



Following is an excerpt from the next STORM CELL thriller

FORCE MAJEURE

*The liberties of a people never were nor ever will be
secure when the transactions of their
rulers may be concealed from them.*

PATRICK HENRY

*The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time
with the blood of patriots and tyrants.*

THOMAS JEFFERSON

*Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill,
that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship,
support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival
and the success of liberty.*

JOHN F. KENNEDY



FORCE POSEIDON





*The best argument against democracy is a
five-minute conversation with the average voter.*

Winston Churchill

YOUR NAME IS AMY IRVINE. You are driving along a two-lane asphalt back road, maybe a little tipsy, maybe just drowsy, your favorite shortcut through the toolies to get to your writing cabin. It's a little two-room thing, hardly more than a shack backed right up to the mountainside, but it has fresh water funneled into a covered reservoir, solar electricity for hot water, refrigeration and internet connectivity, and God's own panorama of the valley below.

With no light pollution out here, the indigo night is perforated with a trillion stars and a giant disk of harvest Moon. You're musing about a sticky angle in your second novel, not paying strict attention to the short tallow cones thrown by low-beam headlights.

You don't use high beams out here because you believe it fright-





ens the desert wildlife.

Then, whipping past—*what* ... are those lights? Reflections? Suddenly, on both sides of the road at irregular intervals, you see streaking past many small flecks of firefly light backed by silhouettes. Your head swivels left and right, seeing dark shapes, random outlines, but comprehending none. After a few seconds, they are gone as fast as they appeared.

When your attention turns back to the road, the man is standing right there doing his impression of a deer in your headlights.

Your brain registers an instant snapshot—he looks military: Kevlar, full camo gear, body armor, heavy boots, assault rifle. Wait, no. You thought it was an assault rifle at first, but this one is different. Much longer, sand colored, with a big scope on top. You've seen those before too.

Your car strikes the man. He flies into the air with the force of a bottle rocket and you recognize two things: His face is hidden by night vision goggles, and he is carrying a Barrett M107 .50-caliber sniper rifle.

Your car crabs a little to the right as you panic-stop, brake sounds chattering across the dusty scrub in full anti-lock. Powerful legs propel you from the vehicle and you run back to the dark shape now like a speed bump in the road, easy to find under the bright night sky. He lies motionless.

The long gun is on the roadside, seemingly intact, but the impact has broken some buckles and shorn the man of his heavy tactical backpack and its contents. Ammo magazines, loose rounds, first aid pouches, and some MRE food packets are blown everywhere across the cracked tarmac.

The man too is largely intact, but his face is not. The skull was fractured by the impact of night vision goggles propelled into his eye sockets at seventy-three miles per hour. A pool of blood has already formed around his head, but blood stops flowing when the





heart stops beating. This pool of blood, leaking out from behind the night vision goggles, is small.

Panicked, but angry, too, you look around for help. You are many miles from the nearest cell tower, and there are no other cars coming from either direction.

What the hell do I do now? you think, and look back down to the lump in the roadway. *And what the fuck were you doing in my roadway, dumb ass?*

The stars and the full Moon provide eerie lighting to your indecision.

Then, Jesus. Now what? What is that sound?

A noise you've also heard before comes from the dead man. You go to one knee thinking he might be alive after all. You check, but there is no pulse. The crackling, hissing sound is not coming from crushed lungs, but from a headset knocked from his head. You pick it up, slowly, and hold it up to your ear like it might hurt you.

You have no idea then how right you are.

"Scorpion-one-six, Scorpion-one-six, Scorpion-actual! Ten-sixty-nine, I say again, *say your goddamn status!* Over!"

A running man answers, breathing hard.

"Scorpion-actual, Scorpion-four. Scorpion-one-six may be down hard in a ten-twenty-one, sir, and his telematics are offline. We're ten-forty-three and about two mikes from the scene. Out."

You don't understand the ten-codes from the radio transmission, but you know they are used by cops. And these were definitely soldiers, so that means MPs—military police.

Two mikes—*two minutes*.

Then you hear another sound. Footfalls. Hard, persistent running footfalls and battle rattle, all pretense of stealth abandoned.

And they're coming toward you.

You're sorry their man is dead, and you fervently wish it hadn't



happened, but you don't know what this sketchiness is all about and you don't intend to stay for the out-brief. Clarity returns, just like it always did for you in Afghanistan firefights—and you know it is time to go.

Right now.

You rise to a combat crouch, survey the terrain, and scurry back toward your car. Your training always sleeps right beneath the surface.

The bobbing heads of maybe two dozen soldiers can be seen above the brush and in the road as they sprint toward your position.

Christ, the damned car lights are on.

On the way back to the BMW you stoop in a fluid motion and grab the long gun with one hand and a canvas sling bag of ammo with the other. You have a .357-caliber Colt wheel gun up in the cabin, just something to deal with snakes and keep the odd bobcat away, but not much ammo. And the cats converging on you now are not bobcats.

