

LT. COMMANDER MOLLIE SANDERS

By Phyllis Zimblar Miller and Mitchell R. Miller

PART I – BACK-SEATER

CHAPTER IV –TANGOES

April 19

0800 hours

Mollie, Surfer, Perez and Jaiswal stood on a pier at the Port of San Pedro. Typical Southern California summer sunshine beamed down on two port police divers in full diving regalia standing nearby.

The two divers jumped into the water as Jaiswal gestured at them. “We’ve got a team checking the hulls of the cruise ships and tankers for bombs.”

“They can’t check all the ships in the harbor,” Mollie said.

Jaiswal nodded. “We do what we can. Airport security got billions for Congress. Coast Guard got a tiny piece of the pie.”

Surfer muttered at Mollie, “Told you it was like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

Mollie ignored him and instead spoke to Jaiswal. “Can you point us in the direction of the nearest Target store? We need to buy some civvies.”

A half hour later Mollie and Perez parted from Surfer and the translator Sam at the entrance. “See you back here in 30,” Mollie said to Surfer. “And think civilian, not tourist.” Mollie ignored the look Surfer shot her.

“I’ll be getting coffee,” Sam said.

Mollie nodded, then led Perez to the women’s section, where they both tried on casual summer pants and tops. “Nothing too noticeable. We need to blend into the crowds,” Mollie said.

Precisely at 0900 hours they met Surfer and Sam back at the entrance. “Find any clothes to go with your call sign?” Mollie asked Surfer.

“Easier to do than finding clothes to go with Gearhead,” he said.

Mollie shrugged, then led the way out of the store and back to the unmarked Coast Guard sedan they were using.

When they reached the Santa Monica Pier, Sam started to pull the car into a parking lot.

“Drive on, Sam,” Mollie said. “Operational rules. We’ll leave the car a few blocks away in case the parking lot is under surveillance.”

Sam found a parking space three blocks away. As they got out of the car, Mollie eyed Surfer’s outfit. Then she reached toward his collar but he jerked away.

“I’m just straightening your collar. Want you to look the best for your part.”

Surfer allowed her to touch his collar.

“Okay, we’ll give you a five-minute lead,” Mollie said. “Then we’ll walk toward the pier.”

Minutes later Mollie took a deep breath of ocean air as she and Perez stepped onto the board walk. They had 10 minutes before the meet, so Mollie and Perez admired the goods offered for sale in booths along the pier while keeping an eye on Surfer and Sam a few feet ahead.

Mollie spotted two swarthy men approaching Surfer and Sam. Suddenly, as the men were almost next to Surfer and Sam, a smoke grenade rolled out of a booth!

Dashing through the smoke screen, Mollie and Perez looked for the men. But they were all gone!

Mollie reached into the summer straw purse she'd gotten at Target. Pulling out her BlackBerry, she pointed to the screen. "Surfer doesn't know that I planted a bug on him," she said to Perez.

Perez grinned. "When you straightened his collar?"

"Imagine that."

"But what about the car keys? Sam has them."

Mollie fished keys out of her purse. "I asked for a second set of keys. You can never be too careful."

Moments later, panting from the brisk walk to the car, Mollie guided the car out of the parking space while Perez held the BlackBerry showing a GPS screen.

"They're getting on the freeway! Right and then left at 4th Street."

Mollie drove east on the 10 until the La Cienega exit south, where the men's car had turned off several minutes earlier.

"This is one of the back ways to LAX," Perez said. "It goes through pumping oil fields in the middle of housing areas." Perez checked the BlackBerry again. "In fact, I think they've pulled off into one of the oil fields."

After crossing over Exposition Boulevard, the car climbed past Baldwin Park and then dipped down, exposing the oil pumps. "Turn off here," Perez said.

Mollie drove the car over a bumpy service road until they spotted a service hut with a solitary car next to it. Mollie stopped her car several feet from the hut. She figured the sound of the pumping well covered their approach.

A Latino sat on a crate in front of the hut reading the newspaper *La Opinion*. Mollie said to him in Spanish, “That your car?”

He replied in Spanish: “What’s it to you?”

She spoke to the Latino in English this time: “Homeland Security. Random check. We’re looking for terrorists.”

