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Opening Extract from...

Bolt Action

Written by Charlie Charters

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CHARLIE CHARTERS

Bolt Action



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Bolt Action is truly a work of fiction. It's make-believe. Readers may recognise certain incidents and concerns. That doesn't change the fact that I have used my imagination when it comes to the story and with details like technical aircraft specifications. Any similarity between my characters and a living person is a complete coincidence, a total fluke.

*At the second tee of the Karachi Golf Club
Sindh Province
Pakistan
4.49 a.m. (6.49 p.m. in Washington)*

It is not a good look for a Pakistani army general. Even a retired one. The shocking pink cardigan. Light blue plus-fours. Especially the two-tone golf shoes.

On the other side of the world someone mutters towards the video image of the general's attire, 'Talk about the dangers of shopping online . . .'

The audience watching their target by satellite phone in Langley, Virginia, has been down this road before. Many times. They understand danger and risk, but only as one-dimensional operational concepts.

A veteran Agency analyst adds, 'It's what happens when you dress in the dark because of the shitty hours you have to work,' the needle of two failed marriages in her voice.

They are diligent and attentive in their work but hardly flushed with excitement. After all, they've quarterbacked dozens and dozens of renditions and extractions, and the world hadn't even come close to ending.

Not until now. This time it will be different. Different because the tiniest changes can unleash the most devastating consequences. And this tiny change, this tweak that the CIA intends on making, will turn an early morning hit-up into the most perilous round of golf. Ever.

Back to the video feed, and everybody notes how the general

has packed a few pounds on to his small frame since being sent into retirement a year ago (there was an uncorroborated report he wore a corset).

Each time he tops or slices or hooks his drive into the humid gloom, General Ali Mahmood Khan swears . . . *Laanat*. Damn. *Mayooskun*. Hopeless . . .

The mild swear words easily carry the dozen yards to the two wiry, dark-skinned CIA operatives lying prone under a thicket of shrubs and tall weeds. Both could easily pass for locals. The live feed of this lamentable golf is also being watched on a boat anchored offshore, to the west of Karachi, near the sandstone cliffs of French Beach. The exfiltration point.

The championship golf course lies within the sprawling Karsaz naval base, so the general's security detail this morning is light. He feels safe. Just a bodyguard and a driver for the Tiger of Baluchistan . . . his fawning local media title.

The second hole runs in a northerly direction. Par five. Good eagle chance. Two hundred yards away a huge tree stands in the centre of the fairway just before the dogleg right. It's there the bodyguard waits, holding a lightweight walkie-talkie, to report whether any of the general's shots clear the tree. Nothing reported so far.

The general's chauffeur kneels over a yellow bucket of lime-green luminescent balls. Only a handful remain. Dutifully he places a fresh one on the tee. The action is illuminated by the bright lights of the general's Mercedes SUV, which is parked to the rear. Engine on, air-conditioning on. The outside temperature is already an uncomfortable twenty-four degrees.

The general waggles his rear end, wriggles his wrists. Winds up, releases and fires the ball almost sideways off the white tee marker.

The watching CIA officers duck instinctively as the shot blasts through the undergrowth above them, like the discharge from a shotgun.

The green-hued video signal tumbles.

Everybody in Langley, in the blue-lit room, watching the monitor, sucks in a collective breath.

‘Are we OK, Victor Three?’ The crackled female voice of concern, thousands of miles from the dangers of sliced golf shots.

Two taps on the throat mike signal, *We’re OK*.

Shakily the picture re-establishes itself, focused on the features of the controversial former military strongman. The man who had once headed the ruthless Afghanistan unit of the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, which had ushered in and then supported Taliban rule. After 9/11, the unit was wound down and General Khan had been transferred to lead the paramilitary Frontier Corps in Pakistan’s so-called Tribal Areas that border eastern Afghanistan. For the next five years he excelled at not finding anybody the Americans tasked him to find. What he *could* do was dip into the almost \$5 billion worth of military hardware with which the US subsidised Islamabad’s side of the war on al-Qaeda.

