

The Legacy Program

Book One

Chapter 1

Evan Black

Halabja, Iraq 2007

I'd been at war long before I landed in Iraq.

Anna's voice haunted me, waiting for me to close my eyes at night. Tonight, it came early. I lay back on the cot, holding my pistol and drifting back to that night in Chicago.

I was on the ground, being kicked and beaten, sirens taunting me in the distance. They pulled her out, slamming the car door as she begged to be let go. Our eyes met—she knew what was about to happen before I did. She screamed my name as they dragged her, heels scraping through the trash and broken glass, toward the abandoned gas station.

Her cries follow me into my dreams at night, every night, as they will for the rest of my life.

I belonged in that casket.

The weight of the pistol told me I had a full mag - seventeen rounds. I only needed one. My heart pounded in my eardrums as I kicked my legs off the cot, staring at my trembling hands..

Just fucking get it over with already.

I sucked in a combat breath and blew it out through pursed lips the way they taught us in training.

"You good over there, Poet?" A beat passed before the words wormed their way into my consciousness.

I snapped out of it and shoved the pistol under my leg. Barney sat down next to me with a smile so wide it nearly pushed me off the cot.

"I'm good." I added a smile and as much bass as I could muster.

"Uh-huh. You sure? Something tells me you were drifting off somewhere even more wretched than Iraq."

The high-pitched whir of fans cooling the six-inch-thick military laptop clicked on and off, competing with the drone of

fluorescent bulbs for noise dominance, alternating like dueling bullfrogs.

“I’m fine, honest.”

His look told me he wasn’t convinced. He’d been one of my instructors during our initial training called *Indoc*, and he’d been looking after me ever since.

He knew what happened, at least the version I told him. The version I told myself.

We were gearing up for my first mission with this unit, Combat Applications Group. Outsiders called them Delta. Expert killers about to hit a bomb-making compound in Halabja, Iraq. They would never have let anyone hurt Anna the way I did.

“Put it out of your mind until we get back. That’s an order.”

He looked over as I avoided eye contact. I nodded, but said nothing, using a small mirror to apply greasy black camouflage to my face.

The microwave went off with a ‘Ting,’ and Barney walked over and pulled out a packet of strawberry Pop-Tarts, the aroma of sweet warm bread ruined by a lingering smell of gun oil and sweat.

I checked the batteries in my night vision and opened the door a crack, but shut it when I saw a sliver of the chaos outside.

Barney was still staring at me.

“What? I’m good to go, if anyone approaches the house, I’ll light them up.” I finished the last two smears with the camo. “I’ll be ready.”

“Yeah, cool, but I don’t want you fighting ghosts out there. The guys that attacked you and Anna are long gone. Killing someone here won’t change what happened back home years ago.”

“I know, Barn. I won’t, I promise.”

In a tear-soaked moment, after I told him what happened, I told him I envied them for being killers. He never let me forget it.

“You don’t want to turn into one of these dead-eyed-Opies, smoking Iraqi farmers ‘cause they got picked on in high school. We’re fighting a war, and there’s a place for people like that right now. What

happens to them when they go back home with a permanent callous on their heart? Nothing good.”

He made a gun with his fingers, pressed it to his temple, dropping the hammer with his thumb and opening his hand on the other side to simulate brains coming out.

I smiled, raising my arm as if I were holding a rope and hanging myself. I tilted my head to the side and stuck my tongue out, rolling my eyes back to complete the image.

We had a laugh pantomiming our deaths. Gallows humor was as military as the socks they issued in basic training.

“I’m working on it, Barn,” I said once we stopped laughing. “I just wish I was more like you and less like me.”

A Combat Controller, at five eight, muscular and blond, Todd Rubble got the nickname 'Barney' for obvious reasons. He exuded bravery, a confident swagger that wafted into the room with him like cologne.

“You want to be short and handsome, don’t you? I knew you hated being tall and ugly!”

I flashed him a smile to let him know he’d picked me up off the floor once again.

“I’m serious, Poet. Too many guys think they’re keeping their buddies alive, and that makes it okay to kill innocent people. But just because there are worse options, that doesn’t make something right. The lesser evil is still evil – you have to at least consider if there’s a way to keep them both alive.” He stood and gripped my shoulder. “You still have a conscience. Don’t let anyone take that away from you. Once it’s gone, it’s gone.”

Before Barn recruited me to fill in for a wounded medic from the Two-Four, Air Force tier one operators, I’d been safe by comparison, operating out of Baghdad International Airport. Even in war he must have thought the biggest threat to me... was me.

Tonight was my first real taste of combat.

“I won’t let anger get the best of me. Or freeze up. Or say anything stupid.”

“Humph, you sure about that last part?”

I smiled as he helped me shoulder my pack. With rescue equipment, medical gear, ammo, IV fluids, and a giant box-O-drugs, my pack weighed over a hundred pounds.

They didn't need a PJ, they needed a damn pack mule.

"Fear's good out there anyway, keeps you from getting stupid."

Easy for him to say. Even the Delta guys treated him with respect.

I pulled the door wide open.

A cacophony of aviation noise and blinding light flooded in from the flight line. Men scurried past, waving orange marshaling wands to direct landing helicopters. Support team soldiers ducked low to resist the prop wash as they pulled gear off the birds.

Forty-foot light poles, surrounded by desert pterodactyls the Iraqis called mosquitoes, bathed the flight line in amber light. Halabja had been around since the second millennium BC, and lights in the distance outside the gates illuminated the memorial to Kurds who died in the chemical attacks.

I stepped onto the sidewalk leading to the flight line.

Crews were spreading a material like kitty litter to sop up spilled jet fuel. The smell hung in the humid night air, thick enough to coat your teeth. I sniffed the air twice and made a quizzical look at Barney.

"So that's what cancer smells like; I always wondered," I called back to Barney, netting a smile.

In the TOC, the Army Sergeant Major made it clear I was one percent bullets and ninety-nine percent Band Aids—stay back unless someone got hit.

Check.

"Here." Barney handed me three cubes of chewing gum as we walked to the helicopters, rotors spinning, ready to fly us to the target.

"Juicy Fruit?"

"Cinnamon. That's all they had."

It was better than nothing. I wondered if it would be the last thing I would ever taste. An hour later, the birds dropped us off in the

desert five clicks from the target area. After the birds flew off, the night was as still as anywhere on earth.

Even at night, Iraq was in the low nineties. By the time we reached the compound, sweat had soaked through my uniform. Dark and quiet, we still had the element of surprise. A typical goat farm, clay-and-mud structures lay inside a six-foot perimeter wall. Tonight, it was the overnight quarters of an Al Qaeda-Iraq (AQI) lieutenant, according to ISA—*The Activity*—JSOC's military intelligence unit.

0230 hours.

The night was pitch black. Stars peeked out from behind fast-moving clouds. Even the moon kept its head down, hanging low on the horizon. Night vision cast a green hue on the darkness.

Ten men stood in silence at the outer wall, rifles up and at the ready. Infrared lasers, visible only through night-vision, lit up like green lightsabers that stretched to the clouds. Predator drones overhead fed thermal imagery to the commander's tablet. He checked it before snapping the case shut.

My heart ticked like the hundredths column on a stopwatch, pushing me to the verge of hyperventilating.

The enemy was just on the other side of the wall.

The Delta Team Sergeant wiggled his finger for me to come forward. Instead of leaning in, he grabbed my body armor and pulled my ear close to his mouth. The smell of coffee and gingivitis were cruel accomplices to the odor of dung that hung low in the hot, wet air.

"Stay here by the gate and watch our six," he said in a whispered voice. "Don't let anyone in or out of the compound. Keep it on safe and don't shoot us in the ass."

