

# SHADOWWAR

## PROLOGUE

### Libya

May 10, 2014

“Target ahead,” my team leader, Jimmy Miles, said from the lead car.

“Copy that, Alpha One,” I replied into my headset, as the outer wall of the abandoned outpost began to emerge from the desert half a mile away, a dark shadow against a dusty brown hill so slight most people wouldn’t have noticed it was there.

I scanned the horizon. Nothing to the east but dunes and distant mountains, the same thing we’d been seeing for the past four hours and two hundred miles. Nothing in front but a dust track in a desert. The hill to the west was maybe fifteen feet at its highest point, rising at a consistent low gradient. It wasn’t much more than a tilt of the horizon line, but out here, it could hide an army.

*The perfect place for an ambush*, I thought, although that didn’t mean much. Every building in this rocky corner of the south Sahara was perfect for an ambush, since they were all built in wadis or against small cliffs to escape the wind. Our contacts, the Tuareg, were the legendary bandit-warriors of this harsh

world; they knew every foot for five hundred miles. But they didn't have GPS, so you couldn't global-position a meeting. You had to meet them at a spot like this.

This was kinetic country, like the old Wild West: banditos were common and law came out of the barrel of a gun.

"Steady speed," I said. "Eyes open."

The call had come in seventeen hours ago from a new contact in Benghazi. A tribe of Tuareg had two cargo trucks full of weapons, and they wanted to deal.

"Why?"

"They were in Mali last year," the contact said. "They fought the French paratroopers at Gao." I could almost hear the shrug. "Now they need money."

My instinct was to turn the opportunity down. Too many variables. Maybe the contact sensed my hesitation.

"It's not small arms, I assure you," he said. "It's what you want."

Finding AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers was easy. The world was awash in them, especially Africa. But surface-to-air missiles, antitank rockets, 20 mm cannons: those weapons were gold. You laid your hands on them whenever you could.

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Fourteen hundred. Deep southwest, near the Algerian border. I'll shoot you the coordinates."

The two hundred thousand euros had arrived five hours ago, on a fishing trawler. The boat had probably come from Malta, our primary Mediterranean financial hub since the collapse of the Cypriot banking sector, but that wasn't my concern. What mattered was the courier. He had been late, so now I was late. I had intended to arrive at the rendezvous by noon, two hours early, but . . .

“They’re here, Charlie One.”

“Copy that, Alpha Two,” I said flatly, biting off my frustration at the site of the off-road trucks. I trusted my team—six Alphas (my team) wearing earpieces, and four local recruits—but I didn’t like the Tuareg having the jump. I wouldn’t be able to scout the location or position marksmen on surrounding dunes.

*This was how the accident happened*, I reminded myself.

“Fifteen,” Miles said, counting men, as the compound came into view, two crumbling buildings surrounded by a six-foot earthen wall. Sand piled on the west side; the roofs clearly collapsed. It was probably the most habitable permanent structure for a hundred miles.

“Eighteen,” said Tingera “Tig” Butuuro, our spotter. “Three against the rise.”

Based on the satellite imagery, I had intended to set up between the warehouse and the rise, but the Tuareg were already there. That left my team with the bunkhouse and the earthen wall. At least the Tuaregs’ cargo trucks—two canvas-covered deuce-and-a-halves that looked like they’d been in use since Indiana Jones slid under a German version eight years before D-Day—would be between us.

“Plan B,” Miles said, seeing the same thing. “Use the deuces for cover.”

Miles’s white Toyota Land Cruiser, obviously stolen from the United Nations and bought by me ten days ago on the black market in Tripoli, left the road and swung wide, giving him a better view into the Tuareg position. Our other two identical vehicles, also bought on the black market, followed.

“Twenty,” Tig said, still counting men.

“Twenty-two.”

“Jesus,” I muttered, as the two Tuareg sentries stood up to announce their positions. At least the deuce-and-a-halves were fac-

ing our convoy. That meant the Tuareg were planning for us to drive them away, as agreed. Or maybe it didn't mean anything.

"Lock and load," I said, as we approached firing range. "Stay frosty."

Manners were important to the Tuaregs. This was a planned meeting; it had to be approached with respect and trust. That meant guns pointed down. Out here, respect meant security . . . if you crossed a line, quite literally, the knives came out.

"Roger that, Charlie One," Miles replied.

I didn't need to tell him anything else. I was the mission leader, but Miles, as always, was in tactical command. He chose the men, mixing and matching skills as mission parameters required. These Alphas were all Tier One operators recruited from the elite of the elite: Navy SEALs, Army Delta, British SAS, Thai special forces, Ugandan Presidential Guard, El Salvador counterdrug hit squad, the best money could buy. I had worked with some of them for years, others just this month. But we understood each other. In this line of work, danger breeds respect and respect breeds love, faster than a fungus. At this point, they were practically family. But even if they'd been strangers, I trusted Miles. He was my brother-in-arms; he'd been protecting my ass since 1992, when I was fresh meat out of officer training and he was my platoon sergeant. Twenty-two against ten, if it came to that, wasn't particularly dangerous for this team. But it was poor operational planning, and that was on me.

"Move to staggered formation," Miles said. "Alpha Three on overwatch. Alpha Two on me."

The Land Cruisers fanned out, the drivers approaching at a flat angle to face the Tuareg, then turning and stopping in unison with their grills facing the way we had come. In a combat situation, parking mattered. You never wanted to back up. You always chose cover. The embankment would offer protection for our two most important assets: men and engine blocks.

I checked my pistols, being an ambidextrous shooter. Everyone else was kitted out with body armor and heavy weapons. I was wearing mercenary business attire—sunglasses, desert boots, 5.11 cargo pants, a web belt, a super 80 button-down Oxford shirt, and bespoke blue linen sport coat from Jermyn Street in London. No Kevlar vest or assault rifle. A few years ago, I was a Tier One operator, too, but I was corporate now.

I adjusted my earpiece and slid the nine-mils into their dual holsters at the small of my back, the only place my sport coat would hide them. Corporate, but not foolish.

“Ready?” I asked the interpreter. The man nodded weakly. He was in his fifties, dressed in cheap slacks and a short-sleeved button-down shirt. He looked like what he was: a linguistic professor forced into this dangerous job by the ongoing disintegration of Libyan society.

*Another weak link*, I thought. But what I said was, “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. This is a friendly transaction.”

I stepped out of the Land Cruiser and walked toward the warehouse, trusting my men enough to keep my eyes on the Tuareg. A few older fighters, but mostly young men. Kalashnikovs slung, but close at hand. There were a few traditional sky-blue robes, beautiful in their simplicity, but most of the men were wearing mismatched desert fatigues. All but one was wearing a black turban. This wasn’t religious. The Tuareg weren’t zealots. In this climate, turbans were a necessity against sand and sun.

I was disappointed but not surprised they hadn’t brought their camels.

“*As-salaam alaykum*,” I said, greeting the Tuareg at the entrance. The building had no ceiling, but faded Italian graffiti was still visible on the walls, probably from the soldiers condemned to live in this hole when Mussolini tried to control this desert.

The man nodded, pulling aside the rug that shielded the empty doorway. I stepped inside. The Tuareg had swept the room, strung a cloth tarp for shade, and placed five rugs in a circle in the center of the space. Three men in blue robes were sitting on the rugs, watching me. They seemed to have been sitting for days.