And then there’s the missing cash. Hundreds of millions of dollars. Reimbursements for losses and the wear and tear from raids and patrols within Pakistan’s notorious Tribal Areas that never took place or were vastly overstated.

Which is why, irked that American national treasure might actually be keeping all these Islamic nutcases in clover, Washington wants General Khan. Reluctantly, and only under a welter of evidence and with another two billion dollars’ worth of military aid hanging on the matter, Islamabad has given her tacit approval. But in a totally deniable fashion.

Five minutes later, General Khan fires off his last errant golf ball. ‘Light me,’ he grumps moodily to his driver, who lights a cigarette for him, and then disappears down into a long, low valley to search for two buckets of glowing golf balls.

General Khan retreats to the comfort of his Mercedes, opening the driver’s side to switch off the headlights before settling into the back seat with a slam of the door. Suddenly

all is dark and quiet. Mynah birds squabble in the distance.

The two CIA operatives focus on the red pinprick of cigarette burn through the tinted windows. In three weeks of observation, the general's two gofers had never taken less than nineteen minutes to return to the car. Two taps on the throat mike, followed by another two. *Good to go?*

Long pause.

In Langley, the analysts and operation officers eyeball each other, searching for the first sign of the famous CIA backslide, a real house speciality. Inevitably focus settles on one of the Agency's associate deputy directors, who is playing wallflower at the rear of the hermetically sealed cabin. The most senior officer in the room understands two things very clearly. One: it's either on or off. Right now. And two: ultimately, this whole thing will be on my neck.

Everybody knows this operation had been conceived by the wunderkinds brought in by the new president, is nothing less than a political power play, and that this particular rendition is against the expressed wishes of a number of the Agency's old hands. The bureau chief in Islamabad, for instance, who'd cabled his opposition in the clearest terms possible. 'No way. Hell no. No damned way. No freakin' chance . . .' Fifty times in total.

But that's a minor irritant in a bigger game. The wunderkinds are trying to re-create the Agency, purging and promoting, bending Langley to a new, more inclusive purpose driven by a president who talked loftily about New Beginnings and Transformative Agendas. Code for Forget the Past. While that old warrior mentality is slowly stripped out, irony of ironies, there is still an audience that needs to know the Agency has teeth. And rendering General Khan – even against the advice of senior agents on the ground – is part of buying some quiet.

So. The associate deputy director rubs his jaw. Lot to think about, standing here on the edge. He blinks up at the main screen and the dark outline of the Mercedes, weighing up the multitude of narrow, operational things that could still go wrong.

An almost imperceptible nod of the head is followed by, ‘Rock and roll. Let’s do this thing.’

The now assured female voice comes through in their earpieces. ‘Victor Three. You are good to go. Confirm. Good to go.’

Three and a half minutes later the dark blue Mercedes four-wheel-drive slows at the massive fort-like gates guarding the 250-acre Karsaz naval base. General Khan is unconscious but little dabs of glue have been applied to his eyelids. His tinted window is down, his hand resting on the sill, and the car eases comfortably around the sets of tank traps. There’s scurrying in the guardhouse but it’s quickly noted that the car details are correct. Two other bodies on board. Everything tallies with their paperwork – which is the only thing a smart soldier worries about. Later the two guards would swear the general’s eyes were definitely open. Looking straight ahead. And deadly serious.

Half an hour later General Khan’s driver and bodyguard are ready to expire from the novel experience of their jogtrot to the gatehouse in steam-heat conditions. There’s a great deal of flapping and faffing as both men are revived. Then a fiery back-and-forth as to whether the general was in the front of the Mercedes driving *and therefore in control*, or in the rear *and in some kind of peril*. Finally, thirty-five minutes later, the alarm is raised.

As the sun’s first rays edge the horizon and backlight the skyline of Karachi to the left of them, a Zodiac inflatable noses through the gentle breaking waves on French Beach. On the water, they still have the cover of dawn’s shadows. Just. Navigation is by a hand-held GPS tracker. The boat scuds along at top speed due south a mile or so, to rendezvous with an eighty-two-foot Monte Fino Sky Lounge cruiser.

