

LT. COMMANDER MOLLIE SANDERS

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PART I – BACK-SEATER

CHAPTER V – “PUSHING HANDS”

April 19

1630 hours

Mollie followed Jaiswal into a bare room just as several other students dressed in causal clothes and light-soled shoes took places facing the teacher. Mollie and Jaiswal quickly joined the others, and they all bowed to the teacher. Then the students turned to a wall of pictures of elderly Chinese gentlemen. The class bowed even more deeply, then turned again to the teacher.

At his gesture they paired off, bowed to each other, and began *t'ai sho*, or “push hands.” For a second Mollie wondered what Surfer would think of each person, beginning with a set of close movements, attempting to sense the movement and balance of his or her partner and use that – not strength – to throw or push out the opponent.

Mollie switched her entire focus to the task at hand. Mollie tried twice to push Jaiswal out, but he just bent away from her. On her third try, he didn't bend, but took advantage of her being off-balance to throw her out.

She stumbled, regained her footing, and with a big grin, got back into contact with him.

She fainted a few times, always the one initiating. Finally, after Jaiswal was lulled somewhat by her feints, she succeeded in pushing him out.

He flew back, propelled by the slightest of movements on her part. He almost thudded to the mat, but got a hand behind himself to stop his fall.

Then he got back up, moved into contact again.

“Good one!” Jaiswal said.

Mollie grinned as they continued, now having each other’s measure.

An hour later Mollie and Jaiswal, back in uniform, and Surfer walked toward the car when Mollie’s cell rang.

Mollie answered “Sanders.”

Mollie listened to the call, then ended without saying another word.

“TimeWall has already come up with some info. One man in custody just received a message on his cell phone that we confiscated. The message was in Arabic, translated by TimeWall. Two men asking why a meet didn’t take place.”

“Did TimeWall locate these men through the cell call?” Surfer asked.

“They’re kitchen help at a restaurant in The Grove. What’s that?”

Jaiswal said, “Upscale shopping next to Farmers Market in the mid-Wilshire district.”

Mollie thought for a moment. “How far from here?”

“Fifteen, twenty minutes.”

Mollie nodded. “We have to pick up the men now before they flee.”

“I’ve got weapons in my car,” Jaiswal said.

“What about local authorities?” Surfer asked.

Mollie shook her head. “No bozos raining on our parade.”

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1740 hours

Kevin sat in the rear while Jaiswal drove; Gearhead rode shotgun and talked on her cell.

“Perez, how do you say ‘On the ground, hands on your head’ in Spanish?”

Gearhead said.

She didn’t know every language, Kevin thought.

“Now transfer me to the security guards at The Grove – it’s a shopping center in mid-Wilshire.”

While Gearhead waited for the connection, Kevin stared at the back of her head. Why was he so hung up about her? Shit, she was his back-seater, which naturally would make him the lead in a flying sortie operation. But this sure wasn’t a flying sortie. Although what the hell it was he didn’t know. Sort of like flying by the seat of your pants with no instruments and no filed flight plan.

He wondered how she had done at the Naval Academy. He’d graduated the June before she started, so their paths hadn’t crossed there. And up until now he hadn’t heard of her. But he wondered what he’d learn if he were to ask about her on the Academy grapevine.

Gearhead turned slightly in her seat to face him. “When we enter the restaurant kitchen, I don’t want the other workers to think this is an immigration raid. If they do, there’ll be mass chaos.”

“You don’t know Spanish?” Kevin asked her.

“I know some Spanish. But I checked with Perez to make sure I said the warning correctly. A wrong word could add to that chaos.”

Jaiswal interrupted. “I’m going around the back way and leaving the car at valet parking. That will put us in position for approaching the restaurant.”

“Good,” Gearhead said as Jaiswal turned onto the access road to The Grove.

Leaving the car with the valet, Kevin and Gearhead followed Jaiswal, striding past the trolley with parents and adults waving out the open windows and past the artificial fountain surrounded by enthralled tourists. Music blared from an outdoor sound system.

