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Opening Extract from...

Diamondhead

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CHAPTER 1

The American military base, colloquially known as Camp Hitmen in central Iraq, shimmered under the anvil of the desert sun. No one needed a thermometer to check the temperature, which had hit 104 degrees long before lunch. And no one felt much like moving out of the shade of the bee-huts or the tents.

Camp Hitmen derived its name from its proximity to the ancient Iraqi town of Hit, which sits on the west bank of the Euphrates River, 130 miles from Baghdad. This was essentially an overflow military base, constructed by the U.S. Army for Special Forces, the Navy SEALs, Rangers, and Green Berets, the heavy muscle of the U.S. frontline military.

And even as the pitiless sun tried its southern-fried best to drain the energy out of the residents, Camp Hitmen stayed always on permanent high alert. It was a place of hair-trigger readiness, a dust bowl populated by watchful, vigilant U.S. troops, whose training had turned them into coiled springs of aggression and, understandably, vengeance.

The tools of their trade were lined up under canvas shelters wherever possible, anything to reduce the temperature of the metal. The Humvees, armored vehicles, tanks, and desert jeeps were constantly under the attention of mechanics and engineers. Gas tanks were full, oil gauges checked, shells and rockets in place. Every component of the military transportation system was battle ready. Just in case.

The Camp Hitmen complex was surrounded by heavy concrete walls, high, with a walkway just below the ramparts for guards to patrol. Beyond its outer rim was a three-hundred-yard "no-man's-land" that was glaringly lit at night by sweeping arc lights. In the day it was just a burning flatland of sand and dust, a wide exposed area upon which any intruder would be shot down instantly.

Nothing's impregnable. But Camp Hitmen was just about as secure as any outpost could ever be in a polarized land, where the population cannot make up its mind whether to hate or welcome those of a different branch of their Muslim faith—never mind a foreign army trying to keep a semblance of order on a lawless Middle Eastern frontier.

And there were still Islamic extremists whose hatred of the Americans was so severe they would willingly sacrifice their own lives just for the chance to murder or maim members of the U.S. and British militaries, serving personnel who were essentially trying to help the country rejoin the international community. Every night they came, trying to fire rocket-propelled grenades, or RPGs, into the complex, trying to rig cars and trucks with explosives, trying to send in their suicide bomb squads to breach the complex before the American guards gunned them down.

It was a deadly environment, and everything was a struggle. The air conditioners struggled, the generators permanently had their backs to the wall, and the electricity supply was under constant surveillance. Men were always on edge. No one walked between the tents. Instead, all personnel wore hard combat hats, and raced over the sunbaked sand, crouched low, ready to hit the deck, at the distant scream of a rocket-propelled grenade. Or indeed the sight of the telltale white smoke that signaled the grenades of the Holy Warriors were coming in from across the far side of no-man's-land.

No one went anywhere unarmed; every day there were missions, and every day there were armored convoys growling out onto the hot, dusty roads, dealing with trouble spots in the treacherous nearby towns of Fallujah, the notorious enclave of the insurgents, or, more likely, ar-Ramadi, often said to be the most dangerous place on earth.

Sorties into Habbaniya, which lies between the two, were less frequent but just as dangerous.

There was a large reinforced concrete bunker inside the complex. This housed the main Command Center and the Military Intelligence Center. Like all U.S. military outposts where the main objective is to locate terrorists and insurgents, the entire operation at Camp Hitmen ran on information, gathered either electronically or firsthand. In the latter case, the information was either voluntarily offered or obtained by force.

Either way, it made no difference to the sun-bronzed warriors of the Camp Hitmen garrison. Their task on a daily basis was to round up the diabolical forces of al-Qaeda or the Taliban, and either capture or kill them, wiping out or imprisoning their commanders. Any damn thing necessary to stop the crazy pricks from taking another shot at a big American skyscraper.

We need to take 'em out, or pin 'em down, either right here or in Afghanistan. That way those suckers aren't going anywhere else. That's the plan. And it's a plan that works.

The creed of the United States Special Forces was that simple. And every man understood it. They knew the risks, and were trained to take those risks. Which did not, however, make it any less dangerous or scary. It just made everyone better prepared, and angrier when things occasionally went wrong.

