

## Prologue

*Lesson 1: Never question the boss*

*Lesson 2: Never question your orders*

*Lesson 3: Never ask why*

*Lesson 4: Any undesired physical contact justifies severe retaliation*

*Lesson 5: Always have an alternative escape route*

*Lesson 6: Always have a backup plan*

*Lesson 7: Never, ever get caught.*

*Lesson 8: Do whatever it takes to prevent a teammate from being captured*

*Lesson 9: If a teammate threatens the success of an assignment, you're authorized to neutralize the threat*

*Lesson 10: If, by some chance, you are taken alive, conversation with an enemy is only for the purpose of manipulation and divulging false information*

*Lesson 11: The successful completion of the mission is your first priority*

*Lesson 12: After the mission, your team is your primary concern*

*Lesson 13: Train as if the world depends on it, because it often does*

*Lesson 14: Complete the mission—or there will be severe consequences*

If we'd known what we were really signing up for, we all would've walked away.

## **PART I: AGENTS**

## Chapter 1

### Smash & Grab

"Dakota, what's your status?"

"*Shadowing the decoy,*" was the response through the tiny com device in my ear. "*He's headed to his car...should be there in sixty.*"

"Copy," I replied, eyeing the enemy operative shadowing the target.

Our man had just left home and was walking to work. My team and I knew his route after watching him the past week, and I'd positioned myself ahead of him.

Grabbing him while he was home wasn't an option, because there were too many enemy spies around that location. So, the best choice was to wait until the target left for work, because this meant they'd be spread out to avoid being easily detected.

Scanning the street filled with people, I took a breath and sorted the scents of exhaust, dust, and shwarmas.

Occasionally, a bus would pass, or a cart pulled by an emaciated horse or donkey. We were on the fringes of the city, so it wasn't completely packed with people, but there were still enough pedestrians for us to hide amongst.

"*Ranger has eyes on the second trooper,*" said a different voice. "*In position.*"

"*Bravo has transport ready,*" came a third.

I turned and started down the sidewalk, mingling with the crowd as the target continued to approach.

"All systems are a go," I replied. "Let's get this party started, boys."

"*Moving now,*" said Ranger.

The target ducked down a side street, a shortcut to his shop.

An enemy operative followed him, keeping a few leisurely strides behind. Obviously, he was dressed like a local to blend, but he was a spy alright. I know, because my team and I had the location of him and his unit's outpost.

We've been watching them also.

Strides behind the target and his escort, I stepped around the corner and silently snuck up behind the enemy spy. Before he had a chance to sense that anything was wrong, I wrapped one arm around his neck and clamped a hand over his mouth. With a sharp yank, I pulled him through an open doorway and into the building on the right.

"Target's shadow is removed," I said a few seconds later, leaving an unconscious operative slumped in a corner.

Exiting out the front of the building, I stepped onto the cracked sidewalk at the same time the target emerged from the alley. In my peripheral, I watched him stop and glance behind him.

*"The second trooper is down,"* replied Ranger.

*"The decoy is in the vehicle,"* said Dakota.

Upon seeing that his escort had vanished, the target did a full circle and became visibly anxious.

"Ready when you are Dakota."

*"Copy."*

Quetta, capital of the Baluchistan province, was one of the most violent cities in Pakistan. The Taliban, sectarian and separatist nationalist insurgents all operate in this area. So, what Dakota was about to do wouldn't be out of the ordinary...

A block away, a deafening bang cut over the general bustle of the morning, and a shockwave made the ground heave.

*"The decoy has been neutralized,"* reported Dakota.

While everyone else looked in the direction of the car bomb, I turned and faced the target. Even though I was dressed like a local, you don't need to speak words to convey your intent. Body language can say it all for you.

When the target looked at me, our gazes locked for a moment before I started towards him.

Eyes widening with fear, he spun and sprinted across the street.

*Too easy,* I thought.

"The target is on the move, southeast bound," I said, lifting into a run.

I kept directly behind the target as we raced along random, narrow alleys. Every time he glanced over his shoulder, I was there. I wasn't gaining ground on him, but I was doing so on purpose.

We'd been running a solid minute when I felt my stomach tighten and a chill trail down my spine. My gut was telling me the other enemy operatives in the area were closing in on our location.

I saw a glimpse of one in an intersecting alley as I flew by it. Pushing my legs faster, I leapt atop some crates beside a one-story structure. I was just clearing the retaining wall of the roof when the operative stepped into the alley.

Crouching, I crept to the far end of the roof and peered over the edge.

The target, in a passage a good forty feet ahead, stopped and turned when the spy called to him.

Glancing up, I spotted Ranger several roofs over, sprinting across the top of a building. When I saw he was headed for a cluster of tin-roofed shacks, I returned my attention to the spy now almost directly below me.

Out the corner of my eye, I saw Ranger leap into the air...and then drop out of sight. His disappearance was followed by a crash.

As planned, the noise drew the attention of the target and he turned his back to the spy.

Just as he was doing so, I jumped from the roof and landed right on the operative. I greatly appreciated what a soft landing he made.

He wasn't rendered entirely unconscious following the stunt, but a kick to the head remedied the problem. That task complete, I ran into the road teeing the alley. I could only imagine the expression on the target's face when he glanced back and saw his spy friend sprawled on the ground.

*"Target's heading east,"* reported Ranger seconds later.

At the next alley, I slid around the corner and cut right. It spit me out a mere twenty feet from our target.

He saw me, skidded to a stop, backpedaled and turned right.

"Bravo, go ahead and move out," I said, falling in behind the target again.

*"10-4, Cree. Bravo is en route..."*

Gaining ground with every stride now, I pulled out my collapsible baton, a bit of a task with all the clothing I was wearing.

By the time I did, I was nearly on top of the target. I saw a shadow at the next passage before its owner appeared, but I'd already sensed he was there.

The dirt alley allowed me to skid into a crouch. I took out the spy's knee with a swing of the baton and then smacked him in the face as he began to drop. One more swing and he was unconscious and slumped against the wall of a building.

I'm all for fancy moves and hand-to-hand combat because I do enjoy a bit of sport. But there are situations when "time is of the essence," and there's no time to play around. This was one of those moments, and today's task called for surprise and violence of action.

Falling back into stealth mode, I quietly caught up to the target and shadowed him.

He'd slackened his pace considerably. When he saw he was no longer being followed, he finally slowed to a walk. He must have thought another spy friend had taken care of his pursuer.

That was a dangerous assumption.

I stopped and took a watching position behind a cart sitting in the deep shadows of a dwelling.

*"I'm right above you, Cree,"* whispered Ranger.

At last, the target did what we'd been waiting for him to do: pull out his cell phone. It was issued to him by the CIA because he was an informant of theirs—an

informant who knew which people the Agency could trust within the current Pakistani government.

*"Ranger's in motion..."*

The target had the phone up to his ear when a noise at the far end of the narrow road made him turn. With his back to me, I slipped to the other side of the alley and entered a shack.

Sometimes you don't want your target to call backup or whoever they're working for. But in this case we did. The world of espionage is about smoke and mirrors, a game of deception. We wanted the Agency to know something was very wrong, for the psychological effect. Manipulating our enemies and getting inside their heads is a specialty of ours.

"Ready when you are, Ranger," I whispered, standing at a door.

*"Ten seconds..."*

"In ten." I glanced at my watch. "Go."

This was going to be good.

I heard our target speaking quietly on the phone as he continued down the road. When he was right in front of the door, I swung it open but remained hidden behind it. Thanks to a small window, I got to watch the rest of the show.

The target had turned and now stood staring at the empty doorway. A breath later, Ranger appeared out the shack behind him and tackled him through the door and into the room I was standing in.

As they crashed to the floor, I stepped into the alley and picked up the phone the target had dropped upon impact. Ending the call, I stepped back into the room and shut the door behind me.

Our target, a man by the name of Tariq, was dazed from his unexpected trip to the ground.

We had no lights on and the bright sun outside made the interior of our shack darker. We were just shadows to him.

"What is it you want?" he asked in Punjabi, the dialect of the Punjab province.

Our man wasn't originally from the Balochistan province, so it was no surprise he didn't speak Balochi; then again very few people did. Still, being a linguist, I'd brushed up on that dialect and was mildly disappointed I didn't get to use it.

Tariq sat there on the floor, sweating from the run and trembling with sheer terror.

Ranger grabbed him and firmly planted him in a rickety chair. Then he gagged him.

"What is it we want?" asked Ranger with a light South African accent.

He pulled a black cloth bag from under his garments and then leaned forward so he was face-to-face with Tariq. "To get you out of our way."

We knew Tariq spoke English because it was the second most common language in Pakistan. Plus we'd heard him use it himself.

"We can't have you continuing to supply information to the CIA about who's on their side in Pakistan's government," I added, laying on a South Wales accent, "That would ruin our other surprises."

With sweat running down his face, Tariq looked at us with wide eyes. He tried to speak through the gag and raised his hands, which we hadn't tied yet. He wasn't exactly a martial arts master, and his mind was overridden with fear at the moment. So he wasn't trying to plan an escape.

Regardless, as soon as he lifted them, I grabbed a couple fingers and bent his wrist at an odd angle. That ceased any further movement from him.

"Probably offering us information about the CIA," said Ranger coolly.

I released Tariq's fingers and then growled in his ear, "So glad to see your loyalty can be bought so cheaply."

Straightening, I stepped behind his chair.

"We already have all the information we need," said Ranger, pulling out his gun.

A visible shudder ran through Tariq.

"I thought you'd have learned from previous wars that the Agency doesn't take very good care of their informants," he continued with some contempt.

"Don't worry, Tariq," I added. "It'll all be over soon."

Ranger tossed me the black bag, and I yanked it over Tariq's head. Ranger then wracked the slide of the gun...and I beaned Tariq with the baton and knocked him unconscious.

