

Chapter 1

Deceived and Framed

Friday 5th January, 1996

Kentobi, Central Africa

From under the trees, Phil McKenzie observed the two helicopters at take-off. They adopted a forward tilting attitude, engines screaming as height and speed were gained. When the leading aircraft reached two hundred feet, Phil raised his rifle and fired two rapid shots into the front of the Perspex canopy.

“Do you think it’ll work Phil?” Joe Conroy asked.

The Russian-built Hind plummeted to the ground, hit the Kentobi dust, and exploded in a ball of flame.

“It’ll work,” Phil replied. “Without his escort, the fearless dictator will turn back.”

The second Hind, containing General Amadi Meterenge, banked to the right taking evasive action. The General’s helicopter also went out of control, spiralled to the ground and exploded in a ball of flame.

“Shit!” Phil gritted his teeth. “Before it spun, the Perspex splintered on the second chopper. I didn’t hear a shot.”

“Long range with a suppressor fitted.” Joe scanned the countryside to the north with his binoculars. “I reckon it came from the outcrop over there, but who the fuck was it?” He continued looking. “It’s a range of at least five hundred metres.”

“No time to ponder,” Phil said, before turning to the other two members of the team. “Let’s go lads. We can’t hang about here.”

Pete Kelly and Dave Carter had been lying prone behind Phil, keeping watch to the rear of the small group. When they heard the second explosion, they exchanged a glance before continuing to observe their individual arcs.

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Phil was the leader of Bravo Two-One, a team of British Special Air Service (SAS) soldiers. They had jogged fifteen kilometres across undulating scrub under a rising sun, and through a forest to meet their deadline. The team had arrived with minutes to spare and left the scene in a hurry. Their lightweight combat kit was saturated from the outward run.

In the opinion of his peers and superiors alike, Phil had the ability to lead, or blend in and be the grey man. His short dark hair and athletic build ensured he appeared unassuming and ordinary in civilian clothes. On a mission, he was 100 % emotionless weapon of war.

According to those who knew him well, and they were few, he was always emotionless. No humour or sadness. He was handsome and fit, but an automaton. Training and instinct had served him faithfully over the years in many international operations. He lived for his job.

Joe was thirty-six, like Phil, but there, the similarity ended. At six-foot-two, Joe was four inches taller, had a muscular build, blond hair, and the nickname Viking. He had served with Phil for seven years, and they'd been in many tight scrapes together. Joe's dry humour usually helped in the bad times, aided by his selfless attitude.

Apart from the brief exchanges between Phil and Joe, and the instruction to move out, nobody spoke for twenty minutes after the shooting.

The team maintained a steady pace when they left the scene. The forest canopy provided minimal shelter, but on reaching the western edge, they would be in the open for at least thirty minutes.

Phil signalled a halt while inside the tree line. "Okay lads." He was taking deep breaths. "I don't know who else is out there ... but somebody wanted the General dead." Phil paused. "Now think about our flight out here."

Like the others, Dave used the stop to take in some water. He capped his bottle. "While we've been runnin'," he said, "I've been thinkin'—it doesn't make sense."

Phil said, "It was a bloody set-up?" He turned to Joe. "Viking?"

"Now you mention it, I agree," the big man said, having caught his breath. "Our pilot wasn't happy when you said we'd continue the mission on foot." He nodded as he recalled. "For a pilot, he was more agitated by your decision, than he was by his helicopter malfunctioning. If it had been one of our regular pilots, he'd have been cursing the machine."

"When we reach the chopper," Phil said, "watch our aircrew." He glanced at Joe and nodded. "We'll bring it up at the main debrief. I don't want anybody to say anything to the two flyboys." Each of the men made eye contact with Phil to acknowledge, and they continued to watch for danger.

"Let me do the talking," Phil continued as he packed away his bottle. "Something isn't right." The others nodded, and the team set off at a trot.

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At twenty-four, Dave was the youngest of the squad. He was a short, dark-haired Scotsman with a great soldiering attitude, a quick mind—and sometimes a quick tongue. Having completed SAS selection six months earlier, this was his first live mission.

He had been in the Highland Light Infantry before his transfer, and his personal assets were his weapon skills and medical knowledge. He was good at logical thinking, like all who passed the rigorous selection process to join the SAS. It had been suggested Dave should control his tendency to question everything.

Phil's team were at peak fitness but dehydrated rapidly under the intense heat. They stopped after another fifteen minutes, each going down on one knee, watching terrain and skyline while listening for any signs of military hardware or human movement. All they saw as they took turns drinking were the grazing wildebeest, zebra and giraffe in the distance.

