

UNDER FIRE FROM AFAR

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To my wife and son. You are the inspiration for all that I do. It is my greatest joy to share my life with you. You have given me the courage to write and share my thoughts with the world more than you know. It is my constant prayer that I never fail you in my duties to provide for you, keep you safe and love you. For all that you do for me, I thank you.

PROLOGUE

The year was nineteen hundred and seventy two. In a remote jungle of Vietnam near the Cambodian border, one lone soldier stalked toward his objective. Gunnery Sergeant Jed Marshall had spent the last three days inching his way across an open field on the outskirts of an NVA encampment. Jed was completely invisible in his gillie suite as he crawled along the ground in the tall grass. The morning dew was still wet on the grass. This made the tall grass quieter to move through. Jed had been stalking on his side to reduce the trail made from his movements. In his head, Jed kept track of the distance that he moved from the tree line. He had crawled 975 yards from the tree line. He was now within 900 yards of where North Vietnamese Army General Bogata lay. Jed gently slid his rifle out from underneath him and brought it up to his cheek. He began taking slow breaths to try to steady his hand. Jed hadn't slept in days. His bladder ached. His whole left side burned from his encounter with a large ant hill twelve hours ago. A patrol of eight NVA soldiers laughed and smoked as they passed within five feet of Jed. This same patrol had passed him the previous two mornings, and like the previous two mornings, they passed right by him. After all, who would be looking for a single American soldier within an NVA encampment of over four thousand men? Jed had also passed right in between two enemy positions with Russian made 12.7mm anti-aircraft machine guns pointed at the sky. Jed could smell the morning's rice rations cooking in open pots. His stomach ached. He tried not to think about the last time he was able to eat. Jed slid a small sand bag underneath the hand guard of his rifle and began checking his windage and elevation adjustments. Although Jed had set his elevation and windage before he left the safety of the trees, this morning was colder than the others. Jed needed just a few more clicks of elevation and a few clicks of left windage to make up for the cold air blowing across the field. Jed settled in to his position and began to relax as he focused his optics on the front door of a small building in the edge of the encampment.

The rifle was a Remington Model 700 chambers in .308. It was topped with a Unertl fixed ten power scope. This is the rifle that Jed was issued when he came in country almost ten months ago. In those ten months, Jed had racked up 84 confirmed kills and dozens of probables. There was a ten thousand dollar bounty on Jed's head. The NVA were desperate to kill or capture as many American snipers as they could. Jed knew that if captured, he would be tortured for any usable intelligence that could be beaten out of him, and then killed. The rifle that had served him so well in Vietnam would be traded for the bounty. He was determined not to let that happen. General Bogata had been the first to begin offering bounties for American snipers. He had also had a group of NVA snipers trained and sent them to hunt him and his fellow snipers down. So far, Jed had killed three enemy snipers sent to kill him. He had also lost two good friends of his, killed by these enemy bounty hunters. That was one of the reasons that he had accepted this suicide mission. Jed had planned this mission himself. He wanted to go alone. He knew that it would be too hard to sneak himself and his spotter this close to the enemy without being detected. It would take Jed two days to hike back to his pickup point, if he some how gets out of this alive.

Jed detected movement in the building that he was watching. There was movement in the window just to the left of the front door. This is it, he thought. He will only get one shot at this. The front door began to swing open. Then a man emerged from the building. He was a short man, about five and a half feet tall. His cleaned and pressed uniform showed that he was some one of importance. Jed had spotted him on his first day of stalking. He saw the man in a clean uniform emerge from a building, stretch and return the salutes of several NVA officers that waited by the front door to greet him. This same routine was repeated on the second day first thing in the morning. Using photographs of the General that he was given at his first mission briefing, and his high powered spotting scope, Jed had identified this man as General Bogata, his target. This morning, the routine was beginning again. Jed saw the General's arms begin to rise. This was Jed's cue. Jed squeezed the trigger of his rifle. The officers greeting the General detected a shot in the distance. They all turned to see where the shot had come from. Not seeing anything, they began to turn back toward the General. It was then that they saw the general slumped over on the stairs of the building. His chest was turning

crimson with blood. One officer rushed over to him and held his head up and began calling his name in a futile attempt to revive him. The General was not moving and his eyes had rolled back into his head. Another officer ran over to a guard tower and signaled the alarm. Within moments, the whole camp bristled with activity. Soldiers began fanning out in groups to check the perimeter. One of the machine gunners in a tower scanned the tree line and opened fire on a small grouping of trees where he surmised the sniper had shot from. Once the other soldiers saw what the machine gunner was shooting at, they also began firing. The small patch of trees jutted out of the tree line making it the closest position to the encampment. Jed had passed through that same collection of trees when he had entered the field. It would be obvious to any marksman that this position would be too far out to take that type of shot, but the regular soldier feared the skills of the sniper and some thought that they possessed mystical powers to make a man drop dead from miles away. Rounds whizzed over Jed's head as men ran toward the tree line. Jed thought that if he stayed out there too long, he would get shot from indirect fire and his stealth wouldn't matter. The anti-aircraft batteries just behind Jed lowered their guns and opened up on the tree line. Trees splintered and fell as the large 12.7 mm rounds tore through the forest. Jed looked around and saw that everyone had already passed him and was still running away from his position. He took that as his cue from the Almighty to get moving. Jed began slowly to low crawl through the grass toward a trail that gives truck access to the camp. If lucky, he could move undetected into the trees and following this trail to a bridge along the river. As Jed approached the trail, the gun fire began to subside, allowing Jed to hear the yelling of orders, the moving of vehicles and the scrambling of men to their fighting positions. Once on the trail, Jed quickly ducked into the tree line and began to double time it parallel to the road. After finding a concealed position behind several bushes about a mile down the trail, Jed stopped to check his position. With his rifle now slung over his shoulder, Jed pulled out his maps and began to orient himself. His primary escape route took him back the way he had come. That route was now crawling with bad guys. Jed's only chance was to move closer to the camp, and move alongside the road to get his bearings. Jed found a small crevice underneath a fallen tree. He slid underneath the tree to catch his breath and figure out how he was going to get home.

After reviewing his maps, he decided on a route that would get him to a small tributary river that he could follow back into friendly lines. Jed got up and began moving again. His muscles ached and burned as he began to move. The adrenaline was wearing off fast and the sleep deprivation and hunger was taking its toll. Jed pulled out his shortwave radio. Jed thought that he could get some air power over his head, he could keep the bad guys off him long enough to escape. He turned on the radio and began calling as he walked.

“Raven, this is Badger six, over. Raven this is Badger 6, over” Jed called into the radio. Nothing. Jed called again. This time he received a response.

“Raven 4 calling Badger six, over” the radio announced. Jed had raised a forward air controller. The signal sounded good.

“Badger 6 to Raven 4 I am E&E (escaping and evading) and require immediate air support, over” Jed spoke into the radio.

“Raven 4 to Badger 6 what is your position, over.”

“Raven 4, my position is grid coordinate g7 by e11, over.”

“Badger 6, be advised that increased enemy activity has just been detected in your sector, over.” Jed shook his head. He wanted to tell the guy that he was the cause of the enemy activity and needed some freaking bombs right now! Jed collected himself.

“Raven 4 this is Badger 6, I copy that warning of the enemy activity. What is the chance that you could get some ordinance dropped to cover my evac? Over..”

“Badger 6, this is Raven 4, I’ll see what I can do, over and out.” Jed put away his radio and quickened his pace. He pulled out his canteen and took several long drinks of water.

The sun was high in the sky as Jed approached the bridge. The bridge was busy with activity and men and materials moved quickly in both directions, some on truck and some on foot. Jed stayed in the safety of the trees. He moved close enough to see the bridge and pulled back out his maps. He was at the right bridge. He would follow this river south, toward friendly lines. Jed checked his gillie suit. It was soaked in his sweat. Jed slipped out of the gillie suit and rolled it up into his pack. Jed took a moment to consume some quick rations and relieve him of what was causing pain in his bladder. Jed began to move along the river, always staying in the tree line. Jed could see fishing boats with NVA soldiers onboard patrolling the river. Jed knew that there

would also be patrols roaming through the jungle. Jed maintained a fast walk for several hours before he came upon a small village. He could hear yelling and soldiers rummaging through huts. Jed moved to a vantage point so that he could observe what was happening in the village. He raised his rifle and began to scan the small village. The village consisted of ten small huts surrounding a small well in the village center. There were about a dozen soldiers searching houses. There were several groups of locals huddled together in the open guarded by several VC guerrillas. One VC was yelling and beating a man in the center of the village. He also had a woman and a small girl with their hands tied a few feet from the man. Jed listened to see if he could make out what was being said. After listening for a few minutes, it sounded like the VC soldiers were looking for something, or someone. This village isn't too far from the NVA encampment. Jed's pulse quickened as he thought that the VC could be looking for him.

"Did they know which direction that I went," Jed thought. The VC interrogator drew a pistol from his belt and pointed it at the small girl. The man jumped at the VC and was quickly beaten back down with the butt of an AK-47 by another guerrilla. Jed quickly began to adjust his elevation and windage adjustments. He was approximately one hundred and fifty yards from the center of the village. Jed brought the crosshairs of his scope down and rested the on the nose of the VC just as he grabbed the young girl by the hair and placed the pistol to her forehead. Jed knew that if he fired the VC would have a fix on his position. He was too close for them to miss his position. In an instant, Jed decided that he could not let anyone die at the hands of these men. Jed gently squeezed the trigger. In his scope, Jed saw a splash of red fluid spray from the VC's head. Jed quickly cycled the bolt of his rifle and began scanning the soldiers for anyone looking his way. He saw a VC with an AK-47 pointed in his direction. Jed swung his sights onto the center of mass and squeezed the trigger. At this point, all the soldiers began diving for cover. The village people scrambled and collected their young. Jed cycled the bolt of his rifle again and took a deep breath. Jed knew he couldn't match the fire power of the soldier with their Kalashnikov rifles. He decided to pin them down and withdraw back into the jungle. Jed waited for a minute. He could hear several soldiers talking and shuffling behind cover. Jed had to convince them that he was there to stay if he was going to buy enough time for him to withdraw. A

soldier peered out from behind some cover. Jed thought that he had been spotted, but before the VC could say anything, Jed pulled his rifle around and placed a round just above his left eye. This was Jed's chance. Jed stayed as low as he could and quickly scrambled back deeper into the jungle. Once he was about 100 yards away from his last position, he began running. Jed had circled around the village and resumed his previous course when he heard soldiers moving through the brush. They were fanning out from the village. Jed slung his rifle over his shoulder and drew out his 1911 pistol. The jungle was so thick that he would do better with his semi automatic pistol than his bolt action rifle. Jed kept moving through the jungle as fast as he could. He could hear the soldiers moving through the brush. They were gaining on him. Just then, Jed's radio came to life.

"Badger 6 this is Raven 4, over," the radio announced.

"It's about time Raven 4, do you have good news for me?"

"Badger 6 I have two F-80's inbound carrying 2000 pound bombs just for you. Where do you want them, over." Jed ducked behind a tree and crouched close to the ground. Jed could now see the forms of soldiers emerging from the jungle's thick cover. He took careful aim and unloaded his 45 in the direction of the soldiers. As the enemy soldiers began taking cover and returning fire, Jed pulled out his map and read off the grid coordinates to the forward air controller.

"Badger 6, the bombs are coming your way. Are you clear of the target area, over?"

"I will be Raven 4. Just send them, over." Jed slapped a new magazine into his pistol and unloaded it in the direction of the enemy again. The soldiers were secure behind their cover. Their return fire peppered the trees around Jed, but they weren't close enough to have a fix on his position. Jed took a deep breath and sprinted out from behind his cover and began running as fast as he could away from the soldiers. The rounds from the AK-47s splintered trees all around Jed, but he kept running. Jed could hear the scream of jet engines above his head and this made him run even faster. The concussion from the 2,000 pound bombs nearly knocked Jed down as bombs began raining down on the soldiers. Jed's ears rang as he ran out of breath. He ducked behind a tree and reloaded his 45. He held his pistol up and scanned the area as things became quiet again. Jed waited for several minutes before he exhaled a sigh of relief. Jed keyed the mic of his radio and spoke.

“Raven 4 this is Badger 6, direct hit, the target is down. Thank God for the Air Force.”

“Badger 6, that’s good to hear. I’ll try to keep something handy for you if you need me again. Godspeed Badger 6. This is Raven 4, over and out.”

Jed kept moving for a few kilometers through the jungle always keeping the river in sight. He checked his map regularly to make sure that he was on the correct course. Jed had just moved into range of the artillery stationed in Firebase Echo 27. A lot of planning had gone into this mission. Jed had hand picked the chopper crew that took him deep into enemy lines. Although the official mission plan took a course straight through several VC controlled areas, the flight had actually crossed over into Cambodia and circled around to the landing zone. Since US forces were forbidden to cross the Cambodian border, the VC didn’t watch the border and it was much easier to sneak a chopper in this way. Air support had also been carefully planned and requested. American planes would not venture too close to the Cambodian border. Jed had to request air support for the nearby firebases to keep the jet in the area but not so close as to let the Vietcong know that there was something going on in the area. Jed requested forward air controllers in his area of operation and had new maps generated to focus specifically on his area of operation. Since he may need to call for close air support, Jed wanted to make sure that the maps were precise. At one point, Jed had considered calling in an air strike into the VC encampment to take care of the job, but had seen several trucks loaded with surface to air missiles in the camp. He knew the camp would have been well protected against an air assault. In addition to lining up air support, Jed had requested artillery support from Firebase Echo 27. Once within range of the base’s artillery, he could rain in high explosives over the enemy with a quick radio call.

Jed breathed a sigh of relief and settled into a position to observe a small fishing village off the river. He slid himself into a thick patch of brush where he would be invisible to the world. Carefully setting his gear up, Jed was ready to be there a while. He began observing the fishing boats with his spotting scope. Jed was looking for a boat that he could use to get down river when the sun went down. His original plan was to hike all the way into Firebase Echo 27, but he was always looking for a better option. The enemy was coordinating its search effort much faster than he thought was possible. He wanted to get down river in a hurry.

As Jed reloaded and checked his rifle, he began thinking about how many times the rifle had made it back after missions like this. He only hoped that he would be able to yet again return the rifle and himself back to base. His rifle, a Remington model 700 had entered military service in 1964. In the early days of the war, the United States Marine Corps was just setting its sniper programs back up. Training and equipment was scarce for those who were called into this profession. Training was hasty and equipment was procured from any means possible. A good number of rifles were purchased from sporting goods stores near military bases in different parts of the Far East. One rifle that was purchased was issued to a young Corporal with a cheap hunting scope and a few boxes of off the shelf ammunition. The Corporal didn't know a whole lot about precision shooting and the training he had received was hardly sufficient, but when you are in country, you either learn fast, or end up dead. The young soldier quickly became an excellent marksman and made several improvements to the rifle. A new leather sling was added and the stock was properly camouflaged. He had also been able to find an armorer who replaced the trigger group with one mail ordered from the US. Since there was no real rifle for issue to Snipers in the early days of the Vietnam War, soldiers received some leeway in regards to modifications to their weapons. He was trying to track down a new scope for the rifle when he was wounded in a mortar attack and was shipped home. After that, the rifle passed from one set of hands to the next. It served its shooters well throughout the years. Sometime around 1968 a new Unertl scope was finally installed with a new set of mounts. Worn after much use, it was in this condition that it was finally issued to another young corporal in late 1971. Jed, a corporal at the time, had just gotten off the plane and was eager to get into some action. He was told that there was a shortage of new equipment and would have to wait to get a new issue rifle. He asked for anything that would shoot and received the worn Remington Model 700 rifle. Jed took the rifle into the field and quickly found what he was looking for. Jed had grown up in the hills of West Virginia and had shot all kinds of guns since the time he could walk. He liked this rifle, but thought it needed some work. After a new barrel and stock, Jed thought the rifle was perfect for him. He had managed to acquire a much heavier target barrel and a new stock to match from a hunting supply catalog that his father had sent him. Jed was quite successful

as a sniper and became friends with his company commander, Captain Evans. The Captain was impressed with Jed's devotion to his craft and his eagerness to use his skills to protect the soldiers that he served with. Several times, Evans had offered to issue Jed a new rifle and he had declined. Jed trusted his rifle and didn't want another one. He had spent enough time shooting the rifle that he knew all of its elevation and windage adjustments from memory.

Jed watched the fishing boats until the darkness of night filled the village. He quietly packed up his gear and moved toward several boats. He had seen one boat come in and knew its motor worked. He loaded his gear on board and pushed the boat away from the shore. The boat drifted clear of the village before the motor was engaged.

The boat moved down the river for several hours. So far the trip had been smooth and Jed hadn't seen too many other boats. Then as the boat came out from around a bend, Jed could see the lights from another boat just ahead as he slowed the motor. Another, smaller boat was alongside the boat with a search light scanning the water. The smaller boat moved away as the spot light glared in Jed's direction. The motor in the patrol boat roared to life and the boat moved toward the fishing boat. Instantly, Jed's rifle leaped into Jed's hands and the crosshairs came to rest on the spot light as the trigger was squeezed. Darkness once again filled the air as men began firing from the boat in Jed's direction. Jed turned the motor to full throttle and ducked low in the boat as he approached the patrol boat. The enemy soldiers could no longer see the small fishing boat that had fired on them but could hear the small outboard motor whining across the water. They fired in the direction of the sound as it passed by their boat. The soldier at the helm began turning the rudder to swing the boat around to pursue the renegade fishing boat. Jed began feeling water sloshing around in the bottom of the boat. The boat began to lower in the water and slow in speed. Jed pointed the nose of the boat toward the nearest tree line and began collecting his gear. The boat ran aground and Jed jumped out and headed into the jungle. Bullets zipped through the trees as the patrol boat neared the beached fishing boat. Jed became disoriented in the dark and was forced to stop and check his map. He could see flashlights scanning the shoreline through the trees as he studied his map and compass with his flashlight. After determining his position, he

moved out. He was just 2 kilometers from the firebase. The boat trip had saved him at least a day of hiking. He was now only a few hours hike from the outer wire. Jed slowed his breathing and began moving quietly through the jungle.

The enemy soldiers searched the fishing boat and after finding nothing, they boarded the patrol boat and moved back up the river. It was dark and they had no desire to run into a patrol on a search and destroy mission from the firebase.

Jed had been hiking for a while when the sun began to rise. The jungle foliage was wet with the morning's dew and the sky was obscured by thick fog that slowly moved through the trees. The sounds of rustling leaves and snapped twigs broke the morning silence. Jed froze and slowly knelt on the ground. The sounds grew closer to his position and he could see the jungle moving with the sounds. Soon, he could hear the whispered sounds of enemy soldiers coordinating their movements. They were just half of a kilometer from the firebase. Jed estimated that there was a regiment size force moving to hit the base. He crouched as close to the ground as he could and pulled out his radio. He quickly entered the frequency that the firebase monitored into his radio and keyed the microphone. In a quiet whisper, he called to the firebase.

