

SHADOW TIER - A LANCE BEAR WOLF NOVEL

Chapter 1

April 4th, 2000, Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco, Mexico

Wolf sipped his tequila, watching the sunset over the Pacific from his beach side chair. He could sense people walking off the beach as the sun disappeared, but now was his favorite time. The steep angle of the sunset providing deep reds and oranges. The sky in purple, blue and occasionally gold. Wolf relaxed his eyes to widen his gaze.

Wait—wait, yes, Wolf smiled. His reward a flash of green.

The hand squeezing his arm told him she had seen it, too. Wolf turned and clinked glasses with his mother. Enjoying a drink with his mother had always felt odd, but now just another part of a relaxing vacation. It had been twelve years since he had an opportunity to join his parents for anything more than a passing through dinner. And he wished his brother and sister were with them, it had been so long. All three of Alma and Andrew Anderson's children had joined the Army. He had cross paths with them during their time on active duty, but as with his parents, it was fleeting moments.

Alma Bear Wolf-Anderson was the most intuitive, insightful, and sensing person he knew. Her questions had always gone directly to the heart of the matter, connecting the unconnected, but allowing him to see his path and make his own choices.

Alma said, "It's been a year of big changes for Lance Bear Wolf. I sense you are missing your old life."

Wolf inhaled deeply, his exhale a simple, “Yeah.”

“At least you’re still serving our country,” Wolf’s step-father Andy said, “When I left Vietnam, I felt like I was cheating my teammates.”

Alma said, “Leaving active duty is jarring for most when they attempt to re-assimilate back into civilian life. You have your national guard team and your job. How do you guys say it? ‘Still in the fight.’”

They laughed and clinked glasses.

This is what makes all the sacrifice worthwhile.

The next morning, Wolf took the bandage off his thigh and cleaned the wound before applying a new one. Hughes, his team medic had said there was no need to sew it closed as his body would take care of the wound just fine by itself. The quarter inch groove a reminder, AK-47 rounds do not care if you are active duty or national guard, no punches pulled. As Wolf ran down the beach, slowly working the kinks out and picking up speed, he thanked his spirit guide for putting him in this place. Except for an occasional three day weekend, he had been denied a break by alert status and mission after mission for the last dozen years.

The image of an eagle building a nest floated through his mind’s eye. Stick by stick the nest would take form over time. And, like the nest, the reason for this place and time was unfinished business churning in his brain. The once in never combination of his Florida National Guard 20th Special Forces team training with Mexico’s newly forming Tier 1 unit. The two

somehow combined with his parent's annual vacation in Puerto Vallarta. Wolf did not believe in coincidence or providence.

Why here. Why now?

February 2000

Someone at Ft. Bragg had come up with the idea to export training normally held at the sprawling base in North Carolina. A side benefit, getting Special Forces teams more time down range. Joint Special Operations Command could not support the training request. So, Wolf's long time friend Captain Williamson made a by name request to the Florida National Guard to green light his team. What was planned as a thirty day training mission to teach advanced Special Forces skills to the still forming Fuerza Especial de Reaccion turned operational. By the middle of the second week, the Mexican secretary of defense (SEDENA) tasked Captain Carlo Gonzalez and his Reaccion troop to join a counter-drug task force working to disrupt the Sinaloa Cartel. The past twelve months had taken a toll. The Army had lost eighteen soldiers and two helicopters to the cartel. The SEDENA needed the best of the best.

Captain Gonzalez's back channel call through the Fuerza Especial de Reaccion Commander to the Commanding General US Special Operations Command secured Wolf's team in a support and intelligence collection only role. It suited Wolf just fine. His early years on active duty had been as a Ranger focused on pre-mission insertion and intelligence collection. Three years after a switch to Special Forces he was recruited into the new Field Operations Group. Their missions supported intelligence collection alongside of Joint Special Operations

Command, JSOC. Wolf was in his element. He had stayed on active duty until the lure of big money, and an easier schedule drew him to contracting. Now, as a Weekend Warrior, he was back at it.

Using a combination of signals intelligence, satellite imagery, and close in reconnaissance, Wolf and his team identified a large grow area and processing facility in the state of Sinaloa. A short walk from a clandestine runway, the level of activity at the lab was as hectic. Security at the site was a multi-layered combination of technical devices and patrols. Wolf mused he had seen nuclear weapons storage facilities with less security. Captain Gonzalez and Wolf's team leader Captain Franks requested an up close look. As the team's senior NCO, Master Sergeant Wolf understood the need for a leader's recon before reporting back to headquarters. So, he would take them in. Wolf and Leblanc, his senior weapons sergeant, had built a hide.