“*Marhaba*,” the old man in the middle said, and touched his forehead in the traditional greeting. His face was grizzled and his teeth rotten. That was typical of the Tuareg, who drank mostly sugared tea.

The man gestured to an empty rug, and I sat cross-legged before him. The interpreter sat beside me. It was traditional to take off your shoes, but I had no intention of removing my desert boots. I noticed the Tuareg hadn’t removed theirs.

We waited, watching each other, saying nothing. These were among the fiercest fighters in the world, but also the most civil. They had survived in this desert for centuries, and their customs were ancient, especially compared with the West. Patience was the Tuareg way.

Finally, the leader nodded. A man appeared from the doorway, carrying a long, slender brass pot. He squatted beside us and lined up four small glass cups on the ground. He placed a lump of sugar in each one, then poured boiling tea slowly over each lump from the long brass spout.

He waited, then poured the tea back into the pot. He repeated the process, this time raising and lowering the ornate kettle as he poured, arcing the tea into the glasses. My interpreter spoke to the Tuareg leader, and the man to his right responded, but there was no need for translation. It sounded like small talk. Perhaps the interpreter was wondering about his lack of a cup. But he wasn’t a person here, only a mouthpiece. That was also the Tuareg way.

Finally, after ten minutes of pouring, the teasmith passed out the cups. I took my tea. It was scalding hot, but I drank it without expression. It was sweet and minty.

Sugar cookies followed, then another round of tea. The Tuareg sipped and munched silently, their eyes alert, their battered but well-oiled Kalashnikovs at their sides.

*Arms deals are dangerous, I reminded myself. Arms deals are points of contact. All points of contacts can go wrong . . .*

The teasmith bowed. Then he stood, took his empty pot, and exited. The three Tuareg began speaking softly. I sat silently. I would wait until one of them addressed me, and then enter the conversation.

*Don't lose focus. Don't forget the danger . . .*

"American?" the Tuareg leader asked.

I nodded solemnly. "A colleague," I replied, stopping to allow the interpreter to repeat my words in Berber. "We have traveled far to meet you."

The Tuareg nodded. They had also traveled far. "Where are you fighting?"

"In the north. Beyond the desert. This is not our fight."

It wasn't the Tuaregs' fight, either. It had been forced on them by European boundaries and the implosion of Gaddafi's regime. This desert was their homeland, and also where the Libyan army dead-enders had withdrawn when there was nowhere else to go. The weapons cache outside had almost surely been Gaddafi's at one time.

The old Tuareg nodded approval. The man on his right spoke.

"Let's go to the trucks," the interpreter said, clearly relieved.

There was no need to negotiate. The terms had been fixed by our mutual friend in Benghazi. No doubt we had overpaid.

Outside, it seemed as if no one had moved, but I spotted Miles in the lead position and surreptitiously extended three fingers on

my right hand, telling him all was as planned. Speaking through the earpiece would have raised Tuareg suspicion.

I walked to the two cargo trucks. They were 1960s Soviet, probably taken from Algeria in a past skirmish. I peeked inside the steel cab. The mechanics looked good, and the keys were in the ignition. The doors were rusted, and the canvas over the beds was covered in dust and patches, but the desert tires and metal rims looked new. They would run for miles, even if fragged.

A young Tuareg in an Atlanta Braves baseball cap stepped forward. He was wearing a Bob Marley shirt under his camos, probably thrown in a donation box by a stoner college kid back in Vermont. He dropped the tailgate and smiled, his teeth already rotten. Societies that forbade alcohol, like the Tuareg, were often insatiable for sugar.

The wooden crates were piled two deep, three wide and four high. I climbed inside and opened two boxes. SA-18 shoulder-launched antiaircraft missiles, known as “Grouse” to NATO and “Iglas” in their country of origin: Russia. With these, amateurs had brought down helicopters in Bosnia, Syria, and Egypt. An SA-18 was rumored to have shot down the Rwandan presidential airplane as it approached Kigali International Airport in 1994, triggering the Rwandan genocide. Throw a few in the trunk of a car, park within a mile of a runway, and a terrorist could bring down a 747 at almost any airport in the world.

The other truck held twelve Soviet KPV-14.5 antiaircraft guns, wrapped in Tuareg blankets. The weapons were used but passable: well oiled, the action unclogged. When mounted on the back of a Toyota HiLux pickup truck to create a “technical”—the workhorse of modern warfare—these guns were devastating. In and out in minutes, killing everything within peripheral vision. I’d seen it in West Africa too many times.

The SA-18s would probably need new coolant units and the

AA guns some parts, but they were a great catch. I nodded to Miles as I climbed down from the tailgate and walked over to face the Tuareg leader, a sign of respect, but also a warning. If anything went wrong, I wanted this man to know he wouldn't get away.

"We accept."

The interpreter spoke at surprising length. The Tuareg nodded. Two of my Libyan freelancers emerged from a Land Cruiser, each with a large Pelican case. They walked over and placed the black molded containers on the ground at my feet.

The leader signaled, and the Tuareg in the baseball cap came forward, flashing his brown teeth. He bent down on one knee and popped the top of the nearest case. He lifted out a plastic-wrapped brick of crisp, new hundred-euro notes. The poorer the people, the more they appreciated freshly minted money. He counted the bricks. The leader nodded, and the young man pulled a long, curved knife from his belt.

"Tangos on the east perimeter."

The shout exploded in my earpiece, just as the knife sliced into the plastic. A second later, I heard the *bip-bip-bip* of an Israeli Tavor assault rifle. Our medic Boon's gun.

"Two Tangos"—meaning targets—"at seven o'clock."

"Eight o'clock."

"Taking fire."

I heard Miles's assault rifle firing in controlled bursts, and the flat repeat of a semiautomatic pistol somewhere behind me.

I leapt forward and knocked the young man unconscious with one swing of the collapsible metal baton I kept on my web belt. In an instant, I had his knife. I looked up, locked eyes with the Tuareg leader, and knew he hadn't double-crossed me. This was third party.

I thought about grabbing the closed Pelican case anyway, but

turned instead and sprinted for the cab of the first deuce, my earpiece echoing with commands.

“Shooters in the east building.”

“Suppressive fire.”

“Cover down on Charlie 1.”

“Roger.”

I grabbed the door handle and swung into the driver’s seat, knowing the key was in the ignition. I turned it, and the engine sputtered.

I pumped the gas, the engine revving and then dying. The desert was full of the light popping of automatic fire, never as loud or chaotic as the movies made it seem. I could make out the audio signature of each of my team’s weapons, with limited returning shots, mostly AK-47s by the sound of it. We had caught the assailants out of position, probably maneuvering for an ambush, so my men weren’t targeting them. They were too well trained for that. This withering barrage was designed to keep enemy heads down, so they couldn’t fire back. Only assholes counted kills.

I turned the key again. This time, the engine turned over. I pumped the gas, and the deuce belched smoke. I double-clutched and shifted. The gears ground, but the truck didn’t move.

“Where are those shots coming from?”

“Tangos on the southeast dune. No vehicles spotted.”

So how did they get here?

