

While Hackett shuffled through some papers on his desk, Brodie looked over at his partner. She was looking at Hackett, or rather, looking through him with a kind of glazed-over expression that Brodie had come to recognize as a sign of deep concentration. She had gotten that look a couple of times down in Kentucky. Once was right before she made a big break in the case. The other was at the Fort Campbell mess hall, while assessing the edibility of the meat loaf.

Now Brodie wondered if she was thinking what he was thinking—that Venezuela had been in the news a lot lately, and not for anything good. Who in their right mind would escape one shithole for another?

“So here’s what we have,” Hackett said, looking up from his papers. “A former U.S. Army sergeant named Alfred Simpson saw Mercer in Caracas. Simpson and Mercer knew each other well. They were in basic training and advanced infantry training together before Mercer went to OCS at Fort Benning and Simpson was assigned to the Fourth Brigade Combat Team, Fourth Infantry Division, at Fort Carson.

“Two weeks ago, Simpson was in Caracas on business. He now works as an oil industry consultant. One night, execs from the Venezuelan state oil company, PDVSA, take him to the Marriott hotel lounge, and after a couple drinks he spots a guy sitting alone at the bar. He thinks it looks like his old buddy Kyle Mercer. Simpson, like most of America, knows that Mercer deserted, and he saw the Taliban video on TV. Simpson hesitates, then gets up to take a closer look. He says Mercer’s name, Mercer turns around, and they make eye contact. Mercer gets up and quickly walks out of the bar.” Hackett added, “Simpson now lives in New Jersey, so I had CID agents from Fort Dix interview him last night. Their interview is in the file.”

Brodie asked, “And Simpson was certain it was Mercer?”

“It’s all in the file,” Hackett repeated.

As much as Brodie relished the opportunity to wander aimlessly through the Murder Capital of the World, he really wished they had more to work with.

Reading his mind, Hackett said, “This is the first tip or clue we’ve had in three years. It’s what we’ve got.”

Right. When you’re clueless, you take what comes along.

Taylor asked General Hackett, “Sir, if this happened two weeks ago, why are we just acting on it?”

“Because we just heard about it yesterday. Simpson said he didn’t know what to do or who to contact while he was in Caracas.”

“How about the U.S. Embassy?” said Brodie. “Is he stupid?”

Hackett ignored that and continued, “Maybe he second-guessed his identification. Or maybe Mr. Simpson didn’t want to rat out his old friend, and he struggled with this. In any case, after Simpson returned to the States, he called an old Army friend who was still on active duty, and this individual, a Sergeant Bell, made a few calls and the tip went up the chain, eventually reaching General Mendoza, who called me yesterday. After I was notified, I had the agents from Dix interview Simpson.”

General Christopher Mendoza was no less than the highest-ranking officer in the United States Army. He had four stars and he was the Army Chief of Staff, and a member of the Joint Chiefs. In other words, he was God, and God had spoken directly to General Hackett, who was now speaking to them. *Thou shalt not fuck this up, Brodie.*

Hackett continued, “General Mendoza told me he wants Captain Mercer brought back to the United States, but he does not want this turned into a media circus.” He added, “While we technically have

an extradition treaty with Venezuela, they have not honored it in some time.”

Which meant this was going to be a snatch job.

Hackett said, “So your mission is to locate Mercer in Venezuela and get him back home to face court-martial. Your mission is not to interrogate him or attempt to determine guilt, just get him in custody and back to Quantico. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” said Taylor with enthusiasm. *Kidnap the asshole if you have to* was the subtext, though General Hackett would never say it. Brodie hoped that Taylor understood what she was signing on for. She’d only been a CID agent for a year, and he was certain she’d never dealt with anything like this. This was the kind of job that could land you in a foreign prison if things went wrong—after which your bosses back in the States would say you must have misunderstood your orders. Or maybe they’d say they’d never heard of you.

Over the years, Brodie had been involved in a couple of euphemistically labeled “extraordinary extractions”—a murderer who’d fled to Belgrade, and an embezzler he’d tracked to a Tunisian beach resort. In both cases they were schmucks, in way over their heads, whose one and only bright idea was to get themselves to a country without an extradition treaty. It didn’t work out for them. But then, they weren’t Delta Force.

