

TRIUNE I

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PART I

Northwest of Khowst, Afghanistan

“Copilot, I have a bad feeling about this drop,” the Special Forces chief warrant officer pilot said as the two heavily armed MH-60L Black Hawk DAP, or Direct Action Penetrator helicopters descended on the cleared out area almost ten thousand feet above sea level.

“No sweat, Boss, the combat control team is winking us in. Authentication checks,” his copilot said. “What’s it look like with the NVGs?”

The pilot scanned the landing zone, or LZ, with his night vision goggles attached to his helmet. It looked clear...too clear, he thought. Where’s the Air Force CCT?

“Did you talk to the CCT secure recently?” the pilot said over interphone as he started descent.

“No, but they have the right blinker code,” the copilot said. “It’s darker than the inside of a coal mine out there, though. No snow to reflect the moonlight.”

The pilot was surprised that the camp was only barely visible in the waning twilight. Something was wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. Through his NVGs he saw the flare of the infrared beacon placed by the Combat Control Team.

I must have go-home-itis, he thought. Everything looks OK, but I can’t shake the feeling we’re going into an ambush. He brought his helicopter down the final five hundred feet to a hover.

“Two, cover us...I have a bad feeling about this,” the lead helicopter pilot said over the secure radio to his number two, five hundred feet above and one hundred meters to the right. He could count on the second helicopter covering the area around the camp searching for any signs of Taliban. Night Stalker regimental intelligence had briefed the assault force they were likely in the area.

“Got nothing from this angle,” the pilot of the second helicopter said, “but we won’t stop looking. We have you covered.”

“Roger that,” the lead pilot replied. *I must just be a bit jumpy. Three days to rotation and home to marry Tabitha. I wonder if she’s...*

“Lead team’s out, pilot,” his crew chief said. The lead helicopter disembarked half its Special Forces A-Team down repelling ropes to the rocky hillside. The boots of

the captain team leader had just touched terra firma when all hell broke loose. AK-74 automatic fire seemed to be coming from all quadrants.

The pilot could see with his NVGs half the first team scrambling over the crest of the hill and beginning to set up a perimeter in the previously prepared bunkers. The weapons NCOs on the perimeter were firing mostly at the tall boulders, the obvious sources of incoming machine gun fire.

“What the...’s happening out there?” the pilot said, hearing but not seeing the action. Enemy fire raked the helicopter including the pilot’s high windscreen.

“Fire from all quadrants, pilot,” the crew chief said, and the pilot could hear the buzz of the 7.62 mm miniguns. Rotating the chopper to get a better look, the pilot saw occasional tracers from a stand of large boulders to the north.

“I’ve got one of ‘em spotted One. Returning fire,” the following chopper’s pilot said as he launched rockets at the estimated source of much of the fire. Over the cacophony of the engine straining against its mounts, people talking on the radio and interphone at the same time and the miniguns, the lead pilot could still pick out the rattle of the high chopper’s center mounted M230 chain gun.

“Where’s the CCT?” the pilot said as the A-team tumbled out of his chopper.

“No sign of ‘em,” came the simultaneous reply over interphone from the crew chief and secure radio from number two.

“Got the team here in the bunker, all wounded, need evac,” the A-Team commander said.

“We gettin’ outta here, pilot?” the lead’s nervous copilot asked.

“In due time,” the pilot said. *He can’t keep his mouth shut...just what we need in a firefight.* “We’re not leaving without our guys. Where are they?” *They wouldn’t leave unless they had to.*

“Pinned down by a machine gun in the bunker,” the crew chief said.

“Let’s break them loose, Co,” the pilots said. Focusing on the tracer fire source, the pilot could see the Taliban through his night vision goggles swarming like ants moving across the open area toward the A-team that was pinned down and taking withering fire.

He lifted off, moving the helicopter between the machine guns and the dug in A-team. The big helicopter opened up on the Taliban force, exposing itself to fire from all quadrants.

“I’m hit,” one of his gunners said, and the right minigun went silent.

The pilot pressed the attack directly at the sources of the machine gun fire, firing four rockets into one position and raking another with the M230 chain gun. The

remaining gunner fired into the left flanking fire and the thirty or so enemy rushing toward the A-team with AK-74 and RPGs.

