

Chapter 1.

September, 2025

Taser imagined the fear of those he came to kill. Revenge finally his. He stared at the steady red light, silently willing it to turn green. He shifted from foot to foot, his usual reserved patience running thin. Tired of waiting. Ten years was long enough and these last interminable minutes were hard to accept. He focused on that, avoiding the subject of the method of delivery. The how did not matter, only the goal. The ends justified the means. Always.

The men in that park thought that, too.

Taser growled, attempting to chase away the little voice in his head. Too many voices in his head. Croix, his handler, held the top spot. The implants his employers had installed when he first joined them included a com-link that gave her that ability. Croix was . . . Croix. No real way to describe her in any other way. Handler, boss, tormentor. Friend? Confidant? Mostly. Sort of. But not. He shook his head. Either way, it was the only voice that really mattered.

This one, the one trying to confuse him now, strove to be the voice of a conscience he no longer possessed. Obsolete, made worse by the fact it sounded like Shelly. She'd died so long ago he was surprised he could remember what she sounded like. Couldn't afford to think about her now. It would get him killed.

The whine of hydraulics helped him focus on the task before him as the plane's belly finally opened to the outside darkness and saved him from the ugly turn his thinking took--again.

He barely registered the flash of green before he left the solid footing of the plane behind and found himself airborne in the black sky of a moonless Iraqi night. Sweet adrenaline surged through his veins, saturated every cell, every muscle, every pore.

Every corner of his being. Nothing quite like a good adrenaline rush. Especially the kind provided by a good HALO jump. He lived for such moments. Depended on them. The only times he felt truly alive, they reminded him that some spark of animation still remained in the void where his heart used to be.

Sometimes the promise of these moments were the only reason he didn't just turn the gun on himself and blow his brains out.

The drone of the plane's engines faded into silence. His heart thumped furiously, the sound of pumping blood mingling with that of rushing wind and his own breathing through the oxygen mask, a necessary piece of equipment when jumping from so high.

One calm corner of his mind kept track of every foot of lost altitude, even as he thrilled to the sensations of freedom he always felt during a HALO. He loved a good jump. Especially at night, when the myriad of stars glittered so close he found it hard to believe he couldn't just reach out and pluck them one by one. In his more unguarded moments, which were few, he allowed himself the notion that one of those stars protected the soul of Shelly.

Perhaps she watched him now and approved of his mission.

I don't. And neither do you.

He slapped the voice down, shoving it into the darkest, dankest recesses of his mind. Even if a part of him thought she--it--might be right.

He ruthlessly squelched the traitorous thought it before it went any further. He felt sure of the justification of this mission. Another blow in the ongoing War on Terrorism. He didn't care if the intelligence community never found a connection between Al Queda and Iraq. Not the point. Terrorism in all its ugliness was all that mattered.

Iraq bred terrorists like mice bred disease. In this instance, the outcome justified the means. It did. If not, he couldn't-- He shied away from completing the thought. Proper performance on his part would rid the world of several hundred terrorists at once!

Several hundred! How many Americans would now live because of him? Certainly more than several hundred. He filled his mind with the numbers. Crowded out all doubt.

He studied the dark expanse of the Syrian desert below him. The infrareds in the camera implanted in the optic nerves of his right eye allowed him to see relatively well even without the light of the moon. A mere five miles to the east, the Euphrates River snaked out of Syria, flowing north to south, a slightly darker ribbon in the surrounding blackness. Lights glowed dimly from the water pumping station five miles to the south of his intended drop zone. Another ten miles south of that lay the village of Shamal, the present location of his target, the current despot calling himself the Iraqi President.

Never mind the US government originally endorsed the man in his bid for power in this country. Nor the fact that the U.S. manipulated events to ensure this man won the most recent Iraqi free elections. The ungrateful wretch had turned on his American masters almost as soon as he had control of the country and the oil.