"Firebase echo 27, this is Badger 6, over." He repeated the call several times before he received a response. Jed turned the volume on his radio almost all of the way down and held it close to his ear.

"This is Echo 27, go ahead Badger 6," the reply came.

"Echo 27, be advised, you have an enemy force a half click directly west of your position, over."

"This is Echo 27, thanks for the heads up, we'll be ready for them. Can you spot for our mortars, over?"

"Roger that Echo 27, but it will be close to my current position, so make sure you get it right, over."

A few men ran out of the radio bunker at the firebase and began waking up soldiers. Men began rushing over to the trenches surrounding the firebase and reinforcing the defensive positions. A few men carried cans of ammunition over to several machine gun nests. The perimeter was defended with well dug in machine gun nests armed with M-60's. In the center of the

base, there were several gun towers with M-2 heavy machine guns. The fighting positions were distributed in such a way as to allow each position to be protected by the position on either side. In addition to interlocking fire from machine gun nests, a series of Claymore mines had been dispersed along the perimeter and were ready to be detonated when the enemy came within range. Within minutes, all positions were reinforced and the base was on standby. Jed relayed the coordinates of the enemy soldiers that he observed moving past his position toward the base. The plan was to lob mortars directly behind the enemy to drive them toward the base. The enemy's movements to the base were usually carefully planned and carried out. With a little persuasion by the mortars, they will be flushed out into the open where the machine guns could cut them to ribbons.

The first few mortars were sent into the air. The enemy soldier's quit movements were interrupted by explosions all around their positions. The carefully placed mortars impacted directly in the mass of soldiers poised to attack the base. The explosions were only one hundred yards from Jed. He could feel the blasts, but had been this close to exploding mortars before. Jed called in new coordinates for the mortars with his radio. As the mortar rounds crashed through the trees and exploded on the ground, the soldiers began to get up and charge toward the base chased the whole way by mortars directed to them by Jed. In all of the chaos, he had gone completely unnoticed by the enemy. As the enemy broke through the tree line and into the open kill zone in front of the base, the machine guns opened fire. The deafening sound of the M-60's shook the ground as men began falling in the opening. As enemy soldiers approached the barb wire entanglements, bamboo ladders were hoisted over and men began climbing through the wire. As the battle raged at the perimeter, several mortars exploded inside the base. One explosion shook the roof of the radio bunker.

"Badger 6, this is Echo 27, we're taking fire from enemy mortars" the message came across the radio. Jed began looking around. Enemy soldiers were still moving around him, but no longer in organized movements. Men were running in all directions and wounded were carried from the battle area. Jed began moving toward the base looking for a clearing from which mortars could be launched. Light pierced the trees just ahead and Jed moved to a position that allowed him to see into the clearing. A mortar launcher was

setup and a crew of three soldiers moved about aiming and reloading the launcher. One enemy soldier talked on a radio and gave instructions to the others to adjust the fire of the mortars onto the target. Jed raised his rifle and positioned his cross hairs on the back of the soldier with the radio's head. A shot rang out and the soldier dropped to the ground. The other men dropped to the ground and began calling for other soldiers to come and give them some cover. After cycling the bolt on his rifle, Jed took careful aim at the base of the launcher and squeezed the trigger. The bullet pierced the launcher tube and knocked the whole assembly over.

Jed could hear the fire from the M-60's beginning to subside. He stood up and began moving quickly in the direction of the base. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and drew his 1911 pistol from its holster. Jed moved quickly through the jungle. Several enemy soldiers who were carrying wounded from the fight saw Jed and swung their rifles in his direction. Jed continued to run directly at them and put two rounds in the chest of each of them as he ran. Light flooded through the trees as he approached the tree line. Bodies of the enemy's dead littered the ground. Broken trees blown from the earth lay in pieces around craters made by the high explosive shells. Jed quickly switched back to his rifle and began surveying the perimeter of the base. The machine guns were no longer firing. A mass of dead enemy soldiers covered the ground around the perimeter trenches and lay tangled in the barb wire entanglements. Several structures in the base were on fire and he could see soldiers exchanging fire within the base. The perimeter defenses had been overrun and the trenches were no longer manned. Injured soldiers crawled from the open area toward the safety of the tree line. Jed aimed his rifle and took several shots at enemy soldiers. Jed sprinted into the clearing as the enemy soldiers fell. He climbed onto a bamboo ladder and across the barb wire. The sounds of injured men groaning and crying out filled the air in between the clatter of automatic weapons fire. Jed climbed into the perimeter trench and fell onto a mass of jumbled bodies. He quickly checked the immediate area for American survivors in need of first aid. Jed's heart sank when he saw several American soldiers among the dead. He forced himself out of the trench. Once inside the base, he moved around and surveyed the situation. The base had taken severe damage and several buildings were destroyed. Soldiers from both sides lay all over the ground. Several groups

of Marines were moving around, moping up the last few pockets of enemy resistance. Several soldiers aimed their rifles in Jed's direction before recognizing Jed as an American. Multiple voices began crying out from a near by bunker. The bunker was dug out of the ground with a roof made of sand bags stacked on a wood frame. Most of the roof was collapsed and smoke from several burning fuel drums was filling the air. Jed ran toward the bunker and immediately began choking on the smoke. Jed slid his rifle and pack off his shoulders and dropped his gear to the ground as he approached the entry of the bunker. The smoke burned his eyes and forced him to squint as he entered. A familiar voice called from underneath the debris of broken supply crates. It was the voice of Corporal Wes Cody. Wes had operated as Jed's spotter for the past 6 months. In that time the two had learned to work together so closely that they knew what each other was thinking. They had gotten into an argument when Jed was assigned the mission to take out the General. Jed knew that his best chance of success was to go alone. Jed knew that the mission would require his best and he just didn't want to worry about Wes getting captured or killed. Although Wes was an accomplished sniper, Jed didn't want to take the chance that something would happen to him. After all, there still wasn't a very big chance that Jed would make it back alive. Wes thought that Jed was going without him out of arrogance, and thought he was a damned fool for even thinking about going it alone. Even so, Wes had vowed to be waiting at the firebase for Jed when he got back. He had been using the bunker as cover during the attack as he picked off enemy soldiers coming over the barricades with his rifle until the bunker was hit by a mortar.

"Wes, you alright?," Jed called as he pulled Wes from the debris.

"I'm hurting, Gunny," Wes replied. Jed pulled Wes onto his back and walked out of the bunker looking for a medic. Jed could see a medic in the middle of the compound working on a row of patched up Marines. Jed set Wes down and yelled for the medic to check him out. The medic came over and began preparing bandages. Jed ran back toward the bunker. He thought he had heard another voice calling for help. The fire from the fuel barrels had spread and was now consuming several crates stacked just outside of the bunker. The crates were filled with hand grenades and the heat from the burning fuel was turning the grenades red. As Jed approached the bunker, he brought his hand up to his head to protect his face from the heat. Several

grenades exploded as Jed neared the entry to the bunker throwing him to the ground. Jed's ears rang and he could hear nothing. In a daze, he looked at the sky and wondered where he was. The dim light from the sun could be seen through the thick black smoke. The smell of burning fuel burned in his lungs. Blood spit from his mouth as he began to choke and cough. He tried to sit up and felt sharp pains through his chest and back. His left leg began to burn and Jed was forced back to the ground from the pain. The ringing in Jed's ears began to subside and he could hear the rapping of chopper rotors in the air. The sound of a HUI helicopter has always been a welcomed sound to soldiers in the field in Vietnam. To an injured soldier, it's the sound of angel's wings floating through the air. The bottom of the chopper came into view as the sky went black. Jed's senses became numb to the world around him as conciseness slipped from his mind.

The light penetrated his eyelids. The fog began to clear from his head and he began to come around. The light from the string of light bulbs dangling from the supports of a field hospital tent hurt Jed's eyes. That wasn't the only thing that hurt. His mouth was dry and his head was heavy. His eyelids cracked open and revealed the first glimpses of his new surroundings. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the light. The tent he was in was just big enough to hold ten cots filled with injured men. There were five on each side of the tent. Next to Jed's cot was a pole suspending a bottle of fluid that connected into Jed's arm through a long rubber tube. When he tried to lift his head dizziness came over him and his head dropped back into his pillow. A nurse saw him struggle and came over to help. She lifted his head and slid another pillow behind him so he could see what was going on in the room.

"How do you feel?" She said.

"Where am I?" Jed asked.

"You are at a field hospital just outside of Saigon. You were med-evaced here yesterday morning. You were in surgery for most of the night." Jed could feel pain in his chest, left arm and left leg. His leg was stiff and he could feel the metal brace holding it in place.

"There is someone here to see you. I'll go get him" the nurse said as she exited the room. A doctor came over and slipped two fingers over Jed's wrist and looked at his watch.

"How are you feeling this morning" the doctor asked.

“I feel like hell doc.” The response came from the patient.

“Well, you’re lucky to be alive. I’ll have the nurse come by and give you something for the pain.” The doctor said as he placed Jed’s arm back on the cot and walked out of the tent.

An officer walked into the tent and removed his cover. He was a tall man and he was carrying a Sniper’s drag bag in his left hand. The drag bag holds the snipers mission essential gear such as rations, a sniper rifle, extra ammo, a spotting scope, binoculars, an extra radio and other gear used in the field. The bag was camouflaged along with the hand crafted gillie suit. When on a stalk toward the target, a sniper will tie his drag bag to one of his legs and the bag would be dragged behind him as he moved. With the drag bag and gillie suit, a sniper could camouflage himself and his gear and become invisible to the enemy. Jed squinted and looked up at the officer.

“Captain Evans?” Jed said as he recognized the man. Captain Evans walked over to the side of Jed’s cot and pulled a chair alongside as he sat.

“How are you doing Marine?” Captain Evan asked.

“I’ve been better” Jed replied.

“How’s Wes?” Jed asked.

“I’m sorry, he didn’t make it” Captain Evans said as his eyes strolled toward the ground.

“If only I had got there sooner, I could have taken out that mortar launcher before it opened fire” Jed said.

“Don’t say that Jed, it was because of you that we held on to that firebase at all. It would have been totally overrun had you not called in and warned the base commander that mortar launcher would have destroyed more of the base and killed more Marines. There was nothing more you could have done.” Jed was close to his spotter and the news of his death saddened him. The only thing on his mind now was to get back into the field.

“So when can I get out of here?”

“Well, you’ll be here about a week before they move you to Tokyo. After getting checked out there, they’ll ship you home.”

“What? I have to get out of here. I have to get back to the field. There are guys out there that are depending on me. Isn’t there something that you can do?”

“I’m sorry, but you have been badly injured, you’re lucky to be alive. The

doctors worked all night just to save your leg. It's going to take a long time to recover from this. You're getting shipped out to a good veteran's hospital back home. They have the best physical therapy center in the states. I'm sorry Jed, but your war is over." The words hit Jed like a ton of bricks. The faces of the men he served with went through Jed's mind. All of those men depended on Jed to keep them safe and he wasn't going to get to go back to them. There was also the sinking feeling that he had let his spotter down. He was not there when he needed him. Jed's face quivered and a tear ran down his cheek.

"I have something for you." Captain Evans said. He lifted up the drag bag. He unzipped the back corner and slid a rifle out of the case. He placed Jed's rifle along side him in the cot.

"They found it next to your pack. I thought you should keep it. You can take it deer hunting or something back home. After all you've been through with this rifle, I thought that it was only fitting that you two retire at the same time. I reported it as destroyed during the fighting at the firebase; the military won't be looking for it. It's yours now. Oh, and another thing." Captain Evans pulled a picture out of his shirt pocket and put it in Jed's right hand. It was a picture of his wife. They had gotten married just before he had shipped out for Vietnam. Jed looked down at the picture. The beautiful young girl was smiling and holding Jed's arm close to her chest. Jed had this picture forever burned in his mind. He knew every line on her face, the shape of her nose, the alignment of her teeth and the look in her eyes, even though he hadn't seen her in almost a year.

"The medic found it in your pocket. He thought you might want it. You'll be with her again soon. Take care son." Captain Evans stood up and slowly walked out of the tent. Jed's fingers wrapped around the picture and he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 1

The year was two thousand and three. In the remote mountain expanses of Afghanistan, two men walk along a small footpath winding through the hillside on their way to the mountains edge. Both men wore robes with turbans covering their head and faces. The men looked like locals except for their footwear. Unlike the common thin soled shoes worn by most in this region, these men wore thick soled hiking boots. They were tan colored with laces tied tightly past their ankles. These men were not from the area or the region for that matter. They walked swiftly, as most men with a purpose do. The man who led had an AK-74U slung over his shoulder. The short barreled Kalashnikov assault rifle was a favorite among those who spent more time walking than shooting. He negotiated the almost invisible trail with great skill as they moved up the side of the ridge at the based of a vast mountain. The man who followed moved slow and gingerly on the loose rocks of the trail. A long Russian made Dragonov sniper rifle clung to the man's back. They slowed their movements as the two men approached the top of the ridge and pulled their rifles from their resting places on their shoulders. Crouching low, the men moved onto a flat spot on top of the ridge behind several large boulders. As the men peered from behind the large rock, they let their eyes scan the road that lay at the base of the ridge that was opposite from the side they had climbed. The first man removed a pair of binoculars from a pocket of his robe and brought them up to his eyes. After observing the road for several minutes the man spoke in Arabic.

“We have arrived on time. The convoy should be arriving any minute.” The second man untied several bags from his belt and placed them on the ground just in front of him. He positioned himself into a comfortable prone position and laid the Dragonov on the bags just in front of his position. The first man scanned the road directly below and focused his binoculars on a large flat rock just on the other side of the road. With his index finger, he depressed a button on top of the binoculars. The number four hundred and eighty three meters appeared on a small screen within the man's field of view.

“Four eighty three.” The man said with no further explanation. The second man checked his scope and dialed in several adjustments. He looked down the ridge and estimated that there was a 50 degree slope to the road. The man knew the angle would make his rounds hit low. After performing several quick calculations in his head, the man dialed in several more adjustments into his scope. When he was satisfied, he settled into his shooting position and allowed his shooting eye to focus down the road, which brought the scope’s reticule into view. The Russian made scope featured and illuminated ranging reticule that was typical of Dragonov sniper rifles. The man began to relax his breathing and rested his trigger finger on the trigger guard. A trail of dust bloomed in the distance.

The man with the binoculars focused his optics on the convoy of trucks and tracked vehicles moving up the road.

“They’re coming. Get ready.” He scanned each vehicle until he found his target.

“Third vehicle from the front, in the passenger’s seat.”

The man said quietly. The man with the long rifle panned up the road and counted vehicles until he found the one he wanted.

“Got it.” The second man said. As the convoy moved along the road the man in the passenger’s seat of the third vehicle from the front became larger. The sights of the Dragonov steadied and rested on the man’s chest. The vehicle was an old British made Land Rover with an exposed roof. The man in the passenger seat wore a green uniform, sunglasses and had a cigar hanging from his mouth. The windshield was dusty, but the form and features of the man could still be clearly seen. The second man took one last breath as the Land Rover approached the flat rock on the side of the road. The trigger of the Dragonov creaked back just before the rifle lurched back and ejected a spent cartridge casing. The wind shield of the Land Rover cracked in all directions around a single 30 caliber hole just in front of the passenger’s seat. The driver ducked his head and slammed on the gas. The body in the seat next to him slumped over and came to rest on the door. The front of the Land Rover slammed into the back of an armored personnel carrier, jarring both vehicles. The driver of the APC was startled and hit the gas of his vehicle while grabbing the mic of his vehicle’s radio. After shouting a few words into the radio, the entire convoy increased speed. Several Russian made RPK

machine guns opened fire on the surrounding hill sides as the convoy sped off down the road.

The two men on the ridge slid back behind the cover of the rocks and began packing up their gear. The second man checked the ground to his right and retrieved his empty shell casing. The two men stayed low as they moved away from their firing position and began to make their way back down the ridge. Becoming more relaxed as they put distance between them and the convoy, both men removed their head coverings and pulled off their robes revealing worn green uniforms. Both men had dark skin and hair, with short stubble making the beginnings of beards. Both were members of an Islamic extremist faction whose name could be translated in English as The Holy Commissioned. The man with the Dragonov was named Sumir Al-shimad. A Jordanian by birth, Sumir had faithfully served with THC in Sudan, Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia, and the West Bank for the last 10 years. He now worked directly for the leader of THC, who called on Sumir to handle any task that required his special attention. The man with him was simply called Daven. Sumir was not sure if this was his first or last name. Arabic was not Daven's first language and because of this he didn't talk much. Sumir did know that Daven had come down from the Georgia region where he fought Russian oppression of the Muslim faith. The two had been paired up several months ago and had been carrying out tasks together as directed by the leader. The two were well equipped by THC and had trained in training camps all over the world.

Sumir was first recruited by THC when he was seventeen years old in the village that he grew up in his homeland of Jordan. Men spoke to the young men who attended worship services at the local Mosque. One morning Sumir was approached and the men told him about the atrocities that were being performed by the U.S. and others that supported the Jew country of Israel. The recruiters saw something in Sumir and soon he was in Afghanistan in a THC training camp. His training included the use of many weapons including the AK-47 assault rifle. Sumir had early shown that he could be a proficient shot with the rifle that was not known for its accuracy. Marksmanship was not something that was stressed during THC training and the philosophy that the bullets will hit what Alla wills was taught. Sumir was soon pulled aside and given an opportunity to shot a Dragonov sniper rifle. He immediately liked

the rifle and soon proved to be the best marksman that the THC trainers had seen. It was his marksmanship abilities that caught the eye of the THC leader. He was sooner after sent off to handle certain situations that required his special talents.

The purpose of this current assignment was to take out a warlord who had recently joined the Northern alliance against the Taliban government. The THC leader was angered by the move and had called on Sumir to personally take him out. THC has operatives embedded into every major faction in the region and used them to find out when and where the Warlord would be traveling. These same operatives would communicate back to THC to confirm the warlord's death. Sumir would not know for certain if he had been successful until he checks in. The two men made their way to a small village consisting of several stone and mortar buildings and a dozen or so small houses made of mud brick. The area was quiet and few vehicles moved through the village. The men walked to a small garage next to the largest stone building. They loaded their weapons and gear into an old Volvo sedan and started the engine. The loud rumble of the Volvo's exposed exhaust echoed from the block structure as the car made its way out of the village. Sumir removed a satellite phone from the glove compartment and dialed a number as Daven drove. After a few rings, a man's voice answered in Arabic.

"Well, what did you hear?" Sumir asked the man.

"It is done. You may return." The man replied. Sumir disconnected the call and placed the satellite phone back into the glove compartment.

"It's done. We can return now." Sumir repeated to Daven, who nodded and accelerated down the road.

