

Chapter 1

You live with the wounds . . . those you can and can't see—at least I know I do, but I have to continue. I don't know for what reason anymore other than survival. Before I had a purpose . . . now . . . I'm just an old man soldiering on.

I draw my HK45CT from the holster, pull back on the slide, and check a round's chambered: we're going heavy.

"JT, do you copy? Over!" says Spook over the radio.

I holster my gun, rearranging the neck strap, and press the throat mic "Spook, get off the air!"

"I'm at the location, and dinner's ready. What's your ETA? Over!" Spook cuts through the radio silence.

I look at my watch, *Saturday, March 11 01:55 A.M.*

"Five mikes (minutes) and get off the air! Over." Releasing the mic, I load a clip into my tool—an M4A1—chambering a black-tipped (armor piercing) round.

"We're going quiet!" I issue the command to my team in the car. All of us attach suppressors to the ends of our tools.

Spook drove ahead, setting up charges to knock out power on the block, and camped out as our lookout during the breach. My team of Bubu, Cuz, Fish, and I plan to breach the building where our targets are in.

"Boss, we're coming to the curve. Saddle up, boys!" Bubu points to the poorly lit curve on the road that overlooks a drop.

“Fish, ready up and stay frosty. We have a little over a klick to cover down the hill.”

Looking at the rearview mirror, I get eyes on him, and sure enough, he’s ready to rock ‘n’ roll.

The SUV stops and we exit the vehicle, slamming the doors behind us. We step over the guardrail and head down the hill.

“Spook, the fox is making its way down to the henhouse. The farmer will be there in two mikes (minutes), over!” Bubu’s radio transmission cuts through my headset as Fish and I make our way down this San Diego hill.

“‘Bout bloody time, dinner is set! On your mark, and I’ll pull it out of the oven!” Spook replies.

“What’s the sitrep? Any dogs hostiles around the henhouse, over?” Bubu asks, referring to any hostiles around our target.

“I’ve got a couple of dogs in the front—I’ve got eyes on them.”

“Boss, we’re on standby—waiting for your signal. Over.” After Bubu’s transmission, Fish and I continue our trek down the hill through dry bushes and trees. The California terrain reminding us of the Afghani mountainside.

“The fox is in the dark, ready to jump the fence. Do it!” I release my fingers from my throat mike and wait for Spook to cut the power as we lurk in the shadows.

The power goes out! Fish rushes past me to cut the chain-link fence and break our way in, cutting over the area we want to break off—a space big enough for us to enter. I cover him, looking at my watch as the seconds go by, hoping everything is going according to plan.

“Dogs are down—I’ve got eyes on the farmer,” Spook says over my headset, referring to Cuz and Bubu. Fish snaps through the last portion of chain link and pulls it down to the ground as we move in.

“The fox is in the henhouse.” Fish moves to my twelve o’clock—he’s on point as my transmission ends.

“The farmer’s in. I’ve still got eyes. Over!” Spook replies.

“Getting ready to breach. What’s your progress, fox?” Bubu’s transmission cuts through as Fish signals that the breach is set on the rear entrance.

“The fox is ready. Blow it!” My transmission ends, and I hear a faint thump as the explosive cuts through the front entrance. Fish is slow to open the door, checking for booby traps, as he slowly opens the rear entrance while I provide cover.

I’m now on point.

“Farmer’s in—I lost eyes. I’m moving. Over!” Spook’s transmission echoes through my headset.

Fish and I drop goggles and turn on infrared, preferring the dark as we prepare for direct fire. Fish puts his hand on my back—signaling where he’s positioned behind me—as I push up the dark hallway.

We hear noise as we get closer to the left turn of this warehouse maze, hugging the right wall to close the angle on anyone from coming into this hallway. Two heavily armed hostiles with Sinaloa Cartel tattoos emerge: contact! Double taps to each one—and they’re down . . . They didn’t see us coming.

“Contact—two tangos down.” My transmission ends as we walk over to the hostiles, confirming the kills.

“Roger, we’re in position.” Bubu’s whisper is magnified in my headset.

Fish and I stop short of the turn from where our dead cartel guys came, staying behind cover as we stare at the end of the hallway and into the open warehouse.

“Take them down!” My transmission ends as I hear the tangos getting frazzled. I make out every other word, and suddenly—nothing. Silence permeates the air as Fish and I push in.

“Clear—tangos are down. Area is clear—how, copy? Over!” Bubu’s transmission ends as we continue to inch closer into the warehouse.

“Solid, copy! We’re making our way up to you. Do you see us? Over.” Fish is stacked behind me as we continue to move closer.

“Roger, I’ve got eyes. You’re clear!” Bubu transmission ends.

“All clear!” Cuz’s yell can be heard throughout the warehouse.

I scan the main warehouse area to find four dead bodies, mountains of cash, a pile of drugs, and enough weapons and ammo to arm a militia.

“Open the garage door.” Pointing to Bubu and the door, I gesture to Fish to come closer. “Fish, the bags!” Fish comes up to me, turns around, and I start pulling black duffel bags from his rucksack.

We spread the bags over the stash tables and begin to put everything inside. Drugs with drugs, cash with cash, and guns with guns because they’re each going to different people: the cash comes with us, the guns go down South, and the drugs to our Tijuana Cartel friends this side of the fence.

Spook backs the van up, exits, and opens the rear doors as Bubu makes his way out to the car where he’ll be waiting for us.

“Oy, come on, come on, time’s ticking.” Spook races down to us and begins to pack stuff into bags. “Be sure to label it, lads.” He throws us color-coded zip ties—black for guns, red for drugs, green for cash—so that we know what bags go where. The cash goes in the car with Cuz, Bubu, and Fish. The drugs and guns go in the van with Spook and me. We’ll take the van to a drop-off, where a car will be there for us, and call our friends with the location of the van.

“Two minutes. Someone just called in the disturbance. Police units are enroute.” Bubu’s transmission cuts through the noise of us packing everything.

“Is that all of it?” I ask, scanning the area once more.

“Bloody hell, this is as good as it gets. Let’s go!” Spook loads the last of it into the van and slams the doors shut.

“You two take the cash, ride with Bubu, and we’ll meet you at the safe house.” Pointing to the bags, I give Cuz and Fish the order to peel out, they grab the bags, and make their way toward the SUV, as I get in the van with Spook.

Spook races to grab a gasoline-filled jug with a timer, and I stand by the passenger side of the van, waiting until he emerges from setting the bomb over the table inside the warehouse—we don’t want to leave traces of DNA behind.

“Take it easy, and don’t do anything stupid!” I say to Spook as I pull myself inside the van and begin to shimmy my way into a boiler suit that can cover my Kevlar and ammo vest. Spook starts to drive us toward the RV (rendezvous point). “There’s the 805. Go south, and we’ll make the drop in National City—the car’s ready, right?”

“Aye, it’s all set.”

I keep scanning for tails or anything out of the ordinary, and the burner phone rings.

“Boss, we’re clear—nobody’s tailing us,” Bubu says over the phone.

“Keep me posted, stay frosty, and keep the thirty-minute intervals going,” I answer as I make eye contact with Spook, confirming everything is OK.

“Roger. How’s it looking on your end?” Bubu is quick to ask.

“So far, nothing, but it’s not over till the guy signs the package.”

“Ha, yeah, you’re right about that.”

“Stay off the air—see you in thirty,” I say before hanging up.

“Copy that,” Bubu replies before the line goes silent.

“The lads OK?” Spook looks over as he asks.

“No tails, but we’ll keep to the plan.”

“Roger.”

Looking at my watch, I see the time, 0230, and reach down next to the passenger’s seat and pull up a laptop opening the police network. I paid a lot of money to some kid to get me access to this so I can begin to look for DUI checkpoints.

“Keep on the 805. Take the 54 East exit, and you’ll exit on Highland.”

“I know my way. Remember, I parked the car.” Spook nods and winks.

“Just making sure . . .” I’m quick to reply.

“Any coppers ’round our exit?”

“No DUI checkpoint. Hopefully, most of them are out after the drunks and not us.”

Spook laughs as he nods back, “We’ve got plenty of firepower back there—wouldn’t mind taking a brick or two back home.”

“A brick will last you a weekend! The minute your hoochies find out, they’d come out in droves, and God knows you’d be awake for a week. I love you, but I don’t think I can handle a week of sleep-dep Spook.” I laugh as I hit Spook in the shoulder.

