

# Sand in the Soul

Michael Oldham

extract

# Chapter 1

*Central Afghanistan, June 2005*

As the sun went down behind the dark silhouetted mass of the rocky mountain ridge, the blistering heat of the day suddenly plunged. In a few fleeting moments, the ambient temperature dropped by ten degrees. Within an hour, the temperature would drop once again by another ten degrees, and by dawn, there would be a covering of hoar frost higher up the mountain. A few dust devils were whipped up, as a breeze generated by the cooling air in the ever-increasing shade tracked up the slope of the boulder-strewn mountainside and along the winding gravel track. Night was falling fast and the small group of men, who were making their way towards the setting sun, were now looking for a somewhere sheltered to bivouac for the night.

There were four men in the group. Each of them carried a Kalashnikov semi-automatic assault rifle slung across his back along with a bedding roll and a small pack. The weapon that they carried, the AK47 was now commonplace amongst Afghan tribesmen. The war against the Soviet Union had initially brutally introduced them to it, but later they took advantage of the disarray in the Soviet forces to profit from abandoned weapons and ammunition in relative abundance.

However, it was finance from the CIA and then the profits from the heroin trade that had allowed the tribesmen to equip themselves with a plethora of modern weaponry that displayed sophistication in killing power hitherto unknown in the area. These weapons included some of the most formidable and technically advanced products of the western world whose lethal qualities were far more devastating than that of the relatively primitive, but nevertheless, ever reliable, Kalashnikov.

Large parts of the country were still governed by regional warlords. The western hemisphere's Coalition forces that were in the process of fighting the Taliban were also caught up in the thankless task of aiding a corrupt government with the objective of bringing some kind of law and order to the country. Nevertheless, insecurity, the sudden rise and fall of the Taliban, and the formidably difficult terrain, left extensive areas of Afghanistan virtually ungovernable.

War and conflict in Afghanistan was commonplace, the native population having rarely seen peace in their lifetime. Traditionally, tribal territories were fiercely defended, and rivalries, vendettas, and banditry, were still a daily part of the brutal history of the country. The miasma of Islamist Fundamentalism and associated development of fanatical terrorist groups gained hugely from the confusion. They found remote havens in the mountains where they could rest, indoctrinate, train, and launch their destructive activities not only in Afghanistan, but also in the rest of the world. They were difficult to track down and even more difficult to catch.

Ahmad Khan Awan, the leader of the small group of men pointed silently at a shallow depression in the mountainside defined by a few large boulders and flat rocks. The area was near to the track and was ideal as a temporary camp. All around, the rugged landscape had been fiercely fashioned by nature; there was not even a stunted tree in sight. It was a landscape eroded by wind and rain, baked and cracked open by the fierce heat of the sun, and shattered by winter ice.

Ahmad was the oldest member of the group; he was thirty-five. He was also the most experienced and physically, by far the largest member of the group. It was unusual for anyone to argue with him. Apart from being overbearing, he was also particularly self-opinionated, stubborn, and sullen. Disagreeing with him was rarely worth the effort.

Jamal, the youngest member of the group saw him as a father figure. His colleagues, Daoud and Brishna regarded him more as an authoritarian and rather irritating older brother. Nevertheless, when Ahmad pointed at the place he had selected to spend the night, they were pleased to stop and they would have agreed, had they been asked, that it was a good choice.

Of course, they weren't asked; Ahmad rarely sought advice. He hardly ever asked anyone's opinion on any subject. It just didn't occur to him that it was necessary to seek advice, or even consult with others. On the few occasions when his decisions were questioned, he was so shocked by the event that openly challenged his competence and personal judgement that his reaction was uncontrollably aggressive. He was simply unused to having his decisions questioned.

Between them, the men carried their provisions for that evening and the following few days. Brishna took a small primus stove, along with a bottle of paraffin inside a pan, from the long sack that he carried inside his bedding roll. While he was setting the stove up on a small table of a rock in the shelter of a large boulder, Jamal emptied the water that they had collected from a mountain stream into the battered aluminium pan, and took a bag of coarse dried leaves out of his pack to make an infusion. The others produced some cooked goat meat, dried fruit, and several pieces of Nan bread baked with cumin seeds.

Their passage deep in the mountains southeast of the city of Herat and northwest of Kandahar had been tiring. The day had been long and the group that they had been following had continued further than expected. They had always maintained a discreet distance behind them, but they had never tried to

pretend that they were not following the same route crossing the mountains. In any event, the terrain would have made it impossible at times for them to conceal themselves. The track that traversed the mountains seemed from its condition to be in regular use and it was important that their dress and comportment appeared in no way alien. They were aware that their presence would have been noted and hoped that it would not cause alarm to the group that they were following. Moreover, they were well aware that their presence might also be objected to. It was one reason why they would have to remain especially vigilant that night.

When Ahmad saw that the group they had been shadowing had at last halted, he had been studying the terrain carefully for the previous hour looking for a suitable place for his team to spend the night. Not long before, they had passed through a cold and windy cleft in the mountain. Now, they were descending a steep track heading almost due west. Ahmad had considered briefly perhaps carrying on for another half hour, overtaking the group they were following and then bivouacking further down the track. However, as the light was fading fast, there seemed little point. Ahmad determined that it would cause less suspicion to stay behind the group that they were following and remain higher up the mountain. In any event, from this elevated position it would be easier to keep the other group under surveillance.

As soon as it was ready, Ahmad was brought a mug of tea. He sipped at it, holding the hot, acrid liquid in his mouth for a moment before swallowing it, enjoying the pleasure of the heat and its' bitter taste. Whilst he sipped, he used his binoculars to observe the group of travellers that were camped some two hundred metres below him. They were doing the same thing; making tea, getting out provisions, and looking for a reasonably comfortable place to spread out their bedding rolls and spend the night in the open.

Ahmad knew with absolute conviction that it would be essential for them to remain vigilant during that night. Without doubt, the members of the group ahead would have already observed them and there was certainly a risk that they might already regard his group as a potential danger. If they did, they would think nothing of trying to eliminate them and Ahmad was concerned that they might launch an attack under cover of darkness. Failing that, they might break camp in the middle of the night and simply disappear.

Well aware that that they were playing a dangerous game, Ahmad's group naturally felt nervous and they knew that their participation left little margin for error. The slightest mistakes invariably resulted in fatal consequences. This was no third world country inter-tribal dispute, the main players in this game were playing for much higher stakes; international supremacy, world trade, democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech. They also believed that they were fighting against intolerance, barbarism, and feudalism. At least that is what some of them thought this conflict was about.

These however were not the sorts of philosophical questions that were going through Ahmad's mind that evening

in the late spring of 2005. He was happy to be fighting for his beliefs, which included his right for revenge against the Taliban who, during their brief, bloody, fanatical struggle for power, had destroyed his family. His companions were of much the same mind. They were orphans of the Islamist Fundamentalist revolution that had spread across Afghanistan following the successful and rather surprising ejection of the Soviet Forces.

‘Jamal,’ Ahmad called quietly to the youth, ‘come and take my place.’

Ahmad passed Jamal the binoculars.

‘Tell me how many you can see in the group.’

In the dim light Jamal counted carefully and then checked to make sure that he hadn’t made a mistake. Ahmad was not very good at tolerating mistakes and he would rather avoid his sharp tongue. He undertook what Ahmad had asked him to do and carried it out with care.

‘Ten,’ he said. ‘That’s how many I counted.’

‘Good, that’s what I counted also. Therefore, they are all still together. OK, so make sure the ten stay there at least until it’s dark. If some of them start moving out of their camp, tell me immediately.’

