lot, tramping around outside. The only open window in the hut looking out was on the female side of the prison. The window in the back door was boarded up and the door chained and locked.

Nick, the former PR man, was about to lose it. He huddled in one corner trembling uncontrollably and seemingly trying to make himself invisible. That would have been a real feat, considering his size.

"What's going to happen to us?" he sobbed. "Somebody answer me."

McAlwain turned away and squeezed his eyes tightly closed. He didn't want to see the future closing in on him. Not yet. Hakeem squatted and drew stick figures on the dirt floor with his finger. Na'omi was busy with the girls. That left Taggart. Nick pleaded with him for reassurance.

"You're the security guy. You can do something, right?"

Na'omi overheard him and scoffed. "He is a drunk. He is no help to us."

McAlwain, the business exec, was the more rational and practical. "Tell it to us straight, Taggart. What are we dealing with here?"

Rip struggled to his feet, favoring his chest. "You don't want to know," he said.

That was too much for Nick. "*Jesus Christ!*" he wailed.

Hakeem was young and skinny with a wide mouth and eyeglasses, one lens of which had been cracked during his capture. His dark eyes brooded on Na'omi and her students.

"The woman and girls," he said out of some deep sadness or regret, "they will wish they never lived at all."

"*Ka daina!*" Na'omi flared.

She rose from her covey of girls and approached the bars that divided the makeshift lockup.

"Those men outside, they saw you on TV," she said to Rip. "They said you had special skills—"

He found it painful to meet her eyes. "You were right the first time," he told her. "I can't help you."

With that, Nick emitted a howl of defeat. Taggart was responsible for their security. Nick had looked upon him as their last and only hope.

McAlwain stood up to take charge, like regaining control of a board meeting that had veered off the track.

"Let's think about this," he said calmly, stabbing a finger at Taggart. "If he's on TV, then so are we. They're probably negotiating our release right now. This is a business deal, that's all. Selling and buying resources. They have a price they're asking, right? So my company will pay it. We just have to wait until they do."

"Who's going to pay for them?" Na'omi asked, flourishing a hand toward her girls who still clutched one another like a nest of frightened hatchlings.

"My company will pay for all of us," McAlwain assured her.

"Bullshit!" Rip snorted. "They're on their own and you know it."

Na'omi's voice went stone cold. Her eyes narrowed. "Is that true?" she demanded, daring McAlwain to lie to her.

"No! It's not true." But the expression on his face said something different. He turned away from the teacher and glared at Taggart.

"I really need you to be more positive, Taggart."

"I don't work for you anymore, Mister McAlwain. What you need isn't my problem."

Na'omi gripped the bars with both hands. "I'm not going to let anything else happen to my girls," she vowed, her voice low and steady and her gaze raking each of the men until it settled on Rip. "And if any of you has a speck of humanity in your heart, neither will you."

"Lady," Rip replied, "heart's got nothing to do with it."

This woman, Taggart thought to himself, grudgingly, had more balls than most men he knew outside the SEAL Teams. He walked away and collapsed against the outer wall, as far away from her as he could get. A man only had so much in him. When that was gone, nothing remained except a shell.

Chapter 25

Nigeria

While the teams had cooled their afterburners at the Command waiting for the call-up, advance parties flew ahead to scout out intel and logistics for the Nigerian op. They had established a forward operating base and staging area just inside the coastal swamps of Nigeria's Gulf of Guinea by the time designated mission teams arrived. The FOB consisted of a few hastily constructed wooden and canvas buildings enclosed in barbed wire at a secure site deep in the forest. Armed Marine sentries patrolled the perimeter. The site would be erased, sanitized, and allowed to return to its natural state as soon as the mission was completed.

Alex Caulder felt the effects of jet lag and a fast three-hour truck journey in the middle of the night. The sun was not yet fully risen, but it was already as hot as two rats fucking in a wool sock. On his way to make a head call at a primitive slit trench enclosed within stretched-poncho walls, and with no roof to keep out the equatorial sun or vultures, he spotted a pair of suspicious-looking men who appeared from out of the forest and casually sauntered along the outer wire. He wasn't fooled by the innocent "Who me?" hillbilly garb they wore—colorful *dashikis* and juju headgear, although they might indeed be innocent locals out scouting their new neighbors. Foreigners sneaking into somebody else's kraal, arriving hush-hush in the middle of the night, were bound to arouse curiosity. Marine security could take no chances; they routed the pair and escorted them inside the compound where they could be held under guard until the mission ended.

The teams would be out of here for good within a few hours, with nobody the wiser until after the smoke settled. That was the way Six worked.

Caulder finished his business at the head and returned to where Team Leader Graves and a crew from Intelligence had completed a target mock-up on the ground—a duct-taped schematic of a Nigerian oil tanker called DAMASCUS II. Graves's team and a second Echo team were waiting. Fishbait rolled his eyes at Caulder's tardiness. Caulder blasted him a one-finger salute. *When you gotta go, you gotta go.*

Bear got down to business. "Listen up."

The teams had received briefings and target folders on the flight over. This would be the final go-through before mission launch.

Bear passed out headshot photos of tonight's target, a professorial-looking African wearing wire-framed glasses. Each man in the two teams was issued a laminated copy attached to a lanyard so he could wear it around his neck for quick reference.

"The HVT is Ebo Buhari," Graves began. "Been running as a courier between Boko Haram and ISIS the past few months. He knows where Rip is—"

Always the skeptic, Caulder corrected him. "He *might* know. That's what Fung says."

"He *knows*," Bear repeated, annoyed. "ISR shows a periodic stationary sentry. Here—"

ISR was an unmanned Predator drone so-called because of its "spy in the sky" clandestine ability in Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance. High-tech saved lives and time in putting together a target folder.

Bear dropped a stone starboard on the schematic tanker to indicate the sentry. He pointed to a couple of boxes that represented the pier to which the ship was tied.

"An irregular roving patrol here," he went on. "So we don't use the gunnel. We board at the portside stern instead. Hook and climb two ladders. Own a footprint and secure the deck."

He jabbed a finger at Caulder with thumb lifted like the hammer of a pistol. He clicked his tongue and let the hammer fall. "Point man, Caulder."

Caulder sauntered onto the duct-taped outline and assumed his position at the stern open to the bay and opposite the pier. It was his turn to take over the drill.

"Fishbait, your Echo element sets up overwatch and secures the shipboard communications. I take our Delta element down one deck to this area here."

He moved over to demonstrate. "Knock on some doors. Hope our guy is home."

Graves motioned for Buddha. "Breacher..."

Ortiz stepped aside in favor of Chase, who would be taking his slot on the team when Buddha moved on and out. Chase took over the demolitions portion of the briefback. He looked confident, like the Ivy Leaguer he had been at Harvard where he served as an assistant professor.

"Based on a sister ship study," he began, "we focus on cabin doors, take a standard load-out for VBSS—Visit, Board, Search, Seizure. If we have to get through something—a wall, a door—we'll get through it."

Graves interrupted. "Why is the New Guy talking?" he demanded of Buddha.

"He's lead breacher for this operation. I'm assist."

Bear did a slow burn. "He can learn on another op. You take this, Buddha. Once we have the HVT and the target is secure, we commence search and seizure."

Bag everything for Intel. New Guy, that's your job. Delta and Echo elements link up by the hook point. Then we call in the extract birds."

"That's if everything goes as briefed," Caulder put in. "Which, as we know, it always does."

Fishbait and Buckley rolled their eyes. *Always the sarcastic wiseass*. Graves ignored the comment.

"Secondary extract is on the docks," he said. "If we get lost going in or out...?"

He shrugged. That *wasn't* going to happen.

The stage returned to Caulder, who displayed a quarterback-like playbook strapped to his wrist. It contained a complete overlay of the ship's decks and cabins.

"We use the bulkhead frame numbers, match them to our schematic," he explained.

"Medical?" Graves prompted.

Buckley took that one. "QRF—Quick Reaction Force—is twenty minutes off objective, so don't get your ass shot. If you're a dumbass and do, use your blow-out kit and plug it up and suck it up."

Bear's gaze swept his SEALs one by one. The briefback turned sober in the realization that it was going down, and that Rip's life might well depend on what happened tonight.

"Now that they know who Rip is," Bear concluded, "there's no telling what they might do. So we got to get to him before they do."

He held up the photo of Buhari.

"And this is the guy that gets us there. We get in, get out, ask for forgiveness later. We cannot, we *will* not, dick it up. Confirm?"

They group-nodded. Bear locked eyes with Buddha. Ortiz nodded again and looked away; he felt like a traitor for letting this be his last mission.

Caulder lightened up the mood with his Dennis the Menace role. "It's showtime!" he hooted, like he was about to ride the waves at Waikiki.

Chapter 26

Lagos, Nigeria

The derelict fishing trawler attracted no attention as it slipped in through the oily night past the brier islands and long sand spits that protected Lagos Harbor from the Atlantic Ocean. Lagos, with a population of about twenty million, was one of the most populated urban areas in the world, not exactly a city but instead an agglomeration of cities, a conurbation. It was also one of the largest and busiest seaports on the African continent, with fishing craft entering and departing the harbor at all hours, day and night.

And filthy. Discarded bottles, cellophane wrappers, cans, dead fish, and other debris in a slick of oil lapped at the prow of the fishing boat as it made its way

toward docks stacked with tankers, freighters, liners, other fishing boats, and private craft of all types and sizes and of various national registries.

Bear Graves's six-man Delta team supplemented by an Echo team crouched at the rails in black wet suits and swim hoods, armed and ready. They were almost invisible in the darkness. When anyone moved, it was like a part of the night shifted.

Tonight would be a swim only, no air tanks. Just masks, suppressed weapons, and balls.

Graves scanned the docked ships through a night-vision scope. The oil tanker was tied up just where techies said it would be. DAMASCUS II. The name seemed to leap out at him.

"That's it," he said.

Caulder confirmed the target through his own scope. "What do you say, team leader?"

It was up to Graves to make the final go-no go decision. "Let's take it down."

The trawler pulled power, its wake catching up and lapping at the hull as it drifted in the direction of the oil tanker. Its red-green running lights were purposefully dimmed to prevent illuminating its passengers while at the same time, to avoid the harbor patrol, complying with international law. Senior Chief Graves passed the go signal. Black-clad SEALs oozed over the gunnels and down a fishing net to slip silently into the dark water, merging with it and becoming nothing more than additional unnoticed flotsam. Fins propelled the twelve swimmers through the oily harbor toward DAMASCUS II.

Caulder on point utilized the tanker's contours and configuration along with his NVGs to approach the ship's low-riding stern. Some careless deckhand had left a line dangling over the side, which made boarding that much easier. Caulder shinnied up the three-inch hawser to the main deck railing. His eyes and the pistol in his fist appeared first. He searched the deck for movement. The greenish shine from his NVGs made his eyes glow like a predator's.

Adrenaline pulsing in his temple sharpened his senses, put him on full danger alert. Sometimes, he thought he was only fully present and alive at times like these. Buddha accused him of being a "risk junkie." But, then, wasn't that a requirement for becoming a SEAL?

The ship's main deck appeared unoccupied, most of the crew either ashore getting drunk or asleep belowdecks. A deck light shone dimly up at the starboard bow where the stationary sentry was supposed to be. Twin diesel stacks and the ship's superstructure obstructed Caulder's view of the pier area. Apparently, the sentry and the roving patrol never anticipated thieves boarding the ship from the seaward side. They were probably dozing off somewhere anyhow.

Hanging precariously from the railing by one hand, Caulder hung the rope ladders and let them unroll to the still water below and the waiting SEALs. With a final scan of the deck, he slipped through the railing ropes like a cat and merged into the deeper shadows by the diesel stacks to cover for the raiders.

Like ethereal beings, SEALs poured up the ladder and into the shadows where Caulder waited. Echo, accompanied by Fishbait, led an external element forward to take out the ship's communications and eliminate sentries. Bear and the

internal Delta element headed for the hatch that led into the ship's interior and to the cabin where Intel reported the HVT was assigned.

Caulder halted the team within view of the hatch and waited until he was sure the way was clear.

"Delta is at set point," Graves radioed Echo and other command elements, speaking softly with his lips next to his headset mic. "Three ... two ... one ... execute!"

The team, with Caulder still on point, descended in a carefully choreographed combat stack with assault rifles prepared for action from any quarter. Pure adrenaline pumping through the heart provides a high like nothing else. Their padded swim booties made scarcely a whisper. The tanker stank of diesel and man sweat. Intermittent overhead lights buzzed faintly and flickered with generator surge.

Distant voices sounded from down an intersecting dimly lighted passageway. Caulder checked the quarterback playbook attached to his wrist and turned toward the voices. The team followed, moving through pools of shadow and light like a single organism. The voices from an unseen source muted into silence.

Just ahead lay the cabin door—21A—where Lieutenant Fung's Intel spooks claimed the HVT should be holed up. The plan was to grab him if he was home, wait for him if he wasn't. So far, ISR reported him still aboard the tanker.

A dim interior light leaked from around the edges of the door. The stack prepared for entry. Caulder pushed the unlocked door wide and immediately stepped forward and to one side to allow the rest of the team to spread into a defensive/offensive posture. A small, academic-looking, middle-aged man sitting at a desk underneath an office lamp startled and emitted an involuntary cry. He must have felt safe here, judging by the unlocked door.

Barely had the intruders digested the sight of their presumed quarry than four burly bodyguard types entered through the door from the adjacent cabin. It must have been they whose voices Caulder heard earlier. Caught unaware, also apparently having felt their man was safe here, they reached for their weapons; the SEALs had surprise on their side.

Graves, Caulder, and Buckley fired simultaneously with their stubby MP-7s. The smack of bullets eating flesh made louder sounds than the suppressed muzzle blasts. All four bruisers fell to the deck, their bodies all mixed up and on top of each other, blood pouring from fresh orifices. One man continued to move. Caulder finished him off with a single shot to the head. Now was neither the time nor place for Marquis of Queensbury rules. Rip Taggart could have said it best: *Fuck 'em.*

The little man at the desk with a map and a drink in front of him immediately lifted his hands in surrender.

"Those men you murdered, they had families," he accused.

Caulder yanked him to his feet and frisked for weapons. Graves compared his face to the photo he carried.

"It's him," he confirmed.

Caulder indicated Ebo Buhari's drink. "Too bad you didn't get to finish that. Laphroaig. Best Scotch in the world. I can smell it from here."

"I can smell you from here," Buhari retorted.

“That’s funny,” Caulder parried. “About as funny as that photo we have of you sucking Jewish cock.”

That set Buhari off on a rant. “You frigging fag infidels. I’ll spoon your brains out of your skulls. I’ll—”

Bear slammed the terrorist courier’s face against the desk, spilling his Scotch. Caulder, who could always find amusement or diversion at the most unusual times, laughed.

“I like that,” he cheered. “‘Frigging fag infidels.’ Alliteration.”

Buddha Ortiz and Buckley stepped outside into the passageway to cover while Caulder, Graves, and Chase secured the prisoner and swept the room for intel. They quickly shoved maps, computer laptops, cell phones, and papers into a carry bag. Buhari, afraid to move, remained where Bear had pounded his face against the desk and then zip-tied his wrists behind his back.

Bear thrust a laminated photo of Rip Taggart into Buhari’s face. “Where is this man?” he demanded with implied threat.

Buhari turned his head away. Caulder called out that the intel sweep was completed. “We’re good. Let’s get off the X, Bear.”

Bear grabbed Buhari by the neck and forced him to look at Rip’s picture. “I’ll ask you again. Where is he?”

Buhari sneered. “In the ground, by the grace of Allah.”

Graves hooked a thumb into the courier’s eye socket. The terrorist fell out of his chair and to his knees, gagging and slobbering with pain and shock.

Outside in the semi-dark passageway where Ortiz and Buckley had set security, one on either end of the hall, Ortiz chanced a quick look back toward Buhari’s door. *What the hell was taking so long?*

He returned to his vigil just as a man, apparently another bodyguard, exited the lavatory-head from a door down the passageway. He giggled to himself while he danced and shadowboxed. White powder under his nose and in his beard provided a clue to his frivolity. The bastard was so spaced out on blow he barely knew where he was.

His eyes seemed to pop out of their skull when he realized he wasn’t alone. This was a good way to lose a buzz. He dived for the open door of the head. The muzzle of Buddha’s MP-7 flickered and thumped two rounds into the bodyguard’s torso before he disappeared into the head. A third shot splintered the doorjamb.

Buddha charged forward to finish off the man. A live frag grenade, fuse sizzling, sailed out from the head and bounced down the passageway toward him. The wounded man was determined to exact revenge.

“Grenade!” Ortiz shouted and wheeled around to haul ass. Buckley dived into Buhari’s cabin just as the grenade detonated with an eardrum-busting blast. Buddha Ortiz disappeared in black smoke and flame.

Chapter 27

Lagos, Nigeria

Chase darted into the smoke-filled passageway and located his mentor crumpled on the deck, gagging and choking. He slung his rifle and dragged Ortiz into Buhari's cabin. The acrid taste and odors of the grenade explosion trapped in tight quarters gave him a fit of coughing and made his eyes water, but the smoke thinned enough that he saw Ortiz had by some miracle escaped virtually unscathed except for a wrenched knee. It seemed when Buddha whirled around to run, he stumbled over a fire extinguisher left on the deck and fell flat. The shrapnel-filled blast from the grenade chewed out the bulkhead above his head.

Dazed and momentarily in La La Land, Ortiz heard bells from the Mormon Tabernacle playing in his ears. He sat up on the cabin floor and shook his head to clear it. He looked as though he had survived a plane crash. He was scratched and nicked all over and covered with soot and insulation from the blown bulkhead. Pain in his knee caused him to wince when he moved it. Otherwise, he seemed to have retained all his parts. Except now he was pissed. If he hadn't already wasted the cokehead who nailed him with the frag, he'd go out and shoot the bastard again.

"I'm good, I'm good," he assured Chase, who hovered over him.

Caulder had been right when he proclaimed "It's showtime!" Except he had missed the time of first curtain call. There was now no further need for sneaking and peeking. The curtain had gone up. *Places, everyone!*

The tanker seemed to be overrun with Boko Haram. Through the dissipating smoke in the passageway, Graves and Caulder on watch at the door detected two armed fighters staring in at the dead man in the head and trying to figure out what went wrong. Graves nodded at Caulder. The two SEALs cut them down with bursts of fire from their suppressor-equipped weapons. *Sayonara, motherfuckers. May your seventy-two virgins all be hideous.*

From farther down the hall, the muzzle of a responding AK-47 hammered frantically from a narrow passageway intersection. Rounds tore into the bulkhead inches from Graves's face, shattering the door facing. Splinters exploded into the air and the two SEALs ducked back inside.

"Caulder, take us out of here," Graves called out.

"Oh, so *now* you're in a hurry."

Fishbait Khan's voice came up on Bear's comm headset. *"That you guys?"*

There was no time to answer him. More fighters were rushing to the fray. As General Custer remarked at the Little Big Horn: "Damn! Where'd all these damned Indians come from?" Something big must be going down somewhere for so many Boko Haram to be aboard the ship. Navy Intel and the spy in the sky had missed something.

Untrained guerrillas, terrorists, and others of that ilk were seldom disciplined. Rather than expose themselves to rush the door, they hid in the passageway intersection, stuck their weapons blind around the corner, and sprayed bullets, depending upon luck to score.

Buckley joined Caulder and Graves at the door and the three of them laid down hellfire while Chase kept tabs on the prisoner and Ortiz recovered. Their bullets spanging off the steel-and-wood bulkheads caught an AK creeping out of hiding and shot it out of the shooter's hand. The weapon skittered down the deck, its

trigger mechanism smashed and a severed finger lodged inside the trigger guard. The nine-fingered victim howled like a dog passing razor blades.

"We're engaging multiple targets," Graves informed Fishbait by radio. "Getting ready to move."

"*Coming to you,*" Fishbait radioed back. Apparently, the exterior element had completed its mission of destroying the ship's communications and putting the sentries out of action.

"Negative, negative," Bear radioed back. "They're throwing grenades. We'll meet you topside."

In the lull resulting from the terrorist losing his weapon and his finger, Caulder scouted the cabin for an alternate way out. He discovered a door leading off the cabin opposite the one through which the four bodyguards had entered and paid for with their lives. The SEAL raid was starting to seriously stack up bodies.

Caulder shouted, "This way!"

The SEALs crept out the back way down an even narrower passageway with Buhari in tow and Buddha hobbling painfully along in the rear. The passage was unlighted. Only NVGs kept them oriented.

They came upon a ladderway leading down. Caulder checked the plaque on the wall and consulted his wrist playbook. He headed down the ladder. Graves balked.

"Down? We're not going down."

"Got to go down to go up," Caulder informed him.

Bear cast about for a second option. From behind and beyond Buhari's cabin came loud gunfire and hoarse, frantic shouting. Assholes must be shooting at shadows.

Not waiting, Caulder disappeared down the ladder. Bear followed and descended into the tanker's bowels, the rest of the team and their prisoner following.

The ladder emptied into the engine room. The stench of diesel and stagnant seawater from leaky bilges permeated the black air. The tomb of pipes, great engines now dormant, and a maze of steel walkways as seen through the greenish hue of NVGs formed a horror Neverland where there might be monsters. The enemy had a thousand places to hide.

Caulder checked another plate on the wall and kept moving forward, cautiously but controlled as always. No panic lived in these disciplined warriors.

Distant shouting echoed through the pipes and air conditioning as the hunt for the intruders spread through the ship. Ortiz lagged behind to pull rear security, trying not to limp. Injuries did not preclude a team member pulling his own weight in a crisis.

Caulder led the way up another ladder to a cluttered cabin at the top, apparently reserved for the engineman. He moved in to check it out. There was an unmade bunk in the corner with a pair of rubber boots and a set of fireman's coveralls on the deck alongside. A nudie cutout tacked to the bulkhead was bent over with her bare butt exposed. Bear quietly relayed their location through his radio headset.

"We're on Bravo 204 Alpha."

He received only static in reply. He tried again. "Any Echo element respond."

Nothing came back except indecipherable garble ending in silence. They had lost comm with Echo, either because of their being encased in the steel confines of the ship or for some other reason that could not be determined.

The passageway through which the team passed didn't look to be well-traveled. It dead-ended at a rusted steel door welded shut. Caulder rubbed crust off a tiny age-fogged window and peered through in his NVGs. Beyond lay a small empty cabin with a ladder off to one side. According to the ship's drawing, the ladder led up and out onto the main deck.

"It's good," he decided. "We go through the door."

He checked it and found it solid. "Breacher up," he requested.

"Buddha?" Graves hissed.

Ortiz made his way forward, hobbling from his bum knee. Chase took the initiative and stepped ahead of him.

"I got it," he volunteered, then announced, "Going explosive."

Graves and Caulder exchanged questioning looks as the New Guy hastily began working to attach a charge to the door's locking mechanisms, exactly as he had trained to do under Ortiz at the Kill House.

"You gonna blow in here?" Caulder asked disbelievingly.

Ortiz arrived and pushed Chase roughly aside. "Move!"

He had no time to explain to the Harvard man the mechanics behind an explosion in a tightly confined space. He tested the door handle and then bent over to inspect the door for weld points.

"Get the hoolie ready," he instructed Chase.

He extracted a small exothermic torch from his possibles kit and began work on the door handle after turning off his NVGs to prevent being blinded. The torch emitted a bright blue hissing tongue of flame that traced a triangle cut around the door handle. Sudden shouting erupted from below the ladderway they had just climbed. Ortiz quickly extinguished the torch. Tension filled the passageway. As long as the door remained sealed, the team had no other avenue of escape except to fight their way through hostiles coming up the ladder.

Buckley edged toward the ladder landing and peered down the dark well.

"Any time," Bear urged Ortiz, whispering.

Buddha stoked up the flame and returned his attention to the door. Going through it was the only viable option. Chase stuffed a first-aid pressure bandage into Buhari's mouth to keep him quiet and taped it in place.

Seconds ticked by. Tension continued to mount until the flame from the torch seemed to cut deeper into their own presence than into the steel door.

Ortiz completed the cut and pushed the doorknob through. It fell to the steel deck on the other side with a clank that seemed to reverberate throughout the ship. *Damn!*

Chase hurriedly wedged a Halligan tool, a hoolie, through the opening and yanked hard on it, trying to lever the door open. Buddha gripped the handle with Chase and the two men pulled. The welded door cracked open about an inch. They kept pulling. Voices coming up the ladder grew louder. It had become a race against time—and time always won when there was a tie.

Gunfire unexpectedly erupted from *inside* the room, some asshole blindly shooting through grating from the opposite side of the sealed room. Bullets pinged

and ricocheted off the steel door. A moment later, Buckley opened up down the ladderway at the gunmen approaching from that quarter. Graves's old pappy often used the expression "between a rock and a hard place" to describe a lack of choice. That was where the team found itself now—between a rock and a hard place.

Buck released another burst, answered by return fire below.

Ortiz let out a curse with raw feeling. "Son of a bitch!"

Graves shoved Buhari at Chase. "Watch him."

He and Caulder joined Buck in suppressing fire from the ladder, their silenced weapons coughing savagely.

Somewhere along the way Buhari had lost his wire-framed glasses. His eyes bulged. The only sound he managed through his gag were grunts of rage and fear. Chase pressed him to his knees and returned to helping Ortiz with the door.

Buck's reinforcements forced the enemy to withdraw from the ladderway. Attackers resorted to eerie hooting and taunting that could have come from anywhere, considering the ship's tricky acoustics.

Past the steel door and up the other side was the only way out. "Little help?" Ortiz requested.

Buck kept watch at the ladder while Graves and Caulder returned to the stuck door and pushed Chase out of the way. Straining, the older SEALs widened the opening. The asshole shooting from behind the grating in the cabin apparently decided he didn't hanker meeting his seventy-two virgins just yet and ran off to a pressing engagement elsewhere.

Sporadic gunshots resumed from the ladder landing. Buckley returned it. Bear checked on Buhari. He didn't want the guy spilling his guts here, literally, before NSA and the CIA got their hands on him for "advanced" debriefing.

"Put your back into it, Bear," Caulder encouraged. "Do I have to do everything?"

"Shut up and pull, damn it."

Chase rejoined the effort. With a final heave, the four big men wrenched the door open. Pouring sweat and shoving their captive ahead of them, the entire team charged through the cabin and up the steel steps toward the main deck. Chase carried the bag of contraband intel from Buhari's cabin while Caulder hung back with Buddha.

"We're on the portside aft ladder," Graves radioed, hoping someone was listening.

Buddha, with his leg stiffening, clawed his way up the last few steps. Graves flung open the hatch and shoved Buhari out onto the deck.

"Going external on the main deck," Bear reported through his headset.

They weren't out of danger yet. In darkness and in heart-beating silence, the SEALs in single file, their breathing ragged, staggered toward the gangway that led down to the dock. The strain of the last hour thrummed through their bodies.

Unnoticed by any of them, a group of fighters in the superstructure above scattered into position to trigger an ambush against the escaping SEALs and their HVT. It may have succeeded except for one factor: Fishbait with Echo's external element had set up a covering force behind a dock crane ashore on the pier. They had purposefully maintained radio and tactical silence to prevent their discovery.

An instant before the enemy shooters would have opened up, Fishbait and his crew unleashed a withering hail of steel that cut down the enemy skulkers like a

Nile scythe through ripe wheat. The night went incandescent with light and sound. Muzzles sparkled and tracers clashed to the accompaniment of weapons barking and rattling in a terrible symphony of death. Battle could be beautiful in a ghastly sort of way.

Bear's men and their prisoner scurried down the gangway and linked up with teammates on the dock. Graves faced the ship and lay on his trigger, spraying the remaining enemy soldiers aboard the DAMASCUS II. Spent cartridge casings clattered around him. Muzzle flashes revealed his face, momentarily betraying how shaken he had been underneath his tough exterior. Death had walked with each of them tonight. *Fuck him*. They had foiled him again.

Everything went quiet in the immediate aftermath. Bear lifted his head skyward. The night was clear with stars and a sliver of moon rising. From not far away, he heard the thumping of a rapidly approaching helicopter.

Chapter 28

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

The village in the jungle to which the hostages were transported had apparently been abandoned for quite some time until Boko Haram moved in to reoccupy it. An open fire crackled in the heart of darkness. Smoke curled from the flames, rising out of what had previously been the village square, and dissipated against the vast celestial panorama of stars and sliver of moon. A night bird called from somewhere in the surrounding forest. Another answered.

Several guerrilla terrorists loitered around the fire, smoking home-rolled cigarettes or chewing khat, a mild opiate. They were garbed out in military-style cammie trousers or khaki shorts, either boots or sandals made of cow or elephant hide, and a variety of shirts ranging from safari wear to T-shirts or short African tunics. Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara with his trademark black beret adorned some of the T-shirts; fifty years ago Fidel Castro had sent him to Africa to foment a communist revolution. All the men were armed, but most had stacked rifles at a baobab tree growing alone in the middle of the town square and marketplace.

The hour was late. Rip Taggart lay curled on the bare earthen floor of the holding cell hut where he tried to sleep and regain strength from the pounding his torso had suffered during his capture. It was a useless effort. His eyes remained wide. He listened to the sounds from outside—low talking, the occasional rattle of weapons or gear, some laughter, footsteps shuffling—and tried to catalogue the size of the force and where the various individuals might be sleeping or stationed as guards or sentries.

Nick the whiny PR man with the shoulders of a quarterback and the courage of the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz* had finally settled down after Rip had had enough of him and threatened to knock his dick in the dirt. Terry McAlwain moved as far from Nick in the tiny hut as he could get on the male side of the

rebar enclosures. His African driver Hakeem followed. Leaning on each other, the pair snored gently in unison.

In their cage on the other side of the split cell, Na'omi and her five girls seemed to have settled down for the night.

Taggart was thinking about Bear Graves and Caulder, Buck and Buddha and Fishbait. The *team*. Brothers never left brothers behind—except Taggart was no longer a brother. He doubted any of them even knew he had been captured. And even if the Command knew, why should it commit resources to rescue a rogue operator from the past?

He became aware that he wasn't the only one awake in the hut. Ambient moonlight illuminated Na'omi's pensive face at the bungalow's only window. He hadn't heard her move away from her sleeping girls, she had accomplished it so silently.

"What are you looking at?" he asked her in a guarded tone.

"I'm counting the guards," she replied in the same guarded manner.

"There's five guards," Rip told her. "And maybe fifteen shooters."

"You're finally sober," she noticed.

"Unless you've got a flask of moonshine stashed somewhere."

Na'omi ignored the comment. "I heard them talking," she volunteered. "They're afraid of you. When their leader comes, he'll kill you."

"Yeah? Well, shit happens."

She eased over to the rebar nearest him. She nodded in the direction of her sleeping girls.

"Do you know what Boko Haram does to girls?" she said. "They'll sell them as slaves, and they'll be raped by their so-called husbands, forced into motherhood before they can even be children themselves."

Her voice edged thin and sharp with sadness.

"The worst part is, their own families will shun them if they're ever free again. They'll be turned away as outcasts. They won't ever be able to go home again. Can you imagine what that must feel like?"

Rip could easily imagine not ever being able to go home again. "Like I said, shit happens. And there's nothing anybody can do about it."

Rip lay unmoving on the floor, not looking at her. She knelt at the bars nearest him and swallowed her pride. Her voice changed, exposing vulnerability for the first time since Rip encountered her at the school.

"Please, mister?" she pleaded. "They don't have much, my girls, but I can put something together. We can pay you. You work for money, don't you?"

There had been a time when he hadn't, when what he did was for God and country and Mom's apple pie and all that bullshit.

One of the girls materialized next to Na'omi and knelt with her by the bars. A shaft of moonlight through cracks in the wall caught her tiny dark face in profile. Rip recognized the little one Na'omi called Esther.

"Mister?" Esther sounded teary-eyed, panicked. "It's true what you said, isn't it?"

Yeah. It was true. There was nothing anyone could do. He hunched deeper inside himself. He didn't need this shit. Nick whining and whimpering, and now a flock of weeping girls and a mean-tempered bitch herding them.

“Bertina—that’s my sister,” Esther said, struggling not to choke up. “Bertina doesn’t know how to feed my bird. If I’m not there, who will feed him?”

Rip had had enough. “You put her up to this,” he accused Na’omi.

Esther persisted. “The seeds are in the tin under my bed. Will you tell her that?”

“One of us will,” Na’omi promised gently and wrapped her arms around the little girl. Rip felt the teacher glaring at him.

“Esther. Her name is Esther,” Na’omi said. “She’s a Christian. Some of the others are Muslim. But neither God nor Allah will save them—”

Rip struggled to shut her voice out of his head.

Na’omi repeated her declaration for emphasis. “Neither God nor Allah—unless we try.”

Chapter 29

Virginia Beach

The returning C-17 touched wheels down at NAS Oceana just before dawn. The team trekked immediately to the Command for debriefing. The mission was considered a success in that it had seized Ebo Buhari, the courier who knew, or should know, where Rip was being held. Spooks from the CIA had been on hand in Africa to immediately relieve Senior Chief Graves of the prisoner and trundle him off to some unknown destination for interrogation. That had been a mistake, in Bear’s estimation. Buhari was more apt to talk if kept under the team’s control where Bear could turn up the heat on him.

The Commander’s debriefing concluded just as sunrise limned the horizon. Bear, Caulder, and Ortiz with his injured knee adjourned to breakfast at the Gulfstream Diner on the waterfront for their usual post-mission ritual. They claimed their customary table at the wide window overlooking the entrance to the bay. It was off-season at the run-down little beach town on the outskirts of Virginia Beach. Only a few boats plied the waters of the bay this early.

The three SEALs had gone by the Cage Room to shower and change before one of the other SEALs with a vehicle on-base drove them to the diner. Bear and Buddha wore their usual causal blue jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers. Caulder as always went unorthodox—psychedelic beach shorts, an old sweatshirt with the sleeves ripped out, a faded red headband, and, of course, a pair of Birkies. Bear slathered butter thick on his pancakes and poured on strawberry syrup. Caulder liked plain old maple laced with blueberries and a fried egg. Ortiz settled for orange marmalade.

Bear and Caulder continued a disagreement that had started in Africa over whether they should interrogate Buhari before turning him over to the CIA. Caulder took the position that that was against protocol. He won out.

“It was a judgment call,” Bear insisted, chewing and glaring out the window toward the bay.

“A bad one,” Caulder countered. “The risk-reward ratio was way off.”

"The reward was ... on the ship the guy might have told us where Rip was. But now he's had time to clam up."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. But there's a right way and a wrong way to do things."

"And you decide what's right and wrong. That's what you do, right?"

"I do a lot of things."

"Do you want to save Rip or don't you?"

Caulder took his time adding more blueberries to his pancakes. Ortiz stayed out of it.

"All right," Caulder said. "You can ask that question once. But what I'm starting to wonder—and, Buddha, tell me if I'm way off here—is maybe you want to save Rip too much."

Fury bubbled beneath the skin of Bear's lean face. "I asked that man to be the godfather to my daughter. Remember that? You were there."

He pointed a stiff finger at Ortiz. "So were you."

Ortiz drew a deep breath. "Bear?"

"You better believe it's fucking personal," Bear interrupted, scorching Caulder with a look. "It's as personal as it get."

He rose abruptly and dropped a couple of bucks on the table.