There's nothing like being positive you're going to die when you're in enemy hands—only to wake up later to find yourself slumped in a booth at a bar in Costa Rica.

I know. It's happened to me before.

Ranger's faux grim demeanor fell away and he snorted a laugh as he holstered his gun.

Outside, we heard a vehicle pull up.

*"Somebody order a getaway car?"* asked Bravo.

I opened the door and there stood Bruce, aka Dakota.

"Hope you've been working out," I said to him.

It was a total joke because Bruce was a mountain of a man and thick as an oak.

At my words, he just rolled his eyes and grinned. Then he grabbed a sleeping Tariq and tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. In two strides, Bruce was out the door and at a nondescript van, which served as our secondary transport.

He threw Tariq inside before Nate, aka Ranger, and I climbed in. Bruce returned to the passenger's seat, with Bravo behind the wheel.

Everyone in place, we started for the nearest airfield. Our Agency informant had a one-way ticket to some island around Papua New Guinea.

I scratched my head, scalp itching from the wig of shaggy black hair I was wearing. I'd been dressed as a local male for this part of the assignment, and I wouldn't have blended well if I'd had my long auburn hair down for all to see. Colored contacts hid my blue eyes, and paint took care of my normally fair skin.

In the spy trade, the art of blending is an indispensable skill.

Nate would only admit under extreme torture that he has dressed as a woman for several Middle-East missions. However, there is something to be said about how many weapons you can conceal under a burka.

Tariq, situated between Nate and me, slouched against me. I shoved him away.

I don't know why our boss didn't just let us kill him, like we had the other informant. It was much more efficient.

The car bomb a few minutes earlier had served two purposes: to create a distraction and to remove another informer. He'd known the locations of weapons caches used by local militant groups. That was the type of information we needed to keep out of the hands of the CIA and the local military.

Speaking of the Agency, I also don't know why we couldn't simply ghost their team here in Quetta. We knew what apartment they were staying in, and even had their secondary location.

But the boss had said "we need them where they are."

We never question the boss, and we never ask why. Lessons One and Three.

If you hadn't noticed by now, we're not very nice people. But I don't care and don't exactly lose sleep over it.

Our organization is currently involved in a developing power struggle with Pakistan's current government, the Taliban, and the CIA.

Tariq isn't the first CIA informant in the area we'd snatched and won't be the last. In the following days, we'll do even more.

"I don't know about you, Nate," I said, awkwardly stretching my arms over my head, "but I do love a good smash-and-grab."

Nate allowed himself a devilish chuckle. "We're good, Leah."

I grinned. "We're good."

Nate and I fist-bumped.



*Ah, I thought as I rested my hands behind my head, I love my job.*

## **Chapter 2**

### **Pressure**

A muttered curse let them know he was on approach before he stormed into the cramped surveillance room.

"Does anyone have eyes on him yet?" asked Marshall Byrne, leader of the Agency team in Quetta.

"Nothing yet, sir," replied an agent sitting in front of a laptop. "Charlie and Delta are still tracking the GPS in the phone."

Marshall glanced at the monitor, which displayed a map of the city and a dot representing their informant. An uneasy feeling clenched his gut. The dot wasn't moving.

Nearly half an hour had passed since the car bomb and they'd lost sight of Tariq. It was confirmed Ali, another informant of theirs, was in the blast, and there was no question that he was dead; people don't come back from total incineration.

Neither Marshall's team nor any assets in the area had picked up chatter, or movements suggesting insurgent groups were planning such an event. But he already had a hunch about who was behind all of this chaos.

One agent who'd been ambushed by an unknown assailant had returned to the apartment. A second was just arriving: Jonathan Ross, Marshall's number-two guy, stepped into the room.

"Anything yet?" he asked, holding his head.

"Nothing..."

Marshall eyed Jonathan, feeling a bit guilty over the young agent's roughed up condition. "You alright?"

Putting one hand on the wall to keep himself steady, Jonathan rolled his stiff neck. All kinds of things popped.

"Yeah, just fine," he grunted.

Someone had actually jumped on top of him before kicking him in the head. The term "aerial assault" had a whole new meaning to him now.

*"Delta to hub, we've reached the GPS coordinates."*

One of the agents had a camera on them somewhere and was streaming live feed to a small flat screen on the rear wall.

With extreme caution, he opened a door and stepped into a large room. A second agent appeared at the opposite end. The only furniture was a wooden bed frame, ancient table, and a chair.

*"You getting this?"*

It took the camera a couple seconds to adjust as the agent stepped to the chair, in the middle of the room. Sitting on it was Tariq's phone and a set of plastic restraints.

Marshall dropped his head and resisted the strong urge to swear again.

It was just as he'd suspected: the same ghost organization who'd grabbed six other informants had just nabbed Tariq. They'd never see him again, unless they delivered his body on their doorstep.

The cell phone and restraints were this group's signature, as if to say "gotcha again! Better luck next time, suckers."

Whoever they were, they operated in total secrecy and stealth on a level Marshall had never seen. They were a threat to the Agency, to their plans, and threatened to undo all the progress they'd made so far.

They were also a threat to Marshall's job security. Or lack thereof.

Four of the six total informants snatched had been under his team's watchful eye. Right about now, his boss was probably wondering why he'd tapped Marshall for this assignment.

Marshall himself had experience and great tact in situations that required the utmost care and secrecy. He also had a natural talent for tracking, which came in handy whenever an asset went "off the reservation."

But he'd met his match with these unknown people. No one knew how many there were, or had the smallest idea about their identity. Clearly, they were covert intelligence, but who would have this kind of training?

Marshall rubbed his aching forehead. "Alright, let's make sure everyone is accounted for and then head out. We need to get back to Islamabad."

This operation wasn't about hunting a terrorist group. It was significantly bigger.

It involved a regime change, removing current authority figures and replacing them with people more easily manipulated, more willing to work with the US when it came to operations within Pakistan's borders. Of course, it was also next door to Afghanistan, which had obvious benefits.

But if Marshall couldn't hold things together, and if everything unraveled just because of this ghost organization...he was positive it was his head that was going to roll.

## Chapter 3

### Agents

I dodged the first jab, blocked the swing and promptly caught a boot in the stomach. Grunting, I deflected the left hook, ducked to the right and then elbowed him in the face.

My rival tried to grab me.

Pivoting, I shoved him away before we kicked each other and toppled to opposite ends of the living room.

Panting lightly, I pointed at my opponent, "You ripped your stitches."

Nate looked at his arm and rolled his eyes. "Not again."

The team had returned to Islamabad yesterday evening, and now we were waiting on the boss for our next orders. Waiting, waiting.

I'd actually managed a straight ninety minutes of sleep. I might've gotten in another thirty, but Nate apparently became bored while waiting for me to wake up and had wandered over to the couch to start poking me.

It didn't bother me, though. Neither of us gets more than two hours of sleep at a time anymore. Besides, I'd achieved swift retaliation by exploding awake and landing a two-booted kick to his stomach. Served him right and he should've known better.

Now for the past four hours we'd been sparring. It's something we do to pass time when we don't have books to read, aren't forming a plan of attack, or cleaning weapons.

Hand-to-hand combat is tiring work, but four hours is just a warm-up. Nate and I can go another twenty before we finally collapse.

I scratched an itch on my calf, where the last of my dissolvable stitches were falling off. They revealed a fresh scar running from my knee to my ankle; it matched the one on my other leg.

They weren't battle scars, though. They were from experimental surgeries.

"Well, if you hadn't ripped your stitches out in the first place," I chided, jumping lightly to my feet.

Nate sent me a look as he stood. "You were the one who ambushed me while I was still in Recovery, Leah."

I totally forgot. I haven't properly introduced myself yet. I'm Leah Trent, and I've been a spy for almost fourteen years now. I trust you won't reveal my identity to any enemy agencies.

In our four-man team, Nate and I are the chief operators. As you may have deduced, we do not work for the Central Intelligence Agency. They're our rivals.

We are, however, part of a covert intelligence organization. Our boss has the resources and means to place us anywhere in the world at any time.

We also operate regularly within the United States.

I don't know how big our group is, or how its organized, but it doesn't matter to me. Just give me the mission and turn me loose.

The Company, as we call it, is everything everyone thinks the Central Intelligence Agency is and does. Media portrays the Agency as an ugly and dark organization who performs gruesome torture on every suspected enemy combatant they get their hands on.

And the general public eats it up, without doing any research of their own.

Of course, the Agency doesn't use mutilation, jumper cables or electrodes which, by the way, is a very unpleasant experience. At least, not officially. Like any group in intelligence, they can be very cutthroat.

As is the nature of the beast.

I still wouldn't choose to vacation at an Agency black site. As if they officially record every person they capture and every interrogation method they use? That's seriously laugh-out-loud funny.

Now, their own tactics are uncomfortable, but don't result in long-term harm or permanent damage—again, not officially. However, I regard them as masters at the psychological side of interrogation. They can make an individual believe their body is taking considerably more damage than it is.

Funny how the brain can trick itself without even knowing it.

I can also tell you another thing: when it comes to actual bodily damage, being waterboarded CIA style is child's play compared to the true Spanish Inquisition version.

Besides, you're only shooting yourself in the foot if you nearly kill a suspect by chopping off bits and pieces of him. You eventually run out of things to cut off, and then you've lost your leverage and only made a mess.

It's all about reaching the point of cooperation. Anything a suspect says leading up to that point is moot.

The Agency had actually turned to the military when initial interrogation techniques, like those utilized by the police, weren't working on detainees. They also weren't looking for confessions anyway; they wanted information. The Agency then modeled its enhanced techniques from methods performed on soldiers going through SERE.

Ah, desensitization. But that's just about interrogation, and doesn't touch on all the dealings and types of people the Agency employs, pays off, or bribes. Hey, I'm not judging. I completely understand. In this world, you do what you have to, and the Company does stuff like that all the time.

