

Prologue

Some special operations missions went as smoothly as you saw them in the movies, and Ryan Weston was one man who could testify to that fact. He had seen his share of action flicks, but for the first time he was about to live out his own feature film.

In 1997 he and a handful of his fellow Green Berets from the 5th Special Forces Group were dropped into Bosnia on a snatch and grab operation. The target was Slavko Dokmanović, a Serbian leader who had been palling around with the likes of Miroslav Radić. If Radić was the king of spades, Dokmanović was the king of clubs. Together they were mostly responsible for the Vukovar massacre. That was a nasty little bit of vengeance when the battle for Vukovar started to go south on them.

On their way out of town, Dokmanović and his pals dragged some 200 male Croatian civilians and POWs from a local hospital. Their brief odyssey ended at a farm in the town of Ovčara. Execution by bullet followed for those 200 helpless souls, but not before those Serbian boys had beaten and abused their prisoners for a bit of sadistic fun.

Dokmanović had been the mayor of Vukovar at the time. Some mayor. Six years later, he and Radić were still on the run.

Ryan was just settling into his new position as part of the 5th group when Intelligence came down on Dokmanović's whereabouts. Some of Ryan's teammates had been around the block a time or two and didn't need to read the file on Dokmanović, they were already familiar with who he was. Ryan on the other hand had some reading to do, and when he was finished he knew why the green light was quickly given. It could just as easily have been called a

capture or kill operation. Capture was preferable. Killing Dokmanović was all right too.

The 5th group team was sent in to link up with a Polish GROM Special Forces unit. A plan was devised at their first meeting inside Bosnia. The US boys would do the bulk of the dirty work. The GROM unit would get all the credit. Don't be mistaken. The Polish GROM are highly trained and very capable operators, but word from the top was clear. The U.S. members were to lead the assault, the GROM were to back them up. During the raid, the 5th group came under heavy fire from about 75 Serbian militiamen at a distance of roughly 200 meters. The militiamen had the upper hand in numbers, but skill and veracity sided with the Special Forces unit. While the 5th group methodically worked their way through the Serbians, the GROM unit went about flanking Dokmanović's position.

Eventually, Ryan and his boys found themselves approaching a local farmhouse. At least three Serb militiamen were confirmed to be inside. As the guy popping his special ops' cherry, Ryan was assigned the role of lead breacher. While everyone gave him cover, Ryan threw a frag grenade through the front door glass. Seconds after the grenade detonated, he kicked in the door. In that moment it was as if time slowed to a snail's pace. Ryan noticed everything; his senses were at a sensitive height he never experienced before. The rush and adrenaline took control of his emotions, but the training and muscle memory took control of his body. Two fellow green berets followed him inside. Ryan went right. The second team member went left. The third cleared the middle of the first room.

A few paces into a second room, Ryan came face to face with a big Serbian son of a bitch. The muzzle of his AK was coming up as Ryan got the red dot of his M4's site trained on the Serb's center mass. Four quick efficient pulls of the trigger later and the man had been driven backwards to the ground, face up. All four of Ryan's rounds had slammed into the Serb's chest with a thud. Looking very dead, Ryan still approached the man cautiously, his rifle aimed. One last round was pumped into his cranial cavity. You never left any doubt as to whether your enemy was dead, unless you wanted to be dead too.

After clearing the farm house and a few outlying buildings, word came over the radios. Mission success. Dokmanović was in custody and every one of his militia members was either dead or on the run.

Amidst the somber backslapping, Ryan savored their success. He was overcome with emotion. He killed his first man, he brought an evil shit bag to justice, and he helped people he would never know by eliminating the men who had terrorized the area for years. Slavko was going to be imprisoned and would be tried for his crimes. The 5th group and Polish GROM unit had accomplished their mission without losing a single life. As mentioned, some missions went as smooth as seen in movies.

Damn, Ryan had thought at the time. This is definitely my calling. Was it the rush, the brotherhood, the feeling of ridding this world of truly evil men? Who knew, maybe it was a combination of all of them, but Ryan knew this is where he belonged.

As the years went on, Ryan was sent all over the globe. He was finding out firsthand what it meant to be a Special Forces operator. He was gaining confidence with each specialized school he graduated from, his skill sets were improving and his marksmanship was now well known throughout the Special Operations community. He was making a name for himself, but never lost sight of who he really was. The respect he gave his brothers was returned tenfold.

Ryan continued to lead by example and gained stature and rank as the years went by, but little did he know the future had something in store for him. Something that would test his developing talents like never before, force him to question loyalty to his country, shake any confidence he once had in his government, and prove once and for all, Hollywood scripts cannot reflect the harsh reality these men might face. America was about to change and Ryan would find himself right in the middle of it all.

1

As was typical of any clear, crisp autumn day in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, Tuesday morning had turned out to be a gorgeous one. The sky was brilliantly blue. The campus of Haddick College looked like a postcard. All should have seemed right to Ryan Weston in this world, but it did not. For days now he had been worrying about the potential for his mission to go south, and to go south in a major way. You did not drag your feet on special ops missions like this for over a year and not expect Murphy's Law to come back and bite you in the ass.

On the way to his Fundamentals of Acting class, and lost in these concerns, Ryan chanced upon the same black haired beauty he had been seeing since the fall semester commenced two weeks earlier.

Man, I'm falling in love with that chick and we've never even said hello to each other.

Ryan's premonition of things going south was suddenly overridden by visions of red roses and kisses and an impulse to go over and introduce himself but he stopped right there. What are you thinking, man? Trying to strike up something with her can only lead to trouble. You did not jeopardize a top secret mission over a woman, no matter how beautiful she happened to be.

Plagued by regrets, Ryan watched the young woman cross the commons and disappear out of sight. He continued on his way, already seemingly late to class and still battling his emotions.

A moment later he heard his teammate Matt calling out from behind him. "How's it going?" Ryan asked as Matt walked up.

"Another day in paradise."

That was their agreed upon code phrase for, nothing new to tell. All was quiet on the western front. No enemy movements had been picked up on Matt's computer scanner overnight.

"The same status with Hector on his end?" Ryan asked.

"Roger. The same status with Hector."

The two men shook hands and hurried on to their respective classes.

Ryan passed two lovers on the way, kissing there with the autumn leaves falling about their feet and Ryan's heart was hurtled back in the direction of the black haired woman. His entire adult life had been about making himself as hard as nails and giving all to his country. It was the central thing he had known as a young man. He hardly knew what it meant to fall in love. Intimacy for him had been a quick fling here and there, followed by the long and lonely hours of isolation and he was growing tired of it.

Well, you're on a mission now soldier, he reminded himself, so you'll just have to suck it up.

Resigned once again to towing the line, in the name of God and country, Ryan walked along still playing with the idea of introducing himself the next time they crossed paths. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn't but the thought of her would not leave his mind.

Walking into his acting class, Ryan found a number of students engaged in conversation up by the stage. He drifted along in that direction but remained at the fringe, his mind back to grappling with Murphy's Law. Had he done everything in his powers to forestall it from overtaking his mission? Ryan had no way of knowing for sure, so his thoughts went on struggling to overcome what he could not see or comprehend.

With a check of his watch, Ryan saw it was 0828 hours. The class was scheduled to start in two minutes. A moment later, Mrs. Dillinger, the drama professor walked in and promptly put the students to work recreating a movie scene.

Just after 0900 hours, an out of breath student came rushing in the door. Everyone stopped in mid line.

“There’s been a horrible accident,” he said. “A plane just crashed into one of the Twin Towers this morning. It’s really awful.”

“Wait, wait, calm down,” Mrs. Dillinger said. “What on earth are you talking about? What kind of plane?”

“I don’t know for sure but I think it was like a big commercial jet.”

“Oh my God. When did this happen?”

“Just a little while ago. Okay, I’ve got to go. I need to keep spreading the word.”

As he ran out of the class, Mrs. Dillinger turned on a TV set at the side of the stage. Everyone gasped. Fire and smoke poured out of a gaping hole near the top of the north tower. There were sudden tears among the female students and a general sense of panic among everyone. Haddick College was less than two hours from the city by car, so many of the students had relatives or friends who worked in the towers, or knew of someone who did.

Ryan stood staring with a very different set of concerns, that gut level feeling about something going south in the world suddenly having taken shape and form. He had been inserted into Haddick College a few weeks earlier as the leader of a specials ops team, with the express purpose of thwarting just such a terrorist attack.

Was this the plot Ryan had been sent there to stop? Was he witnessing the intelligence community in one giant glorious state of failure? His training told him not to make any snap judgments, and Colonel Smith, the overall head of the special ops mission had yet to ring through on Ryan’s pager, but Ryan’s gut level assessment was simple. A commercial jet flying into a high rise tower? This was no accident.

While the students around him remained glued to the live news coverage, blurting out all sorts of farfetched explanations for what had just happened, Ryan stood there weighing whether or not to hustle back to his dorm. He had a secure satellite phone tucked away in a heater vent and calling Colonel Smith seemed like the logical thing to do under the circumstances. While Ryan

weighed whether or not this was the right move to make, he heard more screams and looked up to see the explosion of flames from a second passenger jet having just slammed into the South Tower. As he watched, debris and office papers fluttered off in the crisp, autumn morning.

Holy fuck, he thought. There was no doubt about it now. Ryan was witnessing the very attack he had been sent there to stop.

Within seconds, the pager in his pocket was going off. With a glance, Ryan saw the message was from Colonel Smith. Immediate Response, it read. That meant, get on the horn with him without any fucking delay.

With hysteria surrounding him in the classroom, Ryan raced out the door and back towards his dorm. The campus was in a state of chaos everywhere he looked, students running around frantically or crying on each other's shoulders or trying to reach home from their cell phones.