After driving for several hours, the old dusty Volvo rolled to a stop inside a mountain camp ran by THC. The two men got out of the Volvo and were immediately surrounded by 6 men with AK-47 assault rifles. Their vehicle was searched for explosives and they were patted down for weapons. They were also checked for recording devices of any kind. They were then escorted through the camp and into a cave that had been bored into the side of the mountain. The cave was filled with crates of supplies and equipment. The walls of the cave were jagged and the floor was made up of compacted dirt and gravel. A string of lights suspended from either side of the cave provided the only source of light as the men moved farther into the cave. The

musty smell of sweat and urine hung in the air. They came to a small cavern where bed rolls and stacked crates covered the floor. In the corner, a circle of men sitting on the ground were having an animated discussion. The man in the center of the group looked up and motioned to Sumir. The man stood up and Sumir joined him as he began to walk from the debating group.

“Your operation was successful,” the THC leader said to Sumir.

“Now I need you to prepare to bring destruction to the infidels. Others are already on their way to the US. You must go to Iran and make sure the shipment arrives safely as we discussed.”

“I will do as Alla wills. The infidels must pay for their transgressions,” Sumir said.

“May Alla go with you,” the THC leader said as he left Sumir and returned to the group.

Sumir walked from the cave and returned to the camp. The camp began to stir with activity as men and materials were loaded into vehicles. Sumir ran over to one of the men and asked what was going on.

“The Northern Alliance and the Americans are moving on Kandahar!” The man replied. Sumir ran to the Volvo and jumped into the driver’s seat. The engine was summoned to life and the car sent dust flying in its wake as it left the camp and accelerated down the dirt road. The Volvo slid around the sharp curves of the road as it wound down the mountainside. The Volvo began passing vehicles of all kinds on the road, all heading east toward Kandahar. Sumir knew he was running out of time. He had been planning on moving his wife and son out of Kandahar for weeks, but was having trouble securing transportation for them into Pakistan. He knew Kandahar was a Taliban stronghold and he was hoping that the city could be held until he could get them out. Now with the news that the city was under siege, he would have to get to them before the Northern Alliance pushed into the city. Sumir pushed the old Volvo to its limit on the old dirt roads leading to the city. The sun was going down now and smoke from the city could now be clearly seen in front of the setting sun.

Members of THC were not supposed to marry. Sumir had married his wife in secret and moved her and his son with him into the region that he was operating in. Not even Daven, his partner for the last few months knew of his family. THC wanted single men that could be counted on to sacrifice their life

if called on to do so without hesitation. Sumir was dedicated to the cause, but had great love for his family.

Darkness swept through the mountain passages as the sun set behind the mountains. A red glow could now be seen from the city as fires burned in the distance. Sumir could see a row of brake lights a half mile in front of him on the road. There were several large trucks blocking the road and armed Northern Alliance soldiers were stopping all vehicles. Sumir slowed the Volvo as he approached the line of cars. While quickly turning the wheel, Sumir pulled the Volvo off the road and began driving parallel to the line of cars. The car was jarred by the rough ground but continued toward the road block. People who were standing outside of their stopped cars looked and pointed in amazement. As the Volvo approached the roadblock, soldiers came to the side of the road with their rifles ready. Several men stood directly in the path of the oncoming car until it became apparent that it would not be stopped. Bullets tore through the old Volvo as the soldiers opened fire. Sumir ducked behind the dash and kept his foot on the accelerator. Glass poured into the car as the windows were pierced by the gunfire. Both left side tires were shot out and several shots to the engine compartment sent smoke bursting from under the hood. A shot penetrated the driver's side door and hit Sumir in the left thigh. The car was badly shot up, but kept moving. As the car moved out of range of the soldiers the gun fire subsided. Sumir clenched his hand on his wounded leg. Smoke began to fill the car as the Volvo pulled back onto the road. The car was struggling to hold 30 mph, but Sumir was thankful that it was still moving at all. The car listed to one side and radiator fluid poured from under the engine as it approached the outskirts of the city. The Volvo was slowed to a stop along side an old brick and stucco building. Sumir pulled off his shirt and tied it tightly around his wounded thigh. He winced in pain as he pulled the cloth snug. With the bleeding under control for the moment, he tried to ease the car forward again. The car lurched forward then screeched to a sudden stop as the engine ceased and refused to go any further. Sumir pounded the steering wheel in frustration with his fist before opening the door and taking his first painful step onto his wounded leg.

His leg almost gave out before he could take several steps. His leg stiffened and he began to limp up the deserted city street. He walked several blocks toward the house his family was staying in. He could hear small arms

fire in the distance and the light from the burning buildings became more brilliant. Smoke billowed from burning houses as Sumir approached his block. His pace quickened as he approached his house. Light from the fires in the street showed the house's collapsed roof and several collapsed exterior walls. As he burst through the front door, he began pushing debris around as he called for his wife. The walls were blackened from the nearby fires and broken pieces of ceiling and roof tiles littered the rooms. The hallway to the bedroom was blocked by a large section of the ceiling that had separated from the roof. Sumir crawled underneath the broken ceiling joist and went into the bedroom. An exterior wall lay collapsed over the bed. He called for his wife and son as he pulled pieces of the wall off of the bed. His heart sank when he uncovered the bed and revealed its occupants. His face contorted and tears streamed from his eyes as he leaned down and wrapped his arms around his wife and son. Their crushed bodies lay huddled together in the bed. Anger replaced sadness on Sumir's face. He looked to the sky and could see American F-16 jet fighters streak through the sky. He vowed to return his vengeance on those responsible.

CHAPTER 2

Jarred from his sleep, Jed was disoriented as he sat up in his bed. Sweat ran down his forehead as he began scanning his surroundings. His heart pounded and his breathing was heavy as he tried to remember where he was. A comforting arm surrounded his head as his wife comforted him.

“Ssshhh, it was just a dream.” She told him as she held his head in her arms. It didn’t feel like a dream. Moments ago, Jed was back in Vietnam. He could still feel the adrenaline that coursed through his body as he moved through the jungle toward the enemy. Slowly, his memory began to return and his surroundings once again were familiar. Jed was in his home in Haven Crest, West Virginia. In his late 50’s now, Jed was much older than he was when he left Vietnam. He laid back down and put his arms around his wife. She had become used to the dreams over the years and was always there to comfort him when he had one. It had been over 30 years and Jed could still see the faces of men long since gone. The images of things he had seen never really left his mind, even though his life had long since moved on.

Haven Crest was Jed’s home town where he grew up and where he returned to after the war. A small town nestled in a large valley, Haven Crest was home to just above ten thousand residents. The city hall building in the center of town is well over a hundred years old and is the pride of the residents. In addition to the city hall building, there are several churches that were built just after the civil war. The main industry of the historic small town is an auto parts plant that resides just outside of town. Jed recently retired from this plant after 30 years of service. Jed enjoyed the time off but found it hard to keep himself busy. He now spent most of his time teaching his youngest son the fine art of precision shooting. His oldest son was a senior at Annapolis Naval Academy and whose graduation is just hours away. His youngest son, Jake, was fifteen and a freshman and Haven Crest High School, the same school that Jed graduated from many years ago. In addition to shooting, Jed had spent many hours teaching Jake how to drive. Jed

enjoyed the time he spent with Jake and also looked forward to seeing his oldest son, Ben.

In the morning, Jed and his wife, Carol, got into their car and began the drive to Ben's graduation. Low clouds rolled over the mountains as the sun rose in the east. The drive was smooth and they arrived at Annapolis Naval Academy an hour before the graduation ceremony. As they parked in a guest parking lot, a long black limousine pulled into the parking lot. As several men exited the limo, Jed recognized an older man and began walking in his direction.

"I thought Washington had you under lock and key." Jed said to the older man. The man turned and faced Jed.

"I busted out. Do you think I would miss my best friend's son's graduation?"

The two men shook hands and exchanged greetings. The older man was Senator Joel Evans. Jed had served with Evans when he was a Captain in the United States Marine Corps during Vietnam. They all went into the main auditorium and sat down in a reserved row for the Senator and his party. Jed and Evans caught up with each other on their families and began swapping old war stories. Carol grinned and shook her head. She had heard all of Jed's stories and could recite them all from memory. The graduation ceremony eventually got underway and Jed's mind began to wander as the guest speaker spoke about this class's responsibility to the future. He thought about the day they brought Ben home from the hospital. He thought about his first steps and first words. His mind then wandered to the first time Jed had shown Ben how to hold a rifle. Jed was pulled from his memories as the names of graduates were called. Jed was proud of Ben for attending a military academy and becoming a commissioned officer. Jed had enlisted into the Marine Corps right after high school and had always believed that he would have made a good officer if he had been able to get accepted to the academy. Jed was hesitant at first of allowing Ben to join the military. But once convinced that it was what he really wanted, he accepted the decision. He did, however make Jake, his youngest son promise not to follow his big brother's footsteps. Jed knew the military life and wanted better for his boys. Jed did make some calls to several buddies still serving in the military to try to find a good post for Ben. Even though it had been years since they last

served together, the bond that soldiers shared was strong and Jed was still able to call in a few favors. As the graduation came to an end, pictures were taken and good-byes were said. Senator Evans was headed back to Washington to get back to business. His youngest daughter had been accepted to Columbia University. Evans, when the Senate was not in session, worked to prepare for her to move out to college.

Jed and Carol spent several hours with Ben before returning home. Ben would get some time off to visit, but was busy at the moment preparing to head off to basic training. They talked about how much Ben had grown up while on the way home and their hopes for his life. Jed thought a lot about mistakes that he had made and things that he wanted to tell Ben. There just wasn't enough time to tell him everything that he wanted to say. Jed hoped that the academy had adequately prepared him for what lay ahead.

CHAPTER 3

In the middle of the desert of Iran, about 100 miles from the Iran-Iraq border, Sumir stood in front of the main aircraft hanger at a small deserted airstrip. Inside the hanger, two twin engine turbo prop cargo planes rested with their rear cargo doors open. The doors were lowered to the ground creating a ramp that led into the cargo compartment of the planes. The ramp and the cargo compartment were fitted with wheeled tracks to allow pallets of cargo to be quickly loaded and unloaded. Sumir began to pace back and fourth in front of the planes. Although it had been several months since he had taken a round in his left thigh, his leg was still stiff. He checked his watch. The hands read 10 o'clock. The hanger was devoid of any other aircraft. Tool boxes and 55 gallon drums of motor oil lined one wall. Sumir approached a door on the opposite wall. After opening the door and calling for the air crews to get ready, he pulled the side of his dark brown jacket away to reveal a 9mm Uzi strapped to his side. He checked the magazine and toggled the safety to the fire position. Several men came out of the side room and made their way over to a row of lockers in the corner of the hanger. They removed protective radiation suits from the lockers and began to go about the business of sorting their gear. Several pilots headed over to the planes and began performing pre-flight checks. Daven came though the door and stood alongside Sumir.

“They should be arriving in a few minutes” Daven said.

“The sooner the better. I'd like to get this over with. The Iranians have fear in their hearts for the Americans. I fear they will do something stupid that will jeopardize this operation.” Sumir responded.

Dim headlights began to show in the distance. Sumir yelled to the crews to get to their positions. Two trucks approached the hanger after passing through a security gate. The trucks were covered and painted in the green color of the Iranian military. One truck stopped at the front of the hanger and soldiers wearing Nuclear, Chemical and Biological protective suits piled out. They created a perimeter around the hanger holding their Kalashnikov rifles

at the ready. The second truck drove into the hanger and passed underneath the wing of the first transport plane. The truck backed up to the cargo ramp and several men in radiation suits got out. The men by the lockers finished outfitting themselves in the radiations suits and went over to the truck and joined the other men as they began checking the truck for radiation. After several minutes, they determined that it was safe. The back of the truck was opened and two pallets could be seen inside the trucks. The pallets were loaded with five black cases that were strapped to the pallets. The first one was pushed to the end of the truck and onto a lift gate. The lift then lowered the first pallet onto the ramp of the aircraft. It was then pushed up the ramp on a wheeled track into the cargo bay.

“Move the truck and we will unload the other pallet into the second plane.” One of the men from the truck said.

“No, both will be loaded into this plane.” Sumir snapped in the man’s direction. The man was the technical engineer who was in charge of the material transport. The engineer worked directly for the Iranian government and was very particular about how these types of materials were handled.

“The arrangement was that they would be transported in separate planes,” the engineer retorted.

A small bead of sweat began to roll down Sumir’s left cheek. He did not want his plans ruined by this man. Sumir knew that moving the cases after they were loaded presents new risks that he didn’t want to deal with. In order for his plan to deliver the cases to work, only one plane could be loaded. Sumir walked directly up to the engineer and pulled the hood off of his radiation suit.

“You listen to me, the material will be loaded onto this one plane, or it will be left here for you to deal with.” Sumir growled in the engineer’s face. Sumir believed that the threat of leaving the material would be effective. The world community, the United Nations in particular, has been keeping a close eye on Iran’s uranium enrichment program. There are constant threats of new U.N. sanctions with the effort of trying to stop Iran from producing nuclear material. With new efforts by the U.N. to send inspectors to verify the current activities of Iran’s nuclear program, Iran is trying to hide the fact that not only are they enriching uranium, but have been doing so quite successfully for the past three years. Attempts are now being made to get rid of as much material as possible. With Iran’s government being sympathetic to radical Islamic

movements that appose the west, THC was certainly a candidate to receive a shipment or two.

“Is there a problem?” A man in a black suit asked as he stepped to the back of the plane from the security truck. The man was followed by several soldiers with their AK-47’s clearly visible.

“No problem.” The engineer muttered as he turned his attention toward unloading the second pallet. Sumir tossed the hood to the radiation suit into the back of the truck as the man in the black suit approached.

“Good, we wouldn’t want there to be any complications.” The man in black said as he turned back toward the soldiers accompanying him. The second pallet of black cases was loaded onto the plane. The crew of the plane strapped both stacks of cases securely to the floor of the cargo compartment. Sumir was standing on the ramp inspecting the work as the man in black approached with his two guards.

“I’m sure you won’t mind if we accompany the cargo to its destination.” The man said.

“We do not need your protection.” Sumir responded.

“My government wants me to make sure that the cargo reaches its destination safely. I am afraid I am going to have to insist.” The man in black said as his two guards stepped forward.

“Suit yourself.” Sumir said and walked off of the ramp. He gave Daven a sharp look, Once Daven returned Sumir’s stare, Sumir nodded and headed into the plane.

“Let’s get going.” Sumir shouted as the air crews boarded their planes and the ramps were retracted. Sumir waited until the last moment, and then jumped onto the ramp as it closed. The men boarded their respective trucks and drove directly away from the hanger. The two soldiers that had accompanied the man in black leaned against the wall of the cargo bay, one on either side of the black cases. Sumir walked past the man in black and headed to the cockpit.

“I could use something to drink.” The man in the black suit said to Sumir as he passed.

“All in good time.” Sumir said under his breath as he left the cargo compartment. Daven remained in the cargo compartment and kept his eyes on the soldiers. The empty plane taxied out of the hanger first and lined up

at the end of the runway. The plane loaded with the black cases taxied out next and lined up behind the first plane. After the final pre-flight checks, both planes took off and headed northwest toward Turkey. The planes flew for several hours and passed through Turkey and out over the Mediterranean Sea. Sumir left the cockpit and headed back to the cargo compartment. When he entered the cargo compartment, he was met by the man in the black suit. He was visibly agitated as he checked his watch.

“What is taking so long? We should have landed in Pakistan by now.” The man in black asked Sumir angrily. Sumir nodded to Daven and turned toward the man in black. Daven reached into his jacket and removed a silenced Walther P99 pistol. In one quick motion, he sent one round into the chest of the nearest soldier before swinging his pistol toward the other. Startled, the other soldier was able to get his rifle into his hands before he was struck by a 9mm bullet in the center of his chest. Once the guards were dispatched, Daven came over and stood next to Sumir who was still facing the stunned man in the black suit. Sumir pulled the UZI from under his jacket and aimed the muzzle at the man. Daven stepped forward and removed a pistol from the man’s belt.

“We won’t be going to Pakistan. Are you still interested in that drink?” Sumir asked the man as he walked toward the back of the cargo compartment and hit the button to open the cargo door. Daven moved behind the man and prodded the muzzle of his pistol into his back causing the man to stumble forward. The cargo door crept open causing the air to rush out, dropping the air pressure in the cargo compartment. Although the sudden drop in pressure caused pain in the men’s ears, and dropped the inside air temperature by 20 or so degrees, the plane was flying below twelve thousand feet, so the air still had enough oxygen to keep the men conscience. As the door opened, the sight of the Mediterranean Sea shimmering in the moonlight filled the back of the aircraft. The man in black was prodded toward the open ramp as Daven once again walked to Sumir’s side.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Do you know who you are dealing with? My government won’t stand for this act! You will be hunted down and executed!” The man in black threatened.

“Then let them come.” Sumir said as he leveled his Uzi at the man. Sumir let out a burst of fire from the Uzi striking the man in the chest. The man fell

backward and was swept off the ramp by the rush of air outside. Daven and Sumir stripped the weapons from the two soldiers and hurled them out of the back of the plane before retracting the loading ramp. One pilot removed his head set as Sumir entered the cockpit.

“It’s done, you may proceed,” He said to the pilot before retiring to the cargo compartment.

Both planes continued to fly across the Mediterranean Sea before landing in Madrid, Spain for refueling. Sumir and Daven gathered their gear and prepared to depart the plane once safely on the ground. Since the aircraft’s flight plan showed that it was destined for Mexico, the planes were not searched. The planes would only be subjected to a customs inspection at their destination. Sumir gathered up all of the guns onboard the plane and placed them in a green duffle bag. Along with his black carry on bag, he exited the plane when it was on the ground. Daven followed closely behind Sumir after placing his firearm into the green duffle bag before leaving the plane. As Sumir and Daven crossed the ramp that the planes were parked on, he walked over to a small tug pulling a line of baggage carts behind. Sumir tossed the green duffle bag into one of the baggage cars as it passed by. If the drop off was successful, he didn’t want the pilots to have to explain why they were transporting weapons in empty planes. Sumir and Daven then proceeded to the check in counter for commercial flights in the main terminal. After refueling, the two cargo planes taxied to their assigned runways for departure and took off heading toward Mexico. Sumir checked into a commercial flight flying directly from Madrid to Miami, Florida. Daven went to a different airline desk and picked up his boarding pass for his flight to London. The face of the man standing in front of the check in agent perfectly matched the picture in the passport that Sumir had handed to her. The passport showed that Sumir was a citizen of India and his name was Anjani Singh. Daven was traveling under another name also. His passport showing the name Devish Mantage was also from India. Their immigration forms indicated that they were traveling on business and had nothing to claim. Sumir had obtained fresh passports for this trip to ensure that they wouldn’t show up on any government terrorist watch lists. He had also worked on his English to add a slight Indian accent. That, along with his dark skin made his cover story believable to the check in agent. After being cleared and issued his boarding

pass, Sumir proceeded to his gate. Sumir pulled out his satellite phone from his jacket pocket and placed a call to inform his superiors that everything was on schedule. Then, Sumir and Daven relaxed and waited for their flights.