It would be dark in just over half-an-hour. Jamal settled down to the task he had been given without comment whilst Ahmad joined his other two companions to eat some of the cold dried goat meat and drink a little more of the strong bitter tea. He lent back against a rock looking at the stars that were already visible in the ever-darkening sky above. Behind the mountain to the east, there was already a faint glow as the moon rose. It would be a full moon that night and Ahmad was unsettled by the fact. He got up, walked over to Jamal, and gave him some of the meat wrapped up in a piece of Nan bread.

Ahmad gestured to the youth who gave him back the binoculars whilst hungrily eating the food. Looking through the binoculars, Ahmed could still count ten people below him. Good. Now as the light went out of the sky, and before the moon came up, they would move further up the mountain and much further away from the track. If anyone were going to attack them, they would be able to see them approaching the camp they had originally occupied at dusk. At least that way they would be safer that night.

With their bedding rolls repacked, Ahmad led the way across the mountain, virtually feeling his way through the confused mass of boulders. When he was satisfied that they had gone far enough, he stopped and ordered them to get themselves comfortable for the night. He would take the first watch and then, after two hours, he would wake Brishna, who he had detailed to take the second watch. After the others had fallen asleep, Ahmad took out the American made GPS and made a mental note of the co-ordinates. Then he took out his satellite phone, switched it on, and quickly composed a text message to his controller, relaying their present co-ordinates. It was all he could do at that time; he had nothing else to report.

Ahmad’s eyes strained in the impenetrable darkness and his ears listened attentively to the stillness of the night. His sensory perception was stretched to its limits, but still it relayed

very little. If anything, he was aware that he was hallucinating from time to time, trying to make sense of the emptiness that was filling the sensory centres of his brain. He peered into the void, blinking his eyes now and then and pricking his ears at the slightest sound. By nine-thirty the moon had already climbed up into the sky from behind the mountain and was beginning to obliquely illuminate the immobile cascade of rocks that was the mountainside.

At ten, Ahmad moved. He quietly woke up Brishna. Although he had been in a deep sleep, it did not take long for Brishna to come round. Ahmad said nothing to him. As the light of the moon illuminated his face, he just shook his head negatively. At one, Brishna woke Daoud and at four, Daoud was relieved by Jamal.

Despite the cold, Ahmad had slept soundly during the night and had woken up with the dawn just before 6.00 a.m. He walked over to where Jamal was lying on his front on a rock. As he approached, he saw that Jamal was fast asleep and the anger boiled over at the youth's failure to remain awake. He lashed out, kicking him hard on the knee intending to shock him into wakefulness. He wanted him to remember the pain. However, for Jamal, remembering pain was something eternally confined to the past – already, his brief existence had been brutally terminated.

Bending down and turning him over, Ahmad saw the long gash that had almost severed the head from the body and realised that the dark shadow on the rock was something more sinister. A large pool of blood was beginning to congeal, sticking Jamal's dusty clothes to the gritty surface. Ahmad regarded with disgust the youth's lips drawn back in a final grimace, as death had so unexpectedly overtaken him.

It would have been quick though, Ahmad reflected. The execution was expertly carried out - probably whilst Jamal was sleeping. It was a hard lesson - a brutal kick on the knee would have been kinder, but Jamal had known that mistakes could result in fatal consequences. Jamal's mistake had cost him his life.

Ahmad looked down the mountainside. The group they were trailing had already broken camp and escaped into the dawn. Now, they were nowhere in sight and the chances of finding them again were poor. Ahmad knew that they should try, but he also knew that they would be lucky if they got anywhere near them. Even if they were successful, the same fatal consequences that had overtaken Jamal, would await them. The group that they had been shadowing evidently did not appreciate the attention. Jamal's death was a warning and one that they should heed seriously.

Admitting to himself that Jamal's death was a grave setback, he also felt sorry for the youth and partly responsible for his demise. However, life was harsh. As he had so often discovered during the last ten years or so, it was often also unexpectedly short - so many of his friends and relatives had suffered. Some had died, some had legs blown off by land mines, others had lost their hands, their sight, or their hearing, and many were now entirely dependant on others for everyday

care. They may have managed to survive the war against the Russians, but surviving the harsh justice of the Taliban was another unnecessary struggle. It was because of this misery he was engaged in what he was doing. Enough was enough.

Ahmad hesitated before waking the others and sat on his haunches next to the already cold, stiff body. At the least, before they left, they should bury him. In the meantime, he needed to contact his controller, inform him of this setback, and wait for a response. Ahmad already thought that it was likely that they would have to abort the mission. Putting his hand in his pocket, he searched for his satellite phone and extracted it. His text message was brief.

One dead (J). Contact lost. Agree to abort?

Was there anything else to add? No, probably not: he pressed the button and sent the message. Now he would have to wait for a reply he thought and began to move to awaken his companions. He never succeeded in his plan; he too had committed an error of judgement. Ahmad had assumed that their quarry had slipped away in the night. He was wrong.

As the rising sun began to delicately caress the tops of the mountains two gunshots rang out at close quarters signalling the death of his remaining two companions as they slept huddled, now sprawled, on the ground.

Ahmad was suddenly aware that there were at least three men within a few metres of him. He also knew that they could have killed him just as easily. That they had chosen not to he realised with dismay, could only mean one thing - they intended to capture and interrogate him. His failure to respond to their questions would inevitably result in torture and slowly and systematically; they would reduce him to little more than living flesh in their attempt to learn what he knew.

Looking at his attackers directly in the face, he dared them to confront him. They could sense his defiance and they were especially cautious. They had orders to capture him alive, but they would have to overpower him, without putting their own lives at risk. Ahmad slowly turned away from them towards the body of the youth. As he did so, he slipped his right hand into his long jacket searching the automatic pistol that was neatly snuggled in the holster in his armpit.

The three men advanced warily towards him already well spread out. Ahmad realised that any attempt to shoot it out with them would almost inevitably result in his capture. He might kill one of them, but the others would be on him in an instant and they looked big enough, and experienced enough, to tackle him. Ahmad took one final look at the corpse of the youth that was lying immobile and peaceful on the rock. Then, slipping the automatic pistol out of his long jacket and releasing the safety catch, he quickly put it into his mouth and without any further reflection, squeezed the trigger.

The man who was nearest to Ahmad ducked reflexively as the blood and brains splattered in his direction with the bullet that exploded from the back of Ahmad's head. When he looked up again, Ahmad had already toppled forward as his knees

buckled as his life forces were instantly extinguished. The man looked shocked at the carnage in front of him and trembled. Evidently, despite his appearance, his demeanour indicated that this was something that he was unaccustomed to. The blood and brains splattered across the yellow coloured rocks at his feet invoked a strangely terrifying and surrealistic image that instantly revolted him.

Only three weeks earlier, he had been a student at Sheffield University in England. Nevertheless, his life had undergone a rapid transformation when he and two of his fellow students had flown to Karachi. There, they had met with two Muslim Brothers from France and an escort that would take them across Pakistan and into Afghanistan. That memorable morning, when Ahmad committed suicide in front of him and three other people met their violent deaths, he and his companions were in the process of being taken to a Mujahedeen training camp in central Afghanistan. At this camp, they would learn how to deliver death and destruction to innocent people on a scale far superior to that morning's event; and, in this camp, they would be indoctrinated as lethal pawns in an escalating game of global terror.

It was something he would get used to, the student rationalised, as he forced back the bile rising from his stomach. It was something that he would have to get used to, he told himself with more resolve, as he turned away from the traitor lying on the ground, the blood in the fatal head wound already coagulating in the stark cold of the dawn.