"Roger that, sir," I said. The Delta operators seemed eager to go, just waiting for the signal. Men who cut people's heads off waited for them inside the farmhouse, but these guys didn't even know fear anymore. It sounded like heaven.

I looked away as the charge on the gate went off, the blast wave shocking my chest and replacing the smell of goat dung with dirt and cordite. An acrid taste coated my mouth with all three. The

explosion lit up the farm in a burst of bright green light; a calamity of sound echoed across the hillside a moment later.

The Delta guys were ten or fifteen years older than me, but I could not have kept up with them on my best day. They were inside the first structure before I could get to my feet.

They battered down the front door without a charge, using a heavy ram to pop the lock. Inside the structure, brief flashes of light flickered through the windows as I watched from the gate. The unmistakable sound of suppressed rounds followed, sporadic, unruly pops going off like the last few seconds of microwaving popcorn. Each pop meant death, and there were plenty of them.

It was exciting and terrifying all at once. I stood at the gate as instructed and waited for the dreaded call for *Doc!* - hoping they wouldn't need me. The last kernel popped, and the horrible business ended.

Night vision was like looking through a pair of cheap swim goggles shaped like empty toilet paper tubes, and I had to swing my head back and forth to see the entire house. I swung my head wide, past the house, and laid eyes on a figure walking in the distance, fifty meters to the left side of the structure. I assumed it was one of the Delta team, clearing out the goat pens and little storage huts where they stored the feed.

A moment later, a break in the cloud cover showed the unmistakable outline of an AK-47, the large, iconic magazine of the world's most prolific weapon jutting out like a boar's tusk.

He raised the weapon and advanced toward the main house.

Adrenaline sent unguided energy through me like a downed power line. My hands shook. Breath came in short gasps.

I raised my laser designator and aimed at the figure's chest. I could make out his dishdasha, a flowing robe worn by men in rural areas, and the AK-47 he was pointing at the house.

I flicked the safety off.

He pulled back his arm, and I struggled to center the laser. It danced up and down on his chest as I trembled. I willed my pointer finger into the trigger guard, but it would not budge. The man moved closer to the house. I stared at my finger, desperate to make it move.

Barney emerged from the house, smiled at me, then followed my laser out into the distance.

The figure, now ten or twelve meters away, opened fire, bright flashes licking out the end of the barrel. I panicked as I tried to make my finger pull the trigger, but nothing happened.

Barney raised his rifle and engaged the enemy with three successive shots to the chest. The man crumpled into a pile, falling straight down into his robe.

I turned my head toward the house just in time to feel myself catapulted into the night air, landing on the other side of the gate. Whatever hit me sent me flying, and stopped dead in its tracks. I tried to inhale, but the blast knocked the wind out of me, along with my soul.

When I looked up, a loud pop and a brief flash of light happened on the other side of the wall. I felt the overpressure, but remained too discombobulated to recognize it.

Air came rushing into my chest, hard and shallow at first, then deeper.

I dusted myself off and made it to my feet. A couple more flashes preceded men yelling in the courtyard.

“Doc! Doc, get the fuck over here!”

The figure had tossed a grenade before Barney shot him. Whoever had knocked me out of the way had taken the brunt of it. I looked down and saw Barney. He had knocked me out of the gate and out of the blast zone, but the weight of my pack stopped him and left him on the wrong side of the wall. The grenade went off, shredding his right lower leg. Dark blood spurted into the sand.

My friend was bleeding to death on the desert floor. I blocked everything out. I slipped into my training. Crank the tourniquet tight, plus a quarter turn. Check for distal pulse. Sixteen gauge IV; run it wide open. Only one pack AB negative; O Positive as back-up. Universal donor. Ketamine for pain until there’s a BP of 100.

It was muscle memory, and I performed with limited conscious thought. I held his hand in the helicopter after two tourniquets, three units of blood, and a bit of fentanyl later.

“What happened, Todd? I never even saw him throw anything.” I yelled over the rotors as we landed.

He shrugged. It occurred to me he might not remember himself. I just knew that he had saved my life. He smacked his gums a few times as the fentanyl made its way into his bloodstream.

“I dunno... I just saw the grenade land right at your feet. I was trying to take us both past the gate, but the damn thing went off.”

His blood pressure leveled off, but I knew he was going to lose his leg. The grenade would have killed me for sure. If I had taken the shot, he never could have thrown it.

“Thank you, brother.” I pressed my forehead to his. “I’m sorry.”

The surgery team met us on the flight line, and we used a sheet to slide him over to the gurney. I held the IV bag as we ran along, wheeling him into the surgical unit.

“Don’t worry about it. We got him,” he said. “I wish I was a track star like you. I would have been faster.”

There wasn’t even time to process what had happened. I choked for the second time. That much I knew. The last thing he would want to be was me. No one would. Not even me.

“I’m sorry, Barn, I tried to... I couldn’t do it. I let him get you.”

He grabbed the doorjamb to prevent us from moving. “Don’t worry about that,” he said, pulling me in close. “Just promise me you’re not gonna lose your soul out there.”

I held his hand tight. He was wide-eyed and looked at me like it was the last time. “Just don’t get numb to hurting people. Got it?”

The nurse tried to push the gurney through the door into the surgical unit, but he used all his strength to keep it from moving.

“Promise me, Evan.”

“I promise.”

He relaxed, and they pushed him into surgery.

I resolved in that moment that the next time I had to pull the trigger, I would be ready. No one else was going to pay for my weakness.

I would not fail again.

Chapter 2

I grabbed what I needed from the base hospital and caught a ride back to Halabja by myself a couple of hours later. The Team Sergeant reviewed the footage from the overhead thermals. We'd overlooked an insurgent sleeping out by the goats, lost amid the animals' heat signatures. He had thrown the grenade just before Barney shot him.

I walked past the Delta guys, who neither looked at me nor said a word. They knew I choked, and a man they respected paid the price. I went straight back to our room and dropped onto a cot in the back room, exhausted.

Lying in my rack, I replayed the scene a thousand times, my mind bouncing off the walls in a circular monologue.

I refitted my medical bag with the tourniquets, IV fluids, and meds I had used on Todd. Anything to get my mind off the firefight. It didn't work, and I retched with dry heaves for a few minutes into a garbage can.

Clean up. Refit magazines. Stock medic bag.

Stay busy.

Stop thinking.

Yeah, right...

I was about done with my bag when the front door banged open. The captain lobbed orders into the room like a grenade.

"Air Force, you got a mission. Grab your kit and let's go."

I was in no state to do that.

"On it," I called after him, but he was back out the door by the time I got to my feet. I'd have to face the rest of the team. I couldn't do it, not without Barney.

I threw on my body armor, slipped one arm through my med bag, and grabbed my rifle. When I stepped out into the night air, I saw them.

Three men in black fatigues, carrying identical rifle setups to the Delta operators', stood on the flight line with the captain, along with other gear I didn't recognize.

They arrived in a tricked-out Black Hawk that was whisper-quiet. It was almost silent at idle from where we were, and I could see a couple more guys on board.

"These guys are from an OGA unit on station thirty clicks north, and they have a downed team that needs patching up. You ready?"

That would have been Iran the way the crow flies, but it could have been on the border. He didn't even have to talk over the church mouse posing as a seven-ton fast-attack helicopter.

OGA—Other Government Agency. CIA gets all the cool toys, and the military is full of rhetorical questions. This was one of them. It was not optional.

"Roger that, sir."

"Our medic is one of the men down. We need the full kit. Hurst tool, pneumatic air bags, and all your rescue gear." The man knew exactly what gear a PJ carried and gave orders like a man in charge.