Before they left, Wolf sang his death song. As a Crow Indian warrior, it was a traditional way to prepare of battle, ask for the spirits help to be brave and die with honor if it was his time. Captain Gonzalez questioned him about the practice and his growing up on the Crow Reservation. The Captain was genuinely interested having read and admired many warrior cultures taught during his officer training.

The two hour and twenty minute patrol to the hide site was designed to off set their infiltration into the target area. As he belly crawled into the hide site, Franks coughed at the odor left by the guys. It permeated the dirt walls and was accentuated by the rotting foliage over their heads. The sweat, heat, and humidity worked to tear it down. In contrast to the decay on the inside, the outside had been maintained to look natural with fresh leaves, branches, and debris.

Franks gave Wolf a sorry dude look. Wolf shook his head and smiled. He moved out of the way and let Gonzalez and Franks take in the view. Hidden in a twenty-five hundred meter long valley, the opium poppies, and lab operations acted independently within the single security cordon. From Wolf's perspective, there were two options for prosecuting the site. Forced insertion by paratroopers or helicopter assault. The primary question was how fast you could get an appropriately size force on the ground and into the attack. A perfect mission for his old teammates in the 2nd Ranger Battalion at Ft. Lewis Washington.

Barking dogs broke Wolf from his thoughts. Gonzalez and Franks turned to go, but Wolf held them back.

"Let me figure out where they are," He whispered before crawling out of the hide. A beat later, he radioed. "Come out, we have go now."

Wolf headed north taking a route across the face of the mountain towards a waterfall he memorized from satellite photos. The barking and voices urging the dogs were getting louder. Wolf went as fast as he could while scanning ahead for booby-traps. The sounds of the dogs lessening as the roar of the waterfall consumed his hearing. He worked his way along the edge, looking for a place to cross. Under a ledge, he found a cavern, damp and passible. Wolf took off his boots and crept into the void. Gonzalez and Franks joined him and began searching for a way out.

Wolf said, "You guys go. I'll hold them off and catch up with you later."

"No, we stay and fight as a team," Franks said.

Gonzalez said, "The space is too small, one burst and we are all dead."

Franks and Gonzalez inched their way out of the void. Wolf took off his patrol pack and laid his rifle on top. Drawing his Randall Model 18 knife, he waited for the dogs. The first dog ran through the gap behind the waterfall and lunged at Wolf. He grabbed its throat in mid-air and slammed his eight inch blade into its chest. The dog yelped, struggled, and fell dead. Wolf kicked it into the waterfall, and it disappeared. The second dog was slower and smarter. It kept all four paws on the ground while growling and snipping at Wolf. It tried to circle Wolf, but he cut it off with a slash on its left shoulder before it danced away. Wolf needed the dog gone before its handler showed up, so he moved forward pressing the dog into a corner. With limited options, it was attack him or get swept away in the waterfall. Time slowed down and Wolf watched as the dog settled ever so slightly back, readying itself to lunge. As the dog jumped for Wolf's throat, he collapsed to his knees and thrust his knife hand up. The knife entered between the ribs, piercing through its heart. Wolf spun on his knees and let the energy of the dog move his hand into the waterfall. The rushing water felt as if it wanted to strip the skin from Wolf's hand, but he took the pain in a grunt. Sheathing his knife, he picked up his M-4 and flattened himself on the rock. As expected, the handlers fired blindly into the cavern. Bullets ricocheted and one tore a groove into Wolf's right thigh. When they both jumped into the cavern, one after the other, they stopped for second to let their eyes adjust. Wolf killed them both, pushing the gunmen into the waterfall before donning his patrol pack. When he exited the cavern, he saw Gonzalez trying to reach Franks. Franks had slipped and was desperately holding on while his feet scabbled for purchase. Wolf told Gonzalez to climb out of the way and he moved to a position over Franks. Wolf lowered his safety line with the carabiner folded back on itself to create a loop. Wolf squatted to get the line within reach.

“Slip the loop around your wrist,” Wolf said.

Franks nodded and when he did, Wolf stood, taking his weight, and climbed until Franks could regain his footing. They continued to climb until they reached the summit. On the other side of the crest, they took a short break, drank, and moved out. It was when they got back to the mission support site that Gonzalez noticed.

