



Prologue

The gunfire was sporadic but persistent with loud and deafening staccato sounds. The air was hot and heavy with the smell of blood and cordite that burned the nostrils. Sick to their stomachs with fear and scared beyond terror, twenty young girls tightly huddled together. They were in a small, dark, dank smelly cellar with no way to know whether they would live or die from moment to moment. They had been there in that space for hours, though it seemed like much longer, awaiting their fate.

Their parents, African royalty all, sent them to the English-speaking school in the fervent hope they would be safe and learn to lead a better life through the benefit of education and exposure to a world outside of their villages. The girls were expected to one day rule their people. That was not going to happen if the militant Jihad terrorists got their hands on the girls who were between the ages of five and twelve years old. The Boko Haram respected no one's status in life and would force the older girls into motherhood as child brides for the soldiers, hostages for ransom, and the younger ones would likely be sold into the sex trade. Every girl at the school knew and understood what she was in for if found. So, they remained still and quiet packed in like babes in the womb in the underground earthen tomb while a war raged above their heads.

Little did they know at this moment a tightly-knit group was there to search for and destroy the terrorists. The nighttime helo jump was successful. Moving like ghosts through the thick forests, night vision goggles made them appear otherworldly, but they handily dispatched the last of the insurgents as the mission dictated. Now they were on a recon mission to tag and bag each Jihadist for posterity. Photos, fingerprints,

and DNA samples were quickly and efficiently collected to add to a database of criminals when one of the group discovered the hidden trapdoor in the floorboards in a kitchen storeroom.

Guns at the ready with lasers sites engaged, the trap door was opened, and twenty pairs of frightened young eyes looked up gasping in fear at the sight of the androgynous-looking Ninja warriors.

“Well, hell,” said the leader in a decidedly female voice with a mid-western, American accent into a face mic. “Delta, we have a problem. How do you read?”

“Reading you five-by-five, Explorer One. SitRep.”

“Helen of Troy found twenty little people, all female. Suspected missing royalty. They weren’t kidnapped as originally reported.”

“Breathing?”

“Affirmative.”

“Execute: Gravedigger. Extraction. Secure for transport. Extra helos dispatched. Head ‘em up and move ‘em out, Explorer One. Let’s see how quickly you can make it to the landing zone (LZ). Your time is running out. Watch your six. You’ve got insurgents crawling all over the region. Other teams are going combat ready and wheels up to replace you.”

“Copy that, Delta. Mission complete. Asses on the move. Thirty clicks from the LZ. This is the Explorer One. Over and out.”

As the girls were helped out of the space not much bigger than a Napa Valley wine barrel, one of the Ninja-clad, squad members would step up and the child was secured by harness piggy-back style to the human carrier. When the last child was on board, the Jihadists who were not already buried were dumped into the hole and the trapdoor secured, the squad triple-timed it through the thick woods without leaving so much as a leaf or blade of grass out of place. Some of the squad members, recon-turned-rescuers took point while others spread out to cover both sides and the rear.

Not knowing their fate, but somehow trusting, the girls tightly clung to their personal carriers not uttering a sound. The night was pitch black with no stars or moon to see their way, but somehow they were swiftly and soundlessly moving through the dense forest.

They were suddenly stilled by the sound of trucks up ahead coming toward them through the woods in a space no wider than a goat path. Their carriers melted like mist into the foliage and the girls instinctively knew they had to hold their collective breaths and remain still.

What the girls couldn't see, but the night-vision glasses revealed to the warriors, was another group of about twenty to thirty militant Jihadists standing on the back of two transport trucks with guns scanning the thick woods while the trucks slowly tried to navigate the narrow path. The girls also couldn't see the fluorescent hand signals only visible through the night-vision goggles. They couldn't hear the whispered voice commands that passed among their carriers or the other Ninjas on the perimeters who scrambled like silent monkeys up into the trees.

Yet, suddenly what looked like fireflies centered on each terrorist bloomed blood red, the trucks stopped moving as did the Jihadist who all seemed to collectively and, without a sound, simultaneously melt into the floorboards of the trucks. Each driver and his companion in the windowless front seats slouched down like melting goo. The headlights continued to glow in the dark and the truck engines ran, but that was the only sound that could be heard.

Quickly, another tag-and-bag operation took place, but with no time to bury the dead, they were hoisted up into the tall trees and tied to thick branches where they could not be seen from below. The trucks were driven off the path and the motors permanently disabled. When covered with brush, the trucks could not be seen. Tracks were brushed away assured that they would not soon be discovered. Then the ninjas were again off on a dead run.

Still in the dark, just before daybreak, the ninjas spread out in a circle around a clearing facing the woods. They had not uttered a word,

but MREs, meals ready to eat, and bottles of water were silently passed over their shoulders to each girl. The carriers never took their eyes off the woods and collected each scrap of debris after the girls had their fill. Remaining as still and quiet as a petrified tree trunk, the girls were still securely tethered in harnesses to their carriers.

A huff of air signaled something and the ninjas went on heightened alert. Then without otherwise hearing a sound, huge, black, bat-winged aircraft were suddenly filling the clearing. The ninjas, with their charges intact, sprinted backward toward the crafts and were shortly airborne at treetop level and whisked across the land at dizzying speeds that made the lushly green landscape blur below them. Land gave way to light-brown, sandy shores, a deep blue ocean, and what appeared to be specks on the vast watery horizon. The crafts bulleted toward what soon became a super, nuclear-powered, aircraft carrier surrounded by an armada of other battleships.

They landed on the deck of the huge aircraft carrier long enough to transfer the girls into the waiting hands of soldiers wearing the American flag and medical badges on their uniforms. The crafts were refueled and then another crew of pilots, both male and female, took the bat-winged aircraft off again carrying a different group of Ninjas. They flew toward the place they had all just left as the sun came up over the Mediterranean and the far horizon.