Brodie thought back to Kyle Mercer’s face in the hostage video. *No fear.*

He still hadn’t responded to Hackett’s question. The general looked directly at him—he had eyes like stainless steel ball bearings—and said, “Do you understand, Mr. Brodie?”

“Yes, sir. I do.” But something was missing from this story, and he added, “You said Mercer escaped his captors eight months ago.

How do you know that?"

Hackett and Dombroski exchanged a look, and something told Brodie they had finally reached the heart of the matter.

General Hackett said, "What you are about to see is classified." Brodie was certain the man practiced saying that in front of a mirror every morning.

Hackett took a thumb drive out of his desk drawer and handed it to Dombroski, who plugged it into a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall across from Hackett's desk.

Hackett continued, "Eight months ago, a SEAL team conducting a cross-border operation into the Pakistani tribal territories came across a former Taliban encampment. While they were inspecting the site, they were approached by a local goat herder who presented them with a note, written in English—and, as we discovered later, in Mercer's handwriting—instructing any American military unit to pay the bearer of the note fifty dollars in exchange for valuable information. The SEAL team paid the goat herder and he handed them an SD memory card and then left. The card contained this footage." He added, "It's graphic."

Dombroski pressed play, and they all watched the screen.

A stationary camera showed a burning tent in rugged mountain territory on a moonlit night. A figure was splayed out on the ground in front of the tent. It appeared to be a bearded man in dark clothing. He was sleeping. Or dead.

Another figure was hunched over in the distance, moving in quick repetitive motions. An arm, framed against the sky, raised a long knife and brought it down over and over.

The figure stood. It was a tall, thin man with a beard, his features etched in moonlight. He held the knife in his right hand, and a round object swayed from his clenched left hand.

A human head.

The man walked forward toward the burning tent, and as he got closer to the camera his head disappeared out of frame and his body could be seen approaching a sharp wooden pike staked in the sand. He dropped the knife on the ground and, with both hands, brought the head down onto the pike. A distinctive wet crunch could be heard over the wind and the crackling fire.

“Five men—apparently Taliban—were found like that,” said Hackett. “Decapitated, heads mounted on pikes in a circle around the encampment. Three of them, according to the SEAL team report, were killed by bullets. Two had their throats cut.”

The figure walked forward and crouched into frame. It was Kyle Mercer. His face looked frightening—gaunt, bloody, illuminated by moonlight and by another fire somewhere off camera. His blue eyes were wide open and alert as he stared into the lens. “I hereby resign my commission as an officer in the United States Army.”

He leaned forward and turned off the camera.

The screen went black, and for a moment they all stared at their own dull reflections.

Hackett broke the silence: “For the record, the Army does not accept Captain Mercer’s resignation. He is still subject to military justice.”

*Right, thought Brodie. You are still one of us, and we will find you.*

Hackett continued, “Captain Mercer was held for over two years by a ruthless and sadistic enemy, undoubtedly subjected to physical and psychological torture. It is remarkable that he was able to escape, and this speaks to his considerable abilities. It goes without saying that this man is dangerous, and unlikely to be taken into custody willingly.”

That, thought Brodie, may be an understatement.

Brodie understood something about the stress of war. Before joining the CIC, he'd served as a rifleman in the 2nd Infantry Division in Iraq and taken part in the successful drive to retake Fallujah from the insurgents in Operation Phantom Fury. He fought along dusty alleyways and sunbaked roofs and houses blown open by mortar shells. He saw people ripped apart by bullets and bombs and artillery. Most were the enemy. Some were civilians. A couple were his friends. He'd seen action before that, and he would again, but that battle had changed him.

He wondered what the war had done to Kyle Mercer, not to mention the years of captivity and torture. The Army had turned a kid from San Diego into a trained killer. But what was it that had turned him into a deserter who would abandon his own men? And what had he become when he not only killed his captors, but whacked off their heads and mounted them like trophies? Whatever it was, he must have known he'd crossed a threshold from which he could not come back.

Hackett stood, and they all followed suit. He looked between Brodie, Taylor, and Dombroski and said, "If you have any questions, Colonel Dombroski will answer them." He added, "This meeting never took place."

Brodie wished that were true.