Outside the restaurant The Eaterie they met up with two security guards.

Gearhead told the guards to go around to the back door. “Don’t enter the kitchen,” she said. “Just stay prepared at the back door.”

Inside the restaurant Gearhead showed her ID to the maitre d’. Having been already briefed by The Grove security, he motioned them toward the door leading from the dining area to the kitchen.

They strode through a restaurant filling up with dinner guests.

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1800 hours

Mollie motioned Surfer and Jaiswal to pause. She peered through the kitchen window.

Then she motioned Surfer and Jaiswal to unholster their weapons and follow her.

She pushed through the kitchen doors and yelled in Spanish: “On the ground, hands on your head.”

Eight men dropped. Two Middle Eastern men darted toward the back door.

Damn it! She needed them alive!

Mollie fired over their heads and shouted in computer-phrasе Arabic: “Down on the floor, hands on your head.”

The two men dashed out the back door.

A moment later as Mollie burst through the back door she saw that the men had gotten past the guards, who were only now unholstering their guns. “Don’t shoot!” Mollie screamed at the guards as she ran after the two men.

Mollie could hear Surfer and Jaiswal right behind her as they followed the two men towards the parking structure.

Up the escalator the men ran, with Mollie, Surfer, Jaiswal and the security guards in pursuit. Shoppers jumped out of the way of this frantic chase.

On the top floor of the structure the two men dashed away from the escalators and towards the far end of the floor.

Oh no! Mollie had a flash as to what they were going to do. She sprinted even faster, desperately trying to stop the inevitable.

At the moment when Mollie and the others had almost caught up, the two men jumped onto the waist-high wall, shouted “Allah Akbar” and dove over the top.

Mollie and the others raced to the wall and peered down at the two men. They were splattered on the cement in front of the valet parking stop – inches from a fancy Hummer.

A security guard near Mollie radioed 911.

An hour later Mollie, Surfer and the translator Sam stood with a morgue worker next to the covered bodies of the two jumpers. Also there, their hands tied in wristbands and a security detail behind them, were the two swarthy men and the Latino worker arrested at the oil field.

The morgue worker pulled back the sheets covering the faces of the two jumpers. Mollie said to Sam, "Translate."

Mollie turned to the prisoners. "Is this what you want for yourselves?" she asked. Sam repeated the question in Arabic.

One swarthy man and the Latino remained silent. The second swarthy man spoke to Sam, who then translated. "He says he will give you information if you give these men proper Muslim burials."

Mollie nodded her agreement.

Back at Coast Guard San Pedro headquarters Mollie and Perez watched through the interrogation viewing room mirror as Surfer and the translator interrogated the second swarthy man.

Perez glanced at the screen of a laptop. "TimeWall doesn't agree with the translator's translations. There are enough differences for TimeWall to issue a translation warning."

Mollie looked at the screen. "Is the second translator here?"

"He's working off the tapes as you asked."

Mollie shook her head. "The one from which we learned nothing." She glanced through the window, then said, "Get the second guy. Let's check him out now."

"His name is Amir," Perez said as she went to get him.

Mollie entered the interrogation room to ask Surfer and Sam to step outside with her. Once outside the room, Mollie told Sam that they were taking a break to let the man worry for a while. She would tell Sam when his services were needed again.

“I’ll go get something to eat,” Sam said.

As soon as he walked out of earshot, Mollie leaned close to Surfer and said, “I want to try another translator. Perez is bringing him in now.”

Surfer nodded.

“And remember the most important thing is to find out what the meeting on the pier was about. Keep hammering at that point.”

Five minutes later Mollie and Perez heard the new translator say to Surfer: “He says that they were to meet the men from the boat to tell them what to do next.”

“And that was?” Surfer asked.

Amir spoke to the man, then turned to Surfer. “He was to tell the men to go to the bookstore next to the mosque and ask for a book of ‘The Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam.’”

