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Motivated by a deep and undying love for their country, these operators willingly face intense danger so that America may remain free.

Once labeled “true believers,” this term no longer applies. These warriors have become Apostles

ALSO BY BRAD THO

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People sleep peaceably in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready
to do violence on their behalf.

—George Orwell

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Next to a stream of icy snowmelt from the Hindu Kush, a small caravan unloaded its contraband. Cases filled with weapons, money, communications equipment, and other gear were placed beneath a rocky overhang and covered with camouflage netting to keep them concealed from overhead surveillance.

A man in his late forties with deep Slavic features stood nearby and supervised. He had blue eyes, medium-length gray hair, and both the clothing and bearing of a local Afghan.

When his team of Pakistani smugglers was done, the man removed a stack of bills and paid them double what he normally did for bringing him into the country. It was a severance package. He wouldn't be using them again. This was going to be his final operation.

He made himself comfortable near a stack of rams' horns that marked a Taliban grave site and watched as the line of smugglers and pack animals disappeared back into the mountains toward Pakistan. Though he couldn't spot them, he knew there were men in the rugged hills above, men with sophisticated weapons—weapons he had provided to them—who were keeping him in their sights.

Twenty minutes later, three muddy Toyota Hilux double-cab pickup trucks appeared from the other end of the valley. The convoy splashed across the fast-moving stream and drove up to the overhang. As the trucks rolled to a stop, young men with thick, dark beards and Kalashnikovs jumped out.

Like the man next to the rams' horns, they were dressed in traditional Afghan clothing known as *salwar kameez*—baggy cotton trousers that stopped just above the ankle and loose-fitting tunics that ended just above the knee. They all wore winter coats that came to mid thigh. Many slung warm wool blankets referred to locally as *patoos* over their shoulders to further ward off the cold. Upon their heads they wore *pakols*, the wide wool hat encircled by a thick, rolled brim made famous by the mujahideen during their war with the Soviets.

The men worked quickly and efficiently. Once the gear was loaded, the blue-eyed man climbed into the front passenger seat of the lead vehicle, the driver popped the clutch, and the truck lurched forward.

It was a painful, kidney-jarring ride along a rutted road that followed the snowmelt downstream into the valley. As the truck came down hard into yet another pothole, the men in the backseat erupted in a barrage of Pashtu curses.

The blue-eyed man tuned them out and stared through the spattered windshield. The landscape outside was windswept and barren. It was hard for him to believe that he had been fighting and running operations in this country for over twenty-five years. His blood had been spilled upon its soil on more occasions than he cared to remember and he had watched more men die than anyone ever should.

He loved and hated Afghanistan at the same time. It had taken far more from him than it had ever given. His body was in shambles, as was the small family he had managed to begin over the years during his short visits home. All he was left with in his life was a sweet, innocent boy who had been terribly disfigured.

The blue-eyed man blamed himself. He had known about his wife's alcoholism. He also knew

that it grew worse when he was away. Even though he'd been trained to listen to his intuition, he had ignored it when it told him that the woman could no longer properly see to their child. Had he made other arrangements for the boy, had he found a responsible caregiver to see to him while he was away, the fire might never have happened.

But it had happened, and the father wore the guilt of his son's disfigurement across his shoulder much like the *patoos* across the shoulders of the Taliban fighters now riding alongside him.

He tried to forget his pain and to instead focus on his mission. It was one of the most audacious operations his intelligence service had ever considered. If it was successful, he could finally retire and would be so highly rewarded that he and his son would never want for anything else. That success, though, ultimately rested with the man he was about to meet. In the near distance, his destination finally came into sight.

The village, in Nangarhar's rugged Khogyani district, was mostly mud houses, with some made of stone, which were set along either side of the road.

It was austere and colorless, as much of Afghanistan was. Window and door frames were unpainted. Rough-hewn beams jutted out from beneath rooftops, and none of the buildings were more than two stories tall. Dust and children and hard-looking men with guns were everywhere. No women were visible.

