Chapter 2

Nina Polzin stood naked in front of the streaked hotel mirror. Her hair was dripping on the bathroom floor, revealing the piss poor cleaning job the maid service had done. She traced the outline of a star drawn on her skin. She wanted to rip it off, cut it from her, those bastards. Now she was pretending to be one of them. This had better turn up Whitelace. These men she was with, she worried they wouldn't make it back. Too many different objectives here. It was going to be a cluster fuck. She'd make it out. She always made it out. The only difference this time was that she was going off-book. If the Company finds out, they'll kill her themselves. There was no right way for this to go.

She dressed quickly, covering up those fake tattoos as well as she could. The Bratva had taken her only friend from her, turned her into a heroin addict and a prostitute. She had been close to finding her a few times, but things always seemed to get in the way. The Russian mafia was spread out worldwide, comprised of many organizations working and fighting against each other. Tracking down Nadia was next to impossible and mostly hopeless. The CIA had given her opportunities that she would not otherwise have. Still, there were some things even they could not penetrate.

Everything she needed fit in a single duffel bag. No weapons on this op, so that helped, but she always traveled light. What did she have to bring? Nothing, she didn't even have a permanent residence. She was the perfect black book operative, never a worry about personal entanglements. There was nothing to leverage with her. The only thing she cared about, even in the least, was Nadia, and no one but her knew that story.

It was 4:00 am. Darkness greeted her as she stepped out of her room. Nina surveyed the streets. City of lost angels, there are no angels here. She dropped the key in the night slot, best to leave without being seen, even if that meant she'd have a lot of time to kill before the flight. No matter, it was better if she slept on the plane; it's a long way to Afghanistan. As the cab pulled up, she compared this city to her life. They all came here with hopes of fame and fortune, most lucky just to get out of this city with their dignity and their lives. She knew what it meant to be stuck. She always had been. She was stuck before she was even born. Daughter of spies, how could she ever believe that isn't what she would become? The cab pulled away. Nina stared out the window, wondering if there was a place for her. Someplace where she could be normal, the only place she could think of was in a pine box.

Whitelace, he got close to her once. It was the one time, her one moment of weakness, and it nearly got her and a lot of people dead. She'd been waiting for his name to come up again on her punch list. What the hell was he doing in Afghanistan, though? Why would an intelligence agent from Iran be slumming it with poppy farmers in Afghanistan? There was a play there, but Nina couldn't figure out what it might be. It doesn't matter; if she gets another chance with him staring down the barrel, she'll pull the trigger this time.

The terminal at LAX was dead, which just meant it looked like a busy airport anywhere else. She headed to the check-in kiosk and entered her confirmation number. The ticket spit out of the machine, Helsinki. Well, if there was a layover, at least, she knew someone to have a drink with. She scanned the terminal for any sign of the others. It was a well-planned operation; there should be no chance for them to be seen on the same surveillance footage. Satisfied, she headed to the gift shop. The sound of a vacuum running near the back of the store by the trashy magazine rack was the only indication that she was not alone. She grabbed some gum and a bottle of water. These were the times she hated, the times before the mission. The times when all you had to think about was yourself. Without a mission to execute, there wasn't much else in her life. She looked at her phone, just a burner she picked up before she came here. There would be a drop somewhere in Kandahar City where she could pick up the rest. For now, this was it, her lifeline, her friend.

Alto Silva stepped onto the plane. He positioned his duffel bag in front of him and moved down the aisle. As he passed the first-class passengers, he could feel the eyes on him. Most of these people had no idea what the tattoos on his face represented, but they all knew it couldn't be anything good. He thought back to his college days, before the DEA, before MS13. He could walk down the street then and not be stared at. Let them look; he was a bad man, just like they thought. Even though he was doing this for the good of all these people, he was still a bad man. They were all better off staying away and marking him for what he was, a killer, a drug dealer, a criminal.

He hated this part, waiting for the people ahead to get in their seats so that he could pass. Everyone he looked at averted their eyes. Would he ever be able to look at someone in the eyes again? He finally made it to his seat, E2. At least he had the window. He put his duffel up in the overhead bin and sat down. Sliding up the plastic shade on the window, he stared out onto the tarmac and watched as two men threw luggage onto the conveyer belt. What would it be like if he had gone another direction in life? He could be happy, moving luggage, having friends, getting a drink after work. That's bullshit. He was the one who was gonna take down MS13 and punch the Taliban in the balls at the same time. He could hear whispers behind him. "That man with the tattoos." He was made for this. It was gonna be big, a significant blow, and no one would ever know.

