

The Squad : Black Op by Tom Palmer

**Wherever trouble is kicking off,
The Squad are sent in. They're more
than a match for any kind of enemy.**

**In the first book in this exciting new series
from *Foul Play* author Tom Palmer,
the Squad are sent to Krakow, Poland
just before Euro 2012.**



Chapter 1 DEATH IN THE DESERT

Three small figures moved rapidly across the night-time desert floor, sliding over shifting sands, keeping low.

Low because if they were visible they could be shot within seconds.

They stopped when they located a flickering light coming from an isolated camp. Their target. They knew from satellite images taken earlier in the day that the camp consisted of a large tent, a fire, a dozen camels, a Land Rover and a small army of men. They also knew that the target was heavily armed and, no doubt, under strict orders to fire at anything that moved. It was the base of one of the most dangerous terrorist cells in the world and it would be well defended.

The three figures had to get close to the tent without being spotted and listen to what was being planned.

It was a tough mission, but the trio was up to the job.

Rob, Lesh and Lily worked for the British government, half of a team of six who were deployed around the world and were known as the Squad. They were extremely clever, highly trained and had already been involved in a number of successful missions. The only difference between them and the other spies working for the British government was that they were all just thirteen years old.

Each of them had a role or a speciality that made them perfect for this mission.

Rob – tall, with short black hair – was the leader. His job: to make decisions and give orders.

Lezsek – or Lesh as he liked to be known – was in charge of getting the three of them in and out of the camp without being seen or heard. He was an expert in using navigational equipment.

Lily had to listen to what the terrorist leaders were saying, memorize it and translate it when they got back to base.

If they got back.

Rob held the Squad in position, giving himself time to focus a pair of night-vision goggles. Now he could see the camp in perfect detail, everything green and clear, including three shapes lying motionless on the desert floor.

'Dogs,' he whispered to Lesh.

Lesh – shorter and stockier than Rob – nodded and directed his two friends to the north of the camp, changing direction because the wind was coming from the south and the dogs would be less likely to smell them if they came in from the north.

Ten minutes later, the three children were next to the tent, as planned, having crawled an exhausting last fifty metres on their stomachs, a manoeuvre known as the leopard crawl.

They had rehearsed this operation five times before, less than a hundred kilometres away at a replica camp. But that had been practice and this was for real.

You could never predict the kinds of things that might go wrong, however many times you practised. But, so far, nothing had gone wrong: no camel had groaned, no dog had barked, no guard had taken the safety catch off his gun. The desert was so quiet, in fact, that the noise of a plane flying overhead had distracted the guards, causing them to gaze up at its blinking lights. One guard pointed his gun at it, baring his teeth in a wide grin.

Rob smiled and put his thumb up to Lesh. He'd done his job. They were inside the camp and none of the guards had any idea they were there. Now Rob looked at Lily because the next bit was down to her.

Lily nodded – knowing what was required – and put her left ear against the fabric of the large tent, focusing quickly on the voices inside. She stuffed her blonde curls under a black hat, so that they didn't get in her way.

There were three men speaking Arabic in fast, low voices, but Lily could still understand every word. She had an amazing skill: she could speak dozens of languages. It was her life's ambition to learn every language in the world.

As she listened, Rob looked one way and Lesh the other. Both were squatting, covering every angle, alert to the high possibility of being discovered.

Lily knew she had to focus all her attention on the words coming from inside the tent, leaving everything else to Rob and Lesh.

‘The hour is nearly upon us,’ she heard one voice saying. Not a Saharan voice. Lily knew most Arab dialects and what she was hearing was not local to this part of North Africa. ‘Soon,’ the voice went on, ‘we will have all of our people in position. Our attack will be irresistible. But first we must ...’

At that moment the canvas of the tent caved in and snapped back painfully against Lily’s ear. Something had gone wrong. Terribly wrong.

