

Emily Bestler Books

Proudly Presents

FOREIGN AGENT

BY

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Foreign Agent . . .

“When bad men combine, the good must associate; else
they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice
in a contemptible struggle.”

—EDMUND BURKE

CHAPTER 1

FRIDAY

CIA SAFE HOUSE

AL ANBAR PROVINCE, IRAQ

At six foot four, two-hundred-seventy-five pounds, Ken Berglund was a massive sight to behold. He had a thick, blond beard and sleeves of tattoos up both arms. “T-bones are almost ready,” he called out.

A cheer arose from his teammates in the courtyard, and from the women who had gathered around the old stone slab being used as a dining table. Someone fired up a Charlie Daniels song on their iPhone as more beers were pulled from the cooler.

It was a perfect night for a cookout. Above the abandoned desert fortress, the stars shone in the blue-black sky, a cool breeze blew away the lingering heat of the day, and for a moment you could almost forget where you were.

That was until you noticed the modified M4 rifles kept within arm’s reach, or the .45- caliber pistols the men carried at their hips. As soon as you saw those, the illusion was shattered. Nobody gunned up that heavy for dinner unless they were in a war zone. Which was exactly where they were.

Ashleigh Foster, though, had downplayed the danger. She had spun the trip to her two girlfriends as something out of *Lawrence of Arabia*—a weekend at a romantic desert castle surrounded by nothing but sand and the occa-

sional camel. Of course, as a CIA collection management officer, she knew better. Stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Amman, she saw the intelligence on a daily basis. In fact, it was her job to sort it, encrypt it, and send it all back to CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

No place in Iraq was safe—and that went double for Anbar. ISIS may not have pushed this far into the province yet, but it was only a matter of time.

Ashleigh's girlfriends knew better too. As embassy staffers, they were kept up to speed on the security situation not only in Jordan, but also in neighboring Iraq and Syria. What they were doing was dangerous.

But danger had been part of the weekend's appeal. It was an adventure, and adventures were supposed to be exciting. And what could be more exciting than partying at a CIA safe house for two nights?

They had snuck out of work early on Friday, stopping back at their apartments only long enough to pick up clothes and four enormous Yeti coolers (borrowed from an embassy storage room), filled with all sorts of food including steaks, ice cream, beer, and even donuts.

With a carefree attitude better suited to a trio of college co-eds headed off on spring break, they hopped into Ashleigh's Toyota Land Cruiser, turned up the music, and pointed the SUV toward the Karameh border crossing.

Less than three hours later, they flashed their diplomatic passports and were waved through both the Jordanian and Iraqi checkpoints. Just beyond, Ashleigh's boyfriend and two of his teammates were waiting.

A former U.S. Army Ranger, Ken Berglund worked for the CIA's highly classified paramilitary detachment known as SAD, or Special Activities Division.

He and his six-man team had been sitting in the crumbling desert fortress for over a week. They were

waiting for the CIA to green-light their insertion into Syria to snatch an ISIS HVT, or high-value target.

Berglund's team was already running low on supplies when Langley informed them that the target had changed locations again and there'd be another delay. The CIA wanted to keep the target under surveillance for a few days to see who he was meeting with. They'd decide what to do after that.

Hurry up and wait. It was par for the course for operators. If Langley wanted to delay this mission, that was their decision.

In the meantime, though, Berglund had made a decision of his own. Why not make their resupply a little more interesting?

He and Ashleigh hadn't seen each other in months. When he asked her, she jumped at the chance. As long as she hit the road by Friday prayers, she'd be all right. There wasn't much to worry about between Amman and the border. She'd have her weapon with her and if she needed to rock out with her Glock out, she could hold her own.

Her father, who was ex-military, had taught her how to shoot at an early age. On top of her extensive CIA training, she practiced continually and took great pride in outshooting any man dumb enough to underestimate her.

It was one of the many things Berglund loved about her. Not only was she this hot, south Florida stunner, but she was also her own woman—unafraid, unapologetic, and unaffected by who or what other people thought she should be.

Her father, though, had his own plans. He hadn't wanted her getting anywhere near the Middle East, and had exerted great pressure to keep her back in the United States. But Ashleigh being Ashleigh, she had found a way to get what she wanted.

She always did, which concerned Berglund. While they'd gotten naughty a lot over FaceTime, he was worried she'd eventually need it in the flesh and either find it at the embassy, or somewhere in the diplomatic community.