CHAPTER 4

The grass gleamed with morning dew as the sun peaked over the horizon. The clearing in the woods sloped downward gently bordered by a babbling brook at the base of the clearing before the thick trees of the woods began again. The air was cool and carried by a slight breeze moving through the clearing, rustling the leaves of the trees as it went. Several deer walked along the bank of the brook and picked at the grass as they went. The sight and hearing of the deer was acutely sensitive and this morning they sensed no danger. The larger of the deer moved along ahead of the others, keeping a close eye on the woods and his nose in the air. The lead buck walked the others along the brook and into the clearing to graze on the thick grass and bushes.

At the high edge of the clearing, the light of the sun passed through the air and into a mound of grass and branches through an opening into a glass and plastic tube before entering the sharp eye of a hunter. What appeared to be a clump of grass and branches was the ragged surface of Jed's gillie suit. Jed peered through his rifle scope and tracked the lead buck as he walked. Jed had been on the uphill side of what was known as Pine Ridge for the past three hours, well before dawn. After taking the time to add natural foliage to his gillie suit, Jed settled into a shooting position that gave him a clear line of sight into the whole clearing. He had spent many mornings out on Pine Ridge since he had been a boy and had taken many deer.

Since retirement, Jed had spent more time at the range mostly with his son Jake, teaching him how to shoot. Since deer season had begun, Jed had spent several mornings in different spots and hadn't seen much until this morning. The lead buck was a ten pointer and had to be at least 250 lbs.

Jed relaxed and began to regulate his breathing as he settled his cross hairs on the buck's shoulder. He continued to track the deer as it walked along. Jed began to apply pressure to the trigger of his rifle as Jed's sight picture filled with the face of a man. The man's face was dull grey and wrinkly with

blood running from his eyes. His eyes were staring accusingly at Jed and his mouth was cracked open as if to ask a question. A cold chill broke out down Jed's back as the skin on his neck turned to goose flesh. Jed pulled his eyes shut and put his head down to try to put the image of the face out of his mind.

The face was of an NVA Lieutenant. Jed had been in country for about a month before making his first kill. The patrol that he was attached to had walked into an ambush in the jungle. Men dived for cover as rounds from Russian RPK machine guns ripped through the jungle foliage above their heads. With Jed's rifle cradled across his forearms, he crawled through the jungle's thick under brush toward the enemy fire. The ambushed Marines returned fire and began making radio calls for air support. Jed continued to crawl toward the sound of the enemy fire. The brush was so thick that at one point he crawled past several enemy soldiers shooting AK-47 rifles at the Marines. The thick brush prevented the soldiers from detecting Jed as he crawled past them. Jed had thought about shooting at the soldiers, but his main concern was to take out the machine guns that had the Marines pinned down. If the machine guns were silenced, then he believed that the Marines could advance and fight through the ambush. He needed to stay concealed if he was to make it to the machine guns.

Jed continued toward the sound of the machine guns. As he approached, the legs of several men became visible beneath the foliage created by the large leafed bushes. Jed's heart was racing and his hands were shaking. He tried to concentrate and think back to his training. He looked at his rifle in his hands and thought that he had made a mistake by crawling so close with a bolt action rifle.

After a moment of hesitation, Jed jumped to his feet and brought his rifle to his shoulder as a scream shot out of his mouth. Jed saw two men operating RPK machine guns and a Lieutenant standing behind the men directing their fire. The men were in a well concealed machine gun nest and Jed wondered if any of the Marines would be able to see the position from where they were. The noises of the machine guns drown out Jed's scream and only the Lieutenant turned toward Jed. Jed and the Lieutenant were only about twenty feet apart. Jed looked through the rifle scope and aimed at the man's head. The NVA officer's face filled Jed's sight picture at that short distance. Jed's hands shook and the cross hairs danced around the nose of the officer.

The face in Jed's sight picture was surprised and confused. The eyes were wide and the mouth was cracked open to one side. Jed hesitated for one moment as both men were frozen by fear. Finally, Jed squeezed the trigger and saw the back of the man's head explode and fall backward. The clarity of the man's head was acute due to the short distance and adrenaline made everything happen in slow motion. The shot at close range caught the attention of the two machine gunners and they turned toward Jed as their machine guns ran silent.

Jed, now understanding that he was too close for the rifle to be effective dropped his right hand to his side and pulled his .45 caliber pistol from its belt holster and drew on the two soldiers. His left hand also let go of the rifle and let it drop to the ground. The two soldiers scrambled to draw pistols of their own as their machine guns were fixed in gun mounts and could not be brought to bear quickly against this new threat. Jed screamed again and his pistol belched smoke and fire as he emptied the eight round magazine into the men. Both soldiers were hit and slumped over behind the machine guns. Jed lowered his pistol and stood, staring at the three bodies on the ground.

With the gun fire from the machine guns absent, the point man of the patrol stood up and yelled at the others to move forward. He knew that in an ambush situation, a good ambusher will cut off escape points and will try to destroy its prey as it turned and tried to disengage. In this situation, the weak point is directly in front, the way the patrol was heading. Marines reloaded their rifles and charged ahead, easily overrunning the NVA soldier's spread out in the jungle.

Rounds whizzed past Jed from the Marine's M16 rifles as he stood and stared at the three bodies. The Marines moved past as they cleared the area. Jed's good friend, Corporal Baker stopped by Jed and began yelling at him to start moving. Baker grabbed Jed's shoulder and shook him, bringing Jed back to reality.

With all this running through Jed's mind, Jed opened his eyes back on Pine Ridge in West Virginia. His head rose and he checked to ensure that the face was gone. It was.

"Today is your lucky day." Jed said to the buck. He no longer wanted to be out there. As Jed stood, the buck detected him and the whole group of deer sprinted off into the woods with their white tails held high and flared.

Jake lined up the sights of his Armalite M-15 rifle. The front sight danced wildly but soon steadied as Jake regulated his breathing. As the sights steadied onto the target, he placed his finger on the trigger and squeezed gently to take out the first stage of his trigger. His lungs filled and he paused as he squeezed the trigger once again. The front sight bobbed up and down, and then rested once again on the target. Jake exhaled and relieved the pressure on the trigger, allowing the disconnect to release the hammer.

“High, at eleven o’clock, just outside the ten ring.” Jed said as he peered through a high powered spotting scope just behind Jake.

Jake unmounted the rifle from his shoulder and brought the rifle down to his side to load another round in the chamber. Jake and his dad were at a private shooting range that they were members of, practicing for a shooting competition set to take place next weekend. Jake was in the standing position practicing shooting off hand at a distance of two hundred yards. They were approaching the end of their practice session and Jake’s eyes were getting tired from the strain. He took several more shots scoring one shot in the ten ring and another in the bulls eye.

“Well, that should do it for today.” Jed said as he began packing up the spotting scope.

“You’ve been shooting very well these last few weeks. I won’t be surprised if you don’t out score a few of the old timers next week.” Jed and Jake packed up their gear and Jake placed his target rifle into a rifle case and placed it into the back of their truck. They had practiced regularly every Saturday afternoon since Jake was twelve. Since Jed was now retired, they were able to sneak out to the range after school several times a week too.

“Dad, is it true that you shot a General during the war”? Jake asked as they got into the truck and headed out of the parking lot.

“Who told you that”? Jed asked taken back by the question.

“Well, I was talking to Billy Thompson and he was telling me about what his dad did during the war and he said that his dad told him a few stories about you.”

“He did, did he? Well his dad spent most of the war state side. I’m surprised he had any stories to tell. Not only that, but we didn’t even serve together, so I wouldn’t believe much that you hear from Billy.”

“Well, is it true?” Jake asked sheepishly.

“What difference would it make? That was a long time ago.”

“Well, I don’t know. You just don’t talk about those kinds of things very much. You talk about your friends and stuff that you did while you were on leave, but not about, you know, other stuff that you did.”

“Well then you heard about the important stuff. Anything else that I did, I did to stay alive. I’m not proud of some of the things that I did.” Jed paused.

“Do you want to know if I killed a General?” Jed asked now feeling the need to talk about it with his son.

“I’d like to hear about it, yeah.” Jake said. Jed paused and took a deep breath.

“It was right before I was sent home. He was a North Vietnamese General. I was sent behind enemy lines to take him out. I stalked him for several days before I took him while he was inside an enemy encampment surrounded by a few thousand Vietcong regular army soldiers.”

“Did you get a medal for shooting him?” Jake asked.

“The only thing that I ever got a metal for was not getting killed.” Jed retorted.

“The General was offering bounties for the deaths of Americans. He was responsible for the deaths of several of my closest friends. He paid out thousands of dollars to kids to shoot us in the back while we were on leave and return with our dog tags. Another of my friends was captured and tortured by him and his henchmen before they killed him. I took him out to protect my friends and those I served with.” When Jed finished, Jake had a somber look on his face. There was a lot that he did not know about his dad.

“Come on, let’s go meet your mother for dinner,” Jed said as he rolled the truck down the road, heading home.

That night, over dinner, Jed thought a lot about the things that he did during the Vietnam War. He thought about what additional he should tell his son. There was a lot that Jed didn’t want to talk about to anyone. There was a lot that he wished he could forget. Jed had had a few discussions with Ben when he had told his dad that he wanted to go into the military. Jed told him about some of the hardships that he faced during training and during combat. He wanted to make sure Ben had thought about his decision and was sure that was what he wanted to do, but in the end, it was his decision to make. With Jed’s blessing, he had left for the academy a few months later.

After dinner, while Jed, his wife and youngest son were watching TV in the living room, the phone began to ring. Carol went over and picked up the receiver and said hello. She became excited when she heard the voice of her son Ben on the other end. All in the room made a mad dash around the house to pick up a phone to join in the conversation. It had only been two weeks since Ben had returned from basic training. He stayed for a five day visit before shipping back out for more training. While currently attending training at the Marine Corps Mountain training center, he called home to let everyone know how he was doing. He gave the usual update on how he was doing and how bad the food was before telling his parents about his first assignment once training was completed.

“I’ve been assigned a small unit of Marines to command in Afghanistan. It will be a group of designated marksmen. We’ll be assigned targets to hit by the infantry. The brass thinks this will cut down on the collateral damage caused by all of the bombing.” Ben said.

“Afghanistan, I thought you were going to request something stateside for your first posting?” Carol asked.

“You mother’s right, you be careful out there.” Jed told his son, ignoring Carol’s question.

“You know I will. Look I have to get ready for the next exercise. I’ll call you when I can. Bye.” Ben said quickly before more concern was aired. Jed walked over to his wife and put an arm around her shoulders.

“He’ll be fine. After all, I taught him everything I know.” Jed reassured her. Carol shot Jed an annoyed look.

“I know, and you barely made it back to me.” Carol said as she brushed a tear from her eyes.

CHAPTER 5

Rain streaked across the windshield as the lead cargo plane banked and turned northwest on a direct heading for Mexico City. After crossing the Atlantic, both planes maneuvered into the Gulf of Mexico while keeping their distance from US airspace. After flying around the peninsula of Florida, they were now on a direct heading to their next fuel stop. The co-pilot in the lead plane had been monitoring the radio frequencies that gave weather updates for the gulf region. A new weather system was sweeping the gulf bringing with it hard rain and high winds. Sweat ran down the co-pilot's forehead as he rechecked the fuel consumption calculations for the third time. Was the increased head wind from the storm going to cause them to run out of fuel before they reached their refueling point? After a quick conversation with the pilot, they decided to lower their altitude by another five thousand feet to see if the winds were lower. Both pilots were struggling to keep the planes from buffeting in the high winds. The co-pilot of the second plane had made three trips to the cargo compartment in the last hour to make sure that the cases were still secure. After all, if the containment seals on the cases were damaged, the cases would have to be dumped into the ocean. This cargo was too important. They would never get another chance like this.

The winds did subside at the lower altitude and the pilots trimmed out their planes and adjusted their headings. The fuel gages indicated empty as the planes passed over the coast of Mexico. They were ten miles out from their destination, an abandoned air strip just outside a small farming community. The air strip had been used frequently over the years by drug traffickers as they flew small planes across the border into Texas and New Mexico. The sky darkened as the sun lowered in the sky. After a quick call on the radio, light from bonfires began to burn making the outline of the airstrip visible. One at a time, the planes set down and taxied to an old hanger at the end of the strip. Several men standing next to a fuel truck greeted the pilots as they disembarked from their planes. The pilots were Middle Eastern, while the

men with the fuel truck were Latino and well dressed to fit in with the local population.

“Hola, como estas?” A man said as he stepped away from the fuel truck and greeted the pilots.

“You have the fuel for my planes?” The pilot from the first plane said to the man.

“Of course, as requested. You must be Shumid, you can call me Padro.”

“I am. You should also have a phone for me,” Shumid said.

“Of course.” Padro said as he handed a cell phone to Shumid.

“Good, refuel the planes and tell me where we will stay tonight.”

“We will begin refueling right away. You and your men may stay in the office in the back of the hanger. We have set up some cots for you and your men.”

“Good, make sure none of your men enter either of the planes.” Shumid said as he motioned to the other pilots to follow him into the hanger. This airfield had been used before by THC to smuggle supplies into the US before and although Shumid did not like the Mexicans hired to guard the airfield while they were there, he trusted them not to double-cross his bosses. Padro and another man pulled the fuel truck up to the first plane and began refueling. Three more men emerged from the back of the hanger and began patrolling the area around the planes. The men were dressed in the standard olive drab uniforms of the Mexican army and were carrying M-16's. After getting settled in the hanger office, Shumid powered on the cell phone and made a call to the flight control center at the Mexico City airport and closed their flight plan before settling into one of the cots and going to sleep.

The morning sun peaking over the horizon bore through the hanger and flooded the hanger office with its morning light. Shumid's eyes blinked open as he jerked out of his cot. The other pilots were still sound asleep as Shumid got up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Pedro was sipping a cup of coffee at the entrance of the hanger as Shumid approached.

“The planes are fueled and ready. You'll be leaving soon, yes?” Pedro asked Shumid as he neared.

“We'll be leaving in thirty minutes.” Shumid then pulled the cell phone from his pocket and punched in the number for the flight control center. Shumid knew that the U.S. border with Mexico was closely monitored. Any

plane flying near the border without a filed flight plan would be monitored and intercepted if it came too close to the border. After filing new flight plans for both planes, he went back to the hanger office and woke the other pilots. Fifteen minutes later, both planes were back in the air and were heading for US airspace. The planes flew northwest before crossing the US border into New Mexico. The pilots had been in contact with air traffic controllers as they knew their flight path would be closely monitored as they crossed into US airspace. Per their flight plans, the lead plane turned north toward Albuquerque as the second plane maintained a westerly course toward Phoenix. The planes had put one hundred miles between them as Shumid turned to his co-pilot and nodded. With his hand shaking, the copilot reached over to the transponder and dialed in the transponder code 7777. Within seconds, alarms sounded in the air traffic control center at the Albuquerque International Airport.

“Sir, I have a plane displaying the transponder code indicating a hijacking!” The air traffic controller said, calling to his supervisor.

“Are you still in contact with the pilots?” The supervisor asked.

“I’ve been trying sir, but they’re not responding to my radio calls.”

“Get on the phone with the New Mexico Air National Guard and let them know we have a hi-jacked plane in our airspace!” The supervisor called to another man.

“I want a fifty mile separation from that plane and all other traffic.” The supervisor called to the air traffic controllers.

The pilots of the second plane could hear the radio traffic redirecting flights and attempting to contact the first plane. It was now up to them. They slowed the plane to one hundred and ten knots and lowered their altitude to one thousand feet. The co-pilot pulled off his head set and headed for the cargo compartment. The two pallets of black cases in the cargo compartment were no longer strapped to the floor and now had parachutes secured to the tops of both stacks. The co-pilot went to the back to the compartment and hit the button to open the rear cargo ramp. He next connected the rip lines on the parachutes to cables that ran to the back of the plane. He grabbed a head set at the door of the cargo compartment and waited for the sign. The pilot kept the plane flying low and slow over the Arizona desert. The plane flew for several miles before the pilot saw a small

convoy made up of several Jeeps and cargo vans driving along an old dirt road. After passing over the convoy, the pilot gave the signal. The co-pilot went to the first pallet and pushed it down the cargo ramp. As the pallet fell free from the ramp, the rip cord pulled the chute open. The second pallet followed the first as both pallets floated toward the ground. Once both pallets were out, the co-pilot closed the cargo ramped and rushed back up to the cockpit.

“Ok, let’s get out of here,” the co-pilot said as the pilot pushed the throttles forward and pulled back on the elevator.

A lone Jeep approached the pallets as they touched down. The driver got out of the Jeep wearing a radiation suit. He approached the pallets waving a Geiger counter. After checking all of the cases for radiation, the driver pulled off his mask and called into a small radio. Another Jeep followed by two cargo vans approached. Sumir jumped out of the second Jeep as it came to a stop and began calling out orders to the other men as they jumped out of the vans.

“Secure the cases into the vans! I want this whole area clear in five minutes!” Sumir called to the men. The cases were loaded into the vans and within four minutes everything was loaded and the convoy set out again down the dirt road. Sumir flipped open his cell phone and dialed a number as his Jeep led the convoy.

“The pickup is complete.” Simur said after a voice answered. Sumir had taken a connecting flight from Miami to Albuquerque where he met up with a local group of THC members who had been preparing for his arrival.

“Sir, two F-16s have intercepted the hi-jacked plane.” The air traffic controller called to his supervisor.

“The pilots are now responding. They’re saying that the transponder was set by mistake and that they’re not being hi-jacked.”

“Have the F-16’s escort this plane to runway 27 Left, and call the metro police. I want a SWAT team waiting when this plane lands.” The supervisor called.

“Sir, I have another plane that’s off of its flight plan.” Another air traffic controller said to the supervisor.

“What, where?” Incredulous, the supervisor asked.

“It’s a plane heading to Phoenix. Look, if I back up the radar recording,

it looks like the plane dropped to one thousand feet of altitude and slowed way down.” the controller said.

“Call the Air National Guard; I want them to intercept that plane!” The supervisor called out.

“Sir, what do you think it means?” The controller asked the supervisor.

“Not sure, they could have been getting into position to drop something. Why didn’t we see this until now?”

“Well, with all of the rerouting we were doing with all of the air traffic because of the hi-jacked plane, I guess we missed it until now.” The controller said nervously.

“Sir, we heard back from the Air National Guard, it will take them fifteen minutes to intercept the plane. All of their planes are escorting the hi-jacked plane.” A man called back to the Supervisor.

“Damn it. They’ll be long gone by then. Call the Phoenix airport. Tell them to lock down this second plane upon arrival, and call the Feds. Tell them we have a potential breach in border security.”

Thirty minutes later, the second cargo plane was brought to a stop in an empty hanger at the Phoenix airport. Members of the phoenix SWAT team boarded the plane and detained the two pilots. The SWAT team searched the plane and found that the plane was empty. The pilots were taken to a small conference room in the aviation offices at the hangar to be questioned. Sgt. Staffer, the SWAT Team commander began removing his tactical vest and gear to begin the questioning process when the front door of the aviation offices opened and several men in black suits walked through the front door. Two men turned right to head down the hall toward the hanger and two men walked over to the conference room and looked at the pilots.

“Just what in the hell is going on here?” Sgt. Staffer asked the first man.

