

Terminal Pulse

A Codi Sanders Adventure Thriller

By

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Chapter One

January 1945

Dust blew past Axel's face as he peered down at the old barn from his high vantage point. He spit out a mouthful of the coppery earth and blinked several times to clear his vision. He checked the black-and-white map for the tenth time and then gave his compass one last furtive glance. He was sure this was the wrong location. But all the information up to this point that Oberfuhrer Hans Kaufman of the German High Command had given him had been spot on.

Military intelligence in 1945 was a delicate recipe. An intercepted communiqué or even boots on the ground still didn't guarantee accuracy or success. More than once Axel had been blindsided by incomplete or outright false information. At age thirty, he was one of Germany's most experienced field agents.

Axel had spent the last three days on a highway to nowhere. It seemed equal to the entire breadth of Germany without a single turn. This cursed country was just too big and spread out. The desert, though at times beautiful, was not to his liking. And the never-ending sameness could easily lull the senses, or worse, get you lost.

His objective was an old barn in northern Arizona. He'd almost laughed out loud the first time he heard the name; it was such a funny word—Arizona. The weathered green building looked about as threatening to the war effort as Hitler's dog. The wind had picked up in the last few minutes and the sand it carried pelted him without mercy. Axel pulled his collar up around his neck and covered the side of his face with his left arm. He wondered how this could possibly help Germany win the war.

So far, he'd been very successful and if he could find and terminate his next two targets, he would have accomplished what no other agent in the history of the war had. Axel smiled at the thought as he raised his binoculars for one more look. Yep, he was definitely in the wrong place.

Ten days ago, he had slipped ashore onto Cat Island, a five-mile-long, T-shaped spit of dirt seven miles from the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. The U-boat had found a deep channel on the backside to make his egress relatively simple. It had taken only seven minutes once the conning tower of the submarine surfaced until it was back under for Hauptmann Rittmeister Axel Gunther and all his gear to evac. He then swam to shore through the warm current, pulling a rope attached to his wax-coated US Army musette gear bag. The bag was a donation from a captured US Army POW.

The backside of Cat Island was layered. It started with a soft sandy beach that gave way to saw grass and finally to a clogged forest of trees and swamp. It was void of all life except for mosquitoes and water moccasins. Snakes didn't bother Axel, but mosquitoes, that was another story. The annoying buzz around your ears, the sneak attacks that left you scratching for days. The little blood suckers were undoubtedly the worst of God's creations and they were copious on Cat Island.

The far side of the island hosted the US Army's secret war dog reception and training center. And every now and then he could hear a distant bark carried on the light sea breeze. Axel smirked as he recalled reading the details of the facility. The sole purpose of the center was to train dogs to detect and attack Japanese soldiers based on their unique scent. The army had grabbed twenty-five Japanese Americans and conscripted them to act as bait for the attack dogs. *What a waste of war funds, he thought. Surely the Americans were doomed to lose this war.*

Axel's footprints left a trail in the soft sand as he pushed past the beach and through the saw grass. He picked his way through the forest of pine and water oaks, trying in vain to keep the mosquitoes at bay. The underbrush was thick and impassable. He glanced back out at the ocean one last time. There was no sign of the U-boat that had brought him, just the sliver of a waning moon dancing off the silvery reflection of the water.

There was no turning back. His country was counting on him and Axel would do everything in his power to succeed. At five-foot-ten, Axel had a lean, muscular torso that read like a history book of previous missions: two scarred-over bullet holes and a C-shaped scar as a result of a knife fight he had nearly lost in Norway. Currently he was sporting a full beard and wild, matted brown hair.

It took nearly an hour of scrabbling through the tangled growth to go the half mile to the other side of the island. Twice he had to swim and crawl through fetid pools. Axel paused to catch his breath. He dropped his burdensome gear bag in the sand. The air was pungent with salt and rotten vegetation and the subtle warm breeze did little to cool his sweat-drenched face. But the sight of twinkling lights in the distance sent a small quiver down his spine. *America.*

He quickly got to work inflating a small Army Air Corp life raft that had been acquired for this mission. Nothing was left to chance. Even his clothes matched those of an American airman, just in case he was discovered. Axel felt the prick of a bite on the back of his neck and swatted it. This was going to be a long night.

He quickly launched the raft into the calm water and began his long trip to the mainland. He estimated it would take four to five hours to reach the marina he had in mind. He set a pace that would allow him to maintain a consistent three knots. At least he was saying goodbye to the mosquitoes.

The first inklings of light strafed the sky and started the perpetual morning transition from black to purple. Axel used his Rohm SS dagger to quickly deflate the raft and a loose cleat from the dock to help send it to the bottom of the marina. The dagger was his one ode to the fatherland that he had brought with him. He would never forget the moment Oberfuhrer Hans Kaufman had given it to him.

Hans was the closest thing to a father Axel had left in the world. It was Hans who pushed him to get involved with the Nazi Party and ultimately the SS, where his skills helped make him one of the most successful operatives in Germany. Axel was given the knife after completing a difficult mission three months prior in Liverpool.

