

# Deadly Mistake

By

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## Chapter 1

Mack knew exactly what time it was, it was payback time. Time to put things right, time to give this asshole some perspective, time to collect some revenge for his team.

Revenge wasn't just going to be sweet, it was going to be delicious. It wasn't just a dish best served cold, it was going to be delivered by a piping hot bullet through this punk's brain. Mack grabbed the suppressed 9mm Sig Sauer with his right hand and pressed it to the punk's naked temple. Mack's other hand held a handful of hair, holding the head in place. The look of fear on the punk's face was all at once gratifying, but in the same way a little frightening. Could he really do this?

Mack was a trained killer and while this would be easy, it was also going to be hard. Yes, he'd killed up close and personal before, but those had been orders. This one was on him. On this one he was the judge, jury, and executioner all rolled into one lethal package.

The punk croaked out a sound.

"Please."

"Shut up." Mack barked.

He felt the trigger move ever so slightly as he gently squeezed the mechanism. Another half millimeter and the hammer would be unleashed. The energy in the spring would transfer to the hammer, driving it into the back of the bullet. The power in the gunpowder would be released, and shove the bullet into the punk's brain. Game over, end of story, you're dead.

He deserved it, didn't he? Because of him four young men were dead, their bodies desecrated and paraded around by the locals in mock victory. Because of him, four of his

best friends would never again see their mothers, never again breathe fresh air. But they were more than friends, they were his brothers.

He stopped. Something deep inside told him to wait. An instructor's voice from years ago ordered him to get his emotions under control. The toothy grin of his barrel-chested gunnery sergeant came into view. He could see him repeat "Guns don't kill operators, emotions kill operators." Mack smiled thinly at the recollection.

Think about what you're doing. Did it really start and stop with this moron? Maybe the punk was just following orders. Maybe it was somebody higher up that wanted Mack dead. They could be still out there, still coming after him?

"Why did you kill my team?" Mack growled.

The punk shook his head.

"What team? I didn't kill anybody."

"Four men are dead. You killed them. I want to know why, before I splatter your brains against that wall."

The punk's eyes went wide with fear.

"Look I don't know what you're talking about, I didn't kill anybody." He paused and tried to shift away from the gun. "I don't even know who you are?"

Mack laughed, but the underlying tone was a gravelly growl. This punk may not recognize him, but he knew exactly who this asshole was.

"I'm dead. You killed me."

A drop of sweat started under the punk's hairline. It rolled down his forehead, and into his left eye. The punk blinked rapidly and started to move his left hand up to his eye.

Mack reacted to the punk's arm movement and pressed the Sig to his head even harder. The punk slowly dropped his arm back to his side and Mack lowered the Sig.

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about." The punk said. His left eye watered and a tear squeezed out of the inside corner.

Mac bent down so that his mouth was just inches from the punk's right ear. His massive tricep flexed as he put his weight on the back of the chair.

"OK, let me give you a little hint." He paused for effect. "Lebanon."

The punk's eyes grew even wider and his head snapped up to Mack. Another bead of sweat dribbled down into his right eye. He said nothing for a long moment.

"That wasn't my fault. I can explain."

Mac brought the Sig up to the punk's right temple.

"You have fifteen seconds."

A noise from the hallway snapped Mack's head to the closed door. A moment later the door burst open. In one quick motion, Mack grabbed the punk by the collar, and threw him forward to the floor. He jumped on top of the punk, right knee pressed into the middle of his back. He brought the Sig up and aimed it at the open door.

A split-second later a figure flew through the door. Mack aimed where the shape would be and readied his finger on the trigger. He stopped when he recognized the shape as a kid. He removed his finger and pointed the Sig at the ceiling.

"Stop." Mack yelled.

The kid didn't slow at all and covered the distance between them in a few quick steps.

Mack brought his left arm to stop the kid, but he ducked under it and clasped both arms around the punk's head and neck.

“Please, don't hurt my Dad. It was me. It was me. I killed your team.”