“Special Agent Murphy, this is Special Agent Mullins. We’re with the FBI.” Special Agent Murphy said as he stretched his arm out to show Sgt. Staffer his FBI badge.

“Are these the two pilots from the cargo plane that was held?”

“Yeah. That’s them.” Sgt. Staffer said as he poked a finger at the two men in the conference room.

“We were just about to question them.”

“There’s no need. They won’t talk to you. I have some men on their way

to pick them up. Hold them until they arrive.” Special Agent Murphy commanded.

“Now wait just a damn minute. We found nothing on the plane and these guys haven’t done anything. What’s the FBI’s interest in these guys?” Sgt. Staffer asked now poking a finger at Special Agent Murphy.

Murphy flipped open a file folder and rummaged through several pages before pulling two out and handing them to Sgt. Staffer.

“Recognize these two men? They are members of an Islamic extremist group that is responsible for attacks on several military bases in Afghanistan. We have been tracking their plane for two days now. These men will be sent to Guantanamo Bay for questioning. Now which way to the hanger?” Murphy asked Sgt. Staffer letting his irritation flow through his voice.

Sgt. Staffer, apparently satisfied with the answer, pointed down the hall, this time with a blank look on his face. Murphy waved to the other FBI man and they both walked down the hall and pushed open the door leading to the hanger. Another FBI man in a black suit looked up from several hand held sensors as Murphy entered the hanger and walked over.

“We checked the plane. It looks like whatever was here has been dropped. We did pick up several faint readings, but it looks like the cargo was intact.” The man said.

“They must have made the drop. Is the chopper waiting?” Murphy asked. He had seen this type of setup before. Murphy had spent several years working with the Drug Enforcement Agency and had always said that if the terrorist ever became as crafty as the drug smugglers then we were all in trouble.

“Yes, it’s just outside. The pilots have been given the position from air traffic control.”

“Stay here and make sure that the pilots get picked up. I’m going to check out the drop off point.”

The man nodded to Murphy before heading out of the hanger. Murphy and Mullins made their way out of the hanger and boarded the waiting chopper.

“We should have never let those planes enter US airspace.” Murphy said to Mullins once the chopper had taken off.

UNDER FIRE FROM AFAR

“The Director didn’t think we had the justification to shoot them down.”
Mullins replied.

“Maybe not, but if these planes were indeed carrying the cargo from Iran, then we have a far worse problem on our hands than a few lost planes.”

CHAPTER 6

The year was 2004. In the southern mountains of Afghanistan the rotor blades of the HUI helicopter thumped through the air as it passed through the mountains bordering Pakistan. The HUI skimmed the ground in the mountain pass before banking and gaining altitude. Atop a ridge overlooking the mountain pass, a remote US military outpost bustled with activity. As the HUI approached a landing pad, it was directed down by a signal man waving the helicopter onto the deck. The outpost was home to several hundred US Marines and two dozen Cobra Attack helicopters. The perimeter was surrounded by razor wire entanglements in front of a ten foot dirt embankment to protect the outpost from direct fire. There were several concrete block buildings in the center of the outpost surrounded by bunkers made up of metal frame structures covered with sand bags.

The door of the HUI slid open once the landing skids settled onto the ground. Lieutenant Ben Marshall stepped out of the helicopter and slung his duffle bag and drag bag over his shoulder before returning a salute from the signal man. The main rotor began winding down as Lt. Marshal approached the main block building. Once inside, he dropped his duffle bag into a chair and set his drag bag against the wall before removing his cover.

“Sergeant, I’m looking for Colonel Baker.” Ben said as he approached the Sergeant’s desk.

“I’m expecting him back at any time Lieutenant. Are you checking in?” The Sergeant asked.

“Yeah, I just got in.”

“Well, you can wait in his office if you’d like.”

“Thanks.” Ben said as he headed toward the Colonel’s office. Colonel Baker’s office was at the end of a short hall with pictures of saluting soldiers lining the walls on either side. Ben let himself in and took a quick look around. The office walls were covered with pictures of the Colonel with people he had served with and places he had been. There were also several framed

displays with purple hearts and several bronze stars. As he browsed through the pictures, he began seeing older pictures that he guessed were from Vietnam. One picture caught his eye as he moved behind the Colonel's desk. He saw a familiar face in a picture of three guys posing in front of a sand bag bunker.

"That was taken a few months before he was wounded." Colonel Baker said as he walked from the door and approached his desk.

"Oh, I'm sorry sir." Ben said as he moved out from behind the desk and saluted.

"As you were." Baker said as he returned Ben's salute.

"Sergeant Mitchell told me you were here." Baker said as he walked behind his desk and removed the picture from the wall. He looked at the picture for a long moment before handing it over his desk to Ben.

"God, we were so young. We were still kids. We're certainly not anymore." Baker said. Ben looked at the picture for a moment and felt surprised to finally recognize the man on the left as his father. The man on the right he saw was a young Lieutenant Baker. He didn't recognize the one in the middle.

"You served with my father?" Ben asked.

"A hell of a man, your father was. I served with him during half of his first tour and his second until he was wounded. He saved my ass a time or two. He was a hell of a Marine."

"Who is the other man in this picture?" Marshal asked.

"That's Wes, he was Jed's spotter. It was a hell of a shame to lose him." Baker said. Ben thought for a moment and remembered his father telling stories about his spotter. This was the first time he had seen a picture.

"I heard that you were graduating. I thought that I could use your help out here. Are you sure you wouldn't rather have accepted that spot of the Marine Corp shooting team? I know your father made a few calls to make that happen for you. They don't get shot at too much you know." Baker asked.

"I thought I could do more good out here." Ben said.

"It's a hell of an honor just to be considered for the Marine Corp shooting team. I hear you can almost shoot as good as your old man."

"Well, he taught me a lot."

"Good, you're going to need all the help you can get. I've hand picked

a group of shooters. I need you to get them organized into marksman teams that can put some directed fire on the enemy. Dropping bombs on enemy positions is destroying too much intelligence. We need to be able to clear out these positions without creating a lot of collateral damage. That's where you come in. Get these guys ready to be sent out in support of the Special Forces operations."

"Isn't this normally the type of job that Sniper teams would get sent out for?"

"Normally yes, but we don't have enough snipers in country and we need the ones that we have for scouting operations. We need designated marksmen who can do the job. Do you feel up to it?"

"Yes sir."

"Good, Sergeant Mitchell has the service records for your guys. Gunnery Sergeant Jones has been over here for eight months and knows the people and terrain. I would get with him to bring you up to speed."

"Sounds good, I'll get started."

"Good, check out your men and gear and report back in tomorrow with a timeline for deployment. Dismissed." Colonel Baker said as he moved his focus back to some papers on his desk. Lt. Marshall walked out of the Colonel's office and back to the Sergeant's desk.

"I was told you have some service records for me." Ben said to Sgt. Mitchell. Sgt. Mitchell pulled a stack of folders from a drawer and handed it to Ben.

"Do you know where I can find Gunnery Sergeant Jones?" Ben asked.

"Check in the barracks to the left of the mess hall. You should be able to find him there."

"Thanks." Ben said as he replaced his cover and slung his duffle bag and drag bag onto his shoulder and walked outside.

The air was hot and dry. He had always heard that a dry heat air was better than humid hot air, but today in the 100 degree heat with the relentless Afghan sun glaring down on him, he thought that it couldn't get much hotter than this. A breeze kicked sand into the air and Marshall lowered his head into the wind to keep the sand out of his eyes. The brief reprieve from the heat prodded him forward.

Gunnery Sergeant Jones was a thick man in his mid thirties. He had joined

the Marines right out of high school and had no intention of leaving until retirement. Now in his seventeenth year in the Corps, he was half way through his first tour in Afghanistan. He was picked by Colonel Baker to be Ben's second in command of his group of designated marksmen. Jones knew the men, knew how to shoot and perhaps most importantly knew how to get things in today's military world.

Jones was reassembling the bolt assembly of his M14 when Lt. Marshall entered the barracks.

"Are you Gunnery Sgt. Jones?" Ben asked as he approached Jones's bunk and dropped his duffle bag on an empty bunk.

"Yes Sir." Jones said as he rose to attention.

"At ease soldier. I'm Lt. Marshall, your new CO. I see you're packing an M14."

"Well sir, I've always been partial to the old M14's. The M4's aren't working worth a damn and the M16A2's lose too much velocity past 500 yards at this altitude. I know that the M16 is standard issue, but the M14 really is the best rifle for the job over here."

"I couldn't agree more. Do you think you could requisition a few more?"

"Yea, I think I could get a few more." Jones said surprised.

"Good, see what you can do. Have you reviewed the roster for the new team?"

"Yes sir. They're all good men. I've served with most of the guys personally. Just what exactly is this new team going to be doing?"

"We're going to be the tip of the spear. We'll be sent in to clear hot areas with precision fire to prevent the need for air strikes. The Military brass are hoping this will reduce collateral damage."

"Sir, is this going to be a sniper platoon?" Jones asked.

"No. We're not going to be scouting or calling for air strikes. We're going to be taking the shots for the infantry."

"Well sir, I think we've got the right group of shooters for that kind of job."

"Good, get everyone together and assemble the men in front of the barracks at 14:00. We've got a lot to do." Ben said as he picked his things back up to leave.

At 14:00 hours, Ben walked down the row of soldiers outside the barracks.

“You were all were transferred to me because of your expert shooting skills. I intend to take those skills and develop two man designated marksman teams to be attached to infantry detachments for the purpose of clearing enemy positions without the use of airpower.” Lt. Ben Marshal said as he walked down the line of his soldiers. There were 11 in all not including him. All had on well worn uniforms from their time in the mountains and all had qualified as an expert with the M16.

“Over the next several weeks, we will work to perfect your skills in target detection, range estimation, creating proper shooting positions and you will learn to operate in two man teams. You will also learn to use the M14 rifle with and without optics. Be ready at 0600 tomorrow to begin training. Dismissed.” Ben said before the men broke from their formation.

The mountain air was cool as the sun broke over the mountains in the eastern sky. Ben had spent that night creating training drills for the men. He started them off with a deceptively difficult target detection exercise. There were ten common military items dispersed on a hillside. The men were to draw a diagram of the area and identify as many of the items as possible. Several items were quickly spotted while others eluded everyone’s vision. Ben reviewed several scanning techniques for preventing the early onset of eye fatigue. He showed them how to scan from near to far, then back again to allow their eyes to adjust to the distance more gradually. He showed them how to scan from one distinguishing terrain feature to another to keep track of where they had scanned. He discussed how to use shadows to detect targets. They practiced this drill every day over the next week until everyone could detect at least nine of the ten items that were randomly hidden. Next, they moved on to range estimation exercises. Military objects of differing sizes were placed at random distances from a fixed observation location. Different range estimation techniques were demonstrated by Ben, then practiced by the men. Map reading, estimating the size of terrain features, visualizing a series of foot ball fields and the use of mil dot reticles in rifle scopes were practiced until everyone could estimate range to within ten yards. Daily patrols were taken with each man taking a turn navigating the terrain using only a map and a compass. Quickly the men learned to use the sun to determine direction and to read the mirage to determine wind speed. Time was also taken to practice the construction of well hidden shooting

positions that offered ballistic protection in addition to concealment. Ben showed the men how to use natural terrain features to conceal them and their equipment while digging out stable shooting platforms. He then spent several weeks at the range showing the men how to calculate bullet drop and windage adjustments and dial the adjustments into their optics. As the men progressed, Ben began to break them up into two man teams. Once paired, the men practiced spotting for each other. Their exercises consisted of talking each other onto targets, averaging range and wind estimations and coordinating firing exercises between teams. Gunnery Sgt. Jones was able to acquire a dozen M14 rifles with a variety of scopes and optics. Each man was able to setup his rifle according to his personal preferences. At least four hours a day were spent at the range sighting in optics and honing shooting skills. Ben paired himself with Sgt. Jones and the two found that they worked well together. Ben's initial report to Colonel Baker was that it would take four weeks to prepare the men for deployment. Ben was confident that the men were ready after three and he began putting the teams in for assignments. He was excited and nervous at the same time. This was the first time that he would be responsible for men in combat. He prayed that he wouldn't let them down.

CHAPTER 7

In July 2005, a white GMC panel truck drove down an empty street in the early morning hours. The New York streets were still dark and the air was wet from the recent rain. The plain white truck attracted little attention in this part of New York as there were always plain white vans driving around, delivering various things. The truck slowed as it approached a guard gate marking the south entrance on one of the largest docks in New York. The guard on duty rose from his chair and approached the truck as the driver's side window rolled down. The men exchanged nods as the driver extended his arm out of the truck holding a brown envelope. The guard thumbed through the stacks of one hundred dollar bills and nodded in approval.

"Fifteen minutes," the guard said as he turned and headed back into the guard shack. The gate began to open and the driver rolled his window up. The truck drove into the docks and headed through the tall stacks of containers. The truck came to a stop in front of a row of containers and two men got out. They approached the front of one container as the truck was backed toward the front. One man checked the container serial number with one from a piece of paper on his clip board. He signaled that this was the one. Another man approached the container door with a set of bolt cutters as the door to the panel truck slide open. Sumir jumped out of the back of the panel truck as the lock of the container was snapped off. The door opened and several men emerged from the container.

"Quickly, we don't have much time," Sumir said in a hushed tone. As eight men came out of the container and headed for the truck carrying wooden crates, more men from the truck went into the container and began unloading. One of the men from the container approached Sumir and held his arms out.

"The delivery, as promised," he said.

"Daven, welcome to America," Sumir replied.

"I have brought something for you. I'm sure you have been missing your rifle," Daven said as he poked his finger at a crate that was being unloaded.

“Excellent.” Sumir replied.

It took almost ten minutes to unload the container and load the men and crates into the back of the truck. The container was closed and a new lock was placed on the door. The truck slowly pulled out and headed back for the gate. The driver and the guard exchanged nods as the truck pulled through the gate.

The truck drove for hours. The men in the back were cramped and tired from their journey. It had taken three weeks in the container by transport ship to make it across the Atlantic. The container was loaded from Spain where the men and crates were loaded in the container onto a ship. The container had been stocked with food, water and oxygen tanks to keep the air fresh. A port-o-john in the corner of the container had served as the bathroom. Daven and the other seven men had taken this trip to ensure that the crates of rifles, ammunition, RPG’s and grenades made it safely. Several of the men were also on the terrorist watch list and they couldn’t take the chance that their fake passports wouldn’t work. The dock security had been paid off previously to allow the group to unload their crates before they went through the customs check, which would have certainly uncovered the men.

After a long drive, the panel truck pulled off of a gravel country road onto a dirt driveway. The truck pulled to a stop inside of an old barn as the barn doors were closed. The truck’s door was raised and the men began to get out.

“Where are we?” Daven asked Sumir as he squinted, allowing his eyes to adjust to the light coming through the cracks in the old barn walls.

“We are on an old farm in West Virginia. I purchased it last year when I arrived. We own over one hundred acres around the farm house. We have set this place up as our head quarters. We can train and move around here. It is safe.” Sumir said.

“Then we are on schedule?” Daven asked.

“Yes my brother, everything is going according to plan. Here, let me show you around.”

The farm was an old dairy farm built during the civil war. It had been used for the Underground Railroad and had several underground rooms under the house and barn. Sumir had found the farm while posing as an Indian businessman eager to settle down with his family in America. The realtor

seemed uneasy at times, but the purchase went through without any problems. Sumir had perfected several different cover identities and disguises for his trips throughout the country. He routinely left the farm for weeks at a time and visited the other cells to check on their progress. The farm was home to over twenty THC members who worked and trained. The farm had become the THC head quarters for the US.

Daven took several days to get settled in and used to the new environment. During that time, Sumir had given him a driver's license and several credit cards that had been made for him. He had a fake identity that Sumir had created. He was given new clothes and glasses that he was to wear. He shaved his beard, cut his hair and was shown how to comb and groom his hair to look like an American.

Several days later, Sumir and Daven left the farm in an old Toyota Corolla to go and check on the progress of the cell in Chicago. It took the better part of a day to make the drive. Sumir and Daven talked the whole time. Daven telling Sumir about the status of the movement in Afganistan and Sumir telling Daven about the status of the movement in America. In all, there were THC cells setup in every major city. They targeted the cities with large populations in order to make the largest impact when the time was right. They knew that fear could be a powerful weapon. They chose the farm as their headquarters because of its isolation. It gave them the ability to move about freely. Only certain members are allowed to leave the farm. Most of them must stay on the grounds and avoid contact with anyone who may live near by. The farm was in the middle of a small valley and the nearest neighbors were miles away. The city cells usually operated out of a house in or near the city. The house was purchased by the lead member of the cell using an assumed identity. The safe house would always have a family living in the house that would act as a front to dispel any curiosity by the neighbors. Most families posed as Indians working in the US. Most of the cell members could easily pose as Indians due to their similar skin color and because their accent was easy to emulate. Americans seemed to be more at ease with Indians than middle easterners. One reason was that Indians were traditionally Buddhist, not Muslim. Given the tensions in the Middle East, most people these days were suspicious of Muslims and tend to watch them more closely.

Sumir and Daven drove into the parking lot of a Wal-Mart just after dusk.

They parked and waited. Neither said a word as they waited for their contact to arrive. Several minutes later, a Dodge minivan pulled up and parked next to their car. They got out and calmly got into the back of the minivan. Neither said a word to the driver or each other. This was a deliberate, rehearsed pickup and everyone knew the drill. Once the minivan left the parking lot, Daven and Sumir slid off of the back seats and lay down on the floor covering themselves with blankets that were sitting on the seats. The minivan drove for fifteen minutes before pulling into the driveway of a small house on a suburban street. The house was a one story ranch style house. Aside from the color, the house looked just like every other house on the block. The garage door opened as the van approached. The van was parked inside and the driver got out. He walked through the garage door as he pushed the button to engage the garage door opener. The door closed as he walked slowly and picked up a newspaper at the end of his driveway. After waving to several neighbors, he turned and walked up the sidewalk to the front door. Sumir and Daven waited patiently, still on the floor of the minivan. The driver walked into the garage and opened the side van door.

“You may come out now.” He said as Daven and Sumir pulled the blankets off and got out of the van.

“Daven, this is John Mohammed, he is the leader here in Chicago.” Sumir said as he introduced the two.

“It is nice to meet you.” John said as he turned and lead them into the house. He opened a door off of the kitchen that lead to the basement. The door was lined on the inside with insulation. Hot air greeted the men’s faces as they went down the stairs.

“This is our work area.” Sumir said as they reached the bottom. The basement was full of tables with laboratory type equipment. Daven recognized some of the tools from workshops that he had seen in Afghan caves. The windows were painted black and the walls and ceilings were covered in thick sheets of insulation. Three men worked at tables wearing white lab coats. One man approached and removed his glasses as Sumir began the introductions.

“Daven, this is Nen Peir. He is in charge of the construction effort here. He and his men have been working to complete the project for the past six months.”

“That’s right, Nen said. We haven’t left this basement in months. I believe that we are getting close.”