They were there, of course; hidden behind the thick mud walls of their houses by Taliban husbands and fathers who forbade them to work, to go to school, or even to go outside without being completely covered and with a male family member accompanying them.

The convoy ground to a halt before a high wall set with two massive double doors. The driver of the lead vehicle tapped his horn three times in quick succession. A small panel opened in the gate and a pair of angry dark eyes peered out. Moments later the doors swung open and the convoy rolled into a typical Afghan compound known as a *kwala*.

When the blue-eyed man climbed out of the truck, he was greeted by one of the Taliban's most notorious, battle-hardened commanders. Mullah Massoud Akhund stood about five-foot-eight, a good three inches shorter than the blue-eyed man, but he had a commanding presence.

Massoud's eyes were the color of flint and possessed with the power to look right through a man. His heavy black beard was streaked with gray. He was only in his late forties, but a life of incessant combat had aged him beyond his years, giving him the appearance of a man twenty years older.

Placing his right hand over his heart in the traditional Afghan greeting, Mullah Massoud nodded slightly to his guest and said, "*Salaam alaikum.*"

The blue-eyed man performed the same gesture and replied, "*Wa alaikum salaam.*"

Massoud embraced his guest and held him tightly for many moments. The blue-eyed man had learned early in his career that a hug from an Afghan man was a sign of respect. The longer the embrace, the deeper the respect you were held in.

Finally, the commander broke off the hug. "It is good to see you again, Bakht Rawan."

Many suspected that the blue-eyed man was Russian, but it was a topic Mullah Massoud did not like to discuss. There were still dormant animosities, even in his own village, over the long and bloody war the Afghans had fought with the Soviets. For this reason, Massoud addressed the man as Bakht Rawad and not by his given name of Sergei Simonov.

Their relationship stretched back more than twenty years. Before Massoud had joined the Taliban, he had been a fledgling Afghan intelligence operative and Simonov had been his mentor. His code name was Pashtu and meant “running luck,” something Massoud felt his mentor possessed in abundance.

The pair politely inquired into each other’s health, families, and affairs as Massoud gave orders to his men to unload the trucks. He then motioned for Simonov to follow him inside.

The Russian removed his hiking boots at the door and followed his host. The room was sparsely furnished with two long tables, a low bed, a small wooden desk, and a single chair. It would be more than adequate.

Two of Massoud’s men brought in an ancient carpet and unrolled it along the floor. It was a red, elephant-foot pattern known as a Bohkara. Simonov could only imagine what such a rug would fetch in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

Other men entered bringing blankets, a pillow, a power strip, and an extension cord, which would allow him to run his electronic equipment off the compound’s generator.

Satisfied that his guest was on his way to being situated, Mullah Massoud informed him that he would see him for tea in twenty minutes.

Simonov thanked his host and closed the door. From the leather holster beneath his tunic, he withdrew his 9mm CZ-75 pistol and placed it on the desk next to a suppressor from his coat pocket. Inside the compound, he had no need for any of his weapons. “*Ze talibano milmayam,*” he said aloud in Pashtu. “I am a guest of the Taliban.”

The traditional code of honor among the Pashtun, known as *Pashtunwali*, dictated every aspect of their lives and was very explicit. One of the most important edicts of *Pashtunwali* dealt with hospitality and the treatment of guests. Once a Pashtun invited someone into his home, he was honor bound to protect that guest at all costs, even if it meant fighting to his own death to protect him.

As Simonov unpacked his gear, he ran through the arguments Mullah Massoud had initially raised about the operation and how he would counter them if they came up again.

The bottom line was that the time was right for the Taliban to finally move beyond al-Qaeda.

In 1998, two years after seizing majority control of the country, the Taliban had molded Afghanistan into the purest Islamic state on the planet. Their ambassadors were shuttling back and forth to America and were close to signing a peace treaty with the Northern Alliance fighters—the last holdouts in Afghanistan against full Taliban control of the country. The Soviets were long gone, self-serving Afghan warlords were being dealt with, and the Taliban were on the brink of bringing stability to their war-ravaged nation. In short, they had achieved almost everything they wanted.