Everything that had been pissing Ryan off for the past six months was racing through his head. The red tape. The stove piping of intelligence. The wasting of nearly a year while the CIA, NSA, DIA and DC brass in general dicked around and squabbled amongst themselves down in Washington. How the fuck could you people have failed to get the Intel on not ONE, but TWO giant passenger jets being hijacked and slammed into the Twin Towers?

Clearly this failure had nothing to do with the boots on the ground, but somebody up there was going to be pointing fingers down in his direction, and real soon, so Ryan reflexively started to prepare a defense brief in his head. Setting aside the month of August, when he had been practicing with the varsity football squad as part of his cover and poking around campus to see what he could find in his spare time, the entire three man Storm Cloud Team had been given roughly ten days to uncover a terrorist cell hidden amongst the college's student body.

What a great, god awful failure on the part of the whole goddamned counterterrorism establishment, just a major, major screw up and an indictment of the entire bureaucracy. The boys up top had fallen down on the job, not Ryan, but he still felt as badly as a man could feel and regardless still had a job to do. There was no way to undo this "oh shit" moment but he was still tasked with finding the guys responsible for this attack on American soil.

And, Ryan thought, I'd better do it fast, before they have a chance to get out of town, or worse, to hit us again.

Back in his dorm room, Ryan hurriedly unscrewed the heater vent cover from the wall and yanked out the satellite phone. Colonel Smith was on the line a moment later, and pissed.

“Goddamn it, Weston. I know the time was limited, but I need to hear it from you right now. Have you boys been doing everything in your powers to find these bastards?”

“Yes, sir, and if I may say so, we weren’t getting any help from up top.”

“I know, I know. There’s no doubt in my mind who fell down on the job, but I also know which way the fingers are going to be pointed. Someone up top will be trying to cover their own ass and that means we’re going to be catching hell.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Hell, it’s not your fault, Weston.”

“I’m still sorry, sir. I feel sick about the whole thing and I’m sorry if it falls on you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, soldier but let’s just get down to business. Do you have anything on your radar? Anything that could possibly shed some light on what just happened?”

“No, sir,” Ryan said. “But you can bet we’ll be tightening the screws now, with everything that just went down.”

“All right. You are to remain on high alert. Let’s find these bastards. I received a transmission from the CIA a few moments ago. They think this is just the start of a series of strikes on American soil. Also, the SecDef may want to talk with you directly at some point.”

The colonel stopped in mid-sentence. There was commotion in the background.

“Holy shit,” he said. “Just a minute, Weston.”

While Ryan waited, he switched TV channels several times looking for updates on the attacks in Manhattan. When an e-mail came through from Matt, Ryan messaged back to say, get together with Hector and hang tight. I’m talking to Summit, which was their code name for Colonel Smith. We’ll have a meeting as soon as I’m off.

Moments later, Smith came back on the phone.

“Weston, there’s a report of a plane striking the Pentagon at 0937 hours. Goddamn it, this is war so you boys better get your ship tight. I want your radar spinning full tilt. Observe and report for now. Nothing more until I figure out what the fuck is happening here. You got that?”

“Roger, sir.”

Ryan hung up the phone feeling like his hands had been tied. Observe and report. What the hell was that going to accomplish? He had no doubt with that cowboy up in the Oval Office, someone was going to feel the full wrath of the United States, and soon, but Ryan wanted someone to feel his wrath right then, in that instant. It was what he had been sent there to do. It was what he had been trained to do over the course of his entire military career. He had a mind to get out his M4 and hunt down every son of a bitch who looked like he came from the wrong side of the world. Instead, he returned to protocol. Stay calm. Stay ready. Think clearly. Try to piece the puzzle together.

Holy fuck, Ryan thought again. How could we have let our guard down this much? The son of a bitches actually hit us, and hit us big, and here we are with our pants down and our dicks in our hands.

2

Ever since Ryan Weston had been stationed with the 5th Special Forces Group at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, he had made it a point to stop by the company bulletin board on a regular basis, wanting to see what kind of new assignments the Joint Special Operations Command might have cooked up week to week. Most of the missions he found he wrote off as run of the mill stuff; go track down a few bad guys in Nigeria or the Sudan, make sure a cache of nuclear material in the Caucasus didn't end up in wrong hands. There were any number of variations to the theme but Ryan was looking for something truly special and it seemed on this day that he had finally found it. No particulars were mentioned about the unit itself, other than to say you should be prepared to push the limits unlike anything you had ever imagined before. That gave Ryan a mental smile.

Another member of the 5th Special Forces Group happened by and stopped to see what had caught Ryan's eye.

"What have we got?" John said, reading. "Oh shit. No wife. No kids."

There was a sly look sideways.

"Sounds like I'm a bit long in the tooth for this operation."

John slapped Ryan on the shoulder.

"Just the kind of balls to the wall opportunity you've been looking for, though, partner."

“Yeah,” Ryan said without bothering to look over, a hint of that inner smile now on his face.

“Well, you go get ‘em, tiger” John said and headed off across the base.

Ryan went back to his quarters and lay on his bed, his mind wandering back to the days of growing up in a small Pennsylvania town. Immediately after his folks had gotten married, his father went off to serve his own lengthy tour in the military. His mother had cleaned houses to make ends meet while the old man was off in the world.

In his hours alone, Ryan had built up this fantasy of his father coming home and there being a big family reunion and everyone living happily ever after. Instead, his parents promptly got divorced upon his father’s return and Ryan was sent down south to live with his grandparents on his mother’s side. That grandfather had also served in the military and had returned to eke out a hard, blue collar life in the country.

You farmed six days a week and went to church on Sundays. It was the kind of life where you built your own house and took pride in fixing your own cars when they broke down. When meat needed to be put on the table, you headed out the door with your rifle or fishing rod, then into the garden to pick something fresh as a side dish. Even Ryan’s grandmother was no easy touch. She spent her days cooking and cleaning and ironing, like any other hard working country housewife would have done, but she was as tough as nails whenever Ryan screwed up and never coddled him.

“You can either sit there and feel sorry for yourself, or you can get up and move on, just like your father and grandfathers have always done before you.”

One day she would be baking Ryan a cake for his birthday. The next day she’d have her foot in his ass. It was tough love. You did right or had a good excuse for why you hadn’t.

Nearly all of Ryan’s early lessons in life reflected this exposure to military conduct, hard work, manners, and respect. You walked upright. You kept a stiff upper lip. You respected others. You used good manners. You humbled yourself if you were wrong. You stood your ground if you were right and never backed down from anyone. In hard times, you kept your mouth shut and pushed ahead. Whining and complaining served no purpose.

With everything in life having prepared Ryan for this end, he went off to join the Army the minute he became eligible. There had never really been any doubt in his mind about that choice. To go anywhere and do anything under any circumstances, that was his dream of glory.

Immediately after basic training at Ft. Benning, GA, Ryan had attended airborne school and immediately thereafter commenced to bug the crap out of his Platoon Sergeant for whatever the Army could throw at him. Ranger school was one option, but it turned out that the tryouts for Ranger school fell one week after that year's Special Forces' assessment selection, which meant Ryan would have had to wait another entire year before becoming eligible to earn that tab.

Itching for action and having no use for that kind of delay, he promptly jumped at the chance to fulfill his original vision, that of becoming a Green Beret. Fifty-four weeks of intense training followed, after which Ryan received his highest honor yet, the coveted green cap.

Along the way, the military had turned Ryan into a 6 foot, 230 pound load of flesh and steel weapons, ready to hand you your life if you got in his face the wrong way. Pass him by on the street and you'd think he was the most laidback person in the world. Dig a bit deeper and you might even find a soft spot or two. Fuck with him and you had some serious trouble on your hands.

Those who knew Ryan as a passing acquaintance rarely saw through to his complex interior. They probably recognized Ryan as a man devoid of bullshit and instinctively avoided any small talk about his work as the result. They sensed the confidence of a disciplined soldier and knew enough not to pry into his world of probable secrets. Which was the way Ryan preferred it. Being a quiet professional was his unspoken credo. He had no desire to discuss his work or the violence it involved. Take action when necessary. Be direct and true. Show mercy and compassion when deserved. Otherwise keep your mouth shut and let people think whatever they wanted.

Lying there on his bed that day, Ryan thought again of the posting he had just seen on the company bulletin board. From the moment he had joined the military, he had been waiting for this kind of opportunity to come along, having convinced himself early on that he could be the best of the best, always knowing he had the skill sets to serve on what was known as Black Ops

missions. For most soldiers, this was a fantasy, but for Ryan it was simply a matter of destiny and that destiny finally appeared to have presented itself.

He spent the next several days restlessly waiting for the hour to arrive, and when it finally did he eagerly headed over to the appointed briefing room on foot. To his surprise, a fellow sergeant met him at the door and told Ryan to stand up straight for a photo. That immediately rubbed Ryan the wrong way. When the sergeant asked Ryan to relinquish his military ID until the meeting was over, Ryan was ready to take some heads.

Nevertheless, he complied with the order and went in to find there were only five other men seated in the room. That was another surprise. Ryan had expected to see at least a few dozen guys hanging around.

Ryan nodded at the other men, sat down and had a look around the room. It was standard military construction; cinder block walls painted white, a polished linoleum floor, enough long tables to seat about 125 men and enough bright florescent lights to keep a man awake no matter how boring the lecture happened to get.

A large podium with the Special Forces logo stood upfront. A huge dry erase board mounted behind it. An overhead projector hung from the ceiling. The room had a built in sound system, on the chance that enough men were gathered in there to make hearing an issue.