And during the past six months, there had been a new trend among the car bombers, booby-trap operators, and suicide killers that was causing the utmost concern among U.S. commanders—all of them, SEALs, Rangers, and Green Berets. The insurgents in Iraq seemed to have laid hands on a missile, fired from a handheld launcher, that could actually penetrate a tank or a heavily armed vehicle. And that was something to which no one was accustomed.

Powerful roadside bombs and various RPGs could certainly inflict heavy damage on a Humvee or a jeep, and some damage on an armored vehicle. But those brawny U.S. battlefield tanks could always take a hit and keep coming.

In the past six months the game had changed, though. Suddenly, there were instances of a tank-buster missile being launched by terrorists—a high-speed weapon that could rip through the fuselage of a tank, and decimate any other vehicle it hit. Americans were dying. They were being burned alive by this new enemy: not in large numbers, but sufficient to cause stern protests by Western nations about a missile that threatened to turn modern warfare into a horror scene from the Dark Ages.

One month ago the Security Council of the United Nations had categorically banned it, in a unanimous motion that declared the use of the missile "a crime against humanity." With the support of Russia, China, India, and the European Union, this seemed a solid-enough UN edict to calm everyone's fears about a new modern napalm outrage. The pictures of U.S. tank commanders burning alive from a chemical that could not be extinguished had shaken historians, politicians, and even journalists worldwide. And happily the ban was now in place.

However, as always, things looked very different out on the burning, sand-strewn highways of Iraq. Because someone had what seemed like an endless supply of this confounded missile. The Arab television station al-Jazeera referred to it as "the Diamondhead." And the goddamned Diamondhead kept smacking into American armored vehicles and burning U.S. servicemen alive.

They did not, of course, all hit their targets. But two days ago, one of them, fired from the eastern side of the Euphrates, had slammed into a U.S. tank that was transporting an elite Navy SEAL team to a classified mission. None of the four Americans survived. Neither did the tank's crew. No one could put out the fires that swiftly engulfed them.

The SEALs were seething with fury, and not just at the insurgents who had fired it. They were enraged by the Iranians who had supplied the now-illegal missile. That much was known, and never denied. But the SEALs were especially enraged at the arms corporation that manufactured the Diamondhead. The U.S. high command believed it was French, but could not pinpoint the factory. Unsurprisingly.

The Pentagon decreed the missile had been developed in its early stages by the vast European arms-producing network MBDA, a conglomerate made up of the top guided-missile corporations in Britain,

France, Germany, Spain, and Italy. MBDA has ten thousand employees, and many subsidiaries. It is without question the world's number-one maker of guided weapons systems. Its major shareholders are the European Aeronautic and Space Company, which in turn includes Aerospatiale-Matra Missiles of France.

So far as the head honchos in the Pentagon were concerned, the part that mattered was MBDA's Euromissile, based in Fontenay-aux-Roses in France, home of the MILAN medium-range antitank weapon, godfather of the Diamondhead.

The latest MILAN packs one hell of a wallop. Within a two-mile range it can penetrate a thousand millimeters of Explosive Reactive Armor, or more than three meters of reinforced concrete. It has fantastic antijamming systems, weighs only forty-five kilograms, and can be handled by a two-man crew, the gunner to carry the firing post and the loader to carry the two missiles.

Whoever was responsible for the seriously improved Diamondhead was a missile genius. Step forward the shadowy scientist/salesman, known only as Yves. His pride and joy, the Diamondhead, was probably eight years ahead of anything Euromissile had on the drawing board for the MILAN. And it contained a barbaric burning ingredient that the big public European conglomerate would never dream of including.

However, the new United Nations edict had rendered the missile an outlaw even in the most vicious, amoral trade on earth. If anyone ever found out where the Diamondhead was being manufactured, that plant would become instant history.

The trouble was that no one had the slightest idea where this new "SuperMILAN" came from, not even the hard-eyed members of the widespread security system at MBDA. The Diamondhead was an international pariah, and it was currently protected by one of the most powerful men in France, a man who might shortly become impregnable.

Generally speaking, this was extremely bad news for the U.S. servicemen operating in Iraq. Like all national armies in pursuit of terrorists, the Americans operate under the most colossal disadvantage, because they cannot see their enemy, and neither can they see their

enemy's strongholds. Without effective military intelligence, they cannot locate the tribesmen who wish them dead; there is no recognized garrison at which to aim their fire. Their enemy wears no uniform, and often has no regard for his own life. Mostly, he strikes and retires. Other times, he surrenders immediately, seeking the ludicrous protection of the sixty-year-old Geneva Convention, the signatories of which did not have the murdering modern-day jihadist in mind.