“The Tuareg are heading out. I repeat, the Tuareg are on the move.”

I looked in my side mirror; both Pelican cases were gone.

“They’re taking fire.”

I heard the gears grinding on the other deuce, but I didn’t look to see which one of my men was behind the wheel. I had one job now, and that was to drive my truck onto the egress route.

I slammed down on the gearshift and heard it crunch, then muscled it into first and felt the deuce lurch, then start to roll. I shifted to second, cranking the wheel to straighten it on the road. I heard bullets ripping into the wooden crates and cursed my stupidity in trusting the perimeter to the Tuareg. My cargo of SA-18 missiles wouldn't explode in a firefight, but they could be punctured and ruined.

"Fire in the hole," Miles's voice barked in my earpiece, as I shifted into third. I felt the explosion, then heard it, and a moment later, the dust cloud enveloped the truck. That was the end of a hundred-year-old Italian outpost.

"Pop smoke," Miles yelled. That was what I wanted to hear. Behind me, the Alphas were throwing smoke grenades and laying down fire to cover our escape while someone, probably Frank "Wildman" Wild, British ex-SAS, howled over the headset with delight.

At three hundred meters, outside the dust and the effective range of an AK-47, I looked back. The second deuce was straggling behind, two tires shot out, our Thai ex-paratrooper Boon at the wheel. I could still hear the popping of automatic fire.

Then I saw the Toyota pickup angling over the hardscape at the back of the incline. There were four—no five—men in the back, firing AK-47s as they came. Maybe local bandits tipped off to the sale, but more likely Libya Dawn or Dignity, the local jihadist groups.

Nothing dignified or dawning here. Nothing Western but their weapons.

A man stood up and lifted an RPG to his shoulder. It bounced as the truck caromed over the rocks, but the man needed only a second to line it up in my direction. The distance was a hundred meters and closing; there was nothing I could do. Hitting anything with the notoriously imprecise RPG was little more than

chance anyway, and this man had probably never fired anything like it in his life.

I pounded the gas pedal and held my breath.

Misfire.

I couldn't hear the click, but I saw the man lower the barrel. *Now*, I thought, jerking the steering wheel toward the hardscape and careening back toward the Toyota. Bullets ripped through the canvas and steel, but I focused on a spot just behind the truck's rear wheel, hit the accelerator, and heard a tremendous crunch as the deuce crushed the rear flank of the Toyota. It spun sideways and flipped, launching the men into the dirt. The deuce sputtered, but I ripped the gear down to second and threw the wheel hard to the right.

A moment later, I was back on the dirt road, the Toyota a worthless hunk behind me. My rear tires were dragging, and blue smoke was spewing from under the hood, but the exit route was clear. Only another truck could catch me now.

"Charlie One clear," I said into my headset.

"Alpha One clear," came the response.

"Alpha Two clear."

"Alpha Three clear."

"What about the Libyans?"

"All clear, Charlie One." It was Miles, confirming the count.

"Even the interpreter?"

There was a pause, then I heard Wildman's Welsh accent in my ear. "I nabbed 'im, boss. But God, he smells."

Miles laughed. I knew that laugh anywhere, even though I couldn't see his face. I didn't even know where he was for sure. Behind me somewhere, covering my ass. "Number one or number two?" he said.

"Both."

More laughter over the headset, as the tension eased. Everyone shits their pants the first time the bullets start ripping.

“Any more trucks?” I asked.

“One,” Miles said, “but it’s after the Tuareg. Probably an inside job.”

I thought of the Atlanta baseball cap. Maybe.

I eased back on the accelerator. With only one truck, the Islamists, or dissident Tuareg, or whoever they were, wouldn’t give chase. It may not have been clean, but we had the weapons we’d come for.

*Another victory for the good guys*, I thought as I pushed the deuce into third, then fourth. I could barely see the road through the diesel smoke, but there wasn’t much to see. It was all dirt and rocks anyway.

Eighty kilometers later the deuce died. Boon’s truck, which had been blowing smoke for the last forty kilometers, limped up beside me. It was time to ditch the deuces. The men stripped our three Land Cruisers of excess weight—spare tires, pioneering kit, survival gear—and started to load them with the weapons, while Boon attended to the interpreter, who was in a state of shock. Thai paratroopers as a rule weren’t shit, but I’d hired Boonchu “Boon” Tipnant four years ago because he was a combat medic. Turned out, he was an expert at stealth extraction and hand-to-hand combat, and a hell of a good guy, too.

“Lose the crates,” I yelled, as the Land Cruisers filled up. “And the 14.5 millimeter ammunition.” I could easily source the ammo in Romania.

While the team jammed the weapons into the Land Cruisers—they would enjoy driving the last hundred kilometers with heavy weapons drooping off the tailgate—Miles and I stepped into the desert. I lit a cigar from my portable humidor and activated my sat phone, then lit Miles’s cigar, too. It was a ritual we’d picked up in Airborne in the 1990s, half a lifetime

ago, and we'd smoked a thousand cigars together since, from Sicily to the drop zone at Fort Bragg to the jungles of Liberia.

"Lucky," I said, walking through my mistakes in my head. Unknown broker. Late arrival. No lookouts. I was getting sloppy.

"It's not lucky if you're good," Miles replied.

"That doesn't make it right."

"That doesn't make it wrong, either," he said. Miles was grinning. He was past fifty, and he looked like a dentist, but if I was in a death cage match with a crocodile and fighting for my life, he was the first man I'd chose to be with me.

The sat phone beeped. I looked down. I was surprised to see I'd missed several calls. I walked away a few paces for privacy, puffed on my cigar, and dialed the familiar number. A familiar voice answered.

"Monday, 0800."

"I'm in the middle of something."

"It's off. Come home."

## CHAPTER 1

I straightened my red Hermès tie in the bathroom mirror, then brushed lint from the right shoulder of my dark blue Harvie and Hudson suit, the battle armor of the corporate world. I checked my shave, realized I'd missed a spot on my neck, and dry-shaved the stubble.

Then I went to my closet. On the right were ten suits, blue or gray, and stylishly cut. On the left were a dozen colorful robes and kaftans, gifts from grateful people I'd worked with in Africa. Crammed between them on shelves and utility hooks was my gear. Three sets of boots—black, tan, and olive green. Action slacks in the same three colors. My web belt, my six-inch folding knife, and my collapsible baton, the extendable steel club I'd used to knock the Tuareg unconscious less than thirty hours ago.

I checked my seventy-two-hour “go bag.” I always kept two packed—one for the developed world, one for the rest. My third world bag had been depleted in Libya, so I restocked it with sterile syringes, malaria tablets, batteries, codeine, and other items prized in a war zone. Then I packed my personal essentials: the ivory chopsticks I'd picked up as a teenager backpacking around the world, my portable ten-cigar humidor, and an iPod crammed with classical music.

I had arrived home seven hours earlier after a twenty-eight-hour journey that involved driving the weapons to the desert

camp, choppering to Tripoli, and buying a ticket to Rome with cash. I'd showered in the first-class lounge, waiting two hours, then bought a ticket to Washington, DC, and slept on the plane. I figured I'd have a day in DC, at most, and then it was back to the grind.