Some minutes later, a trim man came in through a back door and introduced himself as Bill. Even with the polo shirt and khaki pants, you knew this guy was military all the way, and a seriously serious individual.

Bill said he was there to discuss the five key components of this new unit, which were as follows. The unit designation would be known as Storm Cloud. The team would be stationed out of Ft. Benning, GA. All missions, orders and everyday life for them would be classified above top secret. The team would operate outside the scope of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. If at any time or anywhere, your cover was blown, the United States Government would simply write you off and let you swing in the wind. If anyone did ever hear about you in the press, it would be to suggest that you were a deserter or traitor or had otherwise stabbed your country in the back.

If you could get past all of that, welcome aboard. There would be four squads, five soldiers in each, with each squad designating a team leader. Five more soldiers would be picked as replacements, in case any of the original twenty men could not deploy or were lost in the field. The entire group would have a unit commander and its cover would be known as the 343rd Military Research and Development Company. Ostensibly the unit would be there to test the viability of new toys for the military. That way, if any of the cutting edge military hardware being dumped on the Storm Cloud team caught the attention of a passerby, there would be no reason for that person to be overly curious.

Every team member would need to have a TS/SCI clearance. TS/SCI clearance stood for Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information. It was the type of security clearance issued to those dealing with highest levels of national security, and no one else. It basically gave you the authority to know anything you needed to know for the purposes of your mission. You got to see shit few in the military ever saw.

That said, the Intel was still on a need to know basis. This wasn't a license to go poking around in any old cookie jar. Those who got too curious would get their wrists slapped. Go too far and you could expect a lot worse than that.

Finally, if you made the team, you would be given an entirely new identity, right down to a passport and social security number. Beyond the Secretary of Defense, the mission leader and the President of the United States himself, you would cease to exist. Bill acknowledged not even he would know who was on the final selection list. Your original military file would remain in place for legal identification purposes only. Bill made this final component abundantly clear. If chosen, you were to speak to no one outside your team members and your chain of command. Name, rank and serial number was okay. The usual bullshit with other members of the military, fine. Letting on that the 343rd was an R&D unit, no problem. Discuss anything else and expect to be shot, or wish that you had been.

As a final thought, Bill let on to everyone present. You wanted in on this party? Feel free to throw your hat in the ring but don't think your prior experience is going to get you a free pass. Delta Force, Navy Seals, Army Special Forces, Air Force Special Operations, etc., etc., it didn't matter. Whatever your Special Operations background, you were going to have to prove yourself all over again.

The meeting was over in less than fifteen minutes. Bill took no questions. He had fifteen other military bases to visit where he would be giving the same briefing. If anyone here was interested, he'd take their names down right now. Either way, he was off to the next post.

One man promptly walked out of the room, obviously having concluded from Bill's no nonsense presentation that this puppy was for the guy with nothing to lose. Ryan and the four other men put their names on the list. There being thousands of special ops personnel across the services, Ryan had no idea what to expect. Even if only 10% of them volunteered for the tryouts, you'd have a one in a hundred chance of making the final cut.

Ryan and the other men were given a day the following week to report. The tryout was going to be a twenty-five day gruel. Get ready to have your ass kicked. Ryan went back to waiting restlessly and wondering what to expect.

When the time came, Ryan was surprised again. Only fifty-three men all told had volunteered. It was the cream of the crop, though. Each of these boys had already gone through airborne, and from there on to air assault school, and with expert infantry badges in hand, had gone on to pathfinder and SCUBA school. Their backgrounds included language training, weapons, vehicles, explosives, medical and communications. You name it, they had a patch. Plus, each of them had already been out on their share of missions and had a pile of decorations to prove it. They had been preparing for just this sort of assignment since the day they showed up for their first military haircut.

The men were driven by bus out to a remote military training site and led into a briefing room first thing. This hard ass colonel was standing up front. He wrote Christopher Smith on a chalkboard and turned to face the men. From all the medals and patches tacked onto his dress blue uniform, it was clear to the men he had enjoyed a long and distinguished career most likely in Delta Force.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Let me give you a little background. When the brass dreamed up this Storm Cloud unit six months ago, they chose me to get it up and running. There was an assumption that if the goddamned thing ever got off the ground, I would be the unit commander and here we are. Now once we whittle this team down to twenty-five men, I'm going to lead you boys into battle, and I don't want any of you to doubt that I know how."

Colonel Smith paused to let his little pep talk soak in.

“So, being members of one Special Operations unit or another, we assume you already know how to climb walls and crawl under barbed wired hazards. We know you’re expert marksmen or you wouldn’t be wearing those patches. We’re not going to retest you on shit you already know. What we want to know is how well you can lie, cheat, steal and not get caught doing it. We’ll be testing your proficiency in intelligence and counterintelligence gathering, in electronic Intel and the use of high tech equipment. We’re going to give you boys a cover story and see how well you can remember the facts and maintain a fiction. There’ll be time each day to keep you in shape but what we’re undertaking here is some hard core, undercover espionage shit and that is going to be our focus. Everyone got it?”

The men in unison said “Yes sir!”

“Good,” the colonel said. “Now let’s roll up our sleeves and get right to work.”

Over the next twenty-five days Ryan had both his brain and his butt run into the ground. That business of maintaining a fiction turned out to be some mind numbing shit and the colonel never hesitated to run the men up and down the hills as a final thought before the sun went down each day. But Ryan was always among the top of the class when the volunteers came panting back to the barracks as evening fell. So when the cut was finally made, he had been chosen not only as one of the twenty-five members, but as one of the four team leaders to represent his assigned squad.

With the others having been sent packing, Colonel Smith gathered the final members of Storm Cloud team into a briefing room for one more pep talk. The fun was just beginning. The hard part lies ahead. That sort of crap. Have yourselves a couple of days R&R and get your asses down to Ft. Benning.

“And in one piece,” he added as the men filed out the door.

Ryan had been the first one to show up at Ft. Benning, Georgia, and what he found was a block and concrete apartment building on the outskirts of the base. Thirty units in all, fifteen kitchenettes on one side of a hallway, fifteen kitchenettes on the other. Each of the twenty-five Storm Cloud team members had been assigned one of these digs as his own.

Ryan quickly settled in. His apartment was roughly 20' by 20', with an economy kitchen and a small bathroom to match, but with a few bucks and a few trips to a local bed and bath operation, he quickly made it into a decent little hideout.

On the second day, as the rest of the team was trickling in, Matt Hollenbeck, one of Ryan's closest friends from the tryouts popped his head in the door. Ryan saw the warm smile first, then the 6'3" and 195 pound frame stepped in. Matt had come out of high school in Syracuse, NY a diehard lacrosse player. That and wanting to be a cop. The cop business landed him in the Army as an MP. After getting tired of the administrative bullshit, his motivation to get away from the MP corps landed him in the Green Berets. As a veteran of the 7th Special Forces Group, Matt was sufficiently badass, but what you saw on a day to day basis was mostly a tech geek with a love for all things Star Wars. He came off like the nice guy next door who was always ready to loan you his lawnmower and talk about why Darth Vader became such an asshole.

"Come on in," Ryan said. The two men shook hands and gave each other a pat on the back. "Good to see you brother. Care for a beer after you've settled in?"

"Love to," Matt said.

"Where's numb nuts?"

"You are no doubt referring to Hector."

"Who else?"

Matt smiled again.

"I saw him parking in the lot as I was coming up the stairs. He should be passing through any minute."

The two men heard someone singing a love song in Spanish.

"Right on cue," Matt added.

Hector Garrido came by wearing a t-shirt with a big K9 silk screened across the chest and carrying a duffel bag. The t-shirt was emblematic of Hector's first love, working with dogs, and what he had intended to do in joining the Air Force. But then the tryouts for joining the Air Force Combat Controllers had come around and Hector dove at the opportunity. There had always been a deep rooted desire in him to do something no one in his San Antonio 'hood' had ever done before, and in the process of the tryouts Hector had achieved a measure of notoriety, that of completing the course at a record level of expertise and without breaking much of a sweat. Few men had done so before him.

After belting out the last strains of his love song, Hector dropped the duffel bag out in the hallway and came in to offer both his friends a hug and pat on the back.

"Time to rock and roll, motherfuckers," he said.

Hector's announcement was accompanied by a little samba and a final gesture with his groin.

"So, looks like they didn't arrest you at the border" Matt said.

With Hector's parents being illegal aliens, albeit hard working ones who had learned the English language and proudly considered themselves to be Americans, you did not say that kind of shit to him and he came after Matt like he meant business, letting out a string of profanities in Spanish as he did. At 5'9" and 180 pounds, he was every bit the pit bull to Matt's greyhound frame and it took every inch of Matt's long arms to keep Hector at bay. When Hector finally got under Matt's defenses, you expected something ugly to happen but he merely picked his friend up in a bear hug and carried him around the room.

Once back on his feet, Matt thumbed his nose at Hector again.

"So, like I said. I guess they didn't arrest you."

"I'll tell you who's going to get arrested, you dickhead. You pasty faced gringos in about twenty years, after you've made such a fucking mess of this country, you'll all be scrambling to get over to our side of the border."

Hector pretended to go after Matt again and laughed when Matt flinched.

“Can you believe this guy?” he said to Ryan. “The most loyal friend this pussy has ever had and he gives me this kind of shit. You wait until some asshole has a knife to your nuts,” Hector said looking back at Matt. “You’ll be glad to have me around.”

“So, did you want to go with us to get a beer?” Ryan asked.

“What? You gotta ask me if I want a damn beer.”

“All right, Rambo,” Ryan said with a smile at Hector and a wink at Matt.