In general terms, insurgents and terrorists are at a powerful disadvantage in terms of weaponry, using old, inaccurate Kalashnikovs and unreliable homemade bombs. Give them, however, a state-of-the-art Diamondhead guided missile, newly delivered from Iran, and the game swings dramatically away from the status quo, in favor of the jihadists.

Navy SEAL Lt. Cdr. Mackenzie Bedford was reflecting on this precise new danger as he wrote home to his wife, Anne, in Dartford, Maine. Sprawled back on big olive-drab desert cushions in the corner of his tent nearest the air conditioner, Mack had just written:

I guess by now you've read about the new tank-busting missile these maniacs are using against us. There's no need to worry, the UN ban has kicked in now, and there's only been one incident involving us during the past two weeks. We all watched that CBS report on television last week. Wildly exaggerated. As usual. . . .

Mack Bedford was thirty-three, a six-foot-three, bearded, 220-pound SEAL team leader of the highest caliber. When he shaved off his desert combat beard he looked like a youthful Clint Eastwood, same open, hard-eyed frankness, same rough-hewn edge to his face, same shock of dark hair except cut shorter. Mack had long been considered to be destined for top command in SPECWARCOM—ever since he'd passed out number one in his BUDs Class, Honor Man, ten years ago.

A native of coastal Maine, son of a shipyard engineer, Mac was a sensational swimmer, once having made the U.S. Nationals. Underwater he could make a porpoise look clumsy, and on land he was a tireless runner, with tree-trunk legs and lungs like a pair of Scottish bagpipes. He carried not one ounce of fat, and was just about unstop-

pable in unarmed combat. Mack, like almost every SEAL, was a high-intelligence killing machine.

Five local thugs, in a lonely bar in the Allegheny Mountains, had once made the truly astounding decision to pick a fight with him while he and Anne were enjoying a quiet drink just before they were married . . . *Hey! This guy's a Navy SEAL. Let's find out how tough he really is . . .*

Three of them ended up in the hospital, with two broken arms and a fractured skull. The other two ran for their lives, with Mack's parting words ringing in their ears: "You're lucky little sonsabitches. I might've killed you all by mistake."

That was reputed to be the only civilian fight Mack Bedford had ever indulged in. But he'd seen close-quarter combat in most of the world's hot spots, especially Afghanistan and Iraq. He was a brilliant sniper/marksman, and had himself been shot twice, both times in the upper arm while taking control of a Pashtun/Taliban village in the Afghan mountains. Jungle or desert, mountain or deep sea, Lieutenant Commander Bedford was a SEAL's SEAL—trusted, relied upon, and the consummate American patriot. Honor Man indeed.

He ended his letter to Anne with the subject they were almost afraid to mention—their seven-year-old son, Tommy, and the terrible disease that doctors suspected may be destroying his nervous system. *"I've checked the insurance out over and over, Anne,"* he wrote,

> *and the Navy has been fantastic. We're covered and Tommy's covered. But we have to find a place in the USA where they can carry out an operation on a kid this young. Let's just hope the disease is not confirmed, and we'll get a breakthrough in the next few months. I have to go now, but I'm always thinking of you. AND DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME. WE'RE FINE. RIGHT HERE IN CAMP HITMEN. WEATHER SUNNY! CHARLIE'S FRYING EGGS ON THE HOOD OF THE JEEP!*
>
> *ALL MY LOVE, MACK*

The big SEAL folded the paper and tucked it into an envelope. He had a lot on his mind, what with the missile and Tommy. For a few

moments he just sat there on his king-sized cushion, contemplating the tough hand life had apparently dealt him, and hoping to God the friggin' Iranians had at last exhausted their supplies of the Diamondhead.

Just then the tent flap was pulled back, and four of his buddies, Chief Petty Officer Frank Brooks, Petty Officer Billy-Ray Jackson, Gunner's Mate Charlie O'Brien, and Chief Gunner Saul Meiers, came wandering in, all wearing desert "cammies" and their favored olive-drab-and-brown bandannas, or, in SEAL parlance, their "drive-on rags." All four of them were sweating like dogs, armed and bearded, like most Special Forces operating in Muslim countries, where it may be necessary to work undercover among the tribesmen.

