Adrian Markov entered the large warehouse, just off San Fernando Rd. in Sun Valley. Surrounded by industrial buildings, storage facilities, auto shops and junkyards, it was the perfect place for a meeting of this sort. Nobody around here is gonna ask questions, nobody around here is gonna care at all. He felt as if he was a bit over dressed. Jeans and a blazer, around here, he looked like a fucking cop and that was the last thing he wanted to be made as. He hurried into the metal door of the building trying not to have too many eyes on him. It smelled of oil and old rust inside. Must have been a machine shop at one time. The place was large, with a huge roll door just to the right of the smaller door he entered. Aerospace maybe, whatever it was it was all gone now, there was nothing in the entire huge space except for a table and six chairs directly in the center, and a rolling white board in front of that. A man stood at the white board putting up photos and writing names. There was another man, sitting about ten or more feet away from the table. He was dressed in an all black suite, white shirt and a thin red tie. Probably secret service, he’d never seen him before, Adrian was sure he didn’t work for “The Company”.

“Good afternoon Mr. Markov. Glad you could make it.” the man at the white board said turning to Adrian. “Have a seat. The rest will be here soon. ”

The man turned back to the white board and contninued putting photos up. He was in his mid forties, curly brown hair, short with gray at the temples. He was in a cheap yellow dress shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, and brown polyester slacks. Did they even make things from polyester anymore? He looked like a man who was so overworked that he didn’t have any time to put himself together. Sloppy some would say, but Adrian could see it, he wasn’t a slob, he was focused. So focused he had little time to put on airs. The door opened spilling sunlight into the dim warehouse. Time for roll call.

A woman entered, she definitely stuck out like a sore thumb. She wore a dark blue skirt suit and black sensible heals. Now, she works for “The Company”, he could tell, she had that arrogance in her stride that said, “I don’t give a fuck, my clearance is so high I could find out the results of your last colonoscopy.” fuckin’ spooks, she better play nice, he had a lot riding on this.

As she approached the table and pulled out a chair, the man at the white board said “Ms. Polzin, pleasure to see you again.” He hadn’t turned around to look at her just continued to write on the board.

“You too Stanley, thanks for the invite.” she glanced at the second man sitting alone away from the table. Adrian could tell she was suspicious of the man, guess he’s not CIA then. Looking at the pictures being added to the white board Adrian recognized some of them. At least two of them were on the FBI’s most wanted list. Every agent committed those faces to memory and Adrian was no different. He had his marching orders though, get the intel on Sadaf Yassin, where he is, where he goes, who he meets with. It should be smooth as silk, as long as everyone else can keep their shit together. The door opened again, this time two men entered.

The first one to reach the table, shaved baled with a goatee, gray and black plaid flannel with the top button done and a white t-shirt beneath, pulled out a seat, turned it around and sat. Both men were covered in tattoos. The second slowly walked up, black Dickies work shirt with black Dickies pants, pleated and rolled, he wore a black and white bandanna and was shaved bald as well. Adrian could see what the tattoos were, he was FBI, and they were on his radar. The facial tattoos marked them as Maras. These guys were Mara Salvatrucha, MS13. So brutal was this gang that the Sinaloa Cartel recruited them to fight Los Zetas in Mexico. What the hell were these guys doing here.

The man at the white board broke the tension. “Mr. Silva. Now that you have arrived we can start.” he moved to the side of the board so that everyone could see.

“OK everyone, this op came together pretty quickly and we have a very short window to get this done. I know not all of you have been briefed so I appreciate your quick response and patience. Let me start by saying. I don’t give a fuck who you are or who you work for, I have it from on high that this is my op and the rest of you are here in a support capacity. I know you have your own agendas, but listen up, your agencies wouldn’t have the chance to get in this close if it weren’t for us. We’re happy to have you hitching a ride but this is a DEA operation people. I don’t wanna see shit go off the rails because of some other priority. These men’s lives depend on you all doing what they tell you to do. So don’t fuck it up. I also want you to know there is no extraction plan. You are expected to operate completely on your own. Mr. Silva has more details for you, Mr. Silva.” at that he moved for an empty chair. It was the first time since Adrian had shown up that he sat down.

