

DANGER NEVER SLEEPS ①

# COLLATERAL DAMAGE

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CHAPTER  
**ONE**

**FORWARD OPERATING BASE (FOB) CAMP CHARLIE  
AFGHANISTAN  
SEPTEMBER**

Sergeant First Class Asher James stared at Captain Phillip Newell, sure that he'd heard wrong. "Sir? Isaiah Michaels? He's in sick hall." He let his gaze jump back and forth between his superiors. Asher was surprised to see the task force commander there, along with Mario Ricci and his unit leader, Captain Gomez. Ricci nodded a greeting and went back to his laptop.

"Michaels never showed up to sick hall. One of our interpreters radioed in—he spotted Michaels at The Bistro restaurant in Kabul. You've got your orders, Sergeant James," Captain Newell said. "Bring him in."

Asher hesitated only a fraction of a second before nodding. "Sir, what's he being accused of exactly?"

"Being a traitor and selling information to the jihadists."

Stunned, Asher swallowed his shout of disbelief. "Sir, you know as well as I do that's not true." He was proud of the even tone he managed to keep.

“Not my call. And James?” Newell said. “You’re leading this one.”

“You’re not coming?”

His captain hesitated. “No, I’m needed here. Waiting on a call from home I don’t want to miss.”

“Forget an anniversary again?” Asher wanted to recall the words as soon as they left his lips. “Sir?” Newell was one of the most private men he’d ever met. All he knew was the man’s daughter had been very sick about six months ago, but it wasn’t his place to ask.

“No.” Newell’s eyes met his. “I didn’t.”

“Good to hear, sir. I’ll just mind my own business now.”

The man’s stance softened a fraction. “You’re a good man, James, I’m just a short-tempered son of a gun these days. Getting word about Michaels has made it worse.” He glanced at the lieutenant colonel and Captain Gomez. “But we’ve been presented with proof. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, because if I hadn’t, I’d be reacting just like you are. But this . . . I don’t even know where to start explaining, so I’m going to have to let Michaels do that.” He waved a hand toward the door. “Now go get him.” He turned to Gomez. “I’ll be ready for the debrief in five minutes.”

Gomez nodded. He looked at Ricci. “Get everyone together in the CMOC. I’ll be there shortly.”

The Civil Military Operations Center. Why they didn’t just call it a conference room was beyond Asher.

“Yes, sir.” Ricci stood and grabbed his phone, dust flying from the sleeve of his uniform. With a growl, Ricci swatted at his sleeve, sending another dust plume to the floor.

Whenever Asher decided he was done serving, the one thing he wouldn’t miss was the dust. And the death. And the occasional order—like this one—that made him want to revolt.

With a final nod to the men, Asher exited the building. Isaiah Michaels? No way. He didn’t believe it for a second. The man was as squared away as they came.

But he'd obey the orders whether he liked them or not. He walked across the dusty yard to the twenty-two-ton MRAP and settled into the vehicle commander's seat with a grimace. The monster machine's air conditioner hadn't yet had a chance to penetrate the suffocating interior heat. The other MRAP, with vehicle commander Sergeant B. J. King, the squad's fire team leader, would also participate in this mission.

Private Jasper Owens sat in the driver's seat next, frowning at Asher. "What's wrong, Sergeant?"

"You got the target, sir?" The shouted question came from Staff Sergeant Mark Dobbs before Asher could answer Owens. Dobbs was their squad medic and was seated in the far back, finishing off an apple cinnamon ranger bar from his MRE.

"I got it," Asher said, turning to face the guys in the back. They sat along the walls of the vehicle, facing each other with their eyes on him while he struggled to push the words past his lips.

The guys exchanged glances. "You going to fill us in?" Owens asked.

Asher shook his head and lifted the radio to his mouth. "King, this is James. How copy? Over."

"James, this is King. That's a good copy. Just waiting for our orders. Over."

"Ash?" This prompt came from Sergeant Mitch Sampson, their gunner and resident artist—also known as Michelangelo—who was seated behind Owens.

"I . . . yeah. It's . . ."

"What, man?" Owens said. "Spit it out." A pause. "Sergeant."

Asher met each one of his unit members' eyes before locking gazes with the engineering sergeant of the team—and Asher's best friend—Gavin Black. Raking a hand over his buzz cut, Asher finally said into the radio so King could hear as well, "It's Michaels. They're saying he's a traitor—selling off information to jihadists—and we're to bring him in for questioning. Over."