"Must be nice," he said to Caulder. "Not feeling anything, for anybody."

He stomped out of the diner without looking back while Caulder eyed their attractive waitress. "I'm feeling something right now," he said and winked at the waitress when she refilled their coffee cups. What do you know? She was blonde.

He finally noticed that Ortiz had not rendered an opinion on the disagreement. "You're real quiet over there, Buddha," he said, then turned on his mischievous grin. "Then I would be too if I had to go home and face Jackie. Makes this ship mission look like playing piñata."

Ortiz remained somber, reflective. "This is some deep shit for Bear, you know that, right? Right?"

"Yeah, I do. But he pushed too hard on the op and we missed the initiative. Got behind the eight ball. That can't happen again."

Ortiz conceded. "It better not."

They both rose to leave. "And just so you know, Alex. I'm the *jefe* in my family, okay?"

Caulder chuckled. "Sure you are."

"I don't believe it when I say it either," Ortiz said. He laughed and bumped fists with Caulder.

Chapter 30

Virginia Beach

Caulder dropped Ricky Ortiz off at his modest but comfortable dwelling in the Cedar Creek subdivision not far from the Main Gate to NAS Oceana and SEAL Command after the blonde waitress from the diner drove him home to pick up his

red-and-purple Bronco. Buddha turned and watched Caulder drive away until he turned the corner down the block. There was this thing between Caulder and Bear, a clash in their personalities and priorities, that had not seemed serious until after Afghanistan.

“Momma! I’m home!” Ricky called out as he went inside and closed the door behind him.

Getting shot at one day and then attempting the next to meld back into family life that seemed to go on as always during an absence proved a schizophrenic challenge for any operative. Ricky heard the hum of air conditioning and the pings, hoots, and other sound effects of a video game in progress. He hobbled into the living room where Ricky Jr. hunkered over his personal computer before he set out for school. The boy continued to play without looking up.

“You get past that thing, the monster with the—?” Ortiz attempted.

“Yep.”

“Cool. Mom home?”

“Think she went out.” He still hadn’t looked up. “We have career day at school tomorrow. Everybody’s dad is going to be there.”

It seemed an accusation spoken quietly. It wasn’t fair to the kid. Ricky felt guilty, but they had been through all this before. “We can’t talk about what I do, buddy. You know that. Maybe next year?”

After he gave up the SEAL Teams and started working for GSS.

“Yeah. Sure,” R.J. mumbled, like he didn’t really believe it. He kept playing his game.

Once the family found out about Ricky’s injury, they would all be on him to quit. Especially Jackie, who would grill him on what happened even though she knew he couldn’t talk about it.

“Know where Mom keeps the Advil?” he asked his son, trying to make a connection here.

“Bathroom, maybe?”

Ortiz sighed and gave up. He limped down the hallway past family photos lining the wall. He heard unexpected voices when he passed Anabel’s closed door. He paused to listen, then tried the knob. Locked. How was that for irony, the team’s breacher having to knock on his own daughter’s door? The voices inside hushed.

“Don’t be a brat, R.J.,” Anabel’s voice scolded.

“It’s Papa, Anabel. Open up, sweetie.”

He felt her panic, even through the door. “Come back later,” she said.

“I just got home. I want to see you.”

Anabel cracked the door and poked her head out.

“How you doing?” Rick inquired suspiciously.

“Homework. I mean, fine.”

Ortiz pushed on the door, revealing Anabel’s boyfriend sitting on the edge of the bed looking guilty. Justin was on the scrawny side, with a tuft of brown hair and wearing a contrite expression. He stood up and wriggled his finger in a tentative greeting.

That did it. This house had *rules*, even if Ortiz wasn’t always home to enforce them. He snatched Justin by the ear and perp-walked the teenager down the

hallway to the front door. Mortified, Anabel trotted along after them. R.J. kept at his monster-on-the-loose game as though unaware of any commotion.

"We weren't doing anything," Anabel protested.

"I want you to know, Mr. Ortiz, I respect your daughter as a woman." It was difficult for a fellow to retain poise while being escorted out by his ear.

"Christ!" Ortiz snapped, short on patience. "Come back in ten years, okay?"

He shoved the boy outside on the stoop and slammed the door in his face.

"I can't believe you did that," Anabel cried out.

"Where's your mother?"

"Working, okay?"

She pivoted in a huff and stormed down the hallway to her room, hurling indignation back over her shoulder. "God, I hate you. You're ruining everything."

Her door slammed. Ortiz stood alone in the hall. His son was busy playing games, his daughter sulking in her room, and his wife working. The house seemed suddenly vacant. Hadn't the Ortiz family once lived here?

Chapter 31

Virginia Beach

Like Ortiz and the other members of his team, Bear Graves found himself transported out of combat and back into the workaday world of normal folks. But his thoughts remained stuck on that cursed ship, DAMASCUS II. After his ritual breakfast with Caulder and Ortiz at the Gulfstream Diner, he had returned to SEAL Command where, as mission leader, he spent the night in further debriefings with representatives from branches of government ranging from the CIA and NSA to the Pentagon and the Department of Defense.

Now, finally free the following afternoon, he found himself stuck in the carpool lane at Drake Elementary where Lena taught school. While moms and Suburbans pinned him in on all sides, he agonized over Buddha Ortiz and the grenade explosion in the ship's passageway. He feared initially that he had lost his first man after having replaced Rip Taggart. Even now, after it was over, he couldn't shake the queasy feeling, a dread that hung on, that he could have been responsible for trading Buddha's life for a chance at saving Rip's.

He lowered his weary head and bumped it on the steering wheel. When he looked up again, he spotted Lena waiting for him by the school entrance. She was surrounded by children and life. She hadn't seen him yet. He suddenly didn't want her to see him right away. He liked watching her like this, enjoying that wonderful laugh of hers as she chatted shop with a male colleague, reveling in the way she bent over to hug a little girl of about five who reached up to her.

He noticed then, even from a distance, the look of sadness that swept over her face when she let the child go.

He mirrored her with a sad smile of his own. Still, after a mission, after the blood and brutality and killing and, yes, the fear, the sight of her always bought

him back to ground. He worshipped that beautiful woman with his entire life, his soul, more than he could ever tell her. She deserved a better man than he. She never deserved what happened to Sarah. Every week she drove to the cemetery to place flowers on their daughter's grave.

A car's loud horn jolted him. It was like the grenade exploded all over again. He knew a teammate once who had PTSD after a mission in Iraq wiped out half his team. Any loud, unexpected noise since then and he hit the deck, immediately returning to that day. It was a hell of a way for him to end up.

The horn behind him in line sounded again, a tentative tap. Graves eased his truck into the vacated spot ahead, his still-white knuckles gripping the steering wheel. Lena waved and ran to the pickup, opened the door on her side, and slid in.

"How was it?" she asked with forced cheerfulness.

"Good. We all got back."

That was about all he ever said about an op. She moved over and kissed him with enthusiasm and held on longer than necessary. Each time he left brought with it the realization that she might never see him again. The other wives felt the same way about their husbands.

"You ready?" Lena asked him.

Huh? Had he forgotten something they were supposed to do?

Then it dawned on him. She had an appointment with the fertility clinic. He talked to her on the phone last night and she informed him about it. He had agreed to go with her.

Perhaps he shouldn't have been so hasty. Family photos showing happy children in successful homes lined the walls of the clinic's waiting room. On a magazine table stacked with *Parents*, *Your New Baby*, *Guideposts*, and other "family" titles sat a plate with little handprints on it and the inscription *Happy Father's Day*. He looked at Lena, expecting to see the by now familiar sadness about Sarah. Instead, Lena looked hopeful, *expectant*.

Bear almost went into shock when the doctor called them in and quoted his fee. Dr. Aarush Banerjee was a small man in his late fifties, dark, from India or Bangladesh. Lena had told Bear which, but he couldn't remember.

"Fifteen thousand dollars," Bear repeated in a daze. It finally sank in. "*Fifteen thousand dollars!*"

Lena squeezed his hand to calm him.

"For the first attempt, yes," Dr. Banerjee counseled in his best professional tone. "If payment is a concern, we offer credit with excellent terms."

"But that's IVF—in vitro fertilization," Lena reconfirmed. "We're starting smaller, right?"

"Yes. We typically begin with Clomid to see if we can stimulate ovulation and go from there."

"And that's...?" Lena prompted.

"Inexpensive. Maybe fifty dollars."

Lena smiled at her husband. *Better?*

Discussing such intimate details made Bear uncomfortable. "Uh, is there anything else she can do?" he asked, beginning to sweat. "You know, at home? Something, uh, naturally?"

"Well, given her age and past history," the doctor said, "it's not surprising your wife is having trouble conceiving. If it's all right with you, Lena, I'd like to do a physical exam to check for any cervical irregularities and draw blood for lab."

He paused and nodded at Graves. "And as for you, young man, we should also get a semen sample."

Graves was quick to question. "Why?"

"*Joseph!*" Lena reprimanded him.

"The more information we have," Dr. Banerjee explained, "the better."

Lena and the doctor were both looking at him. Bear ran a finger underneath his collar. Damn thing was loose, but it still felt like it was choking him. He half-expected steam to come hissing out of his shirt.

"*Now?*" he managed. It sounded like a frog croaking.

Chapter 32

Virginia Beach

A male nurse outside the Sample Room passed Bear a little plastic cup with a lid and motioned him toward a door. "Have fun." Bear leveled the impudent little smartass a burning look that set him back on his heels. Then he entered the room and locked the door. The white room contained a sofa, a commode, a wash basin, and a DVD player attached to a TV set. On the TV screen, a woman in a bra was seducing a man in a chair. The set's volume was turned all the way down to mute. Brown paper taped over the TV controls warned DON'T TOUCH.

Embarrassed but resigned to his fate—people out there *knew* what he was doing in here—he dropped his jeans and underwear around his ankles and got to work dutifully tugging and massaging. It was a hell of a situation for a SEAL to find himself in. He was *ruined* if word of this got around SEAL Command.

He gave up after a few moments. This wasn't going to work. He studied the TV set. Maybe if he found something more stimulating on the DVD player. It was said the male brain was connected to his penis, which meant in Caulder's case it was a one-way avenue.

Bear looked around to make sure no one was watching, which he assumed they weren't. He removed the DON'T TOUCH paper and hit FAST FORWARD. When he pressed PLAY, volume blasted from the set like a jet taking off.

Holy shit!

He scrambled to turn down the sound, but in his haste knocked the DVD player off its stand with a resounding crash. Desperate, he yanked the cord out of the wall. The damned thing finally shut up.

"Okay in there?" the smartass called through the locked door.

Graves stood panting with his pants around his ankles. "Good. I'm good."

He replaced the TV and DVD player, careful not to disturb anything else. He flopped onto the sofa, relieved that that was over. His own reflection gazed mockingly back at him out of the TV's blank screen.

He had to get this nightmare over with. Fill the cup and escape. He closed his eyes and tried again.

This wasn't gonna work. Discouraged, he sank back into the sofa. A knock at the door startled him.

"I said I'm good," he snapped.

"It's me," Lena responded.

He quickly pulled up his jeans and unlocked the door for her. She peeked in. "Did you already do it?"

"I'm... uh..." he stammered. "I think maybe we, uh, you know, should come back."

Lena spotted the TV. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, guessing its purpose.

"What?"

"Is that a DVD?"

She headed toward it. Graves quickly locked the door and tried to head her off. "Don't—"

Too late. She saw the dangling cord and plugged the set back into the wall. Bear expected a roar of sound. Instead, it came on mute. On the screen, a woman with bare double D breasts was riding a skinny man. Lena was amazed.

"Her boobs are so big! I mean, how does her back hold up those knockers? How can she run?"

"Don't think running's a big priority," Bear observed, deadpan.

Lena settled onto the sofa, her eyes glued to the screen. "The last time I watched an actual porn film was in high school." She giggled. "Remember that?"

Graves did. "On the church trip."

She caressed him with an adoring look. "You had such a reputation back then. One of those boys my dad warned me about."

"I was out of control," he admitted.

"You were something wild I wanted to tame."

She smiled *that* smile. Even under the circumstances, Bear felt some of the old intimacy between them. He thought she did too.

Still smiling seductively, she reached out to where he was standing, clutched his crotch, and drew him to her between her spread legs. He stood looking down at her, not so embarrassed now.

"Mmmmm. My big bear," she cooed. She loosened his jeans and shorts and let them drop. She took him in hand.

"Lena..."

"What?"

She was making it work. Their eyes met in an awkward moment. But then, together, they burst out laughing.

"I can stop," she teased.

"Don't."

Graves watched her work for a few moments before he leaned back in ecstasy to let go. Lena held out her free hand.

"Give me the cup," she said.

Chapter 33

Virginia Beach

Like his preferred method of sweating out a recall, Alex Caulder's preferred method of decompressing post-mission was also in bed—and also not alone. He hadn't yet called Kelly, but blondes were interchangeable and her replacement was hitting it pretty good with him on his secondhand bedsprings. The springs were popping, he heard the soothe of the outgoing tide from the beach, and the new blonde was emitting moans and muted screams of pure twilight zone. If there was one thing about Caulder in which he took pride, it was that his women *would* be satisfied.

The next crash of the retreating tide brought them in unison to the crest of the wave and then, more leisurely, into the following trough. They fell back in bed sated, naked, sweaty sheet twisted around their bare legs.

"Holy—What was *that*?" purred the blonde waitress from the Gulfstream Diner.

With feigned modesty, Caulder elaborated, "Just two essences melded into a single fleeting moment. Like peeling up a corner of the universe and seeing what's underneath."

The waitress giggled. "Don't ruin it, hon."

She patted around for her watch on the upturned fruit crate that served as a bedside stand. She checked the time, groaned, and jumped out of bed and began pulling on her diner uniform.

"I'll still get my pancakes, right?" Caulder teased, reverting to his fallback position as Dennis the Menace.

"Honey, you can order *anything* from my menu, *anytime*."

With that, she was up and out the door. Her break was over. Time to go back to work.

Remaining naked, Caulder got up, poured himself a leisurely glass of Scotch, and returned to bed with a copy of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. He had read it twice before, but he was in the process of reading it again. Each time he did, he identified even more profoundly with Siddhartha as he leaves home in hopes of gaining spiritual illumination by renouncing all personal possessions and becoming an ascetic wandering beggar on the Nepalese plains of Kapilvastu. That was something Caulder thought he could get into, might even do someday.

He read up to the point where Siddhartha is about to speak personally with Gautama, the famous Buddha, the Enlightened One, before he closed the book. Smiling to himself in a rare moment of perfect peace, he climbed cheerfully out of bed, strapped on an apron, and began to prepare a beautiful meal for himself—lobster thermidor with brown rice, home-baked bread, and a vintage wine. That, too, was part of his post-mission decompression.

He arranged the completed meal and wine on a serving tray and made his way toward the front porch, balancing the tray aloft on his fingertips like the stuffy waiters did at à la Folie or Colette's.

Monsieur, your repast is prepared.

Nothing came closer to sex than the pure pleasure of dining in the open air with the salt scent from the sea, the cackling serenade of seabirds, and the sun going down. He opened the door with his free hand and froze in openmouthed astonishment.

“Hi, Alex.”

Dharma! He wasn’t aware his daughter even knew his address. This time she wore green lipstick with basic gothic black. Carrying a backpack, she swept on past him and into the cabin. He turned to watch her, too surprised and puzzled to respond. The chef’s apron managed to cover his front, but his backside remained totally exposed to the salt air, seabirds, and everything else.

“How did you know where I live?” Caulder asked his daughter as evening fell.

“Court records, Alex. They’re public.”

Caulder watched his daughter, his discomfort growing. She perched cross-legged in the middle of his bed eating the meal he had prepared earlier for himself. He had pulled on faded jeans with the knees torn out and a Grateful Dead T-shirt. Barefooted, he felt tracked-in sand on the floor beneath his feet.

It was an awkward situation. *Damned* awkward. Hell, he got claustrophobic if a blonde attempted to stay after the bedsprings stopped creaking. Now, instead of one weird-looking teenage girl wearing green lipstick and playing the Salem Witch in his house, it felt like an invasion of an entire coven of witches, each of whom claimed to be his daughter.

“This take-out?” Dharma asked him. “It’s good.”

“I made it.”

He saw it in her face. *No shit?* He looked out the window at the moon rising over whitecaps. “Where’s your mom?”

“Fuck if I know. Call her.”

He started to lay into her about her language. Instead, he let it pass. It wasn’t his responsibility how she grew up, how she dressed, how she *talked*. He dialed his ex-wife’s number. His call went directly to Erica’s voice mail.

“You could call Brad,” Dharma suggested.

Caulder made a face. He wanted nothing to do with Erica’s weenie-necked little limp dick of a live-in. Brad wanted nothing to do with him either after Caulder once threatened to kick his ass.

“Brad says you’re a war criminal,” Dharma volunteered. She seemed to derive a kind of perverse pleasure in passing along the observation.

“A *what?*”

She gave him a quick shoulder lift. “He uses the ‘N’ word a lot.”

“He does know I’m white.”

“*Nazi*—‘N’ word. You know. You do atrocities. Kill women and children and stuff.”

Caulder scowled at her. He was tired of this already. “Is that what you think of me?”

“No.” Another nonchalant shoulder lift. “I don’t think of you at all.”

This was horseshit. *Horseshit!*

“This isn’t cool, Dharma, you know. Showing up like this, unannounced in the middle of—”

“—of *what?*” She made a show of looking around the ratty bedroom with its single dim lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. She made no effort to hide her disdain.

“*This,*” he countered on the defensive. “*Everything.*”

She moved on. “I just need a place to crash for a few days, okay?”

“No, not okay. There are certain things...” Like *blondes?*

Dharma put aside the tray and began digging through her pack.

“Don’t unpack.”

She fished out an e-cigarette and reacted to the look on his face. “Relax, Alex. It’s only vapor.”

Daughter or no daughter, Caulder had had enough already. “It might not look like it,” he said, peeved, “but everything in this house—”

“—*shack,*” she corrected him.

“—has a purpose and a place.”

Everything except for you. But he didn’t say it. Instead, he snatched up his jacket and car keys and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” She sounded anxious.

He ignored her and slammed the door on his way out. He sat behind the wheel of his open-topped Bronco for a moment in the night air, staring out to sea and watching moonlight silver out breakers rolling in to the beach. *What the fuck had just happened?*

He kicked over the Bronco’s engine and drove away.

Chapter 34

Virginia Beach

Ricky Ortiz’s first day back from the op went little better than Caulder’s after his estranged daughter showed up. Anabel and R.J. took off for school without bothering to say good-bye. Buddha was left to rattle around the house by himself while he wondered what this “working” thing with his wife was all about. He thought it had been settled about her getting a job once he agreed to quit the navy and take the GSS position.

He got hungry in the afternoon and went to the fridge to scrounge for leftovers. Old Mother Hubbard’s cupboard seemed to be empty, unless he wanted to cook something. He settled for strawberry Pop-Tarts with a beer chaser. And a bag of frozen English peas for his knee.

He slumped at the kitchen table and stared at the Pop-Tarts and beer. Some homecoming it turned out to be. His knee throbbed in spite of the green-pea ice pack.

By the time Jackie got home, what was left of his beer was warm and he had nipped only a couple of bites from the Pop-Tart. Jackie stopped short when she entered the kitchen and found him there hunched over the table asleep with his head on his arms.

"Ricky! You're home!"

He stirred and looked up. "You're the only one who seems to have noticed I was gone."

He sounded peeved, hurt.

"*Mi rey*," she answered. *My king*. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him soundly. Her eyes took in the beer can and partly-eaten Pop-Tart.

"*Mi rey*, I would have made you something."

She jumped up and raided the refrigerator for something to cook, setting out a carton of eggs, some sausages, and a pack of tortillas. Ortiz noticed she was dressed out in a dark green professional-looking pants suit with a white blouse and heels. Her dark hair was down and brushed to a luster. She looked beautiful.

"How did it go?" she asked him, making conversation when it appeared he wouldn't.

"We got the target we wanted. Waiting to see what he says."

She turned on a burner and fished out a skillet from the drawer below. Coffee in the electric pot was still fresh from this morning. She flipped the ON switch to reheat it.

"And the new guy?" she inquired, still making conversation. "What's his name?"

"Chase. He's getting there."

"He's lucky to have you. We should have him for dinner sometime, like Rip did for you."

Ricky finally got around to asking why she came home all dressed up once she gave up trying to divert him. "Where were you?"

She hesitated. She looked at him and turned back to the stove. "I was working, Ricky."

"Did you fill in somewhere?" he probed. "Like a temp or something?"

She took another moment at the range before she turned to face him. "*Mi amor*, listen. The drug company I used to work for? Before Anabel? They had a sales opening... If I work part-time nights and weekends, it might be enough."

What she was telling him was that her man didn't earn enough to take care of his family. What kind of man did that make him?

"Nights and weekends," he repeated numbly "But—the kids? They need you here."

What he also meant was that *he* needed her at home, *wanted* her here. Ricky Jr. buzzed in from school in time to overhear the last exchange between his parents. He grabbed a chocolate chip cookie from the pantry

"I'm eleven, Dad," he said between munches. "I can take care of myself."

"Besides," Jackie said to his dad, resuming their conversation, "if we need help with the kids, we can ask my mom."

Ricky made a face. "Your mom? Here? Kill me first. Look, *guapa linda*. That contracting job with GSS? Once we get Rip, I'll take it. Everything will work out."

"Ricky, you're in dreamland," Jackie scolded. "We need the deposit for Anabel now. If we want this for her—then this is how it's going to be."

On that note, she returned to banging at the stove. Ricky wasn't willing to let it go.

"You have any idea what your daughter was doing while you were gone?" he asked accusingly, rhetorically, since he was about to tell her. "She was with a boy. In her room. With the door locked."

"Let's talk about this later," she said, nonplussed. She plucked the cookie from R.J.'s hand. "Go brush your teeth."

"No!" Ortiz flared at her. "We'll talk about it—!"

He started to his feet in order to engage properly. His knee buckled and he collapsed in pain. Jackie's demeanor changed instantly from the combative Spanish esposa to the concerned caregiver. She rushed to his side.

"What is it, baby? Is it your knee? Let me see it."

She carefully rolled Ricky's trouser leg up to above his knee. R.J. bent over her shoulder to watch.

"Whoa!" the boy exclaimed when he saw his dad's reddened and swollen knee.

"Can you bend it?" Jackie asked.

"Not really."

"And it feels hot, feverish," she noticed.

He grinned deprecatingly and waved a hand at the thawed bag of English peas that had fallen from his trousers onto the floor. "Ran out of frozen peas."

Jackie straightened, concerned. She called out, "Anabel!"

Anabel, still angry with her dad, had come straight home from school and holed up in her bedroom. "What?"

"Get the key to the van. Your dad needs to go to the hospital."

Anabel rushed to the kitchen. She took a look at her father's injuries, but refused to look directly at him.

"What happened?" she asked, melting.

"Nothing," Ortiz said. "Nothing's happened. Jackie, you're overreacting—"

"Can I drive?" Anabel asked eagerly.

"I'm driving," Jackie said. She tugged Ricky to his feet against his resistance. "R.J., you stay here."

"No way. I'm coming too."

This had become a family affair. The house was going bedlam. Jackie and the children escorted the reluctant patient to the front door, pushing and pulling him and chattering with excitement.

"Guys—" Ortiz protested.

"The ER at Sandhill—" Jackie decided.

Ricky refused to go any further. He lodged himself in the doorway. "Whoa! Stop! Stop! Listen to me. I can go to the base clinic tomorrow. They'll give me a cortisone shot. It's all I need, okay? Now, can we all just ... just go back inside and spend a little time together? As a family?"

Anabel and R.J. paused to wait on their mother's reaction. She put her foot down. "Ricky! Go get in the car."

"Shotgun!" R.J. shouted and dashed for the driveway. Jackie and Anabel followed, not looking back.

Ortiz felt as foolish as a balking mule in the middle of a barn door. *Jefe?* Damned right he was the boss—when Jackie told him he could be. *Madre mia!* He gave in and limped after the rest of the family.

Chapter 35

Dubai

Wait, Emir Hatim al-Muttaqi had instructed Michael Nasry. He would get his chance to revenge the death of his brother, but first came the *next phase*. The American SEAL could wait until after that.

Bitter men like Michael Nasry existed and thrived on visceral hatred. For them, radical Islam served as a tool by which to vent their malevolence upon the world. Islamic terrorism demanded little of a practitioner other than that he kill and destroy and be willing to die for Allah. The Quran provided all the instructions a soldier of Allah required.

Killing unbelievers is a small matter to me.

Fight everyone in the way of Allah and kill those who disbelieve Allah.

I will cast horror onto those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads.

I have been made victorious with terror.

And if a soldier gave his life in the service of Allah, didn't the Quran also promise that on that day he would be in Paradise?

Tension mounted in the adjoining hotel suites Nasry, Akmal Barayev, and their entourage of six young men and women recruiters occupied in Dubai as they waited expectantly for the next phase of the mission to commence. Everything had turned quiet as the clock ticked down. There was little talking. Computer keys stopped clacking. A couple of the techs paced restlessly. The two young women sat on a bed clasping hands. Barayev and the elder recruiter, an Arab of about thirty, stood at the skyscraper's window and gazed off in the direction of the waterfront and the magnificent futuristic edifice known as Madinet Jumeirah, center of the Dubai International Film Festival, which was currently under way. Thousands of cinema-goers, actors, directors, producers, writers, and industry experts were gathering to celebrate the world's best films.

Among the waiting group, only Michael seemed preoccupied with anything other than the festival. Today, it wasn't the old-school video game and its colorful cartoon character with his big ax and his even bigger head that commanded Michael's attention. He left his avatar frozen on the wall-mounted computer screen. He even ignored the hotel TV in the corner as an Arab moderator presented live feed from the film festival... *Last year DIFF was included in Condé Nast Traveler magazine's list of the world's top fifteen film festivals...*

Soon, very soon now, the moderator would be permanently hushed.

Michael's obsession focused on his laptop and a saved clip from a previous news flash. The image on the screen showed a sharp-faced man in an American navy uniform, his chest decorated with medals and ribbons. A voice-over in English narrated: *Richard Taggart has been identified as a highly decorated former member of SEAL Team Six, the elite American special operations team. Taggart had done more than seven combat tours before he left the military last year, and is reported to have been working as a private contractor when he and a larger group were*

abducted in Southern Nigeria. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, although government sources are speculating the involvement of Boko Haram. Mr. Taggart's condition and whereabouts are currently unknown...

Michael stopped the recording, rewound the clip, and played it again while he sat on his bed with his fully packed bag next to him ready to go. Playing the clip over and over had built up a burning rage deep in his core.

From across the room at the windows looking out, the Chechen Barayev turned to Michael and lifted a questioning brow. Michael checked his watch and nodded. He switched his laptop to a local news outlet and dialed a number on his cell.

"Everybody in place?" he asked. He nodded approval at the response. "Make it happen."

Moments later, the two girls sitting on the bed in the adjoining suite screamed involuntarily and the computer geeks and recruiters at the windows gasped as a tremendous explosion consumed the distant DIFF tower. What sounded like a clap of thunder, only much louder, rattled and broke windows all over the city. The Arab moderator on the hotel TV reporting live from the scene shrieked in horror just before the screen went blank. The station immediately cut away and back to the newsroom. Michael muted the volume with his remote and dialed a number on his cell.

"The film festival is no longer festive," he reported.

The voice of Emir al-Muttaqi replied through Michael's headset. "An object lesson that we never again pollute ourselves with this Western garbage. *Allahu Akbar!*"

"*Allahu Akbar!*" Michael dutifully echoed.

In a window on his laptop, the Dubai Film Festival Twitter feed went crazy with Tweets about the attack. Michael closed the laptop and calmly stood up.

"I'm going to get the SEAL," he informed al-Muttaqi through his headphone.

"Not without approval," the Emir shot back, sounding as though he might be losing patience. "He is a distraction from your main mission."

"This is Boko Haram we're talking about. They're going to wrap this guy in Goodyears and torch him. With all respect, he's important for our cause."

"Respect is real when given without hope for respect."

Michael glanced at his packed luggage.

"Meet me in Qatar in two days," al-Muttaqi ordered and hung up.

Emotionless, cold, Michael removed his headset, tucked his laptop under one arm, and hefted his bag. Only then did he bother to glance out the windows. A thick column of black smoke rose from down near the waterfront.

Chapter 36

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Buddha Ortiz drove down Regulus Avenue past the Dam Neck Annex and parked in the late afternoon sunlight in front of the former "chicken coops" that

served as “shop” for SEAL Team Six. Before getting out of his Ford Fusion, he made sure the loose slacks he wore concealed the brace placed on his knee at the hospital emergency room.

He walked inside the Command, trying not to limp as he passed the cages and entered the team room where the entire squadron had gathered to initiate Robert Chase as a full member of SEAL Six in good standing after his first “real world” mission. Other SEALs either wearing civvies or in full training kit ad-libbed greetings, most of them humorous or obscene. Chase’s face broke into his great beaming smile when he saw Ortiz. He looked ridiculous wearing a white wolf’s head cap that contrasted smartly with his dark face.

Everybody was having a hell of a good time quaffing beer, pounding Chase on the back, goosing each other, pulling pranks ... The usual team house stuff. Graves’s six-two lean-and-mean frame actually looked relaxed for a change as he lifted his mug in toast to his team’s rookie.

“—so here it is,” he was saying. “No hesitation, no doubts ...”

That was as far as he got before he spotted Ortiz. Then, in obvious reference to Buddha’s pending departure, he concluded pointedly with, “Never forget what matters most.”

Ortiz took a deep breath. *Damn it, Bear.* Wife, kids, a little house in the suburbs, two-car garage... *Real* family. That *had* to matter most.

Bear brandished a White Squadron patch displaying the unit’s mascot, a white wolf, and awarded it to Chase.

“This is your family now,” he said, with another look cast with meaning at Ortiz.

Damn it, Bear. Let it go.

Men laughing and chatting in high spirits made their way to the bar for refills. Ortiz joined Caulder, who leaned with his back against the bar watching what was going on. The team’s Bohemian might have been something the cat dragged in. Unshaved, he must have slept in his jeans and T-shirt since they all returned from Africa. He had obviously been imbibing vigorously. He bellied up across the bar to retrieve Buddha’s mug, hanging on the wall next to Rip’s.

“Fill ’er up,” Caulder requested of the guy who had been shanghaied as bartender for tonight’s roast and hazing. “And,” he then said to Buddha, presenting him the full cup, “hail to your replacement, Robert *Ghetto* Chase.”

Both lifted their mugs in sardonic salute to Chase, joined by much of the rest of the crowd. Chase now had his formal nickname—*Ghetto*.

“The wheel of time is turning,” Caulder went on, sounding less profound than merely down in his cups. “The young rising up to devour the old. The snake eating its tail. Oedipus killing his father and fu—”

Buddha cut him off. “We get it, okay?”

Out on the floor under the hanging parachute canopy, Buckley handed a foot-tall decanter of beer to Graves for the initiation ceremony. Foam splashed over the container’s rim and onto the deck. Bear thrust it at Chase. Chase took a step back.

“I don’t drink, Senior Chief.”

“Red flag!” Buckley shouted to the accompaniment of an overwhelming roar of laughter and catcalls. A *teetotaler* SEAL? No such animal existed.

"Think of it as your first Communion," Caulder counseled as a throng of laughing, jeering men surrounded Chase to lend their encouragement.

Pressured by the hazing, the New Guy screwed up his courage and, with plenty of sound effects, guzzled the beer. Much of it spilt over his lips and down the front of his button-down Ivy League shirt. Men cheered him to go *all the way*. He emptied the container, but by the shocked look on his face he was about to chuck it up again. He burped manfully and stood tall rather than seem to be the team puss. The other guys didn't help his constitution by slapping him repeatedly on the back like he had really accomplished something. All this was their rough version of a welcome.

Ortiz leaned over and lowered his voice to take a good-natured poke at his protégé. "You go moto and try to blow a hole in a steel ship again with us in it," he said, "I take that patch away from you myself."

Chase ducked his head. Okay, he had made an error of judgment. It wouldn't happen again.

"He's not done yet," Senior Chief Graves announced, raising his hands for attention.

From behind the bar, to great fanfare, he produced a life-size blow-up doll. It was naked and male and obviously aroused in spite of being beat-up and patched from previous encounters and a hard life.

"Come on, guys," Chase pleaded, embarrassed and blushing another shade darker. Nobody told him about all this when he graduated from Harvard and enlisted in the navy to become a SEAL.

"*This*," Graves solemnly proclaimed, "is a symbol of the brothers that you are now sworn to protect. Guard it with your life."

He pressed the doll into Chase's arms while the newbie recoiled from it.

"Hey, Ghetto," Buckley hooted. "Ghetto, if it needs some air, you know where to blow, don't you?"

"You can show him, Buck," Caulder said. "You had it last. And this—"

He displayed a huge black dildo to the hilarity of the assemblage.

"And this," he resumed, "is the weapon you will use to defend us. Keep it oiled and ready."

With that, he ceremoniously "knighted" Chase by forcing him to kneel while he tapped him on each shoulder with the phony phallus.

"You must carry this with you at all times," Graves instructed.

Chase looked mortified. "You're serious?"

"Hell, yes, he is," Buckley confirmed, having experienced it himself not so long ago.

Uncertain but pleased at the honor of being formally accepted by the teams, Chase stood surrounded by his brothers and looked more ridiculous than ever wearing the wolf's head, hugging the obscene blow-up doll under one arm, and clasping the dildo in his free hand.

That concluded the ceremony. Graves stuck out his hand to the newest-ordained official member of his team. "Don't suck," he advised.

"Not planning on it, Senior Chief."

Caulder grinned and embraced Chase. "Welcome to White Squadron, kid. Just don't be afraid to live by your own rules."

Why was it that half the time you never knew what the hell Caulder was saying?

Members of White Squadron engulfed Chase—*Ghetto* from now on—to extend their own rowdy welcome. Buddha Ortiz stood off by himself, moody and quietly nursing his beer. Caulder joined Bear Graves at the bar.

“Wasn’t so long ago you and I were where *Ghetto* is,” he reminisced. “Total noobs.”

Bear nodded, sobering. “Rip yarded us in.”

“Remember his speech, Bear?”

“I know you don’t. Too busy running your mouth.”

“Sure I do. You just gave it. Word for word. Including his ‘Don’t suck.’” He chuckled at the look Graves gave him. “Hey, don’t look so surprised. I remember everything that man said. Shit, he was a Viking, Bear. He was who I wanted to be.”

This was as near as Caulder had ever come to accepting at least part of the blame over what went down with Taggart.

“Don’t talk about him like he’s dead, Caulder.”

Caulder brushed it off. He was remembering when *he* was the FNG. It was Rip who... He didn’t want to think about it now. He tipped his head toward Chase.

“Now the kid is looking at us the same way we looked at Rip,” he noted. “Can you believe that?”

Bear took his time to answer, giving Caulder the opportunity to swallow his nostalgia. Finally, Bear spoke: “Good thing we got it all figured out.”

The two SEALs turned to each other and burst into laughter. Laughing felt good, lightened things up.

But then the laughter died and their eyes wandered out past the team room to a time when the team felt whole and together and Rip Taggart led.

