

PROLOGUE

A flash of light in the distant morning sky captured the attention of the Land Rover's blood-soaked driver. Polarized Oakleys shielded his eyes from the brunt of the sun's rays; still, he squinted through his windshield's glare, desperate to identify the burning aircraft that now spun and hurtled towards earth, a smoldering comet's tail of black smoke left hanging above it.

It was a helicopter, a large Army Chinook, and horrific though the situation must have been for those on board, the driver of the Land Rover breathed a subdued sigh of relief. His extraction transport was to be a Russian-built KA-32T, crewed by Polish mercenaries and flown in from over the border in Turkey. The driver found the dying Chinook regrettable but preferable to a dying KA-32T.

He watched the chopper spin in its uncontrolled descent, staining the blue sky directly in front of him with burning fuel.

He turned the Land Rover hard to the right and accelerated eastward. The blood-soaked driver wanted to get as far away from here as fast as possible. As much as he wished there was something he could do for the Americans on board the Chinook, he knew their fate was out of his hands.

And he had his own problems. For five hours he'd raced across the flatlands of western Iraq, fleeing the dirty work he'd left behind, and now he was less than twenty minutes from his exfiltration. A shot-down chopper meant that in minutes this place would be crawling with armed fighters, defiling bodies, shooting assault rifles into the air, and jumping around like fucking morons.

It was a party the bloodstained driver would not mind missing, lest he himself become a party favor.

The Chinook sank off to his left and disappeared behind a brown ridge in the distance.

The driver fixed his eyes on the road ahead. *Not my problem*, he told himself. He was not trained to search and to rescue, he was not trained to give aid, and he certainly was not trained to negotiate for hostages.

He was trained to kill. He'd done so back over the border in Syria, and now it was time to get out of the kill zone.

As his Rover accelerated through the haze and dust

at over one hundred kilometers an hour, he began a dialogue with himself. His inner voice wanted to turn back, to race to the Chinook's crash site to check for survivors. His outer voice, on the other hand, was more pragmatic.

“Keep moving, Gentry, just keep moving. Those dudes are fucked. Nothing you can do about it.”

Gentry's spoken words were sensible, but his inner monologue just would not shut up.

ONE

The first gunmen arriving at the crash site were not Al Qaeda and had nothing to do with the shoot down. They were four local boys with old wooden-stocked Kalashnikovs who'd held a sloppy morning roadblock a hundred meters from where the chopper impacted with the city street. The boys pushed through the growing phalanx of onlookers, the shopkeepers and the street kids who dove for cover when the twin-rotor helicopter hurtled down among them, and the taxi drivers who swerved off the road to avoid the American craft. The four young gunmen approached the scene warily but without a shred of tactical skill. A loud snap from the raging fire, a single handgun round cooking off in the heat, sent them all to cover. After a moment's hesita-

tion, their heads popped back up, they aimed their rifles, and then emptied their barking and bucking guns into the twisted metal machine.

A man in a blackened American military uniform crawled from the wreckage and received two dozen rounds from the boys' weapons. The soldier's struggle ceased as soon as the first bullets raked across his back.

Braver now after the adrenaline rush of killing a man in front of the crowd of shouting civilians, the boys broke cover and moved closer to the wreckage. They reloaded their rifles and raised them to shoot at the burning bodies of the flight crew in the cockpit. But before they could open fire, three vehicles raced up from behind: pickup trucks full of armed Arabian foreigners.

Al Qaeda.

The local kids wisely backed away from the aircraft, stood back with the civilians, and chanted a devotional to God as the masked men fanned out in the road around the wreckage.

The broken corpses of two more soldiers fell clear from the rear of the Chinook, and these were the first images of the scene caught by the three-man Al Jazeera camera crew that jumped from truck three.

Just over a mile away, Gentry pulled off the road, turned into a dry streambed, and forced the Land Rover as deep as possible into the tall brown river grasses. He climbed out of the truck and raced to the tailgate, swung a pack

onto his back, and hefted a long camel-colored case by its carry handle.

As he moved away from the vehicle, he noticed the drying blood all over his loose-fitting local clothing for the first time. The blood was not his own, but there was no mystery to the stain.

He knew whose blood it was.

Thirty seconds later, he crested the little ridge by the streambed and crawled forward as quickly as possible while pushing his gear in front of him. When Gentry felt suitably invisible in the sand and reeds, he pulled a pair of binoculars from the pack and brought them to his eyes, centered on the plume of black smoke rising in the distance.

His taut jaw muscles flexed.

The Chinook had come to rest on a street in the town of al Ba'aj, and already a mob had descended on the debris. Gentry's binoculars were not powerful enough to provide much detail, so he rolled onto his side and unsnapped the camel-colored case.

Inside was a Barrett M107, a fifty-caliber rifle that fired shells half the size of beer bottles and dispatched the heavy bullets with a muzzle velocity of nearly nine football fields a second.

Gentry did not load the gun, only aimed the rifle at the crash site to use the powerful optics mounted to it. Through the sixteen-power glass he could see the fire, the pickup trucks, the unarmed civilians, and the armed gunmen.

Some were unmasked. Local thugs.

Others wore black masks or wrapped keffiyeh to cover their faces. This would be the Al Qaeda contingent. The foreign fucks. Here to kill Americans and collaborators and to take advantage of the virtual anarchy in the region.