As for the experimental surgeries I'd mentioned, those hadn't started until a few years ago. Up to then, we had plenty of experiences with viral and bacterial strains.

That's always a good time, having our bodies exposed to dangerous illnesses for the sake of shocking our immune systems. The justification behind the exposure was that it would only make us stronger.

Whatever. I don't care about the explanations. Just get it over with and let me get on with my job.

As for The Company, what types of tasks do we perform? Just to name a few, we're about inciting coups, asset relocation and recon behind enemy lines. However, our areas of expertise and primary focuses are: assassinations, information extraction, and the manipulation of the enemy—without their knowledge.

Psychological warfare is a powerful tool.

However, because of the societies and countries we operate in, who do not have the same codes of conduct as the United States, we have to be prepared for true torture.

We were trained as such, hence the harsh treatment.

But it's far more than just training for combat, recon and killing. It's about being flexible, adapting, and assimilating into any given society or culture we are placed in for assignment. It doesn't matter what country we're visiting, we can instantly blend in and disappear.

That's an invaluable skill, and not one you pick up studying in a classroom. You have to be exposed and actually experience it to truly understand.

All that said, I neither dwell on the memories of our abuse nor attempt to suppress them. It just happened. In the end, each excruciating chastisement only strengthened us.

Nate gingerly touched his left cheekbone, which I'd introduced to my elbow. His face would likely bruise.

"Thanks a lot, Leah."

"What are you whining about?" I asked, pointing at my split lip. "Do you see this?"

That was when Brad emerged from the back bedroom. With a yawn, he plopped into a chair at the small table.

"Want to join us, Brad?" I asked, keeping an eye on Nate as he inched closer to me. "Sparring really gets the blood going...helps you wake up."

"Think I'll take a rain check on that, Leah," replied Brad. "I don't want any bones broken while we're still on assignment."

He stretched his arms over his head. "Although, better ten rounds with you than a single session in the Chamber back home."

The Chamber was where we'd spent a lot of our time the first two or three years of the program. There we were privileged to be introduced to true desensitization.

In other words: various levels of pain via torture. Only our boss and the tormentors know what happened in the Chamber. While sessions there were primarily used to harden and callous our bodies, it was also utilized for disciplinary action if we broke a rule. Fortunately, our visits to The Chamber are extremely rare now.

Ready to go another round, Nate and I moved for one other simultaneously. We both jabbed and deflected one another's swings before kneeing each other in the stomach. This put us in close proximity, and I slammed my elbow square into Nate's diaphragm.

Nate staggered back with a grunt and I ducked under his counterstrike.

We live and breathe for combat and confrontation. In our opinion, the more difficult and dangerous the task, the better.

Back home, when we aren't being desensitized, we're physically training, which consists of grueling activities performed in conditions any normal human would avoid at all costs. When we aren't training, we're being psychologically remolded.

We analyze, calculate, with complete emotional detachment. If one was to say we're more machine than human now, well...I don't think I'd argue that point at all.

I swiped away another jab and throttled Nate right in the chin.

We were both mid-swing when the front door opened and in stepped the boss.

Nate and I instantly squared up. Bruce had joined Brad at the table and both jumped to their feet.

"I thought I told you to avoid strikes to the face," said the boss, closing and locking the door behind him.

Nate and I cleared our throats before answering in unison. "You did."

The smile didn't show on the boss's face, but did in his eyes.

"Take a seat," he said, with a nod towards the table.

We complied and sat down as he set a folder on the table.

The boss, Jack McCullen, is a tall and thin man with black hair, touches of gray on the sides. He's a professional character and usually wears a steady, stern expression, even when highly stressed or agitated. As with us, it's difficult to tell what he's really thinking or feeling.

Early on, we trainees learned his hazel eyes saw everything. He's a diplomat, all business, who knows how to play "the game" with exceptional skill.

In the beginning, he'd been a cold man of few words. When Jack did speak to us, he was short and concise. There was no more contact than absolutely necessary, and he'd left the initial training to the individuals he'd selected specifically for us.

We'd had to prove ourselves worthy of Jack's time. We'd trained at all hours of the day and night, in relentless heat and bitter cold.

Perfection was demanded from us right from the start. If we'd failed any single task, we were severely punished.

Drop a component in the snow while field stripping a rifle? You've earned yourself a severe beating. Doesn't matter if you're in the middle of the blizzard, your hands are nearly frostbitten and you're hypothermic.

Fail to take out your target in the allotted time during an assassination exercise? You've earned yourself a whipping and a couple nights hanging from the ceiling by your wrists. During that time, your handlers can come in, beat on and yell at you anytime and for however long they want.

We used live "bait" for those simulations. Turned out they were some of the trainees enlisted early in the program, but had washed out. That was awkward, hunting former teammates.

I'd failed to complete my first assassination exercise. It was the first and the last time I did so.

If you think you're too moral to complete a simulation like that, I'd think long and hard before pointing a finger in judgment. Mind manipulation in tandem with physical punishment, if done correctly, can change your sense of self-preservation, morals and values. Or erase them completely.

Our handlers and trainers are masters at it.

One week after I'd failed that initial assassination exercise, I successfully completed my second one. And I didn't lose a moment of sleep that night.

If physical punishment wasn't enough of an incentive to try harder, there was always the threat of being turned into the "bait" for simulations. Live subjects weren't just used for assassinations, but also as kidnapping victims whom would then be tortured.

Tormenting the weaklings in the program helped Nate and I hone our skills at "information extraction." The victim would be told a vital piece of information and then Nate and I would get it out of them one way or another.

Do I feel guilty about any of that? Not at all.

Like I'd said before: we're not very nice people.

But when you're infiltrating the vilest organizations or tracking the most ruthless, bloodthirsty men the world has seen—how can you be nice? If you don't start out cruel and apathetic, you'll eventually turn into the person you're playing and you won't just be acting anymore.

So the logic behind the program is: why not be an unscrupulous and cold-hearted character from the beginning?

Some organizations you're infiltrating will test you or have you go through an initiation. If your test is to kill someone, you won't have any moral conflicts if you've gone through our program. Showing the slightest hesitation at your initiation is a sign of instant weakness and the group will be highly suspicious of you from the start. This, in turn, can lead to the failure of a mission, and failure is never an option.

Anyway, once the training group had thinned out and those in the remnant showed ourselves able to handle the program, Jack himself spent more time with us. He'd begun to show the slightest emotion in dealing with his agents.

There'd originally been eight on the final team. However, one by one, four of them cracked in the last stages.

What happened to them? Well...let's just say no one found their bodies.

As for Jack, he's the top boss, the one who gives us orders and the only one we accept them from. Approval by him removes from our minds any doubts from a bad day in training.

I am undecided if this bond is intentional or not.

"I hope this isn't going to be another pick-up and delivery job," I said.

Only after so many years together, do we dare to speak our minds. At the beginning, we didn't speak unless spoken to. By now, though, we've established a complicated working relationship.

At my statement, the corners of Jack's mouth pulled upwards.

"No, Leah, this will be a little more of a challenge," he answered, spreading several sheets of paper across the table. "Our time-frame will be tight, and this will be a catch-and-release. We have to do it quickly enough so that the Agency won't know the target was gone to begin with."

"What's our time frame?" asked Nate, turning one of the photos of our target towards him.

"You'll have eight hours tops," replied Jack, "but the quicker the better."

"What's our objective?" I asked, fully engaged.

Jack's eyes gleamed again as he pointed out two men, Pakistani generals, in one of the photos. "Convince the informant that these men are the remaining threats within the current government."

I caught on instantly. "So he'll feed misinformation to his real contact at the Agency. Then when the time for the regime change arrives, the Agency will remove these men for us."

Jack nodded. "You'll actually be part of that operation, but that's further down the road. There are a few more things that need to happen first."



"Like brainwashing a CIA informant," replied Nate, with that infamous mischievous gleam in his hazel eyes.

I met his gaze. "In eight hours?"

My eyes flitted to the boss as a little smile tugged at my lips. "Piece of cake.

## **Chapter 4**

### Mind Manipulation

Night had fallen over Islamabad by the time he closed up the shop and trudged towards home.

It appeared to have been a very long day for our target, Khosa. Head down, shoulders slouched, he wasn't paying attention to what was going on. Not that it would have mattered if he was.

A noise down a narrow alley made him stop and look up. That's when they ran out of the alley: a pair of assailants, wielding assault rifles.

Khosa gasped, spun, and sprinted down the nearest side street. He could hear the running feet behind him and he ducked down the next alleyway.

He was struck hard from the side. Slamming into a shack, his head smacked against the wall. Dazed, he lay there awkwardly as the unknown assailant raised his rifle.

Someone suddenly appeared behind the bad guy and struck him on the head with something. After glancing around a moment, the good guy knelt down and reached for Khosa. He placed his hands against his neck, as if to check for a pulse.

What he was really doing was applying pressure to Khosa's carotid arteries.

"He's out," said Nate a couple seconds later.

I'd been the assailant he'd supposedly pistol-whipped and I jumped back to my feet.

We couldn't cause too much noise or create a scene, because that increased the risk of tipping off nearby agents. We just had to make Khosa think bad guys were after him.

Brad and Bruce, posing as the first two gunmen, appeared beside us. Nate and Brad each draped one of Khosa's arms across their shoulders and pulled him to his feet. Bruce followed behind, and I jogged ahead to make sure the route was clear.

Twenty minutes later, Nate and Bruce dropped Khosa onto a cot in a small apartment we'd rented for this occasion.

Everyone quickly changed out of their assailant clothes. Bruce then stepped out of the apartment, and Brad stood with folded arms beside the table.

When we were all in position, Nate leaned over and shook Khosa's shoulder. That didn't bring him to consciousness, so I grabbed a bottle of water, unscrewed the cap, and poured some water onto his face.

Khosa started and with effort opened his eyes.