He watched the lights of LA turn to tiny dots outside his window. In the air, no turning back. Either pull it off or die trying. He knew Himee was on point, nothing to worry about there, but those other two, the Fed and the spook, they were wild cards. He just had to be what he was pretending to be, Mara Salvatrucha, a Mara. Every friend he had was going to go down because of him. He could help some of them after. Convince them to drop dimes. Then there was Gina, he loved her, she loved him, but she would burn with the rest of them and hate him for the betrayal. There was no coming out of this clean; he never thought there would be.

Closing his eyes, he leaned the seat back. They never went back far enough to matter. By the time he woke up, he'd be in Paris, where he would catch a connecting flight to Afghanistan. He never thought this job would take him there. Heading to a war zone was not in the brochure. After this, he was out. The brass said so. He could almost taste it, freedom, free from MS, and free from the DEA. He planned to leave the country after, find someplace that MS13 wouldn't look, and try to live a normal life. He had a stockpile of money he put away, siphoned off from MS13. He was set for life, as long as he lived through this mission.

Himee Hernandez clenched his fist as the plane touched down. Flying wasn't his thing, and this flight was the longest he had ever taken. He looked around the plane; everyone was Persian as far as he could tell. It was strange to hear only Farsi being spoken. It was clear that he was a long way from home. Standing up, he glanced at the man in the seat behind him. The man averted his eyes. It must be the tattoos. Marked for life, MS13, he will see it in the mirror every day for the rest of his life. A high price to pay, they better take these fuckers down, or everything would have been for nothing. He managed to keep himself distanced from other members of the gang. He kept his relationships surface at best, knowing one day he would burn all those bridges. Grabbing his duffel from the overhead, he turned and started down the aisle.

He trusted Alto, five years in the shit, and he still had his head on straight. This was like nothing they had ever done. The time they spent with the Sinaloa cartel was about the closest thing he could think of. Alto got him through that. He hoped he would get them through this as well. Himee just had to be MS13, treat this like any other supply line he had managed. He steeled himself but could not help feeling that this would get real bloody before they got home.

He stepped off the plane and down the stairs to the tarmac. It was a decent walk to the terminal from the aircraft. It was hot, desert fucking hot, and dusty. He tried to act as if he belonged there even though it was apparent he did not. Sweat began to roll down his back. The heat was oppressive, like standing in a giant oven. The wind blew up dust that stuck to the sweat of his forehead. Welcome to Kandahar, he thought. It looked like Arizona rolled back in time. He could see US soldiers patrolling the airport, which made him feel a bit more comfortable. With the tattoos on his face, it was hard to say if they would help or turn a blind eye if he ran into trouble. He was relieved to feel the cold air hit him as he entered the double doors leading into the airport terminal. Just get me to the hotel room to lay low until Alto got in contact, he thought. The signs were unreadable; he couldn't speak the language; he was alone. The sooner he made contact with the rest of the team, the better. A soldier eyed him as he passed. Maybe he recognized the MS13 tattoo on his neck, or perhaps he just recognized the general look. Either way, the look in his eye was not favorable. It struck him then that he was truly on his own. Even the US soldiers would see him as a criminal and likely leave him to die if it came to that.

The Kandahar Hotel was not far from the airport. Himee had studied enough Farsi to get himself a cab and tell the driver where to go. Kandahar was the second-largest city in Afghanistan. It was teaming with people and surrounded by mountains of jagged rock and hot desert sands. Himee was surprised at how modern the city was. He didn't know what he was expecting. They passed by burned out and broken buildings, reminders of the constant strife that has been part of the countries normal for so long. The American presence was evident in the form of MRAPs passing by on the opposite side of the street and fully geared soldiers mixed into the crowds of locals walking the streets. "We're not in Kansas anymore," he thought as the cab pulled up to the hotel. It was a sizeable five-story hotel situated on what seemed to be one of the city's main arteries. Exiting the cab, he stepped out into a river of people. He hated crowds, too hard to control the situation. He quickly made it across the deluge of humanity and into the hotel doors. The cabbie didn't complain about the money he gave him. He would have complained if it wasn't enough. For all, he knew he just gave the man a week's pay.