Hector went down to dump his duffel bag in his apartment and came back down the hallway with a final left and right bluff at Matt as they went out the door of Ryan’s apartment.

At a bar outside the base, Hector went off to play pool and chase two chicks at a corner table first thing. Ryan drifted into conversation with Matt. Of the two men, Ryan was far more kindred spirits with Matt. They shared the little things that tended to bond any two men together, like being outdoor enthusiasts and the product of broken families. From their very first conversation, they had instinctively developed a trust. Religion, politics, women or just life’s little bullshit, whatever it was, they had found it easy to bare their souls, no sugarcoating and no offense taken at the other’s advice.

Hector, on the other hand was the polar opposite of Ryan, a wild child and practical joker. Once, he had filled Ryan’s boots with shaving cream gel, then waited around for half an hour with a straight face until Ryan finally went to pull them on. He dished it out, but he could take it just as well. Punch Hector for fucking with you and he’d just laugh like you had hit him with a pillow.

Ryan glanced over at him playing pool. Normally Ryan would not have had any use for the kind of bullshit Hector put out, but he had seen his redeeming qualities. First the warrior side of him, the guy you wanted in the trench with you whenever the shit hit the fan, the guy who would pull himself along with his legs blown off, ready to complete the mission, no matter the cost, a smile on his face because he had gotten laid before he left, and then the family side of Hector, the guy who made menudo and always called his mother on Sunday. When Hector took you into his heart, he took you all the way and

Matt and Ryan had become like his brothers. If the shit came down, Hector would lay his life down for Ryan and Matt, and Matt and Ryan were prepared to do the same in return.

After killing that afternoon in the bar, and a few more days of beer drinking and fucking around together, it was finally time for the three men to report to headquarters with the rest of the team. At 0700 hours, Matt, Hector and Ryan were walking up to the unit headquarters together, which was a brick building with a big green lawn out front. A handful of trees were scattered around on the lawn. The sign for their ostensible unit was hanging by the front door. The building was so much a piece of the overall base, soldiers went by every day and never gave it a second thought.

Inside, the offices on the main floor were equally inconspicuous. SCAM, the Storm Cloud Assignment & Mission Room and all the excitement was down in the basement. To get there, you needed an access card and a code that had been granted only to the Storm Cloud members. God help you if you weren't on the team and somehow found yourself down in the basement. The outcome would be grim for any unauthorized personnel. You could forget about your freedom, and possibly even your life.

Along with the main planning room and various other smaller rooms used for training purposes, Colonel Smith kept a personal office downstairs. It was equipped with all sorts of secure uplinks back to the SecDef and even to the President of the United States, if necessary. It was the equivalent of the Red Phone and God himself could not help any members of the team if they found themselves in there without the colonel being present.

As the team members settled into a small situation room that Monday morning, Ryan had the usual look around. It was one more drab, cinder block job with a polished linoleum floor. The walls had been painted an off white. That or the white paint had seriously faded over the years.

Up front, there was a standard blackboard, a dry erase board, a cork board and a dart board hanging on one wall. The blackboard was smudged from end to end from having things drawn on it a thousand times, then erased with somebody's hands and redrawn again. The dry erase board had all kinds of colorful Intel shit written on it, which was usual. The cork board was covered with the faces of the most wanted, along with news articles and various

memos. The dart board had one dart sticking into it. What had happened to the remaining darts, no one knew.

A 27" TV was mounted in one corner of the room and tuned to Fox News. On his way in to the briefing, Ryan had noticed a TV in almost every room. Some of them had two TVs going at once, one tuned to Fox News, the other to CNN. Ryan had no idea who was responsible for choosing the channels and didn't much care, one way or the other. It was always the same crap. Clearly none of these talking heads news people knew what the hell they were talking about anyway.

Whether they were being manipulated by the government, or they actually knew the truth and were consciously manipulating the masses, Ryan had no idea. He only knew whoever was listening to this crap was getting something less than the truth. The only good thing about any of the main stream media networks being on while downstairs was their usefulness in announcing breaking news. Regardless of personal feelings, the news usually broke major event stories quickly and would give the guys at the very least an inkling of what was going on worldwide.

Colonel Smith came in and greeted the team members.

"All right, men. Let's get right down to work. Here's what we know. The NSA picked up on some terrorist chatter a number of months back. Some sort of attack seems to be imminent on our soil and while the boys on the Intel end get things sorted out, we're going to get ourselves ready to kick some ass. Whoever finds themselves dumb enough to come here looking for trouble is going to be sorry they ever did when they meet up with us."

With that gung ho introduction, Storm Cloud team was set in motion. Week after week, the grueling training continued. Weeks led to months, and before you knew it six months had blown by without a mission order being approved. Apparently the trail had grown cold. At least that was what the boys on Storm Cloud had been told. No new Intel was coming down the pike, so everyone was left to sit around and wait.

Meanwhile, the Presidential election had taken place. The Florida recount was in full swing and the whole goddamned country appeared to be in limbo. If some terrorist bastards were planning to attack the United States right then, they'd definitely catch us with our pants down, and no one seemed to be particularly concerned about that fact.

3

It was a late morning towards the end of a work week when the Secretary of Defense strode briskly into a packed situation room at the Pentagon. Two aides came scurrying in after him. The heads of all the DOD divisions had been seated around the conference table going on fifteen minutes at that point and they looked none too happy about being made to wait. The same could be said of the various members of the military brass, only in spades. Roughly half of those in attendance were wearing uniforms. The other half were civilians attached directly to the Office of the Secretary.

“Close the door,” the SecDef said to one of his aides and thumbed quickly through the brief in front of him. That done, he surveyed the men and women gathered around the table.

“Okay, the overview?” the SecDef said, waving the brief.

There were looks among the participants.

“Michael?” he said to the head of the NSA.

“Well, sir, it looks like the Yemenis got their hands on al-Quso.”

The SecDef looked to the head of the DIA.

“Tom? Who is he and what do we know about him?”

“Well, sir, he’s one of the bad guys who had ties to Ramzi Yousef and the World Trade Center bombing in 93. Also with Ramzi, who was behind the Bojinka plot.”

“The Bojinka plot.”

The SecDef rubbed his forehead.

“Refresh me here.”

“That was an operation out of the Philippines, sir. Yousef came close to blowing up a dozen flights headed back to the States in ‘95.”

“And what do we know about Quso’s activities since that point?” the SecDef asked, directing his attention back to the head of the NSA.

“It’s pretty much been a black hole until this January, sir, when he met with another bad guy named Tawfiq bin Attash in Bangkok...”

“Do we know what Quso was doing in Bangkok?” the SecDef said looking back to Tom, the head of the DIA.

“We’re still trying to fit the pieces of that puzzle together, sir.”

The SecDef nodded and turned back to the head of the NSA.

“You were saying?”

“That on the same trip, Quso also went to meet with Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi in Malaysia.”

“Tom, who are they and what was Quso doing in Malaysia?”

“Mihdhar and Alhazmi are two more of the bad guys, sir, and as best we can tell, Quso was delivering money to them.”

“And the money was for?”

“As I said, sir, we’re still trying to fit the pieces of that puzzle together.”

“Okay, anything else to report, Michael?”

“Yes, sir, we...”

“Clair,” the SecDef said over his NSA director. “Where is Rudy? Please get him in here.”

The SecDef’s personal aide scurried off to retrieve the Under Secretary.
“Sorry. You were saying?”

“I was saying, we recently intercepted phone calls made from a safe house in Yemen. They were made directly to bin Laden. By Quso, of course.”

“And I take it you both think this has something to do with the Cole bombing.”

The SecDef looked back and forth between the DIA and NSA directors.

“Well,” the DIA director said. “We thought we saw bin Laden’s fingerprints on this Cole business. The calls seem to confirm it.”

“So, where are we headed with this, Tom?”

The head of the DIA glanced around the room and back at the SecDef.

“Well, sir, we have reason to believe the money Quso delivered in Bangkok was to fund a beachhead here in the United States. We think they’re coming after us, but we really need to get our hands on Quso to confirm that.”

“And are the Yemenis willing to give us a crack?”

Tom shook his head.

“Not yet, sir.”

“What about State? The FBI? Has anybody been given access?”

The Under Secretary of Defense came in at that moment and whispered something into the SecDef’s ear.

“I’ll be damned,” he said. “All right, everyone. I want you to roll up your sleeves and get to work on this Quso business. Let’s put some flesh on these bones. The same for these other two terrorist characters Michael had mentioned...um...”

“Attash, al-Mihdhar and Alhazmi,” the NSA director said, filling in the blank.

“Yes, let’s get a spotlight on all four of them. I want reports by tomorrow morning. That’s it for now.”

As everyone got up to leave, the SecDef gestured for his liaison officer from the Joint Chiefs and his two directors to stay.

“Clair?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“See if you can get me Secretary Albright on the phone.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once the room had emptied, the SecDef looked at those left around him.

“Rudy here just informed me that the Yemenis won’t trust anyone to interrogate Quso except John O’Neill, only O’Neill came back to New York for the holidays and Ambassador Bodine has refused to issue him a return visa. Seems like the two of them got into a turf war over there and Bodine is all in a huff.”

The phone rang in just then and the SecDef took Secretary Albright’s call. The Under Secretary started to explain what he knew to the others in a whisper but the SecDef cut him off with a sharp wave of his hand. The room went silent. The SecDef exchanged pleasantries with Albright then started pressing her about O’Neill.

“Seems like a hell of a time to be engaging in this kind of pettiness, don’t you think, Madeleine?”

“It’s a hell of a time for anything, Bill, what with this recount going on. I don’t think anyone wants to throw their weight around during this transition period. Who knows who’ll be in charge in a month and how they’ll want to play this thing.”

