

*Iraq, 2005*

The village was accessible only by a stretch of highway nicknamed *Thunder Road* for all the improvised explosive devices that cratered the pavement. Everyone hated that road. A real white knuckler. As the counter-IED specialist, Staff Sergeant Jack Cade's job was training the jundi, Arabic for soldier, on techniques for IED detection and disarming. The homemade devices were easy to make and easy to hide—in a dog carcass, a baby carriage, or a garbage heap.

Explosives often consisted of artillery shells and mortar rounds bundled together with containers filled with nails, ball bearings, or rocks. “Trust nothing,” Cade taught the jundi. “Assume nothing is safe.” The Humvees, equipped with electronic equipment, could jam remote activation signals. But jamming equipment wouldn't detect trip wires, pressure plates, or timers.

After the briefing, the jundi and members of the U.S Army Military Transition Team dispersed into preassigned teams into three troop carriers. The Iraqi commander led the convoy. Cade's Humvee brought up the rear, Grif riding shotgun, the boom box blasting Drowning Pool's Let the Bodies Hit the Floor.

The convoy entered the village from the north and halted. The jundi deployed into three squads, each with a US adviser. Squads swept the village west to east, checking for contraband weapons and interrogating the occupants for any intelligence on insurgent activity.

Cade's squad, including Malik and Zaid, entered home after home. He remained outside. An American presence in the home was considered an insult and residents would clam up. Some of the jundi wore ski masks to avoid recognition and retaliation.

Thirty minutes later, the block was swept clean. No arms found and no intel collected on insurgent activity in the area. Cade's squad regrouped next to a white Nissan pickup loaded with green-and-white-striped melons. Zaid sliced one open and passed around juicy red chunks. He

offered a slice to Cade, who waved it off. His orders were to rejoin the command post ASAP.

But since he was only an adviser, he didn't argue against a respite from the blistering heat.

Again, Zaid offered a slice. This time Cade accepted. He propped himself against a cinder block wall that afforded a measure of shade from the scorching sun and chomped down on the juicy melon. A crackle of radio static pierced the stillness of a village baking in a hundred-and-ten-degree oven. An emaciated dog snuffled by searching for scraps.

After a final bite, Cade tossed the rind to the mongrel. At the same time, a boy, maybe nine or ten years old, approached from the south end of the street. Zaid held out a slice, but the boy ran into a whitewashed concrete house two doors down from the Nissan. A few seconds passed and then a man appeared in the shadowed doorway where the boy had entered. He peered at the jundi laughing, smoking, and spitting melon seeds.

In that instant, Cade saw the device in the man's hand.