Pete was a ginger-haired, thirty-year-old ex-Para who had worked with Phil and Joe on several missions and trusted them both. Phil had saved Pete's life twice. Taking care of comrades was natural to some men.

As 'Tail-end-Charlie' in patrol formation, Pete kept his rifle butt in the shoulder and a watchful eye to the rear while he was listening. Wherever he focused, his rifle pointed. He was a wiry man whose head and eyes constantly moved, like a wild animal. He spoke when necessary. As they covered ground, he was continually thinking; assessing.

Dave said, "It must be thirty minutes flying time, for any of their planes to get here."

Pete smiled but said nothing. His young colleague was on edge. It occurred to Phil, young Dave wanted reassurance a helicopter gunship, or a brace of Kentobi fighters wasn't about to show. He winked at Viking.

"Don't worry Dave," Viking said and grinned. "By the time they get organised, we'll be in a different fucking country. It isn't NATO we're dealing with here."

Phil said, "You got something on your mind, Pete?"

"It might be something, and nothing, Boss," Pete glanced at the others. "Before you fired, I turned to do a quick three-sixty, and for a split second I thought I saw something." He squinted.

"Go on," Viking said. "Spit it out, mate."

"Before the boss fired at the chopper—a flash or reflection occurred on the outcrop to the north of our position."

"Fuckin' hell," Dave said.

"Dave," Phil said, "shut the fuck up!" He turned to Viking, "What do you reckon mate?"

"It could have been binoculars," the big man said. "It might have been a telescopic sight."

“A pro wouldn’t be careless,” Pete said, “aiming at us without firing.”

“Unless it was a pro with a last minute briefing or a change of heart.” Viking nodded. “Yeah, maybe we were meant to be targets.”

Dave’s top teeth closed on his bottom lip. He was silenced by a raised eyebrow from Phil, and the expletive was cancelled.

“Keep everything for the debriefing,” Phil said.

“Boss,” Pete said, looking to their rear. “Unless we’ve discovered hungry lions hunting in the daytime” He pointed to a herd of wildebeest which had taken fright. Their dust trail camouflaged whatever had spooked them until two separate dust trails rose behind them.

“They’re fucking big lions,” Viking said.

The team set off at a steady jog. It was hoped whatever the pursuit vehicles were—they didn’t have mounted machine guns. A heavy machine gun could send its deadly message over a serious distance.

The border was indistinct, with no official markings, but they could make out the helicopter parked in the haze three kilometres distant. They reached a point without cover—an ideal range for pursuing troops. Other men might have considered an extra burst of adrenalin and start an early, meaningless sprint. Those sprints faded over distance. The men of Bravo Two-One continued at their steady pace.

An acacia tree between them and their helicopter was the closest thing to a border recognition point. Spits of earth erupted in a row, a few metres to the right of the team. A few seconds later the deep thud, thud, of the machine gun, carried on the breeze. The team zigzagged as they ran, but on the baked, pitted ground, it was hazardous.

As they passed a sizeable solitary boulder, Joe stopped and turned to face their rear.

“Viking!” Phil shouted and glanced back.

“Go, Boss,” Viking called as he took cover behind the boulder. “Pick me up.” He took aim and fired a series of single, effective shots at the approaching vehicles.

“Move it, lads,” Phil said to the others, who had also stopped and turned. He ran to Joe’s side and placed two full magazines next to him. “We’ll be right back mate.” It was a tough decision to take on the role of rearguard. He’d done it himself more than once. Viking was a man’s man—a warrior.

As Phil ran, he held his rifle across his chest and kept a steady pace, confident he would be okay. Bursts of automatic fire no longer sent streams of bullets to land around his feet, and he could hear the single shots from Viking. Rapid fire was being returned to the rearguard. The big man would be firing at the pursuing vehicles with alternate shots which would affect their accuracy.

Phil caught up with the others. Every second would count for Joe. It was ten agonising minutes before they crossed the open border into Mowhandi; and their helicopter. When five hundred metres away, Phil raised his left hand with forefinger extended and made a circular motion.

The pilot and co-pilot had been standing in the shadow of the Puma's fuselage, staring into the heat-haze. They donned their helmets and climbed into the cockpit. When the three elite soldiers reached the machine, the rotor blades were circling, and a cloud of dust rose up.

"We've got one to pick up back there!" Phil screamed, leaping into the cargo area.