The thought of her with some Euro-trash diplomat, or God forbid, some "Ooh-Rah" embassy Marine, was more than the ex-ranger could stand. Any rules he was breaking by bringing her out to the desert were worth it.

But, as is often the case, one bad decision normally leads to another.

The idea of steaks and pretty girls appealed to the other men on the team, and so two of Ashleigh's friends had been invited as well.

As far as the operators were concerned, what happened downrange stayed downrange. There was no reason anyone at Langley needed to know.

Berglund turned his attention back to the T-bones, giving them a final ninety-degree rotation. It seared perfect crosshatch marks into the meat—a technique he had learned one summer in college working at a steak house in Dallas.

It was going to be an epic meal. Ashleigh had even laid her hands on the ingredients for a wedge salad. *If only all their deployments could be like this.*

When the steaks were ready, he stacked them on a plate, slung his M4, and headed toward the table. His helmet, mounted with night vision goggles, sat in a row with the others.

Berglund was only halfway there when he heard the high-pitched whistle of an inbound mortar. Dropping the steaks, he raced toward the others, yelling "Incoming! Get down! Get down!"

CHAPTER 2

Hot, jagged pieces of rock flew in all directions as the first mortar exploded. It was immediately followed by two more.

Scrambling for their gear, team members yelled out their call signs, and that they were “Up!”—ready to engage in the fight.

As they raced toward the areas they were responsible for covering, Berglund grabbed one of his junior guys, a man named Moss. Pointing at the women, he yelled, “Get them to the pit!”

The pit was a subterranean interrogation facility from the days when the Iraqis had used the fort as a detention facility. It was the safest place for Ashleigh and her girlfriends.

“And bring back the belt-fed!” Berglund roared over the din, calling for the team’s lightweight medium machine gun.

The mortars continued to rain down, knocking out huge sections of wall and scoring a direct hit on the fort’s last remaining tower, as Moss rushed the women toward the stairs.

At the bottom was a huge metal door that had been propped open with a large piece of stone. Moss herded the women inside, snatched up the twenty-four-pound

machine gun, and grabbed as many cans of .338 Norma Magnum ammo as he could carry.

“Get to the back of the room,” he instructed. “And don’t come out until one of us comes for you.”

Knocking the stone out of the way, he bent his shoulder into the heavy door and gave it a shove. He was halfway up the stairs before it clanged shut.

Outside on the fort’s decrepit battlements, the gun battle was on.

Berglund was firing his suppressed rifle in controlled bursts when Moss charged into the courtyard. “Hurry up with that belt-fed!” Berglund shouted.

Moss ran to him, dropped the ammo cans, and began setting up the weapon.

“Did they get to the pit?”

He was about to respond when another mortar round came screeching in and exploded inside the courtyard. It blew out half the wall near the stairs, only feet from where he had just been.

“Did they get to the pit?” Berglund repeated, yelling above the ringing in his ears.

“They’re safe,” Moss shouted back.

Berglund pointed with the barrel of his rifle toward the southeast. “There’s at least fifty of them. Maybe more. Armed with AKs and RPGs.”

“Who the hell are they?”

“*Who the fuck cares?* Start putting rounds on them.”

Using the night vision scope mounted to the top of the machine gun, Moss flipped off the safety and opened fire.

The .338 Norma Magnum round was incredibly accurate and exceedingly powerful. Its effective range was 2,000 yards, but it was capable of hitting targets at over 6,000. The General Dynamics lightweight medium ma-

chine gun could burn through 500 rounds a minute, and Moss was letting them have it.

But no sooner had he dropped one group, than another popped up. And now, they were coming at the fort from different directions. It was a swarm. They were everywhere.

Moss changed position six times as one of the team members rushed to the pit to retrieve the rest of their ammo.

Berglund had already called Langley over his encrypted satellite phone for help. He needed intel badly. *Who were these guys? What were their numbers? And what kind of assets were in the area to come to the team's assistance?* Langley didn't have any good answers for him.

Whoever the attackers were, they had struck as the CIA's drone had come off station. A new UAV wouldn't be overhead for at least twenty more minutes. Re-tasking a satellite would take at least thirty. Berglund didn't have thirty minutes. He doubted he even had twenty. Pretty soon, they were going to be out of ammo. When that happened, this fight would be over.