Silva stood, the tattoos covering his face hid his mood, he was in a perpetual state of scary as fuck. How could we be working with MS13 Adrian thought, these were some of the most brutal criminals on the planet. The tattooed man walked to the white board and regarded it for a moment, then turned to face the others. “My name is Alto Silva, some of you are feds”, he looked at Adrian, “and you may have heard my name a time or two. Forget everything you know about me. It should go without saying that what I am about to say cannot leave this room”. He looked into the eyes of each person, holding for a moment.

“I am an undercover DEA agent. I have been under deep cover for the last five years. I grew up in Los Angeles. Connections from my youth helped me infiltrate MS13. I climbed the ladder and I am now on the Council of Nine, the top of the organization. I have done things to get there that, well; lets just say I’m a wanted man. You may have seen my face in connection with some truly bad shit. Now you know, I’m on your side. This is Himee Hernandez.” He motioned to the other tattooed man. “It’s the same for him. He isn’t as high ranking as me, but he is the leader of what they call a ‘Clica’ in El Paso, he runs groups of soldiers on the streets. You may have seen him on a wall as well. He’s undercover DEA, three years in the gang. I tell you this because I want you all to understand the gravity of the situation. If you fail to listen to Himee or myself, it could get us killed. Not to mention dumping five plus years of work down the toilet. After this op I’m out, everything I have done to this point comes to a head here. Himee too. So you better believe we want this to go smooth. I have to live with the things I’ve done and this”, he gestured to his face with two fingers, “it has been long and hard but this is the end of the line. I only say this because if you compromise the mission or hang back when its time to go, I will leave your ass. Believe it.”

He turned to the white board and paused. Moving one of the photos to replace another, the photo that was replaced he threw on the table. “He’s dead.” he said pointing to the photo, it was an Afghani man in his late forties maybe. “So, here it is. I found out that MS13 operates a distribution line out of San Antonio, Texas, which is the largest supply line of heroin into the U.S. that we have ever seen. The interesting part is that no one can seem to find out where it’s coming from. It just seems to appear in San Antonio and then MS13 distributes it from there. We could never figure out where it was coming from until I overheard some conversations regarding it a year and a half ago. Mara Salvatrucha has been working with someone in Afghanistan. We suspect it is the Taliban or one of the other extremist groups providing the drugs for money to fund their operations. I have been working to find more information for over a year. I have positioned myself in a good place to be put on the management of this supply line. Last week we got a break. A drone strike killed two Maras who were in Afghanistan overseeing the operation. They needed a new boss out there and my ticket was pulled. This is an opportunity like no other. Because of that, we allowed other agencies to hitch a ride, we wont get an opportunity to be inside the belly of the beast anytime soon. You two”, he said pointing at Adrian and the woman across from him with his pointer and pinky fingers. “are acting as Russian mafia, I have been working the Russian angle with the higher ups, telling them we need to expand globally. It’s all bullshit, no one but me has been talking to the Russians so I can introduce anyone and they will think it’s legit. This is the volatile piece that could back fire on us. If anyone from MS13 starts to try and contact the Russians, we are gonna be in a world of shit. They are letting me deal with it for now so you have your cover story. It’s just the four of us, we are going in with no backup and no extraction plan. If we can pull this off we will be cutting off a supply line that provides over forty percent of MS13’s revenue. This will cause some serious problems for them. Once done there are several smaller operations that will take out other key supply lines. In the end over half of the money MS13 brings in will disappear overnight. It’s quite possible this will collapse the organization entirely. In addition this also cuts off the flow of money into Afghanistan in a big way. This is big, folks. So here’s the plan.”