That didn't bother me. It was standard procedure. I was accustomed to flying twelve hours for a two-hour meal with a client or source, and then turning around and flying home. The information shared on such assignments couldn't be written down. It had to be delivered in person, or not at all.

What bothered me, as I locked my apartment and drove my thirty-year-old diesel Mercedes through Adams Morgan, my Washington neighborhood, was the Libyan operation.

I wasn't worried about the firefight. That was a known business risk. And besides, I'd acquired the weapons at the agreed-upon price, losing only two deuce-and-a-halves in the process, and cargo trucks were essentially worthless. Yet, by the time I got back to base, my desert training camp was already being dismantled by one of the "cleaning" teams my employer, Apollo Outcomes, used to scrub evidence of an operation.

It wouldn't show, and I'd never let the bosses know, but I was pissed. I had spent six months planning the Libyan job. I had been back and forth between Washington and a fashionable conference room in Houston, Texas, a dozen times. Could this job be done? *Should* it be done? How long would it take? How much would it cost?

I had been the Apollo man in Africa for more than a decade: raising small armies for U.S. interests; preventing a genocide in Burundi with twelve competent soldiers; defeating a warlord in Liberia without firing a shot; "shaping the environment" in Sudan to make way for American foreign policy. Standard stuff.

The Libyan operation was different. In Libya, my goal was to

seize, protect, and operate major oil fields, on foreign soil, for an American oil company, in the middle of a civil war.

It was un-fucking-precedented.

That was what traditional soldiers never understood, even my old paratrooper mates, the ones who called me merc like it was a dirty word. Working for Apollo wasn't about the money, which was less than most people thought, or the power, which was incidental and fleeting. It was about doing the shit I couldn't do in a uniform. No red tape. No political constraints, like I'd have in the public military. This job wasn't about licking boots in Washington. It was about being assigned mission impossible and getting it done. It was being dropped into the middle of a war zone with my rucksack and my wits and nobody to look over my shoulder . . . and changing the shape of the world.

I understood the geopolitical implications of the Libyan operation. I had sat through endless meetings in top floor conference rooms overlooking Houston, discussing the big question: what if the world found out?

But the circumstances, as I'd arranged them, were airtight. The drilling station had been abandoned for more than two years. The location was remote. The pipeline ran through uninhabited desert or controllable towns. AO, as Apollo was known in the field, even had a long-standing contact inside the port at Zawiyah, where we would load the oil onto tankers, and Zawiyah was truly a city where no questions were asked.

The light turned green, and I turned past the massive brick hotel onto Rock Creek Parkway, slipping out of the urban environment and into the leafy gully of Washington's hidden highway.

The operation was a shit pile, I thought as I passed under arched road bridges reminiscent of Roman aqueducts. It was a box of mismatched puzzle pieces. It should never have fit to-

gether. The job had been, by any reasonable estimate, too much to ask.

But I'd done it.

Three weeks in-country, and I'd already seized the drilling station, recruited a few hundred local fighters, and set up a desert camp to train them. We had more than enough light arms and "liberated" black market UN Land Cruisers. Thanks to the Tuareg, we had acquired the firepower to equip helicopters and technical. Already, we could defend a hundred miles of pipeline, and it was still two days before the Houston wildcatters arrived—the craziest bastards on planet earth, even worse than the Navy SEALs—and slammed the station into working order. If anything, I was ahead of schedule.

So where had it gone wrong?

Not the ground game, I thought, as Rock Creek Parkway bottomed out along the Potomac River. I had gone over every move during my layovers and flights, and my end was clean.

Was the operation compromised? Did someone in Tripoli or Houston leak to the press? Was a major shareholder concerned?

But even if a reporter started sniffing around—and I was sure no reporters had, yet—there was nothing to latch on to. I'd drawn my team from the elite forces of a dozen different nations. My indigenous recruits were loyal to tribal strongmen, who knew nothing of the overall operation. My management group, mere figureheads, were the cousins and other assorted confidantes of connected Libyan businessmen, the type of shady characters paid good money to do nothing more than take the fall, if it ever came to that. All financial transactions were layered through them, then routed through the British Virgin Islands, whose banks were more secretive than Switzerland's. It would be next to impossible to trace anything back to Houston, especially given the cutouts and shell companies I'd created. That was why the Fortune 500 hired Apollo.

What about the U.S. government? I doubted USG was involved, but I knew one phone call from State or Defense could shut down a company operation anywhere in the world. That's the power of handing out thirty billion a year in military contracts.

I downshifted as I passed the Kennedy Center, the giant Kleenex box where I got my opera fix whenever I had the misfortune of being in town, and eased into the bridge traffic. The Washington Monument was behind me, and the Jefferson Memorial off to my left, but the skyscrapers of Arlington, Virginia, rose in front, looming over the low treeline of Roosevelt Island. God, I hated going to Virginia, with its consulting firms and tract mansions and glistening office parks for the military-industrial complex. I distrusted it even now, on a clear morning, at the ass end of rush hour, on a reverse commute, and sure enough, the traffic snarled at the first big bend in U.S. 66. There was only one industry in Washington, and these office jockeys, like everyone here, were policy dependent: consultants, attorneys, think tankers, and advisors, a living army of opinions and analysis.

And yet few of them would understand the Libyan operation. They would insist that we don't seize foreign assets for profit . . . not in the sixty years since the United Fruit Company conquered Central America using the CIA, anyway . . . or since Prescott Bush brokered an oil deal with the Saud family.

But that was merely ignorance. This was the way the world worked. A place like Libya—or Syria or Afghanistan—wasn't a sovereign country in any modern sense. Even before Gaddafi was overthrown, the desert regions had governed themselves. In the end, the self-proclaimed “king of kings of Africa” was little more than the mayor of Tripoli. Now Libya was shattered, and everything from oil fields to “tax stations” along desert camel

tracks were run by whatever local racketeer had the muscle and imagination to control them. The Sahara was the American West of 150 years ago: a lawless land where unemployed soldiers, smugglers, natives, and criminals took what they could, sometimes by cunning, usually by force.

Half the world was like that now. West Africa. The Congo. Yemen. In South Sudan, I spent four months helping a local strongman with ties to a U.S. congressman destroy a rebellious rival. The strongman's reward was an appointment to the Ministry of Natural Resources. The reward for our client, a large energy firm, was the exclusive right to drill oil in Block 5A—at a hefty price, of course.

I had believed in that operation. The rebels were butchers. I had seen it myself. Then, three months later, I heard the strongman had slaughtered a thousand “Islamic terrorists,” most of them women and children.

My Libyan operation cut out the local middleman. A middleman who was most likely a murderer, rapist, and thug. In my opinion, Libya was a step toward a more civilized world, not away from one. It was naïve to think otherwise.

So where had it gone wrong?

Somewhere along this damn interstate, I thought, as someone laid on a horn behind me, and somewhere up ahead another car answered. The traffic was completely stopped, and even the Virginians, who lived with this every day, were getting antsy.

*Just get me back to Africa*, I thought, as I heard the pounding opening to Verdi's opera *The Force of Destiny* on the classical station, WETA. It was one of my favorites: two men who fought as mercenary brothers-in-arms, now pitted against each other by fate in a fight to the death. A nice reminder that my occupation was as old as civilization and, like Verdi's opera, often didn't end well.