## Chapter 2

*CIA Headquarters, Langley Virginia, USA – June 2005*

Walter Lewenski, a small, thin-faced man in his mid-forties, sat silently in a comfortable leather chair in the plush air-conditioned office of the Assistant Director of Operations. He was waiting for his superior to return. He had been summoned earlier that morning after he had requested an urgent meeting with his boss. However, at the precise moment when Lewenski arrived, the Assistant Director rushed passed him, heading out of his office, muttering an apology and inviting Lewenski to take a seat, saying that he would be back shortly - he promised.

Compared to Lewenski's office, the Assistant Director's office was spacious and well appointed. A mahogany veneered wood panelled dado covered the lower parts of the walls. Above, the walls were painted white and covered with framed photographs. Behind the Director's desk were the *Stars and Stripes* and a photograph of the President. On the floor, there was a thick, dark blue carpet, which imparted an air of comfort and elegance. The large mahogany desk and the broad leather armchairs reinforced this image, but the image belied the business that was conducted each day in the room.

Occupying the other half of this large office was a conference table with a dozen or so chairs around it. At one end of the conference table was a panel that controlled a wide range of audio-visual aids. The wall behind, which doubled as a screen, was bare. This was a place of work. It was from here that Special Operations were conceived, planned, and carefully directed.

Lewenski had chosen one of the leather armchairs by the Director's desk and sat down, slowly sinking into the well-upholstered seat. Leaning back into the armchair, he tried to relax but found that he was unable. It was still only six months since he had moved back to the States and he was still struggling to accustom himself to the very different lifestyle.

During the previous six years, Walt Lewenski had been the Director of Special Operations in the Balkans. Much of his work had been directed from the CIA station in Camp Bondsteel. Located in southeast Kosovo, this American base, their largest since their military involvement in Vietnam, was the size of a small town. When Lewenski left the base, there were over eight thousand personnel on the site and helicopter pads for more than fifty aircraft. They lived in SEA's, South East Asia huts, which he would have agreed were reasonably comfortable, but nothing compared to the more sophisticated environment that he now inhabited on a daily basis. The door opened behind him.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting, Walt,’ the Assistant Director said as he came back into the room. Conrad Frist sighed as he slumped into one of the comfortable leather armchairs on the same side of the desk as Lewenski.

‘It’s interesting how important we’ve suddenly become again since 9/11. Now the administration wants our advice on a daily basis. That’s when they don’t want it hourly.’ He was clearly exasperated and looked as if he had been in his office half the night. He had.

‘Shouldn’t we be encouraged that we’re now being asked to give advice again?’ suggested Lewenski, remembering periods when the CIA had been ignored, side –tracked, and nearly disbanded.

‘Of course we should, Walt. But when we give it, they rarely take it.’

‘Should that surprise us?’

Frist looked at Walt with some exasperation. He was used to his protégé being outspoken and decided not to react; he knew that Walt was right. ‘On the button, Walt - some of the advice we proffered in the past was poor. I have to admit it. We were ignored and neglected for a decade, ridiculed by a succession of Presidents, and teetering on the brink of self-destruction. It’s true – our track record up to that point was abysmal, and we did get ourselves involved in some messy deals. You know, it is surprising that we weren’t actually disbanded. Now of course, it’s different, we have suddenly become essential to national security once more, but not because we’re suddenly good at what we do - it’s just a reaction to recent events. Nevertheless, it does give us a heaven sent opportunity to improve our performance as well as our image. Don’t you agree, Walt?’

‘I certainly do, sir.’

‘Good!’ Frist sighed again clearly frustrated by whatever it was that was occupying his mind. ‘Coffee, Walt?’ he asked placing both hands on the wide arm of the chair.

‘Yes, I could do with a fix.’

Conrad Frist pulled himself out of the armchair and rose to his feet again. Poking his head out of the door to his office, he spoke quietly to his secretary.

‘Two coffees please, Matilda.’

‘Right away, sir.’ Walt heard her reply before the door closed behind him and Conrad Frist returned. This time Frist went back to the chair behind the desk, sat down, and pulled a buff coloured file from his tray.

‘Tell me about it, Walt,’ he said, opening the file and pulling out a sheet of paper and scanning it.

‘It’s Afghanistan again.’

‘You had some real success there a month ago, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, Abu Farraj al-Libbi was captured northwest of Islamabad by Pakistani agents. He’s thought to be number three in Al-Qaeda.’

‘Well, that is good news, isn’t it, Walt! We’re whittling them down slowly and we’ll get all of the murdering bastards

sooner or later. That's something isn't it, Walt? So what's your problem now?'

'We have just lost another locally recruited Special Ops team and we are going to have extreme difficulty in recruiting and training another group in a sensible time scale. We need to consider the options urgently. Our team was on to something vital and I'm afraid that the trail will go stone cold.'

'What were they doing? What was their mission? They weren't one of the teams looking for Al-Qaeda were they?'

'No, they weren't. British Intelligence alerted us that three Islamist Fundamentalist student activists recently flew to Karachi. A terrorist, who we know is a leading light in al-Ghalib, picked up two French students at Karachi the same morning and then met the Brits, if you can call them that. Pakistani agents trailed them to Chaman on the border of Afghanistan and then to Kandahar. They were good to keep us in the picture. We arranged for a local team to keep the group under observation. There were no problems until about five days ago when the terrorist group left with five others heading for the mountains in the western part of the Hazarajat. My special team took over the surveillance and started trailing them through the mountains. We suspected the group was on its way to a training camp and we think the camp is the one that we have been trying to locate since the beginning of the year without any success.'

'And, did they find it?'

'No.'

'What would have happened if they had found it?'

'The information would be reported to Command and Control at Bagram. There would have been some follow up aerial reconnaissance before an air strike. Afterwards, a detachment of Navy Seals would have probably gone in to capture or finish off. Any prisoners would be taken to the 'Cage' at Bagram for interrogation, and then either incarcerated there, or transferred to Guantanamo Bay for further questioning, or long-term detention.'

'So what happened?'

'We had text messages giving us co-ordinates for a few days, then a message to say that one of the surveillance team had been killed with a request for instructions, then nothing. Two call-in times were missed and so I ordered a helicopter in to the last recorded co-ordinates.'

'And?'

'They found four bodies. Three were murdered, one of them, the leader of the team, looked like suicide. Apparently, the attack was very efficiently carried out. The group evidently did not like being followed and were not going to take any risks of their base being discovered.'

'So, where do we go from here Walt? Proposals?'

'Difficult.' Walt shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

'Come on Walt! You're Head of Ops Middle East now and I need an opinion. I fired that slob Bingaman because he wasn't up to the job. I don't expect you to let me down as well! What's the deal?'

It was true Bingaman had almost completely blown their involvement in the Adriatic when al-Ghalib had plotted to sink the cruise liner *Aurora*. Indeed, it was only because of Conrad Frist's timely intervention that both the EU and the CIA were saved from great embarrassment.

'When I say difficult, it's because we seem to have few options.' Walt was planning his attack, and the opening gambit that would structure the conversation to his advantage.

'OK, Walt, what options do we have? Can't we lean on our Counter Terrorist Centre to send us a few people? They have a huge number at the Detention Centre at Bagram Air Base.'

'They have over a thousand detainees at present, they're stretched to the limit and, they weren't too pleased when I contacted them. I've already been shopping there and the CTC Director was still grumbling that their proposal for creating hit teams of case officers and paramilitaries to undertake covert operations including infiltration had been turned down. He couldn't understand how we were still getting funding. He wasn't too helpful!'

'So what have we got?'

'We have one very experienced Afghan operator available, but he can't do the job on his own.'

'One?' Frist exclaimed.

'Yes, one, and we need to put a team together to work with him.'

'So OK, what's the problem?'

