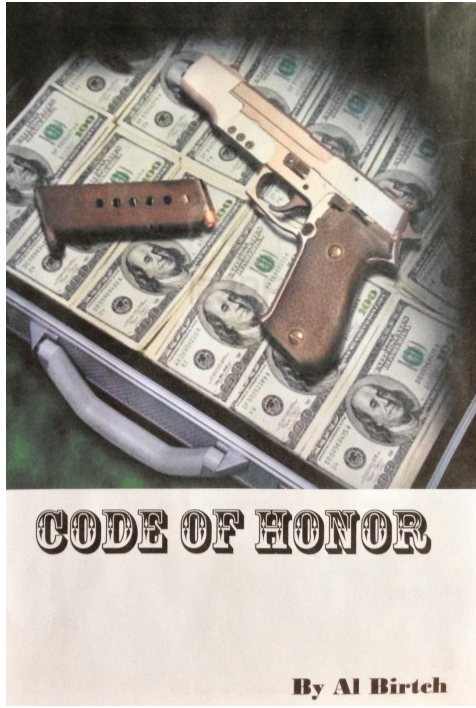




Genre: Action / Thriller

The story begins in the office of President Alvarez in Bogota, Columbia. Bradley McLean, America's Chef De Mission in Columbia is apologizing to President Alvarez that his government cannot supply the military assistance he has asked. Alvarez had pleaded for assistance to capture Salvatore Mendoza, leader of the infamous La Familia De La Muerta, the family of death cartel. McLean explains that the war in Afghanistan was extremely unpopular at home. That the President's approval ratings are at their lowest level since he took office, and with an election just 10 months away, he cannot be seen as being drawn into yet another country's internal problems. Alvarez sees him out but as he walks back to his desk he sees McLean's business beside the empty coffee cup. He's known Brad for 7 years...why would he leave his business card? Alvarez picks it up, turns it over and on the back is written ELSEC Security Solutions...Harold Lyons is expecting your call, and a phone number.

Major Matt Ryker had led a team of 8 Delta-force operators for 3 years in Afghanistan. Even within such an elite team of people like Delta, they were known as the best. Whenever the mission was high risk and must win...they drew the assignment every time. But now the war in Afghanistan has ended and the military has scaled back. Like the vast majority of now-unemployed military, with really only 1 skill, they decide to join the world of private security who often hire out to governments for work that needs to be done clandestinely. Soon they are in the jungles of Columbia. They have captured Salvatore Mendoza, but ambushing and capturing him was one thing; getting him out of the jungle and turned over to authorities another. The team that had never experienced defeat suffers a crushing blow. Four of them, including Ryker, stay back to hold off the pursuing cartel forces, while the other three continue on with Mendoza. A pitch battle ensues. Vastly outnumbered, 3 of the team are killed, Ryker is wounded and captured. He refuses to tell Miguel, Mendoza's brother, the escape route the

balance of the team is taking. His torture is brutal, including severing his right hand at the wrist with a machete and cauterizing the wound with a red-hot iron to ensure he didn't bleed out. But Miguel's cruelty hasn't been limited to Ryker. 2 years earlier he had set his sights on Maria Hernandez. Her husband worked for the cartel and Maria was stunningly beautiful and had caught Miguel's eye. A year earlier Miguel told her that her husband was killed in a fire-fight with drug enforcement police. But she knew that was a lie. That Miguel had ordered her husband killed. But she was trapped. If she wanted to live she knew she had no choice but join Miguel in his bed. But her hatred never abated...and she saw this new prisoner as her chance. With the help of Maria, Ryker escapes taking her along, but not before Ryker uses the same machete to relieve Miguel of his head. The team is now back together but shattered physically and emotionally and cuts ties with ELSEC. The team's bond, their commitment to each other is unshakable. Unable to retrieve the bodies of their three fallen friends, they hold a memorial service. They invite Chris Norman, one of the original Delta team. He had left the unit 2 years earlier to join the Las Vegas PD. The memorial over, they head down the block to one of the local bars. Outside the bar, sitting on the side-walk, a filthy cup in his equally dirty hand, is a homeless man dressed in worn-out fatigues. He holds the cup out...a small bit of change in the bottom. Ryker locks eyes with him. *What unit?* He asks. *51st Airborne* the man answers. *Were you in-country?* *Two tours* he says. The 5 men all reach into their wallets and soon the man's cup is filled with folded bills. *Thank you for your service* Ryker says as he reaches down with his remaining hand and squeezes the man's shoulder. They spend the next couple of hours toasting their lost friends and sharing stories. And they catch-up with Norman...is police work as interesting as Delta had been. Soon they learn Norman is on disciplinary leave. When an investigation he was on had been shut-down, Norman had lost his cool and shoved his commander. The investigators had been digging into casino owner Stephen Kendrick. The combination of the global financial crisis that started in 2008, followed shortly thereafter by the 2-year long COVID pandemic, had devastated the Las Vegas strip. Several casinos had declared bankruptcy. And in 2006 Kendrick had just opened the massive American Dream Casino. He had sunk hundreds of millions of investors' monies into the build, only to be hit by the multi-year global financial meltdown. Even the whales, the million dollar+ gamblers that all the major casinos banked on, were tightening their discretionary entertainment budgets. Like the others, Kendrick was on the brink of insolvency, when suddenly his fortunes began to turn around. While the other casinos were slowly edging back to prosperity, The American Dream began reporting record profits. Something crooked was going on...but after 2 straight years of investigation and surveillance, they couldn't figure out what it was, and so they were shut down. Norman comments, almost off-hand... *"it's a shame that guys like Kendrick get to enrich themselves, while guys like him"* he nods towards the front window where they can see the shadow of the man still sitting on the sidewalk, *"are simply abandoned."* It is this encounter that sets the team on their new course. Ryker floats his idea to the team...that they have the skills required to confirm whether Kendrick's success was above board or not. And if it wasn't, to relieve him of some of it. They weren't in law enforcement...so doing whatever was necessary, legally or not, to find out the truth, wasn't a concern. Norman, expecting to get fired anyway, decides to join the team. The reader will follow this team as they to gather more and more data...supplemented by weeks of stake-outs. Soon they are tailing suspects to and from the airports. Collecting surveillance photos. Watching from outside the airport fence as they