It wasn't my job to question Apollo or its clients, I reminded myself, as the traffic started moving. I was a high-end fixer. I was paid to solve problems in war zones, using whatever means I could get away with. And for the creative mind there were so many means.

Whatever happened after . . . well, it was only rumors, anyway.

## CHAPTER 2

Thirty-eight minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot of a nondescript building in one of the endless office parks near Dulles International Airport. I parked my ancient Mercedes in a long line of similar cars and stared at the man-made pond and the picnic table no one ever used, letting the Verdi wash away my traffic-related stress.

This area was the heart of the mercenary-industrial complex. G4S, a competitor, supplied thousands of security guards to the U.S. military from these buildings, and tens of thousands more to domestic malls. DynCorp pulled down more than three billion a year, although much of that was from military-aircraft maintenance. Blackwater became Xe Services, then Academi, then merged with Triple Canopy, a rival, to beget Constellis Holdings, all in the space of five years. My employer, Apollo Outcomes, had been cleaning latrines on army bases in the 1990s. Now it was a private army with yearly revenues of \$3.7 billion, most of it courtesy of Uncle Sam, according to their most recent Securities and Exchange Commission filing.

The mercenary business, to put it in technical terms, was hot. The industry had exploded during the Iraq War, not just because of contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan, although those were massive, of course. Just as important, with every national asset focused on those countries, there was no one left to deal with the other terrible things happening in the world. For the U.S.

military, that was the opportunity cost of waging two simultaneous wars. For the mercenary industry, it was a once-every-three-centuries opportunity.

Now, less than fifteen years after the Third Infantry Division rolled into Baghdad, contractors like me were the forward arm of Western power, fighting in every rat hole, brutal dictatorship, and economic backwater in the world. It was, quite simply, the biggest change in the military since the heyday of the *condottieri*, the infamous contract warriors of the Middle Ages. But you wouldn't know it from these shabby surroundings and nondescript office parks, where Apollo and its competitors abutted low-level consulting firms and industrial printers.

And that was all by design. The lack of media attention, the bland buildings in boring locations, the forgettable corporate names and artless logos—it was a strategy. Because to draw attention in this business, even positive attention, was to fail. That was why Blackwater was a pariah, before being sold and renamed three times. The military performed the covert actions the White House would neither confirm nor deny. We took care of the clandestine ones, those the government disavowed if they were ever spoken aloud. Our only competition was the CIA, but we were cheaper. And, in my opinion, far better, because we were so deep undercover that half the time, even the CIA couldn't find us. If you wanted to be a player in the Deep State—the shadowy coterie of big business, politicians, media and other elites who ruled behind the headlines, beyond government oversight, and across national borders, regardless of who was formally in power, the world where private armies like Apollo thrived—never let them hear or speak your name.

There was a time, five years ago, when I might have been a power player here, a man who contracted operations instead of performed them. I was invited, groomed, *introduced to soci-*

*ety* . . . whatever you want to call it. But I hated the DC scene: the economy of favors, the double-dealing, the endless scheming in pursuit of a compromised version of a shining ideal, while the shabby duck on the fetid retention pond shed feathers like the plague.

I was a soldier, not a bureaucrat. I chose Africa.

Now I came back three, maybe four weeks a year. Many mercs in the field never came back at all. We were freelancers, hired by the job: cash on delivery, no health insurance or 401(k)s. Old mercs don't retire, they disappear, maybe to some unknown corner of the world, maybe to an unmarked grave. The ones I knew kept busy, taking job after job, so they wouldn't have to face this life, and the people left behind. But I was a mission leader, the point of contact between the men in the field and the suits in the office. My role was to plan the assignments and assemble the teams, so I came here just barely often enough to recognize the frosty attendant at the front desk, the one who never smiled.

"Hello Jane," I said. It had taken me two years to remember her name. She didn't even pretend to remember mine.

I slid my company ID into the bioscanner and held it for three seconds, waiting for the green light, and then placed my index finger on the fingerprint reader. Jane checked her monitor, confirmed my identity, and waved me to the employee turnstile, the one with the NO TAILGATING placard on it. The thick Plexiglas doors swished open. Next to the doors was a metal detector and X-ray machine, with two armed guards. Typical postterrorism precaution, Apollo always said. Only an expert would notice that the guards changed every few days and carried Heckler & Koch MP5SD6s with integrated suppressor barrels.

Beyond the metal detector was a wall—reinforced steel under plaster—with a huge company logo. I walked through a curved white tunnel called a waveguide, a security measure that

emptied into a windowless cubicle farm. Cable trays and monitors hung from the ceiling, as kids in their twenties took phone calls in foreign languages. I had no idea what they did, but they seemed younger every year. When I started here in 2002, the cube dwellers were retired older men from the military and intelligence community, whose pants refused to acknowledge their extra pounds. They were refugees from the great defense layoffs of the 1990s, out here by the airport, playing out the string.

Now the cube ranchers were mostly women, because they make better intelligence analysts, and mostly younger than the Cold War–era coffee stains on the old guys' shirts. I assumed that meant they were going somewhere in life, besides the suburbs.

"Tom Locke. Good to see you. How was the flight?"

The speaker was David Wolcott, my handler for the last five years, lurking as always. Wolcott had the look of those old middle managers, right down to the bald spot and the belt that went underneath his belly instead of around. I figured he had a wife and kids somewhere in the suburbs, a barbecue grill, baseball equipment, and one of those fences with the support poles on the outside so the homeowner can sit in a lounge and look at the pretty side.

"It was first class," I said. As always.

Wolcott had called me home, but that was not something we would discuss. He was a middle manager, and this wasn't a business with postmortem meetings or after-action reviews. If Libya still bothered me a few months from now, I might try to figure out what had happened on my own. Otherwise, I left the past alone.

"Coffee?" Wolcott asked.

"No thanks."

"I don't blame you, Tom. It's garbage. No one has cleaned the pot in a year."

We passed the cube farm and turned down a hallway, where I left my cell phone on a table with twenty others, as required. The next door was steel, with a large combo lock, keypad and camera. Inside was the Tactical Operations Center, or TOC, a large, windowless room of computer monitors running mission status updates, live team feeds, satellite imagery of areas of interest, and video conferencing with company managers around the world. The TOC was a 24/7 war room, complete with top secret government clearance and immediate access to every operative in the world, and it was the worst job at Apollo: cramped, dark, underventilated and underpaid.

Ten paces further, Wolcott stopped in front of an office suite, opened the door, and motioned me through without a word.

“Brad Winters,” I said, as Wolcott closed the door and stayed outside, leaving me alone with my former boss. It wasn’t often I was caught by surprise, but this was one of those times.

“Good to see you, Thomas,” Winters said, rising from his chair.

I had instinctively straightened and brought my arms to my side, a military sign of respect, but Winters came around the table to shake hands. This man had recruited me into Apollo Outcomes; we had worked closely together for six years; he had taught me, molded me, broken and invested in me, and then he’d invited me to join him, as his right hand, in Apollo’s executive suite.

But I’d gone back to Africa instead, and I hadn’t heard from him since.

That was the last anyone had heard from him, really. Brad Winters had transformed Apollo during the gold rush of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, when the Department of Defense was handing out \$300 billion a year to companies with any sort of link to military logistics or firepower. He had almost made a name for himself. And then he had disappeared.