“Oy, I’m driving here! Besides, it wouldn’t last me *a* weekend, more like *two*, and I believe in sharing and caring.” Spook raises two fingers in front of me, gesturing the English way for *fuck you*.

“And I believe in peace and love . . .” I gesture right back.

“How much money do you think was back there?” Spook asks as he continues to drive.

“Couple of million at first glance, but who knows? I’ve been off before, you know.”

“That was quite the cock-up.”

“Heh. Which one? We’ve had plenty.”

“The one when we went down south, and we were knackered after the trip, the job, and when we realized it—it was bloody pesos! *Pesos!* I was gutted!” Spook laughs and shakes his head.

I break out in laughter. “Fucking hell . . .”

“You can’t say that, mate.”

“Spook, you’re as British as I’m Mexican!”

“I was born in the UK . . .”

“You were born in the American embassy in London!”

“I was born in the UK, and I was raised in the UK . . .”

“By your American mother and father . . .”

“I was educated in the UK . . .”

“And you went to war college in the US and served in the US military! You’re as British as Taco Bell is Mexican!”

“Oy, don’t be making fun of our friends!”

“I’m just making a point . . .”

“There’s the car park.” Spook points it out as he becomes serious.

“Anything look out of place?” I start scanning the area for anything out of the ordinary.

“Negative.”

“Park it next to it.”

I scope our surroundings. It’s a public parking lot, and we’ll be camping out across the street. Spook will be in the back seat with eyes on the van and a clear shot of anyone trying to jack our load.

We exit the van and look under the SUV for any booby traps.

“Spook, you have anything?”

“Negative.”

“Keys.”

He throws them my way, and I unlock the SUV. Every time we enter a vehicle we’ve left behind, I expect it to blow the moment I turn the ignition . . . Nothing!

“I always expect it to go boom!” Spook exclaims, reading my mind.

Spook grabs our weapons from the front seat and goes to the trunk of the van. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m taking my cut!”

“One brick . . .” I shout, raising my index finger.

“You’re not me pal!”

He emerges with a brick and a smile on his face, slams the van doors, and opens the SUV’s rear door.

“Did you check the rear?”

He looks in the back of the SUV we’re currently sitting in.

“You’re like the kid I never wanted,” I say as he sits down with a pouty face. “Make the call.”

“I’ll dial, but you talk to them,” Spook says as he begins to dial the satellite phone. “It’s ringing.” He passes it up to me as I hear a voice say, “Speak.”

“I’m sending you the address. Check the email’s draft box. You see it?” I say.

“Got it. I take it nobody made it out?” the voice on the phone continues.

“No,” I put the car in drive and begin to head out, as our friends are on their way. “But we need to have a sit-down.”

“Time and place, and I’ll be there.”

“Sounds good. Enjoy the party favors.”

“Always, amigo. You did good, JT.”

“Always a pleasure. *Salud*.”

“*Salud*,” the voice says as the line goes silent.

I throw the phone on the passenger seat and park the car where Spook can keep a visual of the van. Looking over at the laptop, I refresh, and read the draft from our friend: *Two black Range Rovers*.

“Two black Range Rovers, Spook,” I call out.

“Roger, I see one, two SUVs, and they’re our cars.”

“Who do you see?” I’m quick to ask as I ready my tool.

“Second, let me bring the camera up and snap the pictures. Looks like Miguelito and his posse.”

“We’re good. We’ll let them drive off so that we don’t draw attention.”

The burner phone vibrates, and I answer, “Yes?”

“Boss, we’re at the safe house, and we’re in the clear. What’s your status?”

“They have signed on delivery,” I say as I continue to look at the rearview mirror.

“Roger. We’ll maintain the thirty-minute intervals.”

“Copy that—over and out.” Hanging up the phone, I look over to Spook and ask, “You down for burritos?”

Chapter 2: Pope

The bright lights of the San Diego skyline draw the predators and prey by the droves, like turtle hatchlings trying to make their way to water. It's a bit of a cliché doing a meet and greet in the middle of the night, but I suppose that is what bad people do. At least it's in a popular nightclub in downtown San Diego.

Cars with my men are directly in front and behind me as I drive alone to the rendezvous point. The streets are crowded and alive as I continue to navigate through the Gaslamp Quarter. Slowing down to the meet-and-greet spot I park my car in the valet, it's ten P.M.

"Mr. M, it's great to see you again. Keep her in sight?" the valet asks as he opens the car door.

With a nod and a handshake with a \$100 bill between my fingers, I exit the car. Faces stare at the car and me. The front door staff recognizes my car and leans into their headsets to let their boss know I'm here. Before I get to the velvet rope, they open it to welcome their VIP.

"Right this way, sir," one of the bouncers says as he starts moving people to the side. I keep him a couple of paces to my left—within my line of sight—in case I need to open up on him.

I carry a concealed Colt M1911a1 on my right hip and three clips on my left. Mr. M is the only one that is allowed to carry besides my friend's security team.

Two men with COMMS go to open the doors—it's like a real-life Pandora's box of hedonism and nihilism. The first thing to hit me is the deafening sound followed by the earth-trembling vibrations from the loud music. The second thing to hit me are the scents that fail to drown the filth and lust—it makes for a bad perfume retail counter with a bunch of people that want to fuck each other during spin class. The third thing once I'm inside are the lights. The angle and the setting remind me of a cop shining a flashlight.

“Sir, is everything all right?” my escort asks after noticing I’ve stopped following him.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I’m just checking out the show my boy E puts for the people,” I tell him, but I’m really letting my eyes adjust to the light.

“Pope, my nigga . . .” a brother screams out in a separate section of the club as he waves in my general direction.

I smile and continue to tail my “escort” as I spot the others, counting two close to me . . . I told E—short for Enoch, but he’d rather end you than admit his God-given name—that I didn’t appreciate his escorts whenever I made an appearance.

The energy is electric; whether it’s the drugs or the alcohol, E sure knows how to throw a party, but I always need someone to nudge individuals around to pave the way for his guest of honor.

There are six guys, more than usual, but I recall him saying that he had a VIP for me to meet.

“Pope, wassup, my nigga!” E yells as he welcomes me.

“Not much, brotha. How you been? Stayin’ outta trouble or getting into it?” I shake hands with and hug E as I look over his boy from the hood and his second-in-command, Tarzan.

“Wassup, fam? This nigga, shit! It’d be easier to get these white bitches to fuck the crew than to keep this nigga outta trouble!” Tarzan says as he comes to greet me.

“Shit! You have really good-looking people up in here,” I say. “So what’s this heavy business here? Who our brown brothas over here?”

“These the Mexican fam we talkin’ bout here,” says E as he sits. “Here, have a drink.” He pours champagne and hands me the flute.

“Right on, brotha,” I switch to business mode, since I’m not dealing with familiars. “How can I help you gentlemen today?”

“Aww . . . shit! Here come the Pope! Pope, this is Hector, Hector this here be Pope. Nigga solid, ain’t no one better, and top-grade party supplier,” E says as he does the introductions.

Hector is an unusually tall man for a Mexican—6’3 or 6’4 if I had to guess, very tan, sense of style, and clearly in shape. He looks like he’s had a couple of procedures—nose, chin, eyes, ears, perhaps, to hide his identity.

E is a skinny black man, no more than, 5’6 or 5’7. He has box braids, and keeps a clean shave: a real pretty boy. Dresses in *streetwear* or whatever that is.

Tarzan is 6’6 fridge of a black man. Built like a basketball player, he’s an imposing figure that keeps a clean fade and shave. He wears streetwear as well.

“I have heard a lot about you, Mr. Pope. I also heard you are the man for the type of party supplies that a man such as myself is looking for. My name is Hector Beltran. But please, call me Hector,” Hector says as he settles into his chair.

“Likewise, a pleasure meeting you, Hector. People know me as Mr. M, but you can call me Pope. I’ve heard a lot about you too. So what can I do for you?” I say as I lean over for a handshake.

“Please, have a seat.” Hector points to the chair on his left.

I set my flute on the table, unbutton my jacket, tuck my necktie toward me, sit down, and settle in for his spiel.

“As you may be aware, we are currently looking for some party supplies for my people. There’s a group that has a better club, and we’re looking to compete against them and put them out of business,” Hector says as he starts to sip his champagne.