But the beard disguise was strictly double-edged, because every al-Qaeda leader understood that a bearded American serviceman was, without question, a lethal combat-trained member of the SEALs, Rangers, or Green Berets: a soldier to be either given a very wide berth or, if possible, captured, interrogated, tortured, and then beheaded. The half-trained tribesman did not usually have much luck in achieving any of the latter four options.

"Hey, Mack, how's it looking?" asked Billy-Ray in that informal way SEALs have of speaking to each other, the serious business of rank being almost entirely cast aside among the front line of the U.S. combat elite. The practice of ignoring officer status among the SEALs was well known but often frowned upon by other service personnel. But other service personnel had not been through the murderous training of the SEALs, that relentless ordeal that hurls officers and men into an unbreakable brotherhood. Like a secret society, one that will bind them together for all of their days.

Mack looked up. "Jesus, you guys look awful. What's up?"

"Training run, and a lot of people noticed you weren't on it," replied Billy-Ray, his good-natured black face beaming with humor.

"Tell 'em to go fuck themselves, would you?"

"Roger that, SIR."

Laughing, all four of the visitors flopped down on the big cushions.

"We going out this afternoon, Mack?" asked Charlie O'Brien.

"Fifteen hundred hours, down to Abu Hallah if the guys aren't back."

"They'll be back," chuckled Billy-Ray in that deep Alabama voice of his. "Because we're getting roast ham and black beans for lunch, and there ain't *no* way Bobby and his guys gonna miss that."

"Bobby and his guys might be under a bit of pressure this morning," interjected Frank Brooks. "That truckload of marines those bastards blew up in North Baghdad last Friday got hit by a missile that caused a very big fire. Intel reckons the main insurgent force retreated way upriver to Abu Hallah. Bobby's supposed to roust 'em out."

"Better be careful they don't have any of those goddamned Diamondheads left," grunted Mack. "We'll have to send Frank in to find 'em—his beard's longer than Bin Laden's."

"Hey," said Charlie. "Did I ever tell you what happened to Frank one time in some bar out in the eastern Rockies?"

"Jesus Christ," said Chief Brooks, suspecting he was about to become a figure of fun.

"Well," continued Charlie, "that beard of his was about as long as it is now. You know, can't see his face, 'cept for his eyes. And sitting right there in that bar was an old Indian guy, kept on staring right at Frank.

"Finally, Chief Brooks looks up at him and says, 'Who the hell are you lookin' at?'—in that deep bassoon voice of his."

And the SEALs predictably started laughing, even Frank.

"Well," says Charlie, "the ole Indian took his pipe out of his mouth and said, 'Sir, I ain't staring. Nossir. But I ain't been in this town for twenty-nine years, and last time I was here they put me in jail for fucking a buffalo . . . and I just thought you might be my son!'"

Charlie should, of course, have been a professional comic, and the SEALs rolled around on their cushions, laughing helplessly, as they usually did at his endless supply of jokes. Even big Frank Brooks was guffawing amiably.

Mack Bedford was more accustomed to the high standard of Charlie's jokes because they had served together many times in SEAL Team 10's Foxtrot Platoon. But the lieutenant commander had not heard

this one before, and he fought off the all-encompassing sadness of Tommy's illness, and yelled with laughter with the rest of his guys.

Charlie O'Brien was a top-class SEAL team gunner, a bull of a man in unarmed combat, who often acted as personal bodyguard to his CO. But he was younger than the others, and there were still those who considered his greatest asset to be his uncanny ability to make the boss laugh. Lieutenant Commander Bedford thought the world of Charlie. Like many another Special Force commander, he also understood that the ability to find a touch of humor in even the most diabolical situation was an important military asset.

A lot of Foxtrot Platoon guys still remembered Charlie O'Brien after they blew apart a Taliban stronghold in southern Afghanistan. He had leaped to his feet, flung both arms diagonally skyward, yelling, "*TOUCHDOWN!*" At which point one last dying tribesman clambered out of the rubble and shot a hole in Charlie's helmet. "*FLAG ON THE PLAY!*" bellowed Charlie. "*NUMBER NINETEEN DEE-FENSE.*" Then he picked up his rifle and blew the tribesman away. "Rude fucker," he muttered.