'First we don't have a team and second, our Afghan friend does not like working with anybody, especially foreigners.'

'Given a free hand what would you do?'

At last, the question that Lewenski had been anticipating. He didn't answer immediately, he was searching for the most acceptable way to introduce his idea as well as employing delaying tactics. He knew his boss was in a rush and he wanted to reduce the time he was able to devote to making a decision on this problem.

'Come on Walt, I have to see the Director shortly; he's due to brief the President. There is a lot of *angst* here following the bombings in Madrid.'

'I think the only way we can get up to speed again is to partially outsource the operation.'

Frist looked at him as if he were mad. This was not the advice he had been expecting, nor was it the sort of advice that he wanted to hear.

'Outsource the operation!' He didn't need to shout his expression was enough, but he shouted nonetheless.

'Yes!' replied Walt calmly.

'We outsource lots of things but not Special Ops. It's not our usual style, Walt. You know, we like to keep things in house, close to our chest. We don't even speak to the FBI if we can help it, and we try to keep our dialogue with the Administration to a minimum, apart of course from talking politics. I don't like getting outsiders in to assist us at the best of times – but Special Ops!'

‘What about our existing links with Blackwater for instance, we’ve a lot of contacts, former CIA men in there?’

This was no idle suggestion Walt knew exactly how his Director would react; it would needle him enormously.

Blackwater USA was one of a number of private security firms that was contracted to work alongside the regular armed forces in places like Baghdad. Much as it’s competitors, Blackwater was expanding rapidly in the Global Anti-Terrorist market. It was also aggressively recruiting staff, enticing them away from the CIA with higher salaries and interesting bonuses and Frist was not at all happy.

‘You can’t be serious Walt! I am not going there - and that’s final!’

‘But we do need someone, or a team, who know exactly what they’re doing.’

‘Like?’ Frist could not imagine who, or what, Walt was going to suggest.

‘Myrmidon SA.’

‘You mean Tregay, the ex SBS British Intelligence guy? Why should he be interested in helping us? I thought he had retired, and anyway we know he doesn’t need the money, so what’s in it for him?’

‘Patriotism perhaps?’

‘I doubt it. He can’t feel that patriotic living in Switzerland.’ Frist laughed. ‘You can try it, but I doubt you’ll succeed.’

‘I assume you agree that I should try then.’ Frist stopped laughing. Had he meant to say what he just did? Did he mean to invite Walt to contact Myrmidon? Frist looked at Walt and wondered if he just had skilfully been manoeuvred into going along with Walt’s plan. He suddenly felt out-smarted, robbed of his authority, but quietly amused at Walt’s simple strategy that had trapped him. He was going to say ‘no’, but then he hesitated. Maybe Walt’s idea might be worth pursuing.

‘It means that you can make an approach to Myrmidon. However, I want to make it completely clear that if Colonel Marcus Tregay does get involved in this, this will be a CIA operation and the rest of the team will be CIA staff. Get it? Who have we got who can speak Arabic like a native?’

‘Tariq Ahmed, number two in ops in Camp Bondsteel at the moment and Radi Dushku, the Kosovan Albanian who we gave political asylum and American citizenship to last autumn.’

‘Where’s he now?’

‘Snooping around in the Lebanon, keeping an eye on Hezbollah.’

‘He’s a fag isn’t he?’

‘AC/DC from all accounts.’

‘Reliable sources.’

‘So I understand.’

‘Is it on his record - it could be useful?’

‘I’ll check and make sure that it is.’

‘Who else have you got?’

‘That’s it.’

‘That’s it! What do you mean – that’s it?’

‘That’s it. I said we didn’t have many options. Look Conrad, I’ll come clean, there’s another reason.’

‘Spill it, Walt!’

‘I believe that my last team may have been compromised. There were too many people involved and the group that they were following may have been tipped off. I want a team that has no connections in Pakistan, or Afghanistan, I want them operating clandestinely, and I want them in there without anyone else knowing in Asia.’

Frist got up from his desk picking up a file. As he rounded the desk heading for the door, he threw a glance at Lewenski again, and then, as he put his hand on the handle of the door, bellowed, ‘sort it Walt, and sort it quickly!’

‘I take it I have your authority to negotiate with Myrmidon and redeploy our staff?’ Lewenski asked as Frist opened the door.

Conrad Frist paused. ‘If you want a memo from me, you can have it this afternoon.’ Frist shook his head, it wasn’t as he would have preferred to play it, but Walt had done it again, outmanoeuvred him. He resolved to brush up on his game of chess. He just did not see the moves coming these days.

‘Thank you, sir,’ Walt said as the Assistant Director left the room, ignoring his secretary who had just arrived with two coffees. She stood to one side as he swept past her into the corridor.

‘Thanks, Matilda,’ Walt said, taking one of the plastic cups from her, as he followed the Director out of the room. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s OK, Walt, I’m used to it. Anyway, I could do with a coffee myself.’

Walt sipped the drink as he walked slowly down the corridor. Now, all he had to do was to convince Marcus to join the party. He would have to motivate him somehow and, at that moment, he didn’t have a clue how. Walt Lewenski was convinced that motivating Marcus would be the most difficult part of putting the team together. As it transpired, Lewenski need not have concerned himself, he didn’t have to motivate Marcus at all, someone else did it for him.

## Chapter 3

*Geneva, Switzerland, Monday 4th July 2005*

Myrmidon SA had profited hugely both from new contracts with NATO forces, as well as expanding their business in the private sector. There was an ever-increasing concern about terrorist attacks and the firm's advice was frequently being sought to protect premises and personnel. It was a competitive business. Nevertheless, the firm had been around for over forty years, they had a head start on some of their competitors, and they had an excellent client list, a good reputation, and many contacts. Myrmidon SA was doing well, expanding and developing a more prominent position in the business of global security.

The owners of the firm Marcus Tregay and Sophie Lefèvre were constantly busy and had appointed another tier of middle management that year to deal with the everyday process of running the business. However, they had problems of space - they were running out of it fast.

With the rapid increase in personnel, the office on the outskirts of Geneva, which had served the firm well for over a quarter of a century, was no longer able to accommodate everybody. Their short-term solution was to rent another office in the centre of Geneva, whilst they considered whether to extend the premises at Meyrin, or look for something new, more suited to their current needs. However, taking time out to look at alternatives dug deep into days that were already heavily charged with work.

Having made a promise to each other to relax and enjoy life more, take advantage of good weather, and in particular, good sailing conditions; they had spent the weekend on Lac Lemman, on Sophie's yacht 'Enigma'. Inevitably, however, now that they were also married, as well as being business partners, it was increasingly difficult for them to leave work behind; it dogged them relentlessly.

They had discussed their development plans over the weekend again and failed to arrive at any firm conclusion. Almost by default, they had decided to carry on as they were for the time being and see what opportunities might arise and how they might take advantage of them. In the meantime, they resolved to appoint some property consultants to research the market. If the consultants came up with something interesting, their business was sufficiently financially independent to allow them to make a quick decision, without the need to involve banks.

On Sunday evening, they motored into the marina in the heart of Geneva and moored the boat. Afterwards they went up to their apartment in the old quarter of the city near to the

Protestant Cathedral. It was only ten minutes walk from the lake. As usual, Sophie went up to the little office they had in the turret above the living room. She switched on the computer and checked for messages. She was surprised to see one from Walter Lewenski and immediately came down the stairs to the lounge where Marcus was helping himself to a glass of Laphroig.

‘A little whisky?’ he said, hearing Sophie descending the stairs.

‘Please.’ He turned to pour another glass as she approached him and put her arms round his waist.

‘What’s that for?’ he asked insensitively.

‘Because I love you.’

He turned and took her in his arms.