"You okay?" asked Nate, feigning the deepest concern as he looked the man over.

"What?" he muttered, squinting against the light from the kitchen and lamp on the table.

"Oh thank goodness," sighed Nate with relief.

He took the bottle of water from me and handed it to Khosa, "We didn't know if they'd poisoned you or something."

Khosa stiffly pushed himself up so he was sitting and took the bottle from Nate. "What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"General Gorshani hired insurgents to have you killed," replied Nate.

"He must have figured out you were our informant," added Brad.

Khosa closed his eyes a second, likely trying to clear his head. "Gorshani..."

"Still a bit fuzzy," I said, turning for the bathroom. "I'll get him something for his head."

"We picked up chatter amongst the insurgents and learned about Gorshani's plan to kill you just before you were attacked," continued Brad. "We barely found you in time. There are more insurgents scouting the area."

"You tell him about General Mahar, yet?" I asked, reappearing at Nate's side and dropping two white pills into his hand.

"We don't know for sure he's in on it," replied Nate, throwing me a look.

"Mahar?" asked Khosa, finally gathering his wits.

I pointed at the table as I glared at Nate. "The pictures don't lie, and neither does the intel. We know he let information leak to the ISI that our man in Quetta was supplying us information on weapons caches."

Khosa's eyes widened a little. "You are talking about the bombing yesterday?"

I nodded.

Khosa dropped his gaze a moment, mind sorting out what he was being told. Finally, he looked at Nate. "This is not making sense. General Gorshani and General Mahar are doing good things for Pakistan, and they oppose the prime minister."

I allowed concern to appear on my face and shot a look from Khosa to Nate.

"Do you think they did get to him somehow?" I asked.

Nate's expression intensified. "You mean like brainwashing or some kind of mind manipulation?"

I gave a shake of my head as I regarded our target. "He doesn't look well and he should've recovered by now. If Gorshani is working with some foreign spy agency, the insurgents could have delivered Khosa to them, but he managed to escape...that explains why he was wandering in the streets."

"Or they let him go," Nate added darkly.

As hoped, confusion rippled across Khosa's face. "I was walking home from work..."

Both Nate and my faces furrowed. "It's two in the morning, Khosa."

Nate took a few steps back and gestured at the ancient oven in the kitchen.

Khosa stood and looked at the time.

Nate then pulled out his cell phone and let him double-check the time on it, as double confirmation.

A fine sweat broke out on Khosa's forehead and he put a hand on the side of his face.

"Mr. Khosa—" began Nate.

Khosa held up a hand. "Wait, please, I must think."

There wasn't really room to pace, so he managed a couple back and forth steps. His eyes then fell on a folder on the table.

"Are those the pictures she was talking about?" he asked, pointing.

"Uh, they're classified," replied Brad hesitantly.

"I must be seeing them, please," said Khosa insistently and with great urgency.

Brad shot a look at Nate. After a breath, Nate nodded and put his hands on his hips.

Khosa practically tore the folder open. Inside lay transcripts and pictures of generals Gorshani and Mahar secretly meeting with various militant groups, all falsified of course. We even threw in some photo-shopped images of them with known Taliban members.

It was time for me to switch to a softer tone.

Stepping to the table and tapping a group of pictures of a massive bombing with people carrying wounded out of debris, I said, "Gorshani and Mahar are in alliance with those responsible for killing innocent people, women and children. All our intelligence pointed to two more Taliban sympathizers in the cabinet, close to the prime minister. You confirmed it yourself when you met with Agent Williams last week..."

I searched Khosa's face as he stared at the photos of the carnage and blood literally pooled in the streets. By the expression on his face, I could tell he was struggling to remember something, anything solid.

"I was...sure they were...or maybe it is not...I am not remembering..."

It was at that moment I knew we had him.

I shot a look at Nate. "I don't like this. They must have gotten to him. What if they're trying to turn him against us?"

"You mean...get him to think that we're the bad guys?" asked Nate. "Confuse him and get him to give us bad information?"

If you're thinking "are they seriously giving Khosa their own game plan?" then the answer would be "yes." The very plan we have in place to manipulate him we were accusing phantom spies of trying to do. Essentially, we were playing against ourselves, because we are the phantom enemy.

You might call it arrogant or cocky. We call it having full confidence in our abilities...and a twisted sense of humor.

While Nate and I conversed, I kept my fingers on the photos, occasionally tapping the paper to draw Khosa's attention back to them.

We intentionally threw out and repeated words like "traitor," "corrupt," and "threat," words any Agency contacts might use when talking with him. We wanted them to become triggers, so when he heard them his first thoughts were of the two generals meeting with murderous fanatics, and streets strewn with the dead and dying.

Nate and I spoke for a good thirty minutes, all the while subtly repeating the various words. Khosa became totally enthralled in studying the photos and reading transcripts, with our conversation as background noise to his thoughts.

Compliments of the knock on the head, he was already in a weakened state, a bit fuzzy mentally. That was perfect. It made him more susceptible to our techniques and powers of suggestion.

It also helped that he'd started right off by accepting we were the good guys, his friends here to protect him. He didn't put his guard up very high.

If we'd snatched him like we had Tariq, he would've been much more defensive. That would've required breaking him first and then rebuilding him, which would've taken too long.

"...okay?"

Khosa blinked from his thoughts, more like a daze, and looked at Nate who stood beside him with his hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I'll get an update from our agents scouting the area, and make sure it's safe for you to go home. Okay?"

"We'll have people watching out for you," assured Brad, speaking for the first time in nearly forty-five minutes.

Khosa gave a nod. "Yes, yes, okay."

With a nod from Nate, Brad stepped outside to pretend to make a phone call. He then looked back at Khosa. "Are you sure you're alright? We can take you to a doctor, get you looked at."

I'm not an emotional person, and training has left me unable to recall what it's like to feel most of them. Especially positive ones like happiness or joy have been overwritten and replaced with a sardonic outlook on life, and a morbid sense of humor.

But I confess it took every ounce of self-control not to laugh at the intense expression of concern that was presently on Nate's face.

It's funny because we don't care about anything other than the mission. Yet he was really selling the whole sympathetic friend angle. I couldn't ever recall seeing such expression on Nate's face, even when we were kids growing up.

Khosa shook his head.

"No, I am okay," he replied before heaving a sigh. "I am remembering better now."

Brad reentered the apartment. "There were another six insurgents in the area, but they've been taken care of. You won't have to worry about them, Mr. Khosa."

Nate gave Khosa a nod. "Let's get you home. Once Agent Williams returns from Quetta, he'll probably want to meet with you again, just so you know. But we'll tell him what happened here."

Khosa, the poor fool, thanked us exceedingly for our help all the way back to his house. By then, the two pills I'd given him just before leaving the apartment were beginning to kick in.

Unlike the first dose, the second pills weren't sugar capsules. They'd knock him out a good seven hours at least, and leave him slightly groggy when he woke up. To him, the previous night would seem like a strange dream—but with our misinformation fully intact in his brain.

How could we be sure?

This isn't exactly the first time we've done this. We know when false ideas take or when the subject needs a little more time to accept the lies.

Plus, we've had similar tactics used on us, so we know what works.

The mind is such a funny thing.

## Chapter 5

### Vendetta

It was late and Islamabad twinkled brightly in the inky moonless night.

He walked amongst the tree-covered hills on the outskirts of the city, having left the dirt road a short time ago. He'd been a field agent, or case officer, once himself, and he still kept himself fit. So a little hike wasn't a problem, even with the elevation.

At last, he came upon the squatty structure he'd been searching for. The two men sitting by the front door jumped to their feet when he walked out of the shadows.

One of them shouted something and a second later the man he'd come to see appeared in the doorway.

"Glad to see you found it," he said, before waving the visitor inside.

He stepped through the door and into a large open room. A table sat in the center with a few men seated around it. A fire to the left heated the entire place.

"You wanted to meet with Masood," said the host, a militant commander named Amin.

Once the visitor took a seat at the table, he sat also.

The newcomer poured himself some coffee from the pot in the center of the table and then looked at Masood, "I was told the ISI would assist with the...release...of this political prisoner."

The ISI, or Inter-Services Intelligence, was Pakistan's internal intelligence organization. Rumors of corruption within the ISI were rampant but weren't entirely baseless. History proved they were very skilled at catering to the United States' desire to hunt Taliban operatives, yet secretly continuing to supply said terrorist group with arms and intelligence.

They knew how to play all sides of the board.

Masood, the ISI agent, regarded him with a steely gaze. "We have a far reach, as you Americans say."

"I'm actually more concerned about you staying out of my team's way."

That earned some *tisks* from the other men.

"Hey, you found me," said the American, jabbing the table with his finger. "You asked me for help."

"And we're paying you a lot of money to get one of our generals out of prison..."

"In a way that doesn't hint at your involvement," finished the American evenly. "This isn't as simple as bribing prison staff and police officers. The CIA

wants to replace President Hasan with Reza. But you want me to break out General Baloch, Reza's best friend, so he'll be close to Reza once he's president."

He straightened a little and eyed the men with a cunning gleam in his hazel eyes. "It's my understanding that Baloch actually has a very different agenda in mind if he were in a position of power. But not even Reza is aware of that. He thinks Baloch is behind him completely."

Commander Amin allowed himself a shrewd little smile. "It's only a matter of time before President Hasan was removed from office. Many people are not happy with him. Thanks to friends in the ISI, we've known the CIA has been planning on removing Hasan and some of his generals."

"So you want to let the CIA execute their plan, and then put your guy beside theirs, instead of fighting for the presidential seat," concluded the American.

He knew full well what would happen with that arrangement, but if the money was good, he didn't care.

"If you are saying what I think it is you are saying, then yes," nodded Amin.

