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BLOWBACK

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of *Blowback*. . . .

blow·back \ˈbl_-,bak\ *n* **1** : process by which spent shell casings are ejected from an automatic weapon **2** : unintended consequences of a failed foreign policy or botched covert action abroad **3** : CIA code name for an agent or operation that has turned on its creators

CHAPTER 1

Col de la Traversette French-Italian Alps

Donald Ellyson tried to scream, but nothing happened. He had done a lot of reprehensible things in his fifty-five years, but this was not how he had expected to die—his throat sliced and hot blood running down the front of his parka. This was supposed to be the discovery of his life, the one that would legitimize him and land him at the top of the academic heap. But the moment of his greatest triumph had suddenly become the last moment he would ever know. *And for what?* Did his benefactors actually think he was going to stiff them?

Sure, he was known to gamble, and yes, he often stole artifacts from archeological digs to sell on the black market, but so did a lot of other people. It was just the way the world worked. Certainly, the punishment shouldn't be death.

It was only three years ago that Ellyson had joined a group of archeologists excavating a site southwest of Istanbul. During the dig, a hidden room with a vast trove of parchments had been discovered. Upon closer inspection, the documents appeared to be remnants of the famous Library of Alexandria, which was considered to be the greatest collection of books in the ancient world.

The great library had been almost completely destroyed by the Romans who sacked and burned it in both the third and fourth centuries. It was widely assumed that the balance of the library's contents were destroyed when the Muslims, under the Caliph Umar I, laid siege in 640, but as Ellyson and his colleagues pored over the documents, they realized how wrong that supposition was. Someone at some point in history had apparently managed to preserve a large portion of what remained.

Ellyson was fascinated by what the parchments contained. One in particular was absolutely astounding. It was written in Greek and detailed a firsthand account of one of the most brilliant and most deadly undertakings in ancient history. He never catalogued that manuscript with the rest of the find and went to great pains to make sure no one else on the dig even knew of its existence.

It was a treasure map of sorts, and though it did not have a great big X marking the spot, it promised unfathomable rewards. Once out of Istanbul, Ellyson went straight to the most likely source of funding for an expedition like this. He had been in the game long enough to know players who

would jump at the chance to get their hands on what the manuscript suggested was waiting out there. And, indeed, the promise contained within the manuscript proved irresistible to his erstwhile partners.

Like Ellyson, those same partners had read the classical accounts of Livy and Polybius, as well as works by renowned historians such as Gibbon, Zanelli, Vanoyeke and a host of others too numerous to list. The more the partners read the more they learned, and the more they learned the more they became intrigued with the potential power of Ellyson's discovery.

Based on the archeologist's request, the partners spent millions on aerial surveys by planes, helicopters, and even satellites, combing many of the Alpine passes between southern France and Italy in hopes of locating a particularly valuable item referred to in the parchment.

Ellyson had defied convention, turning his back on the more popular historical locations the document might have been referring to as none of them fit the picture he had cobbled together from his ancient texts. Good fortune, though, did not smile upon his undertaking. Still, despite the lack of progress, the archeologist was confident he'd be successful in the end.

Though at times money was extremely difficult to come by, the men funding Ellyson's search did whatever they had to do to keep the coffers full. Their organization had been searching for decades for just this type of find and couldn't stop now. The power it

promised to deliver them was too important to give up on over something as trivial as money.

It wasn't until recently, aided by three summers of record-setting heat across Europe, that the snow had begun to melt off, glaciers had begun to recede ever so slightly, and near the *Col de la Traversette*, Ellyson had uncovered the first pieces of archeological evidence that proved he was on the right track—straps of leather from an ancient harness, shards of pottery, and a small collection of broken weapons. He had narrowed a staggering field of haystacks to just one, but that one was replete with fathomless gorges and crevices, any number of which might contain his needle.