‘Life’s good isn’t it?’ he said, ‘the business is doing well, we seemed to have settled down together without any problems, and although we work too hard, we have a lot to look forward to.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed, holding on to him tightly.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, beginning to sense that she wasn’t. Sophie squeezed him again and then slipped out of his arms, appearing distracted.

‘No!’

‘What’s up?’

‘There’s an e-mail for you from Lewenski.’

‘What does it say?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t open it. I didn’t want to.’

‘Just delete it then,’ Marcus suggested. ‘I’m really not bothered!’

‘I can’t do that, it may be important.’ She looked at him wistfully, as she played with the silver necklace round her neck. ‘Every time you have anything to do with him, it ends up in a mess with people being killed. I just don’t like him. He’s creepy! You know he’s creepy. You didn’t even used to trust him yourself, never mind like him.’

‘Well there you are, it’s as I said, it’s not important. Just delete it.’

‘No, I can’t, it’s addressed to you.’

‘OK, then I’ll read the message in the morning, if I feel like it,’ Marcus offered. He didn’t want a message from Lewenski to spoil their evening.

‘I think you were right the first time,’ Sophie said, ‘you should just delete it.’

‘I know I should, but I suspect that if I did,’ Marcus was changing his position slightly, ‘he wouldn’t give up that easily. We’d hear from him again. He’s normally very persistent, as we both know.’

‘OK, leave it. Do it in the morning.’

‘Still,’ said Marcus, ‘it will be intriguing to learn why he should contact us. We haven’t heard from him for some time. He must be after something?’

‘Intriguing is the right word. Intrigue is his business.’

That night, like most nights, they made love. It started in the bathroom, while Sophie was leant over the basin. She was naked and in the process of plucking a long hair from her dark

stylish eyebrows. Marcus looked at her and couldn't resist the temptation. He was still wearing his boxer shorts, but he was aware as he approached her from behind that his erection was already growing. Slipping his hands round her slender waist, he placed his lips on the smooth skin between her shoulders. The short cropped hair on the back of her head stood on end as goose pimples invaded her body at his sensuous touch.

Sophie closed her eyes and remained with her back to him, enjoying the erotic contact of his erect member on her body. His hands were caressing her breasts and then one descended across the shallow roundness of her abdomen to explore between her legs. She moaned quietly with pleasure as his finger probed and opened her legs to help him in his quest. Marcus gently squeezed her nipple between his finger and thumb while cupping her small rounded breast in his hand. It was enough.

'Come on,' she said, grabbing him by the hand. 'To bed, I'm not doing it on the bathroom floor again. I want to go to sleep in your arms when we've finished.'

Marcus followed her to the bedroom, switching off the bathroom light as they entered the room. Then picking her up and placing her gently on the top of the duvet cover, he started to stimulate her again, but this time, more passionately and more earnestly.

\* \* \*

The sun was already streaming in through the window of the little office above the apartment at 6.00 a.m. when Marcus went up to switch on the computer. Sophie was still sleeping and he decided not to disturb her. He would take her a cup of tea in an hour's time. Sitting down in front of the computer screen, he logged on to the Internet to look at the e-mails. The one from Lewenski was still unopened. He hesitated a moment, wondering again if he should simply delete it, and then, curious of course, he opened the message. It was short.

Hi Marcus, Hi Sophie,

We haven't spoken recently. Things have changed a bit around here. We may have a job for you. If you're interested, give me a ring. Walt

Walter Lewenski – Director of Special Ops. Middle East

If they were interested?

Typical of Walt, thought Marcus, dangling a carrot, and giving absolutely nothing away. He would have to phone him now to see what he wanted, although he did not intend to being dragged into a spider's web of clandestine activities, especially with the CIA. What time was it now in the Eastern Time Zone of the States? Washington was six hours later, so it would be midnight and not much point in phoning then. It could wait until later that day, perhaps after lunch even. There was no rush.

Marcus reflected on his last encounter with Walt when the terrorist group Al-Ghalib attacked a EU Fleet Exercise in the Adriatic. At least Walt and he had managed to patch some of their differences arising out of their former work in the Balkans, but Marcus still felt rankled by Walt's cynical entrapment of his former boss, Sir Elliot Gower. Now, with time and less emotion, he recognised that Elliot had not only been very stupid, but also deceitful, if not to say, treacherous. Nevertheless, Walt's letting Banovič loose was also criminal. Murdering thugs like that should be banged up for life.

In some respects, however, he reflected, perhaps he should really thank Walt. It was because of Banovič being at large, and his vendetta against Marcus, that he and Sophie had actually met. Banovič strangely had been the catalyst. Without Banovič, they would probably never have met. He also thought about Sanna - the Swedish lawyer in Sarajevo, killed by a car bomb probably meant for him. He still felt guilty and wondered if she had ever received his last message and if Banovič had planted the bomb. Now, he would never know the truth, and acknowledged that the blame he sensed would never completely desert him.

So much water had flowed under the bridge since then, yet it was still only four years ago.

What was Walt up to now? He would be scheming, that was for sure. Why did he want Marcus to contact him? What did he want Marcus to do?

## Chapter 4

*Central Afghanistan, Monday 4th July 2005*

As the clock struck midnight in Langley, Virginia, and the first few seconds of Independence Day began, it was already eight-thirty in the morning in the Central Highlands of Afghanistan. The new recruits from the west were sitting on the ground waiting to be addressed by a tall, bearded, sinister looking Pashtun. The tribesman was from the north of the country and his name was Salman.

Although still unused to the primitive conditions in which they were now living, stoically, the recruits relished their discomfort. It seemed like an essential part of the ritual of becoming a Mujahedeen, one who is resolved to struggle, to fight, and in the fullness of time to become a holy warrior. The cave in which they lived was one of many in the mountainside. The caves were generally small. Some needed enlarging and several were now inter-linked to make communal spaces used for dining, praying, training, and holding meetings.

In the small community that the recruits had joined, there were already nearly a hundred. Impossible to spot from the air, the training camp was just a natural part of the rough arid landscape of the mountains in that part of Afghanistan. The Pashtun, who had been talking quietly to one of his colleagues, looked in the direction of the new comers and coughed to attract their attention.

‘My brothers,’ he said, speaking in heavily accented English, ‘the scum that we killed a few days ago, were Hisb-i-Islami. They were traitors when we were fighting the Russians and they never change; they are still scum. They worked for the Russians, now they work for the Americans. They are whores and you should know that there is still fierce rivalry between the clans. For your own protection, you must not venture out of the training camp without one of my men going with you. There are hostile villages in some of the valleys near here and they will think nothing of killing you if they do not know who you are. There are spies in the villages; some of them work with the Americans, or the British, or the French, or the Dutch, or whoever pays them. Now, I think it is time that all these forces should leave our country. You are here to train to fight them. However, you will not fight them here. No, you will attack them in their own homes, in their airports and stations, on their buses and in their trains. You are here as to train as holy warriors and to give up your life with theirs, to convince them of their error and their evil in coming here.’

Salman paused, inspecting the eager faces of the five young men who were already intoxicated with the mystery of martyrdom, paradise, and celestial virgins. His thoughts were

mixed. These youths were the product of a western education. They had a very different upbringing to the Mujahedeen; he imagined that they might not be as tough, but he was wrong. They had been outraged by the idea that had been seeded in their adolescent minds of global Arab persecution and they had been seduced by the idea of Fundamentalism. It was the antithesis of the democratic background from whence they had come. It was the antithesis of a system from which they felt excluded and alienated; a system that they detested. Salman knew why they had come to the camp. They wanted revenge.

