

# **THE UNSANCTIONED PATRIOT**

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AARON HARDY PATRIOTIC ACTION

Alex Ander

## CHAPTER 1

### NIGERIA

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30 JUNE—9:55 P.M. (LOCAL TIME)  
SOMEWHERE IN THE FOOTHILLS  
OF THE MOUNTAINS IN NIGERIA

“**A**lpha’s in position—over.”

“Copy that, Alpha. Bravo, report.”

“Bravo’s in position—over.”

“Copy that, Bravo. Charlie, what’s your status?”

“Charlie is thirty seconds to ready—over.”

Hidden high above the compound, Sergeant Aaron Hardy moved his legs and body as much as he could. He had been in the prone position for the last seventeen hours, and his muscles were cramping. In two days, he would celebrate his thirtieth birthday; however, at this moment, he felt twice that age.

Hardy had enlisted in the United States Marine Corps upon graduating from high school. He had spent the first four years of his career serving overseas, primarily in Iraq, before becoming a member of the Second Marine Special Operations Battalion, headquartered at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. For the next five years, he had been involved in numerous direct-action, special reconnaissance, and counter-terrorism missions until he had been asked to command a team of his own and conduct top-secret missions all over the world.

Lately, Hardy had been considering a new line of work. During the last five years, his body had been under an extreme amount of stress, and he did not recover as quickly as he once did. He was still in great physical shape, but he knew if he maintained this breakneck speed, his body would fail much quicker. He still wanted to be part of Special Operations, just in a little less intense setting that did not require so much scouting. The countless hours spent waiting for the action were making him grow restless. And, in many ways, they took a greater toll on his body than did the gunfights. He wanted to see

more action, and he wanted more control over the action. He wanted to take the fight to the enemy, not wait for the enemy to dictate the terms of engagement.

Hardy peered through his binoculars and scanned the area.

Milling around, two sentries guarded the main gate. Located in the center of the compound, the main building was dark and quiet. Fifty meters to the rear, two buildings—ten meters apart from each other—served as living quarters for the soldiers. Both structures were alive with activity. The men inside were raucous. Music blasted from one of the buildings.

*80s punk rock*, thought Hardy, lowering the binoculars to glimpse his watch. He raised the eyeglasses again, as his earpiece crackled.

“Overwatch, this is Charlie. We’re in position awaiting your orders—over.”

“Copy that.” Hardy slowly swung the binoculars to the right. “All teams, standby.”

Hardy checked his watch numerous times in the next few minutes. This was exactly what was making him grow restless—the waiting. His teams were in place, ready to carry out their tasks, but everything hinged on the target.

The voice of another team leader filled the airwaves. “Inbound vehicles eight hundred meters out and closing fast.”

*Finally*. Through the field glasses, Hardy caught sight of the approaching headlights to his left. He watched two SUVs speed toward the compound and come to a stop outside the main gate. The guards opened the gate and waved them through.

Once the vehicles were at the main building, the second SUV’s occupants jumped out and took defensive positions around the first SUV. Armed with AK-47 rifles, four men dressed in black suits, white shirts, and black ties stood guard. Their heads rotating left and right, they searched for security threats.

The driver and the front passenger of the first SUV, both similarly dressed and armed, hurried inside the main building. A few moments later, they emerged, stood on either side of the front door, and surveyed the landscape. The one to the left put his wrist to his mouth.

AK-47 in hand, a man got out of the left-rear door of the first SUV, hurried around the back bumper, and opened the right-rear passenger door.

Two feet swung around and landed on the ground. A second later, their owner—a Nigerian warlord—threw his upper body forward and rose to his feet. Nigerian oversaw

the most powerful drug cartel in the country. He stood six-two and tipped the scales at more than three hundred pounds.

Hardy spun the wheel on the binoculars, zooming in on the man's face. He needed visual confirmation to proceed with the mission.

His back to Hardy, the man examined his surroundings. He buttoned his suit coat and took a few steps toward the main building before stopping.

"Come on," Hardy said under his breath. "Show me your face."

Continuing his journey, Nigerian turned his head.

Hardy's middle finger rotated the focus dial a hair, and his eyes narrowed. *Gotcha.* "All teams, this is Overwatch. We are a go. I repeat. All teams, we are a go on my command—over."

"Copy that," replied all three team leaders.

Hardy dropped his binoculars, wrapped his right hand around the stock of the M40A5 sniper rifle in front of him, and shouldered the weapon. He closed his left eye and acquired the two guards at the main gate through the rifle's scope. Swinging the rifle to the right, he placed Nigerian in his crosshairs. When the man was two steps away from the front door of the building, Hardy had the two guards in the scope again. "Go, go, go!"