“I have heard that there is a need for my wares, and as you know, I do not take sides in conflicts; however, due to the circumstances you may be facing in your business expansion, I would look the other way if said proposals came my way from the affected party. But there are

guarantees that would be expected to fulfill such a request. I do not want to assume here, of course,” I say as I look around.

“This *señor*, E, he is all business. You were right, he *can* turn it on,” Hector says as he smiles at E.

“I am simply looking to make whatever this may be into a mutually beneficial partnership. As I see things, the party supplies that you’re looking for have to be top-shelf if you want to end things swiftly. But if you want to draw things out and bleed them out slowly, I also have those options. Ultimately, you want what is best for you and your organization, so you tell me what you have in mind, and I will look at what I can do.”

“This is the list of party supplies I need. E helped me compile it since he has knowledge of the order form. This here is a little advance. It should cover the order and exclusivity from anyone down south,” Hector says as he slips a piece of paper across the table and gestures to the briefcase sitting next to him.

“Yo, I think I got the order form right, but who the fuck knows!” E says as he sips from a foam cup.

“E, you got a lil’ syrup for me, brotha?” I say as I glance over the list and sip some champagne.

“Aww . . . shit!” E pours codeine with lemon-lime soda and ice into a foam cup and hands it to me.

“Pour another cup. We need to drink to our new partnership,” I say as I hand the cup to Hector and look across to the both of them.

“To new friends,” Hector says as he raises his cup.

“New friends!”

Chapter 3: JT

I leave the boys to count the money and celebrate the win. I don't stay for those because I put us in this hole . . . so I leave, and let them have fun. They forget—and for a bit, they don't think about what we do for a living now. There's not a lot of work for our type—nobody wants broken soldiers, especially if two are dishonorably discharged.

I roll down the windows of my truck and light a cigarette—might as well enjoy the beautiful San Diego morning breeze as the sun slowly emerges behind me. By the time I get home, I'll be close enough to the water, and the sun will be completely out, just in time to go to the local bar.

The burner phone goes off. I glance over to see what the text reads: *Lil over 200 bloody million!*

I look around and make for the next exit to locate a public trash can, wipe the phone down for prints, pull out the battery and SIM card, and throw away the phone and battery. I'll burn the SIM card in the truck and dispose of it later—we're fucked! That amount of money just made us the Cartel's top target. That amount of money going missing moves us top of the Sinaloa Cartel's hit list. We won't be able to easily escape this type of heat ... they've killed more for less.

Pulling up to the next exit, parking the car, and lighting another cigarette, I inhale and exhale, then put the SIM card over the lighter that still burns. I try to rid myself of a link among the phone, the score, and the people behind the jacking, but I may be too late.

I bring up the satellite phone and call the phone that Fish or Bubu should answer, since they're the more responsible ones.

"Speak," the voice on the other line answers.

"Burn the burners. Don't take the earnings to our usual fronts. Split it and hide it, and wait for further instructions," I reply.

“Roger. The house will try to come back for its money?” Bubu asks.

“Yeah, I’m not sure if we’re going to be made, but I need to hit up our friends down south.

We may have bitten off more than we can chew.” I scan around to see if I’ve been followed.

“Roger. I’ll tell the boys. What about the family?”

“Until we know, I wouldn’t make any moves, but it’s your families, so move whatever you have to. Keep yours safe, and Spook and I’ll take care of it, or we’ll go down in flames for it.”

“You go, we go, and that’s that. We’re a team!”

“I appreciate it, but Spook and I walk it alone. Besides, it may be our chance to shut him the fuck up!”

“Talkin’ ‘bout getting clipped? Oh, wow, you went there!” I hear the laughter as Bubu tries to reply.

“Get yours to safety. Tell Fish to do the same. Cuz has his cats, and Spook has his . . .”

“Roger. And, JT, you got us.”

“Which is why I need you to do as I say, brother.”

“Roger. I’ll split it all evenly, have everyone dig it, hide it, whatever, but no fronts. Gather the family and sit tight,” Bubu repeats back the instructions.

“Affirmative!”

“Solid copy! Over and out!” The line goes quiet, and I glance at the phone *Saturday, March 11 6:00 A.M.* before putting it down. We don’t have many options.

I start dialing our friends down in Tijuana, and the line rings as a voice answers, “Speak.”

“We need to chat sooner rather than later,” I answer.

“Tomorrow I’ll call with a time and place,” the voice replies.

“Roger.”

As I go to put the phone on the seat, the phone rings, and it’s one of the guys. “Speak.”

“Morning news in all the local stations,” says Fish on the line.

“How bad?”

“Bad, but it seems to be linked to local gang violence . . .” Fish trails off.

“Hopefully, they don’t bring smart people in on it and figure it isn’t. How’s everyone doing?”

“Good, but Spook is being his usual self . . . we’ll let him sleep it off here.” Fish answers.

“Roger.”

“Where do you want me to leave your stuff?”

“Meet me at my place, and we’ll go to the bar for breakfast.”

“Roger. Is that girl of yours working?” Fish asks.

“Not my girl, and no,” I’m quick to answer, putting an end to the discussion.

“No?”

“See you in thirty.” I hang up before Fish asks any more questions.

I put the car on drive, and head eastbound on I-8 for home.

I never pull into the driveway of my house after a score, especially with this much heat; instead, I drive past the house and look for anything out of place. After a couple of drive-bys, I finally stop at my house.

“Every time I shower, I like to think I’m born again and without sin . . .” I told Fish a while ago. Now I stand here under the showerhead, trying to wash the night away, but it never works.

The doorbell rings. I pop the shower door open and walk toward the security monitor in the bedroom. It’s Fish, so I let him in while I get decent—I’m not as comfortable with my nudity as Spook is.

Walking into the closet, I grab the first tee that’s hanging and quickly get dressed to make my way downstairs.

Before I'm able to come into the living room, I hear Fish.

"Here's your end. Sorry, I helped myself to the Blue Label," Fish says as he points to the bag on my coffee table and the tumbler filled to the rim of whiskey.

"I only keep that shit for you. Might as well drink from the bottle," I reply as I continue my walk toward the bar.

"Yeah, I'm finally getting my drink on because of our flipper baby, Spook."

"That's our baby?!" I look at Fish like he's out of his mind.

"Yeah, and we did a terrible job raising his ass!"

"I was working all the time." We laugh as I pour myself a drink, and I raise my glass. "To fucking ourselves over with the cartels."

"We're not fucked yet," Fish says as he sips from his glass.

"You're right. I have the sit-down tomorrow. I'll bring Spook, so that we . . ."

"Let me stop you right there, brother. We're no longer in the service or doing wet work for the agency, so stop trying to insulate the team. We know what we got into when we walked down this path. Go solo or take all of us, but we're grown-ass men, and we need to face up to the situation," Fish says as he rests his left hand on my shoulder while holding his drink with the other.

"You're right."

"Now, before you go on and apologize, let's grab some breakfast, and get our drink on."

"What about Karen and the kids?"

"I called her, explained the situation, and my brother is helping them pack. We're good."

Fish smiles and goes to put his drink down.

"Sounds good—let's go."

The pub is a little shore side getaway of mine. I walk past the red telephone booth, the hall with the pictures empty, chlorinated toilets, and a warm, musky, wooden portal to another place, letting me forget for a minute the shit storm that's rapidly approaching.

I walk toward the bar, a wooden monstrosity that's heavy, dark, and imposing but accommodating once you find your place. The gal behind the bar is playing Neil Young in the background as she preps the bar for the morning.

"JT, you're in early! What'll it be, sweetheart?"

"Morning, June. Are you open?" I ask before stepping completely into the bar.

"Yes, come, have a seat." She clears the bar for me and Fish. "What'll you have?"

"Proper Scotch, and not the shit that my friend had."

"I've got a Balvenie 18."

"Yes, let's buy the bottle. Spook is on his way." I look to Fish as I mention that.

"Yeah, we'll need the bottle, but he's paying." Fish points to me. "He's your child, after all." Fish looks at me and then June.

"It's only my child when I have to pay, huh?" I put my arm around Fish and nod to June.

"OK, boys, whisky, and three glasses." June smiles, waiting for confirmation.

"Yes, June, and this is my brother Fish. Fish, this is June."

"Apologies for my brother's manners. Tyson 'Fish' Lewis, ma'am. Pleasure to meet you."

Fish stretches out his hand for a shake across the bar.

"You're so sweet! Please, call me Junie—JT, where did you keep this beautiful chocolate man all along instead of that wannabe Brit friend of yours?"