Oh, nothing overt mind you. The pretense of ally was carefully maintained. But U.S. intel recently discovered the newest Iraqi leader took up where Saddam Hussein left off. CIA moles reported the manufacturing and stockpiling of new weapons of mass destruction, mostly biological.

Taser wondered for not the first time if he was the only person to expect such behavior from a person born and raised Iraq? Strip the pseudo Western urban veneer away and it was easy to see the terrorist lurking underneath.

It fell to Taser to clean up the mess made by the US government. Nothing new. The present U.S. Administration felt the world would not accept yet another war on Iraq for yet another “regime change.” The majority of countries hadn’t accepted it last time and barely restrained themselves from punishing America for the deaths of innocents that occurred during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Since a full scale war was out, more covert methods had to be used. The job of eliminating this most recent thorn in America's side fell to Taser’s employer. The CoOp.

A covert branch of the government buried so deep even the corpses of a cemetery would have to look down to find it. The CoOp chose Taser to be their Avenging Angel in this mission. God bless their little black hearts. Bless his Handler, Croix, too. No doubt she pitched his case to the CoOp Director and talked Taser's way into the mission. He'd have to thank her somehow.

He thought of the eyepatch he used to cover his optic camera whenever he wanted a few minutes of privacy, sans Croix. She hated it. Maybe he'd leave it at home on his next assignment. Make her positively orgasmic.

At two hundred feet above the hard reality of solid earth, that small corner of his brain that kept track of his progress prodded him out of his maudling revelry. He reluctantly let go of the rare chance at unfettered thought and brought his mind to the business at hand. He pulled the cord that released the thin material that was his only barrier between life and bone-crunching death. Black parawings spread above him and slowed his descent. Another jump survived. He reveled in the freedom of these few seconds of true life afforded him before he touched ground and returned to his shadowy world of the living dead.

He landed smoothly, trotting several steps to a stop. A quick pop collapsed the canopy which he quickly buried in the soft sand. That task done, he removed his backpack and pulled a black and white traditional robe and hood the inhabitants of this area still wore and slipped it over his lightweight trousers and t-shirt. Finally ready, he started his trek across the desert. West, toward Shamal.

He walked in mile-eating strides, pace steady, light steps nearly silent. The temperature on an October night in this part of the Syrian Desert hovered around seventy degrees. Not uncomfortable, but made somewhat so by the present lack of air movement. Although he felt lucky he hadn't jumped into one of the desert's famous and frequent sandstorms, he would have welcomed a breeze.

It didn't take long before sweat plastered Taser's hair to his forehead. He swept some stray muddy blond strands off his brows. Almost time for a cut. Not too short, though. Didn't want to look military. That style tended to catch people's eyes and warn targets of possible danger. He preferred to keep his hair a little long, but not so long as to obscure his vision at some inopportune time. Helped him achieve his goal to remain nondescript, unremarkable and uninteresting.

His blue eyes were his biggest liability. Croix once told him looking him in the eye was akin to gazing into a couple of ice cubes. He sometimes wondered if she meant their color or their expression. Either way, he kept them hooded, never making real eye contact, except when such contact gave him an advantage. A man of a height of five-nine, runner's body, average length hair and seemingly downcast eyes pretty much went unnoticed in the real world. He liked it that way.

For this mission, though, his obviously European heritage required a bit of tinkering with his natural coloring. He had transformed his sandy blonde hair courtesy of a bottle of *Instant Rave, Warm Black* which promised to wash out in two shampoos. Same treatment for the eyebrows. He ignored the warnings against using the hair coloring for that purpose. More likely to die from a bullet than hair dye. A black bushy mustache and scraggly beard made of human hair, a special CoOp spray-on tan, and dark contacts gave his face and body the swarthy look of a man from this region.