The Taliban fire slowed and the attack was blunted. Combined with the fire from the A-Team, the Taliban turned around and headed back for the boulders.

The pilot, keeping his goggles focused on the main force that appeared to be regrouping, eased the helicopter back over the A-Team position.

“Pilot,” the A-Team commander said, “We’re withdrawing... get us out of here.”

“Roger that, A-Team. Chief, get ‘em back aboard. We gotta go,” the pilot said.

“Roger, sir” the crew chief said.

“Twenty meters to the nose, copilot, the terrain drops off. What’s down there?”

Looking at his topographical map under the dim red cockpit light, the copilot said, “It drops straight down two thousand feet to a small valley. To the left the hills drop off more slowly to a rocky ledge.”

The next two calls came almost simultaneously.

“Abort, abort, abort,” the A-team commander broadcast.

“RPG,” the crew chief yelled over interphone. From the cover of a large boulder north of the camp a Taliban fighter launched an RPG, or rocket propelled grenade directly at the Blackhawk.

“Let’s get ‘em outta here,” the pilot hollered over interphone as he observed the trap.

The crew chief signaled the rest of the A-Team to withdraw as the pilot settled the MH-60 as near to the ground as he could. The men began to scramble over the skids and back inside.

“That missed us,” the pilot said as the smoke trail of the first RPG, catching the rose of the last vestiges of twilight, arced over the MH-60 and out over the ravine and detonating harmlessly.

“RPG incoming,” the crew chief hollered as a second RPG headed straight for the cockpit of the chopper.

He would never forget what a bulls eye felt like as an arrow from a champion marksman came at it point on. The dim flame of the second RPG exhaust was steady in his view, indicating it was coming right at them!

Shards of plastic canopy impacted his helmet like buckshot as the RPG crashed through it and into the cockpit.

As if in slow motion he saw the RPG's warhead pass in front of his face, exploded against the copilot's console and blossomed in a blinding white. The flash turned to red and then black. He ceased seeing anything.

A giant ripped at his helmet and oxygen mask and someone else was plunging knives into his eyeballs. The instantaneous crashing sound of a waterfall deafened him. From then on everything was muffled.

The explosive's acrid stench burned the inside of his nose. A cloud of shrapnel that filled the cockpit peppered his face and arm holding the collective.

A shriek of tearing metal told him the chopper was coming apart. He braced himself for a fall, though still held on to the collective and throttles with a death grip.

Ignoring the pain and inability to see, the pilot pulled back on the cyclic and advanced the throttles to get out of there. What he would do next baffled him. He could only imagine the chopper falling over the cliff at a dangerous angle.

He was surprised that they hadn't hit anything. The rotor must still be providing sufficient lift even at high altitude. Thumps from behind him told him that others were still aboard. He didn't know if his Special Forces A team would have any greater survivability with him or on top of the mountain in a hail of Taliban bullets.

As the chopper literally fell off the side of the mountain, he floated against his shoulder straps and felt like everything he had in his stomach was coming up.

Though his head was spinning, he hollered to his copilot to take the chopper but received no answer. Almost miraculously, he leveled the chopper, but could feel it descending.

"I can't see," the pilot again hollered to anyone who would listen. He felt a hand grip his arm...

"I got you, Boss," he recognized the deep southern accent of his Georgia-born crew chief.

The pilot held the still-effective collective and cyclic stick in what he thought was neutral hover. They were, however, descending slowly toward the valley in a slight left bank. No more fire came from the mountaintop as number two chopper continued to rake it with guns and rockets.

"I can't see...you'll have to direct me," the pilot hollered over the wind and rotor noise to the crew chief. "We have no radios...nothing. Can you guide me to get us out of here?"

"I'll do my best, Boss. I'm hanging on to your seat with a death grip. Lift the nose. Good, now take a shallow turn to your left..." the crew chief continued to direct him.

“We’re in the rugged valley to our south. Level out, keep your nose up as much as possible,” the crew chief said.

After two or three minutes of vibration and wind and rotor noise the crew chief said, “I can see the lights of the Khowst runway, just keep her straight and level.”

“Hope whoever’s back there,” the pilot yelled, “are holding on for dear life.”

“I think we got the whole A team, but can’t be sure. Almost lost the team NCO, but he was pulled in at the last minute. Have some wounded, but you’re going to get us to safety, Boss. I know you are. You have to.”