After forty-four minutes General Khan is carried on board like a rolled length of carpet. By flashlight, there are some basic medical checks; all personal effects, his belt and shoelaces removed. The twin diesels click out of idle and the fibreglass hull crushes its way forward as the boat powers up to twenty-three knots. The general is deposited in the VIP stateroom, the

plush drapes closed. All sheets, cables, wires, glasswork and breakables have been removed. Langley gets its first detailed report by secure phone.

Only as they round Cape Monze to the west and put the loaf-shaped Churma Island between themselves and Karachi do the running lights start to flicker on. And everybody settles down, feeling well pleased. Ahead lies a comfortable seventeen-knot cruise down the eastern side of Oman and Yemen, shadowed by a US destroyer, and into the welcoming arms of America's latest foreign toehold: Camp Lemonier in the former French colony of Djibouti.

Pretty much a textbook operation. Damn it if the thing wasn't flawless, the associate deputy director was happy to report in an email to his boss.

Four days later

A telephone call to the CIA's station chief in Islamabad starts with the words all field agents hate: 'You're going to want to make sure we're on the record here, William.'

Long sigh. 'Damn it, Remmy.' The soft Louisiana accent belongs to station chief William Lamayette, who swings his feet off his desk. 'You sure about this?'

The person initiating the call from CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, is retired marine lieutenant colonel Remmy Gardener – the head of the Agency's Office of Terrorism Analysis, one of the twelve departmental streams of opinion and information that fold into the Directorate of Intelligence. In theory, the DI 'identifies' what the problem is and the possible solutions, then the National Clandestine Service delivers whatever is agreed as the 'fix'. Like Lamayette, Remmy Gardener is an old hand.

'Deadly serious,' says Gardener. 'The latest on your best buddy. Ali Mahmood Khan.'

Lamayette cuts in, reproachfully. 'Stop, Remmy. That's not my case.' *You should know that.* 'The White House twelve-inched Langley, so Langley turns around, spans my ass like a two-

bit whore. Ignored pretty much everything I had to say on that shitbag Khan.'

The satellite phone line goes silent for a while. Just a low hum as Gardener enunciates his words carefully, 'Let's say, for argument's sake, information was passed to me that questioned the wisdom of the whole operation. Just as you outlined in your various cables. Now. Who should I share this with? The guys upstairs who okayed taking out General Khan, and are still prettying up their Ivy League blazers...'

'... More like licking each other's balls.'

Lamayette's language is famously evocative and it takes Gardener a little while to get that uncomfortable image out of his head. 'Let's just say they've confused an operational victory with a strategic success. So. Should I pass this information to them, or to the one person who advised against this in the first place?'

Lamayette almost bolts out of his chair. 'You, sir, are a man of integrity and genius.' And he gets to work setting up the software profiles, so that their conversation can be recorded, then entering the protocols of those to be copied on the file about to be generated. It takes a couple of minutes, and then Gardener recounts . . .

'The maître d' pulled me away from a dinner about, what? . . . ninety minutes ago. I was at the Marriott on Pennsylvania Avenue. The maître d' said there was a call on the house phone. Asked for me by name. Knew what I looked like, my rank. Everything.'

'And . . .?' Nothing too remarkable so far.

In his Islamabad office, Lamayette's gaze flicks across the five flat-screen TVs showing rolling news . . . the four clocks . . . Washington, London, Kabul and Islamabad . . . and the illuminated map of the world, which lights up longitude by longitude with the passage of the sun. It is 10.56 p.m. in Washington, just coming up to 9 a.m. in Pakistan.

'A South Asian voice. Pakistani probably. Well educated. Kind of nasal tone. Like his voice hadn't quite broken . . . I made

sure to write down pretty much what he said . . . “*You are holding my client. General Khan. I am his representative . . .*”

I told them this would happen. And a spasm of cold, quailing fear drills right through Lamayette’s massive frame. From head to toe. His first considered reaction is that a call to the Marriott would be untraceable after the fact. He knows the hotel. Perhaps eight hundred rooms all told. How many calls a minute in the early evening would a hotel switchboard like that handle? Too many. Then, how would someone know Gardener’s movements? Somebody in his office? But Gardener was a pro, his team would be tight. Must have been surveillance of some kind. Lamayette, being a station chief, gets paid to analyse and he recognises what this adds up to. Good tradecraft, plus excellent intelligence equals . . . Take This Seriously.