Protests erupted in the vehicle and over the radio. Asher let them vent before raising a hand. “I agree, but Captain said there’s evidence and he’s seen it.”

Silence fell. The only noise came from the rumbling engine.

Finally, Dobbs blew out a breath, and Asher narrowed his eyes. “I don’t believe it either, but these are the orders.”

“Then let’s go do what we’ve got to do,” King said. “Over.”

“I’m not doing it,” Owens said.

The others stayed silent. Owens was the youngest of the group and gave the appearance of being unconcerned about the consequences of disobeying a direct order.

Asher knew differently and lasered him with a hard glare. “I get it, Owens. I feel the same way you do, but let’s at least be the ones to find him and ask him what’s going on.” Owens finally nodded and Asher studied the outraged men. “Because if we don’t do it, someone else will.”

Heads bobbed in agreement. Owens set his jaw and cranked the engine, then lifted his radio. “King, this is Owens. You take the lead. We’ll be right behind you. Over.”

“That’s a good copy, Owens. Stepping off in two mikes.” King acknowledged the plan, and two minutes later the MRAP in front of them started to move.

Fifteen minutes later, the dust beat against the ballistic glass windows as they rolled along at five miles per hour in the Baraki Barak District in Logar Province, Afghanistan. Asher gripped his Colt M4 rifle. The MP4 at his feet would be for close-quarter fighting and the Beretta pistol for even closer. He hoped he wouldn’t have to use any of them. His nerves twitched as he strained to see through the plumed cloud ahead of him.

Owens drove with tense fingers wrapped around the wheel. They rode slowly through the wide-open expanse of land that had become known as a death trap, thanks to the improvised explosive devices that were often planted along the route. Asher would have

recommended taking a different way; however, this was the fastest course into Kabul and they could speed up shortly.

“Hey, what’s that?” Sampson shouted over the engine noise and pointed. “You see that? A vehicle just went behind that hill. White SUV.”

Asher squinted, trying to see what his buddy had managed to spot out the side window through the dust cloud. “Hill? What hill?”

The tension in the vehicle grew to mammoth proportions, and while the air conditioner had finally cooled the interior, sweat started to flow again.

“King, this is James. Did you or your unit notice a civilian vehicle? White SUV. Over.”

“Negative. Over.”

“I don’t see anything.” Asher looked back at his friend. “You sure you saw something?”

Sampson rubbed his eyes, then shook his head. “Yeah, but I don’t see anything now. I’m sorry, I’ve been at this too long. It’s not good for my blood pressure. Time for me to get out of this business and go home.”

“I know what you mean.”

The MRAP in front of them began moving once again and Owens followed. Asher rotated his head, trying to loosen his locked muscles. The thought of home beckoned, and for the first time in a long while, he allowed himself to envision it, allowed the longing to see his family to sweep through. Even though they didn’t understand him, they loved him—except maybe his brother. Definitely no love lost there, but Asher wished things were different.

The explosion came out of nowhere, hitting the MRAP in front of them, lifting it into the air and shoving it over on its side, then the top. Owens hit the brakes as the wave from the blast sent them rolling backward. They rocked from side to side, and for a moment, Asher thought they’d roll over as well, but they finally came to a shuddering halt right side up.

“King!” Asher shouted into the radio. “Give me a report! Over!” Silence. Owens slid out of the driver’s seat to the floor.

Asher radioed a 9-Line Medevac request for help, while Sampson pushed Owens aside. “What are you doing, man? Get your weapon.” Sampson scrambled for the passage that would take him to the top of the vehicle where he could man the mounted assault rifle.

“They’re coming from everywhere!” Sampson’s warning came just as Asher caught sight of the Taliban fighters spilling in behind them. “They’ve got some kind of grenade launcher,” Sampson yelled. “Sir, if that thing hits us, we’re done for!”

“Air cover is on the way. Three mikes out!” Asher yelled. They didn’t have three seconds, much less three minutes, before they’d be hit.

“Then start shooting!” Sampson said. “Aim for the third vehicle in that row coming toward us. See it?”

Asher saw it. Sampson opened fire. The line scattered, but the third vehicle continued to bear down on them. The weapon mounted on the bars of the Jeep fired.

“Get out! Get out!”

Asher and his men rolled from the vehicle and found cover behind a hill as the first grenade hit. Then the second and a third. They all continued to return fire, but there was nothing from the occupants of the MRAP in front of them. Asher pushed down the sick knowledge that every man was dead.

And they were next.

Sampson let loose another volley of bullets while Asher and the others fired back. Bullets pelted all around him and overhead.