All largely a precaution. If he did his job right—and he would—no one would be alive long enough for it to make a difference. Didn't expect to see anyone from other villages. The population was relatively sparse out here, the villages isolated from each other by miles of glaring sand. As long as he stayed away from the single road that connected the small towns, he shouldn't have a problem with running into any locals. His only concern would be those that maintained the pumping station itself. According to the intel, there should be no one there at this time unless something had broken down within the station.

A low beep sounded from his communications-link implant. "Yes, Croix?"

"Damn!" Croix's sexy yet somehow sinister voice purred in Taser's ear. What he called her "pissed voice" which she used . . . well . . . always. At least, with him. *"I get vertigo when you make a jump!"*

A mental picture of Croix falling from her dizzying height of five foot nothing, shoulder-length dark auburn hair streaming, green eyes wide with surprise flashed. Would her lithe body bounce from the impact? No. Breasts, though impressive, not quite big enough to provide the proper buoyancy for such a feat. More likely she'd land on all fours. Claws extended.

Taser allowed himself a small smile at the imagery. "Don't watch," he said finally.

"I don't have much choice."

"I could always put on the patch."

"Never mind. I'll get over it."

Of course she would. She hated the thing. She seemed to get a perverse pleasure from watching his kills, which was why he used the eyepatch. He always pulled it off immediately afterward so his camera could record and confirm the kill. Those few seconds they lost didn't make a difference. He didn't know why he was allowed to use it. Didn't care, either. He didn't like witnesses. Even Croix. Especially Croix. And it let her know she didn't have all the control in their working relationship.

Of course, in his off-duty time, it was a slightly different story. Sometimes, when changing clothes, he would look in a mirror and undress slowly. Piece by piece. Bit by bit. Aware the whole time that Croix watched. Not sure how he knew when she was on the other side of his optic camera. After ten years of her living in his head, he could sense her.

He also knew when she watched his sessions of Virtual Reality sex. He discovered some time back that Croix hacked into the VR program on his computer and

sometimes became a virtual Peeping Tom. Or would that be Peeping Thomasina? He had an alarm that alerted him whenever she tuned in.

Although Croix was a beautiful woman, he didn't allow himself to see her as anything but his handler. Too much of a fantasy Croix might make him desire the real thing. Not a good idea in his business. Love killed. As a man who believed survival was the top priority, he avoided love like he avoided any other bullet aimed at his heart.

A nearby growl followed by a terror stricken squeal startled him out of his musings. A frown creased his brow as he glanced in the direction of the sounds. How had he not noticed the hunt? Even if he didn't see the hunter's movements, he should have at least felt the electric charge in the air that seemed to accompany life and death situations. Instead he'd allowed his mind to wander like some bag lady on New York streets. Not like him to indulge in personal reminiscence while on a mission.

His infrareds picked up the shapes of one animal crouching over another. The eyes of the hunter turned toward Taser, two small, glaring yellow headlights piercing the black desert night. After several seconds, the glowing orbs disappeared as the animal returned its attention to dinner. Soft snarls punctuated the sounds of tearing flesh and crunching bones.

Taser passed by it without a second thought. He didn't fear the nocturnal predators that prowled the surrounding desert. He felt a kinship with them and they seemed to know him as one of their own. Like him, these killers of the night eliminated those unworthy of life. Insured the natural balance.

He, too, stalked an unsuspecting prey. One he'd waited ten years to devour. Iraqi terrorists. He rolled the words over in his mind a few times, examining it from all angles. Iraqi terrorists. Redundant term, really. Iraqi equaled terrorist. In his opinion, Webster's dictionary should define *terrorist* as *an Iraqi citizen; a person born and raised in Iraq*.

He hated them. Hated them all with what little passion he could still muster.

Passion. That was an emotion, right? Forgot what those felt like. Passion, compassion, joy, happiness . . . love. All lost. Even undesirable emotions like sadness and grief had abandoned him. Their existence known only through memories. Because of terrorists. Iraqi terrorists.