Slide the rifle and ammo bag into the car and jump into the driver's seat, kill the damned lights and curse the darkness when you step on the brake pedal to shift from Park into Drive. The guilty red flash of brake lights can be seen at night for miles out here.

You don't have miles to spare.

Lights out and speeding away from the scene on the moonlit road, you are angry at the mystery men whose fault this is and it's pinging your PTSD something awful. You left all that *hooyah* military bullshit behind when you got out, one of the first-ever women to graduate from U.S. Army Ranger School, never accorded the respect men gave unbidden to men.

Keep the accelerator down hard to the floor. This is all straight-away out here and you need to put beaucoup time and distance between you and whatever the hell was going on back there in the road when you drove through the middle of it.



You've opened up ten, maybe twelve miles on them already. You don't know how much margin you need, but it won't be enough until you are buttoned up in the writing cabin.

Reach for your cellphone in a cupholder and, holding it low so the light doesn't show, you touch a speed-dial number. In this stretch of desert closer to the mountain, you can sometimes get a bar or two of cell signal, and right on time, there it is. You touch the speakerphone icon and place the phone back into the cupholder. The soft ringing can be heard from the car's stereo speakers.

When a man's voice answers, it sounds like he's in the car.

"I told you never to call me here," Xavier Cloud says, but the man is laughing. Caller ID told him his old battle buddy was on the horn. "What's up out there in God's country, Irving?"

Irving was his playful take on Amy Irvine's last name. Until now, it had always made her smile.

"Zave, man," you say, "I got a situation here."

He hears the anxiety in your voice. It's too soon to be scared, but you're thinking about it.

"How soon can you get out to my place in Utah?"

"How soon do you need me, colonel?"

You look in your rearview mirror. No pursuing headlights yet, no flashing blues or reds. Those soldiers were POGs—people other than grunts—so even military police will stand around for a while with their thumbs up their asses before the hive mind collects itself. By then, you'll be long and safely gone.

But if they're hot-shit combat MPs—or better, which is worse—there is no telling what resources they can bring to bear, or how fast. Or how angry.

You steal a glance at the luminous dial of your MTM watch.

"About, ah, about twelve minutes ago. I needed you twelve minutes ago. Can you get out here? I might be in some kind of weird trouble, and I can't risk staying on the pho—" and then the





signal is gone again.

Balls. You downshift your BMW *bang-bang-bang* through the gearbox until the roaring car is slowed to a crawl in first gear, then shift into Neutral and handbrake to a stop to avoid triggering the brake lights. With a punch to each side of the roof you smash the bulb in the left and right interior lights with your academy ring. Open the car door to stand in the roadway and look back down the long ribbon of cracked, gray asphalt.

Nothing yet.

Hold down the cellphone's on-off button until it goes cold. Field-strip out the battery and the SIM card. With a powerful fling that would skip a flat rock across Lake Superior for a hundred feet, you Frisbee the phone into the darkness and ghostly desert scrub as hard as you can.

Wistfully, you wish you were back in your little Upper Peninsula hometown of Christmas right now, on the Michigan shores of Lake Superior.

You throw the battery and the SIM card in different directions. Get back into your car, release the handbrake, and power away in first gear. The writing cabin is less than an hour away.

Why are these people out here in my desert? you wonder.

And what are they going to do next?

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A small woman steps off a Manhattan subway at the South Ferry station, closest to the Statue of Liberty. She struggles with a heavy Samsonite suitcase, one of the big ones, with stout wheels and a thick handle. She looks around, evidently a visitor unafraid in a strange place, curious but confident. Touristy, in a but-I've-been-here-before kind of way.





Two New York City transit cops notice the king-size suitcase, the small woman, and the bright blue *hijab* framing her face and possible indecision. One officer is a twenty-three-year-old blue-lint rookie, second day on the job and full of the milk of human kindness. He got into police work to help people, and here was his first chance.

The second officer is a twenty-three-year veteran, the kid's field training officer. He's happy for the rookie's enthusiasm, but he's seen too much of life in almost two and a half decades on the NYPD. No wife, no children, he retires next month to fish and drink a lot of expensive rum in Key West. He thinks the kid too will harden as he grows in experience on the job.

When they approach the woman to render common assistance to a citizen, their new-model body cams and mics record the scene. The high-definition video and audio instantly stream via a heavy-duty police-only WiFi signal out of the subway tunnel and to the headquarters mainframe at One Police Plaza.

When the recording is later reviewed by the president of the United States and his national security team, the last thing they see is the happy, smiling, upraised face of the earnest young woman.

In a mild British accent, she speaks to the officers.

"You know, I have never kissed a man."

Then the screen goes blinding ice-white with a bone-chilling electronic scream.





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This material has not been reviewed for classification.





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