However, whilst he was confident of their commitment, to travel halfway across the world running the risk of being picked up indicated their dedication to their faith, Salman nevertheless wondered how reliable they would be. They had found a cause to fight for, something to give meaning to their lives. Could he also see something in their eyes beyond simple religious fervour? They needed to possess that one special quality that would ensure their commitment to this cause, their commitment to the ultimate sacrifice, their sacrifice and their martyrdom.

He looked at them carefully and he saw that each of them was consumed by an emotion that was stronger than any other sentiment. They harboured and nurtured hatred in their souls - hatred of those who did not conform to their beliefs. Hatred of people with a white skin who treated them like aliens, like second-class citizens. Hatred of white girls who had rejected their advances, or had been too easy and made them feel dirty. It was a hatred of teachers and authority that did not understand them and it was this hatred that would allow them to kill indiscriminately and anonymously in order to make a statement. Salman understood it well. The same primitive tribalism had existed in Afghanistan since time immemorial. It was simply an intolerance of others. Intellectually, for the recruits however, it was just, because Allah had commanded it and it would absolve them of all their future crimes against humanity.

‘You will be here for a month. During this time, we will teach you about weapons. We will train you how to make explosives and how to detonate them. At the end we will smuggle you back into your country with a new identity. The police in your country already know that you have flown to Pakistan and they will be waiting for your return. This way, when you go back, you will be anonymous. Once in your own country you will meet with your brothers who you will teach, as we have taught you.’

There was a nod of approval from his small but attentive audience. Salman paused, collecting his thoughts again and then continued, this time with a tone of resentment in his voice.

‘We learnt much about modern weapons when we fought the Russians who invaded our country. Then, we were the friends of the Americans. They trained us and provided us with arms to defeat our common enemy; we used them to great effect. Afterwards, again with the help of the Americans we sent fighters to Bosnia to fight the Serbs. Then, the Americans double-crossed us. They did not want us anymore, and they didn’t want our faith.’

‘Where did the Mujahedeen fight in Bosnia?’ one of the French recruits asked.

‘They fought with the Muslim brigades which helped to drive the Serbs out of southern Bosnia. Later, some went to fight for the Kosovo Liberation Army. Many settled in Kosovo and Bosnia afterwards. Some continue to fight and one has returned here to help train you. His name is Khalil-al-Ali, he is the second in command of al-Ghalib, the Victorious Ones, and he will be joining us soon.’

‘Tell us about the Taliban,’ one of the other recruits asked.

‘We ruled Afghanistan for five years, we stopped the opium trade, we brought law and order. Our laws were strict but we were good for the country, we united it. Women understood their place in society.’ The tall Pashtun paused again for a moment and stroked his beard. ‘It was the Americans and the accursed British who caused our overthrow. It was their pursuit of al-Qaeda in the autumn of 2001 that brought down the Taliban. Now it is civil war again. Now the opium trade has started again and this time we will exploit it to our advantage. It is the West that buys the drug, and the West that consumes the drug, and it is the West that will suffer.’

‘What are the Taliban doing now?’

‘Regrouping. We will attack again, when the world is looking elsewhere. A part of your mission in Europe is to distract them! While we kill their soldiers and their so-called aid workers here, you will attack them at home. You will make them think that it was a mistake to come here. You will help to convince them to leave! You will convince them that the only way for the future of the planet is the way of Islam. Those who are not with us are against us, and they will die. It is written!’

The recruits nodded to each other, it was the reason why they had come to Afghanistan with such enthusiasm and such commitment. That was precisely why they were there.

## Chapter 5

*Geneva, Switzerland, Tuesday 5th July 2005*

After Sophie had showered and dressed, she came up the stairs from the lounge to the little office in the turret.

‘Can you do me a coffee, Marcus, please?’ she said, going over to her computer.

‘Sure - perhaps you’d like to read this whilst I’m preparing it.’ Marcus showed her the e-mail on the screen.

She glanced at the top to see who had sent it.

‘It’s the one from that shit Lewenski!’ she exclaimed. Her English was perfect but it always amused Marcus when she swore. It never sounded quite right with a Swiss-French accent. The note was short. She scanned it.

‘He doesn’t say much. What does he want then?’

‘Who knows,’ replied Marcus.

‘It’s too early to ring him in the States,’ Sophie said. ‘We’ll call him together this afternoon and see what he’s got to say. He must be desperate to contact you. He knows you detest him.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that I detest him!’ said Marcus, ‘but, I would agree, that I wouldn’t count him as one of my best friends.’

‘That is so British! You understate everything. He’s a sneaky, conniving bastard and you know it!’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Whatever it is he wants, it will definitely cost him!’ That was Sophie’s business mentality and national character coming out. Marcus laughed; if they did anything for Lewenski, she would exact the highest possible price out of him.

As a business they never had a bad debt, their cash flow was near perfect, they never borrowed to finance projects and she had little schemes, especially with computer based products that ensured the clients always paid up on time.

Anything that depended on hardware, as did many of their security systems did, contained a chip, or a programme, which caused the systems to cease operating one month after purchase. Clients would ring up and complain that the system did not work. Sophie would then ask them if they had paid; had they settled their account? If they had, she would give them an eight-figure code to punch in, which started the system up again with no loss of data. If they hadn’t paid, then she told them that they would get the code as soon as the account had been settled. They always paid the next day.

‘I see that Lewenski is now Director of Special Ops – Middle East.’

‘Yes, didn’t he tell us that when we met him in at the medals ceremony in Rome, last January,’ Marcus said, as he was making Sophie’s coffee. They had hardly talked at the ceremony; Marcus had avoided contact with him.

‘Did he? I’d forgotten. I didn’t pay much attention to Lewenski when we were there. I’m not sure that I even spoke to him.’ She hadn’t.

‘Here you are, Sophie,’ he said, giving her a cup of espresso. There was softness in his voice and he could see the tenseness in her dissipate as her shoulders began to droop in relaxation. His voice was comforting and she looked up at him and smiled. Her large, dark brown eyes had a sultry look that morning and her short dark hair, which she had washed in the shower and only rubbed with the towel, made her look slightly punk again. The look suited her and gave her an air of mischief.

They had been together for nearly two years and it was entirely due to Lewenski’s stupidity in Kosovo that they had met at all. Marcus still struggled from time to time to keep up with Sophie’s mood changes. She flitted between being startlingly enthusiastic, to being easily bored and totally distracted. Sometimes, he tried in vain to figure out what was going on inside her head. However, despite being confusingly enigmatic at times, she was hard working, she got on with things, she had many good ideas, and she was nearly always good company. Most importantly, they got on well together - they complimented each other well and they were friends, as well as lovers.

Marcus was more even tempered. He tended to remain calm whatever the situation and his training in the Royal Marines, and then with the Special Boat Service, had taught him to be patient. Sometimes, he irritated Sophie enormously, his inner calmness seemed like indifference, or lack of interest, but she was learning, he just could not get worked up about the same things that would drive her mad. Nevertheless, when it was necessary, he was ruthlessly efficient and completely dispassionate in the job that he had to do. He attacked it single-mindedly with a very clear focus of the objectives. Marcus had discovered this ability in combat allowing him the advantage of time and speed to clinically analyse his situation, assess the dangers, and react appropriately. He was a formidable opponent and not someone to be under estimated, or lightly confronted. Those who had, and Banovič was one such idiot, invariably came off worse.

Marcus and Sophie also complimented each other in work and play. They managed their business well and they climbed and sailed as a team. They had confidence in each other. They were both expert in weapons and armaments. Their firm, Myrmidon SA, supplied military equipment, security systems and provided security services. In their factory warehouse at Meyrin next to their office on the outskirts of Geneva, they also developed and modified systems in their workshops. They had some innovative ideas and had the facilities to develop and test them. Nevertheless, as they both agreed, they worked too hard and played too little.