“Who’s a terrorist?”

“You, asshole,” Mollie said as with one deft movement she grabbed his arm. He groaned as she twisted the arm behind him and frogmarched him toward the hut.

At Mollie’s nod Perez pulled a pistol from a skeleton holster at the small of her back hidden by the summer shirt she wore. She took off towards the back of the hut.

Mollie shoved the Latino through the door of the hut, using him as a shield. In her other hand she held her gun.

Inside the hut she saw Surfer and Sam each tied to a chair. The two swarthy men were arguing in Arabic with Sam.

The men spun towards Mollie and advanced on either side of her. She jabbed her gun into the Latino’s kidney, causing him to scream out and collapse writhing on the ground.

Mollie swung up her pistol in a two-handed grip. The men stopped advancing on her.

“Who wants to die first? And at the hands of a woman. Does that get you into paradise?”

She waited a full beat. “Untie them.”

The two men hesitated, then moved toward Mollie. At that instant Perez broke the window on the rear wall and stuck her gun inside aimed at the backs of the two men.

“Freeze!” Perez said.

They froze.

Mollie waved her gun in the direction of Surfer and Sam. “I said untie them.”

Ten minutes later the two swarthy men and the Latino were tied in the car. Perez and Sam stood on guard next to the car.

Mollie and Surfer talked a few feet away. “We didn’t have the password so they caused that diversion on the pier. They kept asking how we knew to meet them.”

Mollie smiled. “The haystack is dwindling.”

Surfer shook his head. “You’d better call somebody to arrest these guys.”

“Call who?”

“LAPD?”

Mollie shot him a look. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“FBI?”

“They’d only foul it up.”

“Homeland Security? Or the Coast Guard?”

Mollie worked her BlackBerry. “The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. They handle explosives.”

“Remind me to stay well away from you,” Surfer said.

She shot him a dirty look, then dialed a number on her BlackBerry.

**

1235 hours

Kevin was pissed as hell. He, Gearhead, Perez and Sam had waited at the oil well until ATF agents had shown up and taken the three men into custody. Then they had returned to Coast Guard headquarters and changed back into uniform. They'd even had a chance to eat some grub.

Five minutes ago a different ATF agent had shown up and was chewing out Jaiswal over the operation. All this because Gearhead had ...

"... no authority whatsoever to make an arrest!" the ATF agent said. "To question suspects. Or to carry a gun, for that matter."

Jaiswal eyed the agent. "You're saying a member of your country's armed forces doesn't have the right to be armed?"

Gearhead had to butt in now. "I'm detailed to the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard has law enforcement powers. Therefore, I have law enforcement powers. Got it?"

Jaiswal smiled at the agent as if to say "there you have it."

"I'm taking this up the ladder! All the way to the top! If you think for one damn minute that you can get away with this."

"Yes, well, you do just that." Jaiswal said, pointing to the door. "Meanwhile, would you excuse us? We have some work to do."

The agent stormed out, muttering. Kevin felt in sympathy with the guy. Gearhead made Kevin mutter too.

Gearhead turned to Kevin. "Sam is interrogating the tangoes now."

“You don’t know that they’re terrorists,” Kevin said. “Maybe there’s no sinister purpose. The explosives you found could be used to bring fish up to the surface.”

“Fish! Did you see any fishing equipment?”

Jaiswal held up peacemaking hands to Gearhead and Kevin. “While we wait for the interrogator, why don’t you check out some of our procedures?”

A half hour later Kevin stood with Gearhead and Perez on the deck of a Coast Guard patrol boat. Petty Officer Jameson had been assigned by Jaiswal to give them a tour of the port by water.

Jameson looked through his binoculars at a distant point. Then he gestured with the binoculars at an oil platform.

“We’re in the direct flight path of LAX’s four runways. Any skiff or oil platform can launch a shoulder-fired missile on a plane.”

For chrissakes Kevin thought.

“And the target can be picked ahead of time,” Gearhead said. Of course Perez shook her head in agreement with Gearhead.

“Right on schedule,” Jameson said.

“You’ve increased patrols,” Gearhead said. “What else to deter such attacks?”

“Analyzing intel. Hoping to find clues for an early warning.”