The chopper started a severe vibration throwing them back and forth.

The team of pilot and crew chief held on tight and miraculously kept the chopper level and moving toward the light.

“I don’t know chief, I can’t see a thing...feels like someone put a hot poker in both eyes. Can’t control this vibration...gonna fall apart.” The whop, whop, whop took on a different sound, like maybe one of the rotor blades was coming loose. Pieces of aluminum and glass continued to fall off the stricken chopper.

“I’m not sure I can hold it much longer. Oh, God, Oh God, help us! We’ll have to set it down.”

“Not yet, pilot, just a bit longer.”

Shortly a huge vibration overcame the whole helicopter and it seemed to heel to the left

“Hold it, pilot, hold it!”

Amid the violent shaking, the crew chief noticed they had passed the last of the foothills and begun to settle toward the gravel flats of the broad plain.

“Hold it just a little longer, pilot, we’re about a hundred feet,” the crew chief said, “I hope I haven’t totally misread our height. First quarter moon’s not much help...Aah!”

The crew chief’s NOMEX-gloved hands, in a death grip on the pilot’s seat, were torn away as the chopper hit a small hillock. He flew out the open nose of the chopper on impact. The helicopter nosed over into the gravel of a washed out stream.

His crew chief’s screams told the pilot, hanging in agony in his shoulder straps and lap belt, that his real eyes, the crew chief’s, were gone.

The screaming from his crew chief and those in back continued to echo in the pilot’s ears as he felt the heat of the long expected fire.

Chapter One

New York City's Upper West Side

On that glorious October morning, I had no idea I would never see Daddy again.

“Oma, I have your breakfast,” I spoke loudly through the closed door to her apartment in my family’s penthouse.

“Come in my Liebchen,” Hannah Levy said with her sleepy, elderly voice that belied the energy she often displayed on our walks in Central Park.

I set the hand-painted tray on the small table by her dresser, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek. Then I went to her panoramic windows and opened the shades, letting in the hazy early morning sun filtering through the skyscrapers on the east side of the broad expanse smack dab in the middle of Manhattan. I loved just to be in her room, but especially with her. Her perfume, the ancient Chanel No. 5, always permeated the air, so familiar to me ever since I could remember.

I quickly scanned her room, so comfortable yet so different from the rest of my world. Her main floor apartment was part of the main floor of my family’s two-story penthouse on New York’s upper west side, overlooking Central Park. Her furniture included a dark hand-carved double bed that gave her a view looking out the picture window to the east. Adjacent to her master bath to the left of the bed sat an ancient dressing table in the same Bavarian style with a large tri-fold mirror and matching bench. Dominating her broad south wall, a large German shrunk, like a breakfront though much larger, held everything from bric-a-brac to her folded wardrobe.

A single forest green overstuffed chair was illuminated by her antique brass floor lamp to the right of her double door entrance. She spent many hours here reading anything I could find for her as well as subscriptions to several papers and magazines. A stack of *Wall Street Journals*, *New York Times* and *Barron’s* filled a large wicker basket to the right of the chair.

She hated television, but Daddy had insisted she have one. A small, first-generation flat screen stood, usually silent on an occasional table, itself a work of art. Each piece, beautifully hand-carved in almost black mahogany or other dark woods, was precisely placed for function and mobility. I needed her strong sense of stability considering the volatility of my world-hopping Daddy and Broadway Mother.

She smiled and asked, “What wonders do you have for me today?” in the German accent she couldn’t give up.

I turned and smiled again, comfortably secure in the confines of her room, protected from the evil of the street. The sweet old woman in front of me was even shorter than I am at five feet two inches. At night she let her shimmery silver hair down, and it fell to her waist.

“Rosa went to the German bakery and got you four brochen. They are still warm,” I said as I unwrapped the white napkin hiding them. “I was forced to have one with butter and this raspberry jam...they smelled so fresh.” I still could taste the unfamiliar but delicious roll that no one else, but Oma in my family liked. Fortunately I didn’t have to watch my weight, standing one hundred ten pounds soaking wet. I had no shape, or rather I was straight as a stick, and the boys knew it. Here I was a senior and not likely to even have a date for the senior prom. I probably wouldn’t go anyway.