Walter Gerlach, a leading German physicist involved in Germany's atomic development, had been captured by the British while on a train to Dusseldorf. He was then secreted out of the country. Walter Gerlach knew too much and the thought of the allies interrogating him was untenable at any level by the German high command. Posing as a Canadian colonel, Axel had gotten close enough to slip an ice pick into the right ear canal of the physicist. The act had caused such an intense manhunt that Axel had to abandon his planned escape route. It took two weeks and a lot of clever duplicity before he made his way back onto German soil.

Axel slipped the venerated knife back into a hidden sleeve just inside his coat. He crouched behind a battered crate at the end of a wooden pier and took in his surroundings. Thirty boats lay moored in the quaint harbor, some sailboats but mostly shrimpers. Single-masted diesel power boats with an open deck around a central cabin; each with a steep prow. The waterfront had its unique odor of diesel and rotted shrimp. The air was still and all was tranquil except for the normal clanking of cables and stays against their masts.

Axel's eyes finally fell upon a boat that would fit his needs. He grabbed his musette bag and silently moved towards her. The boat was named *Tiger Shark*, but nothing about her looks matched the moniker. The hull was painted a light blue that was mostly covered in rust, though how an old wooden hull had rusted was a mystery to him. A faded red cabin sat up by the bow and a single rigged mast followed behind with a flat deck work area behind it. He silently placed his gear bag over the transom on the aft deck and boarded.

Axel stepped past a mound of nets and carefully maneuvered around the detritus littering the deck. He reached for the tarnished bronze latch on the cabin door and then froze at the sound of movement inside. The owner was aboard and awake.

He pulled out his 9mm British Welrod silenced pistol. It had been confiscated from a dead spy in Norway and Axel had to agree it was perfect for this mission. The pistol was designed at the Inter-Services Research Bureau for use by irregular forces. It had a 1.25-inch-diameter cylinder that was twelve inches long. It used a ported barrel and multiple baffles to diffuse sound and, at the same time, slow the bullet down to subsonic speed. The knurled knob at the rear served as the bolt handle. The in-grip magazine held eight bullets. The Welrod could be fired as fast as you could recycle the bolt and in close range was as deadly as it was quiet.

Axel slid through the hatch door to the cabin and without hesitation shot the boat's owner. One to the torso and the one to the head. The owner barely had time to register the intrusion.

One down, many to go.

Chapter Two

Cruising up the Mississippi River was new for Axel. The muddy water held her secrets and the wall of vegetation on her banks made it difficult to see the river from land. Only the occasional shoreline town broke the monotony. But the *Tiger Shark's* 13R Grey one-lung diesel engine held steady and strong with its distinctive *chug, chug* sound as it pushed north upriver.

It had been six months since D-Day and the Americans were proving to be a real problem for Germany. Axel held high hopes that this mission would make a difference. He had adopted some of the boat owner's clothes and together with his wild hair and beard that he had grown out during his Atlantic crossing, he fit the part perfectly—just another wild fisherman plying the local waters in search of a living.

As the breeze off the water cooled his face, he allowed himself time to reflect. This was what he had trained for. This was for his father and his country. If he kept his wits, everything would work out. After all, America was at war, so everyone was preoccupied. No one would take notice of a man who seemed to fit right in.

Private Andrew Rollins stood stock straight at attention. Even though it was night he could feel the heat radiating off the tarmac. The recent rain did nothing to quell the humidity or the temperature. But Andrew was used to the heat. He had been raised in a wooden shanty fifty miles from here. His daddy had spent almost every waking hour working the cotton fields for a nearby plantation. His momma was a strong woman who had literally beaten him into manhood, so at the first chance Andrew got, he ran off. His plan was to join the Coast Guard or the Army.

The Army said yes, but just barely. What he didn't know was that they had very little use for an uneducated black private.

Twelve weeks of boot camp was simple compared to how things were back home. Private Rollins distinguished himself in the physical components, but his lack of education made the mental part a struggle. The fact that he was a quick learner however, saved him in the end. Following boot camp, Private Andrew Rollins was loaded into a transport truck along with twenty-five of his fellow soldiers and dropped off here. Wherever here was, was anybody's guess.

"Ten-hut!" The new sergeant in charge approached. The enlisted men scrambled to assemble themselves, each one of them eager to serve his country. Private Andrew Rollins quickly filed in and stood ramrod straight at attention. His new uniform was the nicest set of clothes he'd ever owned. He would repay the army with only his best effort.

The sergeant walked up and down the line. Each man held his eyes forward, no one daring to make eye contact. The only sound was distant crickets sounding off in the night. "Riding herd over a bunch of Negroes is not my idea of a good time," the sergeant said. "But when the Army assigned you bunch to me, they said you were special. Is that right? Are you special?"

He was met with silence.

"I can't hear you!"

"Sir, no, sir!"

"I didn't think so. You there, step forward." The sergeant was clearly pointing at Private Rollins.

Rollins did a double-take and then stepped forward, blinking the sweat from his eyes. He tried to exhibit the best of attention ever displayed.

“I want *you*, Private...?” The sergeant looked at Rollins in anticipation of an answer.

“Private Rollins, sir!”