Right now, in the tent, the laughter subsided, and Billy-Ray Jackson suggested they get out and find some of that roast ham and beans. But as they raised themselves up from the cushions, a SEAL lieutenant came running in shouting urgently, "Mack, Mack! We got a big problem. The guys have been hit badly in Abu Hallah. Tanks on fire, and Christ knows what else. Bobby's dead. The guys are pinned down under heavy attack. We gotta go. This is battle stations—*NO SHIT!*"

All five SEALs leaped to their feet, and, without a word, headed to the ammunition cupboards, grabbing extra magazines, grenades, and a heavy machine gun. They tightened on their harnesses, slammed on their helmets, and literally stampeded out into the heat of the Iraqi desert, Charlie and Mack holding the machine-gun straps between them. They raced across the hot sand toward the line of armored vehicles. In the background the Klaxon sound of the camp alarm drowned out the thunder of the massive engines as the tank crews revved them up. The ground crews were shouting above the racket. Drivers and

commanders were checking the controls, gunners were loading shells, armored vehicles were backing up to make room for the four lead tanks to rumble forward.

Billy-Ray and Charlie clambered aboard the first one; Frank Brooks and Saul Meiers were up and into the hatch of the second. Mack Bedford loaded the machine gun and jumped into the passenger seat of the front armored car, which was driven by his regular combat driver, Jack Thomas, from Nashville, Tennessee.

Bedford's vehicle automatically moved to the forefront of the convoy, waiting, revving impatiently for the tanks to form some kind of a mobile line of battle before they headed for the exit, composed of massive, thick wooden gates, reinforced by steel. They were gates that had withstood the impact of shells and bullets, and once had stood up under the onslaught of a half-crazed suicide bomber, who managed to blow up himself and his car but nothing else.

Within four more minutes, the five-vehicle convoy was under way. At the last moment the guards heaved back the gates, and high above, on either side of the entrance, Ranger machine gunners opened fire, raking the boundary wire three hundred feet away, across no-man's-land, just in case an insurgent group was feeling ambitious.

Mack Bedford stuck his right arm out of the window and gave a thumbs-up to the lead tank, which contained Billy-Ray Jackson, Charlie O'Brien, the crew, and enough ammunition to start Desert Storm all over again. They rumbled through to the outer rim, where the automatic reinforced-steel barrier rose to allow them through. When all five vehicles were out, the gate clicked electronically shut and automatically activated four land mines inside the entrance, strategically placed to obliterate any transgressor.

They turned right, heading southeast down the sandy highway that follows the Euphrates River, through the burning-hot, silt-covered alluvial floodplain where temperatures can reach 120 degrees. This flat, arid area, which receives only eight inches of rain per year, was once the cradle of Mesopotamian civilization. Today it is a glowering region of rabid hatreds and violent reprisals.

The mighty seventeen-hundred-mile-long river at this point had flowed through eastern Turkey's Taurus Mountains and right across Syria before narrowing through the limestone cliffs of western Iraq. It ran softer, wider, and browner now, south of the desert town of Hit, and clusters of date palms occasionally dotted the left side of the SEALs' route. The riverside palms looked almost biblical, but there was nothing biblical about the aged Russian machine guns that frequently spat fire at passing American vehicles, straight between the trees, though mostly from the far side.

Mack Bedford's men were on high alert all the way along their five-mile race to Abu Hallah, the heavy guns of the tanks often swiveling to face areas of rough ground cover or copses of palm trees, where unseen Muslim fanatics might be lying in wait.

The men of Foxtrot Platoon had been in Iraq for five months now, and were well versed in the requirement for acute vigilance in all of their sorties beyond the great walls of Camp Hitmen. And this week was turning into an extremely dangerous time, given the continued existence of the Diamondhead, and the Iranians' apparent willingness to keep supplying it, United Nations or not.

Lieutenant Commander Bedford spotted the black plumes of smoke rising from the western bank of the Euphrates two miles out. He signaled a halt to the convoy and stood up, fixing a pair of powerful binoculars on the uproar up ahead. From what he could see, there were two tanks still ablaze. He thought he could see U.S. Army ambulances, but the smoke, dust, and fire obscured the view.

He signaled for the convoy to continue, *flank speed,* the SEALs being a branch of the navy rather than the army. "Step on it, Jack, for Chrissakes," he muttered. "This looks like a real shit-fight."