“Where are those birds?” Sampson cried. His voice carried over the radio, along with the spat of the 240 he fired.

“One mike out!”

“They’re getting ready to hit us again with that RPG!” Sampson continued to man the assault weapon while Asher joined him in

trying to take out the Jeep holding the weapon that would sign their death warrants.

The man behind the rocket launcher fell, hit the dirt road, and didn't move.

For the next sixty seconds, they defended their position as the enemy pushed closer.

Then the sound of the helicopters roaring overhead penetrated the chaos. Sampson fired off another spate of bullets and the choppers joined in. At the launch of the first rocket dropping from the sky, the attackers turned and ran. The birds followed and would make sure they didn't return.

Asher bolted to his feet and ran to the smoldering MRAP thirty yards away.

He could hear his captain's voice over his radio checking in. The others were right behind him, heading to find their buddies. Asher stopped to answer his captain as sweat dripped down his face, dust caked the inside of his nose and lungs, and his heart pounded with grief for the lives he knew were lost. "Captain Newell, this is James. It was an ambush, sir," he said, doing his best to keep the tears out of his words. "They knew we were coming. They hit King's MRAP. He's dead. They're all dead. Over." He gritted his teeth and let his gaze sweep the area. He could grieve later.

Curses blistered the airwaves and Asher listened as the man ranted. "All right," the captain finally said, "I've got this covered. Abort the mission and get back here."

"They knew we were coming, sir. Someone told them. And if Michaels had anything to do with it, I want to find him." But Michaels couldn't have known anything about it. Their friend was in trouble. "We're going to get him, sir. Over."

The captain didn't protest. None of the others did either. They were with him.

Asher closed his eyes, blanked everything from his mind except

the orders he and the others would follow before they could process what had just happened. “We’re on our way.”

Sampson stood next to him. “Michaels?”

“Michaels.”

“I’m getting a couple of souvenirs from that IED, then I’ll be there.”

Asher frowned. His friend’s affinity for collecting pieces of any bomb that didn’t kill him was weird, but whatever. He had more pressing matters to worry about. Like bringing in a buddy accused of treason.



Military Psychiatrist Captain Brooke Adams was ready to go home in spite of the fact that she’d come to appreciate the Afghan people, their country, and their determination to survive—and thrive. She’d been in Kabul for the past six months, doing her best to help the men and women in the United States Army serving on the front lines, and she was tired.

No . . . *drained*.

No, that wasn’t it either.

She was . . . empty.

Done.

And tired of having a male escort every time she went off base. Three more weeks and she could go home. She almost felt guilty about the way she just couldn’t seem to adapt; then again, she was aware of her limitations and she’d reached them. It was better to leave before . . . well, just *before*.

But first, she’d promised to meet her friends. The ladies she now considered family in this war-torn land. Sarah Denning and Heather Fontaine would already be at the café waiting for her, along with Kat Patterson, the combat photographer they’d come to love and appreciate. Rarely did any of them venture away from the base—other than Kat—but things had been quiet, and they

all needed something other than military rations and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Okay, the food wasn't that bad, but The Bistro fare was amazing. The café, set on one of the busiest streets in Kabul, offered a variety of French-Afghan deliciousness that had her mouth watering just thinking about it.

Brooke pulled her hijab a little tighter at the neck and stepped through the door. Her escort headed to the men's side of the restaurant where he'd wait until she was finished.

"Brooke." Sarah waved. "Over here."

The three ladies sat toward the back, away from the windows in the section reserved for women only. On the positive side, things were already changing for the better for this country. She just hoped that would continue.

The red walls boasted lovely paintings of desert landscapes—probably done by a family member of the owner. The wood-burning stove in the middle of the room definitely wouldn't be necessary today. Brooke ducked between the stove and the nearest table to wind her way to the corner table.

She dropped into the one empty chair and let her breath out slowly. "Whoa."

"Everything okay?" Kat asked.

"Sure."

"Liar," Heather said.

Brooke hesitated. "Okay, so no," she finally said, helping herself to one of the cinnamon rolls from the bread basket someone had so thoughtfully placed at her seat. "Everything's not okay." She waved the roll. "But this helps."

Heather raised a brow. She'd changed from her surgical scrubs and wore a simple pair of khaki pants and a blue long-sleeved colored knit shirt. The hijab wrapped around her head held matching colors and brought out her eyes. Which probably wasn't a good thing in this area.

"Wanna share?" Heather asked. Her eyes held compassion—

and a keen intelligence that a lot of people missed when they focused on the woman's outward beauty. Built like a runway model, Heather had chosen medicine over the modeling career that had funded her first two years of medical school.