“Master Sergeant Wolf, where are your boots?” Gonzalez said.

Franks chuckled and said, “Wolf likes to go native.”

Chapter 2

0330 Task Force Command Center, Chihuahua, Mexico

Wolf and Franks learned the Mexican Task Force Commander and his planning staff had come to the same conclusion as Wolf. There was a closing window of opportunity before the dog handlers would be missed, if not already. It would be a first in the war on drugs. A daylight C-130 airborne insertion with Mexican Marines as the quick reaction force. Captain Gonzalez's men would be ten of the sixty-four paratroopers on the drop. Wolf and the team would insert before the drop to the north of the waterfall and provide eyes on surveillance updates. Then they would support the attack as a communication and blocking element at the north end of the runway. Franks ordered a split team deployment. Two groups of six, a standard Special Forces tactic. Each team complete with all the Special Forces skill sets.

The following morning at 0100, Wolf and team inserted and were in place two hundred meters from the end of the runway, their elevation giving them a clear line of sight down its length. Franks and the other half of the split team were in place to their south. Wolf noted the time, 0630 local, as Portes took photos of a King Air landing. It slowed and turned around at a wide spot near their end of runway and taxied back. Wolf watched through the spotting scope as two heavily armed gunmen walked out of the airplane first, weapons at the ready. One of them turned, nodded, and a woman exited the plane. She looked like a fortune one hundred business executive. When she turned and scanned the horizon, it was as if she was looking right at him.

Wolf whispered, "You on this brother?"

“Oh yeah,” Portes said. The sound of the rapid fire shutter clicking away on his Nikon.

As she turned back to acknowledge someone rushing out to meet her, Wolf glanced down at what he liked to call his post office wall. She was the only woman on the page. The sister of Alejandro Cortes, El Chapo Guzman’s lieutenant for west coast operations.

Portes said, “Any later and they would have seen the—.”

He was interrupted by Harris, the senior communicator on the team channel. “Assault force five mikes out.”

Wolf held his throat mic, “Let’s go. Make sure your arm bands are visible.”

Wolf waited for the team to assemble and led them out, relying on his sixth sense to warn him of danger. As he stepped out of the wooded area, he engaged three gunmen to his ten o’clock with his suppressed M-4 rifle. He killed one gunman as the other two were dropped before they could fire. Threat defeated, he turned back in time to see the airborne assault. The C-130 was at what looked to be six hundred feet above ground level. The paratroopers in green and Gonzalez’s men in black, filling the air. As the C-130 departed, the momentarily stunned security gunmen started firing. The more experienced paratroopers slipped their parachutes to get to the ground faster. Some were shooting from under canopy. In the growing fury of gunfire, Wolf saw the King Air propellers spinning. Wolf turned and said, “On me.” As he took off down the runway. The King Air would only need half of the runway distance to take off, and that was three thousand feet from where he now stood. As the team ran down the runway, they had to stop twice to engage gunmen that fired at them from the wood line.

Wolf realized they were not going to make it, so he stopped the team and had them get online, split between either side of the runway. If they could get close enough, they could at least concentrate their gunfire into the cockpit and engines of the King Air. Wolf took two deep breaths and settled himself. Wolf watched the plane get closer.

Wolf radioed, "Remember to lead out in front of the nose. Let them fly through our fire."

The plane broke contact with the ground, the pilot immediately raising the landing gear. The plane's speed kept increasing and just before reaching them the pilot turned the plane to a near knife edge, the wing tip just feet from the ground. As the plane flashed by, Wolf saw her in a window, eyes on fire, presenting him the middle finger. Wolf heard several rounds impact the metal skin of the aircraft before it roared away, climbing just over the trees then disappearing over the crest of the mountain. Franks and the rest of the team called from the wood line and joined them on the runway.

"That was some crazy flying, who was on the plane?" Franks said.

"Eliana Cortes, sister of Alejandro. He's El Chapo's right-hand guy for the west coast."

The operation was considered the Mexican Army's best to date. Millions of dollars of drugs taken out of circulation. Dozens of weapons, RPGs, and encrypted communications equipment. The Mexican President held a news conference touting their success. The American President made a congratulatory call. The team spent the last week of their allotted time on base training with the Reaccion team in their specialties. Intelligence, weapons, communications, demolitions, and medical. The last day was at the pool working on their tan or burn as several of the guys realized too late. Beers, steaks, and tall stories were told late into the night.