After taking a couple minutes to enjoy his coffee and mull things over, the American looked at Masood. "I'll continue as agreed. The primary task I'll need you to do is feed bad intel to the CIA when they ask about the prison break. My team will probably frame someone else for it. But when it happens, it'll happen fast. The Agency is nearly ready to remove the current regime. I'll contact you through Commander Amin and make arrangements accordingly."

Masood nodded. "We'll be ready."

"That's what I like about you Americans, Jack," grinned Amin, "always right to the point."

Jack McCullen's eyes glinted from the light of the fire as he lifted his cup of coffee. "And it's always a pleasure doing business with you, commander."

## **Chapter 6**

### **Misinformation**

A couple days after having some really strange dreams, Khosa met with his CIA contact, a case officer named Williams. They met for lunch in a crowded marketplace, though Khosa was too nervous to eat or drink.

He just wanted to do this quickly and get back to work. He'd had about enough of spies.

"I just need to confirm any more supporters of the current president," said the agent, "are there any cabinet members who would be a threat to a more moderate leader?"

He nonchalantly slid some pictures across the table to Khosa. After studying the photos, he pointed out the threats.

"You're certain?" asked the spy. "You know very well how...deceitful and corrupt politicians can be."

Khosa nodded. "Those are the last men you need to be concerned about."

He tapped on one photo in particular. "Gorshani and Mahar are the only other, what you say? Threats? I'm certain. Will you be leaving me alone now?"

Williams studied him a moment. He then stealthily took up the photos and left a rolled up wad of cash under the napkin that was beside the pictures.

Khosa took the money and pocketed it before quickly standing and walking away.

Williams also stood and meandered through the city for some time. After an hour, and when he was certain he wasn't being followed, he returned to one of the Agency's posts.

With the threat of a ghost organization, everyone was taking extra precautions.

"Did he have anything to add?" asked Marshall, meeting Williams in the living room.

Williams pulled out the photos and pointed to two generals, "He was sure Gorshani and Mahar were the only new identifiable supporters of Hasan."

"That rounds the total out to six who need to be extracted," mused Marshall, rubbing his chin.

"Well, I hope that's the last of 'em," said Williams. "I'm pretty sure Khosa is finished working with us."

Jonathan poked his head, still aching from the kick it'd received, out of a bedroom. "Boss, the Special Forces commander you wanted to speak with is on the line."

Marshall turned down the hall.

Tentative plans for the regime change had already been laid out, so now it was about fine-tuning and executing practice runs until they could all do their parts in their sleep.

But the fear of the ghost organization still hovered over him. The last stages of the plan were finally coming together, and it was quite possible they'd strike again and ruin everything.



## Chapter 7

### Prison Break

The following night was fair, but still very dark because of the new moon and veiled stars.

Perfect for a nighttime raid.

The perimeter surrounding the jail wasn't completely clear of trees and low-lying brush, which allowed us to get close. The only motion sensing floodlights were at the front gate. Security was a minor issue, and though the guards were likely brave, they had minimal training and firepower.

Pity for them, great for us. But we couldn't just sneak in and free one inmate. Nor could we pretend to be some official higher-ups to take one prisoner into our custody.

This had a high risk of tipping off the CIA.

Another option one might have thought of was hiring, and supplying, an insurgent group to raid the jail and free a swarm of prisoners. It'd happened several times in recent history.

However, my team and I didn't consider that a genuine option. We might be elite spies and cold-blooded assassins with no scruples. But we have one exception in regards to who we'll work with.

Our loyalty lies with our homeland, with the United States, in spite of all her flaws. An enemy who plots the slaughter of her civilians with such ruthless hate as terrorist organizations do—is our enemy. No questions asked.

Do we infiltrate radical groups? Yes, but to ensure their end, and not to empower them.

So, we'd be framing a Chechen terrorist group for this raid. They occasionally came into the country to train with the Taliban and learn new tricks of the terrorist trade.

It also just so happened there were a few Chechen radicals imprisoned here.

Of course, we weren't just going to let them go; they'd be tied up until the regime change scheme was complete. Then the guards at the prison would suddenly find their missing terrorists giftwrapped at their front gate.

But the Chechens made for a wonderful cover.

Nate and I stalked along the northeast side of the jail perimeter.

"*Two guards patrolling at the side entrance,*" reported Brad from his lookout position somewhere in the shadows, "*backs to the gate.*"

We crept forward to the edge of the wall and cautiously peered around the corner. Both guards were walking away and into the courtyard. At last, they stopped a dozen strides in and began a muttered conversation.

Nate and I dropped our backpacks onto the ground and slung our rifles over our shoulders. After removing the charges from our packs, we stalked to the gate and began placing them.

It had been a close thing acquiring all the necessary materials in order for this op to happen tonight. Because we're framing a group, we have to use the same materials they use and in the same manner.

Everything was ready fifteen seconds later and Nate and I retreated around the corner. Putting our packs on again, we took up our rifles and braced against the wall.

"Everyone set?" I whispered.

"10-4, cap'n," replied Brad.

"*Dakota's in position.*"

"Alright...open the door, Dakota."

A breath later, an RPG streaked out of the blackness across the street and hit the gate dead center. The flash and bang was louder and brighter than usual, because it detonated the charges.

Needless to say, the gate was now wide open for us.

A second RPG took out the yard light with another loud bang and bright flash.

Nate and I emerged swiftly through the smoke. The two guards were on the ground, dazed from the RPG and debris that had rained down on them.

Nate popped a guard who stepped out of a guardhouse and he collapsed in the doorway.

I was already to the gate leading into the yard which housed the cellblocks. It was a simple metal gate with vertical rods. No problem for some cheap explosives.

Five seconds later, the gate was blown off its hinges. Nate entered first. Pivoting, I walked through backwards. I spotted a couple shadows on the wall at the front gate and sent a spray of rounds their way.

Two went down, both holding various parts of their legs.

Again, the boss said he wanted a minimal body count. Plus, it couldn't look like a highly trained unit had breached the jail. That meant I had to purposefully not "shoot to kill" every guard I saw and, just as intentionally, have marginal marksmanship.

Nothing could look remotely suspicious, to keep from tipping off the Agency. The fact they didn't know we specifically wanted Baloch was immaterial.

Another RPG struck the exterior wall, to keep the guards excited. Moments later, we heard the sound of an AK-47 echoing in the night.

I quickly crossed to Nate, at the row of cells on the right. They were simply large concrete rooms that allowed for multiple occupants.

Clicking on our flashlights, we quickly identified our Chechen insurgents, grouped in the second cell. Our general was two more cells over.

I dealt with the Chechens while Nate retrieved the general. I told them we were here to liberate them and then broke them out. Of course, all their other roommates were welcome to stretch their legs, too.

Nate joined me and together we ran back the way we came. Ideally, we'd go out the rear wall, but that required heavier explosives than we had. And it wouldn't fit the profile.

In the main yard, the group hung a left as a pair of guards opened fire. But they did so as they retreated into a different area of the jail.

I opened fire on their location, just missing them.

"*We're clear, Cree,*" said Nate.

Jogging backwards, I was passing the first pair of guards, still on the ground. One of them looked like he was going to try something, so I meleed him with my rifle.

Then I turned and sprinted out of the gate we'd come in and into the darkness.

I cut through a maze of alleyways, jogging a good minute before reaching Nate, Bruce, Brad. Our new friends consisted of: three Chechens and one Pakistani general. They were all climbing into a van when I arrived.

The other freed inmates had already scattered.

Brad, Nate and company got on the road with the van. Bruce and I followed in a beat up silver sedan.

We drove around for an hour before stopping on a random market street at the northeast edge of the city.

While in motion, I'd changed out of my gear, and replaced it with my local garb, complete with tactical scarf to hide most of my face.

We continued our trek on foot, now heading northwest through some fields. After another twenty minutes, we reached a small neighborhood.

It was almost completely dark here, but earlier the team and I'd spent enough time in this area to find our way to the correct dwelling.

It was two shacks connected together, one for living, the other serving as a garage and workspace.

Nate led the Chechens into the garage, followed by Brad and Bruce. I stopped the general with a raised hand.

I kept an eye on him while my teammates incapacitated the Chechens.

While they were doing that, a soft knock came on the front door. Snapping my rifle up, I kept it aimed at the door, knowing I could shoot right through it because it was flimsy wood.

"What's the code?" I asked in Punjabi.

"Freedom," came the answer.

I flung the door open and the nearest man found himself looking down the barrel of my rifle.

His face registered in my memory and I stepped aside, allowing him and two friends inside.

According to the boss, this was a militant commander and two of his crew. They'd been combating the Taliban for years and managed to keep a number of provinces out of their control.

As for General Baloch, he was liked by a majority of the generals in Pakistan's military-run government. He was the sort who truly hunted down Taliban and insurgent groups terrorizing the people for the sake of creating chaos.

The current President, Hasan, and some of his closest generals, had cheated their way to power and refused to relinquish it.

Typical in this part of the world.

Hasan was soft on the Taliban. Time after time he said he'd crack down on them, but never did. He said he'd do something, and then never followed through, or did the opposite of what he'd said.

Typical of politicians.

Thus, Baloch as prime minister would be a great asset to various militant groups holding out against insurgents and Taliban fighters.

Of course, I didn't believe Baloch and his militant friends were as clean as the driven snow. No one is. But so long as they're countering the likes of the Taliban and they're blood-lusting companions, I'll overlook faults.

My teammates returned from the garage, and Nate stepped over to General Baloch.

"My boss asked me to give you a message before leaving: remember who is putting you in power. If you so much as even think about supplying a terrorist group or planning an attack on the United States...we'll find you and take you out."

Nate can stare down anyone, and the general broke his gaze first. They exchanged a few more words before shaking hands.

In conclusion, we'd returned the general to his people, who would keep him hidden until the right time. They'd also take care of the Chechens. It was the least they could do.

So, our work here was done.

We let them keep what little gear Nate and I had and then all four of us vanished outside into the dark night.

