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Desert Claw

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CHAPTER ONE

'YOU GO IN HARD. Very hard,' said the Major. He paused and eyed the four men in the room. 'You take down that building. You take out the enemy. And you seize that painting fast. I want it returned without a scratch on it. And one further thing. I want all the terrorists killed. All of them. Dead terrorists. No witnesses. No survivors. Is everyone clear?'

'Sort of,' Mick replied quietly.

Major Alexander Lloyd-Barrier. Mick had first run into him ten years earlier. Back then Mick had been a young soldier in the SAS. The Major had worked for some shadowy spying outfit. The Counter Terrorism Warfare Group, or some such name. Mick hadn't warmed to the Major back then and he liked him even less now. He leant back in his chair and tried to focus on the briefing.

'Mick, you're mission leader. You form a fourman fire team, together with Eddie, Jim and Jock.' The Major nodded at the three other men in the room. 'On arrival in Baghdad, you hook up with Summit Security. Mick, I understand you know Bill Berger, the director of Summit? He's been in Baghdad since the war. Runs a big security operation out there. He's got you eight extra men. That's two more fire teams. They're all British and American ex-special forces. Gives you a dozen men to do the job. Should be more than enough, don't you think?'

'Possibly,' said Mick. 'Yep. I s'pose it is.'

'Show a little enthusiasm, won't you, Mick?' said the Major. 'Oh yes, I almost forgot. The codename for your mission is Desert Claw. I repeat, Desert Claw.'

'It's been used before,' said Mick.

'What?' said the Major.

'Used before,' Mick said. 'Years ago, by the Yanks. That fucked-up mission in Iran, to lift the embassy siege.'



'You think I give a damn?' the Major snapped. 'As I said the codename for your mission is Desert Claw.'

'Hope it goes better than the Yank mission did, then,' Mick said.

Five years ago Mick had left the SAS, after fifteen years in the Regiment. Since then he'd worked as a photographer in his native Manchester. Outside of the military, photography was his main passion in life. But he hadn't made much money at it. So he'd agreed to be kept 'in reserve' as an old SAS hand to be called in when certain missions were required. The so-called 'black operations'. High risk. High danger. Top secret. And highly paid. Like now, with this crazy mission to rescue some dodgy painting in Iraq.

The meeting with the Major was being held in Hereford, but not at the regular SAS base. The Major had rented a room in some cheap hotel. It seemed a bit odd to Mick. But he presumed it was all part of the 'black' nature of the mission. Keeping it all unofficial and away from British Government territory.

Mick glanced around the small, shabby hotel room. Luckily, he had his old team with him. Perched on the bed was his right-hand man, 'East End' Eddie. An old SAS hand, Eddie came from the rough end of London. He was hard as nails and sharp as a pin. Next to him was 'Kiwi' Jim, a veteran of the New Zealand SAS. A real joker and a good, honest soldier. On the far side was Matt 'Jock' McLane, a massive Scot. Also ex- SAS, Matt was a man of few words and a fearless warrior.

Like Mick, Jock, Kiwi and Eddie were all 'reserves'. They were Mick's A-team. They'd been on several black missions together. Without his A-team behind him, Mick would never have considered the present mission. He turned back to face the Major.

'There's one thing that doesn't make sense, though,' said Mick. 'You're saying we fight our way into the building and kill all the occupants. It's going to be pretty bloody violent in there. So how do we do all that without damaging the bloody painting?'

'Mickey's got an effing point,' Eddie remarked. 'Might be a bit terminal, innit? I mean bullets and grenades on canvas ain't a medium I've 'eard of before.'

'We've thought of all that,' the Major snapped, ignoring Eddie's joke. 'On arrival in Baghdad you'll pick up several canisters of Sarin. Sarin as you know is a nerve gas. It is lethal to humans. It has no adverse effects on a painting, of course. You will be wearing full assault gear when you attack. Including gas masks. The terrorists will not.'

'Effing nice one,' said Eddie. 'So, we're gassing the bastards?'

'Not exactly Geneva Convention stuff, is it?' said Kiwi, quietly. 'Sort of thing Saddam Hussein got banged up for.'

'You're not being asked to do this because you're the Red Cross,' the Major sneered. 'You're being asked because you're ex-SAS. And you're being paid 300,000 dollars each for your troubles; 150,000 dollars up front. The rest on delivery. Perhaps the money will square your consciences? Plus the fact that they're terrorist scum. They need eliminating. And as I've made clear, this is a totally black operation. As far as Her Majesty's Government is concerned we've never heard of you. Or your mission. It isn't happening. You were never there. So any use of Sarin is nothing to do with us. Do I make myself clear?'

'Clear as mud, mate,' said Kiwi Jim.

'We're flying British Airways are we?' Mick asked, changing the subject.

'Of course,' said the Major. 'As usual, you go out on BA in civvies. Low profile. Why?'

'Just wondering how we get the painting back home again. You do want it brought back, don't you?'