## Chapter 2

Mack rubbed the dust off the window of the seedy bar. He stared out the clear spot. In the parking lot were massive Harley Davidson cruisers, mixed with side-bagged BMW touring bikes, next to dual-sport on-road, off-road bikes, and of course a healthy dose of Japanese sportbikes. This bar was after all located on a road known as “sportbike heaven”. From any direction there were over a hundred turns to get here, and a hundred to get back. Sportbike riders lived for the corners, and the roads to here had plenty of them.

In the far corner of the faded formica bar, right next to the double door cooler which held the fancy iced tea, was the ubiquitous stuffed deer head. It sported oversize dark sunglasses hanging at a goofy angle. To the left were pictures of the bar from bygone days, mostly black and white, mostly of guys in bibbed overalls standing next to a fence post. They always had big grins. The ramshackle structure, fuzzy and blurred, stood in the background.

The place reeked of overcooked burgers, greasy fries, and stale beer. But it was the only bathroom for miles, and if for no other reason than that, it was most welcome.

He checked his watch. They should have been here by now. He pulled open the sticky door to the men’s room and walked to a sink stained with dark brown mineral deposits. A sign above the toilet read “We aim to please so you aim too please”. He splashed some water on his face and wiped it with the coarse, barely absorbent brown paper towels from the dispenser. He felt better with the sweat off his face.

Back at the window Mack smiled when he saw Bobby’s familiar red Honda slip into view and slow to a stop next to his. Bobby twisted the key to turn off the engine, put

down the kickstand, and leaned the bike onto the stand. Before Bobby could dismount Zach and Brandon pulled their bikes up next to his and dismounted. The three helmets were pried from their heads and the parking lot taunting began.

“Where’s Chan?” asked Mack as he popped out the front door to meet them.

They all looked at each other then back at the road.

“I dunno Mack, he was right behind me about 5 minutes ago.” Zach said.

“I betcha it was them dang cows.” Bobby said.

“Cows?” Mack asked.

“Yep, there was this batch of cows near a hole in the fence back there. I betcha one of them little buggers got out on the road.” Bobby said.

“Want us to go find him sergeant?” Zach asked.

“Nah, let’s give him another minute.” Mack said.

“Did you see me lose the front on that one corner?” Brandon said.

“Yep, I thought fer sure you were gonna put’er in the weeds.” Bobby said.

“I don’t know what happened, I was leaned over, pressing on the bar and next thing I know, my knee is dragging on the road.”

“Yep, yer knee puck was puttin out some good sparks too.” Bobby said.

“That one almost left a mark in my shorts.” Brandon said as he removed his leather jacket, the muscles under his skintight lycra shirt rippling in waves.

“Damn, Brandon.” Zach commented “I think you get bigger every week.”

“It’s the shirt.” Brandon said sheepishly “It keeps the leather from scraping my skin.”

“I don’t get it.” Zach said “What’s a tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners, gorilla like you worried about a little skin abrasion?”

“What can I say? The chafing leaves red marks on my shoulders.” Brandon said.

“Sounds like you need a new jacket.” Zach said.

“That’s the biggest one I could find.” Brandon said.

“I believe that. What’er you like 280 now?” Bobby said.

“Actually more lik-“

“Guys, I think maybe we’d better go look for Chan.” Mack interrupted.

Nobody said anything for a few moments as they strained to listen for a sign of a motorcycle. They heard nothing but the chirping of the birds and a light breeze rustling the leaves of a white birch near the parking lot. Then it was there, a faint hum. It grew louder with every second until it was clearly the sound of a piston powered bike. A few moments later Chan’s bike came into view and he turned into the parking lot driveway.

He misjudged the driveway angle, and fell off the edge of the pavement near the corner entrance. The front end first, then the back wheel fell into the grass. There was a loud thunk as the front wheel impacted the parking lot pavement edge, and Chan’s butt was thrown high into the air when the back wheel hit the transition as well. He looked as if he was doing a comical handstand on his handlebars as the bike sped for their position. He fell back onto the seat and skidded to a stop next to Brandon’s bike. He turned off the key and started to lean the bike over to the left until Bobby pointed at the side of his bike.