I knew that meant he'd either fallen out of power, or ascended into the realm where only a hundred or so people needed to know your name. Clearly, it was the latter, and I wasn't surprised. Brad Winters was a dinosaur; he would always be around, even if it was just as an oil slick.

And I wasn't surprised that he looked exactly as I remembered him. That was the man's greatest asset: a manner so bland, he could disappear into any crowd. Winters had gotten his start in the 82nd Airborne—that was a big part of our connection, because I'd earned my jumpmaster wings there, too—and had come and gone from Wall Street before coming to Apollo. His grip had gotten firm in his time upstairs, but the only other change I noticed was the stitching on the lapel of his blue suit.

"I have a tailor, from Panama," Winters winked, following my gaze. "I see you're still shopping Jermyn Street."

My first trip with Brad Winters had been to Brussels to brief NATO officials on a security situation in Africa. When we met at Dulles airport, he had eyed my Brooks Brothers suit and tasseled loafers and finally said, "That won't do."

We got off during a stopover at Heathrow and took a cab to Jermyn Street, off Saint James Square, the ground zero of gentleman's clothing. We walked into several modest-looking shops, where the staff greeted him by name.

Several hours later, I had four bespoke suits on order, nine tailored shirts, an overcoat with a velvet collar, two pairs of John Lobb shoes, a breast pocket wallet, and some Hermes ties and sterling silver cufflinks. It cost me two months' salary, including danger pay, but at least Apollo paid for the connecting flight we'd missed.

Now Winters laughed, and I realized I'd glanced down at his shoes. Most men skimped on footwear, because it was expensive. The shoes I had on this morning cost more than what a Wash-

ington bureaucrat takes home in a month. Winters's shoes cost even more.

"I'm glad you haven't turned your back on everything I taught you," Winters said.

I let the remark slide, made a mental note to be more careful with my gaze, and took a seat. If Winters had come down from the mountain, this was important. But I didn't expect to find out a damn thing about it here. In the army, it had been two-hour mission briefings, with a thick PowerPoint presentation and six outside experts. It was death by detail.

At Apollo, it was eight minutes if you were lucky. And no note taking. The company's unofficial motto was: "Figure it out."

"That was solid fieldwork in Libya," Winters said. "I'm sorry it didn't pan out. I know your other recent missions have been . . . less than satisfactory."

It had been a rough few years of muscle work, the kind of cheap intimidation and sudden violence that was beneath a man of my skills. I had started to wonder if I'd been forgotten, or taken for granted. Winters was telling me, straight off, that I hadn't.

"I recently talked to State," he said, tipping his chair back in a show of disdain for that august department. "There's an opportunity in Ukraine. Short term. Creative. Off the books. Your kind of mission, Thomas."

"Why me?"

I had operated in the Balkans during the '90s as a soldier in U.S. Special Operations Forces, and later transacted arms deals in Eastern Europe for Apollo, but my area of expertise was a thousand miles and a continent away.

"You're the best man for the job," Winters said, like it was a simple statement of fact, which of course it was. "The U.S. and its allies are getting run over by Putin"—*That's an understatement*

*ment*, I thought, *the man just straight out stole Crimea*—“and clients are being dragged down. This conflict is bad for business.”

*We must be in a new business*, I thought, but I said, “I’m no Putin man, Brad.” First name. Power move. You don’t intimidate me, old mentor. “Surely you have someone in-country.” Vladimir Putin was a field of study. There had to be a dozen company operatives, at least, whose careers were built on him and his cronies. And if I knew Brad Winters, he probably already had a half a hundred Tier One operators in the combat zone.

“This is improvisation, Thomas. I need a military artist. The last thing I want is a Putin man.”

I thought of the first time I’d talked to Brad Winters. I was walking across Harvard Yard in the fall of 2001, a year out of special operations forces and a month into my first term as a graduate student at the Kennedy School of Government. “The Army’s no place for a young man like you,” my commanding officer had advised me. “It’s all peacekeeping and politics now. You’ll be wasting your career. Go to school. Spend a few years studying. There’s a position at State waiting for you.” By State, he meant CIA.

A week in, I was bored to tears. I wanted to be where the action was, not doing problem sets for my econometrics class. Then the planes hit the Twin Towers, and all my plans came crashing down. I was outside the Widener library when I received the call.

“You don’t know us,” Winters said, “but we know you. How would you like to save the world?”

*What is this, a joke?* I thought.

Two days later, I was drinking cognac in the presidential palace of the Central African country of Burundi. Hutu extremists were massing along the border. They were planning to assassinate the president, the small prim man sitting quietly across from me,

and reignite the Hutu-Tutsi conflict that had ravaged neighboring Rwanda years before. I had six weeks, at most, to prevent a genocide, and nobody trusted the Burundian army. Nobody trusted the presidential guard. Nobody, even the U.S. ambassador, thought it could be done. That was why the CIA had turned down the job.

Sometimes, “best man for the job” just meant the least informed. And in Ukraine, I would certainly qualify.

“Who requested me?” I assumed this was a BNR—By Name Request. A client had asked for me.

A slight hesitation. Interesting. “I did, Thomas. This one is important. I’m handling it personally, and you’ll be reporting to me directly.”

I sat up a little straighter. I didn’t care if Winters noticed, since there was no use pretending I wasn’t intrigued. Even if Winters hadn’t been my old mentor, he was a powerful man. You don’t turn down pet projects. Or complete operational freedom.

“No chain of command?”

Winters nodded. “Just me.”

“Nothing through official channels?” That was the telling detail of U.S. government work. On a straight USG contract, even a classified one, everything went through the embassy—cover, communications, money, weapons. I held a top secret clearance for this purpose, even though, these days, most jobs didn’t go through the embassy.

“No USG contact. No company contact.”

“A kite?” Kites were operatives that could be cut loose in the event of compromise. The riskiest assignments were always the most prestigious.

Winters nodded again.

Given the lack of actual information, company briefings were about understanding the unspoken. This mission was black, outside even Apollo’s compartmentalized command structure.

I doubted if anyone outside of Winters, Wolcott, and the client would know I was on the ground.

“Who’s the client?”

Winters slid a manila folder across the table. It contained one page: a picture of a middle-aged man. He was dressed in a Savile Row suit, with a stylish pocket square and a platinum Lange & Söhne precision watch, but he had questionable teeth. He was either minor British royalty or Slavic nouveau riche.

“Kostyantyn Karpenko,” Winters said, “a Ukrainian oligarch and member of parliament. He’s been our man in Ukraine for the past ten years.” It was unclear who *our* was referring to, although Winters had dropped a mention of the State Department earlier. Still, you could never be sure.

“He’s a patriot, Thomas. A believer in freedom. He impressed me during the Orange Revolution in 2004, and we worked with him again during the Euromaidan protests that toppled Putin’s puppet government three months ago.” Meaning Apollo Outcomes sent organizers, or provided tactical assistance, or both. We were experts at manufacturing so-called color revolutions.

“We expected Karpenko to be minister of energy in the new government. President if everything went right. It didn’t. Russia invaded—unofficially, of course—and the place went to shit.”