The Army had paid for the rest of it, and now Heather devoted herself to helping put the wounded back together. She took care of the physical brokenness, and Brooke tried to help with the mental. Being a military psychiatrist wasn't for the weak or the easily wearied. "It was a hard morning. I had to recommend a soldier be sent home for suicidal reasons." And just like that, she'd managed to suck any levity right out of the atmosphere. "Sorry. Forget I said that. Let's not talk shop." She lifted her glass of water. "So, who's excited about going home? What's the first thing you plan to do when you get there?"

"I'm going to walk down the street and not worry about getting blown up," Sarah said.

Kat rolled her eyes. "I'm from the worst part of Chicago. I can't walk down the street without worrying about getting shot or something. So"—she drew in a deep breath—"I'm going to find different streets to walk down, I think."

"Come walk down my street," Brooke said with a grin. "I just bought a house."

"What?" Kat gaped. "When?"

"Yesterday. Well, the offer was accepted, and all that's left is to do the paperwork. My lawyer has been granted power of attorney and is taking care of all of that for me."

After a round of congratulations and cheers, Sarah grimaced. "But that's going to have to wait for me."

Kat frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm here for at least another year."

"What!" Brooke and Kat said together.

Sarah shrugged. "I don't have anything I need to rush home to and I love my job. Besides"—she glanced around the restaurant

and lowered her voice—"I'm working on something and I'm not going to have it wrapped up by the time I'd have to leave. So . . . I requested to stay in for a while longer."

"What are you working on?" Brooke asked.

"Something big. Something that's going to make a lot of people unhappy—and probably put some people in prison." She paused. "In prison and unhappy. Kind of goes together, doesn't it?"

Brooke leaned in. "Sarah, what are you doing?"

"Well, originally, I was doing whatever was necessary to get a spot with a major newspaper that would lead me to Morning Star Orphanage, where I was going to do a story on some of the kids there. Instead, I wound up in a part-time volunteer position that has led to—" She stopped and met each friend's gaze. "Never mind. Suffice it to say that this is serious and it's going to blow up a few careers if my source is being truthful with me. And I think she is."

"What source?" Kat asked. Her eyes narrowed. "What's going on at the orphanage?"

Sarah shook her head. "So far, my evidence is circumstantial. But I know—" She held up a hand. "Never mind. My turn to change the subject." A pause while everyone stared silently. "But if something happens to me, it's probably because of this story."

"What?" Heather narrowed her eyes. "I thought you were coming to the hospital to see me. Are you saying you've been coming for other reasons?"

Brooke snorted. "Of course she is." Sarah was always investigating. She was a good reporter and didn't generally overreact to things. The intensity of her words and facial expressions made Brooke wonder if this time she might be getting in over her head. "Your life's not worth a story, Sarah," she said.

"Normally, I'd agree with you, but this . . ." Sarah looked away, blinking back tears. "Just pray I'm wrong."

Kat and Heather continued to press Sarah for details, but Brooke tuned them out, having a hard time focusing on her friends' words.

Not that she didn't care, but her heart was heavy, her mind on the fact that she'd ruined a man's career this morning. That he was from her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina, just made him all the more special—and her responsibility all the more heartbreaking.

Heather's hand clasped hers under the table and she looked up to find the three ladies staring at her. "Sorry, I did it again, didn't I?" She stood. "I'm afraid I'm not going to be very good company today. I think I'll take off." Amidst the protests of her friends, she turned to go.

The little bell over the door jangled as it opened to admit two soldiers dressed in Army Combat Uniforms. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Isaiah Michaels at the bar, turning toward the newcomers. His eyes caught hers and he nodded as his friends settled into the two seats next to him. They both glanced back at her but didn't acknowledge her. The fact that Isaiah did was more than if he'd shouted her name.

Brooke returned the slight nod and sat back down. "Or maybe I'll order my food and enjoy myself."

"That's the spirit," Kat said. She moved her ever-present camera to the side of her plate and held up her water. "A toast. To home."

"To home!"

"And to Brooke's new place. May we eventually spend many a hot summer's day gathered around her pool."

Brooke gaped. "I didn't say anything about a pool."

Heather laughed. "Are you kidding? I'm surprised you're not in the Navy the way you can't live without water. You have a pool, don't you?"

"Well . . . yes, but still . . ."

