

## Preface: Kandahar

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Second Lieutenant White entered the “ready room” and began preparing for the night of battle.

Kandahar, August 2011, 2200 hours: a narrow room just off a main hallway, lined with plywood shelves and plastic drawers stuffed with rolls of Velcro, electrical cables, and heavy-duty packing tape. The smell of gun oil clung to the air. White had written down the long list of gear, and now calmly grabbed items the mission required:

*Helmet and night vision goggles. Check.*

*Headset for communicating with platoon leader. Check.*

*M4 rifle. Check.*

*M9 pistol. Check.*

*Ammunition for both. Check, check.*

*Eye protection to keep dust and dirt from causing sudden blindness. Check.*

*Notecards and pens to document everything that was said and found. Check.*

*Clif Bars in case the mission went long. Check.*

*Jolly Ranchers and Tootsie Rolls for village kids. Check.*

*Tourniquets to stop the bleeding of a fellow soldier. Check.*

*Medical gloves.*

*Zip ties.*

*Water.*

*Check. Check. Check.*

White felt the fear rising, but more seasoned soldiers had provided plenty of advice for the special brand of trepidation that accompanies a soldier on their first night mission. “It gets easier after the first time,” they assured the newbies during training. “Don’t indulge it, just pass through it.”

Ready now, White stepped into the briefing room and took in the scene. Dozens of battle-hardened men from one of the Army’s fittest and finest teams, the elite special operations 75th Ranger Regiment, crowded in to watch a PowerPoint presentation in a large conference room. Many had Purple Hearts and deployments that reached into the double digits. Around them was the staff that supports soldiers in the field with intelligence, communications, and explosives disposal capabilities. Everyone was studying a diagram of the target compound as the commanders ticked through the mission plan in their own vernacular, a mix of Army shorthand and abbreviations that, to the uninitiated, sounded like a foreign language. But every person in the room knew precisely where they needed to be, what their role was, and how they would help accomplish the night’s mission.

White had the feeling of being in a Hollywood war movie. Standing nearby was a noncommissioned officer (NCO) and Iraq War veteran whom the second lieutenant had trained with.

“Are we supposed to say something?” White asked

Staff Sergeant Mason, also out for the first time, scooted closer and whispered back. Neither new arrival wanted to stand out any more than they already did.

“No, I don’t think so, not tonight. The last group will speak for us.”

That was a relief. White had no desire to draw attention in a room filled with soldiers who clearly felt at home in combat. Like a cast of actors who had performed the same play for a decade, they knew each other’s lines and moves, and offstage they knew each other’s backstories. It was an unexpected revelation for White, gleaned

during a fifteen-minute mission review in a makeshift conference room in the middle of one of Afghanistan's most dangerous provinces: this was a family unit. A brotherhood.

The briefing ended, the commanding officer approached the front of the room and the soldiers suddenly shouted as one:

“Rangers Lead the Way!”

They saluted in a finely choreographed sweep and filed out.

The rookie second lieutenant did the same, hoping the gesture didn't look too awkward for a first-timer, then followed the others, trailed by Sergeant Mason. They stepped into their office—a broom closet, actually—and exhaled for the first time.

“Whew,” White allowed.

“That shit is serious,” Mason said. “This is the real deal.”

Then, without another word, they began a systems check, testing the frequency of their radios to make sure they operated properly. This would be their lifeline while on mission. They triple-checked their night-vision goggles, which clipped onto the top of their helmets, and made sure they had batteries for all the electronics they carried: headsets, radios, and a red laser that allowed them to silently point things out to one another. By the time they exited the barracks each was carrying close to fifty pounds of gear.

In one of the many Velcroed pockets of White's uniform was information about the insurgent they were after and a list of crimes he was suspected of committing. In another pocket was a medal of St. Joseph and a prayer card. White stepped out of the barracks and worked to conceal any trace of the intense emotions this moment conjured up: pride in being part of a team hunting a terrorist who was killing American soldiers and his own countrymen; trepidation at the thought that after a short ride on the bird they would all end up in his living room. But it was exactly what White had wanted and trained for: to serve with fellow soldiers in this long war and do something that mattered.