Now at the RV resort with his parents, Wolf appreciated the time to decompress. He was enjoying being with his dad and his boat captain friend. Deep sea fishing a great way to relax and spend time with a couple of hard warriors who were now in the twilight of their years.

Chapter 3

April 5th, 1130 Local, Topolobampo, Sinaloa

Wolf knew it would be a grind but had volunteered to help his step-father make the drive from Puerto Vallarta back to Tucson. The truck had more than enough power to pull the fifth-wheel trailer at the speed limit and its interior was fitted out like a plush front room set. On their second day working their way up, I-15 Wolf suggested they stop at a restaurant known for its excellent seafood. Captain Gonzalez had mentioned the place. His brother Hector would take good care of them.

The decision to stop triggered an alarm from his subconscious, but Wolf pushed it aside. Little did he know he would come to count it as the worst decision of his life.

El Gran Pez restaurant stood like an island in an ocean of debris, a hint of a bygone fishing industry wafting on the afternoon breeze. Brightly colored cigarette boats and expensive cars stood out among the rust of abandoned conveyances—the Sinaloa drug cartel's arrogance on display.

Wolf, Andy, and Alma emerged from the truck and stretched after the five-hour drive. The smell of seawater and fresh asphalt reminded Wolf of the ongoing construction where he lived near Tampa bay.

Just then, three blacked-out Range Rovers raced into the parking lot, pulled up to the entrance, and a security detail leaped out to escort a woman inside. She stopped at the open door,

scanning the area. She was tall, athletic build, long black hair, and outwardly perfect skin framing dark penetrating eyes. She had the look of a predator.

Wolf whispered to Andy. “She reminds me of someone.”

“Right, you wish. Stud.” Andy said.

Wolf suddenly felt uneasy. “We should find another place.”

Wolf watched as his step-father struggled with the choice. In the end he could see it was his mother’s excitement which made the decision for him. Andy turned back to the truck, adding his old Colt 45 under his shirt. A second later, Andy led them to the hostess station. A handsome young man greeted them.

“Good afternoon. Welcome to El Gran Pez—Mr. Wolf?”

Wolf said, “Yes and you must be Hector. These are my parents, Alma and Andrew.”

“My brother said you would be stopping by. His description of you was very precise. Please let me show you to your table.”

As they were escorted to their table, Wolf noted escape routes and choke points, as was his customary process. He marveled at the unexpected but elegant dining. The booths along the walls included high backs and curtains you could draw for privacy. Muted tones on the walls framed what looked to be original Joaquin Sorolla and Francisco Goya paintings of fishing and life on the water. The room accommodated about three dozen booths and tables. There was a bar,

just big enough for the bartender and sommelier. A sign in Spanish read VIP at the far end of the dining area. Two men, undoubtedly from the Cortes security team, guarded the door.

This place is way too nice for a derelict fishing village.

“I apologize for seating you next to the kitchen,” Hector said. “Please accept this gift of wine. I think you will find it pairs well with our fish entrees.”

Wolf leaned across the table and whispered to his stepfather, “Amazing what drug money can buy.”

“Stop, you’ll upset your mother.”

Wolf’s parents ordered the chef’s special, Colorado snapper with a lemon-butter caper sauce. He ordered Goliath grouper, wanting to compare it with the grouper back home in Florida. Wolf attempted to lighten the mood, raising his glass of wine, “To a relaxing vacation.”

His parents raised their glasses and clinked before drinking. The server appeared and apologized for breaking up the conversation. As she passed the plates of seafood around, the air was filled with aromas of grilled fish and aromatic spices. They fell silent as they enjoyed the food.

Wolf was savoring a bite of grouper when he noticed Hector walking toward the kitchen with a worried look on his face. He was being steered by a large man with a Heckler and Koch MP5 submachine gun in one hand and the other on his shoulder. No one, including Wolf, saw the distracted server’s assistant until he crashed into the gunman with a large tray of plates. The

noise of the plates crashing to the floor was overridden by a burst of automatic gunfire. Wolf saw Hector falling. Nearby diners screamed and ran for the front door.

The idiot must have had his finger in the trigger.