The *Col de la Traversette* was one of the most treacherous and highest mountain passes in all of France. Over the centuries, both French and Italian authorities had attempted to sabotage parts of it in the hopes of stemming smuggling between their countries, but the pass lived on. A mere ten meters wide at the summit, the remote pathway was accessible only during a short period between mid-summer and early fall—and even then conditions could still be unbearable. Locals referred to the region's weather as eight months of winter followed by four months of hell.

Despite these daunting obstacles, Ellyson had finally found his needle. He was a much better archeologist than he had ever given himself credit for. And the interesting thing about it was that the group funding his project wasn't even concerned with the entire find, only a part of it—the part he had used as

bait. It was all that had been necessary to get them to finance the operation. What they wanted from the find was a mere token to him, something he could easily do without. It was, in his mind, a minor footnote that had been lost to history. If his benefactors were willing to cover the cost of his entire project, he had no intention of denying them such a small item in return.

Even now from his prone position on the floor, Ellyson could see the object they had been after—a long, intricately carved wooden chest. It was right there—theirs for the taking. He didn't need or want it. So why did they have to kill him? Nobody would have ever known that the box, or more importantly what was inside it, was missing. *Much like me*, thought Ellyson as he heard his two Sherpas approaching and watched as his killer removed a small-caliber automatic from his pocket.

After calmly replacing the pistol in his pocket, the assassin stared at the wooden, almost coffinlike box. For over two thousand years, the ancient weapon had lain beyond the reach of man, frozen within the glacial ice of this remote Alpine chasm, but all of that was about to change. He removed a satellite phone from inside his coat and dialed the ten-digit number for his employer—a man known to him only as the *Scorpion*.

CHAPTER 2

36° 07' N, 41° 30' E
Northern Iraq

Soldiers from the U.S. Army's 3rd "Arrowhead Brigade," 2nd Infantry Division Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT) had spent enough time in Iraq to get used to the sound of enemy rounds plinking off the armor plating of their eight-wheeled infantry carrier vehicle, but ever since they had driven into the small village of Asalaam, one hundred and fifty kilometers southwest of Mosul, things had been dead quiet.

The village was one of many around the Christian enclave of Mosul known for its religious and ethnic tolerance. For the most part, Muslims and Christians throughout the area lived in relative harmony. In fact, the name Asalaam came from the Arabic word for *peace*. It wasn't the locals, though, that the SBCT soldiers were worried about. A stone's throw from the Syrian border, foreign insurgents were one of the greatest threats they faced.

The men had seen their fair share of ambushes in Iraq, including a devastating suicide attack within the confines of their own base, and none of them intended to return home in anything less comfortable than an airline seat. Body bags were out of the question for these soldiers.

Second Lieutenant Kurt Billings from Kenosha, Wisconsin, was wondering why the hell they hadn't seen anything when the vehicle commander of the lead Stryker came over his headset and said, "Lieutenant, so far we've got absolutely zero contact. Nothing, and I mean nothing, is moving out there. I don't even see any dogs."

"Must be pot luck tonight at one of the local madrasas," joked the radio operator.

"If so, then someone should be manning the village barbecue pit," replied Billings. "Stay sharp and keep your eyes peeled. There's got to be somebody around here."

"I'm telling you, sir," said the vehicle commander, "there's nobody out there. The place is a ghost town."

"This village didn't just dry up overnight."

"Maybe it did. We're in the middle of nowhere. These people don't even have telephones. Besides, who'd care if they did dry up and blow away?"

"I'm sure there's an explanation for why we're not seeing anybody. There must be a village meeting or something going on. Let's just take it slow," said Billings. "Do a complete sweep of the village and then we'll dismount. Got it?"

"Roger that, Lieutenant," responded the vehicle commander as their Stryker began a circuit of the village.

For this assignment Billings had organized his men into two, eight-man fire, or assault, teams. The first team, designated "Alpha," was with him in the lead armored vehicle, while "Bravo" team, under the command of Staff Sergeant James Russo, followed in

the second Stryker. Their assignment had been to check on the status of three American Christian aid workers based in Asalaam, who hadn't been heard from in over a week.