“Point taken, Madeleine, but this country would be in a hell of a mess if everyone stopped working each time we had an election.”

“Bill, I’ll see what I can do, but you know O’Neill. He has a reputation for sharp elbows. Going way back. It wouldn’t be the first time he’s angered somebody within the community.”

“I understand, I understand, but he’s also the best in the business and the Yemenis apparently won’t trust Quso with anyone else.”

“Well, actually, I understand they’ve already given a member of Agent O’Neill’s team access to him. A young agent named Ali Soufan. He’s bilingual and I believe getting familiar with Quso as we speak.”

The SecDef sat there drumming his fingers, furious that the Secretary of State knew more than he did.

“All right,” he said. “I appreciate your frankness. I suppose I’ll have to give the FBI a call myself.”

The Secretary wished him well and they got off the phone.

“Clair, see if you can get me Freeh on the phone!”

The SecDef turned to the other men and explained what he had learned.

“He’s out of the office and unavailable to take any calls today, sir,” Clair whispered a moment later.

“All right. Make sure to get him on the phone the minute he is.”

The SecDef looked back at the men around him.

“So, gentlemen, I understand you picked up on some Intel and think our package has arrived.”

The DIA and NSA directors looked at each other. The head of the NSA spoke.

“Well, it seems to have arrived, sir. We just don’t know where yet.”

“Seems to have arrived?”

Michael looked over at the DIA director and back at the SecDef.

“Well, with a gun to my head, I don’t know that I’d swear it is here, but all the Intel and chatter we’ve picked up on certainly seem to point in that direction. In a roundabout way, the CIA has also confirmed it. There’s a terrorist team on the ground and probably in New York State somewhere.”

“Any idea what they’re planning,” the SecDef said, looking at Tom.

“No sir. Unfortunately, our source in Afghanistan bolted for the hills last month and we’ve yet to replace him.”

“Quso could probably answer that question for you,” Michael said.

The SecDef looked from the head of the NSA over to his liaison from the Joint Chiefs.

“All right. I want you over in Yemen right away. Find out whatever you can. Keep an eye on this investigation and report back to me the minute anything changes. And try to get cozy with this Soufan. We may need him as an ace in the hole.”

He looked back at the two directors.

“Good work on this domestic matter and keep me posted. Now, if there’s nothing more, I have a few phone calls to make.”

Everyone in the room left except for the Under Secretary and the SecDef’s personal aide.

“Rudy, I want you to keep an eye on this Bodine business. Do whatever you can to work with Madeleine. We need to get O’Neill back in there. But in case that fails, I want to know everything you can learn about this Soufan fellow. Have a report on my desk first thing tomorrow morning.”

The Under Secretary left and the SecDef looked back at his aide.

“Patch me in to Richard Clarke over at the White House if you can, Clair.”

While she dialed the number, the SecDef stared at a collage of newspaper clippings tacked to the opposite wall, all of them related to terrorist attacks, the '98 embassy bombings in Africa, the '95 Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, the '93 World Trade Center attack included. The Cole bombing was just the latest.

What on earth did these people want from us, the SecDef wondered, besides getting the hell out of their part of the world?

“Sir,” Clair said and pointed at the cupped phone.

The SecDef took the phone and cupped it himself.

“Better call down to Ft. Benning next, and see if you can patch me in to Colonel Smith.”

“Richard,” he said into the phone. “What’s new at the White House?”

“Well, I guess you’ve heard about the little pissing contest going on over there in Yemen.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I have and wanted to talk to you about that and a number of other things.”

“If you were thinking to grab Bodine by the hair and drag her out into the street, there’s a long line ahead of you.”

The SecDef smiled painfully. He was not inclined to make that sort of off color comment, and was no more comfortable being an audience to one.

“Well, perhaps you can tell me what the hell happened over there. I’m hearing that Agent O’Neill offended the Yemeni government.”

Clarke scoffed.

“The Yemenis adore him. Bodine’s real beef was with seeing O’Neill and his FBI team crawl all over her little fiefdom.”

“Well, I’m putting whatever pressure I can on Madeleine to get him back in there, but in your opinion, do you really think John is that essential to the investigation?”

“I understand this Soufan is quite competent, but I suspect sooner or later someone is going to regret taking O’Neill out of the loop. Just in all the glad handing he’s done over the years, he brings a lot to the table. Plus he knows how to knock heads when it’s necessary. Why, what’s on your mind, Bill?”

“Well, I can understand if you’re unable to discuss any of this with me. I have a top secret mission of my own that I’m not at liberty to divulge but anything you can do to help me connect the dots would be appreciated.”

“Go ahead, shoot. I’ll share whatever I can.”

The SecDef explained to Clarke what he had heard about Quso meeting with Attash, al-Mihdhar and Alhazmi.

“And your question is?”

“Well, I know John saw bin Laden’s fingerprints in all of this, in particular with the Cole bombing, but is that how you see it?”

“Let me tell you a little story. One Sunday morning, back in ’95, I called over to the FBI headquarters in Washington. We had been on Ramzi Yousef’s tail ever since he masterminded the ’93 World Trade Center bombing and the son of a bitch was about to slip from Pakistan into Afghanistan, out of my reach.

I needed help and who answers the phone on a Sunday morning at the FBI? Agent O’Neill. Anybody else and they would have told me to call back on Monday but because O’Neill had grasped bin Laden’s vision of a global terror network right from the start, and because he had been following him going all the way back to that Blackhawk down incident, he knew Yousef and the importance of nabbing him. O’Neill jumped right in. I spent two very nervous days on the sidelines but he pulled it off and got Yousef into my custody. And without that we’d be a lot dumber than we are today.”

“So this business with Quso and his trip to Malaysia, you’re saying you think this is connected to bin Laden somehow.”

“Well, now you’re starting to veer into my arena a bit, but in a word, yes. The fact is, I think it’s all connected to bin Laden.”

There was silence.

“I’ll tell you what,” Clark said. “Try calling the CIA and twisting their arms on this. They know something they’re not telling us and here again is where O’Neill would come in handy. He’s bent a lot of elbows with those boys and that’s how you get them to talk. If they like you, you’re in the club. If not, I don’t think the President could get them to open up.”

“Sounds like a lot of petty minded BS to me,” the SecDef said.

“That it is, but setting aside Ambassador Bodine’s little turf war, the real problem here is, our country has been in a slumber for thirty years. To us, this terrorist danger was always way over there, on the far side of the world. We thought of ourselves as immune and now the chickens have come home to roost. We’re playing catch up, Bill. Trying like hell to stay one step ahead of these bastards before they hit us again.”

Just then, Clair whispered to the SecDef that she had Colonel Smith on the other line. The SecDef nodded.

“Well, listen, Richard, I’ve got another call coming in but I very much appreciate you helping me to clear the air here. If you ever need help with something on your end, don’t be afraid to ask.”

The two men rang off and Clair patched Colonel Smith in. The SecDef gave Clair a look and she understood to leave the room.

“Good morning, Chris,” the SecDef said as soon as she was gone. “How are things going down in Georgia?”

“Fine, sir, thank you. What’s our status?”

“Well, Chris, looks like the bastards are finally here. I don’t have much else to give you at this point but the Intel seems to suggest a team of terrorists have landed here on American soil.”

“Well, hell and be damned sir, that’s good news and bad news, isn’t it?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, sir, I mean that it feels like we’re a side show with this recount going on. Is anyone really paying attention?”

“I’m here and on the ball,” the Secretary said. “And this is still a top secret, high priority mission, with a direct line between you, me and the President. And you can bet as soon as a new administration gets into place, I’ll bring him up to speed.”

“As soon as we know which one.”

“Chris, I’m going to suggest we don’t worry ourselves about matters above our pay grade. And this country’s survived greater turmoil than a recount. How’s that team of yours coming along, by the way?”

“They’re as hard as nails sir, and busting a nut to go wheels up, but that’s where they’ve been for over three months now and I can sense them starting to drift.”

“Well, you tell them they’re on alert. That should keep them fired up for a little while longer. In the meantime, I’ll do my damndest to find you a target, all right?”

“Roger that, sir. We’ll be anxiously waiting.”

As soon as the SecDef had hung up the phone, Colonel Smith jumped into his black Suburban and headed out through the Georgia woods. It was a glorious winter day, crisp but sunny. His boys were taking target practice at one of the nearby shooting ranges on base and he wanted to throw them some red meat, however little it might be. After six months of preparation, the Storm Cloud Special Operations Team had been pulled tauter than a piano wire. They had been told to expect the enemy landing in the United States at any moment. Now, after all the false alarms, every suggestion of imminent danger had gotten to be a joke, and a bad one at that.

Hell, Colonel Smith thought as he drove out among the pines. I’d just as soon be hunting wild turkey than to go bullshit these boys again.

As his Suburban came barreling out from the woods, he saw the team off in the distance, gathered with their pickup trucks and Humvees backed up to the firing range. A number of the men were taking target practice with their M4

rifles and various pistols. The remaining members were either watching the others pop off rounds or shooting the bull around the back of the trucks, or both.

Smith saw the green laser dots lighting up the targets, which meant his boys were co-witnessing their EO Tech and Aimpoint sites. It was a curious thing, even to the initiated, those lasers lighting up a target no more than twenty-five, thirty meters away, but it was part of the team's specialty, CQB, Close Quarters Battle. Hand to hand combat and a knife to your throat to keep you quiet, if it ever came down to that.

Colonel Smith pulled to a stop in a cloud of dust and put on his best soldier's face before he got out of the SUV. Twenty-five of the finest Special Operations soldiers in the world gathered around the Suburban to greet him. Ryan was up front and saluted the colonel.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Weston,” the colonel said and saluted back. “At ease, men.”