The AC in the hotel was a welcome change from the heat outside. Making a b-line for the registration desk, he did his best to ask about his reservation. The man behind the desk found his name quickly and gave him the key. Himee walked away as the man began explaining something in Farsi. He didn't care. He just wanted to get into the room and wait. The less time he spent with his face in public, the better. He looked at the room key, the symbol on the key was obviously the room number, but he couldn't read it. He should have studied the field guide more. Eventually, he found the room. It was on the fourth story, and apparently, the rest of the group had rooms on the same row. He hadn't seen any of the others yet. It was better that way. Sliding the key into the electronic slot and watching the light turn green gave him a feeling of relief. Solitude, and a shower, then it was time to wait.

The call came just before eight pm. Himee picked up the phone and heard the familiar voice of Alto on the other end. They were all to head to the lobby but have no contact with one another. Once the contact showed up, they would all follow Alto out and be taken to the meeting point. It was only a vetting process. These guys were ultra-paranoid. Once they felt that everyone was on the level, they would set up transport to the poppy fields. It was the first step, this time tomorrow morning, the team would either be deep in Taliban territory or dead in a ditch somewhere. Himee got dressed and stared into the mirror. He was a Mara, he'd faced down death before, but this felt different somehow.

The lobby of the hotel had a few sitting areas and a gift shop. A faint cloud of dust and cigarette smoke hung in the air. He spotted Ms. Polzin casually looking at things in the gift shop. Like him, she stuck out, but in a different way entirely. His face was covered in tattoos, and he looked like a typical gang banger. She was different, Eastern European, and dressed like a businesswoman. There was no denying that Alto was with him. They both had tattoos and dressed similarly. If anyone had seen American TV, they would identify them as gang members. Polzin could be here for any number of reasons; most would think she was on a business trip or a diplomat from some European nation. Adrian, on the other hand, looked like a tourist who got off at the wrong stop. He sat in one of the cushioned chairs just outside the gift shop. Khaki shorts and flip flops, a Hawaiian print shirt buttoned down to the middle, aviator sunglasses, and a straw fedora hat. He looked like he was at Disney World with his family, not in the middle of a war zone. Respect, he thought, of them all, Adrian was the least likely to be pegged as a cause for alarm. Walking over to a chair with a good view of the door, Himee sat down and began to wait.

Alto waited until he had eyes on the others before he made contact. The lobby was busy enough that four foreigners dispersed throughout the room would go unnoticed. He pulled out the phone, waiting for him in the room when he arrived and hit the only contact in it, just a number, no name. The others could see Mr. Silva speaking on the phone for only a brief moment before ending the call. Ten minutes passed as they all went about their business, each taking casual glances at Alto to see the next move. The phone rang, and Alto again spoke briefly, then moved toward the door, depositing the phone in the trash can near the entrance. The others could see him through the glass doors. He turned to his right and moved up the sidewalk, disappearing from their view. Himee was the first to move. He followed deliberately out the door. Ms. Polzin was buying something from the gift shop and seemed not to notice any of this.

Adrian put down his newspaper and was the next one to reach the sidewalk. He could see Himee in the crowd ahead of him. It was a good thing for those tattoos, he worried for Polzin, and he hoped his god-awful shirt would help her keep eyes on him. Himee made a turn down an alley up ahead. Adrian looked back as he turned into the alley and was relieved to see Ms. Polzin coming down the sidewalk, looking as if she had no idea he was there. There was a taxicab in the alley. As Adrian approached, Himee was ducking into the back seat. He did the same and kept the door open for Polzin. Once Nina was in the car, Alto nodded to the driver, who pulled out onto the busy street.

They winded their way through the crowded streets. Alto wasn't sure if they had told the cabbie to confuse them or if this was just a fucked up maze of a city. Either way, there was no way he could get back to the hotel reliably on his own. After a silent and agonizingly long car ride, they pulled up in front of what could only be described as a nightclub. Alto wasn't sure how Ms. Polzin's presence would be taken. It was his understanding that the only women allowed in a place like this would be employed there. It was going to be an interesting night.