“...Private Rollins to make sure that all you ‘volunteers’ report to building F-12. Is that clear?”

He said *volunteers* in his most belittling way, but Rollins wasn’t going to take the bait. “Yes, sir,” He said with a false bravado. “Sir, where is building F-12?” He instantly regretted the question.

The sergeant walked right up to Rollins and stood nose-to-nose. Rollins could smell the collard greens and grits on the tyrant’s breath. “Am I gonna have trouble with you?”

“No sir. Just a bit lost, sir.”

The sergeant held his gaze and then started a slow nod. “Building F-12 is one hundred yards due east.” He pointed. “You’ll recognize it by the F-12 printed on the door. You know what an F is?”

Rollins nodded eagerly.

The sergeant continued to stare down the private. Rollins smartly dipped his head in defeat.

“Dismissed.” The sergeant spun on his heels and walked off.

Rollins took a moment to collect himself. One of his friends from boot camp put his hand on his shoulder and they shared a silent, *that was close*. Private Andrew Rollins then gathered the men and the all-African American squad marched to building F-12.

Major Lou Grubbs watched as his team double-checked their equipment. He was proud of his work and knew that one day he would be personally responsible for helping end the war. At fifty-five, Grubbs was no figure of health. His obsessive personality, combined with a poor diet and zero exercise, had his blood pressure and his body fat high.

Fletcher Army Airfield, outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi, was well off the beaten path. The Major's little collection of "F" buildings weren't on any map. In fact, the top-secret classification kept his project very isolated from the well-publicized pilot training that the rest of the base was engaged in. Other than an additional security fence, it was all on a need-to-know basis.

"All set to go, sir," his corporal said.

"Good. Make sure the men get in and situated."

"Will do, sir."

Building F-12 was one of six wooden structures arranged in a U pattern. They were painted Army green and had grey asphalt-shingled roofs. In a word—unremarkable. The corporal unlocked and opened the door to building F-12. Private Rollins led his squad inside where there were three rows of wooden benches mounted to a forward slanting concrete floor. Two bare bulbs hung from the rafters and tried to illuminate the room. A large reflective glass panel was built into the front wall and four eight-inch drain grates ran along the floor in front of it. Baby poop-colored brown paint covered everything.

Private Rollins felt a sense of pride that he had been asked to lead the squad and was now delivering on the sergeant's orders. He couldn't wait to write his folks back home in Haynesville and tell 'em all about it. A special mission and *he* was in charge. Well, one of the leaders, anyway. That would set momma straight.

He waited until his squad was seated and then joined them, sitting on the edge of the front bench. The corporal moved to the front of the room and got everyone's attention. "The Army would like to thank you for your participation today." He moved as he talked and didn't look anyone in the eye. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Axel stayed low as he serpented across the empty field. Breaching the boundary of the base had required some stealth, but here inside the second perimeter fence there were no guards, just a collection of wooden buildings, each marked with the letter F followed by a number. He found a stack of five-gallon gas cans beside one of the buildings. One thing the US had in the 1940's was plenty of gas for its military. He quickly modified his plan and went to work.

Rollins beamed as the corporal exited and closed the door behind him. But his smile froze when the door made the sound of being locked from the outside. A speaker that hung from one of the rafters squawked and came to life. An emotionless voice cut in. "Hello. I want to thank you for being part of this test group. Your service to this country is much appreciated." From inside the control room Major Grubbs spoke into the microphone while he watched the soldiers through the one-way mirror.

"We will be running a few simple tests. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, please raise your hand and we will stop the exercise. Once again, thank you for volunteering. Your efforts today will help save thousands of allied lives."

Grubbs turned off the microphone and glanced at his corporal. "It's time," he said. "Batch 1023 first run, twenty-five subjects."

The corporal then twisted three levers and returned to the one-way mirror with a clipboard and pencil in hand. He casually wrote down the batch number and subject count.

Inside building F-12, a yellowish-grey smoke began to waft through the air. Concern turned to murmuring and then commotion, but everyone held their seats.

Private Rollins stared, disbelieving, as the smoke spread its way through the room. “What the hell?”

Someone in the back screamed like he’d been burned or maybe stung and immediately hands started to rise. Soon everyone was raising their arms and shaking them to make sure they were seen.

Then the second scream let loose. Whatever this gas was, it was literally melting their skin. Two men from the back row jumped up and ran for the exit door. When it wouldn’t open, complete chaos ensued. The soldiers fought to break out of the room. Rollins stood back trying to put meaning to the moment. Some of the men had fallen to the ground, their faces unrecognizable. Their bodies twitched and convulsed with pain.

Inside the control room, Major Grubbs looked at the mayhem in a detached way. “Forty-five seconds to complete loss of control,” the corporal said more to himself than to anyone in particular.

“Excellent,” Grubbs said. “Looks like we have a viable solution. Let’s get another group in here right away to confirm the results.”

Private Rollins ran to the glass and pounded it with his fists as hard as he could, each impact leaving more and more of his flesh on the mirror. His lips and half of his face had already sagged to the floor. His mind now completely gone mad with pain, he managed one last thought before he collapsed—Momma was right. Never trust whitey.