The colonel went to a cooler sitting on one of the truck beds and grabbed a Gatorade. Bags of pretzels and beef jerky were scattered all around the cooler, some of them opened, some of them not.

Smith ignored the snacks and sat on the tailgate. The team gathered around him. He had the all business demeanor of a complete professional, with a physique that befitted a man half his age. He had been there and done that for his country. He had seen things the guy on the street only dared to imagine and had the bearing to go with it. He treated the team members like equals and the respect he received in return could not have been higher.

“The SecDef has put us on alert status,” he told the men.

The men just stared. They had heard it all before.

“All right. I know you're disappointed. I don't have your marching orders yet, but apparently a bit of Intel came down the pike, enough to think that the target is finally here on American soil. They're in our backyard and we're going to go hand them their asses here real soon.”

That elicited some nods and a few looks among the men. Colonel Smith held up his hand.

“Now I’m going to be honest with you. They don’t know where the bastards are at this point, or exactly what the hell they’re up to, but they’re definitely here, so keep yourselves sharp and hopefully the next thing you hear from me is wheels up.”

Colonel Smith finished off his drink with a big slug, crushed the bottle with one hand and grabbed one of the M4 rifles on his way up to the firing line. The rest of the team watched as he plugged center target a couple of times from fifty yards off. After a bit more fun with the firearms, Colonel Smith climbed back into his black Suburban, saluted his team and drove off in a cloud of dust.

4

Ryan Weston flopped across his love seat late one afternoon and was fading in and out of a nap. His daily training regimen had wrapped up just before noon, so unless Colonel Smith got a sudden hard on to run the team around the hills one more time, Ryan was done for the day.

It was February, 2001. The election had been decided. The new administration was cleaning house and getting itself up to speed and most everyone in the military had figured the outcome was for the best. From all outward appearances, the alpha males had come out on top. Bush and his team looked to be gung ho, kick ass kind of leaders and Ryan had high hopes they would soon send his team some marching orders.

Except things just seemed to go adrift again once the new administration got in office and no one could explain to Ryan why. Like all the rest of the boys on the team, Colonel Smith included, he was completely unaware that al-Quso had been shipped off to a secret dungeon in Egypt before Ali Soufan got him to spill his guts about his secret meeting in Malaysia. Or that Quso was telling the Egyptians any bullshit they wanted to hear, just so they'd stop burning holes in the bottom of his feet, or that the CIA had been stonewalling Soufan about that secret meeting in Malaysia. Three times Soufan had queried them about it through back channels, trying to connect the dots, only to have the CIA basically come back with a shrug. Don't have a thing on that one.

Ryan had no idea that the interrogation of Quso and the investigation into the Cole bombing had completely fallen off the radar of the new administration, or that they now had a not so secret plan to get rid of Saddam Hussein. All Ryan saw was the administrations focus on trying to catch drug lords down in Columbia and their ramping up a suspect Star Wars program, but very little of their attention seem focused on a terrorist cell invading the

United States. Whatever their reasons, Ryan had begun to change his mind and think these new boys were no different than most DC suits, useless.

As a member of the Special Forces community, Ryan had come to expect this was somewhat par for the course. Special Ops mission rarely got off the ground in a timely manner. Politicians were inclined to get the military all revved up and ready to go, and then tell everyone to sit on their hands and wait while they had exhausted every possible diplomatic means.

In that sense, the interests of a soldier and those of the government were never entirely in sync. A statesman's first instinct was to placate a foe. A soldier's first instinct was to hand him his ass. If making nice diplomatically and realities on the field of battle happened to coincide, great, but Ryan never spent much time holding his breath when it came to being in harmony with the politicians above him.

That wasn't to say he had no appreciation for the public servants up in Washington. In any business, there were always a handful of decent folks, men and women who busted their asses to do the right thing and tried to make the right call, living their lives with a degree of honor, the same as the boys in the theatre of operations were expected to do. But bottom line, the military folks were never allowed to see all the facts. No mission ever went exactly as planned. Murphy's Law invariably reared its ugly head, so a soldier usually had to make decisions by the seat of his pants under fire. Meaning, half of what went down on any mission was automatically outside the bounds of discreet conversation back in DC.

The fact was, Ryan never told the folks up top any more than what he thought they needed to know and hoped for a win, win situation. If things went well, there was always enough glory to go around. If not, well, then the Special Forces guys knew how to cover their own asses. You made copies of everything handed down to you in writing and recorded every conversation, no matter if those conversations happened to be of a classified nature. You want to play politics, fine, but you're not going to hang my ass out to dry.

Why, if the mission itself was flawed, and not its execution, should the boys in uniform be the sacrificial lamb? Not even the most dedicated soldiers were ready to lie down and take that kind of crap, not if it meant losing their honor. If the folks at the top wanted to try and outflank the best of the best, good luck. You were messing with the wrong men.

With Storm Cloud team completely in the dark about the nature of its own mission and increasingly growing adrift, all Ryan could do was continue his daily routine; hit the firing range each day, work out in the gym and learn as much as possible about all the new gear and electronic surveillance equipment that arrived to the unit on a daily basis. And if he grew tired of that, there were always video games and lounging around taking afternoon naps.

Again, Ryan knew this kind of crap came with the territory. A Special Forces team could be in a state of high alert for months and months while the politics and diplomacy played out behind the scenes and on the evening news. Impatient as he was, Ryan had been trained to deal with boredom. He knew enough to stay focused, no matter how boring it got. There was no telling in advance when your beeper would go off with a coded message that basically said, get your ass over to headquarters.

NOW!!!

It was a few weeks into February when just such a message came through on his beeper. Ryan jumped to his feet, threw on his uniform and headed down to the main company headquarters at a stiff pace, but with something less than complete enthusiasm. There had already been a couple false alarms. It was hard to have much confidence in the outcome.

By the time Ryan walked into the SCAM room that afternoon, a number of his other team members were already seated. Others were coming in behind him. Ryan bumped fists with his good buddies Matt and Hector and took a seat.

As the team wandered in and took their seats around the SCAM room, Ryan's eyes remained glued to the TV. A couple of dolls were sitting in as Fox News' anchors that half hour and Ryan was getting in his quota of tits and ass. He was also keeping his eyes and ears on the major news popping up around the globe. Otherwise, the TV served as background noise to the drab surroundings. There was never anything fancy about these Intel briefing rooms. This particular one had four stainless steel tables gathered in the middle of the room, with plain metal stools stationed around it for a place to park your ass during the briefing. An old metal desk sat up in front. It looked like it had been issued during WWII. A small makeshift podium stood on top of it. The room had been designed for ten soldiers, at best, but the Storm

Cloud team had no choice but to stuff themselves in there and as best they could. An expansion and remodeling program was not in the works.

When it came to Intel reports, there was rarely anything fancy about them either, but this day was different. The TV went off and Colonel Smith stood up front reading off his report under the florescent lights. The CIA had developed an asset close to the main terrorist cell in Afghanistan. That asset had been feeding info to the agency. Here was what the CIA had passed on to the SecDef and Colonel Smith. Somewhere in the United States, a group of four young men had been or would soon be inserted into a college as exchange students. From there they would help coordinate a terrorist attack on this country. To complicate things, he told his handlers the cell was not only from Afghanistan, but also operating out of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and possibly even Iran. What that says is zeroing in on who these guys are will be more difficult than anticipated.

“Unfortunately,” Colonel Smith concluded, “it appears that the asset who was feeding us information got spooked and headed for the hills, and he did so before we got to learn in which state this attack was to take place, and at what college, so we’re basically back to square one.”

An assortment of groans and four letter words spilled out from the team members in the room. They had been expecting a green light. They were waiting for wheels to go up on this mission. The last thing they wanted was another briefing to tell them they were going nowhere. They wanted to hear, “all right, boys, let’s go do this shit.” Everything else was a major letdown.

Colonel Smith held up his hands to the mutiny.

“Now look. Yes, this source of Intel has dried up, but the boys overseas are doing their best to replace him. The good news, if any, is this informant was frightened enough to split before the cell members became aware of his actions. That tells me his information is pretty credible. This means no slacking off. Consider this mission imminent, and as soon as the intelligence community has more to tell us, well, they’ll let us know. Now that’s all for today.”

The men left the room, grumbling over one more false alarm and talking shit among themselves.

Another month went by with Ryan still stuck in the same routine; eat, sleep, train, play Madden on his PS2 and wonder in his spare time what these goddamned Intel people did for a living. They sure weren't very good at providing intelligence.

How many times do I have to wash my truck and watch MacGyver reruns before this mission finally gets off the ground?

When Colonel Smith briefed the team again that March, Ryan learned the intelligence community had narrowed the target down to New York City, with reason to believe the terrorists were posing as exchange students at an upstate college. A request from the Storm Cloud team had been sent back up the chain of command. Why not let us get a team on the ground and closer to any possible target, but that request had been summarily denied. Storm Cloud was to stand down, stay alert, wait for their orders and that was that.

Ryan had left the SCAM room one more time thinking, you want us to sit around on our asses and wait? Well, fine. This team has a limitless budget and all the toys you could possibly imagine at our disposal. We'll just blow the hell out of the Georgia woods for as long as it takes for you folks up top to get your shit together.

There being no excuses, Ryan continued to make himself into the very best professional he could possibly be, but that didn't change his attitude. He was pissed about the situation. Somebody was planning to set off bombs in New York City and he was left to chomp at the bit in Ft. Benning, Georgia? That really sucked. Feed us Intel, then tell us to sit on our hands and do nothing. No wonder this country was going to hell.