All five armored vehicles accelerated, their already hot engines screaming in the grim silence of the Syro-Arabian desert. In front of a billowing dust cloud they surged onward. Inside the tanks, Mack Bedford's men slammed magazine clips into their rifles, the gun crews staring through the sights of the big swiveling barrels that would almost certainly be turned onto their distant enemy across the river.

As they approached Abu Hallah they could see the gray outlines of buildings on the far bank beyond the bridge. Almost immediately opposite those buildings were the remnants of the morning task force. Two tanks had been hit and destroyed. The only surviving armored vehicle was positioned behind them, away from the river, with its gun pointing directly across at the buildings. The smoke, however, was still so intense that there was scarcely any hope of taking a decent shot at anything.

The closer they came, the more obvious it was that this had been a major disaster. Mack's warriors could see the ambulances now, and the fire trucks, not to mention the pure hopelessness of trying to carry the dead away from the searing heat and melting metal.

The rescue services were from the U.S. ar-Ramadi base, some fifty miles to the south. They had been on another rescue mission, a roadside bomb farther north, but had turned back immediately when news came in of the attack on the SEALs at Abu Hallah.

Mack Bedford exercised a hard-earned caution about getting too close to burning vehicles when there was still a lot of gasoline in the immediate area. He signaled his convoy to halt, well short of the fires, around fifty feet beyond the bridge. He alone jumped out onto the road and walked toward the disaster area. A young SEAL lieutenant, dressed in battle cammies and carrying a rifle, walked toward him. The two knew each other well, and Lt. Barry Mason said simply, "Thanks for coming, Mack. Afraid there's not much we can do right now, except wait. We got 'em pinned down in that building over there. But they got us pinned down right here, and I'm not anxious to break cover until we've cleared 'em out.

"Jesus Christ. You shoulda seen the missiles they hit us with. Both of 'em went straight through the fuselage of the tanks. Holy shit. Like a goddamned hot knife through butter."

Mack Bedford could already feel the heat in more ways than one. "These fires start when the explosive reached the fuel tanks?"

"Hell, no. They seemed like part of the missile. Everything ignited right away. The guys never had a chance. They were burned alive. I

could see two of 'em trying to get out, but the flames were kinda blue and burned like chemicals. We couldn't get near them. Christ, it was hot. No survivors."

"Obviously the Diamondhead," said Mack.

"No doubt," replied Lieutenant Mason. "Couldn't have been anything else. Fucking thing. Never seen anything more horrible than that. And this is my third time in Iraq."

Mack nodded. For the first time he could see tears streaming down the young SEAL's face, a certain sign of the shattering cruelty he had witnessed along the south road down the Euphrates.

For a few moments, neither man spoke. They just stood back and stared at the misshapen, seared, and twisted metal of the tank, each of them trying to fight away the terrible thought of their brothers who had been incinerated inside the cockpit. For Barry Mason it was all about sadness, remorse, and, inevitably, self-pity, as the brand-new memories of his lost friends stood starkly before him. For Mack, it was something altogether different. Deep in the soul of the SEAL commander there was a constantly burning flame of vengeance. Mostly, it just flickered and could be ignored. Mackenzie Bedford knew full well that all military leaders need to be free of cascading emotion, because anger and resentment are the first cousins of recklessness. But all of them carry this unseen burden, and they constantly grapple to avoid being forced into hasty decisions.

Mack Bedford often found it more difficult than most to hold back the demons that urged him to lash out at his enemy with all the uncontrolled violence he could summon. He even had a name for the surge of fury that welled within him. He called it the "hours of the wolf," a phrase he recalled from some morbid Ingmar Bergman movie. It was a phrase that perfectly described his feelings, mostly in the hours before dawn, when he could not sleep and yearned only to smash his enemy into oblivion.

Right now, standing on this burning desert road, watching the molten iron tombs of his fellow SEALs and three Rangers, Mack entered the hours of the wolf. And deep inside he could sense that famil-

iar burgeoning rage, currently aimed at everything about this godforsaken hellhole in which he must serve.

He turned his head sideways to the hot wind and stared across the river, at the ancient stone dwellings, built mostly on just two floors, all of them pockmarked with bullet and shell holes. Mack could see them clearly through his binoculars. Abu Hallah was an insurgent stronghold, no doubt—a place where Islamist fanatics came and launched attacks on U.S. troops before vanishing once more back into the desert.