Chapter 37

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

The African sun rose over the abandoned jungle village where ISIS-affiliated Boko Haram had brought their hostages to hold for ransom, or, as in the case of the girls, to “marry” or sell. Rip Taggart’s ribs and chest felt somewhat better. When he opened his eyes he saw McAlwain, Nick, and Hakeem still curled up asleep on the cell’s dirt floor. Na’omi stood at her window peering out. A shaft of golden sunshine poured over her slim body and illuminated her face so that it glowed like that of a brown-skinned Madonna on a church wall. He hadn’t noticed before how truly attractive this young woman was. She possessed an inner beauty, which she retained despite the violence and deprivations they had endured since her capture. It seemed to mesmerize him while he watched. There was a quietness about her and in their morning together.

There was also sadness in her expression, a longing, perhaps regret, but there was no sign of the soul-destroying fear that had overcome Nick the reluctant PR man. She felt Taggart’s eyes on her. She turned her head and looked square into

his eyes before she returned to her girls, sleeping in their uniform plaid skirts and blouses that had once been white.

Suddenly, a commotion and a rush ensued outside. A voice shouted, "Everyone out!"

The door flew open. The broad-shouldered, long-limbed leader of this pack of predators, the one called Aabid, burst into the detention hut brandishing a thin-bladed curved sword and a savage demeanor, like he might be pissed off at the world every second of every day.

The three guards who washed in on his wake had that same look. Taggart recognized the demon-giant with the crossbow, Quayum, and the other big man who resembled heavyweight boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. Chido. The third was a skinny teenager who appeared both deprived and depraved. All were garbed out in military-type cammies and bush hats. Taking their cue from Aabid, they commenced throwing their weight about, yanking McAlwain, Nick, and Hakeem awake and bum-rushing them to the open door and out into the hands of other tormentors.

"Out! Out! Everyone out!"

"What's happening?" Na'omi demanded, putting on a brave front for the benefit of her terrified students, who bunched together wailing at the tops of their lungs.

"Ina zaka kaimu?" she added in Hausa. *Where are you taking us?*

The guards ignored her. Laughing and pinching and touching, they seemed to be enjoying snatching up the little females and hustling them out through the open door. Na'omi struggled to hold her girls together in a group so she might better control and protect them. Everything moved fast and violently with a great deal of laughing and jeering by the assembled Boko Haram warriors. Na'omi found herself cast bodily into a pile of legs and arms with her girls outside in the village square. The frightened students clustered around their teacher, eyes wide and white-rimmed, tears running, while their ragtag captors closed in on them, ogling and taking dibs on who got who.

Inside the hut, Taggart remained lying on the dirt floor, ignoring shouted commands to get up and get out. Fuck 'em. He refused to award these bastards the respect of even acknowledging their presence. They could kill him—but so what? A man died only once; and Taggart wasn't about to die on his knees begging for his life. They might kill him on his back, or on his feet or belly. But not on his knees. He begged no man. Besides, he was ready to die.

A pair of mud-splattered shoes, like Farmer Jones's clodhoppers, planted themselves in front of his face.

"Stand up!" Aabid ordered.

Rip refused to move.

Quayum and the Sugar Ray lookalike fell upon him like wild dogs. Kicking and pummeling him, shouting invective, they dragged him out of the hut by his feet and deposited him in the midst of Aabid's soldiers like raw meat thrown into a cage of starving hyenas.

Enough of this shit. The bastards could kill him, but not like this. He threw off his nearest abusers and sprang to his feet, prepared to go down fighting. Before he had a chance to account for himself, a club struck a swift blow to his head from behind. He crumpled to the ground, stunned. The soldiers cheered.

“No! No!” It sounded like Na’omi.

Terry McAlwain, the oil exec, watched Taggart’s encounter without expression. He seemed to have gone overnight from middle age to old age. He kept silent and suitably contrite as terrorists danced around their captives, flashing knives and pointing guns while they laughed uproariously and made crude jokes. He calculated nonresistance to be his best and perhaps only option to save himself and the others.

Hakeem sat on the ground with his head lowered into his arms to shut out the world. Nick had already given up. He crawled inside himself and curled up in his favorite fetal position while he wept uncontrollably. All he could think about was the British-born ISIS fighter the press had dubbed “the Executioner.” This sadist whacked off victims’ heads for the benefit of TV and social media. Nick had convinced himself the same fate awaited him.

Aabid stood over Taggart’s semiconscious form and threw up his hands for order. His troops immediately quieted down. Through the haze that enveloped his senses, Rip managed to make out the cruel eyes and hard lines in the terrorist leader’s face as Aabid bent over him.

“Navy SEAL?” he demanded in heavily-accented English.

Rip struggled to find a voice. “No.”

Na’omi, the girls, and the others would all be in peril if their captors knew who he was.

McAlwain demonstrated some grit in his crawl when he called out in an attempt to negotiate, “Sir? Please, sir... Whatever you want...”

Rip heard a smack as Chido slapped the older man across the face and prepared to administer a sound beating. Aabid’s hand shot up—*Wait!* He motioned for Chido to bring McAlwain to him.

“Perhaps I should be talking to you,” Aabid said in a voice that sounded almost reasonable. “Terry McAlwain?”

Obviously, the terrorists knew exactly who they had seized. This hostage snatch had not been at random; it was carefully planned. What Aabid was doing now, Taggart realized, was putting on a show for the amusement of his troops. As with the beheading of captives for the camera, this was all a primitive demonstration of power and authority and intimidation.

McAlwain thought he saw an opportunity. “Uh, yes. Yes,” he pursued. “So you’ve spoken to SyncoPetro? They’ll pay you. Did they tell you that? Whatever you want, they’ll give it to you. They will ...”

His voice thinned out into desperation. “But... But we’re not wild animals. You can’t keep us here like this. We’re hungry, and—”

An evil smile crossed Aabid’s broad face. He jerked a thumb toward Chido. “Let Chido see.”

McAlwain looked puzzled. “See what?”

“Your hands.”

“Why?”

“I want him to see how hard you work.”

Rip was starting to recover his senses. He saw Aabid quietly draw the scimitar sword from his belt. The cold smile spread across the terrorist’s face without touching his eyes. What this was all about, Rip knew, was dominance.

"Don't do it, Terry," Taggart warned.

Aabid glared at Rip. "Show Chido," he said to McAlwain.

Baffled, McAlwain reluctantly extended both hands toward Chido, palms down. Chido cradled them in his. The oil executive's soft white hands made a startling contrast to the scarred and calloused hands of the African.

"Kumboram du ra wafila du ra'am?" Chido requested of Aabid. *You want the right or the left?*

Aabid turned his smile on the white man. It became reassuring and almost tender. "He says your hands are soft. Like a baby's."

Rip saw it coming. "No!" He scrambled to his feet. Two guards held him back.

Sunlight caught the sudden flash of Aabid's scimitar as it descended and lopped off McAlwain's right hand at the wrist. The severed hand trailing an exhaust mist of blood flew through the air and landed in the dust, where its dying nerves caused it to twitch like a stricken bird. Boko Haram went apeshit at the thrill of it, their roaring approval countered by terrified screams from the schoolgirls.

Blood pulsated from McAlwain's stump. He fell to his knees, staring at his wound in horror and disbelief. His face turned gray in the realization of what had happened.

Aabid calmly turned to Rip. "What do you do now?"

He nodded at the guards, who released the tough-looking American and stepped aside. Taggart's old SEAL survival instincts kicked into gear. He rushed to McAlwain's side and knelt on the ground with him. He yanked his belt free and pulled it tight around the oil man's arm just above the amputation. Before he had time to cinch it down, however, guards grabbed him and pulled him away.

"Tighten it down!" he called out to Na'omi.

"I give the orders," Aabid snarled and caught Rip with a sucker punch to the solar plexus that knocked him to the ground, gasping for air.

Undaunted, brave Na'omi rushed forward to continue first aid. Her fingers trembled so badly she had trouble grasping the makeshift tourniquet and pulling it tight.

"Slow is smooth, smooth is fast," Taggart croaked from on his hands and knees as he coughed and sucked air.

Nodding reflexively, Na'omi forced her mind and hands to slow down and work together. Seeing his boss in distress, Nick managed to discover some backbone. Whimpering pitifully, he ripped off part of his shirt and helped bandage Terry's stump with the rags. Na'omi cinched in the tourniquet and glanced up to see Rip once more in trouble.

Aabid delivered a vicious kick to Taggart's head that split open his brow and sent him sprawling onto his back. Aabid stood spread-legged above him brandishing his wicked knife.

"You are Navy SEAL. Special Forces."

Rip fought to shake off the blow and catch his breath, his mind whirling in confusing circles. "He needs antibiotics, clean dressings—"

Aabid's muddy clodhopper came down on Taggart's middle. His ribs popped like dead boughs snapping. Excruciating pain exploded through his chest, once again robbing him of breath. He curled up on the ground, hugging himself, attempting to find more air, to live long enough to kill this evil barbarian—

Aabid's minions closed in, braying like dogs at the smell of blood, eager to get in their licks before the prey died.

"Navy SEAL!" Aabid persisted.

Through a red haze, Rip made out the traumatized faces of Na'omi's little girls. "...girls need ... girls need..."

Another kick to the jaw carried enough jolt to almost knock his head off his shoulders. His ears drummed hollow. The world of reality seemed to be receding.

"...they need clothes..."

Aabid dropped to his knees and thrust his face close to Rip's. "Navy SEAL!"

Rip coughed up blood. "...girls ... hot food..."

"Navy SEAL!"

Motherfucker! Taggart forced his eyes to focus. They glinted with hate and rage. If he died, he would die as he had lived—as a SEAL. What difference did it make now? Aabid knew who and what he was. What Aabid wanted was not an answer. What he wanted was torture and dominance.

"Yeah!" he exploded in sudden defiance. "Yeah! Navy motherfucking SEAL, motherfucker!"

He spat blood in Aabid's face. He smiled at the terrorist as he braced himself for the coup de grâce.

Instead, incomprehensively, Aabid allowed blood-laced spittle to ooze down his cheek and drip off his chin while he answered Taggart's smile with one of his own. It spread across his lower face, slow and humorless, the epitome of evil. He rocked back on his heels.

"The girls, they will get what they need," he promised. "My men will give it to them."

He was enjoying this. His sadistic smile grew as he made a point of letting Rip follow the course of his eyes as they settled on Na'omi where she still worked on McAlwain.

"Her," he taunted, his voice thickening. "Her. She is going to be just for me."

Taggart hadn't much left physically, but he marshaled what he had and lunged for Aabid's throat. *If this sonofabitch touched her!* Aabid was ready. He laughed and brought the heel of his knife down hard against Rip's forehead.

Everything exploded in bright colors as Rip's world faded into darkness.

Chapter 38

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Rain scrubbed the air clean and then stopped before noon. Sunshine in golden bars broke through the low ceiling and gleamed off the village's tar paper and tin roofs. For a brief time the rain washed away the ugliness and the world seemed fresh again. The surrounding forest smelled crisp and green, and birds were singing.

A frantic cry erupted from a tumble-down grass hut at the edge of the village where the forest began.

“No... No! *Please...*”

A cloud scooted across the face of the sun. The day darkened, as though God had hidden his face and turned his back on man’s wickedness.

Outside the hut from which came the woman’s plaintive cries, two young Boko Haram fighters leaned against the wall with their rifles while they smoked and listened to the woman being raped inside. Earlier, they sought shelter from rain showers underneath the roof overhang while they kept watch. Now, they moved into the sunshine. One was a skinny teenager of no more than sixteen years, perhaps younger. The older one laughed and made crude remarks about what was going on inside, but the younger one, whose name was Felix, averted his eyes and said nothing.

Cries continued to emerge from the hut. “Oh, God! Please don’t... *No!*”

Nearby, at the edge of the forest, the sounds of terror and agony finally penetrated the haze of pain that cloaked Rip Taggart’s awareness. His eyes shone dull and slack from the beatings he had endured since his capture at the hands of the warlord Aabid and his men. They were swollen almost shut, so that what he saw of his environment was blurred and through mere slits. His hands were bound together with rope, the slack of which secured him in a sitting position to a tree.

As his head began to clear from his more recent abuses, he recognized Na’omi’s agonizing pleas coming from the hut. He also suspected Aabid had had him tied here on purpose so that he would hear and be tortured by her suffering and could see the hovel where she was being assaulted.

He tested his bindings, tried to break free. Finally accepting that it was hopeless, he dropped his chin onto his chest and tried to block out Na’omi’s screams.

On the other side of the village past the square, inside the detention cell huts, little Esther, only twelve years old, also endured the torment of what was occurring to her beloved teacher. She stood at the cracked-glass of the barred window gazing helplessly in the direction of her teacher’s agony. Behind her, the four classmates abducted with her huddled together in a corner and tried to make themselves smaller as a group and thereby invisible. They were living the nightmare of what they knew happened to women and girls who fell into the hands of Boko Haram.

Nick on the other side of the rebar in the men’s sector of the cage sobbed openly at the awful sounds of Na’omi’s distress. He clapped his hands over his ears, but it didn’t help.

Terry McAlwain seemed oblivious to suffering other than his own. He occupied his separate corner of the jail, clutching the stump of his arm. Taggart’s belt remained as a tourniquet. Blood seeped and crusted the scraps of clothing that Na’omi and Nick had utilized as bandages. He sat unmoving, staring into space, threatened by shock and blood loss.

Taggart at his tree heard the engine rumble of a truck entering the village. He lifted his head as an old flatbed truck with a faded-green cab pulled into the village and stopped at the square in front of the detention hut. The occupants of a

second truck, a French-made diesel pickup that had pulled in earlier, were hand-pumping fuel from a large tank concealed inside a hut into several grimy barrels in the bed of the pickup. Rip automatically noted the action and location for future reference.

Na'omi's cries ceased as Aabid exited the hut to meet the incoming flatbed. He made a show of buttoning his cammie trousers where Taggart would be sure to observe. He looked smug and self-satisfied. Taggart glared at him. Sooner or later, with the right opportunity, he would kill the sadistic bastard. Chido and Quayum rushed up to return the boss's scimitar to him.

"Lene kungwane, Felix. Nyi 'a ferodejejin," Aabid said in Kunari to Felix, the skinny teenage soldier, who snapped to attention with his rifle. *Go become a man, Felix. She is ready for you.*

Felix looked shy and scared. He shook his head. Recognizing an opportunity, the older boy soldier with Felix pushed his way eagerly into the hut. This time, only the sound of weeping seeped from the building.

Chido and Quayum, the latter now armed with his crossbow, followed Aabid to the flatbed truck in front of the detention hut. After speaking to the truck's three occupants and indicating they should wait outside, Aabid and his seconds entered the hut and approached the rebar behind which Esther and her classmates huddled. The traumatized young girls scampered in terror as far away from their keepers as they could get. Aabid looked them over like a buyer at a goat sale. Nodding to himself, he pointed out two of them.

"Shia. Kuru shia," he decided. *Her. And her.*

They would bring good money in the sex and "wife" trade.

Chido, Quayum, and a third guard unwired the makeshift rebar door and stormed inside the cage to cut out the two selected candidates. The first was perhaps ten or eleven years old. The other was a year or so older. The girls shrieked and struggled, but to no avail. The guards snatched them by their hair and arms, dragged them outside to the flatbed truck, and tossed them onto it, where one of the three truck occupants lashed them to the vehicle's low side railings. The distraught little creatures wailed in mortal dread. The merchant slapped them about to hush them.

"Sui!" Aabid barked. *"They cannot command a virgin's price if they look like pulped mango."*

Heartbroken, little Esther called out the cell window for her friends. *"Kemi! Abike!"*

A guard hurled a tin can at her. She ducked and wheeled about, slashing her right forearm on the rough rebar. After a moment, she quietly returned to stare out the window. Her delicate features trembled with emotion and her arm bled as the flatbed roared away with the two children crying pitifully.

Aabid's day was not over. A military leader was an important man whose duties never ended. He had accounted for the huffy teacher, sent two of the remaining captive females off to market, and now turned his attention back to the SEAL. He stalked to the edge of the forest where Taggart was bound to the tree. Chido and Quayum tailed him like a pair of faithful mastiffs prepared to do his bidding, whatever it entailed.

Rip slumped forward against his ropes. He had watched Na'omi's little students being hauled off into sex slavery and his heart steamed with rage and hatred. Aabid forced his head up with the tip of his deadly blade.

"Come with me, Navy SEAL."

Chido cut Rip free from the tree. Two other guards helped drag and usher him into the village where Quayum produced a black Boko Haram battle flag and displayed it on the outer wall of a hut. Hands still tied behind his back, Rip found himself roughly shoved up against the hut next to the flag. Aabid covered the lower half of his own face with a black head rag and stepped up beside Rip, brandishing his scimitar and assuming a fierce pose.

Chido took the role of videographer. He aimed his cellphone at the disparate pair—captor and captive—and began to record. Aabid made his statement in English. It was a statement that in various forms had become all too familiar in the Islamic world.

"Look, America. Your crusader warriors are weak. They believe in false gods. We will fight to death until only the Quran rules the world. You will see our strength. You will feel the steel of our blades."

Aabid jerked Rip's head back against the wall so that the American stood full-face to the cellphone camera. Rip braced himself when he felt the knife's sharp point nick the exposed skin at his throat so that blood flowed.

"If we do not get ten million dollars in one week," Aabid threatened into the camera, "we will cut his head off."

Chido ceased recording. Aabid and two guards drove Rip to the ground and shoved his face into the dirt.

"You will finance a thousand guns," the warlord hissed in Taggart's ear. "And with those guns we will kill ten thousand more infidels."

Chapter 39

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Bound and helpless and beaten, Rip Taggart's mind seemed to shut down on him. For a period as he lay on the ground after Aabid and his men drove his face into the dirt, his mind simply blanked out the present reality and substituted for it a reconstructed one. It wasn't as though he consciously chose a *particular* different time. In his mental and physical condition, he was close to being incapable of *consciously* making such a choice. Instead, that *different* time came up as though on its own volition, and he let his memory explore it while he remained helpless in the dirt of that filthy little African kraal.

He was much younger then and in the training pool of SEAL Command at NAS Oceania. He wore fins and a short-sleeved wet suit with INSTRUCTOR stenciled across the chest. Two other instructors treaded water with him in the middle of the Olympic-size pool while four SEAL Team Six trainees wearing tan shorts and no shirts swam the pool underwater, testing the limits of their endurance. Two of

the trainees—Joseph Graves back before he was “Bear” and a young-looking Alex Caulder—were shooters for Taggart’s Foxtrot Team.

Rip pulled down his dive mask and snorkeled the surface, keeping pace with his underwater charges as, holding their breath, they swam for the far end of the pool. Caulder the “surfer boy” appeared more graceful and at ease in the water, reaching out with long, smooth strokes. Graves, on the other hand, depended upon grit and pure determination, as with everything else he did.

Caulder touched the wall first and shot to the surface. He exhaled forcefully when his head broke free.

Graves was running out of lung and beginning to flounder. But the man *never* gave up. He kept reaching, reaching for the wall. He went limp in the water an instant after he touched the finish line. His mouth slacked open and emitted a storm of bubbles. His eyes rolled back in his head. Taggart dived immediately and swam the distraught swimmer to the surface. One of the other instructors helped him haul the big man out of the pool.

“Redline! Redline!” Taggart called out.

Other swimmers waiting to enter the pool faced away when they heard the alarm. If they couldn’t help, it was bad form to watch a trainee in trouble. Although weak from exertion and low on oxygen in his bloodstream, Caulder crawled on hands and knees to Graves’s side. The man had gone unconscious.

Rip felt for a pulse. It was weak and thready. He wasted no time in getting CPR started. He knuckled Graves’s sternum to kick-start his heart and then began CPR at a ratio of thirty chest compressions to two artificial ventilations with his mouth sealed over Graves’s mouth and nose. He kept at it, pounding the man’s chest, blowing into his lungs.

At first there was no response. Nothing... *Nothing*. Rip had never lost a man yet.

Graves coughed suddenly, a welcome comeback. His teeth began grinding as he revived, enduring that ritual death and rebirth that every SEAL experienced at some point. Although still gasping, Caulder flipped over onto his back and pumped his fists in the air in a little victory celebration.

“Hoo-yah, Instructor Taggart! Pays to be a winner!” he cheered.

Rip glared at him. “It’s not about winning, shitbird. It’s about testing your limits. It’s about mind over body.”

Graves turned over on his side and vomited up water.

Taggart felt himself yanked to his feet and back to the reality of a shit pile created by Boko Haram in parts of Africa. Chido and Quayum, one on each elbow of his bound arms, dragged him across the village square to the accompanying taunts and jeers of loitering BH fighters, many of whom were buzzing and mean from the use of khat. The narcotic weed made them especially dangerous by sweeping them into a La La Land where Allah spoke to them personally and ordered them to go out and kill! Kill! Kill! Have fun.

The two men filling up their barrels with fuel from the big oil tank kept hidden inside a hut struck a chord with Taggart, a tactical nerve memory of his having seen an oil refinery somewhere in the vicinity of the village on the way in. He recalled that African oil companies sometimes built villages for their employees, villages that were then abandoned if the refineries cut back production or shut down.

Aabid's stooges dragged Rip into the detention hut where McAlwain remained listless and staring out from his corner, and where Nick and Hakeem barely acknowledged his return. Esther and her two remaining friends, Abiye and Kamka, watched through terrified eyes as Chido and Quayum lashed the tall American to a pole that had been added to the hut's décor while he was away.

"Terry needs a doctor," Nick the PR man managed after the guards left.

"Quiet," Taggart snapped, listening as the diesel pickup's engine kicked over.

"It's just a truck," Nick protested.

"Quiet!"

He mentally clocked the direction in which the vehicle departed the village. His head turned to follow the receding rumble of the engine. It headed west, back toward Lagos and Na'omi's school near Edo Village where they had all been kidnapped.

"A truck with fuel cans and an oil tank in the village," Taggart explained when the sound of the departing vehicle merged with the normal sounds of the forest. "There's a refinery somewhere nearby. They'll have private guards. Communications."

Terry McAlwain momentarily recovered awareness and began to wail. "I'm going to die here."

"You're not going to die, okay?" Rip reassured him. "Focus on your breathing, Terry. Focus on your breathing."

False hope was better than no hope. Taggart's knees gave way and he sagged from the post to which he was tethered. That *different time* he experienced outside on the ground while he was nearly unconscious, before Chido and Quayum brought him back here, had salvaged something out of his memory and planted it in his mind for him to mull over now. *It's about testing your limits. It's about mind over body.*

Chapter 40

Virginia Beach

Bear Graves and his team had so far received no feedback about the courier they snatched off the DAMASCUS II. Graves seemed to be right in assuming Buhari wouldn't talk once they fed him into the system. He'd end up living the Jihadist Life of Riley in Guantanamo. In the meantime, nobody knew what had happened to Rip Taggart, whether he was even still alive or not. The waiting for some word, for something to happen, wore hard on team members.

Buddha Ortiz utilized downtime working his injured knee back into shape. Wearing his jogging duds—squadron shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, wet and stained with sweat, and, of course, his knee brace—he slowed from a jog to a shuffle to accommodate his limp as he finished a run. The Ortiz house in Cedar Crest lay in sight at the end of the block when his cell phone buzzed. He knew by the dedicated sound what it was before he glanced at the screen: 999999!

The first thought that came to mind was *Rip*. Call it *hope*. He forced a longer stride when he spotted Jackie leaving home and heading to her minivan parked in front of his beat-up Ford Fusion. He sighed when he recognized her professional working attire and briefcase.

"Where are you going?" he asked, although he already knew.

She kept walking. "Work. I have a conference. I told you."

He wiped perspiration and kept pace. "I got recalled to Command," he told her.

He glanced at his watch. Time was burning.

"I'll be back at nine," she replied. "There's pork and rice in the fridge."

Ortiz tried again. "Jackie! I've been ordered to Command."

"I heard you."

This wasn't going well. She opened the driver's door to the family minivan. He grabbed the door and blocked her getting into the car. She stepped aside and waited for him to back off. Ricky Jr. came around the side of the house tossing a baseball into the air and catching it. He noticed his parents and moved out of sight behind the mulberry tree.

"I might be airborne by nine," Ricky pointed out, trying to get through to his wife.

"Then you better figure it out." There was no give in this woman when she set her mind on something.

"What about the kids?" he demanded.

"We need the money, Ricky."

"Where's Anabel?"

She had been leaving the house with a girlfriend when he set off on his run. He waved at her, but she neglected to return it.

"She's not answering her texts," Jackie said.

"Jackie!" For God's sake, he was trying to reason with her and not lose his temper. "I almost missed the last op. If I'm late again they'll boot me from the squadron."

She dug in, unrelenting. "At least you'll be out."

"Yeah. But not that way. If I separate it'll be on *my* terms. With honor."

"So, now it's *if*?"

It wasn't supposed to be this way between a husband and wife, between a man and his family. They squared off, assessing each other's resolve.

"You have to stay home, Jackie."

He saw her stiffen. Tears of frustration brimmed her dark eyes. She turned abruptly and walked away toward the house, her heels clacking angrily on the walkway. He followed, putting his arms around her.

"*Mi vida... Mi corazon...*"

She shook him off like she was a time bomb on a short fuse. "Not today, Ricardo Ortiz," she said, stressing each word.

"Jackie, I'm sorry—"

"You promised," she flared, wheeling about to confront him. "Ricky, you *promised!*"

Over her shoulder he caught sight of R.J. staring at them from the mulberry tree. Jackie's eyes followed his. R.J. looked so small and scared against the side of

the house. Ortiz extended a hand toward him. The boy turned and bolted into the backyard and out of sight.

“Oh, shit! ... R.J.?”

An awful silence filled the growing gap between husband and wife, between father and children. His cell buzzed again.

“Just go,” Jackie said in exasperation. She seemed to collapse inside. “Just go, okay?”

He attempted to kiss her good-bye. She turned away and planted herself against him.

“Jackie?”

She stood rigid and refused to look at him. He gave up and headed at a trot into the house to change clothes and retrieve his car keys. “*Madre de Dios.*”

Jackie turned and rushed toward the backyard, calling out their son’s name. “R.J.! R.J.?”

Chapter 41

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Commander Atkins’s White Squadron operators filed toward the Intel Briefing Room from various locations around the SEAL Six base, heading like a migrating herd from the Kill House, airfield, shooting range, training pool, beach, and boathouses. It was apparent something big was going down.

“So what’s the gouge today?” Fishbait Khan asked as he, Buckley, and Chase joined the migration. Their first thought was that it had to be about Rip, but they refused to speculate further. They had been disappointed before.

The three were tagged out in cammies and carrying helmets. They had been at the Kill House all morning going through building-clearance drills.

“Spooks’re here,” Buck noticed, nodding toward a pair of government cars in the parking lot. “So whatever it is, it’s going to suck.”

He suddenly stopped and turned on Chase with a grin. “Equipment check!” he cried.

Chase rolled his eyes—*Now?* Nonetheless, he dutifully produced the deflated head of the blow-up doll assigned to his care from the “christening.”

“You give him a name yet, Ghetto?” Buck asked, indicating the deflated head.

“*Buckley*,” Chase replied, deadpan. “I call him *Buckley*.”

Buck gave him a pretend scowl of disapproval, but he had to chuckle.

“*Ghetto?*” Fishbait ran Chase’s new nickname over his tongue. “That the best you could come up with, Buck? *Ghetto?*”

“Sure beats *Fishbait*,” Chase said.

They all laughed, bantering, comfortable with themselves and each other.

“They thought I was an Eskimo,” Fishbait explained.

He *might* have been Eskimo with his swarthy skin and black chin whiskers. Except he was too tall, and his nose was too big and his head too long.

"You're from Alaska?" Chase guessed as the three SEALs entered the crowded briefing area.

"Nah," Khan said. "Afghanistan."

They made their way to where Bear, Caulder, and Ortiz had saved them seats. They were settling in with a few friendly verbal pokes at each other when Lieutenant Camille Fung, the Intel officer, and White Squadron Commander Atkins strode briskly into the room. The room went quiet. Only Bear broke protocol to ask the one question that was on everyone's mind.

"What's the news on Rip?"

"Settle down," Commander Atkins said. "Dubai first."

He stood to one side while the down-to-business female officer clicked a remote to bring up a picture of a bombed-out luxury hotel on the high-def TV set. It must have been one hell of an explosion that brought it down. Only the hollow-windowed hull of the skyscraper remained stacked in a pile of smoking rubble. The camera zoomed in on a distinctive Jihadi black-and-green flag flying in the devastation. It was identical to the one left at the scene of the American embassy bombing in Tanzania.

Lieutenant Fung identified the scene. "The film festival in Dubai. The death toll is now two hundred and ten. The flag design appears to be from the Umayyad Caliphate. All signs indicate this is the new Jihadi group that carried out the Tanzania embassy attack. The explosives match. So does the MO. We have indications that six men took an open water racer to Karachi afterward. Nothing actionable. But whoever it is just moved way up the target deck."

"What about Rip?" Graves repeated impatiently during the question-and-answer period that followed.

"Anything come out of the courier?" Ortiz added.

As far as the team knew, the spooks still had Buhari under wraps, interrogating him and waiting for the politics in Washington to play out. Bear's solution all along had been to waterboard the bastard.

"We're working on it," Fung replied. "SIGINT and ELINT have narrowed down the area where we think Boko Haram took the hostages. Low level voice intercept points to this region."

A detailed map of southeastern Nigeria appeared on the big screen. Fung tapped her pointer on a location east of Lagos. Bear and his team exchanged knowing looks. How near they may have been to Rip without realizing it when they raided *Damascus II* and seized Buhari.

"There are some small refineries in the area," Lieutenant Fung continued, "which is a new zone of BH activity. We have twenty-four-hour ISR coverage there now."

"Show them the video," Commander Atkins suggested.

A video on HDTV brought up a scene of Rip and a broad-shouldered African in a loose black tunic with a black scarf over his head and lower face. The wall of an abandoned hut behind them displayed a Jihadi flag. The African turned to the camera and jerked Rip's head up to reveal his full face. Taggart appeared to have gone through hell. He was unshaved. His eyes were swollen. Cuts and bruises all over his face oozed infection. Senior Chief Graves and his team stared helplessly at the image, their rage growing.

The African on video produced a long-bladed knife and edged it threateningly across the former SEAL's exposed throat, drawing a thin trickle of blood.

"—you will see our strength," the masked Jihadi was saying in accented English. "You will feel the steel of our blades."

The briefing room vibrated with tension as the impact settled in. Graves's face went grim and pale. He didn't want to see this, but he couldn't make himself turn away. He fully expected the next move to be Rip's head severed from his shoulders.

Instead, the masked man paused for effect while he confronted the camera with the knife at Rip's throat. "If we do not get ten million dollars in one week," he warned, "we will cut his head off."

One week! Graves shot to his feet. "We need boots on the ground, sir!"

Caulder tugged Bear back into his seat. Commander Atkins nodded in sympathy with the feelings of his troops. Any of them could conceivably find themselves in a similar crisis at some point in the continuing War on Terror.

"Joe, take it easy," the commander said. "We have every available intelligence asset on it. We'll only get one swing at this, so we let the geeks and spooks develop a solid target package."

One week! Perhaps less, according to when the video was staged and released.

Rip Taggart's battered and haunted visage stared out from the screen at the gathered SEALs. They stared back at him in strained silence.

Chapter 42

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Dusk brought with it the threat of more rain to the BH village in the jungle. The detention hut seemed to withdraw from the lowering clouds and the distant rumble of thunder. Inside, the SyncoPetro executive hadn't stirred in hours except to look down in wretched despair at where his right hand had once been. It looked to Rip as though McAlwain was giving up and waiting to die.

On the other side of the rebar, little Esther gazed sorrowfully out the broken window pane and waited for Na'omi to return. Her two classmates sought refuge in the corner farthest from the door where they huddled together wide-eyed and alternately weeping and trying to sleep. Young as they were, they were quite aware that no better fate existed for them than what awaited the two who were already being sold into slavery.

Rip Taggart's mind was functioning again. He had thought for a while that he was beaten. He wasn't. He could lie down and surrender as Nick had done, or he could fight. *It's about testing your limits. It's about mind over body.* Na'omi, Esther, the little girls, even McAlwain, Nick, and Hakeem, had no one else except him to depend on. What he must do was what SEALs did when no one else could or would.

He checked his environment, gathering what intel was available as the first step toward formulating a plan. He logged next to him the gap in the bars separating

the male side of the prison from the female, also the broken window that Esther had been gazing through for hours, and the back door to the shack with its boarded-up second window.

Between trips to the window to look for the return of her teacher, Esther had found a piece of chalk and was busy drawing something on the wall to divert her anxiety.

“What are you drawing?” Rip asked her.

“My bird.”

“I need you to draw something for me—”

Before Esther had a chance to reply, Chido and one of the other guards opened the front door and brought Na’omi into the hut. Her hair was disheveled, her plaid-and-white school uniform tattered, torn, and soiled. The brown oval face with the wonderful dark eyes that had been so fiery was now bruised and tear-stained.

Rip’s eyes narrowed as the guards threw the young teacher into the rebar cage and locked the door again. She stumbled and fell to the hard-packed floor, then crawled on hands and knees to the farthest wall where she curled up, hugging her knees to her chest and staring at the floor.

Chido hurled a thin red cloth headscarf at her. “Cover your head, whore.”

After the guards left, Esther moved quietly to Na’omi and put her little arms around the teacher to comfort her. At first Na’omi failed to respond. The tiny girl held on tightly until, at last, Na’omi gripped her with one hand and pulled her even closer. She rocked back and forth, clinging to the child and moaning deep in her throat.

Rip watched. Something about the two of them together stirred a dormant emotion, revived a faded memory of a family and a mother he had once had growing up on a hardscrabble farm. Unfamiliar tears filled his eyes. He had not felt this since he was a child himself. Na’omi looked up and he turned his head away to keep her from seeing him like this.

Chapter 43

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

One week. Rip had one week before the bastard with the knife sliced off his head. Less than one week probably. And all the team could do was wait for the geeks and spooks to work their magic.

Alone on the outdoor firing range, Bear Graves in a rage grimly burned up ammo. With his head lowered like a charging bull, eyes slitted, finger squeezing the trigger of his H&K MP7, he stalked toward the man-silhouette target, blasting out the ten-ring. He left a trail of spent cartridge casings on the ground behind him.

He kicked out the empty mag, slapped in a fresh, and expended it shooting into the face he had transposed in his mind onto the target, that of the black-masked

terrorist in the video with his knife at Rip's throat. *If we don't get the ten million dollars in one week...*

Slinging the assault rifle across his back, he drew his sidearm and emptied it as well, shredding the target.

When the pistol's slide locked open after the last round, Bear caught his breath and slowly looked around. Any observer might have thought him mad. It was just that he owed so much to Rip. If not for Instructor Taggart, he might have drowned in the training pool that time. If not for Instructor Taggart, chances are Bear would never have become "Bear." He would likely have been a petty officer riding a tin can destroyer in the Persian Gulf or a minelayer off Korea. He would never have been SEAL Team Six material.

The same thing went for the other members of the team, each of whom owed something to Taggart. Even the FNG Ghetto Chase owed him, if only by osmosis.