“Himee and I will be flying into Kandahar together, you two will fly in separately, routed through somewhere in Eastern Europe. We will have rooms reserved at the Kandahar Hotel, so when you get there ask for a reservation under your name. After that we wait for my contact to get in touch. The main objective of this operation is to break the supply line from Afghanistan to San Antonio. We will do that by assessing the operation from the far side, getting all of the intel we need on the who’s, what’s and where’s. We’ll then be making the full trip, from Afghanistan to San Antonio, traveling with the drugs. We’ll be going on the cover story that we need to see the operation in its entirety. That will be our ticket home. If something goes wrong and we can’t make the run we are stuck out there. On the states side we will have provided the location of the drop. Agents will be waiting to take the location on our go. At that point we will be on the inside. We can drop cover and try to take out any high-ranking objectives. None of our people will know who we are, they will only know there are four agents on the inside. If we can pull this off we will be cutting off a huge supply of money to both MS13 and the Taliban. The Afghans don’t trust the Maras and we don’t trust them. You two, no fucking one is going to trust you. We have to play this smart and low key. Let me do the talking. We’ll have to figure out which one of you is in charge for the Russians. Who ever it is can do the talking for you. We wont get a second chance at this, once Himee and I blow cover, it’s all over, we will either be killed or be out of MS forever.”

“Any Questions?”

Ms. Polzin leaned back I her chair, “Weapons?”

“No weapons, we have to fly, and we are supposed to be civilians. We will have to come up with any heat once we get there. I may be able to talk them into giving us something, it depends on how jumpy these fuckers are.”

“Pretty fucking jumpy, I suspect.” Adrian broke in.

“We’ll they know us, and they know we aren’t gonna be anywhere unless we have coverage, you know what I’m saying?”

“What if something goes down on the trip back to San Antonio?” Adrian’s expression changed, a darker look came over his face.

“We’re fucked.” It was the first thing that Himee said.

“I don’t like it”, Ms. Polzin protested. “How long will we be there before coming back with the drugs?”

“As long as it takes, they have to be ready for a shipment. Could take a few days. We don’t know.”

Adrian stood up and went to the white board, inspecting the faces in the photographs. There were six photos up on the board currently and one of them was Sadah Yassin, the man he was after. He turned back to the others “Where will we be staying?”

“We are going to deep tribal country, areas completely held by the Taliban. They are the ones putting us up. We will be right there at the poppy fields, inspecting the whole operation.” Alto sat down.

“What kind of support can we expect from our people there.” Nina Polzin spoke with a thick Russian accent and had a very dry personality. It seemed every word she spoke dripped with contempt for everyone in the room. Adrian knew the type, that stoic Eastern Block persona. Somewhere in there was a person, she just wasn’t about to show it. She was definitely a spook, when shit gets hairy though, Adrian knew who to stay close to.

“We will be in the middle of Taliban controlled territory, we have Special Forces available, but there’s no way they can get in there. They’ll be dead before they reach us. Like I said we are on our own. We are gonna have to play this just as our covers dictate. Himee and me, we are MS13, don’t give a fuck about any of this terrorist bullshit. We are just working our drug supply lines. You are Russian Bratva, you don’t give a shit either, and you just want to get your hands on some of that distribution. We need to play this as criminals who don’t have any political affiliation. We have to be just as ruthless and hard as they are toward us. They have no play in killing us or taking us hostage. We make them money, they make us money. None of our governments will give two shits if we are hostages. There’s nothing to leverage, as long as we keep our cover we are safe.” Alto stood again and walked to the board.

“This man Sadah Yassin, he is Taliban, he is also my contact in Kandahar”, Alto pointed at the photograph of Yassin. Adrian was gonna be closer to him that he thought. “This is Aasif Basha, he is in charge of the security around the poppy fields. He controls a small army in the area of somewhere over one hundred soldiers.” He moved to the third photo on the board. “We don’t know who this is, we think he is the money man but we aren’t sure.” He pointed at the last photo on the board. “We know this man only as Bridger, he is American we think, we don’t know what his connection is but he is always around.”