Complicating matters was the fact that the SAD team was not even supposed to be in Iraq. This was a completely black operation. The CIA, though, wasn't going to let its people die.

In an abandoned warehouse back across the Jordanian border sat a commercial eighteen-wheel vehicle. Hidden inside its long, white trailer were two heavily modified Hughes/MD 500 helicopters with their rotor blades folded in.

"Let's move! Let's move!" the CIA crew chief yelled as the birds were rolled out and hastily prepped for launch. Their fastest time ever from truck to takeoff was four-and-a-half minutes. If they had any hope of help-

ing Berglund's team, they were going to need to cut that time in half.

The helicopters, CIA versions of the U.S. Army's Little Birds, had been pre-positioned on the Jordanian side of the border as a Plan B. Plan A was for Berglund and his men to roll into Syria via three separate vehicles, put a bag over the head of their ISIS target, and roll back out. The helicopters were only there in case something went wrong during the mission.

An attack of this magnitude, at such a remote location, when no one should have known that they were there, had been considered almost impossible. But here were Berglund and his men, with only minutes left to live. The aviation team wasn't even aware of the unauthorized visitors hiding beneath the fort in the pit.

Swinging his index finger urgently above his head, the crew chief barked for the pilots to fire up their birds. "Get 'em hot! Let's go! Now! Now! Now!"

As four support personnel snapped, slapped, and racked the helicopters' weapon systems into place, the noise in the warehouse was pierced by the high-pitched whine of the engines coming to life.

Moments later, loose panes of glass fell from the warehouse windows as the vibrating rotors chopped hungrily at the air.

When the pilots flashed the thumbs-up, the crew chief gave the signal for the warehouse doors to be opened and he set the birds loose.

Lifting off the concrete floor in unison, the MD 500s hovered and took off.

The team had beaten their all-time best record by a minute and eighteen seconds. It was a valiant effort, and it might have made the difference, except for what happened next.

Two miles out from the fort, as the copilots in each went hot with their weapon systems, a pair of surface-to-air missiles locked on to the heat from the engines. Neither of the helicopters had a chance.

Berglund didn't need Langley to tell him what had happened. He could see the explosions in the night sky for himself. Emptying the last round of his rifle mag, he set it down and transitioned to his pistol.

In his oversized Texas way, he had thought he was being cute when he had welcomed Ashleigh and her girlfriends to the "Anbar Alamo." Whether that had been prophetic or ironic didn't much matter at this point.

With their vehicles destroyed by mortar fire and the helicopters shot down, they had no choice but to make their stand here. Even if jets could be scrambled out of Jordan, they wouldn't arrive until it was too late. This was going to be it.

Berglund was a warrior. And that's how he would go out—on his feet, taking as many of the enemy with him as possible. He only had two regrets—that he hadn't better hidden Ashleigh, and that he never got a chance to eat his steak.

Sacha Baseyev was impressed. The Americans had fought harder than he had expected. Even after running out of ammunition, they had drawn their knives and tried to fight with their hands.

Only two remained alive. Both were beyond any hope of medical treatment, though. He told the videographers to hurry up and get to work.

Walking across the rubble-strewn courtyard, he approached the coolers. Brushing off a layer of debris, he removed a flashlight and opened one of the lids. Reach-

ing inside he found it to be full of—*ice. An incredible luxury in the middle of the desert.*

He then went to the next cooler, and the next, studying their contents. *Bottles of pink wine? Pastries? Ice cream?* As decadent as the Americans were, these provisions made no sense, even for a CIA paramilitary team.

Strewn across the ground near the last cooler were steaks. Baseyev reached down and touched one. It was still warm. He counted nine of them. *Nine steaks for a six-man team.*

Considering how big some of the Americans were, perhaps a few planned to consume more than one steak. But that still didn't explain the wine he had seen. American men, particularly military men, usually drank beer or hard liquor. If they drank wine at all, it certainly wouldn't be pink.

Something wasn't right. The contents of the coolers looked like catering for a picnic or some sort of American beach party. Then, his flashlight caught a reflection a few feet away.

Underneath more debris, he found an iPhone clad in a rhinestone case. Its password-protected screen was cracked, but the image of a woman kissing one of the CIA fighters was clearly visible. This was indeed a blessing.

Holding it up in the air, he called out to his fighters in Arabic. "There is a woman here," he shouted. "An *American* woman. If you find her, you can have her!"

A cheer rose from the jihadists as a handful of them rushed into the stairwell.