Alex Caulder had had his moments with Instructor Taggart. Sometimes, even back then, Graves had envied Caulder's devil-may-care approach to life and his grace in the water. He was like a seal, a *real* seal, the animal. They were in the training pool again, three younger versions of themselves—Graves, Caulder, and Instructor Taggart. Ricky Ortiz perched on the side of the pool, observing and waiting his turn.

"This evolution is the gear exchange," Taggart explained. "With your masks blacked out, you will have one air source for the two of you, swapping equipment in a precise order. Is that clear?"

"Clear, Instructor Taggart."

Caulder shrugged into the air tank harness and Graves prepared to hold his breath as they entered the deep end of the pool. Weight belts sank them to their knees ten feet deep. Completely blinded by their blackout masks, they began the process of exchanging the single air tank between them while Instructor Taggart with his own tank treaded water nearby to observe and maintain safety.

Graves heard Caulder's escaping air bubbles directly in front of him. He felt the tap. *Begin*. That brought on a sudden uneasy feeling of water closing in on him. Claustrophobia. He fought it off.

Precise order, the instructor emphasized.

Caulder's hand swept through the water and found Graves's hand. Caulder removed his regulator mouthpiece and, by touch, guided it into Graves's hand. Graves sucked air and returned the mouthpiece to Caulder.

First, your weight belt comes off...

With their right hands they loosened the heavy belts and let them fall to the crook of their knees while continuing to "buddy breathe" with the one mouthpiece between them.

Then, Caulder will unsnap the waist strap, then the chest strap, take the tank off and place it between the two of you with the regulator closest to Graves...

After unsnapping both straps, Caulder slipped the tank and harness over his head and, by feel, placed it on the bottom of the pool between the two of them. Taggart swam slowly around them, keeping tabs on the procedure.

Graves will then put on the regulator while sharing it...

Graves felt for the top of the tank. It wasn't right. Caulder had neglected to rotate the tank so the regulator control attachment faced him.

If you position the tank wrong, you risk losing contact with your buddy...

Realizing the tank positioning was wrong, Graves rotated the tank himself and took the mouthpiece, exhaling old air and inhaling fresh. However, the weight of the tank during the repositioning caused Graves's knees to rotate. His weight belt slipped down to his ankles and over them and off, making him immediately more buoyant. Things went to shit fast after that.

Flailing his arms to maintain balance and stick to the bottom, Graves lost contact with Caulder, who was holding his breath and fast running out of lung. Graves swept the water in front of him, and to all sides, whirling in the water and struggling to stay down without his weight belt.

If you lose contact, your buddy might die...

Both swimmers were growing desperate. Treading water, Taggart paused to watch the comedy of errors unfolding at the bottom of the pool. He shook his head, amused at the sight of the two blinded men frantically thrashing their arms about trying to find each other, and missing contact by mere inches.

If you are out of air, put your arm out straight and give us the UP signal. Exhale on your way up...

Lungs burning for air, Caulder planted his feet on the pool bottom and threw his right arm above his head, right thumb up. Taggart brought him to the surface, Caulder exhaling spent air on the way up and gasping for air when he ripped off his mask. Graves popped up next to them.

Caulder exploded. "Jesus, Graves! Forget someone?"

"You lost contact with me," Graves retorted.

"Bullshit! You panicked."

"You handed me the tank wrong, asshole."

"Okay, okay," Taggart intervened. "Both of you, tough shit. You have to work the problem in front of you. Deal with your fears one breath at a time by focusing on the here and now."

Caulder wasn't ready to let it go. He glared at Graves. "Yeah. Instead of focusing on your bloated body floating in an estuary. Fish eating your liver. Lovely Lena weeping over you—"

"Weep on this, smartass," Ortiz suggested from poolside, tossing his weight belt to Caulder.

The unexpected weight dipped Caulder's head underwater. He came back up sputtering and struggling to stay afloat. Graves grinned at him.

Taggart shook his head, annoyed by the grabassing. "You good?" he asked Graves.

"Easy day, Instructor Taggart," Graves replied with characteristic determination.

"The man's a bear," Caulder conceded. "You can't stop a bear."

"Go again," Taggart ordered. He grasped Caulder by the arm before the swimmers pulled down their blackout masks. "Caulder, you pull that shit again, you put doubt in a teammate's mind, I *will* ride you out of the program."

Caulder nodded, serious again and his mind back on business.

This time the gear exchange went smoothly. The two swimmers established a rhythm, passing the regulator and tank back and forth, always touching, keeping in contact. Teammates. Taggart hovering in the water nearby, watching, nodded his approval.

Chapter 44

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Rip Taggart had a thought that the village might be serving as a fuel distribution point for Boko Haram in the region, perhaps even a sort of terrorist HQ. Rain had fallen again last night, a few light showers, but now the sun came out bright and sultry hot again and sucked up all the moisture. Right after daybreak Rip heard another truck rumble into the village and stop for quite a long spell, perhaps an hour, at the hut that contained the large fuel tank. He assumed it too was either filling up cans to transport elsewhere or replenishing the large tank. What he needed to find out was if there was a refinery nearby, and if it might provide sanctuary against Aabid and his BH thugs. It was a long shot, but a long shot beat no shot.

Frail little Esther gazed wistfully out the barred window next to Na'omi, who sat on the floor. The little girl hadn't left Na'omi's side since Chido dragged the nearly unresponsive teacher back from her ordeal and hurled her into the cell. Na'omi remained closed off inside herself, hugging her knees, face buried inside her arms between her bare knees.

"Esther?" Taggart whispered. "Come here, Esther."

Guards outside the hut, front and back, continued talking among themselves. Inside, McAlwain appeared half-dead already, his bloody stub of an arm hanging at his side onto the dirt floor. Nick remained listless and ready to accept whatever fate dealt him. Skinny Hakeem swiveled his head to peer at Taggart through his thick glasses, one lens of which was cracked and spiderwebbed.

Still bound upright to his stake, Taggart was unable to get near Esther to explain what he needed. He mustn't raise his voice either and be overheard by the guards.

"Esther?" he tried again, a bit louder since the child seemed not to have heard him the first time.

Esther turned and looked at him with her sad, brown eyes. Her two little classmates huddled together in each other arms against the opposite wall. They stirred and looked at Taggart, and then at Esther.

"When they take you to the bathroom, Esther, where do they take you?" Taggart asked in a hoarse stage whisper.

The guards outside kept talking. Esther returned to gazing out the window. Na'omi remained cocooned, as though lost even to herself. After a moment, Esther turned back toward Taggart and moved a few feet closer toward him.

In a low voice, she said, "A hole in the ground. It's dirty."

"Can you see the road from there?"

Esther shook her head.

"Ask to go again," Rip said.

The little girl failed to understand. "I don't have to go."

Nick shifted irritably from his place against the far wall. "Leave the friggin' girl alone," he flared.

Taggart ignored him, but he changed his approach toward the little girl. "Esther, do you want to go home? Make sure your... uh... It was a bird, right? Feed your bird?"

She nodded. Hakeem appeared to have alerted, was beginning to show interest in the exchange.

"What's her name, your bird?" Rip asked.

"His name. Sama. It means 'Sky' in Hausa."

"Sama. What color is he?"

"Gray. Sama is a gray parrot."

"Listen, Esther. If you help me, I promise you will see Sama again. Okay?"

That brought the child around. She glanced at Na'omi, but received neither encouragement nor discouragement from the withdrawn teacher. Hesitantly, Esther approached the bars on her side next to Rip's stake. Rip dropped his voice to an even lower tone.

"Ask to go to the bathroom," he instructed. "Look for a glow. Fire on the horizon. Or black smoke. Remember where it is when you walk back. Okay?"

Unsure of what she should do, Esther cast a questioning look toward Na'omi. "Teacher?"

Na'omi had been listening after all. She lifted her head and for the first time noticed blood on Esther's arm where she had cut it yesterday on rebar when the guard threw a tin can at her.

"Your arm, Esther," she exclaimed. "Come here."

The child hesitated between Rip and Na'omi. But only for a moment. She dashed back to crouch at her teacher's side. Na'omi retrieved from a pocket of her short plaid skirt the red headscarf Chido flung at her when he brought her back to the cage. As a personal act of defiance, she had refused to cover her head with it. She ripped off a strip with which to bandage Esther's injured arm.

"Na'omi?" Taggart ventured self-consciously. "What happened to you, uh... out there...?" That sounded clumsy, even to himself. He quickly tried to make amends. "Look, no one will ever think the less of you."

"I don't need your pity," she fired back. The woman Rip first encountered at the schoolhouse seemed to have returned.

Hakeem scooted across the floor on his butt and gripped the bars to eye Na'omi with naked disgust.

"She'll never marry now," he scoffed. "No man will touch her. She wasn't modest. They defiled her because—"

"—because I'm a *woman*." She savagely ripped another strip off the red headscarf. "And," she resumed, glaring at the man, "I won't cover my face for any man or God—"

Hakeem came back at her. "You should not have taught Western pollution—"

Until now, Taggart hadn't known where McAlwain's driver's sympathies lay. It hadn't seemed to matter.

"Shut up!" he snapped when Hakeem made to further attack Na'omi's un-Muslim-like behavior.

He returned his attention to Na'omi. "As soon as I figure out where the refinery is," he explained, "I'll get out at night. I'll come back for all of you before they know I'm gone."

Nick the defunct PR man had likewise been listening. "You're full of shit," he fumed. "You won't come back. You'll leave us out here to rot."

"Take the girls with you," Na'omi pleaded.

"Can't. They'll slow me down."

She eyed him suspiciously, unsure whether she should trust him or not.

Before the plot could further develop, Hakeem apparently glimpsed his own pathway to survival at the expense of his fellow captives. He suddenly sprang to his feet and rushed to the door where he began frantically banging on it.

"Hey! Sir! Hey!" he yelped through the door at the guards.

Taggart struggled fiercely against his bindings. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

Hakeem paid no attention and kept pounding on the door, his glasses askew and a deranged gleam of renewed hope in his eyes. The door opened to reveal Aabid standing there, arms akimbo, a pair of armed guards flanking him.

Taggart's eyes narrowed at sight of the bastard leader of this band of savages who beat, tortured, abused, murdered, and raped captives. Rip had never had such an urge to kill anyone before as badly as now, even if it meant his own death.

"*Askr adi sa sha sra'ana diya. Allahu Akbar!*" Hakeem burst out in a single breath, furiously gesturing at Taggart. "The soldier is planning an escape. Please? Allahu Akbar. I'm a muslim. Let me out." "You stupid shithead!" Taggart shouted at Hakeem.

A cold smile touched Aabid's broad face as he turned his heavy head toward Taggart.

"Navy SEAL want to bring help? Yes?" he said in English.

With that, he grabbed Hakeem contemptuously by his buzzard-scrawny neck and tossed him into the clutches of his accompanying guards. He favored Taggart with any icy smile before he walked out and locked the door behind him. His thorny voice carried through from outside. "*Nyi cida kirdiye diy amadu. Ku cida Alaye dimin.*" *You served the infidel. Now you will serve Allah.*

"What did he say?" Rip asked Na'omi.

Instead of answering, Na'omi gathered her girls around her like a mama hen protecting her hatchlings. She turned her back to the door and said something to the girls that made them cover their ears. Taggart then understood what was about to happen. Apparently, Aabid had little regard for cowardly snitches, no matter their origin.

A single gunshot from outside in the town square announced Hakeem's execution. A disturbed flock of wild guinea fowl in the forest set up a cackling uproar as the echo of the shot faded. The schoolgirls screamed in nervous unison. Na'omi pulled them closer into her inclusive embrace.

Aabid's sneering face reappeared, this time at the window. He thrust the barrel of his rifle through the bars, breaking out the rest of the window pane, and pointed the muzzle at Taggart's head. The former SEAL locked eyes with the Boko Haram warlord. He would not die sniveling and groveling in the dirt.

Something invaded Aabid's dark eyes, a glint of unexpected fear. He broke eye contact with the SEAL. His hands shook almost unperceptively as the rifle barrel slowly lowered until the muzzle pointed at Na'omi's bowed head.

Chapter 45

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

After a long pause, Aabid walked away from the window. Taggart sagged forward in relief that Aabid's threat to shoot Na'omi had been only a bluff, a show of innate cruelty. He let his weight hang against his bound hands and the post in order to ease the strain on his legs. He remained alert, however, listening and watching for some opportunity to exploit any advantage that might arise.

Against Na'omi's wishes, little Esther conceded to do as Rip asked. She had real grit for a kid. Both Taggart and Na'omi sweated out the long minutes after Chido later took her from the hut on her request to use the bathroom. The little girl tossed Rip a quick look before Chido impatiently ushered her out. There was no fear in the child's eyes now, only a steely determination to do as Rip asked so she could go home and feed her bird.

Rip had second thoughts when Esther wasn't returned when she should have been. Maybe he had asked too much of her. Na'omi pierced him with a withering look. Both of them had noticed the way Chido ogled the kid when he took her away. If the pervert touched that little girl ... What could Rip do about it, hog-tied as he was?

A rifle shot cracked outside, jarring Na'omi to her feet. She ran to the barred window and looked out. However, it was doubtful these thugs would waste a bullet on a little girl, especially one that had trade value. Still, when it came to those who had no regard for human life, predictability could not be relied on. Toke them up on khat and Allah and they would slaughter their own families or send four-year-olds out with suicide vests to blow up infidels.

They might not kill Esther—yet—but there were other unspeakable things they *would* do to her. All Taggart and Na'omi could do now was wait it out until she returned from her mission.

More rifle shots rang out. At the window, Na'omi flinched with each report. Her gaze out the window seeking Esther's return never wavered. Rip soon concluded by the number of shots and their spacing that someone was target-practicing.

Over at the edge of the forest, out of sight of the detention hut, Aabid was giving the skinny boy soldier Felix some pointers on shooting an AK-47. Kids as young as nine were fighting and dying with ISIS and other terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other countries. Apparently Felix had gotten a late start in the game and was not yet a full-blown Boko Haram soldier. After all, he had refused to join in on gang-raping Na'omi. But give him a few more months and he would be as mean and bloodthirsty as any of the others.

At the window, Na'omi's shoulders relaxed and her pent-up tensions released in a long exhale. The door opened and Chido pushed Esther into the hut and locked her in behind the rebar. He leered at Na'omi, who shuddered with contempt and turned toward Esther as the kid threw herself into the teacher's arms. Esther was scared now that her mission was completed.

McAlwain and Nick remained bunched inside themselves on the floor and gave no attention to what was going on around them. Hakeem was killed. Which of the two of them might be next?

As soon as Chido left, Esther looked around while she absently rubbed her right arm where Na'omi had bandaged it with rags from the red headscarf. Na'omi tried to stop her from continuing her conspiracy with the SEAL. It was too dangerous. But the little girl bravely approached the bars to peer through at Rip.

"I saw black smoke," she whispered.

"Where?"

She pointed.

Rip smiled at her. "Good job, Esther. Loosen my hands."

Esther hesitated. She glanced nervously at the door and at her teacher. Na'omi shook her head: Don't do it. But what about Sama? Esther reached through the gap in the bars and struggled with the hard knots of the rope that fettered the white man's hands. Rip caught Na'omi's eye.

"I need your help, Na'omi," he said. "I need you to make eye contact with the guard. I need you to make him think you like him."

"No..." The thought of it made her stomach roil.

"Listen to me, Na'omi. Think of the girls."

She wagged her head from side to side, her face contorted in disgust for what this man, this *stranger*, was asking her to do.

"Na'omi! Esther could be next. Trust me."

She ran over and pulled Esther away from the bars, leaving Rip's hands tied.

"Why should I trust you?" she rasped. "You're a mercenary."

Chapter 46

Afghanistan

Trust was the key ingredient in putting together a functioning team. Senior Chief Rip Taggart's team boasted a reputation for being not only the best team in White Squadron but also throughout SEAL Team Six. Taggart demanded training to excellence, and he required excellence and proficiency in the field during operations. The man was a tough, hard-driving sonofabitch and he demanded his men follow that example. That kind of drive saved lives, and it pulled off successful missions.

Graves, Caulder, and Ortiz had together completed training for Six and deployed on their first real-world Taggart-led op into Afghanistan. The mission was to capture or kill an HVT working out of the Hindu Kush; things sometimes went to

shit even with the best of planning. The team found their asses caught in the proverbial crack, Murphy's Law in action: *Anything that could go wrong, would.*

The mission itself was accomplished according to briefing. Taggart, along with his three former students and a couple of other temporarily assigned operators called Tommy Hands and Mad Dog, were inserted deep into the rugged mountains along the Pakistan border. They made their way by night along goat trails to a hidden little mud-and-wattle village on the side of a green valley. Sure enough, the target was right where he was supposed to be. He resisted; he and two bodyguards ended up crumpled in one corner of a typical flat-roofed mud-brick house on the village outskirts.

That was when Murphy's Law kicked in full force. Intel had not warned of a troop of Taliban fighters infiltrating across the border out of Pakistan and now spending the night in the village. Not only *in* the village, but some of them actually sleeping next door to the target. A fight was something you didn't need that far off the grid.

Hostile machine-gun fire chewed at the outside walls of the hut, trapping the team inside. The interior was as dark as the inside of a glove at midnight in a cemetery. The impact of enemy rounds kicking grit and dust from the walls made the air restricted and coarse. Sprawled in the dark on his belly, unable to see anything without NVGs, Senior Chief Taggart yelled into his radio in order to be heard above the staccato exchange of fire between his men and the attacking Taliban.

"Viper Three-Three, this is Foxtrot Delta One. Troops in contact. Our location Building One Two. Taking fire. Multiple hostile IVO Primary Extraction Point. Break. Do you have eyes on Secondary Extract? Over."

A female voice responded immediately. "*Delta One, Viper Three-Three. Roger, we have eyes on your hostiles. Route to Secondary Extract appears to be clear at this time. Dragon One-One is inbound.*"

Time to E&E. Taggart cued Ortiz: "Buddha."

Ortiz slithered across the concrete floor to the back door, wending his way through the three corpses and on past members of the team defending at the windows. Bullets entering through windows pocked dust from the mud walls and splintered the wooden door above Ortiz's head.

Taggart was still on the radio, acknowledging transmissions. "Roger that, Viper. Moving to Secondary Extract point now."

The back door was chained; the assault on the HVT had entered via the front door and a side door. Ortiz pulled a compact bolt cutter from his belt and snipped the chain.

"Open!" he called out.

Taggart cut contact with Air Support and led his SEALs crawling across the floor toward Ortiz. "We're gonna get out just fine," he assured them. "Trust me."

That was one of Taggart's most-used expressions. Trust me. Caulder didn't have to have NVGs to see the big shit-eating grin on the chief's face.

At the back door, Taggart made hasty assignments. "Caulder, take us out. Graves on my six. Ortiz, take rear security. Let's go."

Taliban fire mostly originated from the front of the building; the hajjis hadn't had time to organize a siege offense. Like Viper reported, the back of the house

looked clear. Ortiz flung open the door. Caulder darted to the left, Taggart right, the two of them covering the flanks. Taggart tapped Caulder and pointed toward an orchard that stretched downhill in rows toward an open field several hundred meters away. So far, they confronted no direct incoming fire.

From practice and training together, the team moved in a well-choreographed ballet into the orchard and flowed like shadows down one of the channels, every man trotting hunched over to keep his head below the top level of the stubby trees. Caulder led the way, picking out a path with the aid of his NVGs. Taggart kept pace on the right flank, Graves on his left. Tommy Hands and Mad Dog ran with Buck and Fishbait. Ortiz brought up rear security. The IR beams from their rifle sights, invisible to the naked eye, flitted from side to side.

They heard shouting coming from back at the HVT house they had just vacated as attackers discovered their prey had slipped away. Fighters were soon in full pursuit across the orchard, the only avenue open to escape. Green AK-47 tracers streaked above the fleeing SEALs' heads, buzzing like angry fireflies. Bullets cracked through the night and snapped into trees. Caulder flinched when a round zipped past his head so close it seemed to steal his breath. Taggart trotted along so casually he might have been out for a Sunday morning jog in the park.

Leading the exodus, Caulder spotted movement in the trees just ahead. Detecting a shifting shadow through his NVGs, he whirled and popped off two quick rounds. There were no friendlies in this kind of environment other than your own people. The target went down with a high-pitched shriek of pain and surprise.

Caulder froze for a beat in mid-stride to stare at the motionless body in the grass. This was his first kill. He was awed at how fast it had happened, and how easy it was to kill a man. Taggart pushed him back into action.

The SEALs continued their controlled flight, their pathway through the orchard made negotiable only by their night-vision devices. Soon, they broke out into a grassy clearing. At that very moment, a slight figure jumped out of the trees to the right and fled across the open. Caulder, amped up on adrenaline and his previous kill, tracked the kid with his IR laser. Taggart slapped his rifle barrel aside.

"No!"

Caulder went weak in the belly when he realized how close he had come to killing an unarmed kid wearing only a pair of the cotton drawers common among hajji peasants. It took him a moment to get his breathing and heart under control.

The team traversed the clearing into brush and trees on the far side and automatically dispersed into a security perimeter while Rip got back on comm. Things were moving fast—and all in their favor now.

"Viper Three-Three," Taggart radioed. "Delta One peasey posture at Secondary Extract. Marking our position. Break."

At his command, team members turned on their IR strobes to mark their location for extraction. The signals were visible only through night-vision devices. Taggart heard an approaching helicopter. Enemy shooters were also drawing near, charging out of the village and through the orchard on the team's heels. Taggart had a little surprise for them.

"Requesting fire mission," Taggart radioed. "Target 150 meters north marked by IR lasers. Over."

He gave Ortiz the go-ahead. Buddha aimed his weapon laser sight back toward the hut from which they had just retreated and rotated it in a lazy circle that could be picked up by supporting aircraft. Thousands of feet above the earth, an unmanned Predator drone picked it up and passed the target image on to the crew of a Blackhawk gunship.

Moments later, the gunship came in hot with its 20mm miniguns roaring like an echo of doomsday, pulsing out pearls of death at 5,000 rounds per minute, chewing up earth and billowing up clouds of dust out of which unearthly screams erupted. Satisfied, Taggart lifted his goggles onto his helmet and gazed off toward distant mountains gleaming in the moonlight. He grinned at Caulder and Graves. *Damn! War could be so spectacular, so beautiful.*

“Don’t you boys just love this shit?” he said as the down-blast of a chopper’s rotors washed over them, signaling their ride up and out of here.

A good mission was when every shooter who went out came back in. Taggart’s team unassed their Blackhawk at a field FOB. Team members had gone quiet after their pick up. That was normal after-action behavior. Out there in the midst of things, there was no time for anything other than to act and react. Reflection about it came later during the decompression cycle.

A battery lamp illuminated cots and sleeping bags in the team’s GP large tent. Taggart paused at the tent opening to gaze back into the night. He opened his hands flat and looked at them. They remained perfectly steady. He made fists and threw all his energy into gripping them so hard that his fingernails dug into his palms. He had to make himself feel something, if nothing more than self-inflicted pain. *Something.*

His hands began to shake. Maybe he was still human after all.

Caulder flopped down on his cot and stared straight up into the flickering of light at the tent’s apex. Still amped up, he chewed gum with the speed of a piston in an engine racing downhill. One leg hung over the side of the cot, his boot nervously pounding the ground.

Taggart walked over and stood looking down at him. “So? How’s it feel to lose your cherry?” he asked, referring to Caulder’s kill in the orchard.

Caulder feigned nonchalance, a little Dennis the Menace mixed with Freud. “Unbelievable,” he decided after a moment’s thought. “Awesome. I mean ... in the Old Testament sense.”

“Yeah. You get to break all Ten Commandments and get away with it.”

Graves listened in from his bunk. “That’s because God’s on our side,” he decided.

“Amen, brother,” Ortiz chirped.

“First few times it’s like a video game,” Taggart mused. “Like *Call of Duty* or some such shit. When you realize the hajjis shoot back, you get even better at pulling the trigger.”

He shifted his attention speculatively toward the open flap of the tent and the night outside that only the weak light from the lantern held at bay.

“The hard part,” he said, as though talking to himself, “is learning when not to shoot. Like that unarmed kid back there. Watch out for the guys who can’t—or who *won’t*—tell the difference.”

Caulder didn't understand. He was still a newbie at this game. But there would come a time when he would understand.

Chapter 47

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Buck Buckley homesteaded a stool at the end of the bar in the team house. He sagged with both elbows on the bar and stared intently at the screen of his iPad, resembling less the *Miami Vice* cop than a man who had just been sucker-punched in a back alley. Out on the floor, Fishbait Khan hurled darts at a corkboard on the wall displaying an image of Osama bin Laden. Each time he scored a hit, he pumped a fist and sounded off with a Marine Corps boot camp *Hoo-rah!* Several other White Troop SEALs sat scattered at tables playing penny-ante poker, shouting at video games, or scuttlebutting with plenty of laughter and ragging on each other.

Fishbait did a double-take, dart in hand, when Robert "Ghetto" Chase entered with a case of Bushmills Black Bush whiskey under one arm. The team rookie crossed the room carrying his cargo and deposited it on the bar near Buckley.

"Hey, Beer Meister," Fishbait challenged. "Thought you didn't drink."

"You frogmen fuckers drove me to it. Skipper says the Beer Lamp's lit."

Fishbait lifted his palm to Heaven in supplication. "*Isha' Allah.*"

Chase hit the switch to the Wolf Head lamp. The bulb in the feminine crotch of the life-sized nudie was already burning. Fishbait slammed his last dart hard into the bull's-eye on the forehead of Osama and joined Chase at the bar. Ghetto looked at him and pulled a bottle from the case of whiskey. He opened it, sloshed generous portions into two glasses, and handed one to Fishbait. They clinked glasses.

"To the Fewer, the Prouder, the Braver," Chase toasted. He slugged down the drink in a manner he had picked up since his dildo coronation. He turned to Buckley. "Want some, Buck?"

"I'm good."

Buck turned away from the glare of the Wolf Head without looking up. Fishbait tossed down his drink and returned to tormenting Osama bin Laden. Chase pulled himself up on the stool next to Buck and peeped over his friend's shoulder to see why he was so engrossed.

The iPad screen played a grainy video of an empty bedroom. A young brunette wearing red bikini panties and no bra entered the scene. Chase chuckled.

"Go jerk off in your own cage, dude—"

He started in on further wisecracks about horny sailors and porn before he recognized the woman. He caught himself. *Tammi! Buck's wife?*

In the clip, Tammi crossed the room to the bed. She was a gorgeous woman with a definite hitch in her go-along and a bounce in her bumpers. Intrigued, Chase couldn't wrench his eyes off her as she selected a red bra off the nightstand

to match her panties and seductively massaged her pert little nipples into the cups.

Satisfied, she stood before a full-length mirror to admire herself, whirling on tiptoes to catch herself from all angles while a naughty smile played on her lips. She applied lipstick, also red, and smiled secretly at her reflection. She seemed to be completely unaware that she was being videoed.

"I think Baby Doll's cheating on me," Buck said, sounding lower than a rock at the bottom of the Atlantic. "Hope not," he added.

"Your wife? Are you kidding me?"

The screen went blank. Buck sighed with a deep sadness and tried to pass it off as nothing. "At the very least I'll get some hot selfie porn."

"You're spying on your own wife, Buck? Ever thought of couples therapy?"

Buckley grunted and scrubbed his face wearily with both hands, as though trying to erase the video from his mind. He obviously didn't want to discuss it further. Chase got past the awkwardness by fixing his eyes on an 8x10 framed photo on the wall behind the bar. It showed Rip Taggart, Bear Graves, and Alex Caulder during better times. On the beach wearing scuba gear, they had their arms thrown around each other and were mugging the camera like a trio of high school boys.

"What really happened to Senior Chief Taggart?" Chase asked.

Buck refused to discuss that either. "Above my paygrade, bro."

Chapter 48

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

A kerosene lantern hanging on a nail by the door inside the holding cell hut fought back the encroachment of night shadows. It was quiet in the cells, like Death lurked in a dim corner, waiting. McAlwain was likely dying from shock, despair, and his untreated amputation. Nick hadn't spoken in hours, had barely moved. The schoolgirls slept all in a little pile like frightened puppies. Na'omi lay on the dirt floor, eyes open, watching Taggart tied to his stake. She ignored Chido when he entered bearing a bowl of what appeared to be mushy vegetables immersed in coagulated fat.

"*Askr duro biri ye*," he barked at Na'omi. "Feed the SEAL. And I told you to cover yourself, Christian whore."

"What about the girls?" Na'omi shot back in the same language.

"They're not worth ten million dollars."

Chido stooped and shoved the bowl through the bars at Na'omi. He rose and glowered at Taggart, a look Sugar Ray Robinson never wore even when he fought.

"Eat, SEAL," he commanded, pointing at the bowl. He locked the door behind him when he left.

Silence again settled over the cells. Outside, BH fighters had a bonfire going in the village square. Firelight filtered through the barred window, along with sounds

of rough laughter and arguments. The combined glimmer of the outside fire and the lantern inside brought a sad, hauntingly beautiful glow to Na'omi's somber face as she lay on her side looking back at Taggart, unblinking. She made no effort to get up to obey Chido's orders to feed him. Clearly, she wanted nothing to do with him. He was not to be trusted after the peril he almost placed Esther in.

Rip ducked his head toward the bowl of food. "Keep it," he offered. "For the girls."

That produced a little line of puzzlement between her dark eyes. Unlike his fellow foreigners, Mr. McAlwain and Nick, he seemed willing to forego his own well-being for the sake of her and the girls. The man was proving more complex to Na'omi than her first assessment of him at the schoolhouse when he smelled like the local corn and mango brew and his eyes were red from hangover.

The silence between them grew. Exhausted from hanging tied to his post for so many hours—he had lost track of time—he felt isolated with McAlwain and Nick also ignoring him. He experienced the sudden need to make contact with another human being who did not want to necessarily kill him.

"Tell me about your family," he requested of Na'omi at last, to break the uncomfortable stillness that settled between them like an unwanted barrier.

He thought she wasn't going to answer. Finally, she did. She sounded reluctant, but at the same time she seemed almost grateful for the chance to escape captivity by interacting with someone other than her frightened students, if only for a short time.

"My mother was a teacher," she said, not looking directly at him, but instead into a more pleasant past. "In Lagos. For the Lycee. My father worked for the Foreign Office. They sent me to London for my schooling. They wanted me to stay there. But I wanted to help my people."

After that brief exchange, she lapsed into another painful silence. She lowered her head. Taggart barely made out her words. "They will say I brought shame to my family. Just like the girls."

The humiliation and guilt in her voice triggered in Taggart an urge to come to her defense, to take her into his arms and comfort her. "Boko Haram raped you, Na'omi. It's not your fault."

Tied to his post, that was the best he could offer. Na'omi shook her head in resignation. Her life was ruined, even if she survived. The same went for her students.

"My father will say I should have married. I should have been under a man's protection. You don't understand."

Na'omi's conversion to Christianity made life more difficult for her in many ways, especially since her folks were apparently still set in the past. Their beliefs were especially severe on women, who were considered mere chattel and not human beings in their own right. In certain areas of the Middle East and Africa, honor killings were considered acceptable if a woman dishonored her family, for example, by being raped. Women were forbidden to walk the streets unless accompanied by a male relative, denied the opportunity to drive a car or attend school, and were often sold or traded like livestock when they were even younger than Na'omi's students.

"You're right," Taggart conceded. "I don't understand. I'll never understand."

She was finding this man equally hard to understand.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Rip. Richard Taggart.”

“Do you have a wife, Richard Taggart? Children?”

He hesitated. “I had a wife.”

“What happened?”

His features hardened. It was his turn to close himself off.

Chapter 49

War and Home

The years since the Twin Towers fell to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda and President George W. Bush’s proclamation of the War on Terror had been trying ones for the SpecOps troops—SEALs, Green Berets, Rangers. From 9/11 they had endured multiple back-to-back deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Africa, and other far-flung shitholes of the world. Senior Chief Taggart, Bear Graves, and the other SEALs of Six sometimes complained bitterly about the deteriorating state of the military and about rampant political correctness that made the war against terrorists even more formidable. You killed the cockroaches where and when you caught them, but you dared not be heard referring to them as *Radical Islamists*. The US government had gone so far as to spend sixty million dollars to study what ISIS, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and all the other splinter groups *wanted*.

Ask any SEAL what the terrorists *wanted*, Taggart grouched, and he would tell you. And it wouldn’t cost the government sixty million dollars. Ask the victims of terrorist bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, and attacks around the world what terrorists *wanted*. The answer was simple: they wanted to kill or convert everyone on the planet who wasn’t *them*.

Over the course of the years, the war in the shadows continued all this had been especially wearing on the personal lives of members of SEAL Six teams. Marriages had broken up, families were destroyed. Rip Taggart tried not to blame his ex-wife, Gloria, for the end of their marriage. The life he chose in the navy was tough on wives and family. Women talked about it among themselves—how their men were constantly coming and going, how they never knew where their men were, what they were doing, or when and if they would return. There was something schizophrenic about a woman’s life with SEALs.

Taggart’s life with Gloria had been one up-and-down roller coaster of deployments interspersed with short deferments home when there was never enough time to pull things back together before he was gone again. Looking back, which he did only infrequently now, he could have graphed the course of his tumultuous marriage along a continuum of “here today, gone tomorrow.”

In the beginning, it had been wild and fun between them, a honeymoon each time he returned from a mission. The team was younger then. He was younger.

Gloria couldn't wait to get her hands on him when the big bird went wheels down at Oceana coming back from an op. She was an attractive brunette, trim, tough, and in good shape. Those clear gray eyes of hers pierced his soul. His teammates joked that what Gloria wanted, Gloria got.

Then, as now, the Gulfstream Diner was part of the team's decompression ritual as they dipped their toes back into the waters of civilization. Gloria would race up to the diner in their old two-seated Ford pickup and Rip would run out to meet her. Generally they ended up parked on some secluded beach where they made savage love in the backseat, Gloria emotionally starved and attempting to reconnect with him through sex.

Taggart lived a double existence and strived to keep his two sides separate and isolated one from the other. What happened on deployment he dared not talk about to a woman. The single time he tried, Gloria looked at him like he might be a monster with horns.

He had been to Afghanistan on an op where he gunned down a *mujahideen* inside a *qalat*, a common multi-family housing complex in a village on the outskirts of Kandahar. Helmeted and geared-up, he pumped a 5.56 round in the guy's head to finish him off. He'd plant no more IEDs to kill and maim Americans.

He had killed before, but that was the first time he killed when he actually felt nothing, felt empty. Half the guy's skull was blown off. Blood and brain matter gushed onto the floor of the man's own home. He was young, Taggart remembered, hardly old enough to support his black beard. He died with his eyes open and blood running into them. Taggart felt neither compassion nor sorrow. No hate or regret. Just ... *nothing*.

He tried to discuss it with Gloria, but then, the way she looked at him, he couldn't. He never tried again.

Each rendezvous with Gloria on the beach became a physical release without intimacy, pounding her with residual violence from his most recent mission.

It got worse each time.

Back in Afghanistan again, he shot a Taliban three times with his M4, brought him to the ground hard and riddled with steel. Alex Caulder and he walked up to the downed enemy. The guy was still moving and making gurgling sounds. Rip shot him again—and again, and again, splattering blood and gore, speckling his own face and Caulder's with it. He pulled the trigger until the man ceased movement and stopped making noises.