‘Nice morning,’ Sophie said looking wistfully out of the window across the roofs of the buildings in the old quarter, down towards the lake. In the distance, the mountains of the Chablais in the French Alps were barely discernible. The sunlight diffused through the morning haze and there was hardly a ripple on Lac Lemman. She felt the urge to escape.

‘Have we got anything hyper-important this morning?’ she asked, as if asking permission to absent herself.

Marcus looked at the diary on the computer and scrolled down the screen to examine the rest of the day.

‘Nothing desperate, nothing this morning that can’t wait until this afternoon,’ he replied. ‘You have a meeting at the UN this afternoon – Human Rights Secretariat at 3.30. Important?’

‘Quite - it took me several attempts to nail down the person.’

‘Anything you need to get ready for the meeting?’

‘All done, the papers are in the office.’

‘So what do you want to do?’

‘Can we spend the morning on the boat again, we do have some tidying up to do on it?’ Her expression was so pathetic that he knew he could not refuse her. Their idea of managing the business in such a way to allow more time together had never really worked; they simply had not mastered this element of their life together.

‘OK, but just the morning - we’ll go into the office this afternoon, phone Walt, see what he wants and then you can go off to your meeting. How would that be?’

‘Fantastic!’ she said, leaping to her feet and putting her arms around him. ‘I’ll put some jeans on. Send an e-mail to the office; let them know what we’re doing! No, tell them we’re working at home this morning and would prefer not to be disturbed. Great, I’ll only be a moment.’ With that, she scampered down the stairs with a feeling of relief, great joy, and anticipation.

Sophie’s boat was moored in the marina near to the *Jardin Anglais* in the centre of Geneva. It was in this park where they first set eyes on one another as they passed going in opposite directions. Moments later, when Marcus turned round to look at her again, he saw a motorcyclist trying to run her down. It was the following day when they met again in her office when they concluded that the same person, Milovan Banovič, was trying to kill them both.

Their morning on the boat passed too quickly and it was well after lunch when they finally arrived at the office. Now that they had an office in the centre of Geneva, they could walk to work rather than taking the car out to Meyrin. Marcus decided to try phoning Walt at 2.30 p.m.; it would be 8.30 a.m. in Washington and it was likely that he would have already started work. It took him a while to get through but when he did, he was surprised how delighted Walt sounded to hear him.

‘Marcus, it’s good of you to phone.’ Marcus switched the phone to loudspeaker and Sophie came over and sat by him.

‘Hi Walt,’ he said, ‘Sophie’s listening in.’

‘Good, yeah, that’s good. Hi Sophie.’

‘Hi Walt.’

‘I wondered if you would phone, I thought you might even decide not to respond.’ Sophie whispered in Marcus’s ear that they had not properly considered that option.

‘What’s up, Walt?’ Marcus asked getting straight to the point. Walt ignored the question.

‘Oh, I forgot to ask, how you are Sophie?’

‘I’m fine Walt, and how are you?’

‘Great - great to hear you Sophie - I hear you got married, you two. Congratulations.’

‘Yes, thanks Walt,’ Sophie replied, thinking this conversation wasn’t going anywhere. Perhaps it might have been better if they had pretended that she was not there.

‘What’s the weather like over in Switzerland?’

‘Pretty good, in fact too good to be sitting in an office talking to the CIA, if you want to know!’ Sophie said slightly exasperated, after all she was paying for this call.

There was a silence at the other end of the line.

‘Sorry, Walt,’ she added, thinking it might be better if she kept quiet and let Marcus deal with Lewenski. There was silence. They waited.

‘Sorry Sophie - someone just came in and handed me something. You were saying?’

Sophie could not be bothered to answer him and rolled her eyes up at Marcus.

‘OK Walt, let’s get to the point, what’s the project that you want to discuss with us.’

‘I need some fieldwork doing and I wondered if I could interest you in leading a small team?’

‘That will definitely cost him,’ Sophie whispered.

‘Where is it, what’s it about and how long is it for?’ Marcus asked.

‘Afghanistan, international terrorism and drugs, and I haven’t a clue how long it might be for.’

‘Why are you calling me?’

‘Because I’m desperate.’

‘I knew he must be,’ Sophie whispered again, as Marcus gestured to her to keep quiet.

‘What’s the problem?’

‘To be honest, we are just running out of guys on the ground. Recruiting locally has had some minor success, but we’re lacking a sufficiently well developed network to compensate for the losses. Sure, we’ve got spooks all over the place, but they’re not going to interact with locals without being recognised as Americans.’

‘And what makes you think that I will fit it?’

‘I don’t, it’s not why I want you. Look, I could send a Navy Seal in to run a team, or even one of our special agents, but frankly, you have better experience and that’s the special expertise that I’m after.’

‘You said, *compensate for losses*, would you like to be more specific?’

‘Well, we’ve just lost another team. They were all Afghans. They were trailing a group that was moving young recruits from Britain and France to a terrorist training camp.’

It's a camp that we have been attempting to locate for sometime, but so far without any success.'

'What happened to them?'

'We think that three were murdered and the fourth committed suicide rather than face being tortured.' Sophie screwed her face up. Walt continued. 'The Afghans have a history of being very unpleasant with each other.'

'To be honest, Walt, it's interesting, but it doesn't sound like the place where I would want to spend my summer holidays.'

'Me neither, Marcus, but someone has to do the work. The world is becoming a much more dangerous place. We've stepped up our operations since the Madrid bombings, but Madrid won't be the last. There are other networks spreading out from Al-Qaeda, as well as copycat nut-cases lurking in the wings ready to blow themselves up.'

'Sure, I know the background, but this is not really the kind of work that we do. We give advice, provide security services, sell products, we don't provide front line troops, or dedicated intelligence services.' Sophie nodded at him encouraged; he was beginning to develop the patten quite well.

'I know that, but it's you that I want!'

'I'm flattered Walt, but apart from anything else, I'm getting a bit old for this sort of game.'

'I know exactly what you did in Italy; there's not many who would have managed anywhere near so well. And there is another aspect.'

'What?'

'I want this team working well outside all our normal operating procedures. I want a clandestine operation that even 'Clandestine Ops' in Afghanistan don't know about.'

'You've got other problems.'

'Maybe - I don't know. Maybe I'm just being ultra cautious.'

'So, what role had you in mind for me?'

'I want you to lead the team, on the ground at least, if not on paper. What do you think?' Marcus looked at Sophie. She drew her finger across her throat and looked as if she might choke at the same time. Marcus got the message.

'I think we would be inclined to decline your proposition.' Marcus looked at Sophie who nodded in agreement, as she walked away with a big smile on her face.

'I'm not surprised - I suspected as much. I'll admit that I was pretty well resigned to this outcome. But, listen, may I send you the package we propose in any case, just for you to look at?'

'Of course you can send the information and I promise you that we will look at it, but I'm also reasonably confident that our answer will still be in the negative. OK?'

'Thanks, Marcus; let's leave it like that then. I'll e-mail all the documents to you today.'

'That's fine. We will look out for them.'

'Thanks Marcus, and you Sophie, nice to speak to you.'

'Yes, bye Walt.' She shouted from the other side of the room.

‘Bye.’ Marcus terminated the call.

‘I’m going,’ Sophie said, picking up her brief case. ‘I’ll be back by five-thirty – I hope.’ She kissed him on the cheek and left.

The documents arrived within the hour. Marcus could see that they had been meticulously prepared sometime before; they were certainly not documents that Walt had just written.