Grubbs turned from the glass and sat down at his desk. He went through and double-checked his notes. The corporal turned off the gas valves and then flicked the switch to the exhaust fans. He watched as the smoke in F-12 was carried away, revealing a visage of carnage few would ever see.

Major Grubbs smelled it first. Smoke. “Shut down the exhaust! Something is burning.” He grabbed the gas mask off a post and put it on. His lab assistants followed suit and moved for the exit. But it wouldn’t open. Something was blocking the door. Flames were starting to break through. “What’s happening here?”

“The building’s on fire, sir.”

Grubbs ran to the water valve that controlled ceiling sprinklers for just this event. He spun it to the open position—but nothing happened. The flames were now all around him and he quickly realized the hopelessness of it all. Sabotage.

He started grabbing all of his notes and files. He must save the research at any cost. Flaming pieces started falling from the ceiling, starting more fires. An assistant triggered the one fire extinguisher they had and fire-retardant foam shot out to delay the inevitable. Another flaming chunk of roof dropped and hit Grubbs. His hair went up in flames. Desperate, he started smacking his head with his lab notes to put out the flames and they caught fire too.

Building F-12 suddenly erupted in an enormous fireball. The three cans of gasoline that had been strategically placed had finally overheated. It consumed what was left of the twenty-five-man squad, the observation lab and the two bordering structures. Major Grubbs’ body was transformed into charred ash along with everything he had been working on. This was the kind of blaze that consumed wooden structures with ease. And before it could be contained, there

would be nothing left but six building-sized piles of ash and a blackened perimeter security fence.

Axel scooted across the road, back to the boundary fence from where he had come. Glancing back, he allowed himself a brief moment of satisfaction. This was a proud moment for Germany. He hoped his dad was watching. He took the time to repair the hole he'd made in the fence and to remove any trace of his infiltration before disappearing into the night.

Chapter Three

Lieutenant Colonel James Whitsole sat in a booth in his favorite café. Louise's had two things going for it: the food was all-American and it was close to one of the largest military bases in Kansas, Strother Army Airfield. Plus, it had one of the first Wurlitzer model 1015's in the state. *Rum and Coca-Cola* by the Andrews Sisters played on what would become known as a jukebox. James sipped his coffee while he absently pushed around his remaining hash browns. A thought popped into his head and he pulled his ubiquitous notebook and a pencil from his pocket and jotted down something. Across the room at a booth sat two MP's who kept a wary eye on him. Sign of the times, James thought.

James, also known as The Professor, wore a white collared shirt with khaki pants. As far as he was concerned, his military rank was their idea, not his. He may be working for the Army Air Corps but he didn't have to advertise. After all, he was a distinguished scientist who'd proven his worth both in academia and in the practical world as well. He glanced at his waitress. She was a touch over forty and clinging to her fading good looks. Her sizeable rack strained just enough against her uniform to get attention.

He tried to remember her name, but that wasn't his thing.

"Professor, can I get you anything else?"

It snapped him out of his reverie and he slyly glanced at her nametag. "No thanks, Rita, I'm good. Just the check, please."

She smiled and set the check on the gingham tablecloth next to him.

As James headed out to his car, the two MP's followed. "I really wish you two would wait for me at the base," he said.

"Those aren't our orders, sir," one replied.

"What's gonna happen to me in the middle of Kansas? Better watch out 'cause Rita's serving extra spicy sausage."

The two MP's shared a frustrated glance. They couldn't agree more. The war was not here. They needed to dump this asshole and get into the real action overseas. But orders were orders.

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Axel, now clean-shaven with his hair cut high and tight, lowered his binoculars from across the street in his stolen '37 Buick coupe, a two-tone cream-and-black hardtop. Its signature blade-like nose and bullet headlights helped conceal the powerful valve-in-head straight-eight-cylinder engine.

It had belonged to a couple traveling out of Chicago who had been kind enough to give him a lift. He had left their bodies in a small ravine two counties back.

The best part of the vehicle was attached to the inside of the Buick's windshield, an X gas-rationing sticker. Unlike the common A or B stickers which were limited to four or eight gallons per week, the X sticker allowed for unlimited fill-ups.

Axel breathed in the sweet pungent odor of the unfiltered American cigarette. Using his thumb and ring finger, he grabbed and flicked off a speck of tobacco from his tongue. Finally his patience had paid off.

He watched as the professor and his two bodyguards exited the café, got into a jeep and drove off. Axel was dressed in clothes that mirrored the professor's, a white collared shirt and

khakis he had purchased at the local Woolworths. He had washed the clothes along with a half-cup of coffee to give them a lived-in look, the look that just about everyone in America had right now.

Axel strode with confidence over to Louise's Café, while whistling *Yankee Doodle*. He gestured and smiled to a young couple leaving the diner. She was wearing a polka-dot skirt and a white round-collar blouse. He was wearing a leather bomber jacket and crutches. The man pulled out a cigarette and checked his pockets for a match. Without hesitation, Axel pulled out his lighter, saying, "Allow me."

The tip glowed red and the man thanked Axel as he and the woman left the diner.