Surfer asked, “What were they to do with the book?”

Amir asked the man, listened to the reply, then said to Surfer: “He has no idea. He assumes the book would have instructions for what the men were to do next.”

Surfer asked: “How did he get his instructions?”

A moment later Amir had the answer: “Through an email message.”

Mollie nodded when she heard this, then said to Perez: “Maybe the book has instructions about meeting the restaurant workers at The Grove.”

“There are so many different groups of men,” Perez said.

Mollie nodded. “Cut-outs in the intelligence business. Separating the top guy from lower levels.”

Perez checked the computer running TimeWall. Then she said to Mollie, “TimeWall likes this guy – agrees closely with his translations.”

“I don’t want Sam to know we’re suspicious. Find him some harmless documents to translate. He may just be inept – or his Arabic is from a different country where there are differences in idioms – or he may be working with our enemies.”

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2000 hours

Back in the temporary workspace Yolanda Perez watched Lt. Commander Sanders stride to a blackboard and draw circles. “Here’s what we know,” the commander said.

“We can assume that one or two of the men on the Semtex boat were to meet the two contacts at the pier.” The commander nodded at Yolanda, giving her the opportunity to describe what happened next.

“Only thanks to us the men from the boat were detained,” Yolanda said. “So we went to the meet – and that’s how we found the two contacts and then the guard outside the hut. The guard seems to not know anything – just paid for his guard duties.”

The commander took over again. “And thanks to the intercepted cell call, we know the two men from The Grove restaurant were awaiting a meeting with the men from the pier.”

“Which still leaves us nowhere,” Lt. Commander Witlow said.

“And an unsolved tanker explosion,” Commander Jaiswal added.

Lt. Commander Sanders studied her blackboard circles. Yolanda watched the commander, feeling privileged to be working on the commander's team. Still, there was something about the commander that seemed ... what? A sadness or an uncertainty that the confident exterior masked. Yet the whiff of something else was there, like when the commander had asked about Yolanda living with her mother.

The commander turned from the blackboard. "It does leave us somewhere. We now have taken several men out of action. Whoever is higher up on the food chain of these guys has to be getting nervous that his men are disappearing."

Commander Jaiswal walked closer to the blackboard and looked at the circles. "Presumably he has heard about the two kitchen help taking a swan dive off The Grove's parking structure. Even withholding the men's identification from the press, the leader knows they worked at The Grove."

Lt. Commander Witlow nodded in agreement. "Can we use the info we just got from our informant in custody? Both translators agree on this – the men get their instructions through a Muslim bookstore."

Yolanda added, "And TimeWall agrees with the translators."

Lt. Commander Sanders said, "They don't speak to anyone at the bookstore. Just buy a certain book. Perhaps if we pick up the book, the fears of their leader will be lessened." The commander nodded as if to herself, then spoke again: "We'll go to the bookstore early tomorrow morning."

A Coast Guard sailor ran into the workspace and spoke to Jaiswal. "Just got a call from a Carnival cruise ship approaching the harbor. Captain says there's an employee on board who is suspicious."

“How suspicious?” Commander Jaiswal asked.

“No specifics, sir.”

Commander Jaiswal strode toward the door, the other two commanders close on his heels.

At the door Lt. Commander Sanders turned to Yolanda. “Keep checking those translation tapes against TimeWall. We’ll take the second translator with us.”

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2100 hours

Mollie, Surfer, Jaiswal and the new translator Amir stood in the bow of a Coast Guard cutter as it sliced through the choppy waves.

The cutter came up alongside the cruise ship, which had dropped anchor short of the harbor while awaiting clearance to dock.

Mollie led the other three as they climbed the cruise ship’s outside ladder onto the upper deck, where the Carnival captain met them. “We’ve not wanted to alert the man to our suspicions. He’s in the main dining room serving dinner for the second seating.”

“Is he a waiter?” Mollie asked.

“His English isn’t good enough. He’s a busboy.”