Kevin looked out at the port, then turned to Jameson. “The port is wide open – an invitation for ...”

A shout from the cabin interrupted Kevin.

The boat’s captain, Lieutenant Masters, strode on deck. He pointed to a ratty-looking freighter.

“That son-of-a-bitch is discharging bunker oil.” He spoke to Jameson. “Form a boarding party.”

“Lt. Masters, may we be of service?” Naturally Gearhead had to ask.

Masters looked at the three Navy personnel. Then he looked out at the vessel on the patrol boat’s portside. He pointed to Jameson. “Follow his orders!”

Kevin, Gearhead and Perez waited with Jameson as the patrol boat came up on the tramp steamer, which had PRINCE MISHKIN/VLADIVOVSTOCK painted across its stern.

Jameson hailed the boat to prepare to be boarded.

A shot exploded on the deck of the Coast Guard cutter. Kevin, Perez and Jameson took cover. Not Gearhead.

She grabbed a gun from a nearby Coast Guard sailor. Then she shot back at the shooter spotted on the tramp steam’s cabin roof. No more shots from the silenced shooter.

A klaxon from the tramp steamer signaled compliance with the boarding request. Jameson came forward from where he had taken cover.

“Going for a medal?” he said to Gearhead.

Ha! He should only know, Kevin thought. “She’s on the Navy pistol team,” he said.

Gearhead didn’t even look at him as they followed Jameson onboard the tramp steamer.

When the crew of the tramp steamer was lined up on deck, Masters joined them on the steamer.

The captain of the steamer spoke in Russian to Masters. “I am sorry for the shots. Some of my men are difficult – they are not used to international rules.”

Masters didn’t say anything. Obviously he didn’t know Russian.

Suddenly at Kevin’s elbow Gearhead spoke in Russian: “I am sure that is true. What is also true is that you and your crew are under arrest.”

Naturally she spoke Russian. Was there anything she didn’t do?

Gearhead turned to Masters. “I’ve just said he and his crew are under arrest. I assume that is your intention.”

Masters looked at Gearhead. “You speak Russian?”

“Studied it at the Academy.” She hesitated for only a second. “And I need to keep my hand in. Mind if I question the captain myself?”

**

1500 hours

Mollie sat across from the steamer captain in a Coast Guard interrogation room. She counted five empty coffee cups in front of him.

They had been at this for some time. The captain continued to insist on his innocence.

Mollie didn’t buy it. But she also didn’t think he was a terrorist. She’d studied the Russian language and culture enough to believe that this captain was just doing “business as usual” for a Russian-registered tramp steamer.

Mollie rose, nodded at the captain, and exited the room.

In the adjoining room, the one on the other side of the interrogation room mirror, Mollie shook hands with two men in suits, both FBI agents, who then flipped their badges at her.

The first FBI agent said, "You've had him to yourself for long enough. We need to get in to speak with him."

"Either one of you speak Russian?" Mollie asked.

"We have an interpreter with us."

"Then I'd appreciate it if you send me the tapes of your questioning. I want to hear the guy answer in the original."

"What have you learned so far?" the second FBI agent asked.

"He's a good liar. Must have taken acting classes."

"Your interest in him?"

"Shoulder-fired missiles. My pilot and I had to dodge one a couple of days ago."

"You think these guys did that?" the first FBI agent asked.

Mollie shook her head. "They weren't anywhere near at the time in question. I'm just covering my bases."

Mollie left and walked over to the temporary work space. When she entered, she spotted a food tray from the officers mess waiting for her.

"I'm glad to see this," she said. "Grilling someone in Russian increases one's appetite."

Surfer walked up to her. "Your attitude is going to get you in deep shit some day."

"What attitude?"

“The one that makes everyone else look like a fool.”

Mollie raised a forkful of food to her mouth. Before she ate, she said, “Better than having everyone look good until they fail.”

Surfer turned to Perez. “Don’t take Lt. Commander Sanders as a role model. It could get you killed.”

Perez shrugged. “I can make my own judgments.”

Mollie ignored his comment. She turned to Perez and said, “Can you find me another Arabic translator? Civilian or military?”

“What happened to Sam?” Surfer asked.