Axel chose a booth in the back with a full view of the diner. He waited as Rita came over. "Howdy, little lady," he said in perfect English. "Coffee and two eggs over easy with bacon."

Rita smiled and took the order.

Axel had spent seven years of his youth in Detroit. His father, whom he idolized, was one of the top engineers for Opel Auto Manufacturing. In a business arrangement with the Dodge brothers, Opel was co-developing a new line of trucks that could haul loads over virtually any landscape.

During his time in Detroit, Axel's mother helped him learn all things American. His English became faultless and his ability to fit in uncanny. He even played baseball and ate apple pie.

German Military Intelligence had later seized upon these skills and thus began his intensive training program. Learning to shoot and kill was important, but he quickly found that his natural ability to fit in and disarm people with a smile or a phrase was priceless. He could beguile even the most cautious person.

When Axel's father was killed during an American bombing raid on the Opel truck plant in Russelsheim, something changed in Axel. What had always seemed like a game to him was suddenly something very real. He became obsessed with beating the Americans at all costs, blaming them for the loss of his father and making Axel the perfect choice for this deep-cover complex operation.

Before Axel left the docks in Hamburg, his surrogate father, Hans, came to see him off. They shared a coffee and a bratwurst at a *gasthaus* café. The sun made a rare appearance for that time of year and Axel took that as a good omen. Hans looked him in the eye and said, "Four targets are a lot for anyone. Take your time, don't get in a hurry and savor each kill." Axel smiled at the advice; he knew Hans was right. "Your father would be so proud of the man you've become."

Axel dipped his head for a second and then looked Hans in the eye. "Thank you for seeing me off," he said. He stood, saluted and left for America.

During the weeks it took to deliver him to the gulf coast, Axel spent his time going over every detail of his mission and committing them to memory, as it would be impossible to explain his way out of having these types of documents in his possession. He listened to wax recordings of popular American music and was given a few radio broadcasts from the Chicago ABC affiliate. He committed everything to memory so he could whistle a popular tune or talk about the latest anything-American to anyone he met.

Four targets in four weeks and then he was to be picked up off the shore of a little cove north of San Diego. Every detail and contingency had been thought of, but Axel knew plans rarely survived first contact with the enemy. And as a German spy on American soil, he was the enemy.

So far, however, his raid on the clandestine weaponized gases testing base in Mississippi had gone off with out any issues. He had watched in the distance as the fires he set had taken out the entire facility. By the time fire crews arrived, the wooden structures were all ablaze. Now he was on to his next operation, the assassination of one of the greatest avionics masterminds in America.

Professor James Whitsole, a man known for keeping his research to himself until it was fully developed, was currently working on a long-range radar system small enough to fit on a plane. He had an idea for a reduced power source using low-power gas tubes filled with argon rather than nitrogen gas. The initial tests were very promising.

Axel watched as Rita brought his breakfast over to him. “Here you go,” she said. “Can I refill your coffee?”

“Sure. Wasn’t that Professor Whitsole that was just in here?”

Rita braced at the stranger’s question. “Yeah, why?”

“Oh, I’m Fred and I’m being transferred here to Strother. I’m supposed to be working with him starting tomorrow.”

Rita’s posture relaxed “Sorry. You know what they say, ‘loose lips sink ships.’”

“Exactly.”

“He’s a great man, comes in here every morning and eats the same thing. He likes his routines, I guess. Always writing in that notebook of his. Plus, he always remembers my name.”

“Is that so? Maybe tomorrow you can introduce me so I can get a leg up on my new job?”

Rita tugged at the red scarf in her chestnut hair. “Okay. But it’ll cost you.”

Axel looked up at her with a big smile and all the flirt he had in him. “Deal. As soon as I get settled, how ’bout dinner tomorrow night?”

Trying not to sound too anxious, Rita said, “That’d be lovely.” She couldn’t contain her smile as she walked off to serve another customer. Axel’s eyes lingered on Rita’s slim waist and ran down to her still-firm ass. Just maybe this job would have a few perks, he thought.

The moon hid behind a wall of clouds making their trek across the plains. Strother Army Airfield had something very important going on. Axel looked out at the lights and the guards stationed every couple-hundred feet. He was parked on a small dirt turnout several hundred yards away. The constant stream of aircraft coming and going made for good distractions, but the guards paid little heed, keeping their focus on the perimeter. Plus, there was no cover for at least a hundred yards out from the fence in every direction, leaving no easy way in.

Sunrise and sunset in Kansas look identical. The never-ending flat horizon has a mirroring effect. Axel awoke to his internal alarm as the first rays of orange spread across the sky. He was shaved, dressed and inside Louise’s diner just before the jeep with two bodyguards and Professor Whitsole arrived. He was anxious to finish this assignment and move to the next, but Han’s advice echoed back at him. Patience.

The coffee was just how Axel liked it, hot and black. He sipped with a relaxed exterior pose, while on the inside he was on full alert. He held no illusions of what would happen should he be caught.

Rita’s good mood effervesced. She carried her emotions on her sleeve, excited about her date with the handsome new scientist that night. Her constant doting was getting to Axel, but he played along.