"I'm not crossing the border—" The pilot was silenced by a pistol muzzle being pressed to his kidneys.

"You pick him up," Phil said, "or your fucking co-pilot gets a rapid promotion."

The helicopter's engines screamed on take-off, and the pilot glared over his shoulder at Phil. The other two men in the fighting team eased themselves into the large doorway, rifle butts in the shoulder, heels of their boots hooked into the metal runner beneath the open hatch. They exchanged a look, and Dave's lips pressed together. Dimples appeared in his cheeks. The team had changed from hunted to hunters.

It took two minutes before the Puma was close to the boulder, flying at fifty feet above the ground, nose inclined forward, rotors kicking up dust. The pilot turned his aircraft side-on. It was the wrong thing to do defensively, but briefings aside, his passengers were the elite and could shoot more accurately with a full view.

Phil knelt close behind the others in the doorway and surveyed the scene below. One vehicle was overturned, and four bodies were strewn around the area. A second vehicle was within one hundred metres of Viking's location. Two bodies lay beside the second vehicle, and one man lay spread-eagled in the open. A lone surviving Kentobi soldier was exchanging fire with Viking.

"I've got him, Boss," Pete called amidst the noise of the Puma's engines. He squeezed the trigger, and the Kentobi soldier flew backwards with a hole in his head.

As Viking ran towards the aircraft, he and Phil nodded to each other. A nod was their thanks either way, as Viking threw his rifle to Phil and climbed aboard using one hand. Blood streamed down his injured left arm.

When airborne, Dave unpacked painkillers and dealt with the bandaging of Viking's wound. Dave nodded towards the pilot, narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

Viking nodded and gave Dave a thumbs-up for the first aid.

Phil sat with his back against the bulkhead and looked at his colleagues with pride. He had been around a while, but nothing beat the knowledge your team had your back covered and believed in your judgement. Whatever the pilot and co-pilot said at any subsequent hearing, they'd be outvoted.

It was a forty-minute flight to the military airbase in Mowhandi. Conversation was minimal.

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Lieutenant Colonel Sebastian Barrington-Cross of the Royal Lancers was the United Nations Liaison Officer for the troubled region. Several UN member nations had officers in African countries. He had taken the job because of the international flavour of the challenge, and to gain another medal. Barrington-Cross had been a young lieutenant during the first Gulf War, in 1991. He had survived the conflict because of a strong bunch of soldiers. On one occasion his NCOs had saved him from making a catastrophic decision, and the Company survived the situation unscathed.

In an attempt to be associated with glory, the young officer later attended an SAS Selection Course at Hereford. He had trained hard physically for six months before the attempt but failed. He had misjudged the full criteria of the process, and his attitude was noted by more than one instructor.

The men who wore the winged-dagger badge had more going for them than fitness. Barrington-Cross was 'Returned to Unit' on the third day. He had let down a long line of distinguished ancestors—again.

As these things do, the word spread and the disappointed officer's postings had been structured toward less arduous roles. He was fiercely jealous of the men who were capable of making rapid, accurate decisions under fire.

He stood across the desk from Phil, scowling. The officer's knuckles were pressing on the desk as he leant forward. Unlike the heat the team had experienced, this officer's temporary workplace was cooled by the low buzz of an overhead fan. He had commandeered the small building solely to conduct this conversation.

A hint of alcohol contaminated the air when Barrington-Cross spoke. "Who the Hell do you think you are, McKenzie? The winged dagger badge doesn't give you the right to assassinate whoever you please."

Phil fixed his gaze on the senior officer, ignoring the two suited men in the room. They had the appearance of diplomats or politicians as Phil thought of them, and he didn't like politicians.

The liaison officer walked around the desk and stood within arm's length of Phil.

Phil stared into the man's eyes. "I was fulfilling my brief—Sir."

“Don’t try to be a bloody smartarse with me, my friend,” the officer said. “Your helicopter pilot told you the mission would have to be aborted because of a mechanical fault, so he landed while on the Mowhandi side of the border.” The officer narrowed his eyes. “You, however, insisted on continuing into Kentobi on foot.”

“We had a mission to accomplish.”

“You put the lives of your team in danger. You had the audacity to tell the pilot to radio in his position, but wait for your return.”

“I don’t know who these two gentlemen are, but if you’d like me to speak in front of them, I will.”

Barrington-Cross wasn’t going to browbeat this soldier. Special Forces personnel are intelligent, modern warriors and most have a firm grasp of the political situation of the day. The burly officer turned.