“So that’s it, I know you two have people of interest in this, I don’t wanna know unless it’s absolutely crucial. We stick to the plan, get intel on these men, observe on the trip back and shut it down state side. Simple, right. OK, you Russians need to get in costume.”

Adrian knew it was coming, if he was going to be impersonating a brigadier, he would need the tattoos to prove it, Ms. Polzin also. The ink they were using would begin fading after a week. That had better be enough time. No damn way was he gonna do what Silva and Hernandez did, tattoos all over their damn faces. That was a serious price to pay. He had respect for these men; they had infiltrated a dangerous organization and were willing to pay the ultimate price to gain trust. There was no going back from that. Once they were out they would need to be undercover the rest of their lives. Marked men. This was serious, for the first time Adrian began to have second thoughts. He had to suck it up now, this was what he had been waiting for, a chance to make a real difference, a chance to win one for the good guys.

To be continued…

Nina Polzin, stood naked in front of the streaked hotel mirror. Her hair dripping on the bathroom floor revealing the piss poor cleaning job the maid service had done. She traced the outline of a star, which was 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, this was gonna 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 really was no good 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 all over. It was 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 but 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. She looked onto 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, she stared out the window wondering if there was a place for her. Some place 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 for the life of her figure 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 printed, 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. This was a well-planed 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 life line, 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 good of all these people, he was still a bad man. They were all better off staying away and marking him for what he really 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 here whispers behind him. “That man with the tattoos.” He was made for this, this was gonna be big, a major blow and no one would ever know.

He watched the lights of L.A. 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, there were the wild card. 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 Afghanistan. He never thought this job would take him there. Heading to a warzone was defiantly 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 planed to leave the country after, find someplace that MS13 wouldn’t look and try to live a normal life. He had stockpile of money he had 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 plan 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 here 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 everyday 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 stared 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. He 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 was gonna get real bloody before they got home.

He stepped off the plan and down the stairs to the tarmac. It was a decent walk to the terminal from the plane. It was hot, desert fucking hot and dusty. He tried to act like he belonged there even though it was obvious he did not. Sweat began to roll down his back. The heat was oppressive but at least it wasn’t humid. Dust blew on the wind and stuck to he dampness off his forehead. Welcome to Kandahar he thought. It looked like Arizona rolled back in time. He could see U.S soldiers patrolling the airport, which made him feel a bit more confortable. With the tattoos on his face it was hard to say if they would help or just turn a blind eye if he ran into trouble. He was relieved to feel the cool air hit him as he entered the double doors leading into the airport terminal. He just wanted to get to the hotel room and lay low until Alto got in contact. He couldn’t read the signs, he couldn’t speak the language, he was alone. The sooner he made contact with the rest of the team the better. A solider eyed him as he passed. Maybe he recognized the MS13 tattoo on his neck, or maybe he just recognized the general look, either way the look in his eye was not favorable. He realized then that he was truly on his own, even the U.S. 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 and he 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 really 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 obvious in the form of MRAPs passing by on the opposite side of the street and fully geared soldiers on the streets. “We’re not in Kansas anymore” he thought as the cab pulled up to the hotel. It was a large five-story hotel situated on what seemed to be one of the main arteries of the city. 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 cabby 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 weeks 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 forth story and apparently the rest of the group had rooms on the same row. He hadn’t seen any of the others yet and 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. He 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. Apparently this was only a vetting process. These guys where ultra paranoid, once they felt that everyone was on the level they would setup transport to the poppy fields. This 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. As he walked out of the hallway leading into the lobby 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, but she was different, Eastern European and dressed like a business woman. There was no denying that Alto was with him, they both had the tattoos and dressed similar. If anyone had seen American T.V. 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 that she was some 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 warzone. Respect, he thought, of them all Adrian was the least likely to be pegged as a cause for alarm. Walking over to a chair that had a good view of the door Himee sat down and began to wait.