As soon as they stepped out of the cab, the car speed away, disappearing down the street. It seemed the driver was not interested in sticking around and must have been paid ahead of time. The sidewalk was clear of the mass of humanity present on the street where the hotel was. It was nice to get a bit of personal space. A man stood on either side of the door. Straight out of a Time magazine cover, they wore long baggy white shirts and brown baggy pants. They both had full beards and fez style hats. What Alto noticed most was the AK-47s slung around their shoulders. He put aside any preconceived feelings and stepped up to the men as a Mara, nothin' to fuck with.

"Here to see Yassin." He stared at one of the men.

The man said nothing, simply motioned with his head towards the door. Alto motioned for the others to follow and walked through the door as if he owned the place.

Inside was a dimly lit hallway with no doors that opened into a larger room at the end. The light from the room ahead filtered through curls of smoke. The sounds of voices and music could be heard, emanating from the main room beyond. The others followed Alto, Himee taking up a customary position to his right and back about a foot. If anybody came at Alto, Himee would be on them in an instant. The other two walled shoulder to shoulder behind the Maras. Plozin looked every bit the Russian Bratva, but Markov looked more like a tourist. Alto noticed Adrian had opened his gaudy shirt a bit, revealing just hints of the tattoos that marked him as a Brigadier. It was hard to tell how the Russian angle would work. The Afghans had spent years fighting the Red Army. It would stand to reason that they would have issues working with Russians, even if they were Russian criminals. Alto was sure the Afghan's had a rich history of being suspicious of anyone. First, they fought the Russians with US backing, and now they fought the US. Nobody was on their side. They were pawns on the world stage as other nations grabbed for resources and positioning.

They reached the end of the hallway and stepped into a large room with many tables and booths. A lit dance floor dominated the room's center and what looked to be a bar along the right wall. A group of men occupied two booths in the far left corner of the room. They were the only people in the place. A man who carried himself with a superior air motioned them over. That must be the top dog, Yassin. Adrian spotted Yassin as soon as he entered the room. Trying not to betray his surprise, he scanned the room for exits and tactical positions. He hadn't realized their contact in Kandahar would be Yassin. He expected him to be at the compound where the drugs were but not in the city. It was apparent that our forces in Afghanistan were sorely uninformed on the matter. Or maybe they weren't, and a drone had this club in its sights right now. It was a dangerous place to be.

"You Yassin?" Alto said flatly.

"Mr. Silva, I presume?" he replied with a thick accent.

Alto nodded, "This is Himee Hernandez, Maxim Popov, and Svetlana Semenov." he motioned to the others.

"Ms. Semanov, it is customary for women to cover their hair when in public." He seemed to be attempting to provoke her.

Nina said nothing, only stared at him, and held his gaze. Alto broke in, "Who gives a shit? We are not here for a lesson in culture, homie. When are we gonna get to the spot?"

Yassin smiled. "You will be taken tomorrow. I wanted to meet you first, see who the Maras were sending to us."

"These two." Alto waved at Nina and Adrian, "They are the connection to the Bratva. They don't talk much. I was assured they are high level and speak for the bosses. If they agree to the terms and approve the logistics, they will set up a drop point on their side somewhere. That's between you."

"We have a place, but let's not talk business here. You all should relax, would anyone like tea?" Yassin motioned to the table and chairs closest to the booth he was in.

They all sat down, "Sure, whatever you got." Alto was taking stock of Yassin's security detail. Five men around him, two standing at either opening of the booth and the other three sitting with him. He could tell they all were heavily strapped, but none seemed to be wearing any body armor. There could be more men in this building somewhere. Alto had to remember that he was MS13. They would take revenge on anyone who tried to take him out, even here.

"You got cuete's for us?" Alto held up his hand pointer finger and thumb out in the form of a gun.

"I'm glad you asked. I have a surprise for you. I think you will enjoy this." Yassin nodded, and his guards moved out of the booth to let him through. Yassin wore traditional garb and sported a long dark beard covering most of his face. He had a brown Pashtun cap on over his long shoulder-length black hair. He motioned for them to follow him. They all got up and moved to follow. Three of Yassin's guards followed, and the other two stayed behind. They entered a door behind the bar and walked through a small kitchen area then through another door that opened into a long hallway. Alto started to feel like they were walking toward their demise and began looking at possible escape routes. They passed a few doors as they continued on and finally stopped at one.