The fighters lined up by last name and marched into the yawn-

ing darkness of the Kandahar night. Unlike the American cities they came from, whose skies were often clouded by the pollution of industry, traffic, and the millions of lights that power a modern, twenty-four-hour-a-day society, Kandahar's blackness stretched on forever with constellations you only read about at home. The sky was glorious, and for just an instant White slowed and wondered at the sparkling celestial recital that was on display up above. But then a powerful stench yanked the young officer back into the moment. As heavenly as the skies were, just so earthly was the smell of human excrement that hovered over and seemed to surround the Kandahar camp. In a city whose sewage system had been all but destroyed by war, the smell of feces attacked with ferocity anytime a soldier was downwind.

But White was focused on something even more mundane: staying upright while marching along the unpaved, rock-strewn tarmac for the first time in total darkness. "Focus on the next step," White silently commanded. "No mistakes. Do your job. Don't mess up."

Here and there came the sound of fellow soldiers ribbing one another, swapping jokes and gallows humor. But White also detected, in the orange ember of one Ranger's dying cigarette, hints of the stress they all shared. They wore their exhaustion well, but it was there.

White and Mason fell in alongside their fellow special operations "enablers," a group that included the explosive ordnance disposal guys who became famous in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Hurt Locker*. (Even if all the guys didn't love the movie, every one of them could appreciate the scene at the end in the grocery store where a soldier who has just returned stateside scans the cereal aisle in all its overfed glory and wonders why any country needs so many choices.) Close behind was their interpreter, an Afghan-American now entering year four in Afghanistan. Language expertise notwithstanding, the interpreter's gear looked like it came from the Eisenhower era. They all guessed some soldier had worn that helmet back in

Vietnam; it barely held the clips for night-vision goggles and was seriously dinged.

Entering the cramped helicopter, White and Mason were determined not to make a beginner mistake by taking the wrong seat, so they fell in behind a first sergeant, who had taken the new arrivals under his wing. After he sat, they followed his example, snapping a bungee cord that hung from a metal hook on their belt into hooks beneath a narrow metal bench. In theory, these cords would keep them from flying across—or *out* of—the helicopter while it was airborne. The soldiers took root, and with a sudden whirr the bird was off. The only thing Lieutenant White could see through the green haze of the night-vision goggles was a flash from the helicopter's lights as it left the ground.

Here we go, White thought. Outwardly the picture of calm, inside the young officer felt a rush of adrenaline and fear. Everything—the selection process, the training, the deployment—had happened so quickly. Now, suddenly, it was real. For the next nine months this is what every night would look like.

But enough nightdreaming.

Focus, White commanded. Get back to the work at hand. What is the protocol for next steps?

*Brace for landing.*

*Unhook.*

*Evacuate the bird.*

*Run like hell.*

*Take a knee.*

Over the booming engine noise the first sergeant barked out the time stamp in hand signals.

“Six minutes.”

“Three minutes.”

White turned to Mason and gave the thumbs-up with a smile that was full of unfelt confidence.

“One minute.”

*Showtime.*

The bird landed and the door flew open, like the maw of some huge, wild reptile that had descended from the sky. White followed the others and ran a short distance before taking a knee, managing to avoid the worst of the brownout, that swirling mix of dust, stones, and God-only-knows what else that flies upward in the wake of a departing helicopter.

Choking on a batter of dirt and mud, White mumbled inaudibly, *Welcome to Afghanistan*, before rising up to adjust the awkward night-vision goggles that now provided the only lens to the outside world. With barely a word exchanged, the Rangers fell in line and began marching toward the target compound.

The ground crunched beneath their feet as they pressed forward through vineyards and wadis, southern Afghanistan’s ubiquitous ditches and dry riverbeds. They marched quickly, and even though the night goggles made depth perception a nearly impossible challenge White managed not to trip over the many vines that snaked along and across the rutted landscape. No one made a sound. Even a muffled cough could ricochet across the silence and bring unwanted noise into the operation. Every soldier on target knows that surprise is the key to staying alive. And silence is the key to surprise.

Fifteen minutes on they reached their objective, though to White it felt like only a minute had passed. An interpreter’s voice could be heard addressing the men of the house in Pashto, urging them to come outside. A few minutes later the American and Afghan soldiers entered the compound to search for the insurgent and any explosives or weapons he might have hidden inside.

And then Second Lieutenant Ashley White heard the summons that had led her from the warmth of her North Carolina home to one of the world’s most remote—and dangerous—pockets.

“CST, get up here,” called a voice on the radio.

The Rangers were ready for White and her team to get to work.

The trio of female soldiers—White, Mason, and their civilian interpreter, Nadia—strode toward the compound that was bathed in the green haze of their goggles. It was dead in the middle of the night, but for White, the day was just beginning.

Her war story had just begun. It was time for the women to go to work.