While the men from the SUVs fell to the ground, shot by his teammates, Hardy eased back his weapon's trigger. Two muffled 'pops' from his rifle later, the 7.62x51mm NATO bullets found their targets, and the sentries dropped.

"This is Alpha. All tangos are down. I repeat. All tangos are down—over."

Two massive explosions lit up the night sky, as the two structures to the rear of the main building blew apart. One huge fireball rose from the remains.

Hardy heard small arms fire before his earpiece came alive.

"This is Bravo. All tangos have been neutralized—over."

Hardy held his breath waiting for the next situation report.

Charlie Team had the most delicate part of the operation. Their orders were to secure Nigerian. They were to engage him only if he returned fire, and they were to shoot to incapacitate, not kill.

Balling his hand, Hardy called for a situation report. “Charlie, I need a sitrep—over.” In his ear, he heard sporadic weapons’ fire, team members shouting, scuffling. Moments later, the commotion stopped, and silence ensued.

“What’s your sitrep, Charlie?” No response. “Bravo, advance on the main building. I repeat. Bravo—”

“Overwatch, this is Charlie.”

Hardy squinted through the binoculars. “Bravo, stand down and await further orders. Go ahead, Charlie.”

“Overwatch, we have your birthday present...all wrapped up and ready for delivery—over.”

Hardy sighed. “Copy that. All teams rendezvous for evac.” Hardy paused before letting a grin form on his face. “Good work, gentlemen. Let’s go home.”

Thirty minutes later, with his teams safely aboard two Bell UH-1Y Venom (Super Huey) helicopters, Hardy was the last man to board an aircraft and take his place among his men.

The choppers lifted off and banked left.

Feeling the tension drain from his shoulders, he hung his head and let out a slow, long breath. He had brought his people to the completion of another mission without any casualties. In twelve hours, everyone would be stateside enjoying some much needed rest and relaxation. He shut his eyes. *A good day.*

## CHAPTER 2

### JACK

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30 JUNE—8:11 P.M.  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

**J**ack Darling took another long drag on his cigarette before tapping it on an ashtray in front of him. As his fingers spun the glass of straight Scotch whisky on the counter, he adjusted his weight on the barstool. He checked his watch again. He did not like waiting. He saw himself as a busy man, and every minute he waited on someone else was a minute lost in his constant pursuit of the next big news story.

An investigative reporter for The Washington Post, Jack Darling had spent the past twenty years building his reputation on integrity, making sure his sources were legit before any story went to publication. His attention to detail was next to paramount. He worked long hours to track down leads and verify his information sources.

Jack loved journalism, but he had been thinking about a career change for some time. He was almost fifty years old; however, the eighteen-hour days made it seem as if he was approaching, if not beyond, retirement age. He wanted one last big story before he put away his pen and paper. He wanted to go out on top, remembered as the reporter who broke that big story wide open. Maybe he was dreaming. Maybe he was already over the hill. He glanced at his watch. The man he was supposed to meet was late.

*A waste of time...probably won't even show*, Jack thought, downing the rest of his Scotch before getting the bartender's attention and motioning toward his empty glass. Jack loved to drink and smoke. With the hours he put in at his job, these two guilty pleasures helped him relax. But he always knew his limit, and he never crossed the line, especially when working a lead. After mashing his cigarette butt in the ashtray, he reached for his pack of cancer sticks, popped one out, and stuck it between his lips. He thumbed his cigarette lighter twice, but before he could get a flame, his antiquated flip

phone rang. He eyed the tiny, narrow screen. The number was blocked. He opened the device, “Jack Darling,” the unlit cigarette flopping up and down when he spoke.

“Are you alone?”

“What? Who’s this?”

The voice repeated the question, louder the second time. “Are you alone?”

Jack recognized the speech pattern. “Adam?” The man Jack was meeting at the bar only identified himself as Adam. “Where the hell are you? You’re late. I’ve been waiting here for fifteen minutes.”

“I know. I’ve been here for forty-five minutes. Now, are...you...alone?”

Jack sat straight and whipped his head back and forth, eyeballing the patrons. “Of course, I’m alone. Where are you?”

“Have the bartender send your second drink to the table in the back corner.”

Jack started to speak, but stopped when the line went dead. He poked his chin at the bartender, “I’ll be,” and jerked his head over his shoulder, “in the back corner,” before sliding off the barstool as the man behind the counter acknowledged him.