“I found some Nutela, and Rosa cooked you a hard boiled egg,” I said as I turned back to her. Rosa, our housekeeper and general major domo and her husband Ramón accompanied Mother up from Texas when Mother and Daddy were married. Ramón was Daddy’s “man,” his personal butler. Together the husband and wife team ran a staff of five part time men and women for cooking, cleaning, serving at parties and providing general assistance to the family.

“I had a dream, Liebchen,” Oma said after taking the initial sip of coffee.

“I don’t know how you can drink that German coffee, though,” I said somehow not picking up on her comment.

“About you, Liebchen.” Oma slid out of bed in her white floor length flannel nightgown, picked up her gold-rimmed glasses with the pearl chain from the doily-covered nightstand and sat in the overstuffed chair in front of the table I had set up. She bowed her head for a few seconds, and then took a sip of the strong black coffee from the Levi family Dresden china she had recovered after the Second World War.

“You were in danger, Liebchen, but I prayed for you,” Oma said, her mentioning the dream starting to penetrate.

“Do you dream a lot, Oma?” I asked, reaching absentmindedly for her hairbrush on the Bavarian dresser. Hairbrush, comb, ornate bottle of hand cream...everything was meticulously placed so she would not have to put on her glasses to put her hands on an item of need.

I noticed there was a small, obsidian-looking triangular stone next to the hairbrush that I had not seen before, but I ignored it at the time. She was always collecting things, but usually placed them in a special shelf of the shrunk.

I began brushing her long fine hair as we talked. Mother had made me cut my own curly auburn hair the past summer, but in three months it had already grown out and was almost unmanageable. It had been easier to work with short, but I liked it long. Long and curly, just as I wore it in the first three years at Manhattan Jewish High School. Mother said I looked more sophisticated with it short, but I knew sophisticated and me were poles apart.

“Oh, yes,” she said, “and often about you, my sweet Liebchen. You are so thoughtful. That is unusual in a young person these days.”

“Was it an adventure?” I asked absentmindedly as I pulled the brush through her silver locks.

“What?” she asked.

“The dream... about me. The danger. I love reading about adventures,” I said, but of course never wishing to actually experience them.

“Oh, you know you can’t tell a dream before breakfast or it will come true. I don’t want this to happen to you,” she said spreading the sweet nut-flavored paste on her brochen. Now my curiosity was raised. I admit I was always a bit fearful. I had confronted my cowardice and learned to accept, but not change it.

“Can you tell me about when you were a little girl in Germany?” I asked, hoping to take a treasure with me to school that day and almost intentionally ignoring her comments about the dream. I had written her colorful and often scary stories and stored them in my laptop writing files. I mused about collecting them for a book one day. She smiled and was about to say something when Mother’s voice intruded on our reverie.

“Bekka?” Mother’s voice called over the intercom. “Come and eat your breakfast or you’ll be late for school.”

“Please close the door on your way out,” Oma said as I kissed her on the forehead and left, curiously noticing a pale blue light filtering from under her door after I closed it. I turned and walked down the long hall to the breakfast room.

Linda Childress, my Mother’s stage name, sat at the white marble table in the glassed-in sunroom sipping the last of her first cup of Cuvee coffee and scanning *Variety* for possible new projects. Her silver blond hair was piled on top of her head in a disarray that looked like the latest fashion.

“Mother, you are up early,” I said, giving her a perfunctory kiss.

She yawned, not used to getting up before eleven. The life of an actress.

“Honey, I can get you a bit part in *‘Wicked’* over the Christmas Holidays,” she said, not looking up. “Your Father is leaving on a trip...I need to say goodbye. Would you like to work with your Mom?”

“Mother, I thought we were going to Spyros for the Hanukah Holidays,” I said, a tiny pout in my voice. “I said something to Gilda about going with us...”

Then Mother looked up at me, annoyed I had taken such liberty.

“...but I guess I could put her off until next year,” I said.

“We’ll have to talk to your father to see what he wants to do,” she said, again burying her nose back in the paper as Rosa offered her a fresh cup.

“Miss Bekka, would you like breakfast now?” she asked, always cheerful. With a servant’s heart, Rosa was totally dedicated to our family. Though we didn’t demand much, she was always there, since with her husband she had long ago become a part of our family. She was short, almost the same height as I am and had kept an attractive figure, probably because she was always on the go.