“Dude, ya need ta put yer kickstand down first.”

Chan looked down at the left side, shook his head in embarrassment and hooked the round metal pin with the toe of his boot to drop the lever to the ground. After he dismounted they started in on him. The first was Mack.

“Where have you been?”

“Sorry Mack, I ran off the road trying to avoid a cow back there.” Chan said pointing.

“I told ya. I’ll bet one of them little buggers was in the middle of the road wasn’t he?” Bobby said.

“Actually no, he was in the ditch, but I kept watching to see if he was going to run out and I went into the ditch behind him. He got so scared he started running down the ditch in front of me.” Chan said.

“How many times have I told ya? Ya don’t look at whatcha want to avoid, ya look at where yer gonna go. Otherwise ya head straight fer wat’cher lookin at.” Bobby said.

“I know, I guess I just panicked.” Chan said.

“Anything hurt?” Mack asked.

“Just my pride.” Chan said.

“That can be fixed.”

They sat at a table next to a massive fireplace decorated with softball sized river rocks, a dark soot stain spread across the front. The style of the fireplace placed it as part of the original building put up at least a hundred years earlier.

“Good ride so far.” Zach said.

“Yeah its good to be off from the missions at least for a little while.” Brandon said.

“I think that chick in the corner wants to get off, with you.” Zach said tilting his head to a smiling blond in the far corner.

Brandon flushed red. He had the strong jaw chiseled look that turned most women’s heads the moment he walked into the room. Coupled with his muscle ripped body and easy-going demeanor, he attracted women like flies to cut fruit.

“You going to go talk to her?” Chan asked.

“I can’t, I wouldn’t know what to say.” Brandon said blushing.

“I’ll bet you could talk motorcycles.” Zach said laughing.

Brandon just stared at the floor and tried not to look in her direction.

“Mack, when are we going to get more than a few hours off?” Chan asked.

Mack looked at each of them in succession.

“I don’t know guys. We’re just too damn successful I guess. Everybody wants us to clean up their messes.”

“Yeah but this is getting ridiculous.” Zach said. “We’ve been on for like 30 days straight now.”

Zach watched as Brandon got up and walked to the men’s room. He pulled something out of his pocket and leaned forward. He pretended to be tying his shoes.

Brandon’s chair raised imperceptibly then set back down.

“I know, I’m tired as hell too, but orders are orders.” Mack said.

“They have to understand that we’re going to lose our edge if we keep this up.” Zach said.

“Believe me, I have told them the same thing a hundred times.” Mack said.

Brandon came back from the bathroom and pulled back his chair. He sat down and a loud bang erupted from the left front leg. Brandon fell to the floor like a lead weight. He banged his head on the corner of the table, rubbed his temple, and looked back at Zach as a puff of blue-gray smoke swirled up from the floor. Zach was laughing so hard he nearly fell off his chair. The rest of the team joined him, Chan nearly spilling his coke as he tried to put it on the table.

“What the heck was that?” Brandon asked whose wide eyes were still rapidly scanning the area.

“Dude, you should have seen the look on your face. It was priceless.” Zach giggled.

“That wasn’t funny. You scared the shit out of me.”

“Oh, come on, that was just a little popper.” Zach said.

“Well it made me think about the time I got shot that’s all.” Brandon said.

“Sorry dude. I forgot.” Zach said suddenly slumping in his chair.

Nobody said anything as Brandon peeled himself from the floor and stood up. He rubbed his left temple with his palm and pulled the chair back.

“It’s OK. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.” Brandon said as he sat back down.

“Are you OK?” Zach asked.

“I don’t know I feel like I may have gotta concussion.” Brandon said. He waved his arms in front of him as if he were trying to catch his balance, turned and shot Zach a pearly grin. “I’m fine.”

They returned to their drinks and potato chips.

“Mack,” Bobby said “We got sumthin fer ya.”