Jack did not like games. Games fell under the umbrella of wasting time. The frown on Jack’s face transitioned into a scowl. Adam had been in the bar for forty minutes and had never made contact. *This guy has some serious trust issues.* Jack had had two conversations with the man. And both times the man was cocky and rude. There was also an underlying nervousness in his voice.

As Jack approached the corner booth, Adam’s features became visible: short, dark hair, parted on the side. Dark-colored eyes darted back and forth as if he were searching for someone. He wore a blue sport coat over a white shirt. His tie was loosened a bit, and the first button of his shirt was undone.

Jack looked closer.

Adam seemed to be in his mid-twenties, and even though he appeared to be physically fit and attractive, the first word that came to Jack’s mind was ‘nerd.’ Jack stopped at the booth.

The man rose to his slim, six-foot-plus height and extended his hand.

Jack shook the hand and sat.

Adam followed suit.

“So,” Jack was the first to break the initial silence, “why all the cloak and dagger stuff? And what do I call you?”

“Adam is just fine. I don’t want my real name associated with any of this, not—”

The server appeared. Not acknowledging Jack, she placed his drink on the table while staring at Adam. Her eyes never left his. “Can I get you another?”

“Thanks, but I’m fine for now.”

After she left, Jack put a small tape recorder on the table. “Okay. Let’s not waste more time.” He pressed ‘play.’ “So why am I here, Adam? What do you have for me?”

Adam shook his head. “No tape recorders. In fact, I want your word I will be left out of your story.”

Jack pushed the ‘stop’ button and retrieved a note pad and pen from his pocket. He motioned toward the items and looked at Adam. “Is it all right if I take a few notes?”

Nodding, Adam spied the people in the bar while wringing his hands.

Jack opened the note pad to a blank page. “You look scared.”

“You would be, too, if you had seen what I’ve seen. So where do you want me to begin?”

“Let’s start at the top.” Jack leaned forward, clicked the pen, and scribbled on the paper to verify the instrument worked.

Adam squirmed in his seat and took a last glance around the bar before telling his story.

Adam had been a low-level information analyst at The Tucker Group, a company providing security for high-ranking officials of large multi-national corporations and Chief Executive Officers who traveled outside of the United States.

A week ago, Adam had discovered that he had computer access to information way above his security clearance. He did not know why, but as a curious techie, he snooped around some of the files. He found the information so vast that he grabbed a flash drive and began downloading the data. Halfway through the process, the data transfer stopped, and his security clearance had returned to level one. After tossing the drive into his bag, he turned his attention to his workload.

When he had arrived at work the next day, two men in suits met him at the front door and escorted him to a top floor conference room. Fifteen minutes later, a man came into the room and asked Adam questions regarding the information he had viewed



the previous day. Knowing they had caught him, he admitted to skimming through the information, but told them he did not know what it was. The man questioned Adam for two hours before dismissing him.

At noon, Adam's boss—accompanied by the same two men who had met him at the front door that morning—showed up at his cubicle. The man handed Adam an envelope and told him his services were no longer needed.

Adam shrugged. "So I gathered up my personal belongings, and the two men in suits escorted me out of the building."

Jack flipped a page in his notebook. "What was in the envelope?"

The younger man took a long drink of his beer, bobbed his eyebrows, and swallowed. "There was termination paperwork, a paycheck for the remainder of the week, and another check...for *ten...thousand...dollars*."

Jack stopped writing. "They gave you ten thousand dollars *after* firing you?"

Adam nodded before bringing the beer bottle to his lips.

"For what?"

Adam tipped back the bottle.

"Is it standard policy for the company to give such large checks to employees that have been terminated?"

Adam shook his head. "Not to my knowledge."

Jack licked his finger and flipped back several pages. "Did you tell the man in the conference room you had downloaded information to the flash drive?"

"Are you nuts? I was already in a deep hole. I wasn't about to give him a shovel too." He checked his watch and peeked at their waitress. He had noticed her stealing glimpses of him.

"So what was on the flash drive?"

Adam reached into his pocket and produced a small USB flash drive. Making a show, he placed it on the table and pushed it toward Jack. "I started going through it when I got home that afternoon. There's some serious messed up—" he stopped and waved his hands in front of his face. "I don't want anything to do with this."

Jack picked up the data carrier and examined it.

Adam slid to the end of the seat and stood. He gestured toward the three empty beer bottles on the table. "This is on you."

Jack nodded, but said nothing. He studied the flash drive. *What is on this that's worth ten G's?*

“Now, if you'll excuse me,” Adam pointed at the flirtatious server, “either I'm going home with her, or she's coming home with me.”

“I've got one last question.” Jack squinted at the man towering above him. “Why me? Why give this to me? Why not take it to the police?”