I knew Putin was using strong-arm tactics—fifth-column irregulars, soldiers out of uniform, mercenaries—to destabilize the country. Oligarchs and strong men loved instability; that was why the world was unstable. Putin had done the same thing in Chechnya in 1999 and Soviet Georgia in 2008, and both had almost ended in genocide. Fortunately, Apollo was built for these kinds of shadow wars.

“Our job,” Winters continued, “is to reintroduce Karpenko to Kiev power politics. To do this, we need to deliver him a victory. The kind ordinary citizens can rally behind.”

*A symbolic victory*, I thought. *Something public*. It had worked in the Eastern Bloc before. Lech Walesa had freed Poland from Soviet rule with a dock worker's strike. "Storm the palace? Parliamentary assault?" I guessed.

Winters shook his head. "Natural gas."

He handed me another file. It contained a photograph of what must have been a natural gas transfer station. It appeared to be mostly pipes.

"Russia and the West are fighting for energy security, the Pipeline Wars, as we'll phrase it for the press. Ukraine is the battleground. Specifically its liquid natural gas lines. Two days ago, Russian soldiers disguised as a separatist militia occupied the Donbastransgas trunkline station in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk. A strategic location. We estimate between ten and twenty men. Karpenko needs help taking it back."

Straightforward enough. "Assets in place?"

"Karpenko has twenty-five loyal men left. And there is a pro-Ukrainian militia twenty kilometers away, the Donbas Battalion. CIA contract, Apollo execution. They're all volunteers, mostly policemen, teachers, the usual patriots. Two hundred men at last count."

More than enough, even if poorly trained. But I could see Winters's hesitation: never trust schoolteachers against trained soldiers, no matter the odds. Especially when the target was filled with a few hundred cubic tons of highly flammable gas. I'd seen it in Africa. Someone taps the wrong pipe, and the explosion levels a hundred huts. You can't even count, much less identify, the bodies. Better for the shooting to be over before the amateurs arrive.

"I want prisoners, not corpses, Thomas. Pretty pictures for the press. We'll charter two helicopters from Kiev for the media, and lure them with the tagline: evidence of a Russian military invasion."

“And the real story?” I said, knowing that ink was too slim to cut through the clutter of cable news.

“Karpenko’s victory speech, which we’re writing. It will be his Yeltsin moment.”

In 1991, hardliners in the Soviet army surrounded the Russian White House. Boris Yeltsin, then in a power struggle with other reform leaders, stood on a tank and gave a rousing speech against the coup. The troops defected. Four months later, catapulted to a new level of popularity by his speech, Yeltsin became president.

That kind of moment was hard to engineer. I knew, because I’d tried. But it was worth the risk, since leaders mattered. If the Ukrainians lacked a focal point, they needed their own George Washington. But in a pinch, a Boris Yeltsin would do.

“Time frame?”

“Saturday,” Winters said.

Five days. Tough.

“I know it’s tight. And the window of opportunity is small. There will be less than an hour between the arrival of the Donbas Battalion at 0600 and the press at 0700.” If either showed up on time, that is, and militias and reporters rarely did. “This is an active war zone. We don’t want to give the Russians time for a counterstrike.”

I sat back. This wasn’t how Apollo operated. We took our time. We planned things carefully. That was how we stayed out of the news, not to mention the morgue. Someone was running hot on a unique opportunity, as Winters had called it. Maybe the U.S. government. Probably a business client. Someone was willing to gamble on a desperate man sitting on a lot of natural gas. I couldn’t quite figure out, though, why it should be me.

“It’s doable,” I said, “if the Donbas Battalion will follow Karpenko.”

“They’ll follow him,” Winters said, “I can promise you that. He’s partially paying them. You just need to get him there.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “Karpenko isn’t with the Donbas Battalion?”

Winters laughed. “If he was, would I need someone like you?”

He was flattering me. Making me think of whatever he said next as a challenge, instead of a foolish risk. It wouldn’t work. Not this time.

“Where is he?”

“In hiding,” Winters said. “Bank accounts frozen. Warrant out for his arrest. A bounty on his head from the Kremlin, under the table of course, but enough to keep him on the run.”

“Then how can I help him?”

“We have an inside man—”

“And why?”

That was the difference between being a soldier and a merc. In the army, you did what your commanding officer told you to do, no questions asked. A mercenary could turn down work if he didn’t like it, logistically, morally, or for any other damn reason he pleased.

So I expected the hard sell: the importance of stopping Putin, Apollo Outcomes as the hand of the West, even Hitler-and-the-Sudetenland. Winters was a master talker, and this was the moment. Closing time. But instead of pumping me up, he stared into the distance. I couldn’t tell if he was contemplating what to say next, or chewing a dramatic pause.

“There are children, Thomas,” he said finally. “Young ones.”

I thought of Burundi. The new president was the ideal leader for a war-ravaged country: a capable man, a humanitarian. That’s why the opposition was desperate to assassinate him. The odds were he’d be dead in a month, everyone knew that, especially him, but he was willing to risk his life if it meant a small

chance of a better life for his people. Ten years ago, Winters had handed me exactly what I wanted: a chance to make the world a better place. And I was going to turn it down, because keeping this noble man alive *was* impossible.

Then his eight-year-old daughter walked in and gave her father a hug.

Had I told Winters that? I must have—we were inseparable at one time, and I wasn't as careful about revealing myself then as I was now—because Winters was drawing a line: a line visible only to me. Ukraine now is Burundi then. Karpenko is a good man, a *family* man. This is a war-torn nation's best chance.

“Extraction or protection?”

“Extraction. Their passports have been revoked and Interpol is watching. But we have a window, three nights from now, and an An-12 on station in Bucharest.”

*A military cargo plane*, I thought, mulling the possibilities. The Antonov-12 could take a family out, but it could also bring things in. The kind of things difficult to get through customs. The kind of things you needed for an assault on a hardened natural gas facility.

“How do I find them?”

Winters rose and walked to the door. Wolcott was waiting outside. Winters was the pitchman. Wolcott provided the details.

“We've set up a Sherpa,” Wolcott said, wasting no time. “John Greenlees. Former CIA station chief in Kiev, retired in place. He'll meet you at the Hyatt Regency in Kiev at 1400 tomorrow.”

He placed a box of business cards on the table. “Green Light-house Group. Business: facilitation services in frontier markets. You're the president, CEO, and only employee. We've created a legend. Articles on business blogs, old press releases, the usual. The website has been up since yesterday, but it looks like it's been up for months.”

Wolcott placed a thick envelope beside the business cards. I knew what was inside: a debit card and €10,000, the maximum allowable without being declared. You broke the law in this business only when you had to. A fake passport meant arrest, a false identity, a hooded car ride to a Siberian prison. You could talk your way out of a two-month-old consulting business.

Besides, there was no hiding from the Internet. If anyone Googled me, it was all there: paratrooper, special warfare training. I even had a blog, the Musical Mercenary, where I wrote opera reviews. I had been interviewed about it on NPR, of all places. It was best, in this day and age, to own your past.

“The debit card is loaded with €50,000, for expenses. Greenlees will have another €50,000 in cash when you arrive. We’ll subtract out for your plane ticket and equipment.” They were making it look like I paid my own way. That was new. The company always ran cover for action, but not this deep. “Karpenko will pay additional expenses once you link up with him, anything you need.”

