

Chinese Whispers

Prologue

Helmand Province, Afghanistan

The Jackal armoured car ahead bounced and bucked alarmingly as it negotiated the bumpy desert track, kicking up dense clouds of sand and dust which swirled and churned in the stiff breeze. Sergeant Tim Steele, following in the second vehicle – a Coyote armoured personnel carrier – struggled either to see clearly or breathe properly, in spite of the goggles and the dust mask which he was wearing.

This was Tim's first tour in Afghanistan, and so far, after two weeks, it had proved uneventful compared to his previous two tours in Iraq, where he had been involved in some ferocious fighting. All he had done so far was take part in regular patrols like today's, during which he had not even seen, let alone engaged the enemy. These patrols were physically exhausting, though; his back was starting to protest at the pummelling it was taking and his throat felt as dry as the sand all around. Never mind, they should be back in the relative comfort of Camp Bastion within around forty-five minutes.

Then it happened. He saw the fireball erupt a split second before the ear-splitting sound of the explosion assaulted his ears; his face was blasted with a stinging volley of coarse sand carried in a fierce rush of scorching hot air. He recoiled involuntarily, clawing at his face and his goggles, trying to wipe away the sand and dirt as his vehicle came to an abrupt halt, slewing sideways on the sand as it did so. When his eyes were able to penetrate the cloud of smoke and dust, what he saw made his heart jump in his chest and his breath catch in his throat. The Jackal lay on its side, rocking back and forth a couple of times before coming to rest. There was a huge crater covering the full width of the dirt track, and a shower of debris was raining down.

'IED!' yelled Tim, extricating himself from his vehicle and scrambling down onto the ground.

He readied his assault rifle and scanned the surrounding desert for possible attackers; he could see none. He turned his gaze to the upturned vehicle ahead; there were four men in there – were they all dead? Tim began cautiously to make his way towards the wreckage, his rifle at the ready, all the time scanning his surroundings for any further threats. The other three men who had been travelling with Tim were now also getting out of the vehicle and readying their weapons. There was still no sign that the enemy was present; maybe the bomb had been triggered automatically as the armoured car passed over it and not by someone observing the patrol.

Suddenly, he saw movement ahead. One of the soldiers was scrambling out of the vehicle; it was Jim Archer. There was blood streaming from a gash to his forehead and he was

unsteady on his feet. Thankfully, though, he didn't look to be seriously injured. He was followed by their commanding officer, Steve Salt, who was clutching his elbow in obvious pain. Tim looked around once more for any signs of danger; still there seemed to be none. Nevertheless, he signalled for the three men he had been travelling with to stay by their vehicle before he began to advance at a slow trot towards his injured comrades. After the deafening sound of the explosion, the silence was now total, save for the ringing still echoing in his ears.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered as the air was rent by the vicious chatter of automatic weapon fire. He watched in horror as Steve Salt pitched face-forward onto the sand. Alongside him, Jim Archer's body was jerking and twitching like some bizarre, life-sized marionette, before he too fell to the ground. All around the two of them the sand erupted in little fountains as the hail of bullets struck. Tim looked in the direction from which the shots had been fired and there at the top of a ridge, about a hundred and fifty yards away, he could see the muzzle flashes and the silhouettes of around six or eight turban-clad heads. He raised his weapon and fired a long burst at the attackers, causing them to take cover and providing a momentary lull in the onslaught.

'Cover me!' he yelled to the three men crouching behind their vehicle; in unison, they stood up and unleashed a withering volley of fire at the insurgents.

Tim rushed towards the two fallen men, all the time raking the top of the ridge with his own ferocious, but randomly-aimed stream of bullets. In spite of the volume of fire trying to keep them pinned down, the enemy were still returning fire sporadically, and Tim's heart was pounding furiously as he reached his stricken comrades.

One glance was enough to tell him that Jim Archer was dead: his face, neck, and chest riddled with bullet wounds, his eyes staring vacantly skyward. Steve Salt was clutching his blood-soaked leg with one hand while trying, without success, to drag himself across the sand with the other, his face contorted with pain.

Tim fired one more burst towards the insurgents on the ridge before pitching his rifle aside and using both hands to grab Steve under the armpits, dragging him towards the cover of the upturned vehicle. It seemed to take forever – Steve was a big man, and in his current condition he was virtually deadweight. Another short burst of fire thudded into the sand inches from Tim's feet followed by the metallic ping of several more rounds hitting the wrecked armoured car. How the hell had they escaped being hit?

But then Tim's luck ran out; he felt a shockingly hard blow to the front of his shoulder, and at the same time an intense ripping sensation at the back as the bullet passed right through his body. The pain which followed a moment later was excruciating. Somehow, he maintained his hold on the injured man and, with one last superhuman effort, he dragged Steve behind the upturned vehicle, collapsing alongside him, too exhausted to speak or even move. The furious firefight continued raging out of their sight; they were powerless to do anything but lie there listening.

But then the wall of sound subsided, dwindling first to intermittent and randomly-spaced shots, before stopping completely. The silence was surreal, overwhelming, after the fury of

the preceding battle. They waited for what seemed an age, before two of their comrades appeared, one with his rifle still at the ready, the other carrying a medical kit; the latter immediately knelt down to tend to Steve's leg. He took a knife from his belt and ripped open the fabric of the uniform.

'How is he?' gasped Tim, grimacing with pain.

'Looks like ... yes ... two bullet wounds in his thigh.'

'How serious?'

'Not sure ...' He felt gently with his fingers around the wounds. 'I think his femur is broken.'

Steve was lapsing in and out of consciousness as the other man bound his leg.

'OK ... now you,' said the soldier, turning towards Tim. He cut away the fabric from Tim's shoulder and examined the wound. 'You're lucky ... the bullet passed right through without hitting the bone.'

Tim managed a small smile. 'Hurts like a bitch though.'

'I'll bet ... I'll give you a shot of morphine.'

Within seconds of the injection, Tim could feel the powerful drug coursing through his system, dulling the pain almost immediately.

'Better?' said the soldier as he bandaged the wound.

'Better,' confirmed Tim. 'So what's the score out there?'

'We got four of them – the rest have melted away into the desert.'

'What about our guys?'

'The other three from this car are all dead.'

Tim said nothing. He already knew that Jim was dead and he was expecting the worst for the other two but the news still hit him like a pile driver. He felt numb, stunned. This was the reality of war: one moment everything could seem calm, boring even, but then, in a heartbeat, tragedy could strike.

The third soldier from Tim's car appeared, carrying a field radio. 'OK – chopper's on its way ... should be here in about 5 minutes.'

The first man finished dressing Tim's wound. 'When the helicopter arrives we'll get you and Steve on board and to hospital ASAP. The rest of us will get the Coyote back to base.'

Tim heard a groan as Steve Salt regained consciousness. He placed a bloody hand on Tim's sleeve, clutching it and pulling Tim towards him.

He struggled for a moment to find his voice, but then croaked, weakly, 'Thanks, Tim ... I owe you.'

Tim was still trying to frame the words to reply to this simple, but heartfelt expression of gratitude when Steve's eyelids began to flicker and then closed completely.

'Get better, Steve,' he whispered. But Steve couldn't hear him.