Now she spoke to him. “I don’t speak Arabic. I have no way of knowing if Sam can be trusted. I’m not going to risk this whole investigation on a faulty translation.”

Perez said, “I’ll get on it right away.”

“Make sure the new translator has never had any connection with Sam. And keep them apart – don’t introduce them. Have the second one listen to tapes of the interrogation with no translation provided.”

“What if they’re both bent?” Kevin asked.

Mollie smiled. “The solution to this possible problem should be on its way. Special delivery.”

Perez left the room as Jaiswal entered.

“What’s the situation at Camp Pendleton?” Mollie asked him. “Can those Marines help us if needed?”

“If we knew ahead of time where and when an attack was to be mounted. Can’t have them standing guard around every ship indefinitely.”

Surfer chimed in: “Los Angeles is just one port on this coast. What about Seattle? There’s a sub base up there. That could be an attractive target.”

Mollie shook her head. “It’s a military target. Taking out that base wouldn’t disrupt the economy of the U.S. But taking out San Pedro harbor would be a major blow to the U.S. economy – remember \$1 billion of goods passes through San Pedro each day.”

Surfer said: “Truckers. We have to investigate the truckers.”

Mollie nodded – Surfer had a good point. “Isn’t Homeland Security doing something to check truckers who haul dangerous loads?”

“Doesn’t have to be dangerous loads,” Jaiswal said. “Just has to be a truck crammed with explosives rammed into the pier.”

“And what are we doing about finding the two men seen jumping ship right before the explosion in the harbor?” Surfer asked.

Mollie looked at her watch. “The answer to that question should be here right about now.”

As if on cue, Thurman entered the room leading the way for a woman in her mid-30s carrying a briefcase. Perez followed them into the room.

Mollie approached the woman. “Ms. Hong, I’m Lt. Commander Sanders.” She gestured to each person as she said the name. “Commander Jaiswal, Lt. Commander Witlow, Ensign Perez.”

Ms. Hong nodded, stepped over to the nearest CPU and placed a disk into the drive.

“What Ms. Hong has brought us is just now being used by the CIA, the Department of Defense and the Defense Intelligence Agency,” Mollie said.

Mollie gestured for the presentation to begin.

“Imagine,” Ms. Hong said, “police detectives pinning up facts and photos to a wall to study the clues to find a pattern. Our computer application TimeWall is a 3-D virtual wall on a computer screen.”

Mollie strode up next to Ms. Hong. “TimeWall stretches into the past and the future to track people, places, relationships and events using e-mail, phone conversations, GPS positioning.”

Ms. Hong nodded. “A super search engine that filters vast amounts of unstructured information from a variety of sources and looks for relationships, patterns and trends.”

Mollie smiled. “And .. it does this in two dozen languages.”

The computer screen came to life with the application. Mollie turned to Perez. “Ms. Hong is going to give us all a tutorial after we load some of our data into the system. Then you’ll be the point person. And you can incorporate your other tracking applications into this project.”

Surfer glared at Mollie. “And how did you know about this brand-new application?”

“We were tracking its development at STORC. Just waiting for the eggs to hatch.”

Perez turned to Mollie. “It will take me time to input the interrogation voice tapes and the translations for the guys we have in custody and other intel we have. If you want to do something else ...”

“We’ll wait,” Mollie said.

Surfer looked at Jaiswal, who then turned to Mollie. “Commander Sanders, what do you do to relieve stress, to clear your mind?”

“I practice t’ai chi – for maintaining mental and physical balance.”

Jaiswal smiled, glanced at his watch. “I also do t’ai chi, and I know where there’s a ‘push hands’ class about to start.”

Mollie shook her head. “No comfortable clothes with me.”

Jaiswal waved her toward the door. “I have a collection in my car. Always prepared.”

Mollie turned to Perez. “How much time do you need?”

“At least an hour.”

Mollie turned to Ms. Hong. “Do you mind if we leave while the intel is being uploaded?”

“As long as I can connect to the internet, I’ll be fine,” Ms. Hong said.

Mollie smiled, then said, “Surfer, are you into spectator sports?”

He glared. “Do you want me to bet on the outcome?”

“You wish,” Mollie said.