Fish and I bust out laughing as she winks at him and turns around for that bottle.

"You guys can go out to the patio if you'd like. The guys over there can be a little loud."

She points to the group of men rooting for the soccer team on the TV.

We sit outside, pour our drinks, and Fish asks, “We need to figure out what the next steps will be. What are you thinking?”

“It’s only been a couple of hours since we did what we did.” I pause to take a sip of my drink, looking beyond the harbor and back to Fish. “I thought about this scenario before we went on the job, and there are only two things that can play out: we wait and die, or we go after them. We can die in the process, but at least we’ll do it fighting. We’ll need to place a series of calls, which is why I wanted to think it over before I went to Jose.”

“Jose’s the business—wouldn’t you need Juan for that type of assessment?” Fish asks as he scans the area.

“Juan’s the crazy one of the twins, and Jose will have a better idea about navigating this shit storm. This isn’t a counseling meeting—it’s to figure out who knows about what we did inside the Tijuana Cartel.” I point to the table. “This shit will get to the Sinaloa Cartel one way or another, and I need to be sure before I start stalking if it’s the right prey.”

“JT, how long have you and I been on the same team? How many deployments do we have under us? You are not alone—lost, maybe—but not alone.”

“I know, Tyson.” I raise my glass for a toast with my brother.

“Doesn’t Spook know someone who moves gear? Or knows someone who knows someone?” Fish meets my glass, and we sip.

“Yeah, he was attached to one of the task forces during Iraq.”

“Is he reliable?” Fish takes another sip of his drink.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think we have many options.”

“When’s the meeting?”

“Spook’s handling that one, on account that he still keeps in touch with the guy.”

“One of his ‘friends’?” Fish asks sarcastically.

“He says, *his* man. His friends are the hoochies he brings home.” I pause to think about the possibility of Spook being that stupid.

“Speak of the devil.” Fish points to the bar as Spook fumbles his way to us.

“Hey, lads. This one’s for me?” Spook asks as he reaches for my glass.

“That’d be your glass, yes.” Fish points to the empty glass.

“You were always the tough one of the parents.” Spook pours the Scotch as he makes himself comfortable. “Before you ask, I haven’t gotten to call our mate about the hardware. I don’t want to raise suspicion that highly trained ‘meat eaters’ are inquiring about his connection to high-grade wares less than twenty-four hours after pulling the shit we did.”

“I love it when our boy is sober enough for some clarity.” I look over Fish with a wink and nudge toward Spook.

“Francis, you make your poppa and mamma proud.” Fish bumps Spook’s glass.

“Only Mum calls me Francis. To you, I’m still Spook.”

“JT, why is our boy disrespecting me?” Fish asks as he looks around the table, laughing.

“Francis, be nice to your mom.” After a laugh, I tell Spook, “We need to be careful here. We have the chance of striking first, maintaining the element of surprise. What you did today and not calling the guy, that was great, but we need you to maintain this focus. Can you do that?”

I haven’t seen Spook this serious since that day in Afghanistan—the freeway noises, the airplanes landing and taking off, the crowd at the bar, where nothing broke eye contact between us—and he nods.

Chapter 4: Pope

The sun is slow to rise behind me, as color creeps back to the bay, it's 34-past-five in the morning.

The towering skyline still drowns the darkness and for just a few hours the city sleeps.

"That's a nice watch you've got there," E comments as he walks next to me.

"Thanks, E." I'm surprised he's managed to get so close to me without my noticing. I must have been deep in thought.

"Piaget . . . you've got fine taste."

"I see you do as well," returning the compliment.

E smiles, sighs deeply, and says, "It's been a while since I spoke 'country club.'"

"You never lost it, my friend."

"As you probably found out when you had me checked out . . ." E smiles, winks, and drags on his cigar as he leans over the rail of his downtown penthouse. "Do you know why I invited you back to my home?"

"I presume not to keep the party going."

"Correct. You understand something that most people I associate with don't: by doing this deal with the cartel, I signed my death sentence."

I lean against the rail overlooking the city and bay and back into E's eyes. "You're a smart guy. What do you want to hear?"

E breaks eye contact, looks over the rail to downtown San Diego, and says, "Not smart enough."

"You can beat yourself up, feel sorry for yourself, and set yourself on the path to self-destruction, or you take care of business."

“I always knew that getting involved in the drug trade would lead to this, but the profit margin ...”

“I have made a few bad deals in my lifetime and some in my organization believe this is one of them.”

“Then why do it?” E asks.

“Because it is part of a plan.”

“What plan?”

“A strategic development of assets in Mexico that consists of developing the most logically viable partnership between my operation and one of the biggest organizations in the world . . .”

We hear the sliding door behind us open. It’s Tarzan. “E, Hector is calling—says it’s urgent.”

“Let’s go see what he wants already.” E nods to go inside.

I follow Tarzan and E as we make our way through E’s modern penthouse—it’s like we called the same decorator—down a hall with countless pictures of celebrities, musicians . . . You name them, and E is by their side. We continue the walk down the hall into E’s corner office. E makes his way around the desk, and Tarzan points at a sofa for me to sit as he sits across from E. The office is almost identical to mine: open, all white with a handful of pictures, black surfaces, black furniture with white accents, and a room adjacent to the office. I’m not certain what he has behind that door, but I know what I keep.

“Go for E.”

The voice on the other line is angry.

“Slow down.” E continues to maintain his composure.

The voice grows louder as I continue to scan the room—his Berkeley and UC Davis diplomas hang on the wall with the door, but you wouldn’t notice them until the door’s closed.

“Stop. Meet me at the club. Same time. Yeah, I’ll be sure Pope’s there as well.” E hangs up and puts the phone down. “Something went down at one of Hector’s safe houses—millions gone, dead crew, and most of the building burnt down! I stopped him before he said anything over the phone. He wants to sit down tonight.”

Tarzan’s eyes widen as he looks at me.

I look at Tarzan and then E. “I’ll be there.”

“He just wants to chat.” E tries to reassure us, but he cannot hide his nervousness.

I chuckle with a smile, come to my feet, make sure my tie is flush with my shirt, button my jacket, and I put the cigar out on the ashtray. “Thank you for tonight,” I say to E and Tarzan as I reach to shake their hands.

On my way out, I point at the diplomas and stop at the door before I open it. “You’re too smart, E. Be careful—you can’t outsmart them all.” I open and close the door behind me.

Chapter 5: JT

“JT, you know Karen wants to do the kitchen like yours?” Fish’s yelling makes it all the way to my office on the second floor.

“What’s he going on about?” Spook asks as he’s going through my record collection. No privacy when he’s around the place.

“The kitchen! And you need to stop touching my records,” I snap back at Spook, since it’s taken me too long to get some of these albums.

“You’ve got a fine taste in music,” Spook says as he continues handling my albums.

“I know.”

“You know, ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ saw me through some tough shit,” he says as he holds the record and walks out of the office. “Why the bloody hell do you have a three-story house?”

I walk down the hallway toward the stairwell, and I see that Spook has bumped into the picture of all us in Afghanistan. I stop to fix it and wipe off two thumbprints before heading downstairs.

Spook’s fumbling with the record player, so I step in before he damages my original vinyl since he’s into half a bottle of scotch already.

“JT, did you buy the house as is, or did you get someone to do it for you?” Fish keeps going on about the house.

“Bought it as is,” I say as I’m setting the record so that Spook can chill on the sofa.

“Not a lot of furniture,” Fish says as he sits on the dining table next to the lounge area where Spook is spread out.

“Just enough—we made it work that barbeque.” I walk over and sit with Fish.

“Yeah, wasn’t that what led to furnishing and decorating this place? Or, was it the girl?”

Fish raises his brows and smiles.

“Jesus Christ with the girl, brother . . .”

“Don’t give me that . . . I really wanted to see her during breakfast, seeing as how we’ll probably never get to meet her,” Fish continues.

“It’s nothing serious.”

“All right,” Fish says as he takes a sip from his drink and looks around the house. “I love the feel to the house. It’s like we’re trapped in nineteenth-century Mexico, very rustic.”

“Jesus Christ, what the fuck did you do with Fish?” I interrupt him.

Fish laughs loud enough to break Spook from his haze. “I’m married, brother. I pay for five separate home decor subscriptions, and they’re usually in the master toilet.”

I can’t contain the laughter.

“What do you think I do when I’m sitting down for extended periods of time?”