Daven looked around. He had been around workshops like this before, But none so close to completion. He estimated that they were weeks away from completion. He walked over to a thick metal door and stopped.

“May I?” He asked practicing traditional American manors.

“Sure, go ahead.” Sumir replied.

Daven turned the handle and pulled the door back. The room was small, about eight feet by eight feet. It was lined from floor to ceiling with lead plates. There was a metal frame holding in the center holding large metal ball measuring several feet across. Wires ran from connections all over the sphere several inches apart. It was beautiful he thought. It looked just like the diagrams that he had seen back in Afghanistan. Finally he was looking at it. The weapon of fire that would strike the Americans on their own soil. A black case was sitting in the corner. It was one of the five black cases that he had helped smuggle out of Iran. Its contents had allowed them to build it.

Special Agent Murphy stepped out of the doors of a cargo container at the New York port authority.

“It’s him alright. This container matches the one they used last year. They even used the same sender address as before. Given the food and water supplies that they had in there, there were probably about ten guys in here. There are a few places on the floor where it looks like there were several heavy crates as well. The port authority should have caught this sooner.” Murphy said to Special Agent Mullins, who had been talking to another Agent while taking some pictures of the broken seal on the container door.

“They must be moving some men and supplies over here that they didn’t think would make it through customs. This would go along with the chatter that we’ve been picking up about another major attack.” Mullins said.

“Yeah. Let’s go talk to the guard.” Murphy said as he walked toward a small office trailer, Mullins falling in behind him. Murphy and Mullins walked past several FBI crime scene vans and entered the small office trailer. They walked in and nodded to several Agents watching the guard sitting in the first office.

“I hope it was worth it. Those men brought some nasty stuff into this

country thanks to you.” Murphy said to the guard as he rounded the office door.

“Hey, it’s like I told the other guy, I don’t know what you’re taking about.” The guard said.

“Save it. We’ve looked at the security tapes. We’ve identified the men that you let onto the docks as known terrorist. Do you know what the penalty is for aiding known terrorist? Not half as much of a penalty as aiding in a terrorist attack. You better hope that nothing comes of this. You’re already going to go away for a long time.”

The guard face went blank. “I want to talk to a lawyer.” he said.

“That’s right, hire a good one.” Murphy said as he turned and walked back out of the office. Murphy pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and began punching in numbers.

“Who are you calling?” Mullins asked.

“The director. I’m recommending that we raise the National Security Terrorist Threat level. Whatever they are planning, it’s coming soon.”

CHAPTER 8

Dusk rolled off the back of the passenger van as it bumped along the dirt road. The van was an unsuspecting white Volvo escorted in front and behind by late model Land Rovers. From his position high upon a hill overlooking the valley, Corporal Blaine could see the heavily armed gunmen riding in the Land Rovers through his high powered spotting scope. He scanned slowly through the windows of the van and focused on a bearded man in the middle row.

“The target has entered the area.” he called over the radio.

The small convoy approached a small village with several block buildings. The buildings were surrounded by mud brick houses lining the road that cut through the village. All three vehicles entered the village and came to a stop in front of a mosc in the center nearest to the largest block building. Men with AK-47 rifles piled out of the Land Rovers and surrounded the van and cleared the entrance to the Mosc. Slowly the van’s side door slid open and small children started getting out. A man wearing an oversized jacket stepped out of the passenger door of the van. Lt. Ben Marshall focused the crosshairs of his Unertl Scope onto the back of the man’s head as he walked slowly toward the Mocs’s entrance. At the same time, the bearded man stepped out of the back of the van and moved into the center of the group of children from the van. There were seven kids ranging in age from four to seven. Some were smiling and laughing with each other, while others looked scared and clung to the older ones. The bearded man turned and waved to another man near the Mosc entrance.

“The target is up.” A voice came over the radio. Ben took a deep breath and spoke quietly into his microphone.

“Go on my shot.” He said as he tried to put the vision of the children out of his mind. He focused on the first man’s head. He knew that his shot had to be on target within a quarter of an inch. His shooting position was 100 yards away in a small mud brick house. A screen covered an outer window

and his M14 rifle was set up on a wooden table just inside the window. The house looked dark inside to someone looking in, but Ben could see everything in the street clearly. The man with the baggy jacket walked straight toward the Mosc. As he brought his right hand down to his side, a remote detonator became visible. His thumb rested on the red ignition button. Ben's crosshairs came to rest on the center of the man's neck as he gently squeezed the trigger. As Ben's sight picture jumped, he could see his shot pass through the man's neck as his hand relaxed around the remote detonator.

In the same instant, the bearded man turned and looked down the street in the direction that the shot had come from. He saw the flash of a muzzle as a 7.62mm bullet from Sgt. Jone's M14 passed swiftly through his forehead and out the other side of his head. The guards that had come out of the Land Rovers quickly brought the AK-47's up to their shoulders and looked for targets. Shots rang out from the surrounding houses as the children scattered and ran for the Mosc. Two of the guards went down as marksmen from Ben's unit cut them down with their rifles. Fear shot through Ben as he saw the children running toward his position. He no longer had a clear shot at the remaining guards. Ben rose from his position and grabbed his M14 from his shooting platform, ran out of the room and through the front door. The remaining three guards opened fire on the houses as they saw the other guards go down.

While running toward the Mosc, Ben leveled his rifle at one guard and squeezed the trigger as he saw his cross hair bear down on the man's chest. The other two guards went down as they were hit from the side by Marines who had circled around the Mosc. As the children cleared the streets, the Marines rushed in to secure the vehicles and the Mosc. Ben approached the man with the baggy jacket with his rifle raised to his shoulder. After the man was hit, he had fallen face down onto the road. As Ben approached the body, he saw the arm move. Another shot of adrenaline coursed through Ben's arms and hands as he saw the man's torso twist. Ben could feel the pressure of the trigger on his finger as he began to squeeze. As he did, he saw a small hand reaching around the body from underneath. Ben relieved the pressure from the trigger and reached down with his left hand to grab the arm of the dead man. With his rifle pointed at the body, he pulled the dead man over and revealed a small boy underneath. The boy was crying and looked up at Ben

past the barrel of his rifle. The boy began to scream as Ben lowered his rifle and held up his left hand to tell him that it was ok. A woman ran from the Mosc entrance and picked the boy up. Ben lowered his rifle but the woman began yelling at him in Arabic. The woman spit at him as she turned to run back into the Mosc with the boy.

Several Marines rushed to the Mosc entrance and kicked the rifles away from the guard's bodies as they checked the bodies for explosives. Several more Marines rushed forward to check the van and the Land Rovers.

"The van is clear." One marine yelled.

"Clear in the trucks." Came the reply from another.

Sgt. Jones came to Ben's side and slung his rifle over his shoulder. He then bent down and zipped open the dead man's jacket to reveal 4 bricks of C4 explosives strapped to a vest. The C4 was wired to a small 6 volt battery and to the remote detonator that ran down the jacket sleeve and rested in the man's open hand. Manning pulled the detonators out of the C4 blocks before disconnecting the battery and putting the C4 blocks in a satchel that was around his shoulder.

Men and women began coming out of the Mosc and the houses and began to surround the Marines who were busy checking the bodies and taking pictures of the bearded man. Several women started yelling and spitting at the Marines. Ben looked around and saw that a crowd was forming around them and it didn't look peaceful. Several of the men in the crowd were their Northern Alliance contacts. Ben began to become confused. Several days ago, these men came to the Marine outpost and told the Marines that a high value target known as Omar Sharid was coming to their village to hold a meeting in the Mosc with several THC members. Omar Sharid had been organizing militants in the area and had been pressing men from the local villages into service for his cause. The village elders asked for the Marines help to stop Omar from taking any more of their people. Captain Baker had ruled out the possibility of an air strike against Omar Sharid after the Northern Alliance contacts told them that he always traveled with local children around so the local population wouldn't try to do anything against him. They also told the Marines about another traveling companion of Omar's who was known to wear an explosive vest when he travels with Omar. It was said that he would detonate himself around the children if any of the local villagers tried

to do anything to them. When Captain Baker came to Ben to create a mission plan to take him out, he warned that a failed attempt on Omar's life would turn all of the local villages against the Marines, who had been sympathetic and a good source of information. Ben took the assignment and began planning the mission. He figured that the most critical shot would be the man with the explosive vest. Ben knew that a precise shot would be required to sever the man's spinal column before he had a chance to push the button to detonate the explosives. So instead of choosing the main target for himself, he chose Sgt. Jones to take the shot at Omar. He trusted Jones's shooting ability and his restraint to wait for Ben to take the first shot. Earlier that morning, they had been welcomed to the village by the local leadership and were given plenty of time to setup and be ready.

Things had certainly changed now. The crowd around the Marines was beginning to look violent. Several of the older men began yelling at the Marines and pointing out of the village to tell them to go.

"All right, let's wrap it up guys." Ben yelled to the Marines. Several of the younger men picked up rocks and threw them at one of the Marines. One Marine was struck on his back and turned around and brought his rifle up to his shoulder.

"Hold your fire!" Ben yelled. The young men threw more rocks and several Marines pointed their rifles at them.

"Hold your fire God damn it!" Ben yelled again as he tried to retain order.

"Let's go! Head to the extraction point, now!" He yelled to the men as they began to withdraw from the area in front of the mosque. Ben and the Marines collected their gear and moved out of the village and began walking the mile and a half back to their Humvees and armored personnel carriers. There they would hitch a ride back to the forward operating base.

Back at the base, Ben gave a post action briefing to Captain Baker in his office. After reviewing Ben's initial report, Captain Baker began to congratulate Ben on a successful mission.

"Well, it looks like all of the mission objectives were met. The target was eliminated. There were no casualties on our side and no civilian casualties. It looks like another successful mission." Captain Baker said.

"Well sir, I don't know that all of the objectives were met. The local villagers became hostile after the action and began shouting and throwing

rocks. I had to get my guys out of there quickly to avoid an incident.” Ben replied.

“But you did.” Captain Baker said.

“Yes sir, but I thought that we were also helping the locals out by taking this war lord out. I don’t understand why they turned on us. I thought that they wanted us there.”

“Don’t confuse being the lesser of two evils with being the good guy, Ben. These people have been at war with each other for a long time before we came here, and they will be at war with each other for a long time after we leave. They came to us because they knew we had the ability to take care of a common problem, not because they trust us or even like us. Just because they are with us today, that doesn’t mean that they won’t try to kill us tomorrow. That’s the reality of this situation.” Captain Baker said.

“Sir, it just makes it hard to know what good we are doing here.” Ben said.

“I know it does. You’ll have to trust me when I say you’ve done good work since you’ve been here. Your team has enabled us to drop our civilian casualty rate in half and have provided valuable Intel. It looks like you have a couple of weeks of vacation ahead. Have you thought about a second tour?” Captain Baker said.

“I have sir.” Ben replied.

“Well I would love to have you back. Enjoy your time off.” Captain Baker said.

“Thank you Sir, I will.” Ben replied as he returned Captain Baker’s salute and left his office.

CHAPTER 9

A bead of sweat rolled down the old man's forehead. He carefully surveyed the room. Everything was in its place. He checked and rechecked cable connections and reviewed readouts displayed on computer screens. When he was finished, he slowly raised his hand and pressed the power button to the cell phone mounted to the top of the contraption. As the phone powered on he closed one eye in anticipation that something bad might happen. He was relieved to see that the phone powered on and everything was still in one piece. The cell phone chirped as it indicated that it was entering its service area. The old man removed another cell phone from his pocket and with sweaty hands he dialed the number. The cell phone in front of him rang and an automated system answered. He punched in several numbers that initiated a system test that displayed the results on a nearby computer screen. The device was active and all systems were functioning. Happy with the result, he ended the call and replaced his cell phone back into his pocket. The old man was pleased with his work. He had spent the last 3 years working in this very basement day and night to achieve this moment in time. He turned to the corner of the room and took one last look at the large black sphere in the corner. With wires running from the center in all directions, the small nuclear device looked like a work of art to him. For the last time, he turned and started up the stairs of the basement. The room went completely dark as he turned the light switch off once he reached the top. Another man met him at the top of the stairs.

"All is ready. Let's go." the old man said as they headed to the garage. The younger man opened the trunk of a late model Ford Taurus and helped the older man to lay down inside. Both men wore average looking clothes and had dark hair and dark skin. The younger man slid a pair of sunglasses over his eyes and dropped into the driver's seat after closing the trunk. The bright Californian sun poured into the garage as the garage door came open. The car was started and slowly pulled out of the driveway. The younger man

smiled and waved at children playing in their front yards as he passed. Several parents returned the smiles and waves. The man had lived in that neighborhood for years and was liked by everyone who knew him. The man knew though that this would be the last time he would see this street.

The ride was bumpy in the trunk for the old man. It lasted for several hours before the car came to a stop and the engine turned off. Blades of light pierced the trunk lid as it was opened. The old man shielded his eyes with his hands as he was helped out of the trunk by the younger man. The older man could soon see the alley that he was standing in between rows of storage garage doors. The old man once again removed the cell phone from his pocket and began dialing numbers as the younger man opened a nearby storage garage.

The phone in Sumir's pocket vibrated as he sipped the last bit of tea from his cup. Slowly he set the tea cup onto the saucer and removed the phone from his pocket. His heart began to race as he saw the number that had called.

"Report." He demanded into the phone as he removed a small tablet of paper from his other pocket.

"All is ready." The response came from the other end of the phone. Sumir quickly wrote down the phone number and 3 digit code as it was given to him by the old man.

"You have done well. May Alla be with you on your journey home." Sumir said as he ended the call. A smile came over Sumir's face as he stared at the tablet of paper. On it was written four phone numbers with 3 digit codes. Next to each was the name of a city. He read down the list at the names of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Atlanta. He placed the tablet back into his pocket and dialed a number on his phone.

"Yes?" The reply came from the other end.

"All is ready, you may proceed." Sumir said before ending the call.

Daven placed his phone back into his pocket and continued to walk along the sidewalk. He nodded to the driver of a white van as it began to pick up speed. The girl was walking twenty feet in front of him and had not spotted him as she passed by the park bench that he had been waiting on. A student at Columbia University, the girl was walking briskly trying to stay on schedule as she walked between classes. She also had not noticed the white van that was driving slowly down the street approaching her from behind. The van pulled to the curb and the side door opened to reveal two men inside wearing

dark clothes. A chill ran down her back as she saw them and she began to turn to move away as she was struck from behind by Daven who pushed her into the van. Once the side door was closed, Daven jumped into the front passenger seat and the van speed away. The girl screamed as the men pulled a black hood over her head and tied her hands and legs.

“Do what you are told and you will not be harmed.” A man said into her ear as she was tied.

Two hours later, the phone rang at Special Agent Murphy’s desk. He said hello and listened intently for several moments before hanging up.

“What is it Murf?” Agent Mullins asked.

“A Senators daughter was just kidnapped at Columbia College. The report is that several men in a white van picked her up.” Agent Murphy said.

“That sounds like the threats that we have been seeing posted on the net. Do you think that it was THC?” The other agent asked.

“I do. I think the timing is right for their attack.” Agent Murphy said as he straightened his tie.

“Come on, we need to go to talk to the Director. He will want to tell the President that it is starting.” Agent Murphy said as he grabbed his coat and headed out the door.

CHAPTER 10

The gate creaked open at the visitors entrance to Camp Lejeune. Lt. Ben Marshall walked through the gate carrying his duffle bag and his drag bag. Jed stepped forward to greet his son.

“Welcome home, son.” Jed said as he pulled the duffle bag off of his shoulder and carried it to the truck.

“It’s good to be back. I can’t wait to get home. How are Mom and Jake doing?” Ben asked.

“Well, you know your mother. She has been in the kitchen cooking for the last day and a half to prepare for your arrival. She doesn’t think that they know how to feed you, I guess. Jake has been looking forward to seeing you too.” Jed said.

“So what’s in the drag bag?” Jed asked Ben as he hefted drag bag into the back of the truck and got in.

“Just something I picked up in Afghanistan. They are getting hard to come by so I wanted to keep an eye on it.” Ben replied.

It was a six hour drive home from Camp Lejeune. Ben told Jed everything that had happened to him in Afghanistan over the last year. Jed told Ben what he had missed while he was away from home. Time past quickly as the father and son caught up. When they did arrive home and pulled into the driveway, there was a large Welcome Home banner hanging across the front porch and Carol and Jake ran out of the front door to greet Ben. There was plenty to eat at dinner and Ben enjoyed being home again. After dinner, Ben and Jed sat at the kitchen table talking a while. Jake had gone into the living room to watch some TV.

“Dad, come check out what’s on the TV!” Jake said after barging into the kitchen with a concerned look on his face.

“What is it?” Jed asked as he and Ben moved into the living room.

“I though I heard them talk about Sarah.” Jake said as he turned the volume up on the TV. The talking head on the news channel began to recap.

“Once again our top story tonight, fourteen people have been reported missing this morning from all around the D.C. metro area. Not all of the names have been released, but so far it appears as though the three that have been identified are all family members of Senators serving on the Armed Services Committee. The three names that we have so far are James Weavers, Kelly Herrington and Sarah Evans. The police are refusing to release any additional names until the families are notified. There have been several eye witnesses to these kidnappings who are being interviewed by the police. From the reports that we have heard, several of the victims were grabbed off the street by men driving white or silver panel style vans. The police are working on sketches of several of the perpetrators from eye witness accounts.”

“What’s going on?” Carol asked as she entered the room and saw everyone huddled around the TV.

“Somebody’s kidnapped Sarah.” Jed said as he walked over to the end table and picked up the phone.

“Who are you calling?” Carol asked Jed.

“Senator Evans. I want to see if he is all right.” Jed replied. Jed quickly dialed Senator Evans cell phone number. It was a private number that Evans had given Jed. The phone rang several times before Evans picked up.

“Hello?” Evans said.

“Hey, it’s me, Jed. I heard about Sarah on the news. Is there anything that I can do?” Jed asked.

“Oh Jed, somebody took my little girl. I am here talking to Special Agent Murphy with the FBI right now. We don’t know anything yet, but they are working on it.” Senator Joel Evans said in a panic.

“Do they know who did it?” Jed asked.

“No, we don’t know. The FBI thinks its terrorist but it could be someone trying to get a ransom. We just won’t know until. . . .” Evans was cut off by Special Agent Murphy. They spoke for a few moments but Jed couldn’t hear what was said.

“Jed, I am going to have to get back to you, we are getting a message from the kidnappers.” Evans said and then he was gone. Jed hung up the phone and turned back to the TV. The TV news woman was interrupted and given a piece of paper.

“A message was just delivered to me. An Islamic extremist group is now

claiming responsibility for the kidnapping. In a statement given to the World News Organization groups calling themselves The Holy Commissioned are claiming that they are responsible for the kidnappings of family members of Congressman and Senators and are holding them hostage. They are demanding that the U.S. removes all of its troops from Afghanistan and Iraq in exchange for the safe return of the hostages. The statement also contains a warning that if their demands aren't met, they will rain fire upon multiple major U.S. cities." The news anchor said finishing the written remarks that she was given. She paused for a moment and looked like she was going to be sick before beginning a recap of what just happened.