From past experience, Ryan suspected that the Intel agencies were not coming clean with everything they knew. The shit was about to hit the fan and some bureaucratic assholes were sitting in a war room up in DC, holding their cards close to their chests and thinking they knew better.

Well, thanks and good luck. If the country gets nailed while we're down here holding our dicks in our hands, don't come looking for us. We'll come looking for you. We may not understand what the end game is here, or why these terrorist bastards are trying to pull off an attack on our own soil, but just give us a shot and we'll hand these punks back to you, tied up with a ribbon, or in a pine box, guaranteed.

Two more months went by with the same bullshit doing laps in Ryan's head. He was sprawled across his love seat, exhausted from a grueling morning session and settling into an afternoon nap. With Storm Cloud team, you had to grab shut eye whenever you could. Colonel Smith never trained his boys at a specific hour. They might be out all night. They might get a call at five in the morning. It just so happened that on this day, the team had trained from six to noon and Ryan was taking full advantage of his opportunity to get some sleep.

When the Georgia pines stirred outside his windows, Ryan half opened his eyes to glance at them. The TV was on and tuned to ESPN, but with the sound turned down so low, he could hardly make out what the sports analysts were saying.

Off in the distance, he heard rounds going off at a firearms range and prayed flippantly that the rifles were pointed in the right direction.

It was May, 2001 now and Ryan had no way of knowing that this little chicken shit operation had ceased to be much of a blip on the radar screen of this new administration, if ever it had been. They were already turning their battleships around and pointing them in the direction of Iraq. Who had time to worry about four misguided nutcases from the Middle East, who may or may not be here on American soil? There were geopolitical games to play, oil and gas fields to be secured.

Just as Ryan was nodding out for real, a loud knock came at his door.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM.

This is not your typical social call, he thought. It sounded more like the local SWAT team out there trying to break down the door.

Ryan got up and opened it. His buddy Matt was standing out there looking back.

"It might be time to roll," he said. Seconds later Ryan's pager sounded.

Not exactly sold on the idea, Ryan threw on a shirt and some shoes and followed Matt down to the SCAM room.

Walking in, it was quickly apparent that Colonel Smith's no bullshit attitude was ten times more no bullshit than usual. Stacked beside him were booklets, reams of papers and pamphlets. The colonel was focused on the door, making sure everybody's ass had come in and had been accounted for.

When the last team member came in, Colonel Smith gestured for him to close the door and then he held up a large piece of cardboard. The cardboard looked as if it had been cut out of the side of a box. The word Shaja'at was scrawled across it in big black letters. Below that, in red marker were the words IN MOTION. Smith gestured with the piece of cardboard as if to say. It's time to go kick some ass and you had better be ready for it.

Colonel Smith underlined the word Shaja'at with his finger.

"It means courage in Arabic," Hector said to no one in particular.

"What's that Garrido?" the colonel said. "You care to share your insights with everyone else?"

"I said Shaja'at means courage in Arabic sir."

"Yes, we all know you've been studying Arabic."

"I want to be able to ask chicks out in any dialect."

Everyone laughed, everyone except Colonel Smith.

"I also like to know when they tell me to fuck off, sir."

Everyone laughed again.

"Very funny, Mr. Garrido. You're handy for something. Now shut the fuck up and listen."

"Yes sir."

"So, as I was saying, Shaja'at, or courage, is the name of this terrorist cell and they've been operating out of a small college in upstate New York since the start of the spring semester. Maybe earlier."

Colonel Smith threw the piece of cardboard down on his desk.

“Their plan of attack is already in motion and you boys may be going on a hunting expedition. Not all the details are in yet. We should know a lot more in the next few days, but this is the real deal, gentlemen. America is under siege. Not in a way that anyone can see it right now, but don’t doubt that these plans involve some serious mayhem and destruction.”

Colonel Smith commenced to pass out the booklets and pamphlets and reams of papers and then went over the particulars of what was known about the terrorist cell so far. It was comprised of four young men of Middle Eastern descent and they were posing as students at Haddick College in upstate New York. Which students, it was not known. Storm Cloud team’s job was to go find out, track these individuals, apprehend and bring them in.

“Listen, gentlemen. As you will see in your handout, you’ve got over two hundred foreign exchange students enrolled at the college. Pinpointing four out of that many won’t be as easy as it seems. You’ll be trying to pick them out of a possible crowd of Iraqis, Iranians, Turks, Afghanis, Pakistanis, Saudi Arabians, Jordanians, and so on, who bring with them a variety of physical features and languages and communication styles. Right, Garrido?”

“Roger that, sir. These people can be night and day from one country to the next. Plus most of them don’t like each other all that much.”

“Exactly,” Colonel Smith said. “The point is, we don’t know where these four bastards originated from, so we’ve got to discard our preconceptions right now. Whatever team goes in there will need to be able to recognize and understand each individual culture. At least enough so that you can recognize in a heartbeat whether or not they’re using an alias.”

Colonel Smith scratched at the back of his neck and started to pace.

“Now, another thing. There’s a chance they’re getting help from the inside but we don’t know that for sure. Hell, I suppose we don’t know anything about them for sure, except that they’ve used their youthful appearance and a purported love of America to enroll in one of our colleges. And that they must have had some pretty solid connections in order to infiltrate our educational system in the first place. Their documents were good enough to get by customs, so you figure they’re smart. They’re more than likely zealots. And

brainwashed. Whatever you want to call it, you can expect they're prepared to sacrifice their lives for the sake of some holy cause."

Colonel Smith stopped to face the team.

"Shit, they're using one of our nation's most treasured resources as a platform from which to destroy us. Does that piss you off, men?"

The team let out a "YES SIR" in unison to confirm that it did.

"Good," Colonel Smith said. "Because this team's mission is to find this serpent and grind it into the ground with our boots. Some of you will be going overseas to locate the head of this snake. Some of you will be staged here to locate and destroy the domestic operators, but the plan is to hang all these bastards high from the gallows so all the world can see. Is that clear?"

The colonel received another unified YES SIR in response.

"All right. No one is to leave their living quarters for the next two days. You can move around inside the building itself, but that's it. If you need anything, stop on your way home after this meeting and get it now. Next meeting, green light for our mission. I'm pretty damned certain about that. Now, anybody have any questions?"

A hand went up and Colonel Smith hung around to answer one question after another. When he was done, he ordered Storm Cloud back to their quarters.

Two days later, Storm Cloud team was summoned back to the SCAM room. Colonel Smith stood in the glare of the florescent lights, waiting until everyone had been seated and the door had been closed.

"Okay gentlemen," he said. "This is it. The President has finally given the order. Storm Cloud is officially RISING, we're on the move."

Colonel Smith waited until all the gung ho crap had died down.

"All right," he said. "I'm all onboard with the enthusiasm but this team is seriously behind the curve. And that means we have some serious catching up to do, so everybody listen up."

After briefing the men for five minutes on the mission orders at his disposal, Colonel Smith broke them down into teams.

“Gentlemen, your destination is Afghanistan. Your mission, go find the ultimate leaders of this terrorist cell. We’re pretty sure they’re located in a place called Tora Bora. It’s bad ass country and your job is to go in and cut the head off the snake. The President and his staff believe that if we can find and kill the leaders of the main cell, those four bastards up in New York, or any smaller cell like them will be rendered blind and without guidance, all offensive actions should automatically cease because of that. Worst case scenario, they’ll fade into the background and head back home. Any questions?”

Rob Marriott shot his hand into the air.

“What is it Marriott”, the Colonel asked.

“Sir, just curious why the change of mission? From our last meeting it sounded like the President was going to let us go to New York to find and eliminate the smaller cell and stop any action on our soil.”

“It has been determined that our role on American soil must remain limited. The FBI, as you guys know, are to handle domestic issues. This little thing called posse commutates tends to tie our hands, so all we can do is our part across the pond”, he answered. Colonel Smith was hoping this would end the discussion as he was preparing to reveal the truth to only three of the men in seated in the room.

“Any other questions?” the Colonel asked.

No one said a word.

“Good, then go pack your gear. You’ll be wheels up and on your way to Amman, Jordan within three hours. From there, you’ll be landing at Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan. A British Special Forces unit will be there to greet you and help get your feet on the ground. You’ll also get your mission details from them.

Then you’ll be taken further north by chopper to set up a small forward operating base in Gardez, code named Camp Lightning. Just be aware, Bagram has a decent amount of Taliban presence. Bagram is an old Russian air base

and these shit turds are always trying to raise hell there to regain control of the air strip. As you guys know, they aren't the friendliest of folks, and with no one in the region having a clue as to who you are and why your there, you may come across some resistance. Be prepared to do what's necessary to get out of there and on to your final location."

5

As everyone started to get up, Colonel Smith called out the names of Weston, Hollenbeck and Garrido.

“Gentlemen, you’re being held back to maintain the 343rd’s cover.”

Ryan darted a glance at his two buddies and saw the same look in their eyes. We’re being left out of the fun? You have got to be fucking kidding me! Ryan was about to say as much but Colonel Smith motioned for him to keep his mouth shut.

Once all the other men stopped giving them shit about being left out of the fun and had filed out of the room, Colonel Smith walked over to the door, closed it and turned the lock. He came back to the front of the room and crossed his arms.

“Boys, you’re the hunters.”

A feeling of peace returned to Ryan’s heart at hearing those words. He smiled and high fived his partners.

“All right,” Colonel Smith said. “Let’s start with a few parameters. The other team members are on a legitimate mission, too, but they won’t know anything about yours, and we’re going to keep it that way. Nothing said to anybody about this shit, either way. Total silence and no slip ups. Do we understand each other?”