Eventually the place started filling up and she had to attend to other customers. Professor Whitsole ate his usual breakfast at his usual table, with his two bodyguards sitting at the bar

keeping watch—truly a man of routine. As the check was brought over to the professor, Axel could see Rita whisper something in his ear. The professor looked Axel straight in the eyes. Axel did his best to look casual and smiled with a little wave. The professor paused to consider things and then eventually smiled back and nodded.

Axel pulled out the ring he had brought with him and slipped it onto his finger. It was made of burnished gold and looked like a class ring with an engraved eagle surrounded by a bezel of oak leaves with two crossed swords at the bottom. But this was not your average ring, because when the bezel was rotated, a small pin-like spike emerged between the eagle's claws. The spike was coated with a specialized chemical developed by his friends back at the medical division of the Schutzstaffel, commonly referred to as the SS. All Axel had to do was break the skin with the spike and the chemical would do the rest.

Axel rotated the ring so that the spike was facing outward from his palm. He had to be careful not to graze his own hand on the sharp spike. He looked up as the professor walked towards him. Axel stood up.

Immediately sensing something was amiss, the two bodyguards got up and moved in. The professor waved them off with a frustrated look and walked up to Axel and said, "So you're part of the new group?"

"I am."

"What's your specialty?"

"Now, Professor, you know I can't talk about that here."

"Of course, all these stupid rules. After you get checked in, come by my lab so I can see what you'll be good for."

"I look forward to it." Axel reached out and shook the professor's hand.

“Ouch!” The professor jerked his hand back reflexively.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Axel said. “This stupid old ring.”

The professor rubbed his hand. “Quite all right,” he said, not meaning it. “I’ll see you later.” He stormed off in a huff with his bodyguards in tow.

Rita came bounding up as Axel rotated the bezel of his ring to cover the spike and then spun it back around his finger. She handed him a scrap of paper with her address. He acted as if nothing else mattered other than her. “Great. Pick you up at, say, seven?”

“That would be perfect.”

He glanced at her large breasts packed into her uniform and felt almost disappointed he would miss the foray.

Just then, out of the corner of his eye he saw the professor drop to the ground outside by his jeep. Axel tried to look astounded as people from the diner moved to see what was happening. But he knew the professor wasn’t long for this world. The two bodyguards were in a panic as their charge lay jerking on the ground. They quickly loaded him into the jeep and sped off to the base.

Rita spun around, saying, “Did you see—”

Axel was nowhere to be found.

Chapter Four

The binoculars revealed a weathered green barn that looked like it was built directly against a sandstone cliff. The barn was the classic style, two-story with a hayloft up top and a pitched roof. On the main level were two small windows on either side of a large rolling door. A small light glowed from the galvanized fixture outside, painting the front wall with an inverted V-shaped glow and illuminating a collection of unused farm equipment outside. A 1938 Ford flatbed pickup truck was just recognizable in the shadows haphazardly parked nearby. The darkness made its paint color unidentifiable.

This was definitely the wrong place. But until he had officially checked it off his list he had to take a quick look inside. Axel looked at the moonless sky covered in black clouds. There would never be a better time to make his move, so he did.

Years of training instantly kicked in as he dropped down off the slight berm he had been hiding on and quickly covered the distance across the field to the farm equipment outside the barn. He crouched beside an old disc plow that had more rust on it than an unpainted iron rivet in a sea wall.

Axel strained his hearing for anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing but the occasional cricket. This was definitely the wrong place. He considered moving to his next target, which he felt was the most important of them all, a physicist by the name of Robert Oppenheimer who was just to the south of where he was, working in secret at a laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico. Axel had something very special planned for him.

After listening to nothing but crickets for three more minutes Axel stood and casually walked towards the barn doors, just to be sure. Then he heard a loud clank and instinct took over. He was flat against the barn door in a flash. He waited a second and then slipped inside.

In an instant, Axel knew he was in the right place. The barn was built up against a large sandstone cavern that easily went back a hundred yards. Evenly spaced work lights illuminated four large radio-style towers in the center of the cavern. Beyond that was a large concentration of equipment that looked electrical in nature. The air smelled of ozone and he noticed that the hairs on his arms were standing on end.

He pulled the Welrod from its holster and cycled the rear bolt. He could hear some sort of tinkering in the distance over by an electrical apparatus. *Jingle Jangle Jingle* by Kay Kyser played on a static-filled radio in the background. Axel carefully made his way to the back of the barn. Wooden barn beams and unused apparatus gave way to a concrete floor with sandstone walls and ceiling. This place was not guarded because it was so well disguised. He wondered how his superiors had known of its existence.

A worker in a lab coat stepped out in front of Axel from behind a large metal console and for a brief second both men recoiled in surprise, but Axel wasted no time putting a bullet in the young man's forehead before he could call out.

Axel quickly cycled the slide-knob on the back of his weapon, ducked behind a coil of wire and tried to re-establish his surroundings. He could just make out another figure in the distance who was singing along with the song. "I got spurs that jingle jangle jingle." Spotting through the glowing fluorescent-painted sights on his weapon, Axel tried to get an accurate site, but equipment blocked the singing man. He moved into the space between the radio towers to get a better shot, but the subject again moved out of view. Axel slowly started creeping forward.