Caulder looked at Rip for a long moment, not saying anything, but his eyes filled with concern and even horror. Rip's face was a fierce, blood-splotched mask devoid of human emotion. He glanced up at Caulder, then looked back down at the dead man and shot him again for good measure.

At the Gulfstream Diner upon their return, Bear Graves and Lena were the last to pull out of the parking lot, leaving Taggart waiting for Gloria to pick him up. She looked harried and withdrawn when she finally showed. What Taggart failed to understand was that what happened to him also happened to her. It rubbed off on her like a contagious disease.

Out of habit and a sense of duty perhaps, she drove them to *their* secluded beach. The sun rose slowly out of the Atlantic, painting the beach golden and sparkling off rollers endlessly eating away at the continent. They sat separated on

the vehicle seat looking out and saying nothing. She shook her head when he made a move on her, then continued to stare out the windshield at the ocean, her face set.

Rip produced a flask out of the strained silence. He took a long pull and handed it to her without looking. She took it. They finished off the flask without saying a word to each other, without even looking at each other.

Those were the early years of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. SEAL teams were in and out of the country on a regular rotating basis. Taggart's disease of the soul seemed to spread and consume him from the heart outward. Gloria wasn't the only one who noticed the changes in him.

On a team op near Kabul, six suspected al-Qaeda members lay sprawled dead in the darkness of an unlighted room. The last one to fall was a woman who suddenly bolted from an upstairs room. Taggart and Graves cut down on her simultaneously.

Afterward, Taggart stood planted to one side of the carnage while Fishbait photographed the mess for intel purposes. The dead woman wore a black *abaya* that covered everything except her hands and feet and face. A bulge underneath her clothing indicated the presence of a possible suicide vest. Had she charged out of her room with the notion to trigger it against the American invaders?

Bear Graves squatted and cautiously ripped the clothing off her body with his combat knife to expose a ratty-looking back brace instead of explosives. The middle-aged woman had had a bad back. Bear continued to stare down at the bloody copse until Rip took his arm and led him away.

A week later at the Gulfstream Diner, Taggart was again the last man standing as wives arrived to rescue their husbands returned from war. The proprietor had arranged wooden benches and tables outside the café for customers who might feel the urge to dine in the open air or merely to sit and contemplate the ocean's relentless ebb and flow. Rip Taggart sat bent over at one of the tables with his face in his hands, moving only to lift his head now and again to check the parking lot for Gloria. Diseases of the soul could be as contagious for those who waited as for those who went.

Rip finally phoned Buddha, who came back and drove him home.

A few days after this less-than-welcoming homecoming, Rip took over a table outside his cage at Command to spread out his weapons and gear for a thorough cleaning and airing out. Bear Graves came by fresh out of the shower with a towel drawn around his waist.

"Hey," he said, and kept walking toward his own cage.

"Bear," Rip acknowledged.

Graves had been unusually quiet and contemplative since the team's return. He took a few more steps, then halted and turned back to Rip's table.

"What's up?" Rip asked.

They regarded each other. Bear finally came out with it. "On the last op... that woman..."

"What about her?"

"She wasn't wearing a suicide vest."

An edge sharpened Rip's voice when he replied. "How were we supposed to know that? She ran *toward* us."

He resumed cleaning his gear. His voice lowered, became harder. He seemed to be talking to his weapon as much as to his teammate. Or perhaps he was speaking to himself and the contagion inside.

"To these people," he said, "we're like aliens with four eyes and an exoskeleton. You don't run like she did *toward* aliens that drop out of the sky. Okay? Look, someday you'll have responsibility for your own team. Err on the side of bringing them home."

He rose from the table and returned to his cage. He paused at the door and turned back. Graves hadn't moved.

"Bear? Bear, you just have to... You have to bury it. Bury it all."

Chapter 50

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

The village lay asleep except for guards, sentries, and night birds chirping at each other in the forest as the hours dragged toward midnight. Unable to sleep in his agonizing position tied to the stake, Rip Taggart hung forward against his tethers, his mind alert even though he foresaw no opportunity for escape. Hope rested in his convincing Na'omi to cooperate with his plan and either untie him herself or permit Esther to do it. So far, he saw no sign of her capitulating. She did not trust him to keep his word and return for them with help, in spite of the fact that in him lay the captives' only chance.

He heard McAlwain moaning fitfully in his sleep. He would undoubtedly die within the next day or so unless rescued and treated. The condition of his arm above where his hand had been severed at the wrist appeared to have swollen to twice its normal size, leaving a grotesque and bloated thing, discolored and useless. He cradled it against his chest with his other hand, like holding an infant, while he lapsed in and out of consciousness.

Rip regarded him and Nick in the light thrown from the ever-present kerosene lantern hung by the front door that allowed guards to check on them periodically. McAlwain no longer had the presence of mind to assist Rip in an escape attempt. As for Nick, Rip had tried several times to get him to come around, but the former PR man refused to listen. Better to take his chances with a ransom eventually being paid than the slimmer chance of trying to break out. Rip thought him a fool and a coward.

That left Na'omi or Esther. Rip watched the teacher sleeping. Her lips moved as though she were dreaming. Rip hoped it was a pleasant dream. She deserved that much after all she had gone through.

The back door that led into the abandoned goat pen suddenly opened. Like a thief bent on mischief, Chido slipped in with the outside night and stood a moment with his eyes reflecting fire from the lantern. He was bare from the waist up, wearing only a pair of dirty khaki shorts cinched with a wide belt that held his holstered revolver. His eyes were narrowed and reddened, his muscles sheening

with sweat, his red tongue darting out like a lizard's to lick thick lips. By all appearances he was high on khat or mango brew.

Anthracite eyes swept the caged females, who awoke with a start as though sensing a predator. Whimpering in terror, the little girls scurried away from the approaching guard until their backs were against the far wall. Even Na'omi shrank from the big man when he unlocked the rebar cage and stalked inside.

His eyes settled on Esther, his desire not for the grown woman but for the child. Head lowered, wearing lechery in an oily half-grin, he headed directly for the little girl. She crab-walked backward with him in looming pursuit. Escape was futile in the cramped confines. He grabbed her by the arm and yanked her to her feet. He leered and slobbered with lust as he ran his big hand up her short skirt and started with her toward the rebar gate.

There was nothing Rip could do except simmer. Na'omi, however, searched desperately about for a weapon. Finding nothing available, she stepped between Chido and the rebar gate and put on a brave face. A quick glance at Rip and a slight nod let him know she was ready to cooperate in his plan to distract the guard.

"Chido?" she whispered in a husky voice. Her hands ran seductively down her breasts and across her plaid skirt to make it conform to her body. She stuck out her hip and casually made sure she had plenty of shapely leg showing below the hem of her short school uniform skirt. Her voice trembled. "Away from the girls. Outside."

Chido hesitated, conflicted between the unwilling child and the voluptuous woman who clearly wanted him. Or so he thought in his drug-clouded mind. The child would have been easier for him to overcome and keep silent in order not to alert Aabid—but if the woman lusted for him—!

He shoved Esther aside and to the floor and turned his full attention to Na'omi, advancing on her like a wild animal in rut. Rip could only watch the drama play out while rage boiled like bitter bile in his gut along with anticipation that this would work.

Na'omi kept her eyes locked into Rip's, making sure he had the message, while Chido shoved her out the cage and toward the goat pen in back. The girl had pluck up to her eyes.

In Chido's out-of-control lust to get the teacher to himself, he neglected to lock the back door on the way out. It remained slightly ajar. Rip caught Esther's attention and whispered fiercely, "Esther! Untie me. Hurry!"

Without hesitation, the little girl sprang to her feet and rushed to the bars that divided the hut. The gap in the rebar allowed her to reach through to work on the ropes.

"Hurry, Esther!" Rip urged.

She stuck her head through the gap and gnawed frantically on the ropes with her sharp little teeth.

Out back, Chido ushered Na'omi across the darkened goat pen and heaved her facedown across a pile of straw covered by a scrap of canvas. Overcome with animal passion, he unbuckled his shorts and dropped them around his ankles before he wrenched Na'omi's skirt and underwear down over her hips to expose

her nakedness. Big hands clutching her hips, he mounted her from behind and, grunting and panting, entered her and began pumping furiously.

Na'omi gritted her teeth to withstand the brutal assault, but did not resist him. Rip had to have time. In the distance against the horizon she noticed refinery vents glowing against the night.

The guard was so consumed in his crime that he remained completely unaware of a dark and vengeful wraith stalking him from behind. Strong arms snaked around his neck and yanked him off the teacher. In the same movement, Taggart torqued Chido's head to the side, then snapped it in the opposite direction, breaking the neck with an audible pop. Chido slid to the ground, dead. Rip quickly relieved his body of the pistol holstered to the khaki shorts around his ankles.

"Get back inside," he instructed Na'omi. "I'll be back."

"Take us with you?" she pleaded.

"No. I'll bring help. Go inside."

Every instinct Rip had honed over the years in this cruel business cried out for him to run. Only by escaping and returning with help did the others have a chance. Tonight's mission required speed and stealth. He had to do this one alone, without the encumbrance of a half-dead man with an amputated hand, a coward, three little girls, and a woman.

Esther appeared next to him in the moonlight, staring down at the dead body. Chido must have also neglected to relock the rebar cage. Rip sighed and switched his eyes back and forth between Na'omi and the brave, frightened little girl. It occurred to him that there was no predicting what Aabid might do if he discovered his ten-million-dollar SEAL missing before Rip returned with help. He would most certainly execute McAlwain and Nick. Na'omi and the girls were in danger of it themselves.

Mission came first. Always. That message was drilled into the head and heart of every SpecOps trooper. No exceptions. It was a commandment Rip lived by throughout his professional career.

He looked into the little girl's eyes pleading with him not to be left at the mercy of men who enslaved, sold, raped, and murdered children. He looked at Na'omi. She returned his look calmly, dispassionately, but underneath that cool front he realized that she still did not trust him.

His argument against himself was breaking down. There had to be exceptions. He couldn't do it, couldn't leave them behind. He would have to chance all of them escaping—or none of them.

Minutes later, the prison hut sat empty at midnight. Taggart, Na'omi, three little girls, Nick the PR man, and the injured SyncoPetro exec sneaked out the back of the hut and fled through the darkened forest toward the glow of the refinery in the sky above the horizon. Rip led the way at the fastest pace that would still accommodate the slowest among them, which was McAlwain. Sooner or later someone was bound to miss Chido and discover him with his broken neck and the captives missing. That would set off a desperate race between hunters and the hunted.

Nick stayed with McAlwain to assist him.. The little girls slipped along silently in their wake. Na'omi brought up the rear of the procession to make sure no one faltered or wandered away.

"You're crazy!" Nick hissed at Rip. "They'll kill us"

"They'll kill *you*," Rip corrected with open contempt. He had lost all regard for the man. "Me, I'm worth ten million dollars. The girls and Na'omi, they're all worth more than you. Stay if you want. But if you stay, you die."

Chapter 51

Virginia Beach

The geeks and spooks still hadn't come up with anything from Ebo Buhari. It appeared the raid on DAMASCUS II to capture the courier had been a pointless risk. All Bear Graves and his team could do now was wait for Intel to come up with a fresh lead on Taggart's whereabouts before it was too late.

Alex Caulder kicked back in his equipment cage, sandaled feet slung over the arm of an easy chair with the stuffing dribbling out, like it might be about ready to be moved into his beachfront bungalow as redecoration. He was reading the morning *Virginian-Pilot*. The paper led with an above-the-fold head: AMERICAN SEAL HERO TAGGART STILL IN CAPTIVITY.

Caulder had to admit that he missed the hard-nosed sonofabitch. He could be difficult and stubborn at times. But what you could say about him was that he knew his business, always got the job done, and he took care of his men.

Looking back, Caulder thought Rip's breaking point must have come that night of the team party on the pier behind the Beachcomber Bar & Grill that Rip's wife Gloria owned and operated. This was after the team's failed mission into Kunar Province to nab or kill Hatim al-Muttaqi. Buckley was still the team's FNG with responsibility for the obscene blow-up doll.

Taggart lolled on the concrete pier with Graves, Caulder, Ortiz, Fishbait, and Buckley. Empty beer bottles—*dead soldiers*—lined the pier railing above Taggart's head. He guzzled the last suds from another bottle and arranged it in the row with the others. Caulder tossed him a replacement from the cooler. He had been in the water and his hair still dripped.

Electric lightbulbs provided illumination for the pier and bounced off the incoming breakers. Several fishing rods were propped across a reserve cooler at the open forward edge of the pier, their lines stretching and releasing with the surf. No one paid any attention to them. The objective of the party was to drink, not fish.

"So?" Rip drawled to Bear Graves, his voice slurred from over-imbibing. "Lena's home praying to the porcelain goddess?"

Buckley looked concerned. "She sick, Bear?"

Taggart shook his head. "Why are pretty people so stupid?" he marveled. "Bear's gonna be a father, dumbass."

Buckley did feel stupid then. He should have remembered—all of them should have remembered—the day they received their briefing for the mission against al-

Muttaqi. When the alert came, Bear was in the team tent on Skype with Lena when she showed him the sonogram of their daughter, Sarah.

It didn't matter now that team members knew, or should have known, about the pending birth. They were drinking and as a group heaped on Bear another round of robust congratulations in a variety of methods ranging from pounding him on the back to christening him with beer poured over his head. Bear looked a bit overwhelmed by the drunken hyperbole of it all. But, after all, they hadn't had the opportunity in Afghanistan to celebrate the occasion. As usual with such team occasions, it was part commemoration and part raillery.

Caulder channeled his Dennis the Menace. "I tried talking him out of it."

"There goes your sex life," Buckley laughed.

The others gave him *the look*.

Buck backtracked. "What? What did I say?"

"Equipment check!" Caulder shouted.

Buck rolled his eyes but dutifully produced the blow-up doll from a case of Coors stashed nearby.

"You gave him a name yet?" Rip asked.

"We call him *Mr. Wonderful*. Tammi and I had a threesome with him the other night."

"Careful with that," Rip cautioned, adding a strange glance at his wife's bar up on the sand. Its parking lot was nearly full of vehicles. "She might leave you for him. Women like men who don't talk back."

Inside the Beachcomber, Gloria Taggart was busy taking care of customers, a majority of whom were single navy men from the base, with only a scattering of women among them. Buddha's wife Jackie and Buck's wife Tammi homesteaded a booth at the wide window overlooking the SEAL team gathering on the pier.

Gloria was wearing tight jeans, red sneakers, and a sleeveless pullover blouse. She cleared bottles and glasses from a vacated table. A middle-aged, overweight male customer at the adjoining booth leered at her when she bent over. By his looks, he was probably a civilian dock worker at the base with a wife and passel of kids at home.

"Hey, sweetie," he said. "How 'bout some nuts with my beer?"

Gloria slid a bowl of peanuts off her tray for him. His hand shot out and covered hers. She pulled free and playfully tapped him on the nose with her forefinger. "Look. But don't touch, big boy."

Her bartender Monte had another tray ready for her at the bar—shot glasses, lime slices, and a bottle of Jose Cuervo Silver tequila. She waved to Kelly Anne to take over the floor while she delivered the tray to Jackie Ortiz and Tammi Buckley and slid into the booth with them. They talked while she poured shots.

"It's great news about Lena being pregnant," Tammi said.

A neon Budweiser sign on the window blinked on and off. Gloria's eyes wandered toward the pier. "Just in time for another deployment," she pointed out.

Tammi sipped from her shot glass and sucked on a lime. "Buck doesn't want kids yet," she said.

"Ricky always wanted more," Jackie volunteered. "He has five sisters. I guess I'm not a good Catholic girl. I love my kids, but I miss working."

"Believe me," Gloria contributed, "work's overrated."

The three SEAL wives lifted a toast.

"To Lena," Gloria proposed.

"And Joe," Jackie added.

"To Lena and Joe," all chimed in unison, slamming down shots and reaching for limes.

"I've wondered, Gloria," Tammi mused. "Why is it you and Rip never had kids?"

"Are you kidding me?" She swept a hand across the busy bar scene. "Owning this place is like having triplets. Besides—"

She nodded at the drinking fest under way on the pier below.

"Anyway, Rip's already got his teenage boys. It's always the team for him. It's all dick jokes and bar hopping. I mean, when they're not off..."

Her voice trailed off into what sounded like regret. She poured herself another round of tequila after checking to make sure Kelly Anne was handling things okay. Jackie looked concerned. There was something in Gloria's demeanor that cued her friends that all might not be right.

"Everything okay?" Jackie checked. "With you and Rip, I mean?"

Gloria shrugged. Normally, she was not a woman to wear her feelings. "We're fine. When he's here. I mean, when he's *really* here and his mind isn't six thousand miles away. By the time he starts to, you know ... to *settle*, it's off on another deployment."

Jackie and Tammi understood all too well. Forced separations were the toughest part of being married to SpecOps.

Gloria drew a deep breath. "I've been with him... I don't know, maybe fifteen months in the past five years."

"Yeah," Tammi commiserated. "There's always that."

An edge of hardness and resentment tinged Gloria's voice as her eyes narrowed and she looked out the window toward the pier. "What's the point?" she burst out, as though from some turmoil festering inside that she could no longer contain. "Nothing they do makes a difference. We'll still be fighting this shitty war another ten years from now. How many sleepless nights do we have to endure? How many times have we all thought our men were ..."

She couldn't say it. She dropped her chin onto her chest. "When is it going to end?"

Jackie and Tammi exchanged looks. With a long-suffering sigh, Jackie Ortiz lifted her shot glass to the window. "To our men," she saluted. "To safe returns."

In the meantime down on the pier, Rip finished one of the dick jokes of which his wife in the bar so heartily disapproved. "—and the camel says to the elephant, *Hey, you're the one with the dick on your face.*"

During the ribald laughter that followed, Rip reached for another bottle of beer lined up for ready access on top of the cooler. He fumbled the effort, knocking it off to roll down the pier as though it were attempting to escape. That triggered a reaction in the senior chief. He sprang to his feet and viciously drop-kicked the bottle off the pier and into the surf. He froze in position, scowling out across the dark ocean, panting and grinding his teeth as though about to lose control. His teammates lapsed into uncertain silence. Buddha Ortiz slowly rose to his feet and approached his team leader.

"You okay, Rip?"

Taggart blinked rapidly and turned a blank face toward Buddha. It seemed the lights were on but nobody was home. Rip blinked again.

"I need another beer," he decided.

He turned and started to the other end of the pier next to the fishing rods arrayed over the other cooler. For a long time he stood motionless merely gazing out to sea.

"Man... He's on the edge," Caulder observed.

Bear Graves was quick to come to his friend's defense. "What are you talking about?"

"His strings are vibrating."

"Worry about yourself, Caulder."

"I'm just saying..."

Ortiz cut him off. "He'll be fine." But could he be sure of that after what happened in Kunar Province?

Rip remained alone standing on the pier after the rest of the team left. He drained off another beer. With unsteady hands, he painstakingly aligned the bottle on the railing at the forefront of a rank of other empties. He studied them. They were like so many warriors ranked in formation.

Slowly, deliberately, he reached out a forefinger and toppled the last bottle in line off the railing. It shattered and threw glass across the concrete.

He pushed off the second one in line. Gloria approached walking down the pier. "Rip? It's closing time."

He toppled a third bottle.

"Rip?"

Rip's reply sounded hollow and haunted. "The rules say, no booze ..."

Gloria looked puzzled. She watched him tip another bottle off the railing. Broken amber glass reflected back light from the string of bulbs around the pier.

"But I let my men drink there," he continued morosely. "I figure... I figure what's it matter? What does anything matter? Live and let live. That's what I say."

His voice diminished into bitterness. "Live and let live..."

He shattered another bottle. A mere touch of the finger was all it took. It was that easy, and down it went to destruction. Gloria remained quietly watching, her mind retreating into a dark place. Rip stared into the outer blackness, and into the inner blackness of his own soul. They both knew their marriage was over.

Chapter 52

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

The geeks and spooks had finally done it, *convinced* Ebo Buhari, the courier seized at Lagos Harbor, to cough up what he knew about Rip Taggart and the other hostages kidnapped with him. White Squadron's Commander Atkins and Lieutenant Fung assembled the SEALs in the staff briefing room to pass on the news. That it wasn't considered a *mission* briefing informed Graves, Ortiz, Caulder,

Buckley, Khan, and Chase in the front row that the intel extracted from Buhari wasn't actionable. At least not yet.

The briefing began with photographs of the hostages flashing onto the TV screen. There was the usual stiff official navy ID shot of Senior Chief Richard Taggart that had been all over the media, followed by home snapshots of a dozen or so preteen or early-teen African girls with broad white smiles, along with their pretty teacher; another of SyncoPetro oil executive Terry McAlwain and his PR man Nick Rogers standing together in front of an oil derrick; and finally a head shot of the African named Hakeem, who was a company driver in Nigeria. Commander Atkins preceded the viewing with a disclaimer that it was still unknown whether all the hostages were being held together, or even if all of them were still alive. Taggart, however, could be assumed alive, as Boko Haram was demanding a hefty ransom for his return.

"The courier gave up Rip's and the other hostages' location," Lieutenant Fung announced.

"How solid is this information?" Caulder asked, impatient as always.

"Let her brief us, for God's sake," Graves snapped.

"All I'm saying is, torture Santa Claus long enough and he'll admit to being al-Qaeda."

In truth, verifying info gleaned from terrorists always posed a challenge.

"Do we have any other visuals?" Senior Chief Graves asked Lieutenant Fung.

"No. And Caulder? Torture is against the Geneva Convention. All we know is that the hostages were to be taken to a location approximately one hundred twenty clicks east of Lagos. Just north of the Okomu National Park."

She stepped next to a wall display map of the area showing vast, almost uninhabited forest. She tapped a spot on the map with her pointer. "CIA has set up a safe house here ... here at Okoro. A Predator just checked on-station over the area. The problem is the canopy is so thick."

The TV screen transitioned to real-time thermal imagery from the high-flying drone. It showed little but miles of trees with short sections of visible dirt roads here and there.

"We also have an airborne platform listening for words like '*hostage*,' '*SEAL*,' '*Taggart*,'" she resumed. "Anything that might tip their hand."

"How big is the search area?" Graves asked.

"Eight hundred square miles. All heavily forested."

Discouraged, Buckley muttered, "Like searching for flea shit in a pile of pepper."

In all that vast area, Predator's cameras revealed a single distinctive landmark—the magnified white-hot ring of what Lieutenant Fung identified as burning gas from an oil refinery's venting system.

Chapter 53

Nigeria

Rip Taggart, Chido's pistol in hand, led his disparate little band of refugees tripping and stumbling in the darkness beneath thick canopy toward the refinery, whose distant glow could be glimpsed only now and then through the trees. It was a harrowing journey for the little girls. Rip noticed that Esther assisted Na'omi in keeping up her classmates' spirit. His estimation of the child grew.

He kept alert for any indication that they were being pursued. Sooner or later, Aabid was bound to come. McAlwain's deteriorating condition slowed down the trek, but if all went well they should still reach the refinery before daybreak.

Within two hours after fleeing the village, they came upon a joint/pressure valve assembly in an above-ground oil pipe, an encouraging encounter. It meant there must be a road nearby since the refinery would have to send out workers periodically to service the valve.

A short time later, the forest thinned enough that for the first time they spotted flame and black smoke jetting from a towering fifty-foot-high vent pipe. Rip estimated it lay less than a half-mile away. Light from the flame complemented by ambient glow from the night sky through the thinned forest revealed a primitive road heading in the direction of the refinery. That meant they could make faster time.

Rip passed the word. "The road should be safe."

Even McAlwain's spirits lifted. But not for long. Barely had the good news passed through the ranks than Rip threw up a palm, his senses flagged by out-of-place sounds nearby.

"What?" Nick demanded.

"Quiet," Rip responded. "Everyone down!"

The men took a knee. Na'omi quietly bunched the girls into a low huddle, except for Esther, who sought out her protector. She went to her knees next to Taggart and clutched his arm for comfort. Taggart covered her hand with his and smiled.

Shuffling noises came from the direction of the nearby road. Soon, Rip spotted the shadowed outlines of two armed men cautiously advancing along the road in the direction of the Boko Haram-occupied village. Armed like that, in the middle of the night, they had to be BH scouts.

They halted on the road to peer into the jungle. Something had given Rip's people away—a noise, a bird's warning, perhaps their whispered voices. Tension mounted when one of the scouts pointed into the trees. The other dropped low in a wary half-crouch.

Rip waited, nerves jangling, trusting that none of the others did anything foolish like trying to make a run for it.

Both scouts, as if on an unspoken cue, unslung their rifles and moved together into the woods to investigate, heading directly toward where Rip and his people hid in the bushes. Considering the penchant of Aabid's men for violence, Rip realized he had one hope for saving Na'omi and the girls, who were his primary concern. He made the decision immediately to lure the men into effective pistol range.

"Esther! Stand up by me. Now!"

Shocked, Na'omi looked on as little Esther, trusting the tall white man, promptly obeyed. Rip hugged the child close to his side to cut down on her target

potential while he concealed Chido's pistol behind her back. The movement and voice immediately attracted the attention of the two terrorists.

"Hands up! Hands up!" they shouted as they moved in concert, weapons pointed.

Rip and Esther remained perfectly still. Any sudden movement on their part invited a deadly hail of rifle bullets.

"Hands up! Hands up!"

Rip slowly lifted his free hand. In the dark, the men would be unable to determine much about the prowlers other than that they appeared to be a man and a child. Perhaps he was a woodman embracing his frightened daughter after being surprised while out hunting a lost goat in the forest.

Rip remained perfectly still while hugging Esther tightly to his side to keep her from panicking.

Come on, assholes. Just a few more steps.

Partly reassured, the riflemen advanced with more confidence. The flaming vent pipe behind them silhouetted their threatening forms.

Just a few more steps.

He waited until the shooters were ten yards away before he acted. His right hand gripping the pistol snaked out from behind Esther. In the same lightning-fast movement, he stepped in front of the little girl and went into a combat stance with his left hand bracing the weapon. The pistol barked twice in rapid sequence. Tongues of flame licked into the lead man, dropping him. The second shooter got off a single wild shot before Rip's next shot nailed him through the heart. Esther screamed and dashed into Na'omi's arms.

It was over that quickly, with only echoes and acrid gunpowder odor left in the air.

Back in the village, Aabid heard the distant gunfire. He awoke and dashed out of his hut, rifle in hand.

"Chido!" he shouted.

Chido should have been on guard duty behind the detention hut. He failed to answer Aabid's summons.

"Chido!"

He crossed the open village square in long strides and threw open the door to the hostages' cells. He discovered them empty, prisoners gone. He ran back outside and fired at the stars to arouse the camp.

Aabid's rifle fire in the village panicked Nick and the schoolgirls, who were already traumatized by Rip's shooting of the two BH scouts. Rip quickly retrieved the fallen terrorists' rifles. He kept one for himself and thrust the other at Nick. Nick jumped back as if the weapon were a poisonous viper.

"Take it!" Rip snapped. "Let's go. Get on the road."

Time was now crucial. They had to move fast.

"What if there's more?" Nick protested.

"We have to chance it now. Move!"

Nick clung to the SEAL. He was almost hysterical with fear. "We don't stand a chance. We have to give up. Maybe they won't shoot us if we give up."

Disgusted, Rip shook free. "Get on the road," he ordered.

Under clear starlight, Rip and Na'omi herded the trembling girls out of the jungle and onto the road that led to the refinery. Flames from the gas vent brought renewed hope. Together, the little group stampeded toward what might be a last chance for rescue.

At the same time back in the village, Aabid assembled his troops. A dozen or so gunmen piled onto the back of a flatbed truck with Quayum at the wheel, crossbow at his side, and Aabid riding shotgun. On a furious mission to intercept the escaping prisoners, the truck roared out of the darkened village on the road that led to the refinery.

Chapter 54

Qatar

Two days after their success in planning the bombing of the Dubai Film Festival, *Insha' Allah*, Michael Nasry and Akmal Barayev exited the backseat of a chauffeured Range Rover at the international airport in Doha, Qatar. Wary after the long drive from Dubai across Saudi Arabia to meet with Emir Hatim al-Muttaqi on his orders, the two men made their way through the upscale hangar past al-Muttaqi's private jet, which had arrived last evening. It was the same Legacy 650 that had flown them to Dubai from Tanzania after the American embassy bombing.

Two Middle Eastern bodyguards wearing a sort of khaki uniform and toting holstered semiauto Glock handguns stood watch at the bottom of a steel stairway. Emir al-Muttaqi, operational head of Umayyad Caliphate, descended the stairs to meet arrivals he obviously expected. He was a strange-looking Arab in his mid-forties, emaciated with a bearded, cadaverous face and unruly hair turning gray. He wore traditional Arab garb consisting of a flowing white robe and a black-and-white checkered kaffiyeh. Two traits distinguished him in the world of Islamic Jihad. He was utterly ruthless and completely devoted to Allah; and he was rapidly becoming the West's most highly sought HVT since the death of Osama bin Laden.

Michael and Akmal paid homage by embracing and kissing the emir's cheeks.

"You could have just used the Game," Michael reminded him, referring to communications via social media and the video game. "Saved some aviation fuel."

Al-Muttaqi replied in a gravelly, emotionless voice. "Sometimes it is important to look the men under your command in the eye. To build trust. Respect."

"Of course, Emir. *Insha' Allah*."

The emir lost no time in bringing up the purpose of this meeting. "Michael, we've all lost loved ones to the Americans in this war. We all burn with the holy fire of vengeance. But I don't want this SEAL to distract you from our goal."

Nasry's face hardened as he recalled that night in Kunar Province when the US SEAL, whose name he now knew to be Taggart, had *assassinated* his brother—shot him in cold blood, point-blank between the eyes. It would have been fitting had the emir possessed the same burning for revenge in his soul as Michael had

in his. After all, it was he, the emir, whom Taggart and his criminals had been seeking that night. Had they found him, it would have been he, not Omar, who died with the infidel's bullet in his skull.

"We can use the SEAL," Michael said. "For the cause."

"It's risky."

Al-Muttaqi studied the younger man for a long moment. Then, almost reluctantly, he nodded assent. "But remember, Michael, the words of the Prophet, *Alay hi as-Salam*: 'The world is just a moment. So make it a moment of obedience.'"

"Of course. I owe everything to you."

Al-Muttaqi gave a jerk of the head toward his private jet. "Take the plane. There are some Saudis I need to see here."

"Thank you. I'll be careful."

"I know."

He crooked a finger at one of his hovering bodyguards, who promptly rushed forward and presented Michael a urine sample cup commonly used for drug testing.

"I'm clean," Michael protested. "I told you. I've been clean for six months."

"The Prince insists."

Michael gave in. He took the cup with a scowl and trotted up the jet's portable stairway and disappeared inside to perform the required task in the privacy of the airplane's lavatory. Al-Muttaqi turned to Akmal and quietly, in Arabic, said, "Keep a close eye on him. He's American after all."

Michael returned and passed the urine-filled cup to the guard, who walked away with it to an SUV parked inside the hangar. Michael and Akmal embraced al-Muttaqi farewell and gripped elbows with him.

"*Asalam Alaikum.*"

"*Wa'alaikum Salam.*"

Al-Muttaqi and the other guard strode away to the SUV. Michael looked at Akmal and gestured toward the airplane. Akmal followed him inside. They were the only passengers. Michael selected a seat and stared out the window as the turbines began to spin up.

"Don't get too used to the bling, Akmal," he said without looking at his fellow traveler, who took the seat ahead of him.

The wide hangar doors opened. The jet began to move slowly toward the opening, engines whining. From his coat pocket Michael took a photo of his brother Omar, whom the SEAL Taggart killed in Afghanistan. Omar in the yellowing photo wore a Lakers T-shirt and his big goofy grin.

Chapter 55

Jalalabad, Afghanistan

Another entirely different photograph existed of Michael Nasry's brother. This one was snapped by one of the SEALs that night of the raid on the village in Kunar when the SEALs were hunting Hatim al-Muttaqi. It showed him with a bullet hole in his head.

Taggart's team had been unusually quiet, uneasy after extraction back to the Jalalabad military airfield. The mood was more than simply post-op decompression. And it wasn't because the mission had failed and al-Muttaqi had escaped. Something had snapped in the team leader. Perhaps it was the sight of the family murdered in their own bed, father and children, by al-Muttaqi or his men. Add to that the grisly scene when the Mujahideen slit the young mother's throat in front of their eyes.

Or perhaps the senior chief had experienced too much war, been on too many missions.

Not one of the SEALs from that night would ever forget the barbaric image of Taggart scalping the hajji. He stood in the eerie greenish light of their NVGs with the dead man's hair dripping blood in one hand, his knife in the other. But it was the expression on his face that most horrified the others—a mixture of raw savagery and ... *glee*.

Worse than that, however, especially in Caulder's estimation, was when Taggart executed the hajji who claimed to be an American. For God's sake, the guy had been trying to surrender.

It was a different team that unassed the extraction helicopter after the mission and repaired to their tent behind its HESCO and concertina barriers. The team had departed on the op in high spirits and excitement. Bear Graves had just learned he was finally going to be a papa. Buddha Ortiz and Alex Caulder had been ribbing each other about Buddha's yerba maté tea and Caulder's ragged recliner. Now, upon return, they were like feral animals slinking off to their cave after a killing spree in a farmer's henhouse.

Inside the GP large tent, somebody switched on the battery-powered lamp. The sudden illumination revealed faces hard and wary. Men still laden in body armor and combat gear stood apart from one another, avoiding one another's eyes.

Several SEALs from the support/backup team had trailed into the tent as well. They hadn't been present at the raid itself, having been assigned to perimeter security, and now glanced uneasily at one another, wondering what was going on.

Needing a diversion from the discomfort, Fishbait broke out his digital to evaluate the shots Intel would need for the After Action debriefing. The dead American Jihadist's bloody face stared at him from the view screen with sightless eyes.

"Erase that shit," Taggart ordered.

Fishbait objected. "We need it for the post-op."

"I said, erase it."

Rip reached to take the camera, but Caulder moved in suddenly and snatched it away.

"Hey, dude!" Fishbait objected.

Taggart's head lowered and his eyes slitted. "Give me the camera, Caulder."

Caulder glared back at him.

"Caulder, give me the fucking camera."

Tension mounted as the standoff reached its boiling point. Caulder felt conflicted in defying the father figure who had trained him for the team, who had helped make him the SEAL he was. But what Taggart did tonight was wrong to its core. His eyes continued to bore unwaveringly into Taggart's. He had made his stand and wasn't backing down.

"Buckley! Fishbait! Everybody out!" Caulder snapped.

Fishbait hesitated before he and Buckley joined the support/backup operators and left the tent. Graves and Ortiz remained behind with Taggart and Caulder. The four of them constituted the team's foundation.

Accusation and hurt tinged Caulder's voice. "The shit you taught us, Rip? Everything? You betrayed us all."

Graves interceded to defuse the situation. "Hell, Caulder. My grandfather scalped Japs on Iwo Jima."

"It's not the scalping," Caulder countered.

"Then what? Because he killed a hajji? How many have you smoked, Caulder? Twenty? Thirty?"

"He was an unarmed American!" Caulder exploded from rage, disgust and despair. "He *surrendered!*"

"He was a traitor!" Rip shot back furiously.

Graves still strived to be the voice of reason. "The asshole would've just gotten out to kill more of us."