Wolcott dropped a gold necklace with thick links on the table. It was old school. If things got bad, I could snip off a link at a time and barter my way out of the country.

I didn’t like it. Apollo Outcomes was a corporation, not an Old West saloon. They took taxes out of my paycheck. My employment contract was fourteen pages long, for God’s sake—and I was a freelancer. You should see my 1099 tax forms.

“You’ll get your standard rate,” he continued. “Four weeks worth, plus a 50 percent bump up for danger pay, and Mr. Winters is adding a 50 percent completion bonus.” That came out to about \$80,000 for a week’s worth of work. Arguably, my fee should have been higher. But you don’t haggle within the company, and if things went pear shaped, I knew Winters would get me out. Trust is worth more than money when your life is on the line.

“And,” he continued, “you get a team.”

I smiled, thinking of Miles and the boys. Having good men at your side was the only thing in the world more important than trust.

“I know you, Tom,” Winters said slowly, stepping in. He always knew when to step in. “I understand why you stayed in the field.”

He didn’t. He never had.

“You’re right,” he said, as if reading my mind. “I don’t understand. But I believed you when you said you thought you could do more good there.”

He paused again. The man used pauses better than Beethoven. “I know this is unusual. I know it’s outside your area of expertise. But it’s the big one. The ‘good job.’ The one we’ve been waiting for. Forget Africa and look at the big picture. If we shift the balance of power in Ukraine, we stuff Putin back in his box. It’s good for our clients and better for the world. Break Russia, Thomas, and we don’t just win a victory. We change the future. Even for Africa.”

There it was, the Hitler speech, soft-pitched, but unmistakable: *History needs us. We’re the chosen ones. This is your purpose.*

He was stroking my ego. Manipulating me, like he always had. But so what? There were pieces missing here, explanations that were incomplete, but my job wasn’t to see the forest, it was to cut down trees. If I didn’t believe in myself, and my missions, on some deep fundamental level, why had I been risking my life all these years?

Winters rose and knocked on the door. Wolcott entered and handed me a flight itinerary. I glanced at it briefly. One way to Kiev. Three hours from now. Just enough time to head home for warmer clothes and a few appropriate downloads, such as Tchaikovsky’s Second Symphony, known as the “Little Russian,” after the nickname for Ukraine during the reign of the Czar.

Wolcott handed me another piece of paper. It had my exfiltration data, handwritten: a time, date, and grid square location. I committed it to memory and handed the sheet back. Wolcott put it back into a folder with the photo of Karpenko. They would be in the shredder by lunch.

“A company helicopter will extract your team,” he said. “Fifteen-minute window. Don’t be late.”

And that was it. The operation was set. There would be no file, no photos, no written mission brief. And despite the cubicle gerbils toiling fifty feet away, no useful information. There never was.

“I’ll see you in a week,” I said, standing up and straightening my suit.

Winters stood up. I thought he was extending his hand for a shake, but instead, he slipped me a phone number. “My personal line,” he said. “You’ll know when to call.”

## CHAPTER 3

Three hours later, at almost exactly the time Locke was boarding his flight to Kiev, Brad Winters laid his knife and fork across his plate at the Occidental and pushed away the last of his steak. It was just past one P.M., but he had been here for more than an hour. It was time to get moving.

“You got the talking points?” he said to Tom Hagen, the man sitting across from him. Hagen was the only thing more synonymous with Washington, DC, power than a private government contractor: a law firm partner without a law degree.

Hagen’s story was one Winters had heard a hundred times, with slight variations. Undergraduate at Georgetown (sometimes they were Ivy); Senate staffer at twenty-three (after one or two years of “charity work”); chief of staff at thirty; then a permanent member of a prestigious Senate or House committee; and, finally, a filthy rich lobbyist by the time the midlife crisis kicked in at forty. After that—at least in Tom Hagen’s case—came the long, slow decline, something Winters had long ago decided was attributable to a lack of both ambition and imagination. He’d seen it too often, from too many people who had cashed out and lost their way. Never make your goal something you can achieve.

“I’ve got them,” Hagen said, knocking back the last of his Sanserre. “It’s more than stopping a tyrant. It’s energy security. Ukraine has Europe’s third largest shale reserves. Putin is imperiling the world economy.”

“Freedom gas,” Winters said slowly, as you would while teaching a toddler. “Ukrainian gas means freedom from the Soviet threat. Freedom gas.”

“I’ll start with members from Texas and Louisiana,” Hagen said, ignoring the condescending tone. “We’ll establish the Friends of Ukraine.” Politicians were forever creating informal groups around newsworthy issues—the Friends of the Farmer, the Friends of Coal, the Friends of Real Americans.

“I know a crisis communications firm on K Street for the public angle. We’ll create a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization called . . .” Hagen paused, thinking “. . . the U.S.-Ukraine Democracy Alliance.”

“Good.” Throwing democracy in a name was always a good idea.

“It will be a media platform and attack dog, going after the White House and critics, saying things Congress won’t. Don’t worry, the firm is clever, founded by ex-CIA. They do oppo research, media hit pieces, muddy reputations. They even infiltrated Greenpeace.”

“Make it AstroTurf.” Meaning the “nonprofit” should look and feel and, most importantly, sound like a legitimate grassroots organization. “When’s the press conference?”

“When do you want it?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. So we get ahead of any breaking news. I want four senators, at least.” Hagen started to object, but Winters cut him off. “Addison is already onboard.”

Hagen nodded. Addison had pull. “Ten and four,” he said, meaning at least ten from the lower house—they were easy—and four known names. “And then—”

“I’ll see what I can do with Shell.”

Shell Oil held the rights to the eastern Ukrainian gas fields, and they were halfway through an estimated infrastructure invest of

\$410 million, but they had pulled back because of violence in the area. A Putin victory, or a government collapse in Kiev, would put their leases and infrastructure investments at risk. It was a hazard of the modern world economy and, since the pullback in government contracts at the end of the official Iraq War, Brad Winters's main engine of growth. Hagen would kill, almost literally, to have a fat oil company like Shell as a client.

"Are you sure you don't want to go through State?" Hagen said, trying to prove his worth. "I can get you in at the DepSec level." The deputy secretary was the alter ego of the secretary of state and the power behind the policy throne.

"I think it's best if I stay out of it for the moment," Winters said. He had no interest in going anywhere near this political charade until it was safe. That was why he needed Hagen.

"As long as it's for the good of the country," Hagen said with a knowing smile.

Winters figured at one point the phrase had meant something, but it was so de rigeur by now it had become a punch line.

"Right now," he said, putting his napkin on the table and pushing back from the table, "I'm in the process of saving our asses."

Hagen glanced up, surprised by Winters's serious tone. "You're a patriot, Brad," he said, standing to shake his hand. "Just like the rest of us."

The waiter appeared with the dessert menu, stepping deftly aside as Winters turned. "On my tab," Winters said, as his eyes scanned the room.

"Bodegas Hidalgo Napoleon, thirty-year," Hagen said absently, as he watched Winters glad-hand a few familiar faces as he left, the hundreds of black-and-white portraits of Washington players behind him on the walls, portraits that seemed to retreat farther and farther away the longer Hagen stayed in town.