The man yelled, "Jackson, Test number 237 coming up. You ready?"

Axel put on his best American accent from the southwest and said, "Yep!"

The two radio towers started to hum. Then an ethereal glow started to emanate from the tops of the towers. Axel was mesmerized by the display, but soon realized he was not in a good location. He quickly moved for cover, but before he could go two steps, a giant ball of lightning formed between the towers and fired straight at him.

The last thing Axel thought before it hit him was, how he had let his father down and would never see his beloved motherland again. The ball pulsed once and then was gone. The only thing left behind was the Welrod silenced pistol and the Rohm SS Dagger he had carried in his boot.

Hauptmann Rittmeister Axel Gunther had vanished.

Chapter Five

Current Day

Codi sat with a definitive plop. She placed her hands behind her head and interlocked her fingers. Her shoulder-length brown hair swayed behind her. The frayed government issued black chair squeaked from lack of use but managed to allow a slight recline. She looked from her half-empty coffee cup over to the stack of boxes labeled with her name. Lieutenant Colette Sanders was printed in a very generic font on the worn cardboard boxes that had been delivered and stacked in no particular order. Codi flicked away a crop of stray hairs that had fallen in her face and paused a moment to take in her new surroundings.

The ten-by-twelve beige office with no windows and one door had the distinct smell of bleach and old carpet. That's when it hit her how far from her life's goals she had fallen. The normally unbending will that helped define and push her surrendered to emotion. It started to overwhelm her. First a burning in her chest and then excess water in the eyes. But this was not the time or place. She exhaled hard several times and let the sensation dwindle. *Get ahold of yourself.*

It was day one of her new job. Codi flicked the moisture from her eyes with her middle finger and gathered herself. She reached for the now cold cup of coffee and twisted at the bitter taste. It seemed every federal agency had bad coffee. But it was just what she needed to help regain some control. A knock on the door yanked her back to the present. With the back of her hand she dabbed at the rest of her tears and called, "Enter."

Marcus Beckman, a polished cover your ass, political maneuverer, cleared his throat. His star was trending at the agency and he knew it, “Hey, hi,” he said. “Welcome to the GSA. So you’re the new girl.” He elongated out the last part of his sentence.

Codi couldn’t see him over her boxes, so she quickly put on a so-happy-to-meet-you smile and stood to shake Marcus’s hand. A quick furtive glance told her everything she needed to know about the six foot, olive skinned, overconfident man in front of her. Narcissist. *Great I’ve had my fill of those.*

“Lieutenant Colette Sanders, si—”

She caught herself mid-sentence. An awkward moment passed between them.

“We don’t use that sort of formality here,” Marcus said. “Colette, is it?”

“Everybody calls me Codi.”

Marcus sized her up and liked what he saw. The new agent was about five-eight, brunette and stunning. She had an athletic figure and a perfectly proportioned rack that captured his undisciplined eyes. He quickly forced his eyes back up to her face and was met with intense brown eyes with flecks of gold. “I’m Agent Beckman, Marcus. Nice to meet you, Codi. I see they gave you Butler’s old office.”

“Butler?”

“Some loser who couldn’t hack it.” Marcus spoke as though he had personally fired Butler. “After you get your stuff settled, come by and I’ll give you the ‘tour.’ Last office on the left.”

“Sounds great,” she said. If only she meant it. His words sounded fine, but the creep alarms going off in her head could not be ignored. And the way he said *tour* left no doubt as to his intentions.

Thankfully, after Codi flashed him her fake smile, he left.

Codi followed him to the door and turned the lock as he closed it behind him. She mechanically let her fit muscles lower her slowly to the floor, knees bent, back pressed firmly against the door. She absently rubbed her left ankle as an emotional wave engulfed her. Hopelessness and despair swelled, threatening to take on physical proportions. A dark place called to her and Codi fought to stay the hell away. It was a battle she had lost and won over the last six months.

Back then, things were a bit different for Codi.

“Down, down! Cover fire!” someone shouted.

Codi dropped flat and rolled right into a small depression in the mud just as a three-round burst stitched the ground where she had just been. The twenty-six-week SEAL qualification training program was almost over. She had excelled where others had failed. Being the only female in her group didn't help, since the entire program was clearly modeled after a boys' club.

Other females had paved the way and she was determined to carry on. The BUD/S (basic underwater demolition) School was relatively easy for her, as she was a natural in the water and always had been. But she had to overcome her fear of heights to complete the parachutist course. Once she was chosen for SEAL training, she felt like she could do anything, even if most of the other candidates wouldn't give her the time of day.

This was competition personified and nothing punctuated that more than the bell of shame, a brass bell that hung on a post where morning musters took place. When you couldn't take any more or go on, all you had to do was ring the bell. She had watched as several other

soldiers had succumbed to the rigors of the training, each eventually just wanting to make it stop. With the pull of a string they were done.

Truth be told, night after night, in freezing cold conditions, without sleep, there wasn't one applicant that hadn't considered ringing the bell, but the walk of shame up to that bell left a permanent stain. For Codi, failure was never an option. No matter what, SEALs don't fail and nothing could sway her in that direction.