Caulder came back with, "So it's more important to be effective than to be right? Is that it?"

Bear's voice lowered. "It's war, Caulder."

Caulder was having none of that argument. "And we're warriors, not savages. We have rules. If we didn't, we'd be no better than the ragheads."

Ortiz stepped in. "Take it easy, Alex."

Taggart turned to walk away. "We're done here."

Caulder stopped him. "You don't walk away from this, Rip."

Rip froze with his back to the others, his lean body rigid with barely controlled rage.

"Do you remember what you said to me?" Caulder continued. "About killing? That the hardest lesson to learn is when not to pull the trigger. And you said, watch out for the dudes who can't tell the difference."

He shoved Fishbait's camera at Rip to emphasize the bloody indictment it contained. "If you can't control your emotions, Rip, you can't lead us."

"I made the call," Rip retorted, his back still turned. "I'd make it again."

"You crossed the line, Senior Chief."

After a descending silence in which a breath seemed to echo, Rip turned to confront the others. "Bear?" he asked.

"I don't have a problem."

"Ricky?"

Ortiz fidgeted. Torn between two men he admired, his eyes wandered the tent, from the entrance flap down to his boots. "Maybe you shouldn't have shot that kid."

Having taken that stand, he then turned on Caulder, his voice sharpening. "But no one's saying shit. Understand? This is the *team*. *Brothers*."

Caulder still held his ground. "I won't do another op with you, Rip. Ever."

Rip glared. Then he seemed to deflate before their eyes. "Fuck it."

Without another word, in total quiet, he began removing his battle gear. He dropped each piece on the ground—body armor, pistol, webbing—as though ritually stripping himself of his SEAL identity in front of his brothers, his family. He walked out of the tent after a last long, searching look at Caulder.

Bear exploded once the team chief was gone. "Caulder, you asshole! What's wrong with you? That's Rip!"

Caulder looked suddenly uncertain and appealed to Ortiz. "You know I'm right, Buddha."

Ortiz slumped onto his cot, head in his hands. "It's this fucking war," he said, as though to himself.

Outside in the night with the Hindu Kush rising faintly in the distance against the stars, Taggart wandered aimlessly past the TOC tent and stopped next to the cab of a parked deuce-and-a-half truck. He stood motionless gazing out toward the mountains they had just left. He failed to hear Graves's approach.

"Rip...?"

Taggart walked away, past the truck and out of sight into the darkness.

Chapter 56

Nigeria

The intensity of flames stabbing and leaping from the gas vent down the road at the refinery competed with the first break of dawn as Rip Taggart led his desperate band of fugitives on a final dash for safety. They were so close, only a few hundred yards away from possible sanctuary. Detritus from the plant cluttered the road—broken pipe, damaged oil barrels, puddles and stains of spilled oil and gunk. Trees lining the road near the plant were bare of foliage and clotted with oil.

"Hurry!" Rip urged.

He heard the predatory growl of a truck approaching fast.

"Move!" he shouted.

Na'omi's terrified schoolgirls put out all they had left in them after days of near starvation in captivity. Na'omi snatched into her arms the smallest child, nine-year-old Abiye, who lagged behind. She ran with the tiny girl under one arm while waving the other frantically to hurry the children to greater effort.

A flatbed truck loaded with cheering riflemen rounded a curve down the road, kicking up dust against the brightening sky of a new day, its headlamps shining like a monster's eyes. McAlwain, who puffed along behind Na'omi, the stump of his arm windmilling and slinging fresh blood, cast a fearful look back. He stumbled and fell.

Rip yanked the exhausted man to his feet and slapped him on the back for encouragement. McAlwain struggled on, panting and on the verge of collapse. Up ahead, Nick slowed and stopped in the middle of the road.

“Go!” Rip shouted at him.

McAlwain went down again. Rip started to go back for him, except he realized it was over for the oil exec. The man hadn’t the strength to go any farther, and he was too heavy for Rip to carry. He was as good as dead.

“Save the girls,” McAlwain urged bravely. “Go!”

At the end, the man had balls bigger than Nick and Hakeem put together. Rip raced after Na’omi, rifle slung across his back.

He passed Nick, who had given up flight, tossed the dead guard’s AK-47 into the brush and was running back down the road toward the truck loaded with BH shooters. He had his arms lifted in surrender and was flapping them eagerly to stop the vehicle. The jeering horde of armed goons on the flatbed seemed to be urging the driver to run down the infidel.

Instead, the truck skidded to a halt in a cloud of road dust, out of which Aabid emerged with his rifle. Rip heard the shot and glanced back in time to see Nick’s head explode in a pink mist. BH troops broke into bloodcurdling cheers.

Na’omi and the girls rounded a sharp bend in the road. Up ahead lay the metal buildings and stacks of the refinery enclosed in a ten-foot-tall chain link security fence. Gas vents speared red and yellow flames to scorch the morning sky. The guard shack next to the locked gate appeared abandoned. So did the rest of the plant, with not a worker or security guard in sight. That didn’t make sense. What had happened to everybody?

Still, the plant afforded the fugitives’ only chance. If Rip had to make a stand with his purloined AK-47, against odds of at least ten to one, better it be behind the fence where cover and concealment helped even out the contest.

Shots cracked from the truck as it geared back up after Aabid executed Nick. It barreled down the road, closing fast. Screams of terror from the girls shredded the morning air.

“Move!” Rip bellowed at them and at Na’omi. “Get to the gate. Hurry. The gate!”

To himself he was muttering, “Too many... Too many...”

SEALs liked to pick their fights. This was one he would never have picked had he a choice.

He reached the gate and scurried up the wire where he stopped, prepared to help Na’omi and the children across. There was still no sign of help anywhere within the compound. He was reaching down toward the children, urging them to run faster, when the truck skidded to another halt where McAlwain had gone down. Taggart expected him to be shot too. Instead, men dragged McAlwain up to the truck and hoisted him onto the flatbed, which likely meant Aabid thought SyncoPetro might still put out ransom money for his return. Nick’s life, on the other hand, had had no such value.

Yelping and whooping like a pack of dogs, BH soldiers charged toward the refinery, firing their guns into the air. Gunfire, the roaring of the truck, all the excitement proved too much for the three schoolgirls. Only yards away from the gate and Rip’s reaching hands, they panicked and bolted mindlessly in different directions, like dust bunnies blown out from underneath a bed. To them the trees seemed to offer more safety than the refinery compound. Na’omi chased after them, scolding at the top of her lungs for them to come back.

Rip held his fire. To engage now while Na'omi and her students were scattered all over the woods and being pursued by Aabid's men put them in jeopardy of being slaughtered. Aabid wanted *him*, not the females so much. After all, he was worth ten million dollars. Rip had no doubt Aabid would torture and execute Na'omi and the kids one by one if that was what it took for Rip to give up.

From his vantage point at the top of the gate, Rip's eyes again searched the compound for signs that it might be manned and that help was available. Nothing moved anywhere except for flames of fire escaping the towering gas vents. The captives' last chance for rescue was turning out to be a mirage.

Boko Haram soldiers rounded up the scattered girls as though they were a flock of lambs. Quayum, the demon with the crossbow, captured Esther and pulled her back to the road by her arm. Aabid had Na'omi. No one approached Rip, and no one shot at him. Apparently, the troops had orders not to kill him.

Aabid hurled Na'omi to her knees on the road, the muzzle of his rifle barrel grinding into the back of her head. He looked toward Rip. The implication was clear, the threat real. Either the SEAL surrendered, or Na'omi was the next to die with her face in the dust.

The expression on Na'omi's face was a mixture of terror, defiance, and entreaty for Rip to save himself. He would only get himself killed trying to help them, and in the end they would all die anyhow.

Rip was a man who weighed his choices, a trait that had made him a successful SEAL leader. This situation offered two choices. The first was the easiest; he could leap from the top of the fence, land behind the guard shack for cover, and run. Chances were he would not be pursued. Even Aabid dared not openly challenge the government by invading one of its cash cows, whether it was manned or not. Not yet at any rate.

That choice would lead to Na'omi's immediate death.

Her eyes hadn't left his, even with eternity confronting her. He read them even from this distance. *Run, Richard!* they said. *Go! Save yourself!*

The only other choice was to give himself up. They wouldn't kill him; he was too valuable alive. More importantly, they wouldn't shoot Na'omi either. If he surrendered to save her, it confirmed in Aabid's twisted mind that she was also valuable as further leverage.

Rip had never viewed himself as the self-sacrificing sort. It was better that the other poor sonofabitch die for his country, as General Patton remarked, than that he die for his. Mission came first. Always.

He couldn't wrest his eyes away from Na'omi kneeling in the road with Aabid's rifle against her head. As long as he was alive, Na'omi and little Esther still had a chance. And a SEAL was never defeated until he drew his last breath.

He dropped his weapon. Slowly, he slid down the fence to the ground and, hands up, walked toward Aabid and Na'omi.

Chapter 57

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Taggart's escape attempt from the Boko Haram village began at midnight. At full daybreak, the flatbed truck rumbled back into the village, returning passengers to the same place from which they had fled hours earlier. For Aabid's troops, the chase seemed to have been high sport. They were in good spirits, laughing and jabbering and hanging on all over the truck while Taggart, McAlwain, Na'omi, and the three schoolgirls rode in a tight group in the middle of the bed against the cab.

As for Aabid, his cruel eyes and hard facial lines wore the constant expression of being pissed off at the world. While he probably wouldn't kill his captives, at least not right away, Rip suspected he intended to exact from them some form of harsh retribution for the deaths of Chido and the two scouts. His merely killing Nick, whose body had been thrown onto the back of the truck, wasn't likely to satisfy him.

The ruined village lay deceptively peaceful when the truck pulled up and cut its engine. A black-and-white goat with bloated teats and a tinkling bell wandered past and stopped long enough out of curiosity to check things out. It bolted when Aabid's terrorists pushed, threw, and prodded their prisoners from the flatbed and piled off after them. The goat bell took on a different, more frantic sound as the animal continued its flight to the other side of the village.

Taggart looked back as he and the others were corralled toward their holding cells. Aabid glared at him. A couple of men tossed Nick's bloody corpse off the truck. It hit the ground with a loud, mushy *thunk*, kicking up dust. Esther screamed at the gruesome exhibition and crowded with her classmates around their teacher's legs for comfort.

Aabid pointed at the dead American with his rifle. "I told you this would happen," he rumbled. "Next time it will be all of you."

Once the captives were again separated as before by rebar in the hut, Rip knelt at McAlwain's side to inspect his amputation. The oil executive was barely hanging on. McAlwain watched through heavy-lidded eyes as Taggart removed his filthy bandage and cleaned the infected stump from a clay jar of water left in the cell. He rinsed out the bandages and replaced them. It was the best he could do.

"I was wrong about you," McAlwain admitted through his pain. He gripped Rip's forearm with his remaining hand. "You tried, Rip. You tried. For all of us."

Na'omi also watched through the bars while her traumatized girls cowered at her feet. Rip felt her looking at him and glanced up. Their eyes met and he immediately averted his. The process of hardening himself against emotional involvements and the pain they always evoked had begun years before. His soul and heart had only grown harder and more impenetrable as time passed and life's hard knocks validated his outlook. Nonetheless, he could not deny the connection that seemed to be forming between him and the African teacher.

McAlwain nodded off, then gave a sudden start. "I was supposed to call my grandson today," he remembered, his speech rambling and disjointed. "He's turning fourteen. You have kids?"

Rip looked at Esther. Something about the little girl, her courage perhaps, tugged at the stone that his heart had become. "Didn't get around to it," he said.

McAlwain looked pale and sweaty. Incoherent words spilled out, as though he was losing touch with himself. "Not too late... It just goes so fast... You blink and..."

His chin dropped onto his chest. His eyes fluttered as he attempted to hang on. Rip shook him gently to keep him conscious and talking. "What his name, Terry? What's your grandson's name?"

McAlwain roused himself. "Jake. He's right between being a man and a boy, and not sure how to get there. He loves all that SEAL stuff. He's read all the books, does the workouts, everything. Already talking about going to ... BUD/S. Is that what you call it?"

Rip nodded. "Maybe I can meet him," he said before adding, "Talk him out of it."

"You kidding?" He caught a deep breath. "For him and his buddies, you guys are like superheroes."

Na'omi at the bars continued to watch Rip intently, something in her deep brown eyes so much different than when they first met at the schoolhouse.

Chapter 58

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Alex Caulder stopped outside Bear Graves's cage in the Cage Room and watched Bear sleeping on a cot surrounded by his mission gear. The man looked like hell with dark circles around his eyes and stubble on his cheeks. His jeans and T-shirt were wrinkled and soiled. He spent most of his time now at SEAL Command waiting for news about Taggart. Caulder knew how it galled and irritated him at his inability to rush to his old friend's aid. Taggart would have done the same for him, for any of them.

Bear appeared to be dreaming. His eyelids fluttered, his body tensed, his trigger finger squeezed rounds from a weapon visible only in his nightmares. Caulder strode across the cage floor and touched his shoulder. "Bear? Hey, Bear!"

Startled, Graves jerked awake and threw his legs over the side of the cot. He relaxed when he recognized Caulder. "What do you want?"

Caulder grinned and displayed a greasy paper bag. "Doughnuts. Had to fight five cops for 'em."

Buddha Ortiz joined them and took a hard look at Bear. "Tell me you didn't sleep here last night."

"Course he slept here," Caulder answered for him. "Lena won't stop calling me."

Ortiz sighed and nodded. "Me, too." As proof, he displayed her number on his cell phone.

Graves slipped on a pair of worn sneakers and rose from the cot. "I'm going up to Intel."

"Already did," Caulder said.

That wasn't good enough for Bear. "They might have missed something."

"Bear, you've got a doctor's appointment," Caulder reminded him. "You gotta clean up, go pick up Lena."

"We got things covered here," Ortiz assured him.

Chase, Buckley, and Fishbait arrived. They were laughing about something and poking at Chase.

"What's the word on Rip?" Buckley asked at large.

"No updates," Ortiz informed him.

Buckley did a double take on Graves. "Jesus, you look like you slept in the gator pen."

"Maybe no news is good news," Chase ventured before realizing from the sharp looks he received that that might not have been his best observation, considering Bear's state of mind. He cleared his throat and fidgeted with his hands stuffed into his pockets.

Graves was in no mood for their horseshit. He ushered them from his cage and headed down the hallway for the back door to the parking lot. "Anything comes up, you call me," he advised.

He paused and stabbed a thumb at Chase. "And tighten him up."

Buckley broke into his wide *Miami Vice* grin and turned to his teammate. "Saddle up, son. We're working."

If the SEAL drill known as Monster Mash failed to tighten up a man's muscles and reflexes, they couldn't be tightened, and he should go back to the regular navy and become a yeoman or personnel clerk. Caulder and Fishbait took positions to one side of the grueling obstacle course on the beach to function as referees and judges while Buckley raced through it with Chase. Buckley was leaner and quicker than Chase, but Chase had the muscle.

At Caulder's signal—"Go!"—the two young SEALs broke from the starting line and sprinted down the edge of the surf, each burdened with a training dummy that weighed nearly two hundred pounds. The objective of the competition was to dash one hundred yards to where two big rig truck tires lay on the sand. There, they dumped the dummies and arm-pressed the tires over their heads a specified number of times before again racing down the beach to a shooting range where the parts to fully disassembled H&K416 rifles lay on two field tables. To complete the run, they had to reassemble the rifles quickly and fire one shot each at a man-silhouetted target three hundred meters away.

Arms and legs burning from exertion, the two SEALs reached their weapons with Chase in the lead and Buckley trailing by a few steps. They expertly slapped their rifles together from much previous practice. Chase slapped in a magazine, primed the chamber, and fired first. Buckley got off his round a second later. They relaxed, sucking wind and laughing from the challenge.

Fishbait scanned the targets through binoculars and recorded a pock mark dead center in the head of Buck's steel silhouette. Chase's bullet stuck slightly to the left-center in the head.

"Give this one to Chase for speed," he announced. "But, Buck, you hit dead center. Chase took out an eyeball. We're at four-four. Tied for the series."

"Okay," Buckley drawled with another grin. "Ghetto, reset."

"We're going again?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. You got some place to be? How 'bout you, Fish? You got somewhere to go?"

Fishbait shook his head. "Nope."

"Why's that?" Buckley asked slyly.

"Cause I'm all in and down with the team."

Chase looked at them. "You two practice that?"

Fishbait laughed. "Don't have to."

"Fish here," Buckley teased, "he prays five times a day. *Allahu Akbar*. The whole bit. But that doesn't matter to any of us—"

"Debatable," Caulder bantered.

"—because Fish is here for all the right reasons. But the only thing worse than being a Muslim raghead..." He paused a beat for comical effect. "...is maybe a Harvard bitch. You know that about Ghetto, Caulder?"

"It's a lot to overcome, that's sure," Caulder agreed as the ribbing ran back and forth at Chase's expense.

Buck remained mock-serious. "Harvard, navy SEAL, man of color—a trifecta. Punch your ticket here for a couple of years, Ghetto, then sell out and run for Congress. That's the plan, right?"

"You saying you'd vote for me, Buck?"

"I will," Caulder chimed in helpfully. "If politics still mattered."

"Hell, no, I wouldn't vote for you," Buck decided. "My old southern granddaddy would be turning over in his grave. What I'm asking, Ghetto, is are you all in with us, or aren't you?"

Chase caught Caulder's eye before he headed back to the starting line to end the bullshit. He flashed his big grin. "Hell, yes, I'm in," he affirmed.

Buckley laughed and waved a hand at the dummies and the tires. "We'll see," he said.

Chapter 59

Virginia Beach

Ricky Ortiz had made a deal with his wife: "Once we get Rip—" After that, he would leave the SEALs and accept the security management position at GSS where he would earn enough pay to take care of his family without Jackie's having to keep her old job at the pharmaceutical company. A *normal* job, as she argued, would allow him to come home evenings like *normal* men, read the evening paper while wifey made dinner, go to school functions with the kiddies, sleep every night with his wife, and resume his rightful place as *jefe* of a family that seemed to be falling apart while he was off chasing bad guys around the globe.

Except Jackie was growing impatient for all that change to come about. If Ricky wouldn't be home to head the family as she thought he should, then she would take charge, go back to work full-time, pay off the mortgage and Anabel's dance class, and become head of the family until he went with GSS and they began a

new and better life. The woman was inflexible when she made up her mind on something. She no longer referred to Ricky as *mi rey*—my king.

While Caulder and Fishbait oversaw Monster Mash on the beach for Buckley and Chase, Ortiz dragged himself home in a slump. He expected no one would be home. Anabel was probably at dance class and Ricky Jr. playing second base with Little League. Jackie likely had a sales meeting or something; lately it was she more often than he who was away working.

It surprised him when he opened the front door at home and heard voices coming from the dining room. He stepped inside and looked down the hall and saw Jackie at the table across from a handsome young man in a dark suit and a red power tie. She looked great in business attire and a stylish blue scarf around her neck, with her dark hair brushed to a long luster. Their heads were almost touching over a thick binder open on the table between them.

Ortiz wasn't sure what he was seeing. He hesitated to interrupt until he *was* sure.

"It's not like when you were a sales rep, Jackie," the stranger was saying. "It's all KAM now—"

"And that is...?"

"Key Account Management. A single formulary is worth more than dozens of individual doctors writing scripts."

"It may take me a while to get up to speed."

Ortiz didn't like the way the guy smiled at Jackie. Like it wasn't just business with him.

"Listen," the slickster said, "sometimes it still comes down to charm. Like just last week I told a group of formulary stakeholders a joke—"

"Really?" Jackie seemed to be enjoying this a little too much.

"Okay, okay, here it is," Red Tie said. "You know how to hide a hundred dollar bill from a surgeon?" He paused for effect before springing the punch line. "You put it in the patient's chart."

The guy laughed a bit too loudly at his own joke. Jackie joined in. Ricky had seen enough. He barged down the hall to the dining room while trying to appear unconcerned, like a normal husband would when arriving home from a normal job.

"Hey, baby."

Jackie jumped up and kissed him before introducing Mr. Jokester. She actually seemed happy to have him home.

"Ricky, this is Patrick. He was catching me up on some key points for the sales conference. You know, the one I had to miss—I was sick?"

That was Ricky's cue. She hadn't been ill at all. That happened to be the day he returned from mission to Nigeria with his injured knee and the family insisted on driving him to the emergency room.

Ricky extended a perfunctory greeting. "Nice to meet you."

"Good to meet you, sir."

Ortiz frowned. *Sir?* That made him feel like his own grandpa. "Call me Ricky."

Patrick stood up to shake hands. He had a weak grip and a soft hand. "Sure thing, Ricky."

Ortiz headed for the kitchen. "I'm gonna grab something to drink. Want anything, Patrick?"

"No, sir. I'm good."

Ortiz flinched. There it was again—*sir*. There wasn't that much of an age gap between them. It sounded to Ricky like the brown nosing little *pendejo* was trying to ingratiate himself with the woman's husband. He shook out a pain pill from the kitchen cabinet and chased it with a juice box, the only drink available in the fridge. His knee bothered him again. Rather, it bothered him *still*.

In the dining room, Jackie and Patrick returned attention to the sales binder.

"So..." Patrick resumed. "Let's assume you're part of my KAM team. I'd task you with a whole matrix of real-time market data—"

The guy had an irritating, nasal quality to his voice. Ortiz leaned a shoulder against the kitchen doorjamb and sipped on juice while he tried not to appear the jealous husband. The unpleasant expression on his face gave him away. Jackie noticed and stood up.

"Patrick, excuse me for a second."

She whisked past Ricky and into the kitchen, expecting him to join her there. He did.

"You okay?" she asked in a hushed whisper.

"Why are you so made up?" he asked, attempting to sound casual.

"Ricky, I need to look professional."

"For *him*?"

"This is business," she explained on the verge of losing patience. "It's a new world. I have to catch up."

Patrick shifted about uncomfortably in his chair as he pretended not to be interested in the exchange he observed between husband and wife through the open kitchen doorway. Although he was unable to hear what was said, the tension between them was so evident that even their neighbors must have felt it.

Jackie with her back to the table glared at her husband. "Ricky, behave. Please?"

She returned to the table wearing a forced smile. Patrick stood up and glanced nervously from Jackie to Ricky and back again.

"I should go," he opted.

"No, no. Stay. Right, Ricky?"

"Sure. Stay for lunch," Ricky invited with underlying sarcasm. "I'll grill some T-bone. How do you like yours?"

Jackie drilled him with a reproving look.

"Uh," Patrick stammered. "I've got some accounting research to do." He gathered up his binder. "Jackie, see you tomorrow." Then he quickly added for Ricky's benefit, "At the office. Okay?"

"I'll be there early."

She turned on Ricky the moment the front door closed behind Patrick. "What am I going to do with you, Ricky?" she cried in exasperation.

Chapter 60

Virginia Beach

Bear Graves kept his and Lena's appointment with Doctor Aarush Banerjee, the purpose of which was to receive the doctor's diagnosis of potential fertility issues that prevented their having another child.

"I have *what?*" he howled.

Doctor Banerjee explained, "Varicoceles is a swelling of the veins in the scrotum. The result is an elevation in the temperature of the testes."

Graves cast a helpless look at Lena, perched next to him in the doctor's office. "You're saying my balls are too hot? That's what you're saying?"

Filling the little plastic cup the last time he was in was embarrassing enough. But this? If it got back to the team, Caulder especially would never let up on him. He could hear it now: *So you got hot balls, huh?*

Lena suppressed a smile and clapped a hand on Bear's knee to calm him. "Doctor, could you please explain what the problem is?" she requested.

Doctor Banerjee tapped his teeth with the eraser end of a pencil while he regarded Graves and considered the best way to explain further. A big macho guy like this, a SEAL no less, seldom accepted gracefully anything he considered to be an attack on or a disparagement of his manhood.

"Of course," the doctor said. "Sperm, you see, Joseph, are quite sensitive. Heat causes low motility. In layman's terms, your sperm are weak."

Speechless, Graves stared at the little man. What Caulder could do with that! *Weak, sensitive sperm?*

"They can't swim strongly, or at all," the doctor continued. "They die before they get to the egg."

This was not going well.

"Just so we understand," Lena interjected. "How did we get pregnant before?"

"The chance of a single sperm reaching the egg is not eliminated, but it is significantly reduced. You could get pregnant again, but it is unlikely."

"What can we do? Short of IVF?"

Doctor Banerjee addressed Bear directly. "Well, Joseph, you can take steps to keep your testes cool—avoid wearing tight underwear, don't do any heavy exercise, and stay out of extreme heat conditions."

Lena and Graves exchanged a knowing look. "Like that's going to happen," he scoffed.

Of course, the doctor had no idea what Graves's job entailed—jumping out of airplanes, diving the ocean, missions in deserts and tropical forests and high altitudes. So now he had wussy sperm that couldn't take it.

"There is a surgical option—" Doctor Banerjee offered.

"No," Bear responded immediately. A man had to set limits. However, to the reproach on Lena's face, he added, "Too expensive."

"I believe your insurance covers it," the doctor said. "It's an outpatient procedure, relatively minor. I can refer you to an urologist who specializes in such matters."

Graves was still having none of it. In strained silence, he and Lena walked to his truck in the parking lot while Lena carefully considered her next words. He opened the door for her.

"This isn't necessarily bad news," she decided.

"They want to cut on my balls!" he exclaimed, outraged. "How is that good news?"

"We know what the problem is now. We can treat it," she reasoned.

"Huh!" he snorted. "My sperm are weak? They die before they can get off the ready point? I'm a SEAL and my sperm can't even swim. What a joke."

He lifted his hands and eyes in mock supplication to Heaven. "God? You laughing up there?"

"Joseph, this is not a good time to have fragile male ego syndrome. It's not about you and God. It's just a simple medical issue."

She was a tall woman and stepped up easily into the high GMC pickup seat while he held the door for her. It was Graves's turn to measure what he was going to say. He closed the door for her and took his time walking around the end of the pickup to think about it. He slid into the driver's seat and, with both hands gripping the wheel, gazed ahead out the windshield. They had wanted another child, even before ... even before Sarah. After all this time, he could barely make himself think or say her name.

He sighed. "Lena. Maybe it wasn't meant to be."

Lena's blonde head snapped toward him. Her surprise turned to volcanic anger boiling deep inside the wound left by Sarah's death. Her eyes drilled into him, through him.

"Quitting," she said, each word ground out through the grit of her determination, "is not an option."

Chapter 61

SEAL Command, Virginia Beach

Support guys loaded down with Monster Mash gear made their way off the beach. Buckley and Chase were exhausted after most of the day racing up and down the sand carrying dummies, throwing truck tires around, and shooting at iron silhouette men. Low dark clouds out over the Atlantic signaled the approach of possible rain showers. A cool breeze felt good on the sweat the two SEALs had worked up while Caulder and Fishbait kicked back and took it easy scoring the races.

Buck and Fishbait together led the way off while Chase followed with Caulder. Ghetto was by nature a rather private man, quiet in demeanor, and thoughtful at times to the point of melancholy. He was quieter than usual now as he and

Caulder walked side by side up the beachfront dunes, which meant he had something preying on his mind. Caulder either overlooked his mood or chose not to acknowledge it.

"The look on Buck's face," Caulder said, amused by Chase's having come from behind on the final competition to win the series. "He didn't expect that. Priceless. Nice shooting, Ghetto."

"Thanks."

A hermit crab scooted backward across their path.

"Alex?"

Caulder stopped and looked at him. The kid sounded earnest.

"Alex, I want you to know. On that ship, the Damascus—I wouldn't normally suggest an explosive breach under those conditions, but we had the HVT in custody and we were taking fire—"

Blowing a steel door in the below-deck confines of a ship could have taken out the entire team. Bear and Ortiz had already discussed the near mistake with Chase and were satisfied he had learned a valuable lesson and that the incident required no further action. Caulder had no inclination to go over it again. His response caught Ghetto unprepared.

"You surf?"

"I boogie board," Chase said, puzzled.

"Don't say that," Caulder scolded. "Don't ever say boogie board. I'm serious."

"I can see that."

But did he, really? A Harvard grad, and still half the time he couldn't understand what planet Caulder came from.

"So ... same concept. See where I am?" Caulder asked. He soared both hands flat and high above his head to impersonate surf boards.

"Where?" Chase wasn't catching on.

"On the wave, dude. I'm riding the wave. Just floating. You right now?" One of his hands surfed low while the other remained high. He wagged the low hand. "This is you here in the soup, scraping the rocks. If you hang on to things, whether it's the ship mission, your family, or Buck's bullshit, they're going to weigh you down, dude. You're being aggressive. So, instead, own it and float on. Up here."

His low hand caught the next wave and soared to new heights.

"Roger that," Chase said, but still looked confused.

What had this guy just said—that he should merely go with the flow and forget everything else? But to do that was against Chase's nature. He analyzed things, pored over them, looked for logic and meaning. He supposed it had to do with his Harvard background.

Caulder slapped him on the back and grinned. Chase shook his head in bewilderment. They climbed over the dunes to the beach parking area where Graves waited with his GMC truck to haul the Monster Mash equipment back to the Cage Room. Fishbait, Buck, and the support guys were loading training dummies, targets, tables, sledgehammers, tires, weapons, and other gear onto the truck.

"How'd he do?" Bear asked Caulder, referring to Chase.

"He's all in and down with it. So, Bear, you gonna be a dad or what?"

Graves gave him a look. “Jesus, isn’t anything private around here?”

Caulder merely grinned. His cell phone blared *Charge!* as Bear slid into his truck under the wheel. Caulder checked the screen, frowned, and answered the call. “Yep?”

He listened. A shocked look came over his face. “You *what?* I’ll be right there.”

Chapter 62

Lagos, Nigeria

Perhaps the thing Michael Nasry most appreciated in working within the top tier of the international Jihad movement was the perks that came with it. He traveled in style, lived in luxury, as long as he kept producing spectacles for his superiors like the Dubai Film Festival victory and the Tanzania American embassy bombing. The Movement had money. Cash poured into Jihadist coffers from ISIS oil in Iraq and from wealthy believers from around the world—and the Movement was still expanding. Wealthy princes in Saudi Arabia, European millionaires who recognized which way the winds of destiny were blowing, and the burgeoning population of Muslims and Muslim converts in the United States and their supporters raised cash by the millions, billions even, to funnel through the underground pipeline of Jihad.

Jihad’s most dangerous foe is the United States of America. But even the Great Satan grew weaker each year as Americans lost their will to continue the fight. Soon, the war would rage on US soil as more and more disaffected Americans such as Nasry saw the right way to Paradise. Praise be to Allah, the Mahdi would soon return to destroy the infidels and usher Allah to his rightful place on the throne. Michael felt privileged to be a part of paving the way for the Great Mahdi’s return.

Being a convert of Allah did not mean one had to forego privileges and luxuries in the quest for martyrdom. After departing Qatar on Emir al-Muttaqi’s private jet, Michael and his co-conspirator, Akmal Barayev, arrived in Lagos, Nigeria, and checked in at the four-star Lagos International with a beachfront on the Lagos Lagoon. Not far from here in the harbor, Michael now knew, was where American SEALs had kidnapped the ISIS/Boko Haram courier Ebo Buhari, apparently assuming he knew where the criminal Richard Taggart was being held. But Jihad warriors never snitched off their comrades, so that secret was safe.

The emir had been reluctant in temporarily releasing Michael and Akmal from their immediate obligations, but Michael convinced him the SEAL Taggart could play an important role in the forthcoming action terrorist leaders had in mind. Now, Michael and the despised American who murdered his brother were again on the same continent. In fact, they were in the same nation. Only a few miles of forest and the Boko Haram savages separated them. Taggart would be dealt with in a very short period of time to both Michael’s expectations of revenge and al-Muttaqi’s satisfaction in a major action against the world’s infidels.

On the morning after his arrival in Lagos, Michael was watching a Pistons basketball game on the hotel TV's American satellite channel while he waited to be contacted by a source. Akmal quietly entered from the adjacent suite rubbing sleep from his eyes and looking for coffee.

"First quarter. Two point game," Michael noted. He was on his feet in front of the TV, focused on the game.

Akmal ignored the revelation. He wondered about this fixation Americans seemed to have for spectator games.

"It is time for the Asr prayers," Akmal informed him. "Will you join us?"

"In a moment."

During the next commercial break—concerning erectile dysfunction; Americans also seemed fixated on that—Michael switched the game to record on DVR and rose to accompany Akmal. It occurred to him that something about Akmal had long puzzled him. Now was as good a time as any to question him about it.

"What was it, Akmal?" he asked. "What made you leave the Russians, change sides?"

The fog of some unpleasant memory drew itself over Akmal's broad face like a caul. For a moment, Michael thought he was not going to answer. His eyes wandered, stared into a bloody past. After a deep, wavering breath, he said, "We raided Alkhan-Yurt."

It had been a long time ago, in December 1999 during the Chechen uprising against Russia. Russian troops looted, burned, raped, and massacred civilians in Alkhan-Yurt near the Chechen capital of Grozny. Atrocities continued for more than two weeks. Some of the Russian soldiers were pro-Russian Chechens. Teenager Akmal Barayev was among them.

"Alkhan-Yurt was my village," Akmal continued through his pain. "When one or two men resisted, they massacred everyone. My commanding officer shot a twelve-year-old girl. She was bleeding on the ground, but not dead. He ordered me to kill her. I knew her. I knew her family. So I made a deal with God. If I ended her suffering, I would serve Him forever."

Before Akmal fully satisfied Michael's curiosity about how he ended up a Chechen Jihad Mujahideen, one of several "burner" cell phones lined up on the bar buzzed, rescuing Akmal from further torment. Michael picked it up.

"Yes?"

He listened, his excitement growing. It was the contact bearing news he had been expecting. He hung up and turned to Akmal. "It's all arranged," he said. "The meeting is a go."

Akmal nodded woodenly, his thoughts somewhere else. Michael clapped him on the shoulder to bring him around. "Come on, brother. Let's pray."

Chapter 63

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Quayum with his crossbow and savage countenance resembled some medieval mercenary. He burst into the detention hut and drove Taggart, Na'omi, and the three schoolgirls outside, leaving McAlwain behind, and herded them to the outskirts of the village compound where Aabid and a number of his soldiers gathered around the corpse of Nick Rogers. They stood well back from the body, however, and upwind of the stench. Green blowflies settled in buzzing swarms on the carcass to suck at the glazed open eyes, the blood-dried gunshot entrance wound in Nick's forehead, and the ragged blowout exit wound that emptied his cranium of a portion of its brain.

The girls shrank from it in horror and ran to Na'omi, squeezing their eyes tightly shut in hopes that when they opened them again they would be safely at home.

With morbid humor, Aabid tossed a shovel at Rip's feet and motioned at the body. "Navy SEAL, you killed this man. Now you bury him."

Any other time, he would have either left the body where it fell or dumped it in the forest for the wildlife to consume. Clearly, Aabid was one sick bastard who intended to use the corpse to humiliate, punish, and dominate the SEAL.

Rip picked up the shovel and balanced it in his hands, weighing its value as a weapon. Aabid's eyes narrowed and he pointed his rifle at Na'omi.

"Maybe you bury her too," he threatened.

Rip's eyes bore into those of his enemy. "She had nothing to do with it," he protested.