Pausing on the edge of a field, I drew in a deep breath of fresh air. We'd just completed an operation, it was a nice evening, and my team and I were together. Nate, my best friend since we were kids, was beside me.

"It's a good night for a run," I said, feeling as content as I possibly can be in my emotionally void state.

"Lead the way, Cree," nodded Nate, my trusty brother-in-arms.

I slugged him in the air and then lifted into a run, heading southeast.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Ranks of the Enemy**

We had two day's rest before meeting with the teams participating in the joint special ops mission that would remove Pakistan's current president, his prime minister and four generals.

Jack thoroughly briefed us on who we'd be dealing with. We memorized faces and bios of the Agency team, a majority of them highly trained, experienced and mostly former military. Without a doubt, some of them had been part of several previous black ops.

We also studied the members of the US Special Forces who'd be joining in the fun.

Yes, we were about to mingle amongst the ranks of the enemy. I'm unsure how Jack arranged it, but it makes no difference to me.

The two Agency operatives we rendezvoused with had been told Nate and I'd been going back and forth between northern Pakistan and Afghanistan for several years. We knew the locale and were very knowledgeable of the current Pakistani government.

We'd been enlisted for this operation for the sake of bringing knowledge and more manpower.

We met with the spies in a marketplace late afternoon and then made our way to an abandoned, three-story building on the outskirts of town.

The control center was on the second floor. When we entered, Nate and I counted sixteen bodies total, not including ourselves: eight Agency personnel, and eight Special Forces soldiers.

At first glance, anyone would've thought the military men were actually locals because of their scruffy appearances.

We deal primarily with enemy spies, but occasionally cross paths with military forces. Even though we come from different cultures, I hold them in high regard. They have a purpose, protecting the home front and hunting down evil men. Plus I enjoy working them because of their general approach to things: concise, get to the point sort of people.

Besides, US military forces can trounce any opponent, and I greatly respect that.

On the table in the center of the room sat several laptops. One agent was sitting, with two standing on either side of him.

As we approached and both men turned, it was the first time I met Marshall Byrne, team leader and chief of a CIA substation stateside, and Jonathan Ross, his second-in-command.

"Welcome to the party," said Marshall with the type of voice that commands attention.

He was average height, and sturdy with a strong, roundish jaw. Despite signs of stress, determination was set on his face and his hazel eyes regarded Nate and me with great intelligence.

*A worthy opponent*, I thought, as I shook his extended hand.

My spy sense was telling me to be wary of him. By the look in his gaze I knew he was a hunter, someone who was skilled at tracking people like me.

Jonathan Ross matched his boss in height, but was of leaner build and looked to be my age. His jaw was square, nose straight, and dark brown hair offset his brilliant blue eyes. He was one of those individuals who instantly strikes you as "honest." His gaze was mostly curious as he regarded my partner and me, and his overall expression hinted at aptitude.

It's a typical trait of spies.

"We're glad you invited us," replied Nate as he shook Marshall's hand.

"Yeah," I added, "that hole in Bajaur was losing its appeal pretty quick."

The man I judged to be the unit commander for the Special Forces squad laughed at my comment as he stepped beside his.

With a tilt of his head, Marshall said, "Commander Moore. His boss was kind enough to loan him and some of his men to us for this phase of the operation."

Moore extended his hand and I slapped mine into his. "It's an honor. Agent Price, here to help anyway I can."

I leaned over and looked past him at his men around a table near the corner. "Although I'm pretty sure you all could lay siege to the capital yourselves without a problem."

The big man laughed heartily, blue eyes sparkling as he and Nate shook hands.

Nate introduced himself as Agent Bennett. His alias was an inside joke because it was close to his real last name, which was "Benson."

"Commander, why don't you run through the plan we've worked out so far," suggested Marshall.

"Yes, sir," nodded the commander, before waving for us to follow.

As we walked after him, I shot a look at Jonathan. In my peripheral, I'd noticed he'd been stealing glances at me.

So I sent him a stern look and he quickly averted his gaze. He was highly curious, but I'm certain I can cure him of that whenever we converse next.

Nate and I fully engaged as the commander went over their rough plan of attack.

Thanks to insider information, we knew where Hasan, the president, his prime minister and supporting generals would be every day next week. We knew when Hasan left his expansive private villa, and which routes he took to work. The same went for his PM.

It would be easiest to snatch both of them en route. However, that would mean doing so during daylight hours and in the city.

We wanted to execute their removal as quietly as possible. Thus, we'd strike two to three hours before dawn and under the cover of darkness.

"I take it Keza is ready to come out of hiding?" guessed Nate.

"Oh yeah, he's ready to go," replied a soldier named Anderson, "his people will be informed when it's time to move."

I studied the photos of our six targets, four of them generals. Two of them I recognized as Mahar and Gorshani.

I smiled inwardly with satisfaction that our mind manipulation on Khosa had worked.

The sun was setting as we continued to review details about how we were going to snatch the different targets and where we'd transport our six guests of honor.

Fortunately, the grounds of the residences of the president and prime minister provided cover that would allow the strike teams to maneuver.

Once everyone was detained, they'd be transported to various holding locations. Some would be paired before being shuttled to their new homes where unfriendly people were awaiting their arrival.

Simultaneously, Reza, who'd been forced into hiding shortly after Hasan had taken power, would appear again.

With the official president gone, elections would be held swiftly. Because Reza had been a heavy favorite among the people, he'd probably be elected.

Hasan had illegally obtained control during the last election. His time in power had long passed, but he was reluctant to step down. Any political opponents had been jailed, coerced into silence or killed.

The prime minister Hasan had appointed was a cloned version of him. He agreed with everything the president said, and never did anything that might remotely oppose him.

The skills of both Hasan and his PM at international diplomacy weren't any better than how they dealt with national issues. Unlike some authority figures who bend under the will of a neighboring country's leader, Hasan didn't.

He was highly skilled at doing absolutely nothing. Noncommittal to taking action on anything, he made his government appear weak and inefficient.

All in all, Hasan had no friends, save for the prime minister. The military didn't like him and the general population despised him.

If we didn't act, undoubtedly a coup would ensue in the coming months.

Night fell and after the final prayers, we went out in turn to familiarize ourselves with the city and the various routes we'd be taking. It was after midnight by the time we all returned to the post.

Because we were only forty-eight hours away from executing the plan, everyone was sleeping on site. If we stayed elsewhere at night, that would increase the risk of locals growing suspicious of our comings and goings to this building.

Nate and I each ate one of the MRE's from our packs and then played a couple hands of poker with our new Special Forces friends. They seemed to have taken a liking to Nate and me. This was especially evident after we shared a few stories of some close scrapes we'd had with insurgents.

At last, everyone except those on watch got ready to crash for a couple hours. Nate settled in a corner at the far end of the room while I kept watch.

It was completely dark and I stood at the edge of a window looking out over the city, lights burning brightly. The glass pane was long gone, and a nighttime breeze drifted lazily inside, bringing an array of scents.

"You don't have to be on watch, Agent Price," said Jonathan quietly behind me.

"Force of habit," I replied softly, not bothering to turn and look at him, "it's just been Bennett and me for a long time. I'm used to it."

Jonathan stepped beside me.

"How long you been in the trade?" he asked.

I hate small talk, but forced myself to reply. "A long time, but not long enough to want to retire."

After a breath I asked, "How 'bout you?"

I'd inquired out of obligation, not because I actually cared.



I didn't want him to recall anything specific about me after all this was finished. Being a grouch or totally antisocial was something he'd remember about the character I was playing.

"Nine years," he answered, "love the field work and being out actually doing something."

"It's all about the chase," I agreed.

"But...do you ever get tired of seeing all the strife? Or knowing that even if you take down a hundred evil men, a thousand more are just going to replace them?"

I resisted the urge to sigh. I hadn't realized this was going to be a heart-to-heart conversation. Fortunately, I knew how to end it.

"It's how the world is, Agent Ross," I replied, irritation in my voice, "there's always corrupt or evil men plotting the control and destruction of others. That's why there are people like us to stop them, and if we just give up or quit...what's to keep them from striking our homes or killing our families? Killing us?"

In my peripheral I saw him look at me a long moment.

"You plan on doing this for a long time, don't you?"

Finally, I looked at him. "There's nothing but the next mission. I'll do this job 'til the day I die."

I sensed him disconnect, which was what I was hoping for.

We stood in silence a couple seconds before Jonathan said 'good night' and walked away, finally leaving me in peace.

Feeling eyes on me, I glanced over my shoulder.

There was just enough light coming in through the windows for me to somewhat see one of the Special Forces soldiers at the far wall. He was watching me, and our gazes met for the briefest second.

Understanding was in his gaze, and I guessed he'd overheard the conversation Jonathan and I'd just had.

He touched his index and middle fingers to his forehead in a salute. Then he crossed his arms tightly across his chest and closed his eyes.

This told me he trusted me just a little. You don't close your eyes on someone you think is a threat.

Did it bother me that I'd gained the trust of a brave and honest, albeit rough, American soldier? A trust I was going to break, and of a person I was secretly fighting against?

Not in the least. Besides, chances are he'd never know I was involved in what was going to unfold in the days to come.

I returned my gaze out the window, mind running over different parts of the plan.

For the next two days, Nate and I would sleep and work side by side our enemies.

## Chapter 9

### Regime Change

A sliver of a moon was nearing the western horizon and the night breeze had finally stilled. Eerie silence had fallen over the city and surrounding hills, and the atmosphere felt heavy.

Teams had been divided up before leaving the post and now advanced upon our initial targets: four generals.

Four teams, four targets and all at once. When they were secured, we'd rendezvous and reform into two groups. One unit would head to the prime minister's location, the other the president's in a city an hour and a half away.

Unless Nate drove. Then it'd only take an hour.

I was on the strike team approaching the residence of General Shah. Aside from myself, there was Major Walker, Sergeant Sanchez, and CIA case officer Lance.