Then Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization carried out the bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The Americans had responded by firing missiles into Afghanistan. Angered, Taliban leader Mullah Omar broke off peace talks and disengaged himself from the Americans. The war with the Northern Alliance picked up speed and things gradually deteriorated.

Just when it looked as if things couldn't get worse, September 11 happened and the Americans invaded. In short, every problem the Taliban had could be traced to al-Qaeda. It was time for a divorce.

Mullah Massoud had always been smart enough to see al-Qaeda for what they really were—a liability. They were foreigners who put their global jihad ahead of everything else. They didn't care what happened to Afghanistan and its people in the process. Massoud, on the other hand, did, and that was why he had agreed to go along with Simonov's operation.

In typical Russian fashion it was elegantly simple. Simonov had found a way to deal al-Qaeda a death blow, but to make it look as if the Americans had been behind it. As the ineffective Mullah Omar drowned with the weight of the dying al-Qaeda organization tied around his neck, Mullah Massoud would step into the vacuum of power and would take over as supreme leader of the Taliban.

With the windfall they intended to reap from al-Qaeda's demise, they could purchase all the weaponry and hardware they needed. They would mount a devastating offensive against the Americans and their coalition partners and send them running from Afghanistan like whipped dogs. And what the Russians asked for in return for their help was a pittance.

The Russians had learned their lesson and had no desire to repeat the mistakes of the 1980s. Afghanistan had been a Soviet graveyard. This time, they wanted nothing to do with the governance of Afghanistan, only the ability to help increase and share in its prosperity. How the Russians would use their influence in the region was of no concern to the Taliban. As long as they stayed out of Afghan affairs, the relationship showed significant promise.

Simonov unpacked his satellite uplink equipment and reflected on how ironic it was that Russia was now funding and orchestrating instability within Afghanistan, exactly as America had done to the Soviets in the 1980s.

But the Russians needed to be very careful. Times had changed. America had many partners in Afghanistan, and if Russia's role in promoting insurgency was ever proven, the international repercussions would be extraordinarily severe.

He was still running these points through his head when he heard a crash as his door was kicked in.

The Russian reached for his CZ atop the desk, but caught himself and stopped. Standing at rigid attention in the doorway was Mullah Massoud's mentally challenged brother, Zwak.

He wore a blue hooded sweatshirt and boots two sizes too big. One of his pants legs was rolled up to just beneath his knee and he clutched an AK-47 to his side, the top of its barrel wrapped with blue tape. He had the "official" job of guarding the village well and watching for spies. Carrying the rifle was a source of pride and made him feel equal to the other warriors who fought for his brother.

Zwak was thirty-one years old, stood only a hair above five feet tall, and had a coarse, dark beard that followed his jaw line, exactly like his brother's. Each morning the two men shaved their upper lips together in a cracked mirror in the courtyard. When not searching for spies or guarding the well, spending time with his brother was Zwak's favorite thing to do.

Simonov had great respect for how Massoud treated his childlike brother. He never mistook the man's compassion for weakness. He knew that Massoud was anything but weak, and as soon as his country was rid of al-Qaeda, he would be the Taliban commander under whom the country would be united.

The Russian studied his visitor. An intent look of satisfaction spread across Zwak's face as he realized he had startled Simonov. He was exceedingly proud of his accomplishment.

Sergei approached and gave the man a military inspection, which Zwak took very seriously. He stood as straight as he could while the Russian examined his clothing and then his weapon.

Shaking his head, Simonov crossed the room to retrieve something from his pack. Zwak removed

his boots and stepped inside to see what the Russian was doing.

~~When Sergei turned, he held in his hands a pair of white hi-top basketball shoes. Despite their hatred for the West and Western culture, the only thing the Taliban prized as highly as their rifles was basketball shoes.~~

Zwak couldn't believe his eyes. Simonov smiled as he handed them to him. "Don't let anyone take these from you," he said, though he didn't believe there was anyone in Afghanistan dumb enough to rob the brother of Mullah Massoud.