Mollie nodded as the captain led the way. She walked beside him, the others behind her.

“What makes you suspicious of him?” she asked the captain.

“He joined the ship in Hawaii as a last-minute replacement. He speaks to no one.”

“Perhaps just his poor English.”

The captain shook his head. “A couple of my people say there’s something off about this guy.”

“And you trust your people?”

The captain nodded.

“You think he may jump ship when you dock?” she asked.

The captain hesitated. Mollie thought she saw a look of pain cross his face.

“It’s why he may jump ship that worries me. My ... my brother was in the World Trade Center. He didn’t ...”

The captain couldn’t finish his sentence. Mollie pressed lightly on his shoulder.

“You did the right thing to call us. Even with all the best intelligence gathering – it comes down to the instincts of the people onsite. If only all the port workers were as vigilant.”

The captain shot her a grateful look. Then he opened the door to the main dining room.

Inside a large crowd of people sat at tables of eight guests each. They appeared to be mostly Americans dressed in casual clothes as if there were scheduled to go ashore after dinner when the boat docked in San Pedro.

The captain indicated the station of the suspicious busboy across the large room. Then he said to the three men behind them. “I’ll go over with Commander Sanders as if we’re about to greet a guest at the next table.”

“His name?” Mollie asked.

“Employment papers said Yusef Rahim.”

Just at this moment all the lights went off. In the next instant several waiters paraded into the room holding aloft platters of flaming baked Alaska. The diners cheered.

The lights came back on – and the man was gone!

Mollie gestured for the others to fan out and saw Jaiswal speak into his walkie talkie.

Mollie and cruise ship employees searched the kitchen while the captain and employees searched the casino and the Coast Guard sailors searched the swimming pool areas.

Then Mollie strode into the women's sauna area and yanked open the sauna doors one by one. In the last one a person sat hunched over and bundled in towels, even the person's face was covered.

Mollie yanked the towel off the person's face, revealing the busboy.

She snapped his arm into a lock and forgmarched him out of the sauna.

Then Surfer and two Coast Guard sailors followed her as she pushed the busboy into a cramped crew quarters that held several bunks and small lockers.

The busboy pointed to his bunk and locker. Mollie nodded to the Coast Guard sailors, then she and Surfer hustled the busboy out of the quarters.

Coming out on the deck where they had first boarded the ship, Mollie took the busboy's documents from the captain. Surfer kept one hand tightly gripped around the busboy's arm as slowly the three made their way down the rope ladder, followed by Jaiswal and Amir.

Inside the cabin of the Coast Guard cutter, Mollie, Sufer and Amir sat across from the busboy. Amir spoke briefly in Arabic to the man, then turned to Mollie. “He is Yusef Ramin. He says he knows nothing. He is thankful to have this job to help feed his family.”

“Then why did he run?”

“His papers, they are not in order, he said.”

“What do his papers say?”

Amir looked down at the papers Mollie handed him. “That he is from Somalia.”

“Are they forged?”

“That is not something I would know.”

Mollie shook her head as Jaiswal entered the cabin. “His bunk and locker have been searched,” Jaiswal said. “There’s nothing.”

Surfer said, “He could have hidden things all over the ship. Then waited until it docked before retrieving his goodies.”

Mollie looked at the busboy. A small-boned man in his forties. He had the look of an ascetic.

Mollie motioned Jaiswal to follow her up on deck. She said to him, “Let’s not assume that he doesn’t understand English.”

Jaiswal nodded.

“I want him locked up with the others we have. I want to see how they react to this new guy. Sometimes what people don’t say provides the best clues.”

Thirty minutes later Mollie stood looking through a one-way mirror into the holding cell. She watched as two Coast Guard sailors brought Yusef Ramin into the cell to join the three men from the oil field.

The Latino barely glanced at the man, but the other two jailed men straightened just for an instant. An almost imperceptible nod of respect and recognition flashed from the two men to the new prisoner.

Mollie smiled. Her hunch had been right.