‘What did you say?’

Gardener continues. ‘I reply, “I don’t know what you’re talking about but let’s say for argument’s sake I understand . . . what do you want?” The guy laughs, says in his haughty voice, “*But I don’t want anything. Ha. Ha. Ha.*”

‘So I says, “Good. So I can get back to my dinner?”’

“*My client instructed me that if ever he was out of contact for more than forty-eight hours I should make this call. Just to let you know that we know.*”

“Well, thanks a bunch for doing your job. Now my dinner’s getting real cold . . .”

“*Lieutenant Colonel. Your table has not yet been served. You would do well to treat me with some courtesy.*”

‘He was right, of course. We were still on the bread rolls.’ Gardener snorts, a man who doesn’t enjoy being bested. ‘Afterwards I walked the whole damned floor. Don’t have a clue how he knew . . .’

‘Anyways, he carried on:

“*The general was a leader to many and in his name revenge will come. By your actions, America, you have unleashed a very terrible thing. You have started the clock. Nobody . . . not even if you*

returned the general to us today . . . not even he can stop this thing. The forces of revenge have been unleashed. They have taken wing. And whatever happens, they cannot be recalled. For they have taken wing . . .”

Oh, shit, thinks Lamayette. That really complicates things . . .

The object of all this intrigue, General Ali Mahmood Khan, is nothing if not a logical man. With complete equanimity, he could see what was going to happen to him: obviously at some point the Americans would take him down. He had long been pulling on the tiger's tail, joyfully helping himself to hundreds of millions in Washington's military aid. But worse. Such is the soul-enveloping intensity of his hatred that he'd given over every ounce of his brilliance to help her enemies.

One day the tiger will bite back. He knew this. Inevitable, he told himself. But my money is safe. My children are young men, raised to be strong, ambitious and crafty. The new Khan dynasty will rise on my death, a martyr's glorious death, killed by the evil hand of US imperialism. There is nothing to fear in death. For every great South Asian dynasty is born in martyrdom. Nehru. Bhutto. Bandaranaike. And that wretched family in Bangladesh . . .

And so he communicates the gist of his plans to his two sons in a series of postcards . . .

The civilian leadership in Islamabad would sell him out in private, while squealing with outrage in public. Fair enough. That meant, as in a game of musical chairs, he would suddenly find himself without a seat. Therefore, when he conceived his plan he took into account two things: he should consider himself dead or as good as dead, and whatever he planned, he should make sure it was unorthodox. Because in his mind, against *this* enemy, the unorthodox would always triumph.

Macchar. The Mosquito. The message that his lawyer had delivered to the CIA man in the Washington hotel could not

have been more clear . . . *The general was a leader to many and in his name revenge will come. By your actions, America, you have unleashed a very terrible thing. You have started the clock . . .*

Khan is an avid, even greedy, student of everything to do with America. His interest more like a ghastly fascination. A pure hatred.

To a soldier like Khan, America's time has run out. The heavyweight boxer who lumbers around, punch drunk and arms flailing, a deadly mix of overconfidence and unknowingness. The watching crowd of nations complicit in one awful secret: the next challenger will put this fellow down. Just one shot, the right combination, and a new order will be born. The rest of the world watches through the ropes, willing it to happen . . .

Khan had a copy of CIA director George Tenet's *We're At War* memo, issued to all his staffers within days of September 11th. 'There can be no bureaucratic impediments to success. All the rules have changed. We do not have time to hold meetings or fix problems – fix them quickly and smartly.' Fine words, but almost ten years had passed and all of this systemic weakness has brought America to the verge of collapse. Teetering on the edge.