“I think I’ll just have coffee right now, Rosa. Thanks,” I responded. “On second thought, I will have a bagel.”

“I think some fresh-squeezed orange juice, too,” Rosa said. She always did want to get me fat. Mother and I didn’t talk much...not like I did with Oma. I tried anyway as I downed a mouthful of bagel with cream cheese...not nearly as good as the brochen.

Outside the east windows by the heated pool, our potted evergreens bent with the early October morning wind. Most of the Central Park trees had turned crimson or golden and were shedding their leaves in an autumn rainbow. Some small whitecaps lapped the shore Jackie Kennedy lakeshore. I glanced at my Cartier watch Daddy had given me for my seventeenth birthday and realized I really was late. But I had to say goodbye to Daddy.

As I sipped the last of my coffee, heavily laden with real cream and sugar, I noticed the kitchen extension phone bank was unusually active as various lines lit and darkened, almost in rhythm. Then Daddy’s door opened onto our long hallway, the click of his shoes moving toward us. In a pale blue Ike Behar CEO shirt open at the collar, with the sapphire cufflinks Mother gave him for their anniversary, he projected the image of the successful financier he was. With knife-edge trousers and highly polished Morellis, he did look like a model. Ramón had done well. I wondered what appointments he had this morning in his exciting world of high finance.

Though only five feet eight, Daddy’s black curly hair, tinged with silver, and twisted smile had not changed, Mother told my brother and me were what got Mother’s attention when he appeared at her dressing room door after her performance at Fair Park Music Hall in Dallas. And on him, a prominent nose was distinguished. He had no smile this morning.

Daddy's routine was up at five, down the spiral staircase from the bedroom floor of our penthouse to his business suite where he worked out, showered and studied the world financial markets and news until seven eighteen on the dot.

Ramón had laid out his clothes and helped him dress so that he would emerge precisely at seven thirty. Rosa served his yogurt and toasted bagel with creamed cheese as soon as he joined us in the breakfast room.

"How are the most beautiful women in the world today?" Daddy said kissing Mother on the cheek and then me. He would normally report the news of the day. I scooted my chair close to him and hugged his arm leaning my head against his shoulder, but today was different.

Mother smiled at him and said, "Thank you Mr. Levy." But something was bothering him this morning.

"Linda, I'm going to turn over the Syrian deal to Soo Te," he said reaching for his coffee.

"Good," she said, still reading her paper. "That guy you're working with gives me the creeps."

"I talked to Soo Te. He's on his way to Damascus from Singapore as we speak. I just can't fathom what Stalyarnov is doing," Daddy said, though I really wasn't paying much attention.

"Does that mean you won't be going to Damascus?" Mother asked hopefully looking up from her reading.

"Well, I need to make the handoff. I can't disappoint Ali." Ali bin Hussein, Syrian Finance Minister, and Daddy had been classmates at the London School of Economics. I had met him at a party just last summer. I still remembered the sparkle in his blue eyes as we were introduced. Unusual for an Arab.

Mom looked up from reading *Variety* and fixed her eyes on Daddy. "Please be careful. Stalyarnov is not one to forget. Just last week Ethel was saying that Rob Cloister had disappointed him with some Commerce Department thing. Now Rob is in a wheelchair recovering from a hit and run accident. The coincidence is not lost on anyone," Mother said. I shuddered but kept quiet.

"Don't worry, besides I promised Nick he'd get to meet Naomi Youssef. She's all set to take him and Mrs. Stein on a tour of Damascus," Daddy sipped the coffee and stuffed the bagel in after it. "Where is Nick, by the way?"

"He's already gone down to the car," Mother said, "without so much as a 'Bye'... fifteen year olds, hmmpf. I guess he can't wait to lay eyes on that girl."

In reality I didn't care what Nick was going to do, though I guess I was envious that he would miss some school. I was picking the bits of bagel out of my teeth with my tongue and thinking how frail Oma had looked and what I might do to make her life a bit

more pleasant before she left us. Anyway I had my own outings with Daddy and was happy when my snotty brother wasn't around. I finished my bagel, threw my arms around Daddy and kissed him goodbye. Dusty, Daddy's bodyguard and driver couldn't take me to school today because of the trip, so I had to settle for Eric.