Two other men stood with him. One was scruffy and dark-skinned, with unkempt curls of hair absconding from beneath a blue Cubs hat like inmates escaping from a prison riot. The one next to him was tall and lean and wasn't a guy you'd want talking to your girlfriend, wearing a permanent scowl. All of them gave off an air of owning the place.

"It's a CSAR mission, and we need to move. Now," the one in charge said.

The other two guys fell back with me to grab two bags that had my rescue gear. I pointed to what we needed, and they grabbed the bags and hustled them out to the bird without a word.

"If we're getting into a firefight, shouldn't we have more muscle?" I asked, rejoining the captain. It seemed logical, since ten of the world's best shooters were in a building fifty feet away.

"Just you. And we're leaving right now. I have wounded, so move your ass," the leader said.

“You’re under their command until you get back,” the captain said.

I shot a quizzical look as I grabbed my med bag and turned toward the chopper.

“Orders,” the captain said with a shrug. “Straight from the top.”

“BIAP?”

“Pentagon,” he shouted after us as we jogged toward the chopper. We climbed in. A moment later, we leapt into the air, centrifugal force pulling me back hard, despite the engine purring quiet enough to talk over.

I had questions, but no one was going to answer them. An American team was down, so off we went. These guys had to be special activities spooks, but so what? Delta worked with the CIA's Special Activities Division all the time. Getting orders all the way from the Pentagon was unusual for a Combat Search and Rescue like this.

“Put this on,” the leader said. “You’ll need it for this mission. You can call me Boss. I’m the team lead.” He pointed his thumb at the two men from the flight line and two more inside the helicopter. “That’s Kid, Coop, Latte and Salty. The one in the back is Red.”

None of them even looked up, but I nodded at them anyway. If I were lucky, I’d forget their names before it mattered. I had plenty of other things living rent free in my head just then.

He handed me a compact night-vision device that screwed into the bracket holding my other set. I flipped it down, and it was incredible. A thermal overlay boosted visibility tenfold, and the green hue was bright and clear.

The bird banked into a one-eighty, heading east and north, climbing out of Halabja, which meant we were heading into Iran. No one said a word. The G-forces pulled me back into the seat once again, much harder than usual. I lowered my night vision and saw the terrain rushing past the window, as the base's lights faded into the distance quicker than expected.

The pilot engaged the jets, and we went even faster. We had to be going twice as fast as a normal Black Hawk, and that was a conservative estimate.

If we were heading to our deaths, it would be over soon.

“What’s the situation?” I asked over the jets. It was louder now, but even with the rotors and jets at full power, it was still quieter than a normal Black Hawk idling on the tarmac. “How many wounded we got?”

They ignored me and continued checking gear.

“We don’t know,” Boss said. “A six-man team was on a crash recovery mission, and we lost comms. We’ll fly overhead and do a BDA, then land four or five hundred yards out and hump in. We think they’re in a ravine.”

There were six of us on the bird. Not enough for CSAR. We needed more people.

“A dozen Delta guys can jump off right now,” I said.

“We have six. That’s it. We only got you because we were desperate,” he said. “I’m hoping our medic is not dead, he was pararescue, too.”

The man called Coop leaned over and stuck a battered piece of paper into my chest and a pen in my hand.

“Sign it,” he yelled, louder than he needed to. “And hand over your dog tags.”

It was impossible to see the writing, even with the upgraded night vision. The person on my right flicked on a penlight, illuminating the page. No one had ever asked me to sign anything on the way to a target. I understood we had to protect operational security, but ...

Right now? Here?

I scanned the document, curious what was so important.

“I didn’t say read it, asshole,” Coop said. “I said sign it.”

Boss leaned over and held up his hand, indicating he was handling it.

“Our ground team was retrieving a new satellite when they took fire. We’re the QRF. The paperwork is an NDA. You can never talk about this mission, these operators, or anything you see on the ground,” he said. “This mission never happened. That’s what it says. Please sign it. We’ll debrief after we get back.”

This was bad. We had no intel about how hot the landing zone would be or the condition of the casualties. Drones or satellites should have been feeding us ISR updates. Going in blind was dangerous. They'd walked into a firefight.

"Fuck it," I said, and scribbled my name as best I could, resting the piece of paper on my leg and handing it back to the asshole.

These men didn't want me there.

Ditto.

A few seconds later, the bird began the descent.

Chapter 3

“*One* minute,” the co-pilot yelled.

The man closest to the port-side door extended the strap securing him to the helicopter and slid a large-caliber machine gun on a track that folded into the space behind the door. He opened a firing port in the side door and rotated the device until it was targeting the area.

We banked hard and did a three-sixty around the landing zone. Without warning, the gunner fired an energy beam across the entire area, washing out my night-vision goggles with light. I looked out the other side and saw the beam illuminating the crash site below.

I peered out the side window. There were men down there all right, along with a large object that looked like a giant egg. The men weren’t moving. I hoped they were the enemy. A slit trench forty meters beyond the crash site held four figures, but I couldn’t tell if they were moving or not.

The gunner let loose again with what I’d thought was a machine gun. Instead of bullets, a beam of white hot light shot out of the mounted weapon. It lit up the entire area as bright as daylight for a second or two when the beam hit the satellite. We were pulling hard Gs into the turn like we were on a roller coaster at Six Flags.

I press-checked my first round and got ready to disembark, hoping they wouldn’t be shooting at us yet.

“Is it what we thought?” Boss yelled at the gunner.

“Yes, sir,” Salty shot back.

Boss unbuckled and slid forward to talk to the pilots.

“Change of plans. Set us down about two-fifty from the trench. That beam’s only gonna buy us a few minutes,” he called out to both pilots. “I’ll leave Salty with you guys so he can hit it again from the air if we need it.” He slipped back into his seat and slapped Salty on the shoulder. “Keep hitting it once you get airborne.”

Salty nodded.

The pilot flared the aircraft to bleed off speed and began the descent to the landing zone. “We’ve got a radar hit on a bogey sixty

miles out and closing fast,” the co-pilot said. “You’re gonna have company in about twenty minutes.”

“Fuck. Fine. Go stealth on the ground and wait until they land.” Boss tapped Kid on the helmet. “Grab the SAW. We’re gonna need to set up a hasty ambush. Set it up in the slit trench. We’ll play dead until they land.” He pulled a SMAW from behind the headrest and handed it to the man who had berated me about the paperwork.

“What if they don’t fall for it?” Coop asked, stowing the SMAW, a modern bazooka, on his rucksack. “A bird overhead raining down fire is gonna be a bad day.”

“You’re cleared hot on the bird if they start shooting,” Boss said to the pilots. “Don’t worry about the ground troops, we’ll take care of them. Either way, once they arrive on station, kill their comms. If we’re lucky, it’ll give us enough time to recover it.”

“Roger that,” the pilot said.

“What’s plan C?” Coop said.

“MOAB.”

This was disconcerting. A MOAB was ‘Massive Ordnance Air Blast’ ... or in grunt parlance, Mother of All Bombs; a twenty-one-thousand-pound bomb that registers on the Richter scale and has the mushroom cloud of a nuke.

We were not giving that satellite to the Iranians under any circumstances, even if it took a giant puff of smoke and our lives to do it.

The bird touched down, and we bailed out. I pulled my other bags off, and two guys grabbed them and moved ahead of me. They knew what to do and didn’t need instructions. We hurried toward the trench, lasers on the ridge, scanning with high-resolution night vision.

No movement.

Three of the bodies seemed cooler than the other two in the thermal optic. They didn’t even look whole, as if they’d been cut in half. I said nothing. The bodies might be their dead friends. We held fast behind a defilade to assess the last hard point of cover before the trench.

Boss took a knee next to the man pulling rear security.