A glint of metal rose into the air and swung down. A sword hacking at a figure on the ground. Even through the powerful sniper scope Gentry could not tell if the prostrate man had been dead or alive when the blade slashed into him.

His jaw tightened again. Gentry was not an American soldier himself, never had been. But he *was* an American. And although he had neither responsibility nor relationship with the U.S. military, he'd seen years of images on television of carnage just like that which was happening before him, and it both sickened and angered him to the very limits of his considerable self-control.

The men around the aircraft began to undulate as one. In the glare from the heat pouring out of the arid earth between his overwatch and the crash site, it took him a moment to grasp what was happening, but soon he recognized the inevitable outpouring of gleeful emotion from the butchers around the downed helicopter.

The bastards were dancing over the bodies.

Gentry unwrapped his finger from the trigger guard of the huge Barrett and let his fingertip stroke the smooth trigger. His laser range finder told him the dis-

tance, and a small group of canvas tents between himself and the dance party flapped in the breeze and gave him an idea of the windage.

But he knew better than to fire the Barrett. If he charged the weapon and pulled the trigger, he would kill a couple of shitheads, yes, but the area would turn so hot in an instant with news of a sniper in the sector that every postpubescent male with a gun and a mobile phone would be on his ass before he made it to within five miles of his extraction. Gentry's exfiltration would be called off, and he would have to make his own way out of the kill zone.

No, Gentry told himself. A meager measure of payback would be righteous, but it would set off a bigger shit storm than he was prepared to deal with.

Gentry was not a gambler. He was a private assassin, a hired gun, a contract operator. He could frag a half dozen of these pricks as fast as he could lace his boots, but he knew such retribution would not be worth the cost.

He spat a mixture of saliva and sand on the ground in front of him and turned to put the huge Barrett back in its case.

The camera crew from Al Jazeera had been smuggled over the border from Syria a week earlier with the sole purpose of chronicling an Al Qaeda victory in northern Iraq. The videographer, the audio technician, and the

reporter/producer had been moved along an AQ route, had slept in AQ safe houses alongside the AQ cell, and they'd filmed the launch of the missile, the impact with the Chinook, and the resulting fireball in the sky.

Now they recorded the ritualistic decapitation of an already dead American soldier. A middle-aged man with handwritten name tape affixed to his body armor that read, "Phillips—Mississippi National Guard." Not one of the camera crew spoke English, but they all agreed they had clearly just recorded the destruction of an elite unit of CIA commandos.

The customary praise of Allah began with the dancing of the fighters and the firing of the weapons into the air. Although the AQ cell numbered only sixteen, there were over thirty armed men now in step with one another in front of the smoldering metal hulk in the street. The videographer focused his lens on a moqtar, a local chieftain, dancing in the center of the festivities. Framing him perfectly in front of the wreckage, his flowing white dishdasha contrasting magnificently with the black smoke billowing up behind him. The moqtar bounced on one foot over the decapitated American, his right hand above him swinging a bloody scimitar into the air.

This was the money shot. The videographer smiled and did his best to remain professional, careful to not follow along with the rhythm and dance in celebration of the majesty of Allah to which he and his camera now bore witness.

The moqtar shouted into the air with the rest. “Al-lahu Akhbar!” *God is greater!* He hopped in euphoria with the masked foreigners, his thick facial hair opened to reveal a toothy smile as he looked down at the burnt and bloody piece of dead American meat lying in the street below him.

The crew from Al Jazeera shouted in ecstasy as well. And the videographer filmed it all with a steady hand.

He was a pro; his subject remained centered, his camera did not tremble or flinch.

Not until the moment when the moqtar’s head snapped to the side, burst open like a pressed grape, and sinew, blood, and bone spewed violently in all directions.

Then the camera flinched.

Gentry just couldn’t help himself.

He fired round after round at the armed men in the crowd, and all the while he cursed aloud at his lack of discipline, because he knew he was throwing his own timetable, his entire operation out the window. Not that he could hear his own curses. Even with his ear-plugs, the report of the Barrett was deafening as he sent huge projectiles downrange, one after another, the blowback from the rifle’s muzzle break propelling sand and debris from the ground around him up and into his face and arms.

As he paused to snap a second heavy magazine into

the rifle, he took stock of his situation. From a tradecraft perspective, this was the single dumbest move he could have made, virtually shouting to the insurgents around him that their mortal enemy was here in their midst.

But damn if it did not *feel* like the right thing to do. He resecured the big rifle in the crook of his shoulder, already throbbing from the recoil, sighted on the downed chopper site, and resumed his righteous payback. Through the big scope he saw body parts spin through the air as another huge bullet found the midsection of a masked gunman.

This was simple revenge, nothing more. Gentry knew his actions altered little in the scope of things, apart from changing a few sons of bitches from solids into liquids. His body continued firing into the now-scattering murderers, but his mind was already worrying about his immediate future. He wouldn't even try for the LZ now. Another chopper in the area would be a target too good for the angry AQ survivors to ignore. No, Gentry decided, he would go to ground: find a drainage culvert or a little wadi, cover himself in dirt and debris, lie all day in the heat, and ignore hunger and bug bites and his need to piss.

It was going to suck.

Still, he reasoned as he slammed the third and final magazine into the smoking rifle, his poor decision did serve some benefit. A half dozen dead shitheads *are*, after all, a half dozen dead shitheads.