Na'omi was unwilling to let Rip take all the blame for the escape attempt. She gathered her courage and shook her head vigorously. "Richard, you can't—"

"Quiet!" Rip snapped. The less Aabid knew of the bond growing between them, the safer she and the girls were.

The brief exchange along with all that had transpired previously, and their implications, were not lost on Aabid. A cruel sneer crossed his face. He grabbed Na'omi and flung her at Rip's feet. She half-rose to a sitting position and eyed the Boko Haram leader with intense hatred.

"Your whore digs with you," Aabid decreed.

Having spoken, he turned and stalked off, leaving the boy soldier Felix behind to oversee the distasteful task. A couple of other guards loitered in the shade of nearby trees to back up the boy. Felix assumed the tough, wide-legged stance of his idol. Even the kid's voice mimicked Aabid's.

"Dig!" he commanded.

Chapter 64

Virginia Beach

Alex Caulder hadn't seen his rebellious fifteen-year-old daughter Dharma since she showed up that day at the beach to consume his lobster thermidor. She had hung around a couple of nights, cramping his style with both Kelly and the waitress from the Gulfstream Diner, before she disappeared again as mysteriously

as she arrived. What surprised him when the police telephoned him at the Monster Mash beach was that Dharma gave his name to the police as her contact rather than her mother's.

A desk sergeant at the Virginia Beach police station escorted Caulder to an interview room in the Juvenile Division and left him there. The room contained a bare gray metal desk, three stadium chairs, and a poster on the wall of three Teddy Bears sitting on a brick wall. After a few minutes, a clean-cut, spit-and-polish officer in blue, whose name tag identified him as Sergeant Spelke, brought in Dharma. She was all in gothic black as usual—black granny dress, black sandals, hair dyed black with that white skunk stripe through it, and black lipstick again rather than the green from when he saw her last.

"What took you so long?" she demanded peevishly.

"Now's when you tell me why you're here," Caulder responded in the same tone.

She gave him a flippant toss of her head. "Just expressing my First Amendment rights. You know, what you're fighting for."

Sergeant Spelke explained. "She handcuffed herself across the front door of her school. Then assaulted the officer who took off her cuffs."

"Was that some kind of protest?" Caulder asked his daughter.

"Performance art, Alex."

Sergeant Spelke elaborated. "Her friend recorded the whole thing on his phone."

Stunned, Caulder turned to Dharma. The three of them remained standing looking at each other in the small, bare room. "You *wanted* to get arrested?"

Dharma shrugged it off. "We're already prisoners in a system that shuffles us from station to station like rats in a maze. School's no better than jail. Principal or cop? What's the difference?"

The policeman had had enough of this girl's impudence. "Who the hell talks like that?"

Inwardly, Caulder smiled. She reminded him of himself when he was that age. The apple hadn't fallen far from the tree. Bear Graves would probably have referred to the apple tree as a nut tree.

Caulder had heard enough to get the picture. "Okay, sergeant. What's the procedure here? I don't usually have custody over her. I deploy a lot."

"Navy?"

Had Dharma told him that? The sergeant snapped to attention and clicked his heels together smartly. "Marines! Gulf War One. Ooh-rah!"

"Uh-huh." Caulder wasn't impressed. "So what can we do to get her out of here? You know, not put it on her record?"

Sergeant Spelke thought it over. Dharma plopped down in one of the chairs with her back to both of them.

"An apology could do the trick," the sergeant decided.

Dharma approved. "Good idea. So, apologize."

The sergeant scowled at her turned back. "Young lady," he reprimanded in his sternest voice. "You need to learn to respect authority."

The comment delivered in that manner grated against Caulder's Bohemian nature. Dharma, sensing things going her way, lifted her hands above her head to reveal chafed wrists.

"Know what?" Caulder said to the cop. "I think she's right. Her wrists are all scraped. You rough her up?"

That caught the sergeant off-guard and put him on the defensive. Most parents who came in for their delinquents, especially parents with obnoxious little snots that looked and behaved like this one, didn't start off by attacking the police.

"No... uh..." the sergeant stammered, struggling to recover. "The scrapes... That's from her refusing to let us uncuff her."

Caulder's own rebellious Dennis the Menace kicked in and he pressed the advantage. "Or," he suggested, "maybe her civil rights were violated. I'll bring in JAG to represent her. See what they have to say about it."

He paused to let the sergeant reconsider; the policeman's eyes darted about as though he might be thinking of calling for backup.

"So how do you want to play this?" Caulder asked pointedly.

It was a bluff, but it worked. Dharma seemed to enjoy Daddy talking up for her. Minutes later, Caulder and his gothic teen waif of a daughter with day pack on her back walked out of the police station together.

"Why did you give them my number?" he asked as she followed him to his anarchist purple-and-red Bronco with the top sawed off.

"Erica's still out of town. Yoga retreat."

As permissive as Dharma had been raised, her referring to her parents by their first names nonetheless nettled Caulder a little. If he were honest, however, which he tried to be, he would have to confess that neither he nor his ex-wife had been much good at parenting. He had contributed almost nothing to her upbringing since the divorce. Erica and he probably deserved being called by their first names.

"So where am I taking you?" he asked.

She lifted a heavily-painted black brow and glanced at him and then at the Bronco.

"No!" Caulder objected reflexively. "Not my place."

"You signed for me, Alex. You're the responsible parent." The incongruous juxtaposition of *responsible* and *parent* made her laugh.

"What's so funny?"

She gave him her one-shouldered shrug. "Nothing. I guess I'll stay with Brad." She let in a beat before asking innocently, "You know a hospital that has rape kits?"

"Dharma! Don't even joke about that."

"Or what? You'll take him out?"

Caulder stared uneasily at her. Even the thought of Dharma's staying alone with Erica's weenie-necked live-in galled him. This incorrigible slip of a girl had a way of getting underneath his skin.

"Jesus, Alex, I'm just messing with you," she said, laughing it off. "Don't try to be a dad all of a sudden."

There was no humor in her laughter, however. It was laced with something else, something much more weighty. She stopped laughing. They stood in the middle of the parking lot facing each other until she gestured questioningly at the Bronco. He walked over and opened the door for her to get in.

"Does this thing even have seat belts?" she cracked.

Chapter 65

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

A scalding African sun beat down upon the secluded compound, and upon Rip Taggart and Na'omi, who were waist deep in the grave they were being forced to dig for Nick's burial. Both were sweat-caked with red dirt and exhausted from laboring in the heat of the day. Na'omi's long hair stuck to her neck and throat, her school blouse that had once been white now a dingy gray-brown and torn from her futile flight with Taggart and the others through the forest.

Rip's khakis were likewise stained and tattered. His unshaved face covered some of the sharpness of his features while at the same time emphasizing the hardness in his eyes and the set of his thin lips.

Felix the boy soldier tied a bandana around his nose and mouth to filter out the stench of Nick's putrefying body. He proudly brandished a rifle in one hand while with the other he swatted irritably at hordes of flies attracted to Nick's rotting corpse. He sidled up to the grave in progress. Taggart ignored him.

"Navy SEAL. How many people you kill?" he asked.

Rip deliberately tossed a shovelful of dirt toward the kid's feet, causing him to jump back. Undaunted, Felix returned, eager to prove his valor to the man who seemed to have been so respected that his country might fork over ten million dollars to get him back. He squared his narrow shoulders and slapped the stock of his AK-47 as he had seen Aabid do.

"I kill seven," he boasted.

Rip straightened and looked at him with ill-concealed disdain. "Why?"

Felix seemed surprised that anyone would question it, especially a US SEAL whom Aabid said had slain many warriors of Allah.

"Because they are my enemy," Felix explained as though to someone lame of mind. "And because if you kill someone, you take their spirit and command it by a secret name. More you kill, stronger you become."

Rip saw right through him. "You've never killed anybody, have you?"

"I kill seven," Felix insisted stubbornly, and assumed a heroic pose with his weapon.

Na'omi shook her head in sorrow. Taggart shook his in disgust. Killing was what jihadist radicalism was all about. Kids much younger than Felix were indoctrinated into the cult of death. Rip had seen boys as young as five, even little girls, strapped into suicide vests and sent out to martyr themselves by blowing up women and other children. Kids of ISIS and the other radical groups were not allowed a childhood. From birth they were considered "warriors for Allah" and therefore conditioned to accept killing and dying in Allah's name.

Rip resumed digging. Na'omi reached out and touched his hand. Rip saw the deep sadness in her eyes, for the children of her country and for the country itself. Only the week before she was seized with her children from school, an army of

teenage terrorists attacked another school in Gashigar village on the border with Niger. The boys murdered the teachers and took the younger boys and girls. The girls would become sex slaves, the boys would be inculcated as Felix had been into the Allah cult of Jihad.

The world seemed to be deteriorating into madness. Father Namb'i at Na'omi's school said the world was living in the last days of Revelation. Jesus would not like what the world had become when He returned.

Felix and the nearby soldiers under shade trees snapped to attention when Aabid and Quayum walked up to inspect the grave's progress. Aabid bobbed his head in approval and flicked a hand toward Nick's fly-covered corpse lying a few feet away.

"Pick it up," he ordered Taggart and Na'omi. "Both of you."

The grave was only about five feet deep, but apparently Aabid had become impatient. Rip lifted himself from the hole and helped Na'omi up beside him. She staggered from heat and exhaustion and clutched him for support. Aabid motioned them toward the body. Na'omi looked about to be sick as the two of them approached the buzzing green clouds of blowflies.

"Look away, Na'omi," Rip encouraged.

Rip waved his way through the flies and took Nick's head and shoulders to drag the corpse to the hole and save Na'omi from participating. Aabid was not having that. He jabbed his rifle at the teacher and indicated she should help. She convulsed into dry heaves as she took Nick's legs under her own.

Rigor had passed, leaving the cadaver fluid-like with skin and flesh beginning to slough off from exposure to the hot sun. Working together, Rip and the teacher half-carried, half-dragged the body to the open grave and tried to lower it gently and respectfully into the ground. It slipped from their grasp, however, and crashed at the bottom in a puff of red dust and body fluids. It was death and burial at its most grotesque.

Na'omi fell to her knees and retched violently. Rip took a knee next to her and held her as she dry-heaved. Aabid stood above them, laughing sadistically.

Rip had had enough. He snatched a shovel off the ground and in a sudden rage sprang to his feet with one intent—to kill Aabid before the warlord's soldiers killed him. But before he could act, Na'omi in a rage of her own charged straight for Aabid and certain execution. Seeing her in peril, Rip dropped his shovel and grabbed Na'omi to hold her back.

"You will not silence us!" Na'omi screamed as she struggled against Rip's arms. "You will never silence us."

Aabid seemed amused by the drama. A cold smile escaped from deep inside his dark and dangerous innards. He had apparently planned for even more drama, for as soon as he whistled sharply through his two fingers, soldiers poised to receive the signal dragged Terry McAlwain from the detention hut and dumped him unceremoniously next to Nick's grave. The poor man floundered about in the dirt mumbling incoherently from fever and starvation.

"No!" Na'omi cried. "Terry—!"

Aabid addressed McAlwain, although the oil exec appeared incapable of either understanding or responding. "Your government refused to pay," he growled. "All this money for oil, no money for you."

It occurred to Rip that if SyncoPetro declined to pay for McAlwain, in accordance with a no-ransom, no-tribute policy the United States established as far back as the war on the Barbary Pirates, why should the US be inclined to pay for him?

Rip attempted to reason with Aabid. "He's been through enough. Just let him go. You don't need them, any of them. You just need me."

Aabid nodded and seemed to consider it. "Yes. He has suffered enough. And he is worthless."

His eyes shifted toward Felix, who stood nearby at semi-attention with his rifle at order arms.

"Felix!"

The boy sprang to like a well-trained dog and trotted up to his commander. Aabid gestured toward McAlwain. "Kill him."

Felix hesitated, his eyes widening.

"Kill him now!"

Felix licked his lips. He was obviously no accomplished killer, no matter how he bragged about it. His eyes connected with Rip's.

"Don't do it, Felix," Rip implored, trying to get through to the boy. "Look at his face. You'll never forget it, I promise you. It's not what you think it is."

The muscles in Felix's little-boy face slackened and began to twitch and jerk. He seemed to be at war within himself—the dark side of Jihad arrayed against what remained of his childhood humanity. Aabid stood silently and watched him until the boy stepped forward with his rifle and looked down upon the gray-haired man squirming mindlessly about on the ground. He lifted his rifle to take aim.

McAlwain regained some awareness at the end. He sat up and caught his balance. "It was my grandson's birthday," he blubbered. "He was fourteen years old—"

The report of a single rifle shot reverberated through the forest and into the village. McAlwain tumbled into the grave on top of his former PR man. Na'omi sobbed into her hands. Screaming from the schoolgirls watching from the window of the detention hut pierced every corner of the BH compound. Aabid favored Taggart with one of his evil smiles, as though gloating in triumph over the making of another young warrior for Allah.

And Felix flashed the SEAL a defiant look from the dark side from which there could be no return.

Chapter 66

Virginia Beach

Lena Graves wanted another baby, needed it to fill the void in her heart over the loss of Sarah. While Graves ached to please her, he felt conflicted and overwhelmed by the diagnosis that his insufficient manhood was at fault. He was also dealing with the matter of Rip Taggart's kidnapping in Africa and the moral

responsibility that he and his team assumed in effecting Rip's rescue, no matter what it took, what they had to do, or where they had to go. He felt personally responsible in a way no woman could understand. Taggart would still have been with the team and never been kidnapped had it not been for events that began that night in Afghanistan's Kunar Province.

On Sunday morning, Joe and Lena Graves drove to church in awkward silence and occupied their usual pews. They sat silent and still, not touching, as Pastor Adams wearing his vestments and clutching his Bible took the pulpit. He was a small, devout, balding man in his fifties. It was he who had delivered the final services for Sarah.

Graves only half-listened to the sermon. Instead, he sifted through his troubles until something in Pastor Adams's message caught his attention: "*So the Lord said, I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds, and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them...*"

Graves stiffened, stricken by the words, his heart racing as though they were directed at him.

"But let's take a moment to remember *who* was spared," Pastor Adams continued. "Noah. The righteous man, blameless among his people. God would allow his line to continue..."

Graves could not have explained to anyone exactly what in the sermon impacted him so viscerally. He couldn't even explain it to himself. All he knew was that Pastor Adams had triggered an avalanche of questions within his soul. His chin dropped to his chest and he covered his face with his big hands. Lena looked at him in curious alarm.

After services during congregational cookies and coffee time in the sunshine on the front lawn, Graves made an opportunity to talk to the minister while Lena mingled with church friends. She watched him from the corner of her eye, wondering.

"That was a powerful sermon, Pastor," Graves opened.

"I'm glad you thought so, Joe."

The pastor studied Graves during a moment's pause. Joe seemed troubled. It was common knowledge in church that Joe Graves was a navy SEAL whose work was otherwise classified. For days now in this navy community, Richard Taggart's kidnapping had occupied front pages and the nightly newscasts. People talked of little else. NAS Oceana had been a hive of activity for days. Even the secretary of Defense had flown in for a briefing with base commanders.

Now, when Joe Graves seemed disinclined to pursue his uncharacteristic approach, Pastor Adams thought to get around to what troubled him by bringing up the topic that must concern every military man to some degree.

"We're praying for the SEAL and those poor girls," he probed gently. "Only God knows the ordeal they must be going through. Did you know him?"

"I'd heard of him," Graves replied, avoiding a direct answer because of security issues. "We all had. And we're praying for the girls too. So..."

He fumbled for the right words to express dormant feelings and thoughts aroused by the sermon. "So... God punished everyone—for what certain people did?"

“Yes. It’s an important message. Sins have consequences. Sometimes even deeper than we can imagine.”

Pastor Adams’s kindly eyes regarded the big SEAL with compassion and understanding. It was difficult for men like Graves, warriors, to express their inner emotions, even to themselves, much less to someone else. Graves solved the conundrum by speaking in generalities.

“Then it’s possible God would...” He faltered, tried again. “...that God would punish a child ... for what her father—?”

“For what her father...?” the minister prompted.

Graves lifted his head to the bright morning sky, as though God might be watching. “If her father ... committed a big enough sin...?”

His soul-searching stalled when Lena walked up, concealing her concern for him with a smile. “Your sermon was excellent, Pastor. As usual.”

“Thank you. Joe and I were just discussing it.”

Graves pasted on a smile of his own. The moment had passed. “Well, we should go, Pastor. Thank you.”

Pastor Adams released them with, “See you next Sunday.” Perhaps there would be another time.

Joe and Lena walked away, their awkwardness with each other broken by the unexpected buzz of his cell phone. Numbers appeared on the view screen: 999999.

“Command,” Graves acknowledged. “Could be about Rip.”

She nodded without comment. This call always seemed to interrupt at inconvenient moments. Graves shifted his feet and looked away. “Lena...?”

He embraced her suddenly, fiercely. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

But she sounded distant, a response by rote, her eyes squeezed shut while a mixture of emotions—anger, love, hurt—surged through her breast.

“We need to talk, Joseph.”

“Okay,” he conceded. “I know.”

Lena waited for him to go on. Instead, he seemed to withdraw to another planet from which he became unreachable. After a moment, she sighed with deep sadness. Now was not the right time.

“You’d better go, Joseph.”

He looked at her, nodded, and walked away.

Commander Atkins and Lieutenant Fung were prepared to brief DEVGRU SEALs when Graves, still in his go-to-church attire, arrived and took a seat in the front row with Caulder, Ortiz, Chase, Buckley, and Khan. They looked expectantly to their squadron commander. Something must have come down the pipe about Rip. Lieutenant Fung confirmed it.

“Employees at a refinery in our search sector confirmed suspicious Boko Haram activity nearby,” she said, tapping a pointer on her boot while Commander Atkins stood by, “Through an Agency asset, we identified an abandoned village which we believe may be where the hostages are being held.”

She snapped her clicker. An ISR drone image appeared on the big screen. Once again it revealed dense forest. She zoomed in on barely visible fragments of structure among the trees. “Here’s a live feed from the ISR platform,” she said.

“The asset can positively identify?” Buddha Ortiz asked.

“No. He would have risked tipping off BH if he got too close. But he observed activity consistent with a hostage compound—round-the-clock sentries along the perimeter, vehicles transporting in food and supplies.”

Commander Atkins stepped forward. “Command agrees it’s enough to warrant forward staging in the area,” he announced. “We’ve secured a safe house ten clicks from the target. The Agency will arrange ground transportation to the ORP. It’s too dense for vertical insertion. And it could endanger the hostages if they heard you coming.”

He swept Graves’s team in the front row with a flinty gaze. “Wheels up in an hour,” he said.

Chapter 67

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Aabid had been a fool to assume the US government would pay a ten million dollar ransom for the return of a hostage. Paying for the return of hostages encouraged more taking of hostages. Aabid had Terry McAlwain executed when he accepted this essential fact. Then why, Taggart pondered, was he being kept alive? Was it something personal with the warlord?

Barefooted, stripped down to his khaki trousers, and on his knees, Taggart utilized a shovel to pound another crude iron nail spike into the connecting crossbeam of a crude ten-foot-tall wooden cross Aabid had him constructing in the village square near the detention hut. It was the same shovel he used earlier to bury Nick and McAlwain in their common grave. Armed guards, including Felix, kept watch from the shade of nearby huts.

Steel on steel rang through the dilapidated shacks and shanties. Aabid possessed a depraved sense of humor and irony. He had had his men deliver the two pieces of timber to the square, then brought Taggart out at gunpoint and explained what he wanted done. It was only fitting, he sneered, that since Christ had suffered on the cross for the sins of the world that Taggart should suffer likewise—and that he should do so in full view of his African whore and the little whorelets who had betrayed Allah by converting to Christianity.

Carrying a machete, Aabid swaggered from his HQ building to inspect Rip’s work and toss another nail into the dirt. He pushed it toward Rip with the point of his machete.

“Another, Navy SEAL. It must hold you through the night.”

Rip considered the nail. It was approximately six inches long, the length of a blade. Aabid tapped the earth with his machete. *My knife is bigger than your knife.*

Rip hammered the new nail into the cross. *Survive and wait until the right opportunity.* Na’omi and the girls watched from the narrow window of the holding cell. Rip heard Esther sobbing her little heart out.

“Mighty American SEAL, look at you,” Aabid taunted.

He turned to face the prison hut and the faces in the window. "Now you know who has the power," he mocked. "The infidels cannot protect you. America cannot protect you. You..." He pointed his machete at Rip kneeling and working on the cross. "This ... *God* cannot protect you."

Still wearing his evil smile, he paraded to the holding cell. A guard unlocked the door and Aabid pushed it open with his machete and stepped inside. Na'omi jumped back from the window. Her students flocked to her, their frightened eyes fixed on Aabid. Aabid jabbed his big knife through the rebar at Esther.

"Tell me," he demanded. "Who can protect you?"

Esther trembled at Na'omi's feet. "Leave her alone!" Na'omi flared.

Aabid sniggered and rattled his machete against the bars. "Say it!" he insisted of the little girl. "Who can protect you?"

Esther was too terrified to speak.

"*Who?*" Aabid thundered.

"You," Esther managed meekly.

Aabid smiled again and left the hut. Outside, he ordered, "Put him on the cross."

Several soldiers wrestled Rip into submission and spread him onto the cross where it lay on the ground. They tied his bare wrists and ankles to it with lengths of coarse hemp rope whose fibers tore into his skin as the knots tightened.

"Stop it!" Na'omi cried out from her cell window.

Aabid ignored her. "Careful. He's valuable," he directed his soldiers. Aabid's fighters hoisted the cross upright with Rip tethered to it, his arms outstretched on the crossbeam, his wrists and ankles bearing his full weight. The ropes cut deep into his flesh. The pain was so excruciating that it felt like his limbs were being severed from his body. Still, he refused Aabid the satisfaction of seeing him suffer. He glared into Aabid's eyes during the entire procedure, his expression carefully controlled to reflect not pain but the contempt he felt for the terrorist leader.

Soldiers dropped the base of the cross into a hole prepared for it and tamped it upright in place. Body weight on Rip's outstretched arms and shoulders threatened to tear them loose from their joint sockets. His breathing sounded like a blacksmith's bellows. Blood streamed from his wrists and splattered droplets into the earth. Thus, half-naked, Taggart sagged on the cross, suffering as Jesus must have suffered two millennia ago. That was the example Aabid intended in his mockery of the infidels and their pathetic God.

Na'omi found it impossible to turn away from the lurid spectacle, as though in watching she might in some way share his anguish. Her eyes welled with tears as she held her little girls tightly around her.

From across the square, Aabid confronted Na'omi at her window. "How do you like your messiah now?" he jeered.

Chapter 68

Nigeria

Michael Nasry's partner-comrade, the Chechen Akmal Barayev, arranged a rendezvous with four Chechen Islamic fighters at a private airstrip in the forest on the outskirts of Lagos. Michael and Akmal, driving a blue rented SUV, arrived as the sun peeked across the top of the jungle canopy. The landowner was a scrawny Nigerian with smallpox scars on his face and a game leg he collected in action against infidels in Algeria. Various Islamic groups paid him to keep and protect the airfield as a conduit for fighters and arms into Nigeria.

As they waited for the aircraft, Michael read a piece from the *Washington Times* he had picked up at a newsstand before leaving Qatar. To him, the US, albeit his native land, was a shitbag country on the decline—and it was losing its own declared War on Terror. He chuckled with morbid delight over a quote from the US director of the National Counterterrorism Center, who testified before Congress that the world's army of terrorists was "broader, wider and deeper than at any point since 9/11. It is our judgment that their capacity to carry out attacks abroad and around the world, including in the United States, has not thus far been significantly diminished."

No shit, Dick Tracy.

The plane landed on time and discharged four of the toughest-looking hombres Michael had encountered. They looked perfectly capable. They were not especially big men, but they bore scars and the steely gazes of men who had seen things. They looked Asian-European and wore semi-uniforms of digital cammie and bush hats. Better yet, they brought their own weapons—holstered handguns, AK-47s, and even grenades. After all, airfields like this one did not bother with customs officials.

Akmal had known them from Chechnya and the fighting there. He assured Michael they were trustworthy and capable of handling any transactions with Boko Haram that Michael might have in mind. Few even in the Islamic community trusted the volatile and impulsive BH cells that sprang up all across northern Africa from Nigeria to Somalia and Kenya, and who specialized in kidnappings and extortion.

Michael, Akmal, and the four armed Chechens piled into the rented SUV and made their way south and east until Akmal, behind the wheel, pulled into a primitive roadside fruit and vegetable market and makeshift café, the appointed site for the rendezvous with Boko Haram agents. Michael and Akmal entered the café while two of the Chechens wandered the open market as roving security and the other two stood watch near the parked SUV. A curious Nigerian with a machete eyed the foreigners and chopped off the end of a coconut.

The bare-floored café contained a few homemade chairs and several crude tables with uncovered surfaces. A flyspecked window overlooked the unpaved road that ran past. The sweating tea vendor wore a stained apron over his bare chest. Michael looked him over distastefully and ordered cups of tea. Excited and on edge, he leaned back in his wooden chair facing the door. One leg jiggled nervously.

Akmal sat across the table from him. Out of nowhere, perhaps inspired by the arrival of the Chechens, Michael said to him, "I've been thinking about the girl in your village. What was her name?"

Akmal's visage hardened. It had been years ago, but he was unlikely ever to forget the little girl bleeding out on the ground and his promise to God when he put her out of her misery.

"Layla," he replied, barely above a whisper.

"Layla. And did you avenge her?"

Akmal looked away, his features frozen. "I castrated my commanding officer and slit his throat. Then I left for the mountains."

Michael nodded approval. The tea vendor set steaming cups of liquid on the table and wiped his hands on his apron. Michael waved him away.

A military-style Humvee loaded with armed Boko Haram fighters skidded to a dusty stop outside. It was right on time, as though the men in it must have been right down the road keeping an eye on the rendezvous point. Boko Haram didn't trust anyone either, whether fellow Islamic or not.

A giant of a man armed with a sidearm and a crossbow barged his way into the café and stopped to look over the territory. Quayum wore khakis. His face and nose were long and broad and his head shorn close to his scalp. He crossed to Michael and Akmal, eyeing each of them suspiciously.

Michael pushed a cup to the African and invited him to sit down. "I ordered tea."

Quayum remained on his feet with no change of expression. "The price is ten million dollars," he said.

Chapter 69

Nigeria

The CIA and its assets, along with an advance SEAL support and tech element, had turned a secluded and abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Lagos into an improvised staging area. Senior Chief Bear Graves's Delta Team along with Foxtrot were flown into a Nigerian military airfield under cover of night and whisked to the warehouse by a variety of inconspicuous civilian transports, including a garbage truck. The lives of Rip Taggart and the other hostages depended upon the mission remaining clandestine.

Footfalls and voices echoed in the cavernous warehouse. Crates and boxes and rusty farm equipment cluttered the interior, which was illuminated by a scattering of bare lightbulbs. It smelled musty and sour from long disuse other than by colonies of rodents.

As soon as the teams arrived, they got busy with pre-mission rituals of unpacking equipment, maintaining weapons, going over maps, and collecting up-to-date intel. Bear Graves spread a map on a field table underneath a light and with his team hit the high points of the mission plan a last time before kickoff. All six operators wore jungle-pattern cammies and ballistic helmets. Their packs, weapons, armor, NVGs, and radios lay sidelined, ready to go.

"An indigenous vehicle gets our team to the ORP," Graves narrated, tapping his forefinger on a grid coordinate near an abandoned Boko Haram village where CIA assets had pinpointed the hostages' location.

Caulder affected a plaintive groan. "Please tell me we're not looking at more garbage trucks."

"Cargo truck," Graves clarified. "We ride in the back. Local driver up front with one of our Agency handlers riding shotgun."

The local CIA asset-driver wrapped in an old blanket snoozed nearby on the hard concrete floor. He was a diminutive Nigerian in his late forties. His Agency handler sat rocked back in a metal chair reading a paperback book, a tall African American from Chicago with eyes that constantly strayed from his book to scan the warehouse. Graves doubted little if anything escaped his scrutiny.

"Local driver, huh?" Fishbait snorted with a sly look at Chase. "Why don't we use Ghetto? He'd blend right in."

Buckley laughed. "You kidding? He's the least black guy I know."

"Good one," Chase admitted, shaking his head. They never let up dealing him shit about Harvard.

That led to a round of rough grabass to relieve tension, part of a team's camaraderie and cohesiveness.

"Buddha, on the other hand—" Buck pursued with a grin.

"Nah," Ortiz said, going along with the fun. "I'm only confused for a black man in the shower."

Caulder slapped Ortiz on the back. "You too?"

"Knock it off," Bear interrupted, all business. "Okay, we patrol in the rest of the way from the ORP. About three clicks to the target."

Graves spread a schematic of the abandoned village over the terrain map. Ortiz massaged his game knee, concerned about how it would hold up to a forced march.

"This," Graves explained, "is how the village looked when it was housing for the refinery workers, before it was abandoned. Assuming not much has changed, this building—here—is our primary target. Foxtrot will clear and search for the hostages. Delta Team will take the Two Series building and clear clockwise until the compound is secure."

The hardest part of any op was the waiting. Following the short briefback, Ortiz slipped off and squatted behind a stack of old crates where he pulled up his cammie trouser leg and injected a syringe of cortisone into his knee. Caulder caught him emerging from hiding with his rucksack on his back and stretching his leg, testing it.

"How's the knee?" he asked.

Ortiz shrugged it off as no big deal. "Fine."

He squatted and rummaged out a yerba maté tea kit from his ruck and began preparation to brew a cup. Caulder spread his poncho liner on the floor and sprawled out on it. After watching the tea making for a minute, he brought up Bear's intense preoccupation with rescuing Rip.

"This is some deep shit for Bear," he commented.

"Some deep shit for all of us. It's Rip we're talking about."

"That's what I mean. You think Bear's got his head on straight?"

Ortiz lit a flame to his canned fuel and placed a canteen of water over it to boil. He looked at Caulder. "If you don't think Bear will do the right thing," he said, "you shouldn't be here."

"Hey, Buddha," Caulder protested. "Rip was my team leader too. I want to bring him back, same as you."

"Then let's go get him."

Elsewhere in the warehouse, Senior Chief Graves, looking harried and distracted, secluded himself from the other SEALs and fished out his cell phone. He clicked onto the little screen a photo of Lena and him and their baby girl Sarah—Dad and Mom laughing and cooing with Baby and happy like Lena and he had not been since.

He tapped the screen and started to dial Lena's number, providing he had coverage and could make connection. He sat for a long time just staring at the screen before he abruptly closed the cover and stuck it back into his cargo pocket.

Chapter 70

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

How long had it been? Hours? Days? Rip Taggart had lost all sense of time as he hung near naked on the cross with the brutal tropical sun beating down on him and sucking moisture through his scorched skin. Head dangling, he seemed to lose more of his desire to live with each shallow breath. His mind drifted, shuttering in and out of reality.

He heard singing. His eyelids fluttered. He didn't believe in angels. His head slowly twisted toward the source of the sweet voice lifted in song. Through the blur of semiconsciousness he sighted in on Na'omi's lovely brown face framed behind the window bars of the holding cell. She was belting out a traditional old Christian hymn, *How Great Thou Art*, in an effort to will him not to give up.

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder.
Thy power throughout the universe displayed...*

Felix ran at the window, brandishing his rifle and yelling, "Shut up, you stupid whore! Enough!"

He sounded more and more like Aabid.

Na'omi hushed, but she remained at the window where Rip could see her, reaching out to him with misty, sorrow-filled eyes. Uplifted for that brief moment by her singing, Rip began to mumble the hymn in what would perhaps be his final act of defiance.

I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder.

Thy power throughout the universe displayed...

Chapter 71

Warehouse Staging Area

SEALs and their support elements at the isolated warehouse designated as a staging area made final adjustment to weapons, gear, and plans as kickoff drew near. Everyone fully expected a firefight if Boko Haram occupied the village as suspected. Buck Buckley cleaned and oiled his MK48 7.62 heavy machine gun for the second or third time. Then he went from team member to team member making the same demand.

“Boys, show me them extra rounds.”

The machine gun was a critical weapon of both offense and defense should a fight ensue. It burned up ammunition at an astounding rate. The weight of sufficient ammo was too heavy for the gunner alone to carry. Therefore, extra belts were distributed to the other team members.

Caulder ripped open the Velcro on an outside pouch of his ruck to reveal an ammo belt neatly folded within. Buck nodded approval. “Caulder, you put my anal retentive homo cousin to shame.”

“You’re welcome, Buck.”

Buddha Ortiz opened the top of his pack to display a belt stuffed in on top of his breaching gear. Buckley grinned. “Buddha, no one can stuff a car, a burrito, or a bag like your people.”

“It’s our national tradition.”

Caulder indicated the belt in Ortiz’s gear. “I got room. I can carry those rounds.”

Buddha went all defensive, suspecting Caulder’s offer had to do with his having discovered Buddha shooting up his knee with cortisone. “You wanna tell me something, Alex?”

“Nah, Buddha. You’re just carrying a lot of breaching shit too is all.”

“Well, I can carry my own shit and a few extra rounds. Okay?”

“No problemo.”

Caulder zipped up his pack. Buddha walked away, taking effort to conceal his limp.

Buck’s voice rose in annoyance from another sector of the warehouse where he stood over Chase and Fishbait after making the same demand of them: *Show me them extra rounds.*

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Buck exclaimed.

Ghetto fumbled inside his pack. “It’s in here. Give me a sec.”

Buck pointed his finger at him like it was a gun. “Bang! We’re all dead. Fish, wanna explain the point of carrying extra rounds for Professor Harvard?”

“Heavy weapons eat up a lot of ammo—” Fishbait began.

Chase cut him off. “So we each carry extra. I got it.”

Buck was still pissed. "If you knew, you'd stick those rounds someplace where you or I could get to 'em quick. Because while we're unpacking your picnic basket, everyone else is wondering why the hell there's no cover fire."

Chase had had enough. He got in Buckley's face. "I got your rounds right here, motherfucker."

He thrust the ammo belt above his head and rattled it. Buck grinned, shook his *Miami Vice* head of wavy hair, and moved on.

Caulder joined Chase and Fishbait. "He's testing you," he said to Ghetto.

Chase was hot. "No shit."

"It's not about the rounds, Ghetto. It's about this..." He tapped his forehead. "It's about ... whether you can keep it together. You're in the pros now, bro."

Chase got it. Every man's life in the team depended upon every other man, and all that other business about there being no room for error. Ghetto was working on it, he really was. The last thing he wanted to do was fuck up. Chase hadn't known Taggart, but he knew Taggart didn't tolerate fuck-ups. Neither would Bear.

"A little advice," Caulder offered diplomatically. "Just fold the belt up and stick it in your outside pouch. That's how we do it here."

The SEALs were ready to rumble by the time a dingy cargo truck pulled up and stopped outside the warehouse. The morning sun shined on SEALs in full battle rattle, including weapons, as they streamed out the warehouse doors and packed onto the truck like puppies. Support and add-ons boosted their numbers to over two dozen. Caulder climbed up the back of the vehicle and turned to offer Ortiz a hand up. Buddha looked him up and down, bemused and again somewhat annoyed. Like Caulder thought he was a cripple or something?

"Thanks. I can manage."

Ortiz boarded and scooted in beside Caulder on the side bench. Buck and Fishbait, followed by Chase, jumped in and found seats among their team and the other team.