Forgetting custom, Zwak dropped the shoes on the floor and slid his feet inside. They weren't a perfect fit, but they were much better than the oversized boots he had been wearing for as long as he could remember.

Zwak tested the shoes by bouncing up and down on his toes. His excitement registered in the smile on his face.

But as he remembered his purpose for coming to the room, his smile faded and Zwak was all business. "Tea," he said. "Tea now."

The Russian smiled back and said in Pashtu, "Tell your brother I will be there in a moment."

Snatching up his rifle, Zwak slung it over his shoulder and headed for the door. As he reached it he turned back around. Simonov assumed a thank you was coming. Instead, Zwak repeated, "Tea now."

"Soon," said the Russian, "tea soon," and he watched as the man left his room and stepped out into the courtyard to show off his new shoes to his brother's Taliban soldiers.

Walking over to his pack, Simonov withdrew a picture of his son, Sasha. It was the last photo that had been taken of the boy before the accident.

He pinned the picture to the wall above the desk and placing a kiss upon his fingers, pressed them against the photo. "Soon, Sasha. Soon," he said.

Grabbing a folder full of photographs, the Russian took a deep breath before heading toward the door. Everything depended now on whether Mullah Massoud was still 100 percent committed to his plan.

Stepping into the courtyard, Simonov prayed that the American he had selected would be the right bait for his trap. Time and the new president of the United States would tell.

KANDAHAR PROVINCE
MONDAY (THREE WEEKS LATE)

Dr. Julia Gallo sat on a dusty carpet and eyed the cracked mud bricks and exposed timbers of the tin room. She didn't need to look at her interpreter to know that he was watching her. "Ask again," she said.

Sayed cleared his throat, but the question wouldn't come. They were in dangerous territory. It was bad enough that the young American doctor dragged him to the most godforsaken villages in the middle of nowhere, but now she was openly trying to get them killed. If the Taliban knew what she was doing, they'd *both* be dead.

The five-foot-six Afghan with deep brown eyes and black hair had a wife, three children, and a not-so-insignificant extended family that relied on him and the living he made as an interpreter.

For the first time in his twenty-two-year-old life, Sayed had something very few Afghans ever possessed—hope; hope for himself, hope for his family, and hope for the future of his country. And while what he did was dangerous, there was no need to make it any more so by taunting the specter of death. Dr. Gallo, on the other hand, seemed to have a remarkably different set of priorities.

At five-foot-ten, Julia was a tall woman by most standards, but by Afghan standards she was a giant. And although she kept her long red hair covered beneath an Afghan headscarf known as a *hijab*, she couldn't hide her remarkable green eyes and the fact that she was a very attractive woman. She was a graduate of the obstetrics and gynecology program at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, and ten years her translator's senior. And while she might have shared Sayed's vision for the future of Afghanistan, she had her own opinions of how best to bring it about.

In a country where most parents didn't name their children until their fifth birthday because infant mortality rates were so high, Dr. Gallo and others like her had made a huge difference. Infant mortality was down more than 18 percent since the Taliban had been ousted. That meant forty thousand to fifty thousand infants who would have died under the old regime were surviving. She should have been thrilled, but for some reason she wasn't. She was unhappy, and that made her push harder to bring about change.

Gallo knew she wasn't just rocking the cultural boat on these visits out into the countryside, she was shooting holes in the stern and reloading, but she didn't care. The Taliban were a bunch of vile, misogynistic bastards who could rot in hell, as far as she was concerned.

"Ask her again," she demanded.

Sayed knew the answer and was certain Dr. Gallo did too. It was embarrassing for the women to have to answer, yet she pressed her point anyway. It was the setup for a message she had taken to proselytizing on a regular basis. Gallo had become a zealot in her own right, no different from the Taliban, and as much as Sayed admired her, this was going to be their last trip out of Kabul together. He would respectfully ask their NGO, CARE International, not to assign him to her anymore. He wasn't going to die because of her.

Dr. Gallo had always been complicated. She never spoke about her family or personal life, no matter how many hours they spent driving together or how many opportunities Sayed offered her. She either turned the conversation back to him, asking questions she already knew the answers to, or she

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