“Rig it up.” Latte peeled off, and Red fell in right behind him like they’d done it a hundred times, heading toward the satellite. Boss squeezed the shoulder of the man in front of the stack, and we moved closer to the trench, lasers scanning in all directions.

Lasers lit up the trench as we piled in. Two guys stayed topside to cover us in a classic L-shaped assault.

No need. Everyone was down.

“Kill the lasers; that bird’s almost in range,” Boss said. I switched mine off. It would take the Iranians nine or ten minutes to cover the last thirty miles, assuming they didn’t have a cool guy helicopter. It would have to be enough.

Two guys who were lying topside outside the trench were dead. The first body only had half a head and one arm. The other one was much worse.

“I’m starting triage,” I said as the other men set up the machine gun on top of the trench.

“No time, asshole. We have two minutes, and we need all the guns we can get trained on the X,” Coop said. “Save your Band-Aids for later. Bullets first.”

I knew this border area well from working with Barney as he plotted his air support strategies. We had time.

“Sir, the Iranians will send a UH-1H Huey out of Dazful Army base—a hundred fifty knots an hour, tops. Let me at least check for survivors. The pilot said we have ten minutes - I’ll be ready in seven.”

My heart was pounding, but if I had any chance to help them, I had to act fast. I didn’t think the wounded had another ten minutes based on the injuries to the dead.

“Stand by, both of you,” Boss said, keying up the radio. “Captain, is it still one bogey inbound?”

“Affirmative,” the pilot responded. “Thirty miles out. ETA, ten mikes.”

“Copy. Let us know if anything changes. We’re set here.” Boss turned to me. “Hurry up. We’re going to play dead in seven minutes, no matter what. The mission comes first.”

I set off along the ditch to locate the other casualties I'd spotted on the way in. I only had my med bag with me, nothing heavy like traction splints or folding litters, but at least I could stop any massive bleeding. It might buy me enough time to save someone.

The first body I came to was dead. Very dead. I wasn't sure why. Even with these upgraded goggles, I couldn't tell. His heat signature was dead degrees lower than it needed to be. If we were in an E.R., I might have worked on him; out here, there was no time.

Six minutes.

The next body was three meters farther down, still warm, but unresponsive. I knelt down, unclipped his body armor, and gave him a sternal rub.

"Ahrreg, you fuck," the patient said. "Stop it!"

He moaned the words more than made a coherent statement, but he was alive. Something told me I had found my fellow paramedic. We do sternal rubs on other people; they're not supposed to do it to us. He did not like it.

Four minutes.

I patted him down to feel for wet spots indicating major blood loss. I cut off the body armor's straps, and bingo. He'd taken a hit just below the plate, winning a wet T-shirt contest he hadn't signed up for. I packed it with dressing and wrapped it with tape to provide pressure.

"Time's up, new guy," Coop yelled over. "Enemy is entering the zone. Stay still until they touch down. Let 'em think we're dead."

The enemy bird was almost on station. I used a pressurized can of QuikClot under the dressing and put his body armor over the wound, pushing down on it with my foot to add pressure. It was all I could do for him.

One minute.

I rested my gun on the trench and laid a spare mag on the deck. I froze as light from the helicopter became visible in the dark desert sky. Sounds of the rotors beating the air into submission grew from a distant whisper to a full-on hurricane.

Sand from the hovering helicopter whipped into my face. Alive or dead, this would be over quick.

We were seconds away from going loud.

Chapter 4

Hannah

Washington, DC suburbs, 2007

The smell of death hit her nose at the top of the stairs, taking her right back to the opening days of the war in Iraq. The only thing missing were burning tires and garbage in the street. It was four o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon in Alexandria, Virginia, a wealthy Washington, DC, suburb. For the man hanging from the ceiling in apartment 3C, death had already come and gone.

The Reaper doesn't care how clean the streets are.

A cop outside the building checked the name on her press pass and gestured with his thumb over his shoulder, signaling for her to go in. The cop offered a jar of Vicks to put under her nose to mitigate the smell.

"Nah," she said, smiling at him. "Peppermint shit still smells like shit."

"Suit yourself," he said, raising a brow and nodding.

She took a mask and a pair of booties out of a box on the steps and slipped them on. The mask wasn't gonna keep out the smell, but it kept the spit in her mouth from contaminating the crime scene, and that kept the detectives happy. She didn't care whether the detectives liked her because she'd served overseas, or because she was nice to look at and followed the rules. For Billy, a homicide detective with APD, it was her witty banter.

It was slow, so when he texted her the address, she shot right over.

She pushed through the door to the apartment, and the sight of the body alarmed even her soldier's eyes. The naked body was male, that was obvious, and had been there several days. The skin was mottled, and whatever blood was still in him coagulated in the lower extremities. She took a moment to examine the contraption rigged to the ceiling to string him up.

The body hung over a painter's bench by piano wire running through two half-inch metal eyelets; one screwed into the ceiling and

one to the floor. His hands were zip tied behind him, and his mouth was duct-taped shut. The wire around his neck had sliced most of the way through, and blood seeped down his chest and legs and pooled on the floor. It was dried, and there was more out than in.

“How long’s this guy been hanging around, Billy?”

“You’re cold, Hannah.”

She leaned around the bench, looking over the damage the wire had done to his neck.

“Jesus Christ, he must’ve pissed somebody off but good.”

“Yup, you got that right,” Billy said. “These assholes are getting sicker every year. I thought the chick duct-taped to the chair last year was bad.”

The blinds were shut in the otherwise dark room, shunting sunlight around and overtop into sunbeams that highlighted dust where the body hung. Crime scene investigators in coveralls and masks moved about the apartment. She couldn’t see their faces, but it didn’t seem like the usual crew, and they ignored her. Cameras flashed in the dark room like strobe lights in a Halloween horror house.

She lifted her camera to snap a photo, but Billy stopped her. “No photos, they’re keeping a tight lid on this.”

She held up a finger at the flashes of light. Billy said not to ask with his eyes.

“Jeez, fine,” she said. “Would’ve looked great in my living room, though.”

Billy just shook his head. “You’re broken inside. You know that, right?”

“Uh-huh. Who’s the new crew doing the crime scene?” she whispered, hiding her mouth behind her notepad.

He looked at her for a pregnant pause. “Feds. Don’t ask.”

She nodded, but they both knew that was a conversation they would have soon.

She walked behind the body and looked it up and down, then came back around and stood next to Billy. “Okay, I’m stumped, mister detective. What the hell happened here? Is this some serial killer type stuff?”

“Oh God,” Billy said. “Please don’t say that and definitely don’t print that. That’s not what happened. I don’t think.”

She wasn’t sure what to make of the scene. He wouldn’t know either, not for sure, but that wouldn’t stop him from giving his initial impression as if he did.

He used his pen as a pointer, chewing his gum too loud.

“We have this wire running from the floor to the ceiling and around his throat. I think he was standing on the bench, with the wire cinched so tight that he could only keep the pressure off his neck by standing on his tiptoes.”

He stood on his tip-toes to demonstrate, moving the pen from the wire to the bench and then to the man’s neck. “It looks like they used the man’s calf muscles as a timer of sorts. When they gave out, he would hang, and that piano wire would slice into his throat with the slightest bit of pressure. So, either the killer is a sadistic fuck, or he wanted him to talk, or both. I’m going with both.”

Fuck. Alright, fine...

“Okay, I’m impressed.”

Billy beamed, and she let him have it. He was a good soul. “But what about the duct tape around his mouth? You can’t talk with your mouth taped shut.”

He squinted and clicked on his Maglite mini, directing the beam at the man’s head. “I’m guessing they did that after. Look at his mouth.” He circled the beam on the mouth. “It’s not as sunken in like the rest of his face. Probably a dish rag or washcloth or somethin’ stuffed in there, something the perp could put in and take out when the victim decided he’d had enough.”