"Hey, what's Harvard pussy like?" Buckley needled Chase in an effort to lighten up things and make amends for his earlier attitude.

Chase was learning to go along with the bullshit by dishing it out himself. "Not bad. Speaks three or four languages, does advanced calculus."

"Yeah? Well, you'll have to fill us in over tea and biscuits."

"Sure. I make a damn fine Earl Grey."

"Bet you do." Buckley turned to Fishbait to explain. "That's fancy tea, Fish, in case you're wondering."

"Tea I know. It comes with this," he said and gave Buck the finger

All the bullshit and banter relaxed them for what lay ahead. Soon, the truck was boarded and loaded. Bear Graves activated movement by speaking into his radio. "Foxtrot Delta is en route to ORP."

Cargo doors slammed, shutting out daylight and encasing the now-silent SEALs in the dark. It was a go. They were on the move.

Chapter 72

Nigeria

Akmal had remarked on the flight from Qatar that he believed reason was anathema to the average Boko Haram fighter, who understood only force and violence and the raping and kidnapping and peddling of young girls and women on the slave market. The United Nations and the United States in listing Boko Haram a terrorist organization declared it the world's most violent and unpredictable. In Michael Nasry's opinion, all these negative traits were well represented in the ugly giant Quayum, who had been sent to barter the price for the hostage Richard Taggart.

The tea vendor at the roadside fruit and vegetable stand café refilled cups of tea three or four times at the table of the two foreigners and the scary-looking African, who had finally seated himself as the dickering continued. Akmal and Michael seethed at Quayum's intransigence. Michael, however, was better equipped temperamentally to handle him. He attempted to reason with the hardheaded BH representative.

"I understand your desire to maximize the purchase price," he remonstrated. "But your organization swore allegiance to mine. And we had an agreement. Five million dollars."

"Ten," Quayum stubbornly insisted.

Akmal, his patience burning thin, pointed out to Quayum that, "You proclaim to follow the Quran. It says we do not outbid each other, or turn away from each other, or outsell each other. We are to be servants of Allah as brothers. We should act like it."

"The Quran? Allah?" Quayum retorted. "What do they have to do with this? This is business."

To Akmal's surprise, Michael unexpectedly changed strategies and gave in to Quayum's demands. "I will agree to your price."

Akmal frowned at him. What the hell was Michael thinking? Michael gave him a sly look up through his brow. Never mind, the look said.

Quayum grinned broadly in triumph. The grin vanished when Michael dropped the other shoe onto the bargain. "If I see the SEAL first," he said.

Quayum glared. "Impossible."

"Nothing is impossible. I see the SEAL or no deal."

The giant thought about it. Sensing a big payday, he pulled out his cell phone to dial Aabid for instructions. Michael laid a hand across the phone's screen.

"No calls," he cautioned, rolling his eyes toward the sky. "The Americans will pick it up. Take me to him."

Michael Nasry, Akmal, and their four Chechen gunmen in their blue rented SUV trailed the Humvee carrying Quayum and his contingent along narrow dusty roads deep in the Nigerian forest. Michael had assumed a smug, self-satisfied smile that played around the edges of his mouth, like a Cheshire cat keeping a secret. He leaned forward from the backseat to peer out the dusty windshield past the driver and his front seat passengers to the plume of dust ahead. He chuckled to himself.

Such cheerfulness in the deal Michael had struck with the BH savage puzzled Akmal. Emir al-Muttaqi would scarcely be pleased.

“The emir didn’t authorize ten million dollars,” he carped.

“Those assholes up there don’t know that.”

Michael twisted his head to look out the back window, an invitation for Akmal to do likewise. Akmal’s eyes widened when he spotted two other SUVs trailing them in distant dust. Presumably, judging by the smile on Michael’s face, they were full up with other Chechen fighters. Michael had never intended to pay ten million for the SEAL. Nor even five. Apparently, he had made his own Chechen deal.

“What are you doing, Michael?” Akmal cried.

“What you did with your commanding officer. What needs to be done.”

The impact of what Michael planned struck Akmal numb. “The emir—?” he finally stammered.

“Let me worry about the emir. I have his blessing. Are you with me?”

Akmal hesitated. The faint hint of a smile lingered on Michael’s narrow face. “The correct answer,” he said, “is, ‘Yes, Michael, I’m with you.’”

The American’s smile spread into low, growling laughter. “No turning back now,” he exclaimed with barely contained excitement.

Chapter 73

Nigeria

Three groups of vehicles traveling two different jungle roads were on an intersecting destination that could only end in a clash. Quayum’s Humvee with his fighters spearheaded directly toward Aabid’s headquarters in the abandoned village south of the refinery, whose officials and workers were so intimidated that they provided cheap fuel for Boko Haram vehicles and kept their mouths shut about what went on in the region. Or so Aabid thought. The refinery had never really been a practical sanctuary option for the escaping hostages in Aabid’s custody.

Michael Nasry commanded the second convoy of three SUVs—the lead vehicle occupied by Nasry, Akmal, and four Chechen gunmen and, a mile back, two other SUVs loaded with Chechen fighters. Quayum’s Humvee and Nasry’s SUV kicked up such clouds of dust on the road that the trailing Chechen vehicles went completely unnoticed by the Boko Haram contingent.

On a different jungle road bound for the same destination, the cargo truck packed with heavily armed SEALs eased up to a roving Nigerian police checkpoint. Two officers in green uniforms and armed with Chinese-manufactured AK-47 assault rifles piled out of their marked Range Rover and stepped cautiously out onto the road to block the truck. Their caution was not without justification. Just two weeks ago, Boko Haram Islamic extremists attacked and overran a remote military/police base near Maiduguri in the northeast, killing and wounding at least thirteen before the surviving soldiers and cops fled from the superior firepower.

One cop at the checkpoint was a tall, thin official in his late forties, the other younger by twenty years and shorter by several inches. They coughed and flapped their hands at the dust cloud that enveloped them from the braking truck.

In-country roving checkpoints posed a common inconvenience for travelers. Never stationary for long, they changed locations frequently in attempts to keep smugglers and poachers off-balance. Inside the cargo truck, the Nigerian CIA asset driver traded an anxious look with his African American CIA handler.

The senior cop hopped up on the running board to tap the muzzle of his rifle against the glass. The truck driver put on a friendly face and rolled down the window.

“Good day, officer.”

The younger, more nervous policeman remained standing in the road to keep a wary eye on the truck’s two passengers, his weapon at the ready.

“Where are you heading?” the senior officer asked in heavily accented English. Although most Nigerians spoke English as a common language, not all spoke it well.

The driver supplied his rehearsed cover story. “Cocoa factory.”

“So what is in the truck?”

“Bags. For the beans.”

The official eyed the driver shrewdly, making his assessment of possibilities. “You are aware there is a toll?”

“No.” Then he added quickly: “But I can pay it. How much?”

The officer grinned. “How much do you have?”

Nothing got done without palms being greased.

The driver pulled out his wallet. The other cop on the road tipped the muzzle of his rifle upward to cover the cab’s occupants. The driver showed his hands with the wallet in them.

“Him too,” the senior cop directed, indicating the passenger.

The CIA handler obligingly extracted a thick roll of currency from his pocket, which inadvertently included US bills. The agent had just yesterday entered the country. The cop’s face turned suspicious.

“American dollars?”

Thinking fast, the driver attempted to explain. “He is with the shipping company. Just came off the boat. From America.”

The officer wasn’t buying it, not right away anyhow. He stepped down from the running board and pointed his rifle. “Out! Both of you.”

Tension built inside the enclosed cargo compartment as the SEALs overheard the exchange. Each man remained perfectly still, except for hands creeping onto their weapons. Caulder shook his head in exasperation. Held up by a couple of backwoods cops. *Fucked up.*

The driver immediately obeyed and jumped down to the road. The black American scooted across the seat and got out behind him. Both men stood at the side of the truck with their hands lifted.

“Officer, what is the problem?” the driver asked, striving to sound and appear as relaxed as a man could with guns pointed at him.

As the older cop frisked the driver for weapons and contraband, he caught the anxious, inadvertent glance the man cast toward the back of the truck.

"Ka sa ido a kansa," he said to his partner in their native Hausa dialect, and jabbed his rifle at the other man, the passenger. Keep an eye on him.

The junior officer stepped forward, his finger on the trigger of his rifle. The senior officer nudged the driver with his weapon. "Open the back," he demanded.

"Officer—"

"I said open it."

That left the driver no choice. These cops, corrupt or not, meant business. The CIA man stood on the road, held in place at gunpoint, while the senior cop marched the driver to the back of the truck to unlock the double door. SEALs inside the cargo bay heard footsteps crunching on the road and got ready to confront a crisis. Killing these cops would cause an international incident. Not handling them, killing them if necessary, meant the mission failed.

The nervous driver keyed open the lock, making as much noise as he could to alert the men inside as well as to help cover any noise they made. He looked back at the officer for further instructions. The cop motioned with his rifle for him to open it. His rifle barrel lowered momentarily as the driver in one brisk movement swung the doors wide.

Daylight flooded the compartment, revealing what must have seemed to the stunned police officer an entire army with an arsenal of weapons all aimed directly at him. Bear Graves's eyes bore into the policeman's. He placed a finger to his lips. *Shhhh.*

Up front by the driver's door, the rookie cop who held the CIA handler at gunpoint was unable to see what was going on with his superior at the rear of the truck. The long quiet made him uncertain. He craned his neck, but he still couldn't make out anything without leaving his prisoner.

He was so preoccupied with the back of the truck that he failed to notice Caulder, who had crept around the front of the cab behind him. The muzzle of Caulder's H&K tapped him gently behind the ear. He froze, his eyes and mouth popping wide in an expression so comical that the black CIA spook burst out laughing. Crisis averted.

Chapter 74

Nigeria

The cargo truck granny-gear down a secluded dirt road that erosion had gutted into deep ruts. It pulled off into a grassy clearing surrounded by forest giants and cut the engine. SEALs and support emptied into the ORP, or objective rally point. A flock of green parrots took flight while a troop of outraged monkeys hurled excrement at selected targets.

The CIA handler and his asset remained inside the truck to keep armed watch over the two policemen from the checkpoint, who were now firmly hog-tied and out of commission until the mission was over. Team Leader Bear Graves got with the other team leader tapped for the op to coordinate with field tech support people

running combat control, comm, medical aid, ISR, Intel, and other essential functions, most of whom would set up shop inside the truck.

Afterward, Graves cut across the clearing to where Caulder and the others gathered underneath the spreading arms of a baobab tree to do stretches, inspect gear and weapons for the last time, and perform superstitious rituals they believed might keep them from harm. Bear would say a quick prayer—not now but later, just before the team went into combat mode and headed for the village where, hopefully, they would find and rescue Taggart and the others.

“Soft timeline is to start infil at midnight,” he informed them. “Be ready.”

The sun still rode high, just off its zenith. Operators had plenty of time to rest up and catch a few Zs before launch time.

Bear moved on, checking and rechecking every detail, as was his habit. He and the other team leader, an angular senior chief with the unlikely nickname Mule, who, in fact, possessed that animal’s particular stubborn temperament, were going over a topo map when his radio chirped. It was their ISR platform, an AC-130 Gunship.

“Foxtrot Delta One, this is Reaper Two-Two. Be advised four-vehicle package moving north on north-south dirt road. Appears to be heading toward target compound.”

An Air Force combat controller looking for Bear rushed up with a Rover, a small portable laptop device with a thick antenna that provided a relay from Mission Control’s downlink with the ISR platform flying overhead at the edge of space. Bear watched two vehicles on the screen approach the village. Two other vehicles appeared to be following the first two, but at a distance so they wouldn’t be noticed.

“Roger that, Reaper Two-Two,” Graves radioed. “I see them. Stay with the vehicles until they’re clear of the target compound.”

Caulder joined Graves at the Rover screen. They watched the first two autos, one of which appeared to be a medium-size truck such as a Humvee, the other an SUV-type, until they disappeared underneath thick foliage that surrounded the abandoned village. Shortly thereafter, the two trailing vehicles, which on the screen looked to be either SUVs or Land Rovers, also passed out of sight in the trees. Graves and Caulder waited expectantly for the vehicles to reemerge on the uncovered section of road past the compound.

Minutes passed. Graves’s jaw ached from gritting his teeth. Caulder rammed his fists deep into the pockets of his field cammies, his body rigid. Something was undoubtedly going down, but the SEALs had no way of knowing what until it actually happened.

The rest of the team congregated at the Rover, including Mule and his men. Everyone in the clearing was now aware that the equation and mission might be about to change. Murphy’s Law.

Then again, the four trucks might be merely delivering supplies and reinforcements. One factor, however, made that highly unlikely in Bear’s mind: the two trail vehicles were not with the first two and seemed to be surreptitiously tailing them.

“Hey, do you still have them?” Bear radioed.

“Negative. We lost them when they reached the target area.”

Graves and Caulder locked eyes. Fuck. This didn't look good.

"Might not be anything," Buddha suggested hopefully.

"Or it could be a kill team moving in to take out the hostages," Caulder speculated.

Graves stuck to the radio. "Reaper Two-Two, Foxtrot Delta One. Any SIGINT or radio chatter over the target?"

"Negative. Whoever it is, they're keeping quiet."

Bear Graves felt torn between either acting now—it was his call—or the possibility of not pushing hard enough fast enough. A thin line of decision and indecision separated the two choices. He mustn't let the fact that this was all about Taggart influence him.

Caulder had already made up his mind. "Bear, we gotta go now. Or they'll be gone."

"We're going in blind," Fishbait pointed out. "In daylight. With zero tactical advantage."

The rest of the team along with Mule's team waited, staring at the Rover screen as though by their intensity they might make something happen.

"Bear?" Ortiz said in a hushed voice as excruciating minutes ticked by. "Bear, it's what we came for—for Rip, for the girls."

Graves nodded, as much for his own benefit and the war that waged inside himself as for the benefit of the others. There was no clear answer. There often wasn't in this business. He pushed away from the Rover and looked around at the grim faces of the other SEALs gathered around waiting for his decision.

"We're going in," he announced. *"Now."*

Chapter 75

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Rip Taggart hung unconscious from the cross in the village square, among the huts and sagging fences and wrecked car hulls and debris of a community that had died and its corpse reanimated but never brought quite back to life. The boy soldier Felix and a number of other Boko Haram loitered about in the wreckage like cockroaches in a deserted house. Some of them chewed khat to alleviate their existence, others napped in the shade of the hovels or sat entertained by the SEAL's ordeal, watching him slowly die. For this infidel, as for all infidels, there would be no seventy-two virgins in Paradise. Allah would surely send him to Hell.

In the afternoon when the sun was at its hottest, Felix and a few other ragtag fighters upon Aabid's orders hacked through the SEAL's bindings and let him fall to the ground. Felix and one of the others each grabbed a leg and dragged Rip across the square to the detention hut and dropped him inside with barely a glance at Na'omi and her three frightened little girls.

As soon as the guards were gone, Na'omi ran to Rip with a cry of distress, thinking him dead or dying. Their captors no longer bothered to lock the rebar

door that divided the hut. She dropped at Rip's side and cradled his head in her arms, crying softly from relief to discover that he lived. Esther brought a gourd of stagnant water from which Na'omi washed his sunburned face and helped him drink. She shook him gently in a desperate attempt to revive him.

"Wake up, Richard, wake up!"

Abruptly, Rip inhaled mightily and tried to sit up. "The girls?"

She rested a calming hand on his chest. "They're here," she said. "They're safe."

Little Esther brought more water and sat on Rip's other side clasping his hand.

Vehicles suddenly arrived in the square, engines gunning. Na'omi stiffened. "*Listen!*"

Rip attempted to concentrate as car doors opened and slammed and the square bustled with activity and excitement. He heard voices raised and orders barked. Booted feet raced about. He forced himself to his feet with the help of Na'omi and Esther. Blood- and sweat-stained, his energy sapped and his heart racing from deprivation and exposure, he nonetheless remained resolute to resist the best he could to protect this woman and her little girls.

They heard men approaching and glimpsed movement outside through cracks in the hut's walls. The door opened and Aabid's long-limbed form stood in the doorway silhouetted against the sun.

"Your new owners have arrived," he announced.

Chapter 76

Nigeria

For Bear Graves, there was something eerie about the way things were going down. The discarded village lay on a little-used road with a cutoff to the oil refinery. The main route continued on through and past the village into the virtually unpopulated interior dominated by the Okomu National Park. Nothing about the abandoned village should have attracted traffic—unless visitors had specific business with Boko Haram.

That was what troubled Bear. The first two vehicles—the SUV and what appeared to be a Humvee—were barreling straight to the village when they inexplicably vanished from ISR view and failed to reappear on the road leading out. Same thing for the other two vehicles that appeared to be tracking the first two from a distance. They also vanished beneath jungle canopy. Whatever was going on, Bear was willing to bet a month's pay that it had something to do with Rip Taggart and the other hostages—and it wasn't for their betterment.

Unlike conventional armies that relied upon numbers and force of weaponry, US SpecOps depended upon the stealth, surprise, and striking power of small, highly trained, and resourceful bands to conduct specialized warfare close-up and dirty. White Squadron SEALs saddled up and immediately fragmented into two attack elements as they departed the ORP in order to close on Boko Haram from separate quadrants that provided an interlock of overwatch and mutual security. Senior

Chief Mule and his team would circle wide and come in from the left flank while Bear and his team took a fast, straight-in approach. The truck and most support remained camouflaged on-site at the ORP, with the exception of pararescuemen and a few other vital assets. Medevac helicopters stood by on-call at the warehouse staging area outside Lagos with the acquiescence of the Nigerian government.

Broad daylight provided less than optimum conditions for maneuvering on an enemy. SEALs normally are night fighters, but the approach of the mystery vehicles and the possibility of their being a hostage kill team had persuaded Senior Chief Graves to act promptly. He hustled his team cross-country through rugged terrain furred with tropical rain forest and gashed by gullies and tumbling streams. Caulder took first point on a tactical southeasterly azimuth calculated to break the team out on the village outskirts in about two hours. Senior Chief Mule and his element would be arriving shortly thereafter on the flank prepared to cover in the assault.

Team members required little urging to keep up the pace. This might be their last and only chance at rescuing their former troop leader. As the team scrambled up the brushy side of a ravine, Buddha Ortiz's injured knee gave way and he slipped and fell.

"Motherfu—"

Graves glanced back, concerned. Buddha sprang to his feet.

"I'm good."

Caulder on point shot up a hand and called a listening halt. He thought he heard gunfire in the distance, but soon concluded it must be monkeys foraging in the trees and the roar of a nearby waterfall. The forced march continued.

On another listening halt, Caulder looked around. "Where's Chase?"

"On your one," Fishbait said. He nodded to where the SEAL running flank stood frozen almost in midstride at the top lip of a ravine.

Chase recovered and signaled for patrol leader up. Bear Graves made his way forward while Chase remained riveted to a horrific sight he had come upon. A dead, partly-decomposed African man, noose around his neck, hung from a tree branch ten feet off the ground. He had been stripped naked and both hands chopped off. Below at his feet in a single scorched pile lay the charred remains of a woman and two small children who appeared to have been burned alive.

Since this area largely lacked population, it was Bear's guess that the man may have been an employee of the nearby refinery who had somehow gotten crosswise of the local Boko Haram cell and been left here with his family like so much discarded spoiled meat as a warning. Carrion eaters and insects squabbled over what was left.

Chase's stomach roiled with revulsion, disgust, and rage at the young SEAL's first actual face-to-face encounter with the atrocities for which the world's terrorists were capable. Harvard had not prepared him for anything like *this*. It struck him with awful clarity why his teammates might be so cavalier about killing Jihadists. A hand squeezed Ghetto's shoulder. "Gotta keep moving," Buckley said gently. "Bastards have gotta pay for this."

You got that right, Chase thought as they moved on. Buckley cut a last look at the grisly scene before he fell back into patrol formation.

As Bear's team neared the outskirts of the abandoned village, whose rusted and damaged rooftops became visible through the forest, he set an overwatch element. Half the team "leapfrogged" forward while the other half held and covered. Cover then leapfrogged forward and through the first froggers, who held cover. This maneuver continued until contact or an enemy area was cleared.

Caulder and Graves exchanged meaningful looks. Things were too damned quiet. The village materializing ahead appeared to be as it was advertised—abandoned. Graves sorted through several possibilities: the terrorists had gotten wind of their presence and fled with the hostages; the terrorists had murdered the hostages and fled; terrorists had not been here in the first place; or a trap was being laid. Whichever it was, the four vehicles that had seemingly vanished as they converged on the village had to be at the crux of it.

As tension mounted, leaves and twigs crunching underneath advancing boots echoed in the stillness. Bear Graves looked stressed, tense, angry. Ortiz wore his game face. Chase was unable to rid himself of the image of the slaughtered family left as carrion. A large bird flitting from a nearby tree startled him. He fell into a crouch, weapon snapping to the ready. *Fucking bird.*

The bird had also rattled Buckley and Fishbait. They grinned at Chase and shook their heads in self-deprecation.

At the edge of the village where the forest fell back, Buckley leapfrogging on flank came upon what looked to be a fresh grave. Cautiously, amped up and ready with his weapon charged, he approached the first hut. He stepped over a fallen tree trunk and froze. There at his feet in the weeds sprawled a dead African with a number of bullet holes in his back. They were fresh wounds and still draining blood. The man wore the mixed uniform of a Boko Haram fighter.

Nearby, Buddha Ortiz came upon another Boko Haram fighter shot dead. To his twelve, Alex Caulder slipped past a tree and stopped. He caught Graves's attention and motioned downward with his eyes to a skinny kid lying face up in the grass. He had been shot through the back with exit wounds coming out the front of his tunic. His mouth hung agape, leaking fluids, his vacant eyes gazing up into the trees. His rifle lay unfired at his side.

What the fuck had happened here?

These men had died within the past hour or so. By the looks of things, death had caught them completely unaware, by surprise. Thick foliage and distance had absorbed the banging of rifles other than at that one point when Caulder thought he heard gunshots. It would probably have all been over within a minute or two at most. Call it planned treachery and assassinations.

A vehicle engine sparking to life on the other side of the village disturbed the stillness. *Shit!* Graves threw Caulder a Go! The band of SEALs in fire team battle formation charged out of the trees and into the village for what Graves feared might be a last-ditch effort to rescue their former team leader—or to recover what was left of him.

Chapter 77

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

Bear Graves had no time to waste waiting for Senior Chief Mule's team to arrive on his flank and get into position to assist. All he could do was coordinate Mule's eventual participation by radio while his own team stormed posthaste into the village. As his operators spread out through the outermost huts and shacks, he signaled Buckley to drop back with his 7.62 heavy machine gun to cover the advance.

Several more bloodied bodies lay strewn among the buildings. A single shot cracked from ahead. A giant of a man armed with a crossbow went down execution style with a bullet through his cranium moments before a blue SUV roared out of Dodge from the opposite end of the village, headed out on the road that led deeper into the park. Graves caught only flashes of it between huts before it was gone in a tornado of dust. He was unable to tell anything about passengers or how many there were.

Graves observed the crossbow man's executioner and a number of other fighters assembling in a stay-behind force to cover the SUV's escape. That meant a VIP or possible HVT was about to get away. But there was little he and his men could do about it now. They had their hands full.

The foreign-looking fighters gathered around a pair of dark SUV vehicles to block the pathway through a clutch of buildings. They were garbed out in what Graves took to be surplus US camouflage BDUs. Even more astonishing, they were not Africans, but looked probably Eastern European. They seemed as surprised to see the SEALs as the SEALs were to see them. One of the men yelled something in Russian and ducked behind the driver's door of the lead vehicle. He swung his rifle toward the SEALs. Fishbait picked him off with a single bullet through the head.

His comrades dived for cover behind and underneath the two vehicles and opened up on the SEALs with a fierce crescendo of automatic rifle fire. Graves and his troops scattered for cover among the huts and rusted car bodies and returned fire for fire. Tracers crisscrossed between the SUVs and the abandoned hovels and shacks. Ghetto Chase plucked off one of the enemy soldiers as bullets thumped into wood, metal, and thatch and spanged off vehicles to ricochet with keening whines into the sky.

Graves went for his radio, shouting into it to be heard above the deafening bedlam of battle. "This is Foxtrot Delta One. We are troops in contact."

Having seen these fighters and heard them shouting in Russian, Bear had no further doubt about who these mystery troops were. It all added up—outmoded surplus BDUs, Caucasians, speaking Russian... They were Chechens. Bear had run up against them in Afghanistan where they fought as allies with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. They had also been found fighting with ISIS in Syria and Iraq, in Africa, and elsewhere on the wrong side of the War on Terror. Rip Taggart had compared Chechens to Viet Cong guerrillas fought by US troops during the Vietnam War. They were a different breed, he said.

"They fight till they die. They have more passion, more discipline, and less regard for life. They will transplant anywhere. I don't think they ever eat or that

they're clear as to why they fight. They fight most of the time, anytime, anywhere. It's like a fire in their bellies."

What surprised Bear most was finding them in Africa fighting Boko Haram, both of whom were ostensibly allies of ISIS and each other. He knew it wasn't because the Chechens had turned righteous, that they were in Africa to wipe out this one particular Boko Haram cell. Treachery was somehow involved.

The catalyst seemed to be Rip Taggart, or perhaps one or all of the other hostages. What else could it be? And if they came to seize Taggart from Boko Haram, what did they want with him? Unlike the relatively unsophisticated Jihadists of Boko Haram, they must know the United States never paid ransom.

The escaping SUV concerned Bear and made it imperative that he and his team locate Taggart with haste. But first they had to deal with the Chechens.

The Chechens were skilled warriors. Each side in the fight jockeyed for an advantage to defeat and kill the other. It was run-and-dodge fighting, a chess game played with life and death in the balance, with everything geared up by adrenaline and testosterone. Each passing second could deliver a man's final breath.

The deep coughing of a heavy Chechen machine gun erupted from a hut next to the cornered SUVs, its muzzle flickering and flashing from within the hut's dim depths. Buckley crawled up along the side of a building and pumped a fifty-round burst into the hut. The Chechen continued pouring out lead to pin down Fishbait in an old sewage drainage ditch.

Seeking to gain a better angle, Buck swept up his machine gun and dashed across an opening between two huts. The enemy gunner tracked him across the open with a cone of fire. Buck went to ground, skidding in behind a pile of mud bricks.

Several Chechens had spread out into the village to bring the fight to the SEALs one on one. One of them heaved a grenade at Graves and Caulder as they jockeyed for position against the fighters at the SUVs. The two SEALs hit the dirt behind a hut just as the little hand bomb detonated with an eardrum-busting Cra-a-a-ck! The explosion tore out one side of the bungalow and peppered the air with shrapnel and debris.

Uninjured, but with ears ringing, the two SEALs scuttled like lizards across the ground on their bellies to seek cover in a copse of gnarled fruit trees. Two Chechens pressed the matter and darted forward to the rusted hulk of a Toyota with its rubber rotted off and jacked up on its rims.

Lying flat on his belly among the fruit trees, Bear rolled over on one side where he could look underneath the carriage of the Toyota to see boots on the other side. A squeeze of his H&K's trigger blew a foot out from underneath its owner, dumping the man on the ground and exposing the full length of his body to Graves. He tapped a round underneath the abandoned car and into the Chechen's screaming head, exploding it like a pumpkin struck by a sledgehammer.

Caulder took care of the second Toyota Chechen the same way. He grinned at Bear. *These poor fuckers will never learn.*

The tempo of the fight quickly turned in favor of the SEALs. Buddha Ortiz dumped an enemy fighter and then, sprinting through a hail of bullets, dived through the open door of a hut that, by the smell, must have served as a barracks,

and which he hoped would give him an angle on the machine gunner who had Buck pinned down behind his pile of bricks.

That didn't work. The gunner switched from Buck to home in on Buddha. Fire chewed at Ortiz's hut, stinging his face with wood splinters. Pinned down himself, he hugged the floor.

Buddha's action relieved Buckley of attention and provided him the opportunity he needed. He switched cover from the brick pile to a hut nearer his target where he opened up on the machine gun. A shriek of pain from inside the house told him he had scored. The gun went dormant.

Buck's gun also fell quiet. Nearby, Chase assumed his teammate may have run out of ammo. He ripped open the Velcro on the outside pouch of his pack where Caulder had advised him to store extra ammo and made a dash prepared to offer Buck a spare belt of 7.62. Buck, looking stunned, stood with his back against the outside wall of the building.

"You low on rounds?" Chase asked him, panting from exertion and excitement. This was worse than Monster Mash.

Buckley gave Chase a searching look. "Nah, I'm good."

He staggered back, clutching his side. "Ah, crap!"

That was when Chase saw blood seeping out between Buck's fingers. Buck crumpled to the ground, still hanging on to his weapon. A lucky round had found the opening between the SEAL's protective torso plates above his hip. Buck was lapsing into shock.

Buckley now lay fully exposed to the sonofabitch up-range who had shot him. Chase spotted the guy peeping around the corner of a nearby building trying to get a second shot at Buck to finish him off. Chase snap-fired. The shooter went down hard and final.

Now in the clear, the FNG darted from cover into the open and dragged Buckley behind the hut. "Man down! Behind southwest building!" he radioed through his helmet mike.

Having secured the wounded SEAL, Chase scooped up Buck's machine gun and hustled to the corner of the hut to resume Buck's cover position. He opened up on his first available target—a Chechen running from the hut where Buck had killed the previous gunner. This guy had apparently gone in the back door and recovered the dead man's heavy weapon. He avoided Chase's fire and ducked behind the first of the two bullet-riddled SUVs.

On the other flank, Ortiz was ready for him. He released a 40mm round from his H&K M320 GLM. The grenade hissed across the abandoned village and through the sagging open door of the SUV behind which the Chechen had gone to ground. The white-hot explosion hurled the Chechen soldier's body out from hiding. He was dead by the time he hit the ground.

The SEALs looked about for fresh targets as a sudden, eerie silence fell over the village. There was no immediate sign of further life other than Bear's team. Bloody corpses of Chechens killed by SEALs and Boko Haram fighters executed by Chechens lay strewn on the battlefield. The firefight was over. It had lasted less than five minutes.

Senior Chief Mule and his backup team arrived too late to get in on the action. Bear's team had suffered one casualty—Petty Officer Buck Buckley. An air force pararescueman, a PJ, accompanied Mule's SEALs.

Buck lapsed into semiconsciousness. The PJ removed his patient's protective plates and slit open his cammie jacket and trousers to expose bright blood gushing from a bullet wound low on the SEAL's side just above his hip. The wound was bad; the aorta may have been severed.

"You see an exit wound?" the PJ asked Ortiz as he applied a field pressure bandage.

Buddha quickly inspected the rest of Buck's body. "Negative."

Buck went into convulsions, coughing violently and spraying Buddha with blood.

Chapter 78

Abandoned Village, Nigeria

The abandoned village was now definitely abandoned, except for the temporary presence of the SEALs and the eternal occupancy of the ghosts of those who died here today. SEALs rushed hut to hut to secure the area. They found food and weapons and fuel and items of clothing stored in some of the huts, along with bedding and personal items. One of the huts containing prayer rugs and a few copies of the Quran apparently served as a mosque. A flatbed truck and a Humvee were parked near what appeared to have been a HQ of some sort and the residence of a warlord. There was little else that might have transformed this village into a real home. It had simply been the temporary base of bloodthirsty and cruel terrorists that needed to be wiped completely off the map. Senior Chief Mule suggested they burn it to the ground when they left.

Alex Caulder discovered the holding cell. The first thing he saw when he entered the hut was the corpse of a large, long-limbed African male wearing the makeshift Boko Haram uniform, slumped against the wall just inside the door. A machete lay on the floor next to him. Like the others, he appeared to have been taken by surprise and executed.

Aabid the Boko Haram warlord and terrorist was full of bullet holes, having died in violence the way he lived.

Signs of occupancy confirmed that a number of people had been confined for quite some time—water gourds, bits of cloth, small bare footprints on the dirt floor that must have been made by the seized schoolgirls, larger adult prints of at least five adults.

Caulder went to the door and called out to Graves. "No hostages."

Bear feared that hostages may have been passengers in the SUV when it sped out of the village. There was no way to know if Rip was among them. Nor, if he had been, why he had been taken and for what nefarious purpose was he being kept alive. It was a mystery with no foreseeable hopes of solving it.

The large wooden cross in the courtyard with bloody tethers hanging from it was still another mystery. Obviously someone had been hung on it and tortured, perhaps in some kind of bizarre reenactment of Christ on the cross. But this was not Calvary and Rip was not Jesus. If he died on that cross, which seemed one possibility, he was not apt to rise again from the tomb.

Gloomy and disappointed, Graves and Caulder made their way back to where the PJ was working on Buckley. Gone was the twist of Buck's lips that gave him the appearance of a hipster vice cop. His dark wavy hair was crusted with dirt, sweat, and blood. He looked pale and lifeless, unmoving, the bandages around his torso soaked in blood. The rest of the team gathered at his side.

"How bad?" Graves asked the PJ.

"Is he bleeding out?" Ortiz asked.

The PJ drew a deep breath and nodded grimly. "Hit between the plates, tension pneumothorax, internal bleeding. He's urgent surgical."

Graves felt gut-punched. He stepped away and got on the radio to Mission Control. "This is Foxtrot Delta One. Execute QRF. We need immediate CASEVAC. Single, Cat Alpha, urgent surgical."

Category Alpha meant Buck might be dying, would in fact die unless he received definitive care soon.

After a break, Bear added, "This is Delta Foxtrot One. Target secure. We have a dry hole. Commence SSF."

Buck hung on by one heartbeat after another until, with relief, his comrades heard the thrashing rotors of the approaching Black Hawk medevac kept on-call at the warehouse staging area. Graves, Caulder, Chase, and Ortiz, one on each corner of a poncho, carried their critically-wounded teammate to the village square where Fishbait marked the LZ with a discarded shirt and was hand-signaling the bird in on it.

Structures surrounding the square and the cross in the center of the small clearing prevented the chopper's touching down. It hovered in a swirling cloud of dust as a gurney at the end of a cable descended from the aircraft's open door. The PJ along with Caulder and Chase worked quickly to secure Buck to it.

Bear Graves stood by while he felt his thoughts haunted by the sermon Pastor Adams delivered last Sunday before Bear received his 999999. They were words spoken by prophets of the Old Testament.

"The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the Earth..."

Once Buck was secured on the gurney, Caulder and Chase stepped away to allow him to be winched up into the belly of the black bird while the PJ hung on and rode up with him. Rotor wash like a wind before rain whipped their clothing and hair. *"...and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time."*

Buck's stricken teammates stared up at the gurney, taking what they feared might be their last look at their brother alive, each of them deeply affected.

"So the Lord said, I will wipe from the face of the Earth the human race I have created."

Graves couldn't help feeling guilty, as though it were he who had brought all this on in some way he could not quite understand.

“And with them the animals, the birds, and the creatures that move along the ground...”

He sensed Caulder watching him as he tried to deal with his own emotions of concern and grief for Buck and for Rip Taggart. Caulder edged over next to Graves, and the two SEALs together watched Buck disappear into the chopper with the PJ. They stood like that, heads uplifted, watching, until the Black Hawk rose and disappeared over the treetops and into the horizon.

“...for I regret that I have made them.”