It was scut work and Billings didn't like taking his men out to check up on people who had no business being in Iraq in the first place—even if they were fellow citizens. Not only that, but the term *Christian aid worker* was a gross misnomer, in his opinion. He'd yet to meet one whose primary reason for being here wasn't the conversion of souls for Christ. Sure they did good work and they filled in some of the gaps that were invariably left behind by some of the larger, more established and experienced aid organizations, but at the end of the day these people were missionaries, plain and simple. They also had a rather otherworldly talent for getting themselves in trouble. There were times when Billings felt more like a lifeguard at a children's pool than a soldier. While young missionaries might have the best of intentions, they more often than not lacked the skills, support, and all-around basic common sense to be living in what was still very much a war zone.

And that was another thing. The U.S. military was supposed to be in Iraq backing up the Iraqi military and Iraqi security forces, not helping lost twenty-somethings find their way. But whenever one of these situations popped up, which they did at least once or twice a month, it always fell to the American military to go out and rescue their own people. The Iraqis didn't want anything to do with them. They

were too busy trying to put their country back together to be wasting their time on rescue efforts for people they had never invited into their country in the first place, and frankly Billings couldn't blame them. He had suggested to his superiors that missionaries ought to be required to post a bond before entering Iraq, or to at least be required to pay the cost of their rescue the way stranded hikers and mountain climbers have to do back in the States, but his superiors just shrugged and told him it was out of their hands. If young Americans needed rescuing, even in the wilds of Iraq, then that's what the U.S. military was going to do. Never mind the fact that it might put more young American lives in jeopardy in the process.

Billings studied the faces of the men on his fire team and toggled the transmit button of his radio. "Russo. You copy?"

"Loud and clear, Lieutenant." At twenty-five years old, Russo was an old man compared to the eighteen-to nineteen-year-olds on his fire team, but not nearly as experienced as Billings, who was twenty-eight.

Billings heard the beep tone that indicated Russo had taken his finger off the transmit button of his radio and said, "This might not exactly be a routine check-in-on-the-children op. Let's be very careful on this one."

"We're careful on every one."

Billings smiled. Russo was right. They had one of the best platoons in Iraq. They'd been in country for three months and had chalked up some impressive wins against the bad guys, and no one had suffered so

much as a hangnail. “Just the same, there’s something about this that doesn’t feel right. Make sure your guys stay focused.”

“Will do, Lieutenant. In fact, if Alpha team would rather stay nice and cozy inside their vehicle, I’m sure those of us with Bravo team would have no trouble sorting this one out.” There was a chorus of chuckles from the men inside Russo’s Stryker.

“Not on your life, Sergeant,” replied Billings with a smile. “When we get in there, you make sure your men watch and learn from us.”

“Hooyah, Lieutenant.”

Billings turned to the men inside his Stryker and said, “Gentlemen, Sergeant Russo seems to think we’re not needed today. He says Bravo Team can handle the assignment themselves.”

“Fuck Bravo team,” said a young private named Steve Schlesinger.

Normally, Billings wouldn’t put up with language like that, but he liked his men to get pumped up before going into potentially dangerous situations. Besides, eighteen-year-old Schlesinger was their shining star. He had uncovered and helped defuse more improvised explosive devices in the last month than anyone in Iraq over the last year. The kid had a sixth sense for danger, and despite the fact that he was from Chicago and thought the Cubs were a better team than the Milwaukee Brewers, Billings liked him.

“Okay, then,” replied Billings. “We’re all agreed?”

A chorus of “*Fuck Bravo team*” resounded throughout the lead Stryker. It was good-natured competition and Billings knew his men well enough to know that

when boots hit the ground, it didn't matter what team they were on, the men were all brothers united against a common enemy. He had no doubt Russo was whipping up his men as well.

As Billings felt their Stryker slowing down, he knew it was only a matter of moments before they would have to step outside and try to figure out what the hell was going on.