Only hatred managed to survive, not only unscathed, but stronger. He hung onto it with every ounce of his being. With vengeance. Would this mission sate that vengeance? His steps faltered at the thought. What if it did? What if he lost the only emotion left to him? Possible to live completely devoid of feelings, he supposed. Also possible he might wither away . . . disappear. Wink out of existence with no trace of his ever having lived.

He shook his head in denial. No. The hatred would not abandon him. Too much injustice existed to ever satisfy it. Still plenty to despise in his world.

He resumed his trek, the occasional soft rasp of sand sucking at his black leather boots the only sound other than periodic animal howls in the distance. A sudden breeze blew the bottom of his hood around. Unexpected but welcomed. Taser lifted his face somewhat so the air current could dry the sweat. Grains of sand pelted his exposed skin as the wind picked up, twisting his robes around him.

Alarm bells sounded in his back-brain. He studied the sky as he turned in a slow circle. In all directions stars glittered brightly on their black velvet canvas. Except north. They winked out of sight one right after another in rapid succession.

Taser blew out a sigh. Luck not with him tonight. He quickly rummaged through his pack for the oxygen mask and slipped it into place, breathing shallowly to preserve the remaining oxygen. Needed some for tomorrow. He eyed the sandstorm's rapid advancement, then flung himself face down on the ground to wait out the siege.

Within minutes, the storm hit with a vengeful anger that matched his own. Harsh winds whipped the sand into a frenzy, mounting a furious assault on him. He felt the sharp sting of each individual grain, his blowing clothing no barrier to those tiny

projectiles. For an irrational moment, Taser wondered if the sandstorm was the desert's retaliation for his plan to irradiate some of Her children.

Interesting paradox, really. If not for Her children, the man called Taser wouldn't be here. Wouldn't exist at all. *They* created Taser. Jolted this Frankenstein to life the day the terrorists spawned from this godforsaken place had killed his entire family. Drew's family. Drew. The name he answered to a lifetime ago.

Had a very different view of terrorists back then. With nothing better to do than listen to the howling wind and feel the bite of the sand, Taser's mind turned to his past. Reminded him of a conversation he'd once had with Shelly. Ten years his junior, eleven to his twenty-one, she was the best part of his world. He loved his parents, but Shelly had him wrapped about her little finger.

Both their parents didn't get home from work until after six so Drew always tried to arrange his university classes so he could be there for Shelly when she got home from school. One December day, she came home full of questions and opinions about the "War on Terrorism." They'd had some sort of assembly about it that day and she was bursting to discuss it with him.

"From what I've heard," Shelly said. "they aren't trying to kill just one or two terrorists, but get rid of terrorism completely. Isn't that a noble cause?"

"Oh, sure. Very noble. Just not possible. For every terrorist and every Iraqi civilian they kill, another will come in to take their place, wanting revenge for their mother, father, husband, wife, son or daughter. We will never be able to get rid of all the terrorists," Drew had told her all those years ago. "There are alternatives to dealing with terrorism without resorting to mass murder." At the time, he had believed it.

Ironic that the shell of the man who'd uttered those words now lay in a raging sandstorm in Iraq waiting for his chance to resort to just that. His stomach twisted, its acids whirling in time with the spinning sand as the implications of that thought planted

itself into his consciousness. He flung it back into the dark recesses of his mind before it had a chance to take root.

This is not murder! he told himself coldly. Murder was unjustified killing. He had more than enough justification for what he was about to do. This was justice. Justice for the Twin Towers. For everyone who had died at the hands of terrorists.

Taser slowed his suddenly rapid breathing, trying to relax as much as possible while being caught in a sandstorm in the middle of enemy territory. He shifted to relieve himself of the accumulating load weighing heavily on his back. Sand rattled down on him, nature's version of the rapid-fire of an automatic weapon. Reminded him of . . . No. No dwelling on that. He wrapped his arms around his ears in an attempt to block the sounds and the memories they evoked. He pressed his masked face harder into the ground, but he couldn't stop the sounds of the G-18s wielded by the terrorists that had attacked the July Fourth festivities of a small town in Virginia. Battlefield Park lived up to its name that day. Most of the townspeople lay massacred the ground red with blood. His parents. Many friends. And Shelly. The atrocities the raiders had performed on her could never be forgotten. Or forgiven.