"Love you Daddy," I said and kissed Mother perfunctorily, grabbed my books and went to the elevator.

"I love you, Sweetheart," Daddy said after me. I didn't know I'd never see him again.

* * *

INTERPOL Headquarters, Lyon, France

"Did you see this dispatch, Jean-Claude?" rookie American agent William Bowles said to his senior partner who was returning from a late lunch. He pointed to the large display behind their tandem desks.

"Oui, Mon Ami. Looks like our friend Stalyarnov has surfaced again," the gray-haired vintage agent said to the young man as he settled behind his gunmetal desk. "Better get a note out to Hassam in Damascus to keep an eye out for him. Somehow he has gotten on the inside of the upper levels of their government."

"Roger...uh, already done, Jean-Claude," Bowles said. "And did you see this one about Sergei Mikhailovich? Looks like there might be a connection, at least on this deal."

"It has not been the first time we've had indications of a connection, but we could never confirm it," INTERPOL agent Jean-Claude Dumont said. After twenty years as an officer in the 10th Commando Parachutist regiment in the French Special Forces, Dumont was medically "retired" as a senior agent focused on the Russian mafia. "Mikhailovich never surfaces. A connection makes sense, though with what we know about Stalyarnov. He has been reported to be the 'legitimate' financier for Sergei's branch of the Russian Mafia. This Syrian thing is just a way to launder their drug and prostitution money.

"Who's the American that's supposed to be involved...Levy, I thought...Jeremiah Levy?" Jean-Claude asked.

"A behind the scenes financier. Supposed to organize investment funding and run the show. Amn al-Dawla is aware of a big deal to make their Eastern Desert blossom, according to Hassam," Bowles said of the Syrian State Security apparatus. "Hassam thinks it is the same thing."

"Wonder if we could get a hand on Stalyarnov?" Jean-Claude mused. "When you talk to Hassam, see if he can get al-Dawla to detain him. We have a charge sheet long enough to satisfy even them.

"Isn't Tibawi still the police strongman?" Jean-Claude asked.

"Don't know, but I'll ask Hassam when I talk to him," Bowles said.

“I may send you down there to see if you can get in on this. I would like very much to, how do you Americans say it, ‘corral a big one’,” Jean-Claude said. “May even go with you myself.”

* * *

While I was standing at the elevator I was surprised that Oma strode out of her suite fully dressed and on a mission. She wheeled her black leather and red-striped Tumi Alpha carry-on through the kitchen wearing her travel “uniform” of her black pantsuit and frilly ivory blouse, her silver hair looking immaculate. She hadn’t said anything to me about going anywhere when I had taken her breakfast into her. She must have moved like lightning to get ready so quickly. Daddy stood when she entered the breakfast room.

“I didn’t know you were travelling,” Mother said, barely looking up from her reading.

“Grandson,” she said to Daddy ignoring Mother’s comment, “I would tell you not to go, but I know you wouldn’t listen to me.” She leaned over and kissed Mother who smiled artificially, then hugged Daddy and kissed him on both cheeks with an affection she did not normally show. He looked at her in amazement.

“Uh, Hannah, don’t worry I will be careful. When will you be back?” he asked.

“In three days,” she said and without another word walked out to the hall toward me standing at the elevator door.

The elevator door opened. Oma’s driver Uri stood there, surprising me.

“Ride down with me,” Oma said to me handing control of her bag to Uri. It was not a request. I followed her into the small elevator.

She said nothing however until we reached the level where Daddy’s stretched limousine, the Mercedes and the other two cars were waiting. Uri rolled the bag to the trunk of the first car in line, the gleaming black Crown Victoria. Nick peered out of the limo. Ramón, who always accompanied Daddy on his trips, opened the door for my brother. Nick got out and came over to us. He stood over a foot taller than Oma who had to reach up to give him a hug. Though I would not admit it to him, except for his gangly appearance, he was growing into a man. I just wished one of these days I’d grow into a real woman.

“I’m going with Dad to Syria. Where are you going, Oma?” he asked.

“No matter what happens,” she said to both of us looking directly into Nick’s eyes, then mine, “You must believe God loves you.” She got in the car, and they drove down the ramp out of sight. Nick and I just looked at each other.