Billy was a big deal back in the day. Even put down a crew of pros knocking over armored cars about fifteen years back. Now he was past his prime—beer gut, thinning hair, white, short sleeved button-ups and Father’s Day ties from Kmart, from back when either of them was still a thing. Still, he had his moments. It made sense. Regardless of why the killer did it, the body was a horrible sight, and given what other horrors she’d seen, that was saying something.

“Okay, that’s not bad, Billy. Not bad at all. I like it. But why the duct tape then, you know, if they got what they wanted?”

“To muffle the screams once his legs gave out.”

Jesus ... Al Qaeda has nothing on good ole American psychos.

She stared at the body, half decapitated, bloody, and hanging like an animal. It would be hours before they collected all the evidence and could take the body down. She could learn more at the morgue later that night. It wasn't like she had plans.

“You think he talked?”

“Wouldn't you?” He didn't bother to look over at her. “It's a pretty elaborate setup. Can you imagine thinking about what's gonna happen to you when your legs give out? Anyone would try to save themselves.”

“Then they taped his mouth shut and left him to hang anyway. At least they could have killed him first.”

“Like you said, he must've pissed somebody off but good.”

“This victim got a name?”

He clipped his pen into his shirt pocket and put his notebook down on the kitchen counter. “Listen, I need a favor on this one. That's why I texted you, and you alone. Like I said, brass wants a tight lid on this until we do our preliminary investigation. They're being very hush-hush, not sure why. Might be terrorism. Feds are all over it. We need twenty-four hours before you print anything. I need you to tell the other vultures outside it's a typical stiff. Overdose. Nothing to see here, type stuff.”

“You know I'm gonna have to lie, right? Not gonna make me very popular, you know,” she said. “I have to drink with these people.”

Lying downstairs is sometimes how you get upstairs in the first place.

“Look, you'd be helping me keep a lid on it. They told me not to say anything to the press, but one hand washes the other. I'll give you the name so you can get the ball rolling.”

“Does that mean I'm not a vulture?”

He smiled at her.

“You're my vulture. Twenty four hours. Let us run the cabs to and from this area, bus stations, airports... all that shit. They're already doing it as we speak.”

“I don’t want to get scooped by someone else.”

He pulled her over to the kitchen counter and lowered his voice. “Look, maybe by tomorrow afternoon’s edition you could run it. The boys are already on the lookout for one-way flights and tickets purchased at the airport. Not much to go on, but we gotta start somewhere. If it’s a normal schmo, with any luck, once he knows we found the body, he’ll panic and try to bolt.”

“Or she... could be an angry ex. What’s his name?”

“Could still be a he,” Billy said. “Besides, a ‘she’ would have to be a pretty beefy gal to get him into that position.”

“Huh, good point. What’s his name?”

“Could be a ‘them,’ too. It would be a lot easier to pull the wire tight if you had a couple of people.”

“You’re stalling. Give me a name.” She tapped four fingers on her notepad in rapid succession as loudly as possible. “I’m not gonna print it. I need to start some background stuff.”

“Jonathan T. Skrupski.” He deadpanned her. “Don’t fuck me on this, Hannah. The brass sounded serious about not breaking the seal with the press.”

“It would be making sweet, sweet love, Billy. And I won’t. Promise.”

“I am not a whore, young lady,” Billy said, fanning himself with the notepad he was holding. “Not anymore, anyway.”

Hannah broke out into a wide smile and scribbled the name into her notepad. Even soldiers didn’t have dirty talk like cops. It was wicked good banter, and she loved it. It reminded her of the camaraderie in the army.

Most of the Washington, DC, bigwigs and staffers lived in Alexandria, so the FBI’s parallel investigation meant nothing. Even if it were a psycho ex-lover or a staffer, it would still be juicy. And it could be something even more interesting. Her gut told her it was the latter. It would be worth it.

However, nothing is free.

“Okay, I got you. I’ll tell the vultures to buzz off, but I’m gonna need the autopsy report from the morgue,” she said. “Will you call me and let me know when you send the body down?”

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll text you when we wrap up here.”

“Don’t forget. I’m trying to sink my teeth into something more interesting than O.D.s and Senators getting DUIs. Will you keep me posted on this one when you get leads? I’ll only print what you tell me once you give me the green light.”

“I will. Just don’t forget me when you get that Pulitzer. It’s spelled B-I-L-L-Y.”

Hannah laughed as she headed out the door. She winked at him on the way out.

“Never,” she called out behind her.

The usual suspects manned the press line outside the building. Congress was getting sneaky about banging their interns, and campaign finance laws were so lenient they didn’t bother with envelopes anymore, these days bribes were direct-deposited.

The other reporters didn’t have photographers with them, oblivious to the carnage upstairs.

“Well, what do you have up there, Hannah? Teacher’s pet - how’d you get to go in? They’ve been holding us out here for damn near an hour.”

The man asking went by Gregory and corrected anyone who called him Greg. They’d worked together at the *Washington Post*, and he was one of the few people who knew why she had left.

“Another overdose, I’m afraid. I was just in there asking them when this town was gonna get something worth reporting.”

She noticed another reporter, Christine, along the sidewalk.

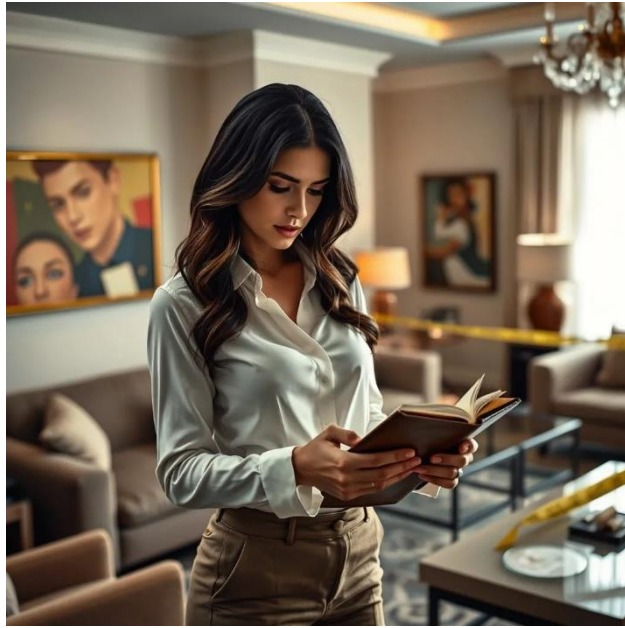
“Hey, Christine,” she said, waving. “Sorry, you guys. There was a bunch of fentanyl powder all over the place. That’s why the police line. I even had to put on booties and wear a mask just to stand in the hallway. They wouldn’t even let me in the room.”

“Fuck,” Christine said. “I’m about to throw a rock through the mayor’s window so I have something to write about.”

“Pack it in, boys and girls,” Gregory said. “I’m hitting the bar early, and I’m getting drunk. If you come with, I might just do something newsworthy. First round’s on me... as long as it’s beer. Cheap beer. You coming, Hannah?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. I gotta drop some stuff off at the office, but I’ll meet you guys there. I even brought a camera up there, if you can believe it. Total waste.”

The group of reporters dispersed from the police line, got into their vehicles, and packed it in. Hannah had other plans. She had to do a ‘look-up’ on the person renting 3C, and run a background check. With any luck, he’d be someone worth looking up.



Chapter 5

She climbed into her V8 Firebird, gold-flecked with a custom paint job, and started for the office. With the T-tops out, it was better than a convertible. The deed was done. She'd called off the dogs, but there'd be hell to pay down the road. Reporters don't like being lied to, even by other reporters. Especially by other reporters.