One might think the more people the better on an operation like this. But too many bodies in a smaller house, like the one Shah lived in, meant we'd be tripping over each other.

We were geared out for this operation. That's another reason why, when I rarely work with our military, I enjoy it so much: they have all the good stuff.

The house was situated near the hills on the edge of the city. We stopped in the trees and studied the structure a moment.

The real potential problem was the pair of guard dogs Shah kept on the premises. Being bitten wasn't the initial worry: it was them barking and alerting the general, his family, and the neighbors.

However, Walker and I had night vision scopes. Sergeant Sanchez and Agent Lance had thermal imaging. Because stealth and silence was vital, all our primary weapons had suppressors.

None of us had raised our weapons yet to scope things out when I heard a breathy *woof*. It's the kind of sound a dog makes when he's spotted something he's not sure is a threat.

All four of us snapped up our rifles.

"*Two dogs,*" whispered Sanchez, "*edge of the yard and near the front door,*"

"Bourbon and Specter have the door," whispered Walker, aka Bourbon, beside me.

I locked in on the dog at the front door.

"*We've got near,*" replied Sanchez.

Half a second passed before Walker said, "Take 'em."

One moment the two dogs were standing, looking right at us. The next they were laying on the ground.

"Good shots," whispered Walker.

"*Breaking off for the rear,*" said Sanchez, and he and Lance moved off with the silence of shadows.

Walker and I made for the front door. On the way by, I grabbed the dead dog and carried him to some bushes. I didn't want to risk someone randomly walking by and seeing him in the yard.

I rejoined Walker's side as he reached the front door.

"*Got four heat signatures inside,*" came Lance's voice in my ear, "*two in the south bedroom, rear of the house...third and forth in another room, west side.*"

"Copy."

I'd already checked if the door was locked, and it was. I picked it in three seconds flat. Staying crouched, I gave a nod at Walker.

"*Romeo and Halo have an entrance, rear door,*" said Sanchez, aka Halo, "*should give a line of sight straight down the hall to the front door.*"

"Enter on my go," said Walker.

I grabbed the door handle, quietly turned it and then waited.

"Three...two...one...go."

I opened the door and stalked inside. In total silence, we cleared the living room and kitchen, to our right and left, and then advanced towards Sanchez and Lance, at the end of the hall.

General Shah had a wife and two children. Fortunately for those three, they'd be staying. How they dealt with their husband and father's indefinite disappearance, or how they survived, wasn't my concern.

On my way by the kitchen, I grabbed a chair. Upon passing the kids' bedroom, I propped it under the door knob.

Last thing we wanted was for them to hear something, come out of their rooms and see the four of us. If this next step was done perfectly, though, they wouldn't hear a thing.

I was just glad there was a door to their room. More often than not, there are only concrete doorways and the door is just a blanket.

I slipped on a pair of regular gloves over my fingerless ones. Lance and I removed a tiny tube and black strip of cloth from a pocket in our vests. We then applied the liquid onto the strip.

The anesthetic we were using was a derivative of chloroform. But unlike chloroform, which had a sweet scent and wore off almost instantly, the drug we were using was odorless and lasted a good ten minutes. We also wouldn't have to hold a cloth against our targets' mouths and noses; the fumes were enough to do the trick.

Of course, that also meant Lance and I had to be careful. Otherwise we'd each be taking a powernap.

When we were ready, I got a tap on the shoulder from Walker. We entered the bedroom and identified General Shah and his wife, both sleeping soundly.

I crouched beside the wife, Lance the general, and we held the strips just under their noses.

After counting to thirty, we glanced at each other and then gently nudged the husband and wife.

Nothing.

We gave Walker and Sanchez a thumbs-up. Lance and I stepped back while the two soldiers yanked the sheets back and pulled a black cloth bag over Shah's head.

Lance and I stored the clothes we'd used in ziplock bag's, with our gloves. Everything then went into a spare pocket on our cargo pants, away from our faces, just in case.

Being the biggest of the group, Walker grabbed Shah and tossed him over his shoulder.

Lance led the way out of the room, followed by me, then Walker. Sanchez closed the door on his way out.

I grabbed the chair that'd secured the kids' bedroom door when I walked past, and returned it to the kitchen.

Mindful of the body of the other guard dog at the front door, we exited the house. It was a short trek down the road to where we'd stashed our car.

Lance hastily injected the general with a mild sedative before gagging and stuffing him in the trunk.

Twenty minutes later, we arrived at the drop point, the location where we handed him off to a handful of Agency operatives. They were some of the reinforcements that'd arrived twelve hours before we began executing the plan.

Shah would only be in the shack thirty minutes tops. The other teams were already en route with their targets. Once everyone reached their drop points, the generals would be sent off to...wherever.

From the time the four teams reached their targets' residences, to the time they left them at the drop points, thirty-two minutes had passed.

Another ten minutes later and everyone met at the rendezvous point.

The moment the four of us on Walker's team entered the dilapidated apartment building, we knew the plan was in for some changes.

It was to be expected, because no plan survives the battlefield.

The agents keeping an eye on things from post were in an excitable state. Marshall was speaking with Commander Moore, who'd already returned with his team.

"Slight change of plans," said Marshall, looking at us. "The president is just leaving his villa in Lahore and is on his way here."

It was unlikely someone had tipped off Hasan. If he knew about us or what was happening, he wouldn't have left the safety of his villa; he would've hunkered down instead. He also wouldn't be driving to the same city we were presently occupying.

Unless he was a total idiot.

"That'll actually work out then," I thought out loud as I stepped over to a map taped on the wall.

"You're thinking Zimbabwe, '07," said Nate, appearing off my shoulder.

We glanced at each other, remembered there were others here and then faced the agents and soldiers in the room.

I looked at Marshall. "You thinking a loud breach of the PM's villa? Announce our presence and give him time to call Hasan and warn him?"

In spite of the stress of the situation, a trace of a smile appeared on Marshall's face. "Exactly. By the time that happens, our second team will have already passed his convoy. Hasan turns tail and heads back to his villa, where we'll be waiting. We strike when he's out in the open, while he's on approach to the compound and thinks he's safe."

"He'll have to pass through the outskirts," I said and jerked my thumb at the map. "Near the main road, there's a small field where a herder grazes his cattle. We could herd them into the street and force the convoy to stop without raising suspicion."

"Alpha and Bravo teams, head out," called Marshall, before looking at the commander, at his side, "A drone is tracking Hasan's vehicle now. We'll confirm they turn around, but you'll need to lay rubber to get into position on time."

The big man flashed a grin. "No problem."

Alpha team piled into two vehicles and got on the road.

Bravo also moved out, making for the PM's villa. Their job was made slightly easier by the type of breach they'd be executing. They wouldn't have to worry about

setting off alarms, or traversing the grounds in utmost silence. The idea now was to create as much chaos as possible, to scare the life out of the minister.

Nate and I were both with Alpha squad. The drivers of the vehicles drove as fast as Nate does, and we were nearly to Lahore when the call from the PM came in. Compliments of the agents at the outpost, they patched it through so we could hear.

"...*somebody is here!*" shouted the PM, voice barely audible over the sound of weapon's fire and breaking glass.

"*What?*" asked Hasan, alarm in his voice, "*What are—*"

"*I don't... they are...you must be staying there!*"

A deafening bang briefly drowned out the conversation.

"*Don't come to the city,*" panted the minister, and I guessed he was attempting to run from a pursuer, "*wait until...*"

He never got to finish. We heard a faint grunt and I guessed someone had tackled him. Then the call ended.

Not ten seconds later Moore received a phone call, listened a moment, and then hung up.

"Hasan has turned around and is heading back to Lahore," he called over his shoulder.

Now the race was on. Just because we were ahead of Hasan didn't mean we'd have adequate time to get into position. He was likely yelling at his driver to drive like a bat out of heck so they could get back to the compound. He'd make up ground quickly once we stopped and were out on foot.

It wasn't long before we reached the outskirts and slowed. The drivers parked on opposite streets and would stay with the vehicles. Everyone else piled out.

It was already decided who would do what, and Hughes and I took off for small field I'd mentioned. We reached it in two minutes flat. Inside, the scrawny cattle regarded us with mild interest.

We each found a decent sized stick in the brush and then waited.

Five minutes later, we heard Moore's update. "*The convoy is fifteen minutes out. Go ahead and bring in the doggies.*"

"Copy that," replied Hughes.

We flung open the gate.

To our relief, the cattle needed no encouragement to leave their enclosure. They walked right out and we directed them up the road.

There was a brief hitch when the cows wanted to stop three-quarters to the target location. After thirty seconds of poking them, I grabbed one of the leaders by the nose and flicked the stick behind me, popping it on the butt.

It huffed a snort and flicked its tail with distaste, but started forward. One cow followed us, then another and another, and the herd was moving again.

That's when we saw a white sedan rolling across the intersection ahead, before a light post stopped its forward progress with a *crunch*.

"*Five minutes out*," reported Moore.

Hughes and I left the cattle to mingle about the intersection. We took a pair of the tables left by some vendors and laid them about the street. Then we toppled a few benches for extra effect.

In the quiet of the early morning, we heard several vehicles drawing near.

One agent dropped into the driver's seat and slumped against the steering wheel. A second lay on the ground near the mess of tables and benches.

All the while, the cattle idled about in a bored manner.

Could we have ambushed Hasan's convoy while it was still out of the city? Sure, but they'd be moving fast and a roadblock would only encourage reckless driving. No one wanted to be tearing around the desert in darkness and risk hitting a herd of goats, or worse, a camel.

If we'd struck when they were in the city, it would've resulted in a noisy chase through the area and attract all kinds of attention we didn't want in the first place. Nor could we allow him to return to the safety of his villa.

It was best not to heighten Hasan's state of stress and paranoia any more than it already was.

