

CONDITION BLACK

by Stu Jones & Gareth Worthington

EXCERPT

Through the lens of her SLR, Marie Wayland couldn't pry her gaze from the morbid scene as it unfolded some two hundred feet away. Another twist of the objective and the image in her ultralight mirrorless camera became crystal clear, even in the fading evening light of the Syrian sun: a man, his hands bound secure with coarse rope, sucking with erratic breaths at the cloth bag over his head. The fabric molded to the shape of his quivering lips and stuck there for an instant before being blown out again. He cried out as two masked assailants forced him to his knees. A whimper emerged from beneath his hood, followed by a muffled plea for mercy. Unwavering, the men stood in a line behind the captive, their AK-47 rifles pointed to the sky. Above them all, a black flag, inset with white Arabic script, fluttered like a pirate banner in the desert wind.

A young man carrying a beat-up camcorder scurried onto the scene and set up his tripod. He fiddled with his equipment, then gave a thumbs up. One of the soldiers stepped forward and pulled a curved blade from his belt. He called out and pointed to the camera, stabbing the air with the long knife. For a moment, he seemed to look right at Marie. Her heart faltered and the hot prickle of perspiration dampened her forehead.

Marie lowered her camera and eased further into a small depression in the side of the hill, perfect for both observation and concealment. "Don't be tree cancer," she whispered to herself. A strange phrase, but one that had proved invaluable during her long and storied career as a war correspondent. A Marine Corps scout sniper had offered her this golden nugget of advice during a stint in Afghanistan. Master of short-range reconnaissance, he'd spotted her crouched in a ball, peering out from behind a twisted stone pine tree. After approaching undetected, he'd whispered in her ear: Don't be tree cancer. Marie had nearly jumped out of her skin. She later discovered the phrase referred to an observer drawing attention to themselves by standing out from the world around them.

The voice of the knife-wielding man rose in pitch. Marie shuffled for a better view and raised her camera once again.

The knifeman jerked the hood from the captive's head.

A chill crawled down Marie's spine.

Glen Bertrum, the American relief worker kidnapped three months ago from the outskirts of Aleppo, shifted on his knees. With a brutal shove from his captors, the terrified relief worker flopped to his side, squirming. The knifeman descended on Glen, then sawed at his relief worker's neck with the blade. Blood sprayed against the sand. Glen screamed for what seemed an eternity, the sound morphing into a horrible sucking wheeze.

His gore-drenched knife dripping, the murderer yanked Glen's head free and held it aloft.

The men shouted in victory, thrusting their weapons into the air.

"Shit," Marie said, lowering the camera.

The cruelty and barbarism of humankind knew no end, and these zealots had a way of making it even uglier, spreading their jihad across the globe like a pestilence. Without raising the SLR again, she watched the terrorists conclude the recording and march away, leaving Glen's decapitated body to rot.

Marie's stomach knotted, and she tried to swallow away the tingle of nausea in her throat. This isn't why you're here, she thought. A beheaded aid worker wasn't news, even if she had met the man before. Such things hadn't been news for a long time. The war had escalated, far beyond Syria and the Middle East, beyond single hostages and beheadings. Terrorist cells were now a pandemic, spread across the globe, and embedded in every country. There was no central faction anymore. No IS or al-Qaeda, or Allah's Blade. The war against the west was now an idea, a disease infesting the world. Anyone, anywhere could be an enemy—the core vision metastasizing, traveling to every corner of the Earth and there propagating.

Major cities now operated under war-time policy; curfews and rationing to prevent too many people congregating in any one place, such as a supermarket or a major sporting event. Aerial surveillance and street-level military patrols did their best to keep people safe, but a cage was a cage. In some ways, Marie felt free out in the world, even if it was in the enemy's backyard. Yet while hate for terrorists was justified, as in all wars the enemy wasn't the only one capable of terrible things. So too were the allied forces—the people who stood against terror and extremism—and that was why she was in Syria.

The little jaunt Marie had undertaken was unofficial. Her boss would kill her if he knew she'd conducted this op. After flying into Istanbul and crossing the border south of Daruca, she'd spent the better part of the past three days moving from checkpoint to checkpoint, working her way along

Highway 7 through northeastern Syria. With dark features and perfect Arabic, Marie hid with ease among the local population.

Marie pulled a tablet from her backpack and keyed up the map she'd gotten from her contact. The coordinates were correct. A tiny civilian village in Northeastern Syria. This ramshackle settlement was little more than a speck on the map, and from what she was told by her contact, this place was of zero military significance. No base, no known weapons caches, no landing strips. The small cell of terrorists she'd just found was likely that: a small cell. Little more than a coincidence, and by no means justification for this village to be firebombed back to the stone age.

Unless they'd found something of significance.