There was a formal letter explaining broadly the nature of the contract and with it, was an outline brief that dealt with the object of the mission. There was a description of the organisation structure, the other members of the team involved, a description of the weapons, technology and communications, procedures to be used and the like. Walt had also included a draft contract, which included information on price, payment, extension of time, insurance, contract termination and so on. It was well thought out. However, what was almost beyond belief was the size of the proposed fee. Marcus gasped when he read the sum of money. He put the package down; it would have to wait until Sophie returned later that afternoon.

Sophie was much later than she had expected. Marcus waited patiently. She arrived back at the office as the last person was leaving. She locked the door behind her and climbed the stairs to their offices on the first floor.

‘Good meeting?’ Marcus asked.

‘Interesting – women’s rights in third world countries. They are useful contacts to keep. You never know, some work may come out of it, we even touched on discussing the cost of providing personal protection services.’

‘Were they interested?’

‘I think they were fishing, trying to get a general idea on cost, organisational implications, logistics and the like.’

‘Good - I expect that you impressed them.’

Sophie looked at Marcus with a sideways glance. It was the compliment that alerted her. ‘What are you after?’

‘I think that you should read this.’

Marcus held out the papers that Walt had e-mailed that afternoon and then been printed. Sophie took them, sat down in a leather armchair, and started to read. Marcus left her to make some coffee. When he returned she still had her head in her hands studying the papers. He put the coffee down beside her. She mumbled. He went over to his computer and started reading the e-mail again on the screen.

‘*C’est pas vrai!*’ she suddenly exclaimed. ‘Have you seen this figure he’s offering?’

‘Yes, what do you think,’ said Marcus, looking at the figures again.

‘I told you that he must be desperate.’

‘I wonder how this operation is being financed.’

‘If it’s the CIA, it could be financed from anything, and it would probably be better not to ask.’

‘So, what do you think?’ Marcus asked, wondering if Sophie might be lured by the extravagance of the offer.

‘I think if we wanted to, we could persuade them to double the offer, but I wouldn’t go anywhere near Walt

Lewenski, even if they offered us Fort Knox! What about you, you're not tempted are you?

'Not really.'

They were lucky, they didn't need that kind of money, they were reasonably wealthy in any event, but it did make them both think, nonetheless.

'Sure, you're not saying that just to please me, are you.'

'No, not really - there would have to be a very good reason, other than money, for me to get involved with Lewenski again and, frankly, I can't think of one compelling enough, at this moment in time.'

And so, after discussing the subject a little more they composed a courteous reply to Walt Lewenski, thanking him for considering that their company might be interested in the project, but nevertheless politely, and firmly, declining it.

That evening as they left the office, they walked arm in arm along the lakeside in the warmth of the evening sun. Marcus put his arm round Sophie's shoulder and she leaned towards him, tilting her head. The scent of her hair filled his nostrils and as he caressed her cheek and neck with his thumb, they felt doubly content in each other's company and the thought that they had made the right decision with regard to Lewenski's offer.

But such decisions, the decisions of lesser mortals, as the ancient Greeks had so clearly realised, can be set aside by divine intervention, or at least by supposedly divine intervention.

## Chapter 6

*Central Afghanistan, Thursday 7th July 2005*

The training sessions during the previous few days had gone well. The recruits had been introduced to a variety of weapons, many of which they might never use. Nevertheless, familiarity with all kinds of weapons was thought to be very important. Getting used to killing people was also important. They had undergone fitness training and they had been given some rigorous religious indoctrination aimed at reinforcing their belief, just in case there was any doubt. They were left with a sentiment that reflected the indisputable righteousness of their cause.

Theirs was not the only camp in Afghanistan. There were well over fifty or so similar camps. Some were smaller and highly mobile so that they could decamp at a moments notice and disappear into the wilderness. The coalition forces had had limited success in identifying the camps by satellite because of the rugged nature of the country and many of the terrorist groups used caves and were consequently well hidden from view. Without committing huge numbers of troops to the mountains, the Taliban were always able to disappear. All that the ground forces could do was to control the roads, some of the valleys, the access to the cities and make occasional raids into the countryside. It was an impossible task, they were too thin on the ground, often badly supported, and hampered by political indecision especially on spending.

The recruits practised continually, for example, climbing and firing their weapons at targets whilst hanging from ropes. They began to develop a sense of camaraderie and they became committed to the idea of the Jihad, the holy war, in which they saw themselves as warriors of Allah, the sword of Allah, and the sword of divine vengeance.

‘Islam must rule the world and, until Islam does rule the world, we will continue to sacrifice our lives,’ Khalil-al-Ali had said to them. They believed and supported him wholeheartedly in this philosophy. Anything other than their full and undeniable commitment to this cause was unacceptable. To be half-hearted in their sacrifice and their endeavours would have been an offence to Allah.

The morning commenced as it did everyday with prayers. The ritual was repeated five times each day. Slowly, carefully, and methodically the recruits were de-westernised, becoming accustomed to a different rhythm of life, at the same time learning to accept both the need and their acceptance for a violent end to their lives, when they would blow themselves up along with other, innocent people.

They did not consider that anyone who was unfortunate enough to be close to them at the time of their self-destruction, whether they were Muslims like themselves, or Christians or Jews, had a right to life. They might be unfortunate to be caught up in such a conflict, but they would nevertheless be quite indiscriminately extinguished to enable a political and religious statement to be made. They would be extinguished to persuade the world to return to a barbaric medieval society where women had few rights and where girls were stoned to death for having been raped, where slavery still existed and where illiteracy and poverty ensured the supremacy of the male clergy. They would be extinguished to appease a vindictive and vengeful god and they would be happy to die, seemingly content with their murderous work.

They were not people who had any desire to live in a world where humanity, compassion, friendship, or even justice had any meaning; they were simply messengers of destruction and vengeance. They had already excluded themselves from everyday society and they had only one object left in life, to kill, and to kill in a place where the world would take note.

Strangely, they believed that ordinary people would consider them martyrs, and that what they did was by no means evil. But how could this possibly be true? Was this the true message of Islam? Surely, it was a corrupted version, articulated for the especially weak-minded, the impressionable, the blind, and the stupid. For whose benefit was this radical change? Would their quality of life improve, would they be happier, better fed, better educated? Not the ordinary man, that was for sure. He could be maimed or killed as simply as the next man, when it suited their cause, they had already proved that! So, was all humanity ultimately destined to live in a climate of fear all their lives if they were ever allowed to succeed in their cruel objective?

## Chapter 7

*London, England, Thursday 7th July 2005*

Thus, on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> July, a morning much like any other in a large western capital city, where crowds of people were squeezing themselves into trains, buses and underground railways on their way to work, another group of terrorists struck. At 8.50 a.m., without warning, four impressionable, but murderous young men, blew themselves up along with fifty-two other people. They also injured over seven hundred more in the proximity of the three tube trains and the bus that they had attacked. No doubt, when they conspired with religious fervour to execute their desperate act, they were wholly convinced that what they were doing was good, or at least acceptable, just perhaps, even possibly, divinely inspired, but certainly not evil.

It was around midday that a spokesman for al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks. They had trained the terrorists and admitted that they were now training others to do the same thing.

The news of the atrocities shocked the world, but for the British, and in particular Londoners it was unsettling. Both the French Government and the Americans, in fact the CIA, indicated that they had already warned the British Government of the imminent attacks. Of course, the representative for the British Government denied that any such communications had ever been received, but then the representative was a politician.

History repeats itself. The world has the opportunity to learn from it, but it rarely does. History teaches us many things and often concentrates on the workings of government. All over the world and all through time runs a constant theme of lying politicians and corrupt governments. If history teaches us anything, it is, without any doubt, that politicians in general are pathological liars.

Thus should we assume that the government representative probably lied?