“I can never get over that accent of yours.” Mack said “You sound like a dumbass country hick, but I think you may be the smartest one in the room.” Mack scanned the rest of the clientele. “In fact I know you are.” He paused “Show me what you got?”

Bobby produced a small package from his motorcycle tank bag that lay on the floor near his feet. The entire team grinned eagerly as Bobby handed it to their leader.

“What did you guys go and do?” Mack asked grinning.

“It’s not much. Just a token of our thanks for getting us this far.” Zach said.

“Me? It was all of you out there bustin your asses to make it.” Mack said.

“Yeah but we would have never made it without your,” Chan paused. “guidance.” he said wistfully.

“You mean my size 12’s on your asses?” Mack grinned. They all had a laugh. Mack tore off the brown paper and extracted a small rectangular box. He opened the lid and found a polished stainless steel pocketknife packed in the center. He extracted the knife and opened the blades one by one.

“This is a nice one.” Mack said turning it over in his hand.

“We engraved our names on it.” Brandon said. “To make it more special to you.”

Mack scanned each blade. Bobby’s name was engraved on the razor sharp long blade, Zachary was engraved on the Philips screwdriver, Brandon was etched into a smooth area of the nail file, and Chan was prominently displayed on the side of a small USB memory stick that folded out from one end.

“I love it.” Mack said turning to each of them in order. “I’ve led a few teams in my career, but this one, you guys.” He said looking at each one “I can honestly say, you guys are like the little brothers that I never had.”

“Don’t tell that to Brandon.” Zach said “He’s too big to be anybody’s little brother.”

He said placing extra emphasis on little.

Mack’s phone suddenly beeped a loud tone. He extracted it from the small holster and flipped it open.

“Sergeant Bronson, yes, yes, OK, we’ll leave as soon as possible.”

“Outside.” Mack said. They set down their drinks, picked up their gear and filed out the door.

“We’ve got another mission.” Mack said once they were out of earshot of the other riders standing around their bikes.

“Aw come on Mack.” Zach said “This is the first break we’ve had in like forever.”

“Sorry guys, duty calls.”

“Where to?” Brandon asked.

“We’ll get our orders back at headquarters.”

While the team got their gear on and got ready to leave, Mack dialed his phone.

“Bronson residence” said the voice on the other end of the phone.

“Hi honey.”

“Mack” His wife said. “Are you coming home tonight like you promised?”

“No babe, I can’t.”

“You promised.” She said.

“We got another mission.”

“Mack,” She almost shouted “General Briggs said you were going to be off for 6 weeks starting this weekend.”

“What can I say, duty calls.”

“It’s not fair.”

“Tell that to the bad guys. They’re the ones that make our schedule.”

“Briggs needs to get someone else to take the load.”

“Unfortunately, we’re the best he’s got.”

“It’s still not fair.”

The line was silent for a few moments.

“I gotta go.” Mack said.

“Be careful. I love you.” His wife said.

“Always and I love you too.” Mack said. He closed the phone and sighed. “See you when I see you.”

### Chapter 3

Mack stared as wispy clouds drifted across the face of the autumn moon and wished more than anything, he was home. The team was right, they needed a break, but what could he do? Duty called and they had to answer.

He was tired, the kind of tired when even your bones hurt. His limbs felt as if giant weights were pulling them to the ground, every movement labored and painful. Even before they left on this mission the commander promised it would be the last one for a few weeks, but he didn't believe it. That promise had been made a couple of times already. When he thought about his wife, she seemed like a distant memory. He tried to remember what his son looked like, but he couldn't, and it pissed him off.

His team looked exhausted and it pained him to see them dragging their tired bodies around. These young men had been tested in the throes of the worst combat situations and not just survived, but thrived to become the ultimate strike team, a preeminent force in the ranks of the military. But now in their movements, he could see that they too were feeling the effects of the fatigue.