Two vehicles in a row appeared up the street. As hoped, they slowed drastically until finally stopped near the intersection.

The windows and windshield of Hasan's vehicles were resistant to weapon rounds like .223, 5.56 NATO and 30.06 and lesser calibers.

However, they weren't permanently resistant; the glass could only hold out against a handful of rounds.

And neither this type of glass, nor the engine block, was impervious to a Barret .50 caliber sniper round.

Both vehicles were instantly rendered inoperable. The drivers and anyone inside were still trying to figure out what was going on when our two vehicles pulled up beside them, and several of us ran out of the shadows.

The agent on the ground, and the one in the wrecked car, sprang into action and drew their weapons as they approached the convoy.

Carefully placed rounds took out the front windows of the car Hasan was in. We knew which one he was riding in thanks to the drone tracking the signal on his phone when the prime minister called him.

Sanchez and Moore meled the driver and passenger. Reaching in, they unlocked the doors and Hughes and Anderson cautiously opened the back doors.

The bodyguard beside Hasan offered resistance and took three rounds to the chest. As for the president, he found a bag over his head before being yanked from the car.

He was shoved into the SUV, which then sped away. The remainder of us, including the two snipers, jumped into the other car and took off after the lead vehicle.

The execution of the grab itself took under two minutes, from the time Hasan's convoy stopped, to the time we drove away.

We high-tailed it to the designated drop point, where we received word the prime minister had been snatched successfully.

Dawn was approaching and we heard the first prayers of the day echo over the city while we finished debriefing. At last, everyone meandered away, either to find breakfast or to sleep.

Marshall Byrne thanked Nate and me for our assistance. Afterwards, we stepped outside and disappeared into the morning crowd as the sun rose.

## **Chapter 10**

### **Sabotaged**

The same day we'd removed Pakistan's leaders, Reza emerged from hiding. Any shock the general population might have felt over Hasan's disappearance was overridden with excitement.

As for the people, they were told by officials that Hasan and his supporters had fled because of increasing dislike by the people and military. They'd been pressuring him to leave, and so he finally did.

There were rumors about an ambush on Hasan's convoy, but that was written off as an insurgent attack. That hadn't really been his car, anyway.

The mess at the prime minister's residence was blamed on Chechen radicals who'd escaped from jail a few days previously.

For the next two weeks, Jack, the team and I watched how things proceeded. Sure enough, elections were held quickly and Reza won the presidency by a landslide.

We then watched with satisfaction as Reza appointed Jawad Baloch, his best friend, as his prime minister. Baloch was equally loved by the people, and even more so by the military.

I wondered what the CIA thought about him, because he wouldn't be easily manipulated by them.



Nate and I were watching from a balcony up the street as Reza finished a speech. After concluding, he waved at the people and made for his convoy.

He climbed into the car, and it was just pulling away when there was a flash and deafening bang. His vehicle was engulfed in flames. The other two, in front and behind, were totaled.

It was the handiwork of Commander Amin and his group. But Jack had helped them keep their plans of this attack from reaching the keenly listening ears of the Agency.

Not that it was difficult. They'd already planned the bombing long in advance and gathered supplies. That way, there'd be no mad rush at the last minute to buy materials.

The knowledge of the attack was also kept between Amin and his two chief officers. The fewer people who knew, the less likelihood there was of the plot being thwarted.

Nate and I stepped inside the apartment and reviewed the final plan with Jack. We were flying home late tonight, but there was still one more move to make.

Reviewing finished, Jack disappeared to initiate the plan.

Nate and I slipped into disguise while Bruce and Brad finished packing. By the time we were finished, the afternoon was wearing on into evening and dusk was falling.

Nate received the call from Jack and then looked at me. "Time to go."

"See you at the plane," I said to Brad and Bruce on the way out the door.

Down in the streets, Nate and I headed in the direction of the Agency post. We were nearly there when we heard the commotion a few roads over. The pedestrians around us grew anxious before they began moving in the opposite direction of whatever was coming.

Slipping into an alley, Nate and I picked up to a run. It was getting darker by the minute, and as it did, the faster we ran.

We spotted the building the Agency spies were using and crouched atop a shack.

Minutes later, militants, loyal to the now deceased Reza, appeared off to our left.

They'd received an anonymous tip about some spies who were behind the bombing and where they were staying. If the militants wanted to exact revenge, they needed to do it before they escaped.

Nate and I were to oversee the attack. Jack didn't want any Agency agents actually killed. But we didn't want them to stick around to remedy the chaos we'd just created with Reza's death.

I don't know why Jack was being so soft with the enemy spies.

*Let them get gunned down, I thought, then there'll be fewer agents for us to worry about later.*

But my opinion was irrelevant, and orders were orders.

Jumping from the shack, Nate and I eased closer. We stopped again one road from the building. Three agents sprinted out the rear of the structure as the first militants entered the front.

According to Jack, there were six agents remaining at the post. So, the first half were free and clear.

Some of the militants moved around the structure, towards the rear, to cut off anyone escaping.

Nate and I sprinted through the growing darkness towards the pair of gunmen. We hit them hard and fast, before taking up their rifles and ducking into cover by a row of dwellings.

The rear door opened and out ran two more agents. They couldn't take time to consider the bodies, and they ran for all they were worth into an alleyway. A breath later, the sixth agent appeared...with a pair of militants on his heels.

Another couple more appeared around the far corner.

"I'll hold the pack," said Nate, as the lone agent tore past us.

There was just enough natural light left for me to identify that...it was Jonathan Ross.

"I've got the straggler," I replied, turning and lunging into a run.

Nate squeezed off a couple rounds as I ducked into a passage, sprinting hard.

Hair on the back of my neck rising, my spy sense was telling me there were more gunmen nearby. They must have split up to scout the area, just in case any spies slipped out.

By now, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and the lights around the city allowed okay visibility. Climbing onto the roof of a shack, I saw a running shadow to my right. A few more were behind it.

I broke into a run again, moving parallel to the lead shadow, whom I guessed was Jonathan. He was fast, I gave him that.

Then again, when you're literally running for your life...

Two militants appeared in the alley below on my left. I leapt from the roof for them. On my descent, I brought the butt of my rifle down on top of the head of one gunman. His body was falling as I spun and meleed his friend.

I didn't want to draw other militants to this area by opening fire.

*"I'm coming up behind you,"* said Nate's voice through the com in my ear.

As for me, it was back to rooftop running. It took me nearly a minute of all out sprinting to catch up to one of the militants chasing Jonathan.

Up ahead, I spotted a crouched shadow stalking along a roof. It paused at the far edge and peered over.

A shout came from somewhere, and the shadow spun and leapt off the roof.

More shouting.

I'd just found Jonathan.

Coming up behind the first militant, I rendered him unconscious. Turning a corner, I did the same thing to the second.

There was no one between me and Jonathan now, just twenty feet away. That might have been the end of it.

But it wasn't.

Jonathan suddenly ducked, weapons fire from an alley to his left just missing him. The bullets were still flying past him as he returned fire with his handgun.

That neutralized the threat, or one of them.

He dodged out of the way of a stream of bullets and moved my direction.

At the far end of the passage, another militant emerged.

Jonathan skittered closer to me, back still turned. His weapon was raised, and he glanced over his shoulder to make sure his route was clear.

That's when he spotted me.

After doing a double-take, he jerked to a stop, and then looked back at the other militant. He was surrounded and didn't stand a chance, especially when another gunman appeared in the street in front of him.

It was sheer instinct that made him crouch, arms covering his head.

I was still walking towards Jonathan, and I sidestepped his crouching form so I wasn't shooting directly over him.

The AK-47 isn't known for its accuracy. Plus I was shooting in a low-light setting.

The boss had said "no Agency casualties," and there wouldn't be, not on my watch.

I dropped the militant straight ahead, and then the second one as he emerged from the passage to the left.

The reason I'd continued to approach Jonathan was because of what he attempted to do when he looked at me again.

His brain, running a thousand miles an hour, acknowledged that two militants were down. How or why that had happened, he didn't care. All he knew was that I was still standing and had a rifle.

Nate and I were again dressed as locals for this outing, and Jonathan assessed that I was another militant. I'd already slung the rifle over my shoulder, freeing my hands and keeping it out of my way.

But that doesn't matter when you believe you're about to die. If your enemy has a visible weapon anywhere, he's fair game.

Jonathan spun to one knee as he raised his gun. But he'd already let me get much too close.

I ripped the gun away and kned him in the head before kicking him in the chest to help him to the ground. When he raised his head, he was looking down the barrel of his own gun.

He lifted his eyes to me, and I regarded him grimly.

"Ali! Yella!" I heard Nate shout behind me.

Another tense moment passed before I released the magazine, ejected the round from the chamber...and tossed the gun at Jonathan's feet.

"Yella," repeated Nate, *hurry*.

Then I turned and jogged into the blackness of another passage. Nate and I tossed our rifles and sprinted through the slums, heading for where our car was parked. Once we reached it, we sped for an airfield.

As we boarded the plane, I rated this mission as a complete success, on our side anyway.

Reza's death wasn't a surprise to any of the team. If Baloch wasn't going to be a key player, we wouldn't have gone to such trouble to break him out of jail and keep him hidden.

With Reza gone, Baloch would take power. It was a dream for Amin, and the military government, come true.

I allowed myself a smile as I dropped into my seat and wondered what Marshall was thinking right now. All the hard work of turning informants, getting assets in place, gathering intelligence and studying targets had seemed like it'd paid off.

Initially, the operation on the Agency's end had been mostly successful. So a few informants had been kidnapped or killed, but it all worked out.

That is, until today, when they were hit with the surprise of the car bomb. In that instant, everything the Agency had worked towards had come undone. Adding insult to injury, they were being run out of town.

All of Marshall Byrne's best-laid plans, and the hard work of his agents had been sabotaged from the very beginning.