The others cracked up, and Brooke couldn't help the smile that curved her lips, even as she shot another glance at Michaels sitting with his friends at the bar. He caught her gaze, held it for a brief second, then looked away. He wanted to talk. She almost snorted, her ire rising. Well, he could wait on her this time.

“What’s he doing here?” Sarah asked.

“Who?”

“Isaiah Michaels.”

“You know him?” Brooke asked.

“Mm. Yes. Met him on the base a couple times, then ran into him at the hospital when I was there covering something for a story, then again at the orphanage.”

“What was he doing at the hospital and the orphanage?”

“That’s not important.” Sarah’s eyes bounced between Michaels and Brooke. “How do you know him?”

“That’s not important,” she mimicked and ignored the eye roll from Sarah.

“He keeps looking this way,” Sarah said. “At you. Like he’s waiting on you or trying to get your attention.”

“Well, he can keep waiting on me.” He was a client and he’d called to schedule an appointment, which had shocked her socks off. She’d always been the one to schedule the appointments and then had to practically drag him to them—or threaten to report his absence. Then he’d failed to show up. Which hadn’t shocked her nearly as much.

They ordered their food and, for the next forty-five minutes, talked and caught up before duty called Heather and Sarah away, leaving Brooke alone at the table with Kat. “You really think Heather will decide to leave the Army and go work in a hospital?” Kat asked.

Brooke lifted her hands, palms up. “Sounded like she wants to.”

“She’ll be bored.”

“She’s a trauma surgeon. I doubt *bored* is in her vocabulary,” Brooke said with a wry smile.

“Seriously, I’m a combat photographer. You think I could just go home and start taking headshots?”

“It’d be a lot safer.”

“Broooooke . . .”

“I know. What am I thinking? You never have been one to play it safe. I have a theory about that, you know.”

“Hmm, so, who’s the guy?” Kat asked.

“Which one?” Brooke had no trouble following her friend’s deliberate change of topic.

Kat smirked. “The one you locked eyes and exchanged nods with. The one who’s still sitting over there with his friends pretending he’s not waiting on you. I mean, I know his name, thanks to Sarah, but anything else I need to know?”

“Nothing much gets by you, does it?”

“Not if I want to stay alive.”

“I can’t say who he is,” Brooke said.

“Ah. That means he’s a client.”

Brooke smiled and took a sip of the hot tea the server had brought.

“And by that look he gave you when he came in, he has something he wants to talk to you about.” She sighed. “Which means, I need to say goodbye.”

“I don’t know what he wants,” Brooke said, her voice low. “I have a lot of clients who are ordered to see me and sit there in silence for an hour. Not saying he’s one of those, but I do have a lot.”

“I know.”

“So you know what I do?”

Kat raised a brow.

“I talk,” Brooke said. “And I talk some more. The whole time. About PTSD and coping strategies. I talk about faith and God, saying things like, ‘I don’t know if you even believe in God at this point, but if you do . . .’ and so on.” She swallowed. “I don’t know if it makes a difference or not and I’m tired of trying. Tired of being treated like I’m an intruder who can’t understand what they’re going through—much less isn’t able to help.” She shook her head. “Nope. It’s time for me to leave.” She stood.

“Aren’t you going to see what he wants?”

“If he wanted to talk, he should have shown up two hours ago for his appointment.” Brooke heard the brittle hostility in her tone and took a deep breath. “And now I’m breaking the rules in even saying that.”

Kat stood, too, and placed money on the table. “You’re doing good, Brooke. I know you can’t see it, but you are.”

Brooke let her gaze linger on the soldier who refused to look her way but was clearly waiting on her, as noticed by Kat. She closed her eyes and let the words wash over her. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“No problem. I’m going to scam. Let me get out the door before you leave so he won’t think we’re together anymore. Then your escort will follow you, the guy who wants to meet with you will follow him, and his friends will . . .” At Brooke’s scowl, Kat gave her a sheepish smile. “Well, you get the idea.”

A single man and single woman didn’t meet together in a public place. It would be fine to walk and talk with her within a group, and his friends would make sure that’s what it looked like.

“I think I know how it works at this point,” Brooke said.

Kat grabbed her camera and looped it around her neck. “See ya.”

“Stay safe, friend.”

“Always. You too.”

“Always.”

Kat left and Brooke waited a few seconds before following in her friend’s footsteps. Just as Kat predicted, the moment she passed the man at the bar, he turned and followed her. And his friends did the same.

The window next to the section where she’d been seated exploded and she went to her knees. A hard body hit hers, covering her as debris rained down.

She managed to gasp in one breath and then another explosion rocked the building.