The US dollar was finished, drowning in trillions of debt, mostly held by foreign powers or overseas sovereign funds. A decade of stock market growth lost, *kaboof*, in months. Discredited financial and government institutions. Hundreds of billions in unfunded liabilities in Medicare, pensions and social security about to fall due . . . and still their politicians bicker and fight and drag the country downwards.

Just what General Ali Mahmood Khan wants. To drop America to her knees. To deliver a defeat, like Port Arthur, Dien Bien Phu, or Suez. To forever change America's destiny. To leave her as the once-mighty imperial powers of Russia, France or Britain had been left. Naked, vulnerable and so very ordinary in the eyes of the rest of the world.

In his neat postcard penmanship, the general maps out his plans, the timeline his sons must follow. The narrative, he reminds himself fussily, the narrative is so important . . .

You remember my birth date? March 15th 1954. I was born on the very same day that Charles Piroth committed suicide. By then, he had only one arm and couldn't kill himself with his sidearm because he needed two hands to cock the weapon. So he mumbled his apologies to all those he had failed, retired to his bunker, clasped a grenade to his chest and pulled the pin. And as he died, on the same continent, almost three thousand miles away, your father came into this world. Perhaps the hand of Destiny. No?

Tiny, precise strokes, the nib scratching at the card and the Pashto script flowing like Arabic from right to left, his shoulders hunched over the lines, stopping every so often to rub his eyes. The general's phones, his emails, everything, he knows, is being monitored. But not the mail . . . who would think to monitor the mail?

Colonel Piroth had been commander of French artillery at Dien Bien Phu. He'd bragged about the 105- and 151mm howitzers, how they would annihilate the ragtag volunteers of Ho Chi Minh, and his General Giap. But for all Piroth's boasts, his artillery never 'saw' Giap's forces, never could spot his emplacements in the jungle. Instead it was the Vietnamese, an invisible enemy, who rained hell down on to the besieged French forces. Snapped their will to fight.

Imagine. The French took mobile brothels into battle with them, prostitutes to give them courage. And Piroth's commander even issued General Giap with a written challenge, as if he were a musketeer. Understand this, my son. America right now is like France at Dien Bien Phu . . . No stomach for the fight, too fat to care.

The details of Operation Macchar covered a total of forty-eight picture postcards; ninety-six, as there were two sons.

A lot of information about General Khan's extensive Pashtun connections, the almost impenetrable bonds of debt and honour that would spring into action with the correct supplication and coded words . . .

The American warlords will learn that no amount of push-button technology or military hardware will defeat a multitude of people animated by a righteous cause. We will deliver that cause. We will deliver that righteous anger. We will deliver Operation Macchar . . .

He personally affixed each of the four-rupee stamps then he took the time to pack the cards carefully into a tatty chamois cloth, bound many times over with elastic band. This unremarkable package he entrusted to his senior housekeeper, who, under pain of dishonour, promised faithfully to post them if the general failed to appear any morning.

The *Why* and the *When* of Operation Macchar are detailed on the back of the postcards. Clues as to the *Who*, the *Where* and the *How* are on the picture side. There are ninety-six, but only three different images.

One card shows the faithful masses swirling around the vast, cube-shaped Holy Kaaba in Mecca, performing *tawaf*, the counter-clockwise thronging that lies at the heart of the Haj pilgrimage. This is the *Who* of the plan, a representation of Muslim innocents, those that are to be sacrificed, and whose fiery death would send up an unyielding shriek of outrage to unite the world.

The *How* is elegant, simple and totally unorthodox. A profile-shot of a twin-engine Boeing 777 in the colours of Pakistan International Airlines, on final approach, flaps and landing gear extended. The pride of the PIA fleet.

And the *Where* is a view of New York. An aerial shot with the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island in the foreground and in the skies above Manhattan vast plumes of red, white and blue, coloured smoke from the tailpipes of a half-dozen fighter

jets. A postcard to celebrate the recent fiftieth anniversary of NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command.

... And by his hand, we shall trap the US president into ordering the deaths of Muslim innocents. By his hand, we shall trap his country, and the world shall see the Truth.