"Did you see where the missiles came from?" he asked Lieutenant Mason.

"Nossir. But they came straight across the river, from one of those houses, and they did not swerve. Just came straight at us."

"Two only?"

"Yessir. One hit the lead tank, clean as a whistle. The second one came in right behind it, smashed into the next tank, just as if they had been individually aimed from two firing posts."

"Were you stationary at the time?"

"Nossir. We were making about thirty miles per hour. By the time my vehicle had stopped and I hit the ground, both tanks were blazing like a couple of goddamned bonfires. Except with that blue flame I mentioned. Never saw anything catch fire that quick."

"Jesus Christ," said Mack. "And we don't dare flatten those fucking houses across the river, because they're probably full of unarmed civilians and someone will put us all in jail."

"And it's hard to know if the missile men are still in there," said Lieutenant Mason.

"Tell you what, Barry. I can see a small group of vehicles just beyond the houses. I'm gonna drive back down this road and take a look. I'll take my guys with me and turn around. If I see one sign of a hostile enemy on that side of the river, I'm taking them out."

"Probably make us both feel a whole lot better, right?"

"Guess so," said Mack, who was now conscious of the ever tightening knot of pure anger in his stomach, the old familiar one that heralded the hours of the wolf.

He signaled for his driver to come forward and for the four tanks to follow. He climbed aboard the armored car and led the way down the road for four hundred yards, stopped, and instructed the tanks to turn around, back toward the fires, and to aim their main artillery at the buildings across the river.

"Don't fire. Just be ready."

Positioned now at the rear of the convoy, Mack trained his binoculars on the small gathering of Arabs and trucks on the other side of the water. There was a stone wall, however, between the SEAL commander and the insurgents, and Mack's car backed up another fifty feet to improve the angle. Now he could see clearly.

There were two unmistakable tripods placed in the ground midway along the wall. He could not identify the equipment mounted on top of the tripods, but since he was most certainly not looking at a highway surveyors' unit preparing for a new freeway, Mack assumed the worst. He was looking at a missile sighting system and a guidance assembly, almost certainly identical to the ones that fired the new and improved French-made MILAN 3.

Mack knew enough about the MILAN to understand it fires in two stages, the first burn being for one and a half seconds, just to eject the missile out of the launcher. The second stage burns for eleven seconds, accelerating the missile to two hundred meters per second. The guys in the U.S. tanks never had a chance.

He had every reason to believe the secret Diamondhead may have been a shade faster, with perhaps a tougher cone protecting the warhead. As he stared at the small group across the river he suddenly observed the arrival of a new vehicle. And this was not a rough 4x4 desert truck; this was the sleekest of Mercedes-Benz limousines.

He watched the chauffeur hold open the door for the man who occupied the rear seat. Out into the desert stepped an immaculately dressed Western man wearing a dark pinstriped suit, with a blue tie and a scarlet handkerchief stuffed into the breast pocket of his jacket. He was essentially bald, with slicked-back dark hair on either side. Even from this side of the river Mack Bedford could see the jutting Roman nose.

The Arabs clustered around the new arrival, shaking his hand and smiling. He walked to the first tripod and spoke briefly. He examined a long tube that had been in the back of one of the trucks. Then he returned to the tripod and stared through the sights. For five more minutes he spoke to the men, all of whom were wearing Arab dress. Then he placed his arm around the shoulders of one of them and steered him to the limousine, which immediately accelerated away.

Mack walked back north, along the line of his tanks, instructing them to move on up toward the fires and to prepare to shell the wall that shielded the missile launchers. All four began to rumble forward, and the commander jumped into his own vehicle for the short ride.

As they came to a halt Mack climbed down from the right-hand side of the vehicle. As he did so there was a roar from the lead driver, whose head was above the hatch.

"*INCOMING! . . . HIT THE. . . .* " But it was too late. The missile from the other side of the Euphrates lanced across the water, belching flame, and slammed straight through the starboard-side fuselage of the lead tank, the one that contained Billy-Ray Jackson and Charlie O'Brien.