It would be worth it. She just knew it.

After the fiasco at the Post, it was a step down to move to WTOP news radio, not that there were any other offers in DC, and she wasn't about to move. The station often reported the AP wire plus local news, but it still had a few ground pounders in the metro area.

Her settlement with the Post had put a few bucks in her pocket. Okay, more than a few, but it came at a high price. They didn't give her much of a choice. Take the money, sign the NDA, and let them bury the story, or let her informant go to jail.

In Iraq, jail meant death. She couldn't let a good man pay for her curiosity.

She had just sat in her chair before a visitor showed up.

"What'd you get out there?" Shelly asked, hanging off the corner of her cubicle with a venti something delicious in her hand. Well-dressed and full-figured, with dyed red hair and a bit too much make-up, Shelly was in her early fifties. "Anything mysterious?" She waved her fingers like she was casting a spell.

"Nah, probly not," she said. "I have to wait for the autopsy to come back, but it's probably nothing."

"Aw, sorry it wasn't a triple homicide. Maybe tomorrow," Shelly said, crossing her fingers and wearing a big grin. "Any plans for tonight, Hannah?"

"A box of Pinot Grigio and a sack of White Castles. If I'm feeling froggy, I might throw in a pint of Haagen-Dazs." She didn't want to lie, but the situation called for a bit of misdirection. She could make it up to her later.

“That’s a shame, Hannah. You’re too young and pretty to spend your nights alone. Don’t you worry, though. Mister Right’ll come along when you least expect it.”

Shelly was a rarity in the news business. A nice person, liked by all, and rarely did anything other than head straight home after work. Married thirty one years to the same man, never cheated, and still happy. Almost certainly had a cellar full of dead bodies. Even if Shelly was a secret serial killer, she was always very upbeat about it.

“And you can tell him where I am. At home, getting diabetes.”

“Who?”

“Mister Right.”

Shelly sighed. “I’ll tell him.” Her melodic voice trailed off as she made her rounds, strolling down the cubicles on the other side.

She had no interest in meeting anyone. At best, he could be Mister Right now. She’d lost Mister Right, and drunk dialing him again last night was a huge mistake. That could not happen again. The whole thing at the Post had been a strain, and she took it home one too many times. Her ex had found solace in Ms. Right, or at least Ms. Less Wrong.

It had been a tough year all around. She saw her reflection in the monitor screen before it booted up. She was still pretty, young - *or was it pretty young?* - sexy even, with straight brown hair down to her shoulders and soft green eyes. She just looked tired. Not physical exhaustion, more like life exhaustion.

She entered variations of John and Johnathon T. Skrupski into a database of government officials, criminals, and other noteworthy people. Nothing. Not in the last ten years. She went back another ten. Changed a couple more spellings, removed the first H in Johnathon. Nothing. She just knew he was a *somebody*. She needed him to be.

She punched in John Skrupski from 1984 and prior.

Bingo, sort of.

A hit came back for a professor of mathematics at Caltech in 1978. The poor bastard in 3C wasn’t old enough for that, unless he’d been a professor since he was in diapers, and tweed jackets with patches on the elbows look funny on toddlers. The guy from 3C was thirty five, tops.

3C could be the professor's son.

She stared at the name, and it hit her.

J.T. Skrupski got a minor hit: an article in the school newspaper from seven years earlier, about three professors and a research assistant named J.T. Skrupski. He was part of a team receiving an award for advancements in quantum computing research at MIT.

Her flip phone buzzed with a text. It was Billy.

Bombs away! It had an electric bomb emoji with a lit fuse.

The body had been sent down to the morgue. Quantum computing would have to wait.

She grabbed her purse and shut down the computer. Maybe the morgue could make the dead speak.

The morgue still had a few cars in the lot, but it was after four and the day shift had gone home. Her knowledge of gallows humor, along with being a woman who isn't squeamish, got her through the front door. She made fast friends with the mortuary scientists who did most of the actual autopsies, and with the few assistant MEs unlucky enough to be working the late shift.

She flagged down a tech she knew.

"David," she called after him through the glass panel in the front receiving area. "Can you buzz me in? I'm tracking down a stiff APD sent over."

"You're not the only one dying to get in here, Hannah," David said.

He hit the buzzer under the counter that unlocked the double doors, and she pushed her way in. She caught up with him at the end of the hall.

He was moving a body down to the exam room.

"How long have you been re-hearsing that one?" she said, smiling. "It's dead tired."

"Oh my God, that's terrible," he said. "Way worse than mine. Who're you here for? I have one right here if you're not particular."

"Looks a little small."

“She’s ninety three, what’d you expect?”

“I’m looking for a guy who just came in from an apartment building in Taylor Run.”

“Hmm, fancy. Must’ve been well-to-do. Doctor Ristelli is on tonight for fat cats,” David said. “You know, I just process the little ones. He’s down in the big rooms. Room one, I think. He’s got to have your stiff. I’ll walk you down there. Have you met Bob? He’s good people, you’ll like him.”

“Aw, but you do it with such style. Don’t sell yourself short, you’ll be running this place soon,” she said. “And no, I haven’t met him. Will you introduce me?”

They walked down the halls, listening to the squeak of the gurney’s wheels rolling along the ceramic tile floor. A perma-smell of lemony bleach emanated from every corner until they turned down a corridor with two large rooms on either side. They could hear music from the room on the left, and David pushed open the door. Dr. Ristelli was drinking a glass of red wine and tried to hide it at first.

“Don’t worry about it, she’s cool. Bob, this is Hannah. Hannah, Bob. She’s with that radio station, news... whatever,” David said, walking back out into the hall. “She’ll make you famous, but she also might drink all your wine.”

The body from 3C was on the table, looking even worse than before, if that was even possible. Bob offered her a plastic cup, and she took it. He poured two glugs worth into her cup.

“Did you go there, Hannah? To the apartment,” Dr. Ristelli said.

“I did, earlier. It was quite a sight. Not much better now, I’m afraid.”

The dead man’s eyes were bulging out of the sockets now in a way that she hadn’t noticed at the apartment. Bob nodded at her, agreeing.

“Are you sure you want to stay? This can be... disturbing to some.”

“It’s okay, I’m not squeamish. Plus, now I have wine. You might never get rid of me.”

He nodded and smirked. "I do have a scalpel."

He took pictures of the body from various angles with a Polaroid 600 instant camera.

"I don't know how to use those damn digital cameras. I never know where to plug in the cables. Do they go to the computer or to the printers? I like the old cameras; snap, and you get a picture right now. I always use it for homicides." He took several photos of the wrists, some high and some lower down by the hands.

"Look at this," Dr. Ristelli said. "You can see postmortem lividity, this discoloration in the skin, above the bindings around his wrists. His hands were bound so tight that blood couldn't get through." He clipped the bindings when he was done.

Once he finished photographing the rest of the body, he unwrapped the duct tape from the mouth. It was wrapped around the man's head twice and coated with blood. Inside, he found the dishrag, just like Billy said.

The police had clipped the piano wire about ten inches below the eyelet, but it remained wrapped around his neck. Dr. Ristelli used a wire cutter to clip it away, pulling it out of the neck and watching her face, looking disappointed when she didn't react.

She'd seen worse, and the ones she'd seen were still alive and screaming.

"He was hung by this, yes?" he said, holding up a section of wire. "I'm surprised the weight of his body didn't tear right through his cervical spine. He must not have weighed much, even before the attack."

She tried to stay out of his way as he seemed to want to work his way north to south, starting at the head.

"Look at this, my dear." He used forceps to spread the tissue around the neck, set with rigor mortis and caked in dried blood. "The wire cut much deeper on the left side than the right."