“Friggin it?” says Spook as he’s smoking grass.

“The fucks a friggin?” I continue to laugh, confused with what Spook has to say . . .

“Friggin it. You know, masturbating like the menopausal woman he’s become . . .” Spook says, followed by a cloud of smoke.

“Burn!” I belch out as I reach to hit Fish on the shoulder.

“First, fuck you, Spook—I know you understand that, wannabe Brit. Second, I need Bubu here to back me up—he knows what’s up. Third, where’s Karen? You two are animals.” Fish looks at the door, hoping Karen will breach it to save him.

“First, I can’t believe you cussed. Second, when’s she coming?” I’m barely able to talk on account of his ass getting burned.

“She’s probably stuck on the bridge, dealing with traffic. . . You know how it gets on the weekends over there—which reminds me. My mom and Isaiah are in town, so we need to barbeque next weekend. Spook, I expect you to behave and not act like an animal. JT . . . just show up.”

“I still don’t know why you live in Coronado . . .” I say begrudgingly.

“You know why, brother . . .” Fish takes a sip of his drink.

“I know . . . but I can’t stand the sound.”

“I saw the light, and the sound of the Bird snapped me back out . . . Oh, the missus is here!” Fish says in excitement and stands up.

“I’ll walk you.” I stand up with him and start walking to the entrance.

“I’m leaving my car outside, if it’s OK.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” I put my arm over his back.

“I’ll be here for the meet.” Fish winks as he opens the door and hangs a backpack over his free shoulder.

“That better not be my money,” I say jokingly.

“What’s mine is yours, remember? God, I love this entrance!” Fish looks around as I shake my head.

“I still don’t know what you did to my Fish.” Laughing, I walk Fish to the gate and wave as I see Karen in the car. Once Fish and Karen drive off, I finally head back inside for a power nap.

I look at the watch *Saturday, March 11, 12:42* and scan over the sofa from the entrance to see Spook’s finally out.

Chapter 6: Pope

The foyer to this high-rise seems to be designed by our Liberace president or some Sheikh—just garish, gold everywhere. It's as if the landscaping crew loaded their leaf blowers with paint and regurgitated gold. It's one of the reasons why I passed on the penthouse here—that and the view . . . I like to look at the water. The smell of the bay hits me as the doors open, and as I step outside toward the valet, the smell of urine sneaks into the beautiful ocean breeze. In downtime, it smells of urine, whatever the time of day.

"Ticket, sir?" the valet asks.

"The Pagani over there." I point to the car, hand over the ticket as my security detail steps out of their waiting SUVs. "Boys."

"Sir, where we off to?" asks Papa as he comes up to me, the rest of the boys forming a diamond around us.

"It's still early. I thought that we could go eat something, but the options would be limited at this hour . . ."

"Yes, sir. There's that British pub on India Street or that breakfast place over on Hillcrest that should be open now."

"You drive . . ." I hand the keys to Papa. "Mexican?"

"Several places open, sir, but they can probably cook you a better meal if you go to the Coronado house," Papa says as he enters the car and signals to the team we're leaving.

"Yeah." I enter the car. "Tip the boy and take me to the Coronado house."

Papa tips the valet and starts to drive as I roll the windows down to take in as much of the breeze as possible. One SUV drives in front of us and the other behind as I rest my arm on the

door and stick my hand out the window against the wind, closing my eyes as I feel the blast of the morning chill when we take I-5.

“How are you doing, sir?”

“I have to meet the Mexican again tonight. Something went wrong—not clear on the details—but our friend may think that I was involved, for however mad the thought may sound. Where’s the money?” I keep my eyes closed as I try to rest them.

“It’s safe—riding in one of the cars with the men,” Papa answers.

“I’ll take it to the meeting today in case there’s a *change of plans*.” I gesture air quotes sarcastically with my hands.

“Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“It’s not the service anymore—it’s just us.”

Papa turns off his comms, “Listen, Alex, you need to be careful. The Mexicans, they’re fucking animals, and they do crazy, irrational shit. You can’t leave me outside—you need the guys around you twenty-four seven, even in everyday meetings. I know you can handle yourself—God knows, I know—but if something happened to you . . .”

I open my eyes and make eye contact with him. “I know, Charlie.” He smiles, and I squeeze his leg as I look out the car once more with the wind in my face.

Charlie opens his comms. “Boys, make sure that Candice is prepping breakfast. The Pope is starving.”

Chapter 7: JT

“JT, JT, JT . . .” The sound of gunfire snaps me awake. “Wake up.”

Saturday, March 11. 1700.

It’s like someone rattled a bird’s cage, and suddenly, I’m awake from the recurring nightmare of my memory during the OP. My heart is racing, hands tingling, short of breath, and I feel like the walls are coming down on me—I’m having another panic attack . . . I try to compose myself. I get up, get into the shower, and open the cold water over my face, around my neck, and over my head. Water always has a calming effect, even when I was doing underwater training—there is nothing more peaceful to me than the cold, dark of water. I hop in the shower to try and calm down, but before I do, I grab a hair ribbon that Annie left behind. It’s one of the few things that calm me down: the smell of her hair.

“JT, you decent?”

“I’m in the shower.” I rinse off whatever soap is left, shut down the water, and take the towel that’s hanging over the glass wall.

“Cover up. I don’t want to see your twig and berries,” Spook yells.

“You’re in my bedroom,” I yell back.

“You need a towel?”

“No, I need you to get out!”

“I thought about what you said. Ring the guy for gear.”

“Yeah.” I dry my upper body, wrap the towel around my waist, and step out the shower and into the bedroom, where Spook is spread over my chaise—he was offended I didn’t know the proper term—as if he were taking the sun. “What about it?”

Spook gets a good look at me and asks, “You ever had those scars looked at?” There’s a look of concern.

“A reminder of how close . . .” I say as I look away and walk toward the closet to change.

“I left on that battlefield whatever little life I had left.” Spook says.

“Those red sunsets . . .”

“That dark orange most days, but when it was red . . .” Spook pauses and takes a deep breath. “Never seen another sunset like it.”

“I have the photograph you took,” I say as I continue to get ready.

“Yeah, I see it in your office.”

“Why the change?” I step out of the closet.

“If the gait doesn’t already give it away, your outfit will.”

“Fashion advice from Mr. ‘I was a pirate turned cologne model’?” I say, laughing.

“Low—even for you.”

“You haven’t told me why.” I put on my watch and paracord bracelet, and I slip my .45 with its concealed holster to my right and the concealed magazines to the left. “You heavy, right?”

“Does the Catholic Church . . .”

“Got it.” I interrupt him before he finishes his statement, and I pull up a chair in front of the chaise.

“We’ve made a total cock-up of this, so why wait? We’ve got surprise, plus they’re probably just now putting it together. Nothing will change if we call people within forty-eight hours or seven days.” Spook leans toward me.

“You’re right. You know . . . it’s like I ran out of time.” I recline on the chair and look out the window. “Just when I thought I had more time—I only ever did this to get more time, figure things out.”

“We’ve got the paper . . .”

“How long we running for?”

“We can go on the lam.”

“But for how long? You know they’ll find us—we’ve tracked people down for them!”

“Oh the memories . . .” says Spook.

“Look, we ran down two cousins of Jose and Juan—they were family!”

“But they didn’t try.”

“Spook, come on.” I look at him for a no B.S. assessment.

“The club . . . that was a proper cockup.”

“That was a proper shoot out.”

“We ought to know better.”

“You know, Jose’s been harping on it.”

“Attempting to vicariously live through us . . . but he wouldn’t get it.”

“I didn’t expect it to go sideways like that.”

“Bloody hell . . . don’t even know if I remember it like it was.”

“What do you remember?” I lean in to listen closely.

“I think so—I don’t know . . . it’s all one long war.”

“Why keep going?”

“I don’t know, JT.” Spook stares out into space going silent. “Do you?”

“I was hoping that we never crossed that line, but I suppose once we did the club job there was no turning back. There was a time that if some shit ailed me, that I would let it kill me, and I wouldn’t fight it. I figure, been fighting my whole life, so why keep going? I’d be getting peace after all. But then I met her and something changed, I don’t know when, but all I want is time and now this? I guess I got desperate.”

“JT, what’s going on?”

“Just the usual shit.” I stare into space.