When the Strykers finally came to a halt in the center of the village, the soldiers jumped out and took up defensive firing positions. Though no one said anything, they were all feeling the same thing after having made a complete circuit of Asalaam. There wasn't a single soul in sight and it had put everyone on edge.

Justin Stokes, a young, skinny private from San Diego who had a bad habit of engaging his mouth before his brain, said, "Maybe it's siesta time."

"At 10:30 in the morning?" replied six-foot-four Private Rodney Cooper from Tampa. "Stokes, my grandmother doesn't even take a nap at 10:30 in the morning."

"Whatever it is," said Stokes, "something about this place isn't right."

"It's fucked up, is what it is," added Schlesinger. "Where the hell are all the people?"

"That's what we're here to find out," replied Lieutenant Billings, cutting the crosstalk short. "We're in the game now, so let's keep communications on an as-needed basis."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant," the men responded as

Billings walked over to where Russo was standing. He was using the reflex sight on his M4 to look for any movement at the far end of the road.

“What do you think, Jimmy?” asked Billings.

“I think it’s too quiet,” said Russo as he lowered his weapon.

“Maybe we’re looking at an ambush.”

“I don’t think so. If somebody was going to hit us, it would have already happened.”

“So what the hell’s going on here, then? Where are all the villagers?”

Russo double-checked his firing selector and said, “I don’t know, and I’ve got a feeling I don’t particularly want to know. This village isn’t our problem. We’re here to check up on three American aid workers, so let’s do that and get the hell out of here.”

Billings studied the cracked, sun-baked façades of the mud brick houses up and down the narrow road, some with their doors and windows standing wide open, and agreed. “All right. Here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll take Alpha team to the building the missionaries were using as their health center. You and Bravo team do a house-to-house search. This is a simple cordon and knock, no door kicking. If you find one that’s already open and no one responds to a polite rap on the frame, you and your men can go inside and look around, but tell them not to touch anything. We’ll meet back here in fifteen minutes. Got it?”

“Yes, sir. Fifteen minutes,” replied Russo who then turned to his men and said, “We’re on. Let’s saddle up.”

One of the Strykers shadowed Bravo Team along

the main road, while the other followed Billings and his men as they walked a block over to a worn, low-rise building that looked like it might be a school or an administrative office.

“Provincial Ministry of Police,” said Rodriguez, as he read a faded sign above the doorway. He was the only one on the team, besides Russo, with a workable grasp of Arabic.

Billings looked at the one sheet briefing he’d been given in Mosul and cursed. “Goddamn it. They’ve got this piece-of-shit map flipped around. We’re supposed to be a block over in the other direction.”

“Why don’t we take a look inside anyway?” said Stokes. “It’s an official building. Maybe there’s official information inside.”

“Which we haven’t been authorized to enter or look for,” replied Billings. “We’re here to do reconnaissance only. If we find an open door, we can go in, but if a door isn’t open, we’re not going to start kicking—”

Before Billings could finish his sentence, Cooper leaned into the flimsy, weather-beaten door with his massive shoulder and popped it off its hinges. As the team looked at him, he said with a smile, “Somebody must have forgotten to lock up.”

“The hell they did,” replied Billings. “The next person who tries anything remotely—” The lieutenant was cut short by the overwhelming stench that poured out of the building.

“Jesus!” exclaimed Schlesinger. “Don’t these people know they’re supposed to put their garbage *outside* for pickup?”

Billings, a man all too acquainted with the smell of death and decay, knew that what they were smelling wasn't garbage. "Cooper, Rodriguez, Schlesinger, and Stokes, you're coming inside with me. The rest of you stand guard out here and keep your eyes peeled. The shit might hit the fan very quickly here."

"It smells like it already has," said a redheaded private from Utah as he readied his weapon and took up his watch.

Tucking their noses into their tactical vests, Billings and his men stepped inside. After clearing the vestibule, Cooper kicked in the door to the pitch-black main office and the rest of the team button-hooked inside. A chorus of "Clear—Clear—Clear" rang out from the different members of the team as they swept through the room, guided by the beams of the SureFire tactical flashlights mounted on the Picatinny Rails of their M4's.