An Iraqi terrorist group claimed responsibility as a symbol of their anger over the bombing of their country. They chose a small town in memory of the all the villages destroyed by US bombs. Virginia because of its place in history within the original thirteen colonies. Drew hated the Iraqis for what they had done to his town. His family. Him. To his once secure world. It took ten years. But now he had the chance to avenge Shelly. He planned to savor every second.

Once the storm abated, he set off again with renewed determination. Time to bring an end to his pain and to lay his dead to rest. In less than two hours he reached his target. The water pumping station that supplied Shamal with their drinking water. A supply shared by two other villages, as well. Not that it mattered. Taser didn't particularly care how many Iraqis would die from tonight's sabotage. The more the

better. Any other time, any other place, he wouldn't feel that way. Would have tried everything in his power not to be assigned such a task. He was a killer, yes, but not a mass murderer.

This mission required mass execution, accomplished from a distance. Not his style at all. Croix generally assigned him to jobs involving a single terrorist or terrorist supporter; two or three at most. Usually using either his bare hands or his favorite weapon, the taserpick. Seldom with a gun even though he was rated as an expert sharpshooter. He preferred up close and personal, one-on-one eliminations. A more honorable way to deliver death to a stranger, even a cowardly terrorist.

But this place, these people, fell into a different category than the rest of the world. A festering cancer that needed surgical removal from the Earth's body. Every single one an evil, hateful terrorist. Born that way. Lived that way. A handful would die that way very soon. Thanks to him.

Hopefully the Iraqi President and his minions didn't drink bottled water. Wiping out these villages would be a sweet revenge. Taking out the President would be that much sweeter. Besides, Croix and the CoOp would get very upset if he failed. Never a good thing.

He did object to the manner in which they wished him to use to carry out their orders. Poisoning what should be life-giving water seemed a singularly dishonorable way to rid oneself of enemies. There were valid reasons for using this method, though. The sabotage perpetrated by him would doubtless be attributed to Syria. An Iraqi regime friendly to the U.S.--at least as far as the rest of the world knew--did not sit well with Syria's leaders. The death of the present Iraqi leader could result in an Anti-American government, a possibility Syria would drool over.

He stopped a mile from the station, its structure outlined in the dull purple of dawn. Daylight would soon be chasing away the rest of the shadows. The plan called for

him to hide during the day and wait until nightfall to enter the station and deposit his surprise upon this terrorist-infested rathole.

He glanced at the rising sun. Late September in Iraq was not the cold, brisk autumn of the CoOp's home base in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Still the hot season here, with temperatures boiling to a hundred in the daytime. Sometimes more.

He quickly reconned the area. Not much around to hide in or around. Sand, sand and more sand. The planted fields running along the Euphrates were too far away and had too many people coming and going. Nothing to speak of by way of vegetation here. He didn't relish the idea of using an old Bedoin trick and lying buried in the sand for several hours. Wasn't afraid of it, either. He could and would endure it.

"I think you should backtrack a little."

Taser gauged the distance to the station. "This is my part of the job, Croix. Let me do it."

"My job is to keep you alive long enough to do yours. If I say to backtrack, then by God, you'd better . . ."

He cut the link. Times like these, he didn't care to listen to Croix's opinions. Sometimes she got on his nerves. Something he could do without right now. Another beep. Getting quicker. Used to take her longer to figure out she was talking to herself.

Ignoring her, he shrugged the backpack from his shoulders, then checked his watch. Nineteen hours until midnight. Nineteen hours. All that stood between him and sweet revenge.

With a mental salute to the Bedoins, he burrowed into the sand and settled in for the long wait.