“It was a Saturday night. Jose and Juan had an in—someone on the inside, a bartender! — that’d get us our shooters and clips in an ice bucket when we placed the order. She knew you, so she knew what’d be in for—they had her kids! —and we would be there.”

“We went in as tourists, some gringos looking for a good time, but we were there to work.”

“Bloody . . .” Spooks says as he struggles with the name. “Julio!”

“Pinche Julio!”

“Yeh, I remember. The club was packed, titties everywhere, and half the cunts were cartel.” Spook stares out the window. “Julio and Alvaro Lopez, brothers, just like Jose and Juan . . . on the mother’s side! We knew the floor plan and building layout, so it was just a matter of zeroing in on the target. I had to piss like a racehorse—then walked round the club like a muppet, some out of place tourist, and combed the area. He had his VIP section, a roomed off portion of the club, with one entrance, and a circular sofa—built to the room—that surrounded a dance pole . . . big enough for ten and four girls dancing on a small stage so no room for error. I went to the DJ, requested The Hills by The Weeknd, gave him some money, and waited for my track. We were 25 yards from the room, we figure, buckets paid, table held, so we rolling to see what we can pick. That shooter and clips were so cold it gave me chills when I hid it. And it was show time! I walk ahead, you walk closer to the stage—my seven! —so you cover my six. I remember walking up to the guys—there were four by the entrance! — asking ‘*You VIP?!*’ and the moment that muppet gave me the ‘*the fuck look*’ I pulled on him.”

“It was so quick!”

“The four go down before the fourth is able to pull up.” Spook continues to stare into space. “I hugged that wall, and the first dude that came out I grabbed him by his shooter, pulled

him, and one to the dome. The second was ready for me, comes out expecting me, but by the time he finds me on his shooter I've pulled on him. I go in—only two rounds left—and Julio's hiding behind the girls but once he revealed enough of his face . . . I pulled on him. The girls flee, and I put another in his head . . . the .45 wacked off a chunk of his face with the first shot and the second was right in the forehead. I reloaded and before coming out I realize you were already in a fight of your own."

"I thought I'd forgotten. Made it all up, and recreated into what it wasn't."

"You were there." Spook says as he leans back, glancing at me, but resuming his story. "I peeked out and saw you were ducking behind the mainstage. You were reloading. Once I figured where they were, it was easier, and coming out the room I knew where they were."

"It'll go wherever you put it."

"And it did. There were three behind the bar, two of them jumping over, and making towards me—they probably could've pulled on you, but they were too focused on the boss—and it was instant: two shots into the domes . . . bloody hell, some real shit, bruv." Spook says as he makes eye contact, only to look away in an instant. "The bar man stood no chance . . . he was down before he could turn around."

"That gave me the space to put it downrange."

"Those two never knew!" Spook laughs, "The ones by the main door had AKs."

"That fucking sound . . ."

"In that club!" Spook exclaims. "It was deafening the music, but it was amateur hour."

"Real shit shooting."

"What a good .45 can do, right?"

"Yeah, you're a fan of the classic—like your typewriters and old books!"

"That Colt 1911, but that night at the club I was happy I left a SIG for the bubble."

“That was some shooting.”

“We make a good team.” Spook says as he smiles, eyes filling with joy.

“The best!”

“Better than Fish?!”

“Spook . . .”

“It was, indeed, a shootout. I didn’t roll up my turtleneck till the door.” Spook laughs.

“The whole point for those long necks was to cover part of our face!”

“You forgot yours too.”

“Strip clubs all look the same.” I mumble.

“And that was our in.”

“And the start to our Doomsday countdown.”

“We kept shooting out the street—wouldn’t let us go!”

“Four came out from the backrooms.”

“That’s what you were shooting at?” Spook asks incuriously.

“What else would I be shooting at?”

“Making it look like amateur hour?”

“With our faces on camera?”

“We had a beard growing contest before the OP and shaved after the OP. No big deal.”

“Yeah, but that was the day that we went from proctors to mercs. But I needed the money, brother. Now I don’t know what’s next.”

“Let’s go to Vinny’s—Pyro still frequents it.”

“You drive!” I grab a light jacket from the chair behind me as I head for the door. It’s not until I’m on the first floor that Spook finally makes for the stairs, and I continue to the exit. “Lock up behind us.”

Sunsets finally start taking longer. They're just right, not eerily early, and they don't overextend their stay. Driving down I-5 with the window down, the sunset, and the cool ocean breeze, I try to distance myself, at least for this moment, from the reality that awaits us. Eyeballing the money that Fish brought, Spook's right to seek out Pyro. Maybe he's got a connection or someone that can get us the gear we need with the time we have.

The skyline keeps growing, the lights muting the stars, and soon it'll fight the moon for attention. I close my eyes once we enter downtown . . . a reminder of where I come from.

"You OK, JT?" Spook asks over the engine sound.

"Yeah, just thinking." I keep my eyes closed as I reach for the controls to close the window.

"Sorry I had to take this way." Spook fumbles to turn the AC on.

"It's fine," I answer, keeping my eyes closed. "It only ever started affecting me recently . . . old age, right?" I grin with eyes closed.

"Nine years old, right?" Spook asks.

"Yeah."

"Did you ever find her?"

"No."

"But if we make it out of this one, will you try?" Spook asks cautiously.

"If?"

"Yeah—when we make it, will you try and find her?" Spook tries to laugh it off.

"Maybe. I've been giving it some thought," I say as the car finally starts moving.

"Would you forgive her?"

I open my eyes, looking at him and ask, "What's the matter?"

“I was looking at the picture while you were asleep—I didn’t want to wake you, so I just looked at the lads. Everyone’s in it, including those heavily concealed CIA cunts.” He pauses and finally says, “What if it’s our turn? What if this is the last one?”

“I was trying to avoid the thought, but I had the dream . . . only this time, it was different,” I answer hesitantly.

“This is a proper cock-up! Maybe we should consider bugging off.”

“American. Jesus, I know you’re an English major, but fuck . . .” I answer, half joking but annoyed.

“Go away!” His look gets even more serious.

“Yeah. I know. We have to fix it—not for you or me, but everyone else.” I look away and out to the concrete slabs and homeless that litter them.

“How long were you out there?” A few moments go by before he asks the question.

“One month. The police stopped and asked me questions—took me to the department. The apartment had an eviction notice, no way of finding my mother. Before I knew it, I was in a shelter.”

“Do you want to know why she did it?”

“I know why: she was a heroin addict. I just want to know if she’s alive or dead.”

“Should I try to contact my mum?” Spook asks after giving it some thought.

“You should. It’s been a while since you spoke with her.”

“After the discharge,” Spook says begrudgingly.

“Your pops?”

“He passed. Christmas,” Spook answers nonchalantly.

“This past Christmas?” I look at Spook to see his reaction.

“They called me on the thirty-first—after they cremated him.” He doesn’t blink and continues to look down the road.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I lean forward to try and catch his eyes.

“He disowned me, remember?”

“But he was your father . . .” I try to reason, to make sense of it, but not push Spook away.

“You don’t know yours,” Spook replies.

“But you did!”

“Did I?”

I look away, unable to say a word. I don’t know what he went through, or what he’s going through. I’m just disappointed in myself for not seeing that something was wrong. That Spook might’ve been going through some shit, and I couldn’t see it.

“I’m sorry, Spook.”

“I wear my ring with pride, not just because it’s Annapolis, but a big ‘fuck you!’ to the old man.” He extends his right middle finger and gives the bird. “We’re almost there.”

“Where you landing this jet?” I say, looking around the cabin of Spook’s car.

“Valet, right across.”

“Every time I’m in this car, it’s people taking pictures,” I say uncomfortably.

“It’s a proper British car.”

“And you’re a proper pain in my ass.”

Moments later, a valet greets Spook as he opens the door. “Your ticket, sir.”

“Keep her near.” Spook grabs the ticket and slips him a bill.

We look at Vinny’s place, and something’s out of place: a sports car in between two black SUVs. They look armored.

“Those at Vinny’s?”

“Hard to tell. Weekend night always draws flash cars.”

“Like yours?”

“Pagani. Two million at least! Mine’s a McLaren P1 about one point six,” Spook says as we walk toward the bar.

“That’s the cost of the place I bought,” I reply.

“Bloody hell . . .” Spook stops to gaze at the Pagani. “This is a two point five million spec.”

“Spook.” I tap him as he’s hunching over the car, and I nod at the two guys, contractors, by the entrance. “I think you shouldn’t get too close to the car.”