She had something to prove to herself and to her father who had been taken when she was just thirteen. She used him as a spirit guide in her life and more than once had pushed herself beyond her limits to please the figment in her mind. The relationship had worked and in spite of a high-priced psychologist, she had held on to her imagined father and used him to gain inner strength. Together they had succeeded where others had failed.

Codi popped her head up just long enough to get off two three-round bursts down range on target and then dropped back down as return fire nicked the ground around her head. She gripped her colt M4A1 assault rifle with its 5.56mm NATO rounds. This was it—go time. “Cover me!” she screamed as she jumped up to storm the bunker they were trying to breach.

A klaxon sounded as a voice came over the loudspeakers. “Stand down; end of drill. I say again, end of drill. All cadets meet in the war room for debriefing.”

Codi sloughed off the excess mud that clung to her like a hungry parasite. Somehow she had survived another exercise where her team leader had given her the shit job. Two previous encounters had proven that most of these macho soldiers had no respect for her and did whatever they could get away with to pressure her into quitting. What they didn't know was that that sort of harassment only made her dig her heels in deeper and fight even harder. After all, she'd made it through hell week and often beat them at their own game.

Growing up north of San Diego, most people would think that Codi had had it easy. But after her dad passed, she became a latchkey kid with a mother who would dip into depression and disappear for days at a time. They moved every year or so, her mother in search of a new job. In time, Codi found that the only person she could really count on was herself. She had used that as a motivator to find her independence and stand on her own. In high school, she found that few people were as fast as she was in the water and she capitalized on that ability to pay for college. After graduation, in spite of several promising opportunities, Codi joined the Marines as an enlisted soldier. She had something to prove and nothing would get in her way. Now, three years later, as a SEAL trainee, she was determined that no one or nothing would break her.

Codi's eyes snapped open. She had been asleep for only a short while. It was somewhere between one and three in the morning. It was cold and it was raining. They were fifteen miles outside the base on a four-day maneuver. Something was moving off to her right. She could sense it. The rest of her squad was still asleep. With the crazy hours they kept, one quickly learned to sleep when you could.

She tapped Corporal Westmire next to her, the one guy in the squad she really trusted. He was instantly awake. Codi gestured with her hands—two fingers pointed at her eyes and then pushed together pointing to where the intruder was, followed by three fingers held up: three possible tangos were headed to their position from the south. Westmire stealthily alerted the others and they were quickly on their feet and spreading out into a defensive formation.

The group was going on three hours' sleep in the last seventy-two hours. They were cold and mostly exhausted from the non-stop physical exertion. Appearing from nowhere, their

instructor stepped from the dark followed by two assistants. He looked the squad over and barked, “Everyone up that tree now!”

There was a large tree twenty feet away. The lowest branch was at least fifteen feet up. The group didn’t hesitate. This would require serious teamwork and they were ready.

Codi and the corporal set up a human platform that the other trainees used to attempt to scale the tree. The squad leader pushed off and got his hands around the branch, but it was wet. Just as he started to pull himself up, he slipped fifteen feet down, bounced off Codi and hit the ground flat on his back. Everyone stopped, not sure what to do. He struggled to get to his knees and take a breath. The instructor walked around the tree once and said, “Now you’ve got four minutes.”

The squad leader sucked it up and tried again. This time he got a full grasp around the branch and hauled himself up. Others followed until it was Codi’s turn. She pushed off with everything she had and got a firm grip on the squad leader’s hand that was reaching down. She dug her feet into the trunk and held tight to his hand while he pulled her up. She slipped a bit on the wet trunk but recovered and continued to climb. Just as she was within reach of the branch, she felt his grip loosen. She looked up into his eyes and could tell something was off. “No, no, don’t you dare!” she screamed at him.

She tried to reach for the branch and caught just a finger on it. But it was too late. The rain and the *male only* military mindset conspired together and Codi fell. She tried desperately to tuck and roll when she hit, but the cracking sound and the shooting pain in her ankle told her it was futile. She looked down to see the distorted shape of her ankle. It was broken and so was everything that mattered to her at that moment in life.

The bell of shame rang loudly and Codi wasn't going to let them see her cry. Then it rang again and again. What the... Codi snapped out of it as her cellphone brought her back to reality—her new office. She grabbed the phone and hit the green button. “This is Codi.”

“Girl, you're here! I'm so excited. When do you get off today, cause we gots to celebrate.”

Codi's BFF, Katelyn Green, lived in DC and worked for the office of Senator Hightower from Wyoming. She was outgoing and had been the genesis of several regrets over the years for Codi. They had met in a Poli Sci class at University of California San Diego and had been best friends ever since. Katelyn's curvy figure and carefree attitude got the boys' attention, but Codi's athletic build and genuine charm kept them around.

They set a date to meet after work at the Black Cat on Fourteenth NW. Codi hung up and stared at nothing for a second. She would put the past behind her for the moment. Even the last six months where darkness and depression seemed to rule the day.

Codi pressed into a standing position and opened her office door. “Okay,” she said to herself, “time to show 'em what you got.”