“Gentlemen, I would appreciate a few minutes alone with this soldier. I feel we should discuss this matter—at a military level before I make my report.”

One of the two diplomats opened his mouth to argue, but his associate nodded towards the door and looked back. “Five minutes Colonel.”

“Thank you,” Barrington-Cross waited until the door was closed before he turned to face Phil. “Now, bloody explain yourself.” He smirked. “I have a feeling you’re about to be arrested for the assassination of an international statesman.”

In the absence of witnesses, Phil showed his true contempt. A dimple appeared in his right cheek, and he shook his head. “You might as well get rid of the uniform and dress like those two arseholes out there.” Despite his self-control, Phil could feel his face warming.

“You had better watch your step McKenzie, and remember who you’re talking to—”

“Why?” Phil interrupted. “Is this being fucking recorded?” He turned his head to look into the corners of the small office to emphasise the point. Phil’s nostrils flared as he breathed, but he kept his mouth closed when he wasn’t speaking. The scent of the officer’s aftershave drifted to Phil’s nostrils. It was out of place amongst the other aromas, the whirring overhead fan and the intense heat and dust.

“Okay,” Barrington-Cross said. “You tell me. What do you think is going on?”

Phil levelled his gaze on the liaison man and spoke for five minutes, explaining the political and military situation in each of the four neighbouring countries. When he named the head of state who had been assassinated, he emphasised the rank, and laughed after saying, “General Amadi Meterenge.” He concluded his speech in a matter of fact tone.

“I don’t know who did shoot down his aircraft, but they did the world a favour.” As Phil spoke, he watched the liaison officer. The big man’s eyes had lost the intense glare, his cheeks were relaxed, and his jaw sagged. Phil nodded slowly and summarised.

“Don’t try to bluff me about fucking reports Colonel. You wouldn’t be aware of the original brief. I reckon you’ve been told to pull me in and rubber stamp my arrest and you are to point the official accusing finger.”

The Colonel couldn’t stop the twitch in his left eye. “How much I’m aware of, is no concern of yours soldier. You are now relieved of duty, and you’ll be escorted from here under armed guard.”

“Before my armed guard arrives, I have two questions for you to ponder.”

“Go on.”

“First. How long was the helicopter crew ordered to wait before abandoning us?” Phil smirked when the Colonel’s eyes widened. “Secondly, how is it such a faulty helicopter made it back here without a hitch?”

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While Phil’s unofficial debriefing was taking place, a white Toyota Land Cruiser pulled up at the entrance to the small building. It had UN painted on various body panels in large black letters. Two burly soldiers, one white and one black, got out. They were wearing UN insignia and light blue berets. Both glanced at the armed men outside before entering the remote building. A few minutes later, they came out with Phil in handcuffs. One of them was carrying Phil’s weapons.

Phil’s team had been sitting on wooden pallets in the shade of a roof extension. They were drinking water and discussing how the smell of wildlife permeated the air. When they saw Phil being led toward the Toyota, their first response was to stand and raise their weapons into a firing position.

The UN soldiers hesitated. Phil made eye contact with his team and shook his head. The armed escort continued to glance back as they ushered Phil into their vehicle.

The liaison officer appeared in the doorway to address the team. Right behind him were the two men in suits.

“You three gentlemen,” Barrington-Cross said, “will be debriefed on this sorry affair and flown back to the UK.” He glanced at the Toyota. “You will face military proceedings should your Commanding Officer wish.” He cast a long look at the departing Toyota, and his left eye twitched. “I will, of course, furnish your CO with a report of the facts. Your plane will leave in approximately one hour.”

“What about our fuckin’ boss?” Dave stepped forward, his rifle across his body.

“Your boss has an appointment elsewhere—don’t push your luck, soldier.”

“Well,” Dave said as the officer turned and went inside, “I reckon we should go after the Toyota and spring Phil from those fuckin’ UN gorillas.”

“No point mate,” Viking said. “We’d end up joining him, and you saw his blank expression. He’d want us to do the right thing.”

“Which fuckin’ is?” Dave said, his brow furrowed and eyes squinted.

“We shut the fuck up.” Viking shook his head. “We let the head-shed deal with it when we get back to Hereford.” He turned to stare at the departing UN vehicle. “Phil will be fine.”

Pete cleared his throat and spat onto the dust before voicing a rare opinion. “If the boss man at Hereford thinks there’s anythin’ to worry about, we’ll be comin’ back here mob-handed to get Phil out. I’ll personally tackle both of those fucking gorillas.”

Dave and Viking laughed.