The smell of roasted garlic wafted along a cool breeze that gently blew on their faces. Mack surveyed their cover, eyelids heavy. Their stealthy insertion had evaded the Lebanese police so far, but in the distance a police siren wailed mournfully. The team spread out around the drab concrete structure, and settled in for their two hour wait. Moonlight glinted off the window of the upper floor of the brown stucco building where the suspected terrorist cell leader was holed up, making it difficult for Mack to see inside.

He leaned his head back and tried to get some rest before it was time to go. He quickly gave up. The caffeine tablets he'd taken a couple of hours ago were doing their job. Unfortunately they didn't have the same effect on the fatigue. He decided to take another look.

While the house was technically near downtown Beirut, it was located on a side street in a quiet neighborhood, away from the main thoroughfares. Mack flipped down his battle helmet display and saw four heat signatures on the upper floor. Five more were located on the lower floor. There were too many bad guys to do anything right now. He switched his display to a wider field of view and examined the locations of his strike team. The display showed 2:13am local time.

Without warning gunfire erupted from Mack's left. Chan had opened fire into the one of the lower floor windows.

"Chan, we're not in place yet. Why are you firing?" Mack said into his lip mike, still trying to shake the exhaustion from his body.

"I have orders to fire sergeant." Chan said.

"I see that, but you're shooting at nothing. You're going to give away our positions."

Mack understood that Chan couldn't argue with what the display ordered him to do but it was obvious there was something wrong with the command. They weren't supposed to go for another 110 minutes. To his right, in the helmet display, Mack saw Zach getting set. After a few moments gunfire erupted from Zach's position.

"Zach, hold your fire."

"I have orders to fire Mack."

"Fuck." Mack shouted, but he hadn't pressed the transmit button.

This operation was supposed to be a stealthy extraction, not a goddamn shootout. From the other side of the house Mack now heard Brandon fire his weapon. He cursed again as his display lit up, a crosshair appeared on a window of the lower floor, and he received orders to fire a grenade. He aimed his grenade launcher, fingered the trigger, felt the concussion as the projectile was expelled, and smelled freshly burned propellant as a light trail of smoke exited the barrel. The grenade penetrated the window, hit a wall inside the building, exploded with a blinding flash, and produced a chest rattling concussion. The adjacent windows exploded outwards flinging shards of glass in all directions. But when he examined his helmet display, he saw that the grenade had hit nothing. He had simply broken a few windows.

*“What the hell?”* thought Mack *“why did I just shoot a grenade into an area with no targets?”* On his display targets were now moving upstairs towards the open windows. All four members of his team were firing their machine guns into the building, but they were shooting through windows on the empty first floor.

“Team, targets are on second floor, aim your weapons manually at second floor.” Mack ordered.

“Mack, our crosshairs are on the lower floor windows.”

Mack could see the icon for Chan light up as he talked.

“I don’t care what the system is telling you, take out the targets upstairs. Flip your visors up so you don’t get confused.”

“Yes, sergeant.”

Mack flipped up his visor and trained his rifle scope on the second floor window farthest to the right. He switched the scope to infrared and a target walked by the

window. He squeezed off a few rounds and smiled when the enemy crumpled and fell to the ground.

A moment later he saw the distinctive fire and smoke trail of an RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) streak toward Bobby's position. A blinding flash and deafening explosion signaled the grenade had impacted. Mack lowered his helmet visor to see if Bobby had escaped, but he lay on the ground completely still. Mack toggled his display to read Bobby's life signs. His heart sank when the pulse and respiration were displayed as flat green lines on the display.

"Dammit." Mack said under his breath.

"Team, pull back, pull back, we need to find better defensive positions."

No sooner had the words left Mack's mouth when another RPG streaked to Chan's position and exploded in a giant yellow fireball.

"Goddammit." Mack shouted. He saw that Chan was down as well.

"Zach, Brandon, get your asses over here double time." Mack said.

"Coming sergeant." was the reply.

Mack trained his rifle into a second floor window where he saw an enemy with a rocket launcher taking aim at his position. Mack pulled the trigger and blasted a grenade into the window. The grenade tracked true and impacted the enemy launcher with a loud bang. The now man-less RPG whistled down the street and exploded into a building a few hundred meters behind.