Everyone sat glued to the TV in a state of shock for several hours watching the news media replay the same footage over and over again of several locations where people had been abducted. Several more names were released of people who had been taken, but overall no new information about the situation was reported. Jed tried to call Senator Evans back several times but did not get an answer. Jed had spent a lot of time with Joel's family over the years and knew Joel, his wife Julie and their daughter Sarah very well. At 10PM the white house spokesman gave a brief statement condemning the act as a terrorist attack on the nation. The statement reiterated the United States long standing policy of not negotiating with terrorist and also stated that everything that could be done to locate and rescue the hostages was being done. Jed tried to go to bed and get some sleep. He was restless but at this point he could not think of anything that he could do.

The low yield nuclear bombs went off almost simultaneously. In Chicago, a cell phone rang in a basement of a small townhouse less than ten blocks from Michigan Avenue. The cell phone connected to the bomb triggered a timer connected to small explosives that began the nuclear reactions. Five minutes later, the townhouse was vaporized. The initial blast generated immense heat that melted cars, houses and the streets themselves for several blocks in every direction. The superheated air expanded and formed a powerful blast wave that surged in every direction throwing cars and collapsing houses in a twenty block radius. The initial pressure wave blew out windows and rocked building foundations for miles around. As the air began to cool down and the blast wave dissipated, air began to rush back to the epicenter of the blast and created a second pressure wave. The second pressure wave

collapsed buildings weakened by the first and tossed cars into the air causing them to land blocks away from their original position. The initial burst of radiation charred buildings and started fires up to twenty miles away. A powerful electro magnetic pulse surged through the city frying electronic devices for miles. When the blast finally dissipated, the city was quiet. Fires consuming buildings and vehicles were the only sound. Just before the Chicago explosion, cell phones rang in Los Angeles, Atlanta and New York. The detonation timers were triggered. Minutes later the bombs in those cities were detonated with the same result.

Just before three in the morning, Jed was jerked out of sleep and opened his eyes. The house was silent. His stomach began to ache. He felt as though something was not right. Slowly and quietly he moved down the stairs and out the front door. The morning air was crisp and dew clung to the front porch bathing Jed's naked feet. Jed walked out onto his front lawn and listened. He heard nothing. Jed had lived on this land for many years and could tell when something didn't feel right. He could tell when a storm was about to come in or when the temperature was going to rapidly change. He didn't know how, but he could tell. Something inside of him was now telling him that things were not right. A flash of light appeared on the horizon to the northeast, another to the south, then another to the west. Jed had never seen anything like it before. The flash of light was like the sun rising but only for a split second. For a moment he questioned if he had really seen anything at all. He rushed back into the house and turned on the TV. He flipped through the channels and found only static. He walked over to his chair and turned on the radio. After scanning through the dial he found a radio station playing country music. He sat in his chair and stared at the static on the TV and listened to the radio for a half of an hour before a voice came on the radio. The radio DJ stated that news reports were coming in about explosions in several large cities. Jed sat glued to the radio as news began to come in. Explosions were reported in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Atlanta. The local radio station didn't have any more information at the moment. Jed turned the TV back on and flipped through the channels. Several channels were now displaying a test pattern. Jed was so intent on the radio that he didn't hear Ben come down the stairs.

“What's going on?” Ben asked.

“There have been some explosions reported in New York, LA, Chicago and Atlanta. They must have been big because the TV is out.” Jed replied.

Just then, the image of the Channel 4 news broadcast filled the TV. A news woman came on and stated that a general state of emergency has been declared by the President due to the unexplained explosions that rocked 4 major us cities. FEMA is responding and National Guard units have been called up to assist. The news also reported that several major telecommunications hubs have been damaged and there are reports of outages all over the U.S. Both men watched in amazement. When clear thoughts began to once again flow into Jed’s mind, he said “There’s going to be a lot of panic. I’m going to go down to the Sheriff’s office and see if I can help.”

“I’m going with you.” Ben said as he headed back upstairs to get dressed. Jed went upstairs and woke Carol and told her what was happening.

“Oh my God. Be careful.” she said. Jed got dressed and on his way out of the bedroom, he pulled open his top dresser drawer and retrieved his 1911 pistol. After sliding it into his belt, he dropped a couple of extra magazines into his front pocket. Jed met back up with Ben in the driveway. Ben was putting his drag bag into the truck.

“What’s that for?” Jed asked.

“It’s better to have it and not need it, then to need it and not have it.” Ben replied.

“Let’s have a look.” Jed said as he motioned to the drag bag. Jed unzipped the case and slid the rifle out. The M14 was painted desert tan and was wrapped in thin strips of burlap. Jed eased back the charging handle and checked the chamber before sliding the rifle back into its case.

“I guess things haven’t changed much in the past 30 years. I thought that everyone was shooting mouse guns these days.” Jed said.

“I have a sergeant who is good at tracking certain items down. This one’s off the books, so I didn’t want to leave it at the base. The ballistics aren’t very good with an M16 past 500 yards or so. You can really reach and touch someone with an M14 though.”

“That’s a fact.” Jed said as he opened the driver’s side door of his truck.

As Jed got into the truck, he pulled the 1911 out of his belt and placed it into the glove box.

“What’s that for?” Ben asked.

“Well, it’s better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it.” Jed said with a grin as he eased the truck out of the driveway.

Jed noticed that there was more road traffic than normal on the roads.

“I would have guessed that more people would stay at home today.” Jed commented. As they drove past the supermarket, Jed stopped the truck to take in the scene. Hundreds of cars were in the parking lot. People were going in and coming out of the store in a frenzy. People coming out of the store had full shopping carts. Some even had two carts that they were pulling.

“People are panicking. It’s probably like this all over.” Jed said as he pulled back onto the road. There was a lot of activity at the Sheriff’s department when Jed pulled into the parking lot. Deputies were coming in and out, several with their backseats full of people arrested. Jed and Ben made their way into the station and walked past the front desk. Several detectives looked up from their desks and gave a busy nod to Jed as he passed through. Sheriff Bob Thompson was behind his desk thumbing frantically through police reports. There was a small TV in the corner that was tuned into the news.

“Hey Jed.” Bob said as he looked up from the reports.

“It’s been a busy morning.”

“Let me guess, a lot of break-ins and looting.” Jed said.

“Yeah. From all over. Everyone is afraid that the world is coming to an end I guess.”

“Things are getting ugly down at Standford’s Grocery. I caught a look at it on the way in. You might want to send a deputy down there.”

“I’ll get one of the city guys on it. I’ve got every man in the department out on the highways right now. There are a lot of people fleeing the cities and there have been...” Bob trailed off and his focus locked onto the TV. A special report was coming on the news. The news anchor was reporting that a tape has been received from the terror group called The Holy Commissioned. They are claiming responsibility for the bombing attacks early this morning and they state that they are holding family members of US House and Senate representatives as hostages. They are demanding that all U.S. troops be removed from Afghanistan and Iraq in return for their safe return. They also warned of another bombing if their demands were not met.

The news report then played several excerpts from the video with an English translation. The video showed an unidentified THC member standing in front of a brick wall wearing traditional Arab robes and a ski mask making the statement. There was a small bookcase off to one side with several Kalashnikov rifles leaned against it. There were several blindfolded hostages on the other side of the figure who were on their knees. Sheriff Thompson's eyes widened and his mouth began to hang open.

"I've seen that wall and bookcase before." Bob finally said.

"What?" Jed replied.

"You want to go for a ride?" Bob asked.

CHAPTER 11

The front door of the Sheriff's department flew open as Sheriff Thompson moved quickly toward his cruiser. Jed and Ben followed closely behind.

"What is it, Bob?" Jed asked. Bob stopped and turned around.

"Do you remember about 15 years ago when old man Jenkins died?" Bob asked Jed.

"Yeah, I think so."

"I had only been a deputy for a few years and I got the call when his body was found at the bottom of the stairs of his basement of his farmhouse. I spent two hours in the basement staring at the walls with the body before the medical examiner arrived. I can't say for sure, but I could swear that that terrorist video was filmed in that basement."

"But that old farm has been empty for years." Jed argued.

"No, it was bought a year or so ago, but I never met the guy who bought it."

"Do you think that we should get a couple of deputies to check it out?" Jed asked.

"No, it's probably nothing. I just want to check it out." Bob said.

"Well, we'll follow you out there." Jed said as he pulled open the door to his truck and jumped in. Bob started up the cruiser and pulled out of the parking lot as Ben jumped into the truck. Jed put the truck into gear and pulled out after Bob.

It was a 25 minute drive out of town to the Jenkins family farm. As busy as the roads were initially, Jed was surprised to see that the roads seemed relatively empty. The Jenkins farm was at the base of a small mountain. The farm had been in the Jenkins family for several generations until James Jenkins died 15 years earlier. The estate has been tied up in probate court since then to resolve an ownership dispute between the remaining relatives. James had died at the age of 67 of a heart attack and hadn't properly kept his will up to date. The dispute was finally resolved two years ago and the farm was

sold. Only the real estate agent had actually met the man who had purchased the 180 acre farm.

As Bob approached the entrance he noticed that the front gate was closed and chained shut. He pulled off the road followed by Jed. He got out and approached Jed.

“Well, let’s go have a look.” Bob said as he started off through the woods toward the farm. Ben grabbed his drag bag as he got out of the truck and slung it over his shoulder before following Jed into the woods. Ben had an uneasy feeling about the whole thing and it was habit for him to have his rifle with him. It took several minutes for the men to walk through the woods and reach the edge of the clearing where the house was located. Bob stopped at the tree line and looked around. The house was 300 yards from the tree line with an field of tall grass in between. Bob saw several men walking around the house and just as he began to bring his arm up to wave at them, Jed’s hand stopped his arm and pulled him back into the tree line.

“Wait, those men are carrying rifles.” Jed said.

“I’ll have a look.” Ben said as he knelt down and opened up his drag bag. All three men laid prone in the tree line taking cover behind several tall trees. Ben brought his rifle up to his face and peered through his 10 power Leopold scope.

“I can see at least 5 guys at the house. It looks like they are carrying AK-47’s. There’s at least one more on the second story balcony. I can also see some movement in the house but I can’t make out how many are in there. These guys are wearing jeans and T shirts, but they also have dark skin. These guys look middle eastern.” Ben concluded.

“This could be where they are keeping them.” Jed said referring to the kidnapped family members.

“Well, we don’t know that for sure but there’s sure one way to find out.” Bob said as he began to get up.

“Keep an eye on us.” Jed said to Ben as he got up too. Ben pulled a magazine out of his bag and snapped it into the rifle before cycling the charging handle to chamber a round. Bob and Jed slowly made their way out of the tree line and started toward the house.

“Don’t make any sudden moves. I’m just going to ask them a few questions.” Bob said as they walked.

“Well if you don’t like their answers we’re going to have to get out of here fast. They’ve got us outgunned.” Jed replied gesturing at the men with rifles. They didn’t make it 20 yards out of the tree line before several men saw them. Instantly, 4 men began running toward them.

Sumir was in the basement when his radio chirped.

“We have captured 2 intruders.” the voice said.

“Hold them, I will be right there.” Sumir said into the radio as he grabbed his Dragonov which was leaning against the wall on his way up the stairs. Sumir made it to the second story bedroom with the balcony that overlooks the farm. He stepped out onto the balcony and raised his rifle to his shoulder and focused on the group of men in the field. He looked at the 2 men surrounded by his men. One of them was wearing a uniform of the local police force.

“Who are these men?” Sumir asked into the radio.

“Sheriff Thompson and another man. The other man isn’t talking. We took a pistol off the Sheriff. The other man is unarmed.” The voice responded over the radio.

“Remove the other man’s wallet and look at his driver’s license. That will tell us who he is.” Sumir commanded over the radio. One of the men walked around and pulled Jed’s wallet out of his back pocket and began flipping through it.

“His license says he is Jed Marshal. It looks like he lives in town.” The voice said.

“Find out if there are any more of them.”

“The sheriff says that he is out on a call checking on an elderly woman who is lost. The other man was accompanying him.” The voice said.

“Kill them both and dispose of the bodies.” Sumir said into the radio.

Ben tracked Bob and Jed as they walked into the field. About 100 yards from him, they were met by 4 men with AK-47 rifles. One man pulled out a radio and began talking. Another man grabbed Bob’s pistol and checked Jed for weapons. The other man walked around to Jed and pulled out his wallet. After removing his license, he gave it to the man with the radio. After listening to the radio for another moment, the man pulled out a pistol and pointed it at Jed’s head. The crosshairs instinctively tracked to the man’s head and the rifle jumped. The man went down. Jed and Bob began running

back to the tree line. The other 3 men brought their rifles up to their shoulders. Ben fired 3 quick shots and placed a round into the center of mass of each man.

Sumir watched as the man with the radio pulled out a pistol and trained it on the other man's head. A shot rang out and the man with the radio went down. Sumir pulled his rifle up and began scanning the field. Three more shots rang out and Sumir saw a faint muzzle flash from behind a large tree along the tree line in the direction that the men were now running. Sumir placed the crosshair on the spot that he saw the muzzle flash from and squeezed the trigger. He then panned over to the Sheriff and the other man and got a quick glimpse of them as they disappeared into the trees. Sumir squeezed the trigger then they were gone. Sumir cursed, then left the balcony and ran downstairs.

A shot ripped through the air passing between Jed and Bob as they dove into the tree line. Jed made it back to his feet.

"Come on Ben, let's get out of here!" Jed said as he looked back at the large tree where he had left Ben. Jed's eyes widened and time slowed down. Jed's mind clouded over and as it began to clear, a mortar exploded nearby. Jed could hear automatic weapons fire. He could smell burning canvas and diesel fuel. As the smoke cleared in front of him, he could see the crumpled body of his spotter. He was back at his old firebase Echo 27. He rushed over to Wes and pulled him up. He pulled his arm over his neck and began moving. He was moving through trees now. He could still hear the firefight behind him. The smoke from exploding mortars still burning in his nose and eyes. Wes was getting heavy now. His body was going limp. Jed could no longer carry him. Both men fell to the ground. Jed lifted his head. He could now see Ben lying on the ground next to him. He had a gunshot wound in his neck and was bleeding from his mouth.

"Oh God." Jed exclaimed, a single tear running down his cheek. Bob grabbed Ben's left arm and began to pick him back up.

"Come on; let's get him out of here!" Bob called out. Jed got back up and helped lift Ben up by his right arm. They carried Ben back. Jed led them back to his truck. Bob glanced just up the road at his cruiser.

"There's no time. We'll have to come back for it." Jed called over his shoulder.

“Get in, I’ll drive.” Bob said after a second of thought. Jed pulled Ben into the truck and held him in the passenger seat. Jed grabbed a towel from behind the seat and applied pressure to his neck to stop the bleeding. Bob got into the drivers seat, started the truck up and took off down the road.

“Come on Ben, stay with me.” Jed said. Jed thought about Wes. He didn’t want to lose Ben too. He brought his hand up to Ben’s mouth. He could feel the warm breath on his fingers. Bob pulled his radio off of his belt and began calling to his dispatch to report the shooting and to call ahead to the hospital.

“Bob, you need to call the FBI and get in touch with Special Agent Murphy. He’s working on the kidnapping case. Tell him that we think that they are being held at the Jenkins’s farm and tell him to get the Hostage Rescue Team down here right away.” Jed told Bob once he had finished talking to dispatch.

“I’ll make the call just as soon as we get to the hospital. How’s he doing?” Bob asked.

“He’s hanging in there.” Jed replied. Bob pulled up to the Emergency Room entrance. There were several nurses waiting to help with a gurney. They helped to get Ben out of the truck and rushed him inside. Jed went in with Ben.

“It’s going to be all right boy. You’re all right now.” He told Ben. They brought Ben into a room and a doctor told Jed that he was going to have to wait outside.

Sumir rushed down the stairs and ran outside. The thought that there could be more shooters out there flashed through his mind and forced him to take cover behind a van parked outside. He spent several minutes panning around looking for someone through his rifle scope but the woods were quiet. He called several men over and sent them to check out the tree line. As they went forward with their AK-47’s in hand, Sumir made his way to the spot where the 4 men were hit. He checked for pulses on the men one at a time, but they were gone. Daven walked up from the house with his Kalashnikov in hand.

“These were good men. They died in Alla’s service.” Daven said. Sumir looked down and saw the wallet spread out on the ground. Next to it was the driver’s license that belonged to the second man. He picked up the drivers license and studied the picture. Sumir’s radio chirped.

“There is a blood trail through the woods, but it ends at the road. There is a police cruiser parked by the gate and tire tracks from a second vehicle on the side of the road.” The voice at the other end said.

“Look around, but stay off the road. If you don’t see anything, then come back, but stay out of sight.” Sumir commanded into the radio. Sumir held the drivers license up for Daven to see.

“Take several men and go and pay this man a visit. If he is not there, take his family.” Sumir said to Daven. Daven took the license and nodded to Sumir.

Jed paced in the emergency room. He brought his hands up and saw that Ben’s blood was on his hands and shirt. He went to the bathroom and began washing his hands. As he was drying his hands off, he thought about Carol. He left the bathroom and checked his pockets for change to use the payphone. A blade of fear ran through Jed as he realized that his wallet and drivers license were left at the farm. Immediately he darted out of the emergency room door and to his truck. He started his truck and peeled out of the parking lot, dodging several incoming cars on the way out. Jed kept the accelerator pressed to the floor of the old truck as he flew down side streets. He reached over and opened the glove box. After removing his 1911 from the glove box, he placed it in his lap.

It had been several hours since Carol began to worry about Jed and Ben. Jake had woken up about an hour after they left and has been glued to the TV ever since. Carol had grown tired of the news and began cleaning the house to keep her mind off things.

A knock at the door freed Carol from the dishes. Her first thought was that Jed must be home but he wouldn’t knock on the door. Then her step slowed as the thought that it could be someone with bad news entered her mind. Jake flipped the TV off and stood up to see who it was. Carol approached the front door and checked to be sure that the door chain was engaged. She slowly opened the door and peered out at the three men standing on her front porch.

“Yes?” Carol said. It wasn’t exactly her friendliest greeting, but these were suspicious looking men.

“Can we speak with Jed Marshal please.” the first man said.

“He’s not here right now.” Carol replied.

“Do you know when he will be back?” The man asked.

“I’m expecting him at any moment. Perhaps you should come back later.” She suggested as she began to close the door. The first man pressed against the door jolting it to a stop when the chain stopped it from opening any further.