Adam laughed. “You should know the answer to that better than *me*. If you want something done in D.C., you don't go to the police. You go to the press.”

## CHAPTER 3

### FLASH DRIVE

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9:21 P.M.

**S**itting on the edge of the black faux leather couch in his living room, Jack Darling moved the mouse attached to his laptop computer. His eyes glued to the screen, he could not believe what he was reading. After his meeting with Adam, Jack had gone straight home, plugged the flash drive into his computer, and pored over the information the device contained. Halfway through, he had realized his hopes and dreams of having one last story that would forever immortalize him as one of the best investigative reporters Washington, D.C., maybe even the nation, has ever seen, was about to come true. *You're getting ahead of yourself, Jack. Need to verify this first.*

Without looking away from the screen, he brought the glass of whisky to his mouth and tipped it back. When none of the liquid touched his lips, his concentration shifted to the empty glass. He reached for the bottle of Jack Daniels and started to pour himself another glass, but stopped. *Need to stay sharp, focused.*

Discarding the liquor bottle, Jack stood, rolled up his sleeves, and walked across the room to a small table cluttered with paper, a phone book, and several pens. He shuffled through the papers before opening the wide drawer beneath the tabletop. Pushing items out of the way, he found a business card and ogled two lines in the center: SPECIAL AGENT RAYCHEL E. DELACRUZ...FEDERAL BUREAU of INVESTIGATION.

A year ago, Jack had spoken with the agent while investigating Congresswoman Hayes, a woman who had been caught in a sex scandal involving one of her male staffers. The staffer had been providing her with top-secret information in exchange for a future position in her cabinet if she won her race for United States Senator. DelaCruz had been the lead agent on the case and had been credited for bringing down Congresswoman Hayes. She had only been with the FBI for a couple of years, but she had impressed Jack. She was extremely professional, and he had a sense she was an

honest, no-nonsense kind of person. Jack valued integrity, and he had a knack for seeing that quality in others.

Flicking the business card between his fingers, he stared at the pile of papers on the table in front of him, not looking at anything in particular. *This might be too big to take to the police.* After nearly a minute, he reached into his pocket, took out his cell phone, tapped numbers, and put the mobile to his ear.

Several rings later, he waited for a pre-recorded voicemail message to finish. “Special Agent Delacruz, this is Jack Darling. I’m a reporter for the Washington Post. We met a year ago when you were leading the investigation into the case against Congresswoman Hayes. Anyway, I have recently come into the possession of some information I think you’ll find interesting. I’d like us to meet...”

## CHAPTER 4

### PEANUTS

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1 JULY—11:57 A.M.

**J**ack Darling tossed a handful of peanuts into his mouth while he waited for Special Agent DelaCruz to arrive. They had arranged to meet at noon at a restaurant on ‘H’ Street NW. He loved the establishment’s hot dogs with bacon and cheese. Plus, the restaurant provided free peanuts. Jack checked his watch—11:58.

Bells chimed.

Reaching for more peanuts, he looked up and saw a woman enter the restaurant.

She scanned the patrons, stopping when her eyes settled on him.

Spotting the gun and badge on her hip, he raised his brows. *If that’s her, then she’s even more attractive than I remember.*

The woman wore a typical outfit for someone in her position, black slacks and a blazer with a white blouse. She removed her sunglasses and put them in a blazer pocket.

Jack’s speculation was confirmed.

“Mister Darling, I presume.”

The reporter stood and proffered a hand. “Special Agent DelaCruz, I’m glad you were able to meet with me on such short notice. Please,” Jack gestured toward the chair on the other side of the table, “have a seat.”

“Thank you.” She shook Jack’s hand and sat. “Please call me Cruz.”

DelaCruz was her full name, but when she joined the Army, her fellow soldiers eventually dropped the ‘Dela’ and called her Cruz. They had joked with her, saying it was too long and too difficult to pronounce. To this day, her shortened name had stuck with her.

Jack got the attention of the server and eyed Cruz, “I know you’re busy, so I took the liberty of ordering you a burger and fries. It should be out soon.”

“Thank you.” She took a couple of deep breaths and settled into her chair.

“If you don’t mind me asking, you seem a little winded. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. The office is not far from here, so I decided to power walk it and get some exercise.”

The server placed two plates of food on the table. “Can I get you something to drink?”

Cruz smiled. “I’ll just have water.” She ate a couple fries as the woman left. Fast food was not her favorite; however, not wanting to be rude, she felt obligated to eat some of the meal. “I don’t mean to rush you, but I have a long day ahead of me. So, if we could get down to business, I’d really appreciate it.”