“Oh. So here’s our VIP?” He lets out a chuckle as he walks toward the door and past them.

I follow ten paces behind Spook. By the time I’m inside the joint, Spook’s already at the bar.

“Vinny!” Spook screams out.

“Yo! What are you kids doing here?” says Vinny as he comes around the bar to get a handshake and hug Spook.

“Bada bing!” I yell out as I make my way toward Vinny. “How you been?”

“Getting into shit.” Vinny comes over to handshake and hug me. “You?”

“Getting into some shit. Watch out, or that little Brit over there will fucking drink you under the table,” I drape my arm over Vinny, still hugging the bear of a man.

“Jamie, get me three glasses and the twenty-five,” Vinny belches to his wife and bar manager.

“Vinny, that’s not necessary.” I’m quick to calm down this party.

“Spook’s buying,” Vinny replies.

“Hi, Jamie.” We walk over to the bar and toast.

“To the navy!” Vinny raises his glass. With his gold crucifix, white linen pants, and white button-down shirt, the man looks like Tony Soprano.

Spook and I look at each other and toast. “To the navy.”

“What’s with the guys?” I ask Vinny as I nod to two more contractors going toward the bathrooms and the group sitting at the end table.

“A regular. He knows we sweep the place weekly, so he comes, pays, and leaves.”

“You still getting the old salts?” I ask, scanning the bar with the pictures of GIs and sailors geared up, and in whites and blues.

“We still get the old salts and plenty of officers,” Vinny whispers.

“Loose lips sink ships . . .”

“Amen, brother.”

“Lady keep you in check?” I nod toward Jamie.

“Hell, yeah! She my mama,” Vinny yells out.

“I need to meet with Pyro. You seen him?”

His face gets serious, looks around, and asks, “You sure?”

“I need gear, like the shit we had, if not better. We’re willing to pay top dollar,” I whisper, looking around the room.

“I haven’t seen him.” He pauses, looks around. “Leave me a phone number. If I can find him, I’ll have him call. But if I can’t find him, I’ll see if I can find someone that can hook you guys up.”

Spook gets up and walks toward the restroom. I keep an eye on him so that he doesn’t step out of line. The contractors are no joke. One of them looks like a career guy; the other a five and out . . . the great ones can’t resist and the private sector’s pay. The other two, I’m not sure.

“Sit, you want some food?” Vinny points to the barstool.

“Just the drink is fine.” I take a seat where he pointed.

I look around the bar and realize not a lot has changed. On one side, the place is covered in pictures of current and former service members. On the other side, there are little lockers everywhere where people pay to leave their mugs—a badge of honor, and the one constant for those returning from deployment. Vinny makes his way back to the bar. It’s a library of alcohol, hundreds of bottles, a taste from every base, he says.

“I still have a mug here?”

“Spook still pays your dues.” Vinny smiles as he goes back to bar work.

“I take it he has a key?” I ask, hoping that wouldn’t be the case.

“Look what I found on my way back from the head,” Spook says, holding the two mugs like a clown.

“He does.” Vinny starts laughing.

“Pour us a pint!” Spook yells out.

“Wash it first.” I stop Spook from handing the mug to Vinny.

“No! This is for not coming in years.” Spook passes the mug over me and on to Vinny.

“He’s got a point.” Vinny continues to laugh, tears running from his face.

“I’ve had diarrhea water. What’s a little dust going to do?” I say proudly.

Vinny pours the beer in the mugs, sets them on the bar, and raises his glass of scotch. We raise our mugs, and as we meet his glass, Spook toasts, “To the Navy!”

“*The Navy!*”

Chapter 8: Pope

“Charlie, did you find out what happened?”

“Fell under our local guy’s jurisdiction but taken over by the feds when they found traces of drugs and the Sinaloa crew.”

“Hector’s crew got hit!”

“Big time! Word on the street, the crew’s fucked! They took a little over two hundred mil in cash, plus whatever product was left behind.”

“And they suspect me?”

“Too early to tell, but I’ve called our boys on break back in. Everyone is on alert, and I’ve made the preparations to leave the country if necessary. Again, precautions, since we don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

“Cartel losing a lot of cash is never good . . . they have killed many more for a lot less.”

“The one thing he says was that it was all quick, professional, with no shots fired from the Mexicans: the power was knocked out, and they found flashbangs,” Charlie says.

I stop gazing at the San Diego skyline over the balcony, turning to Charlie. “Operators?”

“Tight grouping in the chest and head, suppressors, and shape charges—explosives proficient—in the generator and doors. They knew how to breach.”

“Find what you can about whatever outfit may be out there—dishonorable discharges. No firm would want them; they’re soldiers of fortune. We will go to Vinny’s tonight, but send some of the boys—they may have guys who know something. I need everyone back here by seventeen hundred.” I stop to look at my watch. *Saturday, 30 past nine.*

“Roger that.”

“Another, thing.” I stop Charlie.

“Yeah?” Charlie turns as he’s at the door.

“Get me the files from ops I ran in the last twenty-years. And, get the firm to gather any INTEL on this incident. We have the intelligence division in our org and they’ll be able to leverage government intelligence networks.”

“You think that you ran some of the people involved?”

“If your source is correct, these men were in the same group. Platoon even.”

“There were a couple that got reviewed.”

I look away and back to the skyline. Charlie closes the bedroom door. The cell phone vibrates, and it’s a text from Charlie: *Try to get some rest.*

Again, I thought back to Afghanistan. That had been a disaster. Two of the three task forces that I counseled went down in flames; the last one was just a political catastrophe—massive collateral damage and civilian casualties, easy pickings for news outlets everywhere. In the end, that task force had several casualties, several wounded, and a couple of dishonorable discharges.

The taskforces were part of the early going of our OP in Afghanistan. Theorizing that small, tactical groups could be flown from a carrier and deployed swiftly was put to the test early as members of the CIA and JSOC were sent to Afghanistan for reconnaissance, intelligence, and establishing a network of former mujahedeen allies—a list that I procured and curated after years of running weapons and supplies into the country during the Soviet-Afghan War and during the internal Afghani Taliban conflicts—that could provide support once the invasion began. It would also secure valuable intel for early bombing and high value targets.

A lot of work went into securing a deal with Pakistan, securing safe air travel for me and the supplies, and securing the contacts and meetings with key figures in Afghanistan. I had done most of the leg work, but Washington still managed to screw it up. I had to watch from the aircraft carrier because of a bureaucratic pantomime showcasing the CIA’s departmental might after their

biggest intelligence blunder that led us to this situation: September 11. I, myself, raised concerns during my time with the CIA to no avail. It was not until I went private that I stopped caring because the enemy of my enemy had now become my friend!

Pakistan is still a friend, but so is much of the world considering the services my firm renders. The trade routes stand. The free movement of supplies, logistics, and personnel continue. And my firm still manages several US contracts in the region and globally.

I step into the bedroom, sit at the table, and open the laptop. I type, *Soldiers dishonorably discharged, civilian bombing*. The search engine gives me a bunch of results. I click on images, and I see the naval shots of two individuals, James Taylor and Francis Laurence-Rockmoore. A couple of articles later, I find the second pair, Patrick McAllister and Mark Elison. Both pairs were part of the two separate taskforces that went down in flames. I print all of their pictures but not before remembering their faces.

"I brought you some coffee because I know you won't sleep, and the pictures you printed." Charlie sets the tray on the coffee table and goes to hand them to me.

"Those four are a start."

Charlie takes a look at each one of the men, memorizing their faces. "I'll make sure they learn them."

"Is Vinny's set?"

"Yeah. Told him to expect us between eighteen hundred and twenty hundred."

"And our friend?"

"Pyro will be there. I brought you the hard drives." Charlie gives me the bag off his shoulder. I start setting the hard drives on the desk and plugging them in while Charlie pours us coffee.

"Kilo, can you come over?" Charlie radios as he stands next to me, handing me coffee.

There's a knock at the door. "Come in." Charlie walks toward the coffee table, grabs the photos, and hands them to Kilo. "Make sure you learn these faces, and see if you can find out if they're doing cowboy shit."

"On it, Papa." Kilo closes the door behind him.

"See?" I've found something.

Charlie comes over and leans to look at the screen. "You were right."

"There's a couple more. I'll print the pictures. Reach out to the farm—see if they have anything recent on these guys."

"The agency knows you active?" Charlie asks as he looks me dead in the eyes.