Before Hector, Matt and Ryan had stopped nodding their heads, Colonel Smith went on to the particulars of the mission. The three of them were to be

enrolled as students at Haddick College and from this platform they were to find this terrorist cell and bring it to justice.

“Gentlemen, I recommended you to the President and SecDef for two reasons. You’re the youngest of the unit operators, so I think you’ve got the right looks and swagger to blend in with these college kids.”

Hector smiled and raised his eyebrows at Ryan.

“Don’t be fucking around, Garrido. This is major important shit. Not your opportunity to bang every good looking chick at Haddick College.”

“Yes sir!” Hector said. He had parked the smile and straightened his back for good measure. The colonel gave him a look and continued.

“Like I was saying, you’ve got to play the part and do whatever needs to be done without raising suspicion. Which brings me to the other reason you were chosen for this mission. Each of you was in the top five when it came to training, knowledge and experience. I figured with your age and skill packages combined, you were our best shot at nailing these boys. Now I’m putting my ass on the line for you, and I’m trusting you will not do anything to make me regret that decision, understood?”

“Yes sir,” the three men said in unison.

“All right. Now before we get on with the rest of the briefing, I’m giving each of you the opportunity to opt out. No hard feelings.”

Colonel Smith waited with arms folded. There were glances among the three men but nothing said.

Real comical, Ryan thought to himself in the silence. You may as well tender your resignation to JSOC and end your Special Operations career. That and see if the military had any openings in the commissary.

Still, the point was well taken. This mission could end up in one of only two ways, discreetly and with complete success, or with Murphy’s Law having overrun the thing and everything turning to shit. At which point, the brass would probably send out a second team to eliminate the first one. At best, with security compromised, the team members would be hung out to dry by those

in DC, looking to protect their own asses at all costs. Which for Ryan would mean the end of his military career, and in something less than an honorable fashion.

Ryan left the meeting a few hours later with the various ramifications of what he had just learned turning over in his head. The main point being that only six men on the face of the earth were supposed to know about this mission, the President, the SecDef, Colonel Smith and the three team members. How fucked up could this be, if the other team members weren't even allowed in on the party? Hell, for all Ryan knew, Colonel Smith was lying to him and not to the men headed for Afghanistan.

Back in his room, Ryan whipped up some macaroni and cheese and sat down to eat it in his recliner. His heart and head were all over the map. He had the Discovery channel on and was trying to enjoy a program about a safari in Africa but it was impossible to concentrate with a dozen questions bombarding his brain.

Holy shit, he thought. This is really happening. He laughed to himself and thought, this is like 21 Jump Street, but Johnny Depp got more than one take to do it right. Nobody else in the whole world will ever know about this mission unless someone turns traitor or starts talking in bed. Ryan had been on covert operations, but this was on another level altogether.

When the Storm Cloud team rolled up its sleeves the following morning, one thing was abundantly clear. For all their training over the past six months, and all the different scenarios they had expected to encounter, posing as college students hadn't been one of them.

In keeping with this fact, Colonel Smith prepared a crash course on how to act like college students for his three young soldiers.

"Gentlemen," he said. "You're not much older than the average college student, but being naïve and gullible and full of boyhood dreams, that isn't supposed to be in your skill set."

"The beer parties will be no problem, sir," Hector said.

"Cool it, Garrido. Now look, as highly trained soldiers, I know this is not going to be easy, substantially undoing what the military has taken years to

instill in you, but that's in part what we have to do here. Exchange your guns ready demeanor for that of a college kid."

The colonel shot Garrido another look when he saw him smiling.

"Shut it. I already made this abundantly clear. This isn't to be your college field trip for banging beaver. Now, about this terrorist cell. With how little we know, we have to make a handful of assumptions. The first one being that they're using their cover as college students to utilize campus computers, phones and other resources in order to communicate with their leaders and execute this attack.

The even more frightening question is, are they using internships to gain access to places they wouldn't normally have access too? Maybe they're not, but either way, we're going to double down on our hacking, wiretapping and tracking skills. We're also going to dial in our lock picking skills because the college registrar and the dean of students' offices are located in the admissions building, and that's where they keep all the student files and other documentation we need. No doubt you'll have to break into that building once, and probably more."

The colonel had been leaning over with hands on his desk and stood up.

"Gentlemen, in short. Anyplace the terrorists might be hiding their secrets, any way they might be trying to communicate with each other and their leaders, any way they might be attempting to cover their tracks, we need to know that and we need to use any means at our disposal to get at the information. All right?"

"Roger, sir," the men said in unison.

"All right, then let's get to work."

When the final orders were cut in early June, Matt, Ryan and Hector had been through a punishing month of preparations. They were then placed on a C130 and flown up to Ft. Drum, New York. At Ft. Drum, they were handed a plain, unmarked Chevy Suburban and told to drive downstate to the town of Binghamton. Colonel Smith was there to greet them and hand each team member a vehicle for their personal use. Each car had a secret compartment under the spare tire, within which an assortment of special weapons and

gadgets had been placed. The men knew how to handle all the goodies tucked away in their trunk and could raise a lot of hell if needed. With that said, Ryan knew the little stash of weapons wouldn't be traced back to anyone but them. Which put things into perspective, they were ALONE on this mission and their skill and ability to succeed was paramount.

That aside, these men would look like everyday citizens. The cars had been registered under their new alias, the same with their insurance. Their military records and fingerprints had been scrubbed from standard searches. If a local cop pulled one of them over, no alarm bells would go off. There would be nothing to raise an eyebrow.

After a long morning of briefings, Matt and Hector followed Ryan up to Haddick College. All three men were to complete their admissions requirements and immediately drive back up to Ft. Drum. With 90% of the kids gone for summer break, the colonel worried that having the team hang around campus during the summer might be a red flag for the four terrorists.

However, as team leader, Colonel Smith wanted Ryan to get up to speed as soon as possible, so it had been arranged for him to try out for the college's football team in August. Football players reported to campus a month early, giving Ryan an entire month's jump on the Intel. With Ryan's size and conditioning, love of the game, and given that he had played football in high school, making the team and fitting in figured to be a piece of cake.

Pulling up to the college campus that first day in June, the three young men felt collectively as if they had been plopped down into the middle of the colonial era. The campus was nestled up along the northern foothills of the Catskills. Ivy covered the old, brick buildings. Paths wandered among wide, green lawns. Antique lampposts adorned the way.

The three men found a bench and sat in the shade of a maple tree. Many students were gathered in the shade of these stately old trees, a few reading books, but most of them talking excitedly among themselves. There was a sense of anticipation in the air. The spring semester was about to end. Graduation was only a few days away, meaning summer was just around the corner.

Matt looked over at Ryan. Ryan sat staring at the serene setting.

“This seems like the last place you’d look for trouble, eh Sarge.”

“No shit,” Hector said. “What are they going to do? Blow up the local pizza parlor?”

“What do you think?” Matt said. “Hard to picture any trouble beneath this lovely façade.”

Ryan finally looked over at him.

“Probably that’s the point, but guys, rank will no longer be used while we are here. There are too many ears with way to many uncertainties.”

“Got it, and yeah, probably that’s the point.”

“I’ll tell you what the point is,” Hector said. “Banging some tail, so let’s get down to business.”

“Why don’t we deal with admissions first,” Ryan said. “Then we’ll see how much time you have left for the ladies.”

“You act like I can’t walk and chew gum at the same time.”

Ryan ignored him, got up and headed for the admissions building. Matt and Hector followed. Hector was already busy greeting ladies along the way.

Once they were inside and filling out forms, Ryan used his age and background to secure the position of residential advisor at Wilcox Hall. The position had two advantages, additional authority and the privacy of a separate room. Plus Wilcox Hall housed mostly senior students who were consumed with trying to graduate. That meant fewer party hounds out wandering the halls in the middle of the night, or preppy residents with some kind of crisis to be resolved.

Their business completed, the men drove into town for pizza and a few beers. Hector of course hit up on some chicks. Then, as afternoon shadows were spreading over the Catskills, the three men headed back up to Ft. Drum. More training ensued, cover stories were practiced, and new clothing was purchased. The type of mission Ryan used to imagine himself being a part of was now here.

As the lone wolf, Ryan returned to the campus in August and immediately set up a secure satellite phone link with Colonel Smith. An abandoned heater vent in Ryan's room served as the phone's hiding place.

In the morning, he went over to participate in the football try outs. After some wind sprints, weight training, and other agility drills, Ryan was invited to join the football squad for the upcoming 2001 season. He tried to contain how excited he was, but then reminded himself, if you want to play the part, act the part and showed that making the team was an accomplishment for him.

The second night on campus at around 0100 hours, Ryan broke into the college's primary communications center but did nothing more than photograph the various phone switchboards, computer servers and fax lines inside. A secure computer link would have to wait until Matt, the team's main hacker and communications expert, arrived back to campus in the first week of September. Ryan knew enough to get something half ass set up, but on a mission like this you did it right the first time.

For the present, with Matt and Hector up at Ft. Drum, and with most of the other students still away for the summer, Ryan used this relatively quiet time to walk the campus and make mental notes of the layout. The computer labs were here, the phone line hubs over there. He soon knew the type of locks used on every door and every security procedure, from campus police to security camera coverage's, to the access and egress points of all the dorms. Ryan got eyes on a few students as he went to and from football practice, but until two a day practices were over and the rest of the team arrived, he was a bit occupied and unable to gather Intel efficiently.

Lying in bed at night, he found himself wondering about the terrorists. Were they truly evil? Or were they just misguided young men who had been brainwashed into doing something against their will? On a warm summer night, with college students laughing down below and the sound of a meadowlark warbling off in the pines, it was hard to feel any sense of urgency.