In the next moment the window was filled with the flashes of machine gun fire. Mack ducked around the corner of a house near his position as he heard the distinctive hiss of bullets fly just inches over his head. His helmet was peppered by concrete spray as

the bullets impacted the wall just above his helmet. The air smelled of molten metal from the heat of the bullets. The effect of compression as they impacted the wall, heated them to a temperature that gave off a smell, the smell of molten metal. It left a bitter metallic taste in his mouth.

He stayed hidden behind the wall and pointed the muzzle of his gun around the corner. He used the video sight on top of the gun to shoot a target on the second floor. A second target jumped back as bullets from Mack's gun smacked into the wall near him spraying pieces of stucco in his face.

Mack pulled his gun back and tried to locate Zach and Brandon. The display showed Zach behind a brick archway near the front of the house. Brandon was pinned down by machine gun fire near the far side. Zach popped up and fired controlled bursts at each window. This drove the enemy backwards, but soon his clip would run out and he would have to stop and reload. As he reloaded the targets would return fire and pin him down. Zach was quickly running out of ammunition. Mack needed to do something fast or both of them would be sitting ducks.

"Brandon, get ready to make a run for it. I'm going to lay a couple of grenades in the second story windows." Mack said.

"OK, Mack, let me know when to go."

"Going on 3." said Mack "Ready, 1, 2, 3, go now." Mack shot a grenade in the left window, pumped the action to load another one and shot it into the right window.

As soon as Brandon heard the first grenade explode, he jumped up and ran. He didn't stop running until he was behind the first house and around the corner of another.

“Brandon watch those windows for RPGs.” said Mack “If you see one aiming in your direction you take him out pronto. Those guys are accurate as hell with those things.”

“Will do Mack.”

Brandon ran down the street that bordered the back of the house, turned right at the next intersection and circled back towards Mack’s flank. With Brandon out of immediate danger Mack concentrated on Zach. Zach needed to get the hell out of there soon or any minute another RPG would likely be heading his way. Mack kept his gun-mounted sensor trained on the second story windows as he developed a plan to rescue Zach.

An enemy soldier approached the window with an RPG and aimed toward Zach’s position. Mack shot a grenade into the window closest to the shooter, but he missed. Luckily the blast caused the soldier to fire his RPG before he had it properly aimed and it sailed past Zach to the right.

*“Dammit, I’m running out of time.”* Mack thought.

“Zach, what’s your situation?” Mack asked.

“Pinned down. Every time I stick my head out I get fire from window second story left.”

“What happens when you fire into the window first?” Mack asked.

“They move to the window on the right and fire from there.” Zach said.

“OK, you fire a clip into the left window, I’ll wait a couple of seconds, fire a grenade into the right window. You run like hell in my direction and I will fire into whatever window they try to shoot from. Understood?”

“Yes, Mack.”

“We go on 3.”

“On 3.”

“OK, 1, 2, 3, go, go, go.”

Zach used his gun mounted sights to fire into the left window. Mack could see the targets scatter, two of them moving to the right window. Mack fired a grenade into the right window and waited for the blast. The explosion blew one of the targets out of the window onto the street where he landed in a heap. The other target lay on the floor motionless. Mack relaxed for a moment, until he saw multiple enemy soldiers climbing the rear stairs.

## Chapter 4

Zach slammed another clip into his rifle and examined his helmet display for enemy targets. An instant later he saw the explosion in the window, and took off on a dead run toward Mack. He quickly covered the distance from the house to a low stone fence. He vaulted over the fence and continued to run as fast as his legs could go. Just past the fence, his right foot became entangled in a piece of wire. It had flipped up from a small shard of wood, kicked up by his left foot. He fell forward and his left palm slammed to the ground. Off balance his momentum carrying him forward, he kept his legs driving. It reminded him of the high school football drills his coach had taught him long ago. The words still echoed in his ears. “Zach, keep those legs up. Come on, higher. I said higher. You don’t stop until you see that goal line. You hear me?”