Mack Bedford watched aghast as the entire thing burst into a bright-blue chemical flame, the inferno in the interior now blasting through the hatch like a blowtorch gone berserk. A blowtorch from hell. Someone was trying to get out, but his entire head was on fire. He never even had time to scream before he died. It looked like Billy-Ray.

The roar of the fire drowned out the next missile that streaked across the river, leaving a fiery tail, and smashed into Mack's second tank, the one that contained Chief Frank Brooks and the master gunner, Saul Meiers. No one had a prayer. Once more the missile ripped through the steel of the tank and detonated into a sensational fireball, incinerating everything in its path.

Lieutenant Commander Bedford just stood there, as did Lieutenant Mason, both of them in shock at the sudden and terrifying impact of the hit from the insurgents. Again they watched as someone, this time the tank commander, battled to get out, but it was a grotesque charade. Everyone in the tank was plainly on fire, burning alive, caught in the roaring chemical flame that extinguished life instantly. The SEALs,

on their rescue mission, were gossamer moths trapped in the devil's inferno.

Men were leaping from the other two tanks, anything to get clear before the next Diamondheads came in. Mack Bedford stood there, staring, in some kind of a dreamlike trance. He could not quite work out who was dead and who was alive. Was this hell, and had he died with his men?

The roar of the flames drowned out everything. The billowing smoke was rising a hundred feet in the air. No one could even see the far bank of the river. SEAL team leaders were hustling everyone into positions beyond the shattered convoy. Someone rushed up to Mack shouting, "*THIS WAY, SIR—WE GOTTA REGROUP—WE GOTTA GET CLEAR OF THIS FIRE!*"

Mack joined the rest, running over the rough ground, keeping the burning convoy between his men and the death-trap missile launchers across the river. Like everyone, he was scared to climb back into the tanks to open fire on the enemy. It seemed nothing could stop the Diamondhead on its chosen course, and its deadly mission.

He assumed a loose command, instructing that no one move until he was certain the insurgents had made an escape. SEALs had already phoned for help from every available quarter. Within fifteen minutes, rescue helicopters would arrive, but there was no one to rescue. It was impossible to live within the periphery of the Diamondhead missile. They waited in silence as the flames crackled beneath the desert sun. And then slowly they rose up from the sands and began to walk toward the pile of tortured metal, which contained the tortured, charred remains of their friends and colleagues.

It was still too hot to get close, but they walked around the outside until, one by one, they saw a strange sight on the far side of the river. There were a dozen robed Arabs, their hands held high, walking toward the bridge. The Americans watched, amazed. One of them yelled, "Don't do anything, guys! This is the oldest trick in the book. They've unloaded their weapons. They're surrendering as unarmed civilians. They know we're not allowed to touch them!"

And this assessment was accurate. The jihadists knew the rules well. Rather than retreat into the desert and face an aerial bombardment from U.S. aircraft, they chose to deny what they had done and pose as a group of local Bedouins, going about their peaceful, lawful business, innocent of any form of attack on the forces of the United States of America.

Mack Bedford looked back at the dying flames of the tanks, and tried to hold back his tears for Charlie O'Brien and the rest. He stared again at the bridge, and the anger welled up inside him—*But these fucking towelheads crossing the river. . . . Jesus Christ! . . . They've just murdered my guys!*

The silence seemed to cast a mantle of unreality over this tiny corner of Iraq, a land of such unaccountable hatreds. There was no movement among the stone-faced SEALs as they watched the little group of wraithlike figures still walking toward the center of the bridge. Still with their hands held high.

From here their sandals made no scuffing sound on the sand-swept flagstones of the bridge. It was as if the Americans were watching through a long-range slow-motion camera lens, watching the advance of this murderous little cabal that had caused lifelong heartbreak for these serving U.S. troops.

But the Arabs kept coming, kept walking. Only the Foxtrot Platoon commander recognized them as the missile men he had watched through his binoculars across the river. And once more he raised the glasses and stared at the oncoming killers, unarmed now, but still with that unmistakable loathing etched on their faces.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that these were the perpetrators of this shocking crime, committed in cold blood with four of the internationally banned Diamondhead missiles. And now there was a murmur of restlessness among the Special Forces as they watched the bizarre scene on the Euphrates Bridge.

Team leaders, fearful of the rule-book consequences of attacking men who carried no weapons, were muttering softly. *Steady, guys. . . . Take it easy. . . . Let 'em keep coming. . . .*