"The American's were told where our operation was, and they sent in a drone. It killed your men, your Maras." He opened the door to reveal an Afghan man tied to a pipe in the corner of the room. He had dried blood on his face and was sweating profusely. He must have been there for a few days judging from his clothes and the smell of the room. "This is the man that told the Americans where to target." Yassin pulled a SIG Sauer P220 from under his shirt and handed it to Alto.

Alto took the gun, "Para mis hermanos" he said as he crossed the room. Under his breath, he muttered, "Perdoname madre." Extending his arm to the man's forehead, he fired one shot spraying the back of his head against the wall behind him. He turned to Yassin, "We need one for each of us." he said as he tucked the gun into his pants at the small of his back, "ammo too." Alto walked casually out of the room and back down the hall without stopping to see if anyone was following. Yassin lingered a moment on the dead man. He turned to one of his men, "Get them what they need."

After more uncomfortable conversation and posturing, Yassin's man came back with a gun for each of them. The guns and ammo were in a tattered red backpack. Alto took the pack, and after inspecting the contents, nodded to Yassin.

"We will have a car for you at the hotel tomorrow morning. I will call your room. You can get the others together. Make sure you are not followed. The American's have assets all over this city. You're not used to this, you won't notice them, but they will notice you. They may not know you are connected to us, but they will certainly wonder what you're doing here. If you are followed, we will have to pull out and wait for another time to get you. If they know, we are here and what we are doing, we will certainly be taken out. I will leave tonight. If you are not with me, you may have a better chance. If you are, they won't hesitate to destroy a whole city block just to be sure."

"You will leave here separately," he continued, "and head back to the hotel. I will be in contact. We will arrange for your transport to the compound tomorrow. Be patient. We can only move out when it is safe to do so. Do not draw attention to yourselves. We have limited opportunity to get you out of the city unnoticed." he spoke softly to one of his men. Alto didn't speak the language, so it wouldn't have mattered even if he could hear what they said. "Go now. I will see you all at the compound, safe journey."

Yassin's men coordinated cars for each of them. They were taken separately back to the hotel and dropped off at varying distances away. It was up to them to walk the last few blocks back to the hotel and make sure they were not followed. Alto was glad to be on the streets. Every car ride seemed like it would be his last, and that club, he was sure they were being led to their deaths. It felt good to be on his own time on the streets where he belonged. Sure these were the streets of another country, miles from where he was from, but the streets had a heartbeat, and Alto could catch the pulse of a city no matter where he was. The people on the sidewalk parted as he approached, he was an apex predator, foreign and strange, but there was no mistaking what he was, a bad, bad man.

He made it back to the hotel and headed to his room. As he opened the door, Agent Malkov approached and followed him in. They entered the room quickly and shut the door. Alto turned on Malkov with venom in his eyes.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing culero? If anyone sees us together, we're fucked"

"No one saw me come up. What the fuck was that at the club, Alto?" Adrian was visibly shaken.

"If you can't cut it, you can get the fuck out of-"

"He was an American asset Alto, not some street rat" Adrian cut him off.

"Yeah, and if I hadn't." Alto faltered a moment, his eyes downcast.

"You think his contact is going to just let that shit go. If he was giving coordinates out for drone strikes, he's a CIA asset. They will be crawling up our ass this time tomorrow."

"If I hadn't, they would have killed us all. I do what I have to do. I kept us all alive. If I hesitated for one fucking second, we would have been made. You just keep your fucking emotions in check, gringo; we can't risk it now, not here. We will die out here unless we become who we are pretending to be."

Adrian stared at Alto. "Para mis hermanos? For my brothers? That's what you said. You were getting revenge for your Maras. You are in too deep, man, and I am not gonna go down because you can't make that distinction."

"I have to play the part. So do you, go to your fucking room and keep your head down until they make contact."

"You can't just-"

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. I have given everything I have to this. I have become everything I hate, and there is no redemption for me. I am gonna get us through this, and then you won't have to see me again. But don't pretend to know why I do what I do, and never put me on the wrong side."

"This isn't over, Alto." Adrian flashed him a cold stare as he walked out of the room.

Alto closed the door behind him. Malkov was going to get them all killed. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at his reflection. Adrian was right; he had become as bad as the men he was here to put away. Mara Salvatrucha, maybe he was exacting vengeance for the Maras, who had been killed. Had he gone this far down the rabbit hole? This was it for him, one last chance at redemption. He just had to stay alive long enough.

To be continued...