She leaned in and saw the wound. The left side was down to the bone, while the right still had most of the heavy neck muscles intact.

"Why do you think that was, Doc?"

“I can’t be certain,” Dr. Ristelli said. “But it’s possible someone inserted something between the neck and the wire on the right. Did you see anything like that?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about it, but ...”

“You’re also not supposed to be in here. And I’m not supposed to be drinking cabernet, so...”

“Touché,” she said. “One of the detectives thought he may have been tortured. It’s possible they intervened to let him talk?”

“I see,” he said as he continued to work. “He was hanging, then?”

She nodded, then watched him work in silence for a while.

“What do you think, doc? Do you think that’s what happened?”

He looked up at her with only his eyes and then back down to the body where he was working. He frowned and bobbed his head side to side, contemplating.

“I moved here from New York; the city, not just the state. Wife got a job at Georgetown. Back in the city, we’d get mafia guys, Russians, Colombians, even the Triads,” he said.

He used a caliper to pull out the dishrag and placed it in a collection dish for analysis.

“Triads used to do something like this, just not as sophisticated. Twine around the ankles, hog-tied around the hands, and then the neck. They choked unless they curled in their hamstrings to create slack. When they couldn’t do it any longer, the noose tightened, and they choked. It was always about getting information in those cases.”

“What kind of person could do something like that?” she said. “I can’t imagine how awful it was. Terrifying.”

“People like that were so damaged when they were young, their empathy just shut down. Like a callus that forms over the brain because of repeated exposure to humiliation and emotional trauma,” Dr. Ristelli said.

“Some people are just rotten. They’re born that way. They die that way, taking good people with them most of the time.” She’d seen

it plenty. Violent men always did harm in the name of their version of good, which usually meant good for them.

“I pity them,” Dr. Ristelli said. “A man who takes pleasure in the suffering of others has never known joy. Ever. He’s just trying to regain some sense of lost power.”

“Well, that’s why you’re a doctor, I guess. You care. The world needs more men like you, Doc, and less like them.”

The doctor wrapped-up, tucked the photos along with the case files into a folder marked *Homicide*, and filed it into a cabinet by date. A technician would enter the data into the computer in the next few days. He promised to let her know about the toxicology reports and bid her farewell.

She skipped the White Castles and had half the box-O-wine gone when her phone rang. It could be the doctor calling. She took a deep breath and answered.

“Townes,” she said.

“Hey,” Billy said. He spoke in hushed tones. He usually sounded like he was yelling. “It’s me. Are you laying low like I said?”

It was weird, but so was Billy.

She would play.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’m laying low like you said. Why? Is Colonel Mustard by your desk with a candlestick? Arrest him!”

“It’s not funny. Something’s going on here, I don’t even know what. The captain brought me into his office when I got back to the station and read me the riot act. There are Feds here, too,” Billy said. “It’s still going on. I’m supposed to be calling my wife.”

“About what, the murder?”

“Oh, God, don’t even say that. But yeah, the crime scene. Listen, I gotta go. I’ll call you later. Don’t talk to anyone. You hear me? Don’t say anything to anyone.”

“Okay, okay. Where are you, Billy?”

“I’m still at the station,” he said.

She looked at her watch.

What was he still doing there at ten-thirty at night?

“What? Why?”

He yelled to the captain that he was coming, then the line went dead. It was weird, but so was Billy. He’d called her drunk before. He could have been calling from McGee’s or some other cop bar for all she knew.

She’d deal with it tomorrow.

She polished off the rest of the box and fell asleep.

Chapter 6

Iranian Desert

Sixty miles northeast of Dazful

The enemy bird held its hover over the target, whipping sheets of sand and debris against every piece of exposed flesh, as I struggled to take the pain without moving. The crash site was a jumbled mess of bodies and parts, some of which I'd assumed were enemy troops. It would be impossible to tell the cowboys from the Indians from the air.

I wasn't sure which one we were anyway.

The enemy pilots rotated in all directions, looking for movement. I expected to see a flash a moment before our bodies came apart, as the cannon fired bullets the size of railroad spikes that would hit us before the sound even reached our ears. The bird leveled off parallel to the site, made a slow descent, and touched down.

Soldiers inside opened the bay doors.

Kid's machine gun lit up the night air, slamming into the hull and greeting the men inside with a hailstorm of bullets. Tracers became a thousand angry green fireflies, ricocheting off the craft in all directions into the black desert night. A dozen men inside tried to flee, but there was nowhere to go.

Corpses collected just outside the craft like a pile of discarded rag dolls.

With a scream, the SMAW rocket closed sixty meters in a split second. The helicopter exploded and jumped fifteen feet into the air. Coop had perforated the fuel tank with the hit, a near perfect shot. Shrapnel from the chopper rained down all around us, and small, burning pieces bounced off my uniform as I slapped away a burning ember from my neck.

The rear third of the aircraft detonated under the onslaught. Two men inside fell out, engulfed in flames, and were cut down in a grotesque act of mercy.

The rocket demolished the fuselage, and even half a football field away the heat made me recoil into the trench. My nostrils burned with smoldering jet fuel, gunpowder, and roasted flesh. Light flooded

into my optics, and I flipped the NODs up and out of my eyes, now stinging from acrid, black smoke.

The burning craft illuminated the surrounding desert. Snaps and pops cracked off intermittently as onboard ammunition ignited and exploded. The crew cabin caught the brunt of the attack, but the pilots were dead as well, engulfed in flames in the cockpit.

Boss called ceasefire.

“I need help over here,” I yelled over to the others. “Grab my kit bags.” I never even fired. The other shooters mopped up the enemy chopper. I wasted no time getting back to the patient at my feet.

“You hit?” Coop dropped the bag at my feet.

“No, but I think I found our medic. Just a hunch, though. Do you know him?”

Coop and Kid knelt on the other side of him while I pulled out a folding litter and IV fluids.

“Yeah, that’s him. Is he gonna make it?” Kid grabbed the man’s hand and held it with both hands. “Hang in there, Doc, we’re gonna get you out of here. We got a bird on station and another one inbound.”

That was news to me, but it was nice to hear that they at least cared for one another. The gash in his abdomen looked almost surgical. It was too precise for bullets or explosives. Doc had severe burns all over his body, but there were no powder marks or charring. It was as if he had gotten a severe sunburn at zero dark thirty.

Only radiation does that.

I threw in a fourteen-gauge IV, a needle the size of a coffee stirrer, and ran point-nine saline full open to put some volume into his veins. I could feel his radial pulse, so his blood pressure had to be at least ninety.

It meant he had a real chance, and I intended to take it.

“It’s a scratch, right, brother?” I wanted him to live. I hoped he could hear me. “Help me roll him onto the litter. Where’s the bird, the one we came in on?”

“It just set down,” Kid said.

I peeked my head over the trench and saw that he was right. I latched the buckles that strapped their medic to the gurney.

“You guys hustle him over to the helicopter. I’m going to see if there’s anyone else alive.”

They nodded confirmation, and I started down the trench. I could tell through the thermals that the last man was already getting cold in his lower extremities. By itself, that won’t kill you, but missing most of the left side of your chest wall will.

An hour had passed since the fight they’d been in. What remained of his torso was sheared off at a razor slit angle, and his body armor was still glowing hot in the thermal vision.

Too hot for an hour later.

The radio in my ear crackled to life.

“Doc!” a voice called over my radio. “We need you!”

All medics are called ‘Doc’ when shit hits the fan. I bailed out of the trench and saw the burning hulk of the enemy helicopter we’d annihilated, ordinance still cooking off as the flaming wreck lit up the desert night.