"Operation Helen of Troy is something only the Director of the CIA and Philip knows of to minimize risk."

"I know that your op was the initial catalyst to start the firm, but will you be reaching out to Philip; after all, he's your wrangler?" Charlie asks with an incredulous look.

"He is on a need-to-know basis. Right now, with a new president, I can maneuver easily during the turmoil of a new party coming into office."

"We'll be moving quickly?" Charlie asks as he takes steps away from me.

"After this deal is finalized, we will get one step closer toward achieving operational success. The aim is to complete this op by end of April, early May with a clear victor in this cartel war."

"Nothing's changed?"

"No. Meeting with Hector reaffirmed that we are on the right track."

"Philip and the agency won't be happy."

"They won't. But they will look the other way because they need me more than I need them. Besides, if only a handful of these files made it to the public, we would have a national controversy spanning six presidencies." I open the files for task forces 185, 183, and 179.

“Afghanistan was a shit storm!” Charlie says with conviction.

“It was an unmitigated disaster, despite all the intel.”

“I remember.”

“We should have continued running ops like we did with 183 and 185.” I pause and I stare at the personnel photos of 185. I click on one, and I enlarge it.

“I remember that day. That’s 185.”

“That’s correct.” I continue to stare at the screen, the entire team, including spooks.

“There was the guy, Ghost?” Charlie pulls a chair next to me.

“Spook.”

“That’s right!” Charlie says as his aha moment.

“Spook calling us spooks.” I smile and shake my head.

“No,” and we say in unison, “Look at the Brit calling them spooks.”

“I was concerned at first when command threw the list of names . . . they had a long list of successful missions and were all highly decorated—the best the navy had to offer. But they had a Laurence-Rockmoore.”

“Richie Rich!” Charlie nearly jumps off his chair.

“Indeed, his family is reported to be worth billions; however, not from his father’s side, but the mother’s. Father was an officer, from a military family of West Point graduates turned ambassador,” I pull up the files on Francis Laurence-Rockmoore. “And son of Diane Rockmoore of the New York Rockmoores—the telecommunication tycoons.”

“Do you think these are our guys?” Charlie asks as he looks me in the eye.

“Doubtful . . .” I open the files from the task force, one after the other. “Dishonorable discharge, KIA, medical discharge, medical discharge, dishonorable discharge, KIA, KIA, medical discharge,” I recite to Charlie as I switch from file to file.

“There’s still a possibility, right?” Charlie takes over the mouse pad to scan the profiles.

I lean back on the chair. “Possibly, but some of these wounds are serious—shrapnel, gunshots—and those are just the team guys. The group guys suffered heavy casualties. That was the last OP I oversaw.”

Charlie looks over and reads one doctor’s postop notes. “There’s no way.” He suddenly looks confused and opens Laurence-Rockmoore’s file. “Not only is he fucking lucky on top of being rich . . . not a single fucking wound!”

“Meanwhile, his team was ravaged by combat,” I answer in disbelief.

“No offense, but I hope there’s a special kind of hell for officers.” Charlie shakes his head in disgust.

“None taken,” I pause and look at Charlie. “I just hope I don’t go to that hell.”

“I’ll save you a seat,” Charlie smiles and winks at me. “Lay down and I’ll look at the files. It’ll be like the old days.”

I squeeze his knee, continue to smile, and as I go to stand up, Charlie stops me.

“I forget you can grow a beard . . .” Charlie runs his hand around my mouth and down my chin. “You need to shave that stubble off.”

“I haven’t had the chance to clean up.” I shyly grab my chin and rub my hands over the stubble.

“Go clean up so you can rest. I’ve got this,” Charlie says with a smile.

Chapter 9: JT

Seeing Vinny and his wife so happy got me thinking about my life. I don't know what'll happen after tomorrow's meeting, but for the first time in my life, I'm scared. But what scares me the most is that I don't know why. I walk around downtown, leaving Spook at Vinny's, and I suddenly realize that I'm walking away from the noise and toward the water—the smell of the saltwater cutting through the smell of the piss and homeless. I was one of them at one point. The cool breeze from the bay continues to lift my spirits. People come alive once more when the sun goes down in downtown. I always try to get away from it. I get to Harbor Drive and see in the distance the USS *Midway*, and I continue to walk toward it. Our task force operated out of a carrier just like this—the memory makes me sick to my stomach. I feel short of breath, and my heart starts racing . . . am I having a heart attack? I lean against a barrier as I try and catch my breath. It's another anxiety attack! I try to control myself using breathing exercises, mental exercises to try and keep it from escalating to a panic attack.

My phone vibrates. It's a text from Annie: *I heard you stopped by*. And before I'm able to answer, she follows up: *What are you doing tonight?*

I'm starting to calm down. I type, *Nothing*.

I need to close up. Stop by and we can leave together, Annie replies.

See ya tonight.

<3.

<3. I smile and hit "Send."

I look out at the bay, across the water, and realize that Coronado is just across the way. We called Coronado home for a while. Fish still calls it home. That's where I met Fish, Spook, Bubu, and most of my guys. I don't know why Spook's been looking at the picture . . . he has his

hunches, and more often than not, he's right. It's been a while since I dreamed about that day, as long as I've known Annie, but today of all days, I start thinking about all of them, especially our team guys.

"Taxi," a brother stops and asks, "Where to?"

I step into the cab. "Aero Club Bar."

"You got it."

"Harbor, Laurel, to India," I instruct, looking out the bay.

"You know your routes. You from around here?"

"Logan."

"City Heights," The driver looks in the rearview mirror. "Must've been tough . . ."

"*El güero*," I smile and continue to look out the window, keeping an eye on my friend from my periphery.

"See," the taxi driver points to the sky as raindrops start to fall, "I picked you up at the right time!"

"What's your name?" I ask before looking at his taxi license.

"Max."

"James, but you can call me JT." I make eye contact with Max through his rearview mirror.

"Nice to meet you."

Max continues to drive, the rain not letting up. "It feels like another El Niño."

"Yeah . . ." I think as Max navigates the all-too-familiar streets.

"Well, here we are."

"Thanks, Max." Without looking at the fare, I hand him a hundred. "You never picked me up." I wink at him and slip him another hundred.

"Fucking college kids." Max smiles and winks right back at me.

I close the door and step out to the rain, pausing when I get to the sidewalk for a brief moment—it's rare to get rain in San Diego—and finally walking up the ramp and through the door. My watch reads, *Saturday, March 11 2000*, and there's a crowd, but I know who I'm looking for—a friend of Pyro's who frequents this joint. Hopefully, I can make sure we get a meeting ASAP.

The bartender nods at me. The shelves behind him are stacked with bottles—they have a library of whiskey—as I scan the bar for Pepper, Pyro's friend and a team guy.

A torso stretches from the bar, slouches. It's Pepper.

"What's up, brother?" I say to Pepper as we handshake and hug.

"Not much, brother. How 'bout you?" Pepper takes a step back and gives me a good look.

"Another day."

"How's the team?" Pepper asks.

"They're all good."

"Spook?"

"Spook is Spook!" we say in unison.

"JT, what are you having?" asks the bartender.

"Whatever new scotch you have that's at least twelve."

"You got it!"

"Been a while . . ." Pepper looks at me as he raises his glass.

"Yeah, been busy. You know how things go." I wink as I raise the glass the moment the bartender rests it on the bar.

"I have the feeling that there's something else . . ."

"I need to meet up with Pyro," I say, looking around the bar.

"He called me earlier. He should be in today or tomorrow, but I'll see if he can meet,"

Pepper says as he sips his drink.

“It’s important.”

“I’ll let him know.”

“Pepper, it’s important, seven figures, but I need to get in touch with him.”

“You got a clean line?” Pepper reaches in to ask close to my ear.

“Yeah.” I reach for my pen and notepad, write down the burner number, and give it to

Pepper. “This burner’s good for another . . .” I look at my watch. “Seventy-two hours.”

“I’ll let him know when he touches down.”

“Thanks, brother.” I smile and raise my glass.

“You must be in on some shit if you’re dumping burners on a regular. . . You working?”

Pepper asks after he takes the note.

“Not yet, but how’s your shooting?” I ask with a grin on my face.

“Sharp as ever,” Pepper says as he nods in approval.

“To the navy.” I raise my glass to meet his.

“Million-dollar killing machines!” Pepper raises his glass as he pounds fifteen-year whiskey.