board private planes that they track down as having originated in Syria. Within 10 weeks they have confirmed how Kendrick turned his fortunes around. He is laundering money for the President of Syria and a few of his top Generals. Any observant dictator knows that sooner or later their run will come to an end. The lesson of Saddam Hussein had been well learned. Having boxes with hundreds of millions in cash hidden around '*inside your own country*' is of no value when you find yourself on-the-run and needing to exit in a hurry. You need to get those boxes out while you are still in power. And every week, Ryker and his team had watched as diplomatic couriers, with a lot of luggage in tow, arrived at the casino, only to leave the very next day, suitcases looking a lot lighter. They had hacked into the casino's accounting records. The books would show these fake-whales lost millions. Then a few days later, different middle-group of high-roller gamblers would show up and stay 2-3 days and win-big. Their winnings openly declared, taxed, and deposited in American banks; now fully cleaned. As far as they could see, Kendrick was taking 30% off the top for his services. The whales would lose \$50 million, and the follow-up high-rollers would win \$35 million. And this had been going on for the past 18 months. It was slick. But how to relieve Kendrick of some of that ill-gotten gain. They decide that good-old-fashioned blackmail was the route. Show Kendrick their proof. Make it clear that they had no intention of turning it over to the police or the gaming authority...after all it was all illegally obtained evidence. But they would turn it over to the CIA and it wouldn't take those people long for they would be intercepting those couriers and his money source would dry up. Not only that, but these Generals might hear from an anonymous source that it was Kendrick's sloppiness that had led to the CIA catching on...and Kendrick's time on earth would be limited. Pay us \$25 million dollars and we will destroy the evidence. They didn't think Kendrick would balk at that amount. He skimmed that much every couple of months. But greedy people do not share easily. And they absolutely do not trust the other side to honor any agreement. Back when Kendrick was on the verge of financial collapse, he had been approached by Jack Watson, the founder and CEO of Breslin Security based in Miami. That company didn't have any experience in providing casino security, but they did have several hundred employees providing security to high profile businessmen and politicians in the Middle East. It was Watson who offered Kendrick the way to save his crumbling empire. Soon Kendrick had fired all of his internal security and replaced them with Breslin personnel. Facing blackmail, Kendrick enlists the aid of Watson and within a day Brad Stoneman, Watson's go to man for high-priority wet-work, is in Vegas. The drop is set and the exit plan intricate. Ryker and his team feel they have all contingencies mapped out. Most of it goes as planned...they do escape with the \$25 million, but not before Stoneman takes out one of the team. Davis is gone. The team has now lost 3 of the original 8. We fast forward a few weeks. Ryker and the remaining team are in a meeting room. A laptop is projecting a set of numbers on the wall-screen. Ryker is reviewing the numbers with the team. *Over the past 4 months, between hotels, rental cars and other out-of-pocket costs, including our own salaries, the Las Vegas operation cost \$800,000 which has been refunded out of the \$25 million. A further \$1 million has been set up in a trust fund for the college education of Davis, Franco and Avery's children. Anonymous donations have been made as follows: \$10 million to The Wounded Warriors Foundation to create additional shelter spaces for homeless veterans, \$5 million to the Veterans Mental Health Association to assist with their outreach program and to further research into the treatment of PTSD, \$3 million to the VA to purchase the new MRI machine they have been fundraising for, and \$3*

million has been donated to Doctors-Without-Borders to support the work that they do. That leaves \$2 million in reserve to fund the up-front costs of our next mission. Dawson has 3 candidates to evaluate which we will discuss at next week's meeting. Ryker wraps up the meeting by pouring out a shot of bourbon into 5 glasses and handing them out. They all stand. *Here's to Davis, Franco, and Avery.* 3 days later finds Ryker in the Dominican Republic. He's wearing full camo and laying flat in some tall grasses. A rifle sits on a tripod, it's butt on the ground. About 600 yards' away is the 14th hole of a private gold course. There is a lone golf ball on the green about 15 feet from the flag. A golf-cart pulls up, a lone occupant inside. It's Brad Stoneman. There is a brisk wind coming in off the ocean and the brim of his panama hat flutters slightly. The day is gorgeous. He leans back against the seat of the cart and takes another draw off of the large cigar. A 280 grain 338 Lapua bullet leaves the barrel at 2,650 feet per second. At 600 yards it hits with the energy of 2,652 foot-pounds. The inside of the golf cart is splattered red. The wind now tumbling the panama hat across the green. Ryker pulls his head back from the scope – *that was for you Davis.*

The End