A shifting wind mercifully carried away the smell of burning flesh and gasoline.

The wounded PJ was on the fold-up litter at a makeshift rendezvous point past where the men huddled outside the satellite. Our helicopter idled on the ground a football field away, just on the other side of them. The radio call came from the men gathered at the base of the egg-shaped satellite.

“What’s going on?” I said, triple-timing over to them.

I got that much out before I saw why they called me over. Red and Latte, the two men Boss sent to rig the satellite for transport, were both dead. They didn’t need a medic; they needed a priest. Or an exorcist.

I’d never seen anything like it.

“Stay back, God damn it,” Boss said. “It has an electrified energy field around it. Don’t get close.”

There was a deep humming noise I felt as much as heard, like a speaker at a concert you were standing too close to. Deep bass moved through my body as if Metallica was about to blare out a guitar solo.

The two men were cleaved in half, but where the other half had gone was a mystery. A look of total surprise at the moment of death was etched on their faces. Their lower halves were sliced off at a seventy-degree angle as if a surgeon had used a laser to make the incision. No blood flowed out, and none pooled.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Boss said. “Romeo Two?” He keyed the mic to the external channel.

“Romeo Two,” the pilots shot back.

“It still has an active field generator. We just lost Red and Latte. They’re KIA. We need the Chinook ASAP, and we need a flyby so Salty can hit it with the microwave to disable it. Copy?”

I assumed he meant the gun on the switchblade mount they had fired from the air.

“Romeo Two copies all. Stand by.”

Voice, checklist calm.

I was not.

From a distance, the object had a smooth, shiny metal surface, like someone had shrink-wrapped an egg with the dull side of aluminum foil, then blow-dried it smooth.

Not a single crease.

Viewed up close, it had the consistency of a soap bubble, with shiny purple, amber, and green colors swirling on a mother-of-pearl liquid surface. The satellite was bright, almost glowing, not reflecting light, absorbing it in a way that defied description.

The light from the burning wreckage of the enemy helicopter seemed to amplify the liquid's luminosity, as if it were responding to it.

Multiplying it.

“Force field, sir?” I said to Boss. “What is that thing? Nothing can do that.”

“It’s classified, lieutenant. You don’t need to know. You need to shut the fuck up,” he said. “We’re working on it. Just stay back.”

I couldn’t stop staring at it, drawn to it in a way I couldn’t explain, like it was alive and appealing to me for help.

I had none to give.

“It wants us to leave it alone.”

Boss and Coop looked at each other, then at me.

“Stand down. You’re here to treat the wounded, nothing else,” Coop said.

“Just stay back,” Boss said. “We’ll be wheels up in fifteen. We’re almost done.”

“What is it? What have we done?”

When I said that, I got his attention. He stared right at me in a way that told me not to ask that again.

“It’s a satellite. Now fuck off.”

He knew it was bullshit. I knew it was bullshit. His look told me to pretend it was God’s truth. He stood up and called out to everyone gathered at the object.

“We’re falling back. Everyone, move back eighty meters. Right now. Directed energy EMP is inbound in sixty seconds.”

I helped Coop lift the other medic, and we retreated eighty yards.

I covered Doc with my body to absorb the sand kicked up by the bird as it passed overhead. The gunner shot a green, tubular shaped energy beam at the craft that knocked out every electronic I had. Rifle optic and radio went dead. Automatic blood pressure device on my patient’s arm—dead.

The night vision they gave me worked fine.

The satellite lit up bright red, then an angry amber, for about ten seconds before becoming opaque and luminescent. It was hard to

look at. At once, all illumination from both the beam and the craft died out.

For the first time, it was just a shiny white metallic egg about twice the size of a Volkswagen camper van.

“Kid,” Boss called out. “You’re up. Get over there and give me a sit rep.”

“On it,” he snapped back without hesitation.

It had just cut two men clean in half, but he got up and looked through his optic. He dropped his body armor and gear and got ready to sprint the distance to the object.

“How confident are we it’s off?”

“Ground, we have two bogies inbound from the East and one from the North,” the pilot said. The blast of energy from the helicopter did not affect Boss’s radio.

“What’s the call, sir?”

“Fuck.” The team leader looked at a display on his forearm. “Ninety-five percent, Billy. We’re out of time.” He reviewed some written communication from whoever was in charge of this goat rope. “I wouldn’t send you if we had a choice.”

The source of his call sign revealed, Billy, aka Kid, sprinted off toward the craft, and I knew one thing... it wasn’t gonna be me doing that shit.

Sometimes satellites drop out of orbit, and sometimes special mission units like this are tasked to retrieve them. This wasn’t that.

This was something else.

We should have received a full intel briefing. Enemy troops, friendlies in the area, known hazards. Mission success depends on it. Not an unread NDA, signed under duress in the dim red glow of a souped-up helicopter crew bay.

Billy took off running. He reached the satellite in seconds and pointed a device at it. He must have been satisfied that it was safe, because he got close. Close enough to touch it. He put his hand on the craft.

He let out a loud yell that we could hear from our position. I jumped up and began covering the distance between us.

I ran track in college and got there quick.

“Billy!” I called over to him, covering the last few yards. I stopped short of the object.

An unseen force was pulling him in, but his face was calm and peaceful. I grabbed his hand and tried to pull him out, but he was stuck and would not budge. In what seemed like a second later, the force released, and we both tumbled back.

The impact with the desert floor must have knocked us both out. I did not know how long we had been unconscious.

I came to, roused by Boss yelling instructions to dozens of men in NBC suits that were not on scene before. A Chinook was idling a couple of hundred meters off, and men were getting ready to load the egg-shaped craft inside. Orchestrated chaos swarmed all around us, forty or fifty men sweeping the area like they’d done it all many times before.

“What the fuck did you do that for?” Boss said, under his breath.

He wasn’t looking at me, but I knew he was talking to me. He was directing men all over the place. They were rigging up the machine for transport. They were using the hydraulic bags I used for rescue to brace it into the Chinook.

He turned and faced me.

“No one told you to do that.”

I was too groggy to fight with him. My head was spinning. My vision was blurry, and my words slurred. I didn’t know why I did it myself.

I just couldn’t take being a coward for even one more second.

I had died enough of my thousand deaths.

Billy lay next to me, discombobulated, but alive. My watch had stopped working. I looked over at the other PJ on a cot to my left.



The wounded medic looked over at me and shook his head. He had regained consciousness, and two men picked him up and carried him over to the waiting helicopter. More men came and carted me off, then Billy right behind. They placed us in a waiting Black Hawk helicopter.

A moment later, we lifted off.

I watched the Chinook rising parallel to us, the object we had fought so hard to recover loaded within. The smoldering burned out hulk of the Iranian helicopter became an ever dimmer light flickering in the distance. Four F-16 Strike Eagles streaked by low and fast. Two-thousand pound bombs detonated in rapid succession, obliterating anything bigger than a pebble and leaving no trace of our mission.

I knew one thing; that was no satellite. It was a craft. The time between grabbing Billy's arm and regaining consciousness would change my life forever.

I hope you enjoyed the first six chapter of The Legacy Program. Earliest access to the full novel is via the Kickstarter launching in the next several weeks, with eBook copies being sent out immediately after its conclusion (paperback & Hardcover versions also receive the eBook version free).

I'd love to have you sign up at:

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/m1kf/the-legacy-program-a-sci-fi-conspiracy-thriller>

The crime scene in apartment 3C that kicks off Hannah's investigation, the novella *Escape from Taylor Run*, is available until the Kickstarter begins at:

<https://storyoriginapp.com/giveaways/019e4c40-bdd0-7bfc-bd59-8d76ea67b729>

Thanks you so much for reading!

Best Regards,

M. Paul Whelan