Zach pictured his legs as two giant pistons and drove them as high as he possibly could. He was still moving forward and slowly started to regain his balance. After a few seconds he righted himself and turned on the speed. He flew towards Mack with every bit of strength he could muster, his lungs screaming for air.

Mack saw Zach bolt out of his hiding place and turned his attention to the enemy soldiers inside the building. He did not want to lose another member of his team to these assholes. Losing two of them was already more than he could bear. Mack tried to put it out of his mind, but he couldn’t. He wondered how this mission had gotten so screwed up so fast. Just 36 hours ago they were thousands of miles from here enjoying a nice ride in the country. Now they were in a losing firefight running for their lives.

Mack snapped back to reality. He had taken out the two targets at the right window. He had a hunch that the enemy might regroup at the left window. Both windows were still empty, but there was movement at the back of the building. A small group came together and were maneuvering toward the left window. Mack watched in amazement as Zach stumbled, threw his arm out to stop his fall, and continued to drive those thick tree trunk legs of his until he was running as if nothing had happened.

*“Damn, this kid can run.”* thought Mack *“That’s one of the reasons that I picked him for this squad wasn’t it?”*

Seeing Zach run at full speed, Mack pictured a cat that had accidentally stuck his tail in a fireplace and caught it on fire. His movements were almost in hyper-speed as his legs became a blur of motion.

One of the group of enemy soldiers had nearly reached left window. Mack aimed his weapon and got ready to shoot. In an instant his helmet display lit up and instructed him to fire a grenade into the window. Mack ignored the helmet command. He didn’t know what was wrong with the helmets but he sure as hell wasn’t going to trust it now when he needed it the most. The order had the correct feel, but he couldn’t trust it, not yet.

This TBC (Tactical Battlefield Commander) had already screwed him once, he wasn’t about to let him do it again. I mean it wasn’t his ass out here under fire. The TBC or BC as he called them, were usually located in an area remote from the mission operation area. He could picture some geeky propellerhead sitting at a console in the bowels of an office building in D.C. or maybe San Jose, sipping coffee and flirting with the secretary, while he was out here in harm’s way. But such was the new military and there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about it.

He knew the BC had global tactical awareness of the battlefield from a multitude of sensors, but sensors didn't always tell the whole story. Mack followed orders, and for the most part they had been good ones, but this BC, well he was going to have a little face time with him when he got back.

Just as Zach neared his position, a soldier with a machine gun popped into the left window. Mack was ready for him and fired a burst into his head. The enemy soldier's cranium rocked back from the impacts and he fell forward without getting off a shot. His body lay partially blocking the left side of the window.

Zach flew around the corner full speed and dove behind Mack. Sliding on his hands and belly, he spun around and popped up on his feet in one fluid motion. He looked like a baseball shortstop that had just dug out a tough grounder, and righted himself in time to throw the ball to first. Zach was out of breath as he moved into position behind Mack.

"Cover our flank." Mack said.

"Yes, Sergeant." Zach said breathing heavily.

Zach put his back toward Mack and scanned for enemy targets. He examined the display for targets between their current position and the helicopter extraction point about 2 clicks behind them. So far the path was clear, no one in sight. The only person he saw was Brandon one block ahead and one block left of their path to the chopper.

"Here they come." Mack said as he watched the enemy climb down the stairs, exit the rear door, and move in their direction.

"Brandon get your ass moving, targets are on the move. Looks like they are going to try to run around and flank us." Mack said.

“OK, Mack, I will meet you 1 block ahead at the corner.” Brandon said.

“Move your ass, we’re leaving now for the extract point.” Mack said.

The extraction point was 2 clicks ahead, through a park next to the Beirut River. The plan, at least in Mac’s head, was fairly simple. Get their asses across the park without getting shot, call the chopper, and jump on once it touched down. It all seemed pretty simple and straightforward, but he knew, it never was.

Mack checked his helmet one more time to verify Brandon’s position and the position of the enemy. The bad guys were behind them and gaining. They needed to pick up the pace.