In the passageway below, it took two of them to pry open the pit door. The first man to force his way in took two shots to the chest and one to the head. Another gunfight was on.

This one, though, was much shorter. Ashleigh only had two spare magazines.

When her pistol ran dry, the jihadists poured in. Her colleagues were clerical workers. They didn't carry weapons.

It took only seconds for the unspeakable to begin.

CHAPTER 3

SUNDAY
VIENNA, AUSTRIA

Scot Harvath wasn't trying to hide. He expected to be seen. That was the plan. Be brief. Be bloody. Be gone.

There would be hand wringing by the Austrians, of course. But the politics of the assignment weren't his concern.

The White House had been crystal clear. Either the Europeans dealt with their problem, or the United States would.

Harvath sat in a corner of the Café Hawelka. A suppressed Beretta rested beneath a newspaper in his lap. Art posters covered the faded walls. The place smelled like chocolate and stale cigarettes.

Taking a final sip of his coffee, he stood and set the newspaper on the table.

His target was sitting with another man near the window. Both were in their early thirties. Neither looked up.

Approaching the table, Harvath said only, "Paris." Then, placing the suppressor under the man's jaw, he pulled the trigger.

Even though the Beretta was suppressed, the shot was

still audible, and the man's brains splattered across the café window were extremely visual.

Patrons screamed and knocked over tables and chairs in a rush to escape. Others sat frozen, either in shock, or out of self-preservation—hoping not to attract the shooter's attention.

The CIA director wanted a Rembrandt—*big, bold, and unmistakable*. Harvath had delivered.

Exiting via the rear of the café, he took off his cap, disassembled the weapon, and slid everything into his pockets.

Six blocks away, he walked into the Hotel Sacher. Tipping the coat-check girl, he reclaimed his overcoat and shopping bags. He then used the men's room to clean up and change clothes.

He stood at the sink and washed his hands. There would be multiple descriptions of him given to the police. None of them would be accurate. The bystanders had been transfixed by the violence and the speed at which it had happened.

His waiter would remember only that he was a white male, maybe in his thirties, who had quietly placed his order in German.

If they were able to track him all the way to the Hotel Sacher, the coat-check girl would remember him as attractive. He doubted that she'd be able to add "Five foot ten, sandy brown hair and blue eyes" to her description. Either way, he'd already be gone.

Outside the hotel, he had the doorman hail him a cab for the main train station. There, he laid a false trail by purchasing a ticket for Klagenfurt, a village near the border.

Exiting the station, he walked a few blocks to a nearby U-Bahn platform and hopped on the subway for six stops.

He poked around an obscure Vienna neighborhood for twenty minutes, then found a cab to take him to *Ristorante Va Bene* near the river. Confident no one was following him, he sat outside and had a beer.

He was cutting it close. The ship would be leaving soon. He needed that beer, though.

More than the beer, it was the five minutes of quiet. Five minutes to get his head out of one game and into the next.

He hadn't run an operation this way before. Trying to serve two masters was never a good idea. It didn't matter how smart you were. You were begging for something to go wrong. And when things started going wrong, mistakes started piling up, along with the bodies.

He looked down at his watch. *So much for five minutes of peace.* Pulling some cash from his pocket, he threw back the rest of the beer, paid his bill, and left.

It was just over a mile to the Port of Vienna. Along the way, he tossed the Beretta and then the suppressor into the Danube.

He retrieved the Ziploc bag he had taped beneath a Dumpster with his passport, key card, and other personal effects. Putting everything back in his pockets, he ran one more mental check as he patted himself down. He didn't want to get caught with anything tying him to what had happened at the café.

Stepping onto the ship's gangway, he presented his embarkment card and smiled at the crew. They put his shopping bags onto the belt of the X-ray machine and had him walk through the magnetometer.

In the four days he had been on the ship, he had noticed a hundred ways a terrorist or other bad actor could wreak havoc. None of them involved sneaking something through the magnetometer or the X-ray machine.

Receiving the “all clear,” the crew handed him his items and welcomed him back aboard. One cheerful staffer began to ask if he had enjoyed his time ashore, but he was halfway across the lobby before she could finish.

Arriving at his stateroom, he paused at the door and listened. *Nothing*. Fishing out his key card, he let himself in.

It was dark. He began to reach for the light, but stopped himself. The sliding glass door was open. A figure was standing on his balcony.