Wolf drew his Browning Hi-Power 9mm pistol and rushed toward the scene. He glanced behind to see Andy following with his .45 ACP at the ready. The large man who had been steering Hector held his still smoking MP5 submachine gun pointed at the lifeless Hector.

“Drop it” Wolf said, in Spanish. When the gunman moved his MP5 in their direction, he did not hesitate. Two Federal Hydra-Shok hollow-point 9mm rounds slammed into the gunman’s chest. As the gunman dropped, a burst of automatic gunfire cracked past Wolf, a round striking Andy in the right arm. Wolf pushed him away and said, “Get Mom, meet you at the truck.”

Wolf side stepped to cover behind a column. He whispered to himself, asking his spirit guide for bravery as he peered around the column. The room was chaos, pistol shots and automatic weapons fire, bodies slumped across tables and littering the floor. A security detail rushed out of the private dining room surrounding the woman he now recognized, Eliana Cortes. As they moved her toward the front door, she stopped and stared. Wolf locked eyes with Eliana and thought he saw recognition before he heard her say, “Kill the Americans.”

Rounds cracked against the column, splintering the wood. The gunman was shooting wildly from the middle of the dining area. Wolf moved out from the left side of the column and shot three times in rapid succession to put the gunman down. He holstered his pistol and retrieved the gunman’s MP5 and extra magazines. In his peripheral vision, his parents ran toward the kitchen.

Headed for the service door, good.

Wolf cleared the private dining room and worked his way to the front door where he saw a gunman in the shadows his weapon pointed outside. As the gunman spun, Wolf killed him with a three round burst. He toppled partly out the door, causing more screams from those outside. Wolf kicked away his weapon and took in the scene. Wounded staff and diners sat in scattered pockets across the parking lot. Tires screeched as cars speed away.

Wolf performed a combat reload, inserting a fresh magazine in the MP5 and put the partially used one in his back pocket. He slapped the charging handle to ready the weapon and stopped cold.

It was hard to hear over the noise from the parking lot, but it was unmistakable. His mother was singing.

Oh, Mom, no.

Rushing back into the restaurant, Wolf heard his mother finish her death song and scream a war cry. Andy's .45 barked twice. Seconds later, more gun shots followed by the sound of an MP5 on full auto erupted from the kitchen area. Wolf blasted through the server's door, his senses registering the odd mix of burning seafood and gunpowder. To his left he saw two dead gunmen. To his right a gunman standing over bodies turning to shoot. Wolf killed him with a shot that entered his left eye. Wolf shot him twice more as he stepped over the body to reach his parents. There, halfway out of the service door, he found Andy shielding his mother and another woman. He checked Andy for a pulse, nothing. A concentrated circle of wounds in his back had sealed his fate. Gently pulling him off his mother, he found her pulse steady but weak. The large pool of

blood answered his question, but he checked the other woman for a pulse. She was gone too. As he tended to his mother's wounds, the rising harshness of sirens brought hope.

A few minutes later, the place was swarming with law enforcement and EMS. Wolf was standing, MP5 still in his hand, having been pushed out of the way by the EMTs. They eyed him nervously, He did not care, the MP5 was his crutch as he watched the EMTs load his mother onto a stretcher. A police officer came into his sight with his pistol drawn and ordered him to the ground. Wolf spoke calmly in Spanish as he dropped the MP5 and kicked it away.

“I am her son, not cartel. I need to go with my mother.”

“Get down, now,” The officer responded, walking into Wolf's space.

Wolf grabbed the officer's right wrist with his left hand and used his right to fold the officer hand back over itself until he dropped the pistol. Wolf kicked it away and let go of the officer, pushing him backwards.

“I am going with this ambulance. Arrest me at the hospital. Do not get in my way.”

Wolf sensed danger from behind and dropped to a crouch as two more officers tried to tackle him. One of the officers flew over Wolf his flying tackle a complete miss. The other came in lower, knocking Wolf over. Wolf rolled with the force and grappled with the burly officer.

I don't have time for this.

Wolf stood and found three officers with weapons pointed his way. One had a yellow tipped taser ready to fire.

Wolf sighed as he laid face down on the asphalt. An officer grabbed his arms and handcuffed them behind his back.

“I’m her son. Let me go.” Wolf said, as he watched the ambulance drive out of sight.

Wolf rolled over and sat up. He rocked and asked his spirit guide to help his mother. Wolf closed off the chaos around him and began to sing. When he finished, he said to himself, *I know who you are—Eliana Cortes.*