“Run Jake! Get out!” Carol yelled to Jake who was standing watching as Carol fought to keep the men out. The men began throwing themselves against the door to break the door chain. Jake ran through the living room and the back hall toward his parent’s bedroom. He quickly flung open the closet door and pulled out a gun case. After flinging the case open, he grabbed the AR-15 rifle and a full magazine and ran back out of the bedroom. He bolted out of the back door while slapping the magazine in place and pulling back the charging handle before letting the bolt slam home. He was breathing heavy now. Adrenaline surged through his head. He rounded the side of the house and ran for a tree in the front yard. He knelt down behind the tree and the rifle came up to his shoulder. Blood surged through his body. His lungs rapidly expanded and contracted pulling and pushing air through his chest. The sounds of his heart drowned out all others. The front sight of his rifle came into focus against the backdrop of the front porch. The front door gave way to the shoulders of the men as they broke through. Two men grabbed Carol and dragged her outside as Daven followed behind. She kicked and scratched at the men as they pulled her out onto the front porch. A man raised an arm above his head and brought his fist down onto Carol’s head with a thud. She fell to the ground slipping out of the other man’s grip. Jake’s arms began to shake but his hold on the rifle was firm. The front sight pulled toward a man fighting with his mom. The man struck her on her head and she fell to the ground. Jake’s heart throbbed in his ears. The front sight settled on the man’s chest. Jake could feel the rifle pound against his shoulder. The front sight became blurry. Jake’s eye blinked pushing a tear down his cheek. The front sight came back into view. One man lay on the ground. The other men were behind a white van parked by the front of the house. Jake could hear what sounded like angry bees buzzing past his head and the tree in front of him began splintering. Jake turned and slumped behind the tree. He could hear the gunshots now coming from behind the van. The tree was being picked apart on either side of him. The rifle slid out of his hands as they came up and covered his ears. Frozen by fear, Jake could hardly move now.

As Jed turned down his street, he could see a white van parked in his driveway. As he got closer, he could see two men behind the van firing at a tree in the front yard. Adrenaline surged into his veins as he made out what appeared to be Jake behind the tree. Jed's truck slid to a stop just behind the van. Jed's feet hit the ground before the truck had stopped and he was moving fast. With his 1911 up he rounded the back corner of the van and fired two quick shots into the chest of the first man. As the second man turned toward Jed, Jed brought his arm up. He hit the man across the face with his pistol and the man dropped. He kicked the man's pistol away from the man before continuing around the van and found Carol huddled behind the rail of the front porch.

"Are you all right?" Jed asked as he helped her up.

"Yeah, I think so. Oh my God, Jake!" Carol said as she turned and ran toward the tree that Jake was huddled behind. Jed turned and headed into the house checking each room for more bad guys. Carol went over to Jake and put her arm around him. He was huddled behind the tree with his hands over his ears shaking. After checking the house, Jed came out of the house and over to Carol and Jake.

"How many of them were there?" Jed asked.

"Three, I think." Carol replied.

"Get into the house and get some things packed. You and Jake need to go to your parents for a little while." Jed said.

"What's going on Jed? Where's Ben?" Carol asked.

"There's a group of terrorist held up in a farm just outside town. The Sheriff, Ben and I found them and Ben was shot." Jed said quickly.

"Oh my God, Ben was shot?" Carol said, the panic building in her eyes.

"He's at the hospital and he's going to be Ok, but I need you and Jake to get out of here until I can take care of things." Jed said trying to calm Carol.

"It's OK, he's alright, and the Sheriff is with him." Jed said in a calmer voice now.

"Ok, we'll go. You go get these bastards, Jed." Carol said as she turned and went back to the house with Jake. Jed turned back toward the van. One man lay on the ground in front of the van. There was a blood pool on his shirt right in the center of his chest. He looked down and saw the AR-15 lying on the ground next to the tree.

“Jake wasn’t ready for that.” Jed said to himself. Jed rounded the van again and checked the third man. The man was still unconscious lying on the ground. Jed slid his pistol into his belt and grabbed the man by his right arm and began dragging him to the garage.

Sumir went back to the house. His men hadn’t seen anyone come back for the police cruiser so he ordered them to come back to the house. Sumir had all of the 14 hostages moved down to the basement and left one man to guard them. He had two more men patrolling the woods and three guys around the front of the house. Sumir had returned to the balcony with his rifle. He checked his watch. Daven should have been back by now. Sumir now feared that the police would come back and he needed Daven and the other two men back at the farm. Sumir picked up his radio and keyed the microphone. He called out to Daven in Arabic asking for a report. The UHF radios were supposed to have a 10 mile range and may make it into town. He didn’t know if he would get a response or not.

“Are you looking for your man, asshole? He’s with me now.” The response came back on the radio. Sumir’s face froze.

“Would you be Jed Marshall?” Sumir asked into the radio with a scowl contorting his mouth.

“That’s right. Who might you be?” Jed asked.

“My name is not important. I want to talk to my man.” Sumir demanded.

“Oh, well I’m sorry. He can’t come to the phone right now. We’re going to have a nice little chat about you and your plans. I know that you were the shooter on the roof. I think maybe I ought to come back there and have a talk with you too when I’m done here.” Sumir cursed and threw the radio and sent it crashing onto the sidewalk in front of the house.

After dragging Daven to the detached garage behind his house, Jed went back to the house and helped Carol and Jake pack up some clothes and get into their car. He told Jake that he would have a talk with him about what had happened when this was all over. He hugged Carol and sent them off. After returning to the garage he kicked Daven in the leg and he began to stir. Jed grabbed Daven’s left arm and pulled it over to a large vice that he had at the end of a long workbench.

“Alright boy, we are going to have a little talk now.” Jed said once he had

Daven in place. He tied his left leg to the front of his old tractor before returning back to the workbench. He pulled his left arm up to the vice and began closing the vice on Daven's hand. Once the vice began to apply some pressure on Daven's hand, his eyes opened and he began to fight to pull his hand back. Jed had pulled the rope tight before tying it to the tractor. Daven was stretched out and couldn't reach the vice with his other hand. There was now enough pressure on the hand to prevent him from sliding it out.

"What's your name?" Jed asked Daven leaning down piercing him with an intense stare.

"Kill me pig! I will not talk to you." Daven spat back. Jed reached up and turned the handle on the vice. The vice squeezed Daven's hand even more. His hand began to throb and Daven tensed to control the pain.

"Why are you here?" Jed asked.

"There is no god but Alla!" Daven recited before spitting at Jed. Jed calmly reached up and began turning the vice. The throbbing in Daven's hand turned into a sharp pain as bones began to crack under the pressure. Daven let out a moan as his other hand began flailing toward the handle of the vice to relieve the pressure.

"Why are you here?" Jed once again asked while turning the vice handle.

"Kill me pig! I will not talk to you!" Daven barked as the bones in the hand snapped and popped.

"Oh, I'm not going to kill you. You see, there are worse things than death and I'm going to make sure that you feel all of it. Now you're either going to start talking or I'm going to start by tearing your arms off." Jed said walking over to the tractor and getting into the drivers seat. Daven was moaning and wincing in pain. He looked at Jed and watched as he started the motor on the tractor and put it in gear. Panic came over Daven as the tractor began pulling at his leg. Daven was prepared to die, but pain can be a great motivator. He hadn't felt this type of pain before. Daven decided in the split second that it wouldn't matter what was said or what this man knew because soon they would all be dead and he would be with Alla.

"No more! I will talk!" Daven screamed. Jed shut off the tractor and came back over to Daven.

"My name is Daven. I was sent here to kill you." Jed moved his hand up to the vice and began slowly relieving the tension.

“Where are the hostages?” Jed asked Daven.

“They are at the farm.”

“Who is in charge at the farm?”

“His name is Sumir.”

“Was he the shooter on the roof?”

“Yes.” Jed jerked the vice open and let Daven’s crumpled hand fall to the floor. Daven winced in pain and pulled his hand to his chest and sat up against the tractor.

“How is Sumir planning on negotiating for the hostages?”

“He is not. The plan is to kill all of the hostages tonight.”

“How?”

“By detonating the last bomb.”

“When?”

“At 6 o’clock.” Daven said. Jed looked at his watch. It was four thirty. He didn’t have much time. Jed began looking for rope as a radio chirped in Daven’s front shirt pocket. Jed removed the radio from his pocket as a man speaking in Arabic came over the radio.

CHAPTER 12

“Jed, are you alright?” Bob asked after answering the phone.

“Yeah, I’m fine. A couple of those guys came to my house. Carol and Jake are ok. I sent them to her parents place. I had to kill two of them, but I have a third tied up in my garage. They do have the hostages at the farm. They also have another bomb. They are planning on detonating it in just over an hour. They never intended to negotiate for the hostages. Listen Bob, if the bomb that they have is the same size as the ones that went off in the cities, it will take out the town. You have to start evacuating.” Jed told Bob at a hurried pace.

“Oh my God. I’ll see what I can do. Hey Jed, I was able to get a hold of the FBI. They are sending a team to the farm, but I don’t know when they will get there.”

“I’m going to head down there and see if I can slow them down long enough for the Feds to arrive.”

“Hey Jed, Ben’s going to be alright.”

“God willing.” Jed said as he hung up the phone.

Jed opened the basement door and moved down the stairs. The pull chain clicked as the light came on. Jed pulled a long box out from underneath his workbench. The long box along with another taller box was placed on the workbench. The long box was opened and several blankets pulled back to reveal a Remington Model 700 Sniper Rifle. The other box contained Jed’s old Gillie suit. Jed took several minutes to check the rifle and to make sure that his 100 yard zero was still dialed into the scope. Jed then unrolled the gillie suit and pulled it on. It had been several years since Jed had last put the suit on to do some deer hunting. Minor alterations had to be performed over the years, but the suit still fit. Jed loaded several boxes of ammunition into a large leg pocket, slid his pistol into his belt along the small of his back and secured his Kabar knife to his belt before heading back upstairs and out to his truck.

Jed pulled his truck off to the side of the road about a quarter of a mile from the farm entrance. After getting out of his truck, he loaded his rifle with five rounds and closed the bolt in one quick, smooth motion. Jed pulled his veil over his face after adjusting his gillie suit and moved slowly into the trees. Jed's gillie suit was made for stalking. This means that there is little netting and burlap strips on the front to allow for better low crawling. Jed knew that he would have to move carefully to avoid detection. Jed moved slowly through the woods. The woods were thick and visibility was only about 15 yards. Jed slung his rifle over his shoulder and switched to his pistol. He avoided walking through brush or leaves that would make noise and used a fresh game trail that he spotted leading through the dense parts of the woods. Jed stopped every fifty yards or so and listened for a minute before moving on. After walking for about 10 minutes he stopped and began hearing movement in the woods just ahead of him. The sounds seemed to move back and forth. Jed moved closer slowly by staggering his steps and pausing between steps as he would when he was deer hunting to avoid spooking the deer. The movement in the woods was constant, effectively masking Jed's movement. Jed could now see a dark figure with a rifle moving through the woods. Jed watched him for a moment. The man was patrolling back and forth through the woods along a game trail. Jed waited until he had moved away and slowly moved up to a large tree and knelt behind the tree and a bush. Quietly, he slid his pistol back into his belt and pulled his Kabar out of its sheath. The man continued down the trail before stopping and checking the area before turning around and heading back up the game trail. Jed stayed quiet and knelt behind the tree and waited for the man to walk past him. As the man passed the tree, Jed moved out behind him and brought his arm over the man's back and around his neck. The man felt Jed's arm come over his shoulder and began to turn his head as the sharp blade of the Kabar sliced through his throat. Jed stepped back as the man brought his hand to his throat. The man tried to shout, forcing air bubbles through the wound on his neck. Staggering forward, he collapsed onto the ground. Jed wiped the blade of his knife on the man's pant leg before replacing it into his sheath and pulling his pistol back out. The light from the farmhouse clearing was visible 50 yards ahead through the woods. He moved slowly through the woods transitioning to a low crawl when he was about 10 yards from the tree line. He crawled up to the tree line

and slowly setup a shooting position under a large bush. Once he was sufficiently camouflaged, he pulled his rifle up to his shoulder and looked around. There were two men walking around the front of the house and he saw no movement inside the house. After observing the house for several moments, Jed focused on a dark spot of the house on the second floor. In his younger days, he could have made out exactly what it was, but after a minute, he guessed that it was a balcony on the second floor with the doors open.

“That is where I would be.” Jed said to himself. Jed looked at his watch. It was a quarter to 6 pm. Jed couldn’t afford to wait any longer. Jed estimated the distance from the tree line to the front of the house to be 285 yards. He dialed in a few adjustments into his scope and brought the crosshair to rest on the center of mass of the first man in front of the house. After a few deep breaths, he squeezed the trigger. Jed quickly cycled the bolt of his rifle and scanned over to the other man. The other man had dropped to one knee and began firing his AK-47 rifle into the woods. The man had badly misjudged Jed’s position and was firing 50 yards to the right of his shooting position. Jed settled the crosshair on the second man and squeezed the trigger again. As the second man went down, a bullet ripped through the bush that Jed was in sending several leaves falling onto Jed’s head. Jed brought his rifle up to the balcony of the farmhouse just in time to see the muzzle flash of the second shot that came through the bush tearing a hole through several strips of burlap on Jed’s back as it passed. Quickly cycling the bolt, Jed brought the crosshair onto the spot where he saw the flash and squeezed the trigger. Jed watched the balcony for several seconds, seeing no movement, before cycling the bolt again. He began scanning different sections of the house through his scope. Just as he passed by the front bay window, he caught the flash of a man running past. Jed’s heart jumped as he thought of the bomb. Jed checked the balcony once more to check for activity before he got up and began running to the front of the house, pulling the pistol from his belt as he ran.

Sumir threw the radio down in disgust and watched it break open against the sidewalk. He began thinking about the situation. He thought about why this man would have shown up at the farm. He thought about why he would bring the police. Then the thought entered his mind that he may be trying to

get at one of the hostages. He then thought that he may be able to use this to his advantage. Sumir went downstairs and checked over the kitchen table. There were maps, radios and pistols spread out on the table. Next to the local town map, there was the driver's license. Sumir picked up the license and went down stairs. The man watching the hostages turned around and faced Sumir as he came down the stairs.

"Get them up." Sumir commanded. The other man began yelling and signaling to the hostages to get up. He lined them up against the basement wall as Sumir began at one end. Sumir held the license up to each hostages face and watched their eyes. Each hostage looked at the license and most reacted with a confused expression. He held the license up to the face of a young woman that they had taken from a college campus. Sumir watched as her eyes widened.

"Do you know this man?" Sumir asked the woman. The woman froze for a moment before answering.

"Yes." She said nervously.

"Who is he?" Sumir asked.

"He's a friend of my Dad's." She said. So, he's after the girl, Sumir said to himself. Sumir turned and went back up to the second floor. He got on his radio and ordered one man to patrol the woods across from the farmhouse and two more men to watch the front of the house. He then rolled a mat out on the floor of the bedroom with the balcony and closed all of the blinds of the windows before opening the balcony doors. Sumir knew that the inside of the dark room would not be visible from the outside. He lay down in the prone position on the mat and pulled his Dragonov rifle to his shoulder. He focused on the tree line on the other side of the open field. After estimating the distance to the trees, he dialed in a few adjustments into his scope before topping off the rifle's magazine and checking the round in the chamber. He checked his watch. It was five o'clock. Sumir watched the trees and called for status reports over the radio every five minutes. He checked his watch again at five thirty. Sumir wanted this man to show up again. He wanted another shot at him. In thirty minutes it wouldn't matter anyway. Sumir figured that the bomb was big enough to destroy the town with the farm. The man would probably die anyway. Fifteen minutes later Sumir was rubbing his eyes with his hands. His eyes had begun to strain over the last hour from focusing

through his scope when he heard a loud bang. One of the men guarding the front of the house that was closest to the house fell back into the bushes. Sumir brought the scope up and checked the tree line. A second later, he heard another bang and saw several branches of a small bush move. Quickly, he brought the rifle over and fired at the bush. The rifle recoiled and he squeezed the trigger again as he brought the top chevron of his Russian scope back onto the bush. Another bang echoed through the open field. Sumir heard the buzz of the bullet like an angry bee fly past his ear then a pain in his left shoulder. Sumir dropped the rifle and rolled out of the view of the open balcony doors. Pain began shooting down his left arm and his shoulder began to burn. Sumir looked at the balcony doors and imagined the man scanning the room like search lights in the night sky. He staggered to his feet and moved out of the bedroom and down the stairs. He paused at the front living room and looked at the large bay window. If he moved fast, the man couldn't get a good shot off at him, he thought. He ran through the living room, then down to the stairs. His arm began to stiffen up now and all he could do was to hold it close to his body. Sumir ignored the pain in his shoulder as he moved quickly down the basement stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, he yelled at the man guarding the hostages, ordering him to go up and watch the front of the house. The man grabbed his rifle and went up the stairs. Sumir pulled a 9mm Glock pistol from his belt with his right hand and pointed it at Sarah Evans, ordering her to get up. Once she did, he got behind her, reached his right arm around her and pointing the pistol back at her head, both of them now facing the stairs. Two quick gunshots vibrated through the floor above before footfalls could be heard on the stairs. Blood ran down Sumir's left arm as he pushed his left hand into his front pocket and pulled out a small black remote. Sumir fought with his stiffening hand to punch in a four digit code and held his thumb over the pound button on the keypad. Jed rounded the bottom of the stairs and brought his pistol up aiming at Sumir's head.

"It's too late!" Sumir shouted to Jed.

"If I press this button, the bomb will go off." Sumir jabbed the pistol at the corner of the room. The large black sphere loomed in the dark corner; wires running in all directions like snakes from a hole in the ground. Jed kept his focus on Sumir, knowing what was there. Sumir was holding Sarah firmly in front of him, obscuring the silhouette of his head behind hers.

“It’s OK Sarah, it’s going to be all right.” Jed said to Sarah. Sarah was crying now. Sumir pressed the barrel of his pistol in his right hand to her temple.

“Now drop your pistol and I’ll spare her life.” Sumir said to Jed. Jed kept his pistol trained on Sumir’s head knowing that there was no chance of him letting her go. Sarah brought her elbow down and jammed it into Sumir’s ribs. His grip of her slipped and she pulled way from him. Sumir aimed the pistol at her head as she moved away and began to squeeze the trigger. Jed focused on the three white dots of the sights of his pistol. The center dot was held steadily on the center of Sumir’s face. Sarah jerked and pulled sway from Sumir. As her head moved clear, Jed squeezed the trigger of his .45 pistol. The sights jumped and Jed saw Sumir go down. Sumir fell against the wall and slid down smearing a blood trail down the wall, the remote slipping from his hand, his mouth hanging open below the single red dot just above the bridge of his nose. Jed ran over to Sarah and put his arm around her and as they turned toward the steps, three FBI agents ran down the stairs and pointed their MP5 submachine guns at Jed and yelled at him to put his gun down. The FBI agents were wearing black tactical vests with full entry gear. Jed brought his hand down and let his pistol drop to the floor. Two of the agents searched the rest of the room and gave the all clear signal into their radios. More agents came down the stairs and began guiding the hostages out of the house. Several more agents approached the black sphere in the corner and began taking pictures and documenting connections. The first agent approached Jed and placed him in hand cuffs and guided him up the stairs. When they went outside, there were FBI cars and tactical vans parked at the front of the house. Agents were loading the hostages into vans and quickly driving them back up the driveway. The agent put Jed into the back of a black Crown Victoria with two suited agents in the front seat.

Special Agent Murphy turned to Jed from the passenger seat.

“Are you Jed