“I understand.” Firmly holding the hot dog he had ordered in one hand, Jack pulled a manila folder from a leather bag with the other and handed the tan jacket to the federal agent.

Cruz opened the folder and perused the contents. Taking small bites of her burger, she digested the information.

Jack waited.

Minutes later, she put down her burger. “Have you verified any of this?”

“I’m,” he wiped his mouth with a napkin and swallowed his last bite of food, “in the process of doing that now, but I wanted to bring you in on it as soon as possible. I was hoping you could use the resources at your disposal to check those elements that I don’t have access to.”

Cruz nodded her head. “I can do that.” She closed the folder. “Is this all of it?”

“That’s only about half of what was given to me.” Jack motioned toward the folder. “You can keep that. I made copies.”

“What about your source?” Cruz grabbed a few more fries.

“He wants nothing to do with it. He worked for a private security company called,” Jack retrieved his notepad and flipped through a few pages, “The Tucker Group...before they fired him.” Jack leaned closer to her. “Get this. The day they fired him, they gave him his regular paycheck along with a ten thousand dollar bonus.”

Cruz raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve never heard of a bonus for getting canned either.”

She checked her cell phone—12:30. “Do you have anything else I should see, Mr. Darling?”

“I have plenty more for you, but I need to check into it first. So what do you say? Are you in?”

Cruz stood and held up the folder. “If this checks out...yes, I’m in.”

“Great.” Jack rose to shake the agent’s hand. “You have my number.”

Cruz pulled a ten-dollar bill from her pocket.

“It’s already been paid.” He smiled. “You can get the next one.”

She returned the gesture. “Thank you. I’m sorry to have to eat and run, but, now that you’ve given me more work to do, I really must be going.”

Jack laughed. “I understand.”

She hesitated while staring at the folder. “If you don’t mind me asking, why did you contact *me* about this?”

“I like your looks.”

Her body stiffened and her eyes became thin slits.

Jack heard his words in his mind and quickly raised a hand. “Let me clarify. You *looked* like a person I could trust. I was impressed with how you handled the case against Congresswoman Hayes.”

Cruz relaxed her posture.

“And something told me I should contact you.”

She nodded. “Thank you. I’ll be in touch, Mr. Darling. Have a good day.”

## CHAPTER 5

### OLE TOWN TAVERN

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8:46 P.M.

**A**dmirating the Federal Reserve Building on his left, Aaron Hardy walked down Forty-First Street. It was good to be back on American soil, taking in the sights of Washington D.C. He was on his way to the restaurant to meet his entire team for drinks. In a few hours, Hardy would turn thirty, and his team was determined to celebrate this birthday milestone.

After the mission in Nigeria, everyone was excited to get out and blow off a little steam. The restaurant of choice was The Ole Town Tavern, a small and well-known establishment in the Downtown District of D.C. Its roots date back to the turn of the twentieth century. Arguably, the restaurant had the best shrimp on the East Coast.

Hardy tugged on the handle of a heavy glass door and stepped inside the eatery. The noise of a raucous crowd greeted him. He was immediately immersed in the atmosphere of patrons mixing food, alcohol, and sports. The place was packed with people cheering for their favorite team and downing a few too many beers. Hardy sidestepped servers and squeezed between tables, as he headed to the back of the building to a small room his team had reserved.

Hardy entered the room to an ovation of applause from his men. He saw several empty beer bottles on the table and snickered to himself. *I guess I'm late.*

He took off his jacket and draped the garment over an open chair. After listening to several good-natured comments about his age, and being told the next round of drinks was on him, he left to find the men's room.

Halfway down a narrow and dimly lit hallway, he stepped aside and nodded at two young women as they passed.

They gave him a flirtatious smile.

His cell phone rang, and he connected the call while watching the women.



They cranked their heads his way for another glance.

“Hello. This is Hardy. Hello?” The voice on the line was barely audible. “What? I can hardly—”

Something happened with the game on the television, and the people clapped and screamed.

After a quick look toward the noise, “Hold on a second,” he found a nearby door at the back of the restaurant and slipped outside. As the door slowly shut behind him, he focused his attention on the call. “Okay, who’s—”

The restaurant exploded, sending fragments of glass and brick flying through the air. The closing door slammed into his back. His head rocked backwards and bounced off the door before his body was thrown more than ten feet.

Landing near a metal dumpster, he rolled onto his side and saw flames shooting out of the tavern’s upper windows. Heat from the fire singed the hairs on his arms while he crawled behind the dumpster. Lying on his back, the last thing he saw was the night sky and a full moon before a secondary explosion pushed the dumpster—and Hardy—further away from the building.