Lily looked to her left to see Lesh, illuminated by the soft light coming from the tent, staring past her, his face tight with shock. So she turned to her right to see that Rob had fallen against the canvas and was now sprawled on the ground.

Rob had heard what he thought was a shrill alarm going off right next to him and had stumbled in shock against the tent. But it had been no alarm, just a tiny fly fizzing about inside his ear.

Loud voices broke the sudden silence.

Questions. Orders. Shouts from inside and outside the tent.

Without a word, the three children stood and ran at top speed, just as they had practised, making use of their special studded shoes to get a better grip on the loose sand. They knew exactly where they had to run: a fixed point one kilometre to the east. Their only chance of surviving.

Rob then shouted into a mic in his watch as he ran. ‘Abort mission. Abort!’

Cracks of gunfire filled the air as rounds of ammunition came over their heads, accompanied by the thump of the guns. The glow of tracer rounds fizzed about them.

Lily was ahead of the others to start off with. She was a good runner, as well as being a gifted linguist. Her dad had taken her running on the hills where they used to live when she was very young.

They ran as fast as they could for one minute, then at half speed to conserve energy. Lily had played her part well. But had they got away? Should they go to ground? It was for Rob to decide. He had to keep his cool, even though he was painfully aware that it was his fault that everything had gone wrong.

Before Rob had a chance to make his mind up about what to do next, the trio was lit up from behind at the same time as they heard the scream of an engine.

‘The Land Rover!’ Lesh shouted.

Rob knew Lesh was right. It was the vehicle they had seen back at the camp. He remembered that it had been fitted with four headlamps above the windscreen. He had seen it through the night-vision goggles and grimaced at the irony that they were being hunted down by a vehicle that was made in the UK, the very country they were there to protect. He had no doubt that there would be a machine-gunner leaning out of its passenger window.

Now they were running at full speed again. It was exhausting and painful, but they had no choice.

Rob saw more red-hot tracer rounds skimming the sand dunes ahead of them. There were a dozen sounds to identify at once: guns, dogs, shouts, engines. It was impossible for his head to take it all in.

But then there was something else. A louder noise drowning out everything. Rob looked up instinctively, still running, to see something looming over them, something huge and black, so black it was darker than the sky. A double set of rotors were moving the air, the sand and everything in between.

Rescue in the form of a massive night-operational Chinook helicopter.

‘Down!’ Rob shouted. ‘Down. Down. Daaaa . . .’

Lesh hit the ground, arms over his head, to avoid both the incoming fire and the sand the helicopter was whipping up. He knew exactly what the Chinook would do and that an Apache attack helicopter, armed with four Hellfire missiles, would be coming in as an escort. This was how the British army responded when a mission went wrong.

Although they were in an extremely dangerous situation, Lesh was thrilled by the military hardware that was hanging over them and by what it was about to do, and he felt a new explosion of adrenalin rushing through him as he grinned and cowered at the same time.

Lily squatted on the ground and put her hands over her ears, protecting herself, waiting to feel Rob crouch down next to her.

But Rob was not next to Lily.

She closed her eyes now because she knew what was coming. Two missiles from the Apache to stop the camp guards in their tracks, to buy the three of them time to get on to the Chinook, which was now touching down.

The missiles came a second later. *Whoosh. Thump. Whoosh. Thump.* Sand and shrapnel and pieces of Land Rover tossed across the desert floor, everything lit up by all the colours of the rainbow in a series of blinding flashes and pulses.

As the lights faded, the only sound Lily could hear was coming from the Chinook’s rotor blades. A violent whirring.

Lesh lifted his head off the sand and looked back, waiting for Rob’s order to board the Chinook. His mouth was full of sand and he could feel grains in his eyes and inside his clothes. But there was no word from Rob. All Lesh could hear was a muffled cry coming from near to where he knew their leader had last been.

Lily sat up. She had known instinctively what was wrong from the moment Rob had not crouched next to her. ‘He’s hit!’ she yelled above the sound of the helicopter.

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