The reason the room was so dark soon became apparent. For some reason, the windows had been completely covered with heavy wool blankets.

Rodriguez shot Schlesinger a puzzled look and whispered, "Are those supposed to be blackout curtains?"

Schlesinger traced the edge of one of the blankets with the beam from his flashlight and shrugged his shoulders in response.

"Why would these guys want to block out light here in the middle of nowhere?"

"Maybe they were trying to hide something."

"Or hide from something."

Billings didn't care what the blankets were for.

“Tear them all down,” he ordered, “and let’s get some light in here.”

Stokes and Cooper stepped over to the windows and began pulling the blankets down. Light flooded the room. As it did, Schlesinger glanced up and his voice caught in his throat. “Holy shit.”

In unison, the rest of the team looked up and saw what Schlesinger was looking at. Suspended from the ceiling were at least fifteen decomposing corpses.

Cooper, the biggest and until this point one of the bravest members of the squad, recoiled in horror. Stokes made the sign of the cross while Rodriguez and Schlesinger instinctively raised their rifles and swept them back and forth along the length of the ceiling, ready to fire. “What the fuck is going on here, Lieutenant?” begged Schlesinger, the fear evident in his voice.

Billings had no idea what the hell they were looking at. The bodies had been tied almost flush against the ceiling and the heavy timber braces had completely hidden them from view when the team had first entered the room. Billings was about to say something, when a voice crackled over his radio. It was Russo.

“Alpha One. This is Bravo One. Do you copy? Over.”

Billings, his eyes still fixed on the gruesome scene above him, toggled his transmit button and said, “This is Alpha One. I read you, Jimmy. What have you got?”

“We’ve found somebody, Lieutenant. He appears

to be one of the village elders. It looks like he hasn't eaten in a week, but he's alive."

"Where'd you find him?"

"He was hiding behind one of the houses we were checking. My guys think he was foraging for food."

"Does he know what happened to the rest of the villagers?"

"He says all the survivors are hiding in the mosque. That's where we're headed now."

"Wait a second. *Survivors?*" repeated Billings. "Survivors of what? And what do you mean they're *hiding* in the mosque? What are they hiding from?"

"I'm still trying to figure that out. The old guy keeps repeating some word in Arabic I don't understand."

Billings motioned for Mike Rodriguez, their other Arabic speaker, to join him and then said into his radio, "What's the word? I'll see if Rodriguez knows it."

There was a pause as Russo asked the old man to speak directly into his microphone. Then it came—an intense, raspy voice that sounded like a set of hinges in serious need of oiling, "*Algul! Algul! Algul!*"

"Did you get that?" asked Russo as the old man backed away from his radio.

Billings looked at Rodriguez and noticed that the soldier's already ashen face had lost what little color was left. The bodies strapped to the ceiling had gotten to all of the men, but they had to hold it together.

"You ever play Xbox, Lieutenant?" asked Rodriguez, his eyes still glued to the grotesque forms hovering above them.

“No,” said Billings, who failed to comprehend any connection between a video game and their current situation.

“*Algul* was the first Arabic word I ever learned and I learned it while playing a game on Xbox called Phantom Force.”

Anxious for answers, the Lieutenant demanded, “What the fuck does it mean?”

“Loosely translated, it’s a horseleech or a blood-sucking genie, but usually it’s used to describe a female demon that lives in the cemetery and feasts on dead babies. When there are no babies left, it moves on to whoever is left in the village and keeps feeding until no one is left alive. I’ve also heard it’s a derivative of an Arabic word which means living dead and devourer of women and children. However you slice it, *Algul* is an Arabic vampire.”

Billings was about to tell Mike Rodriguez he was full of shit, when one of the bodies strapped to the ceiling above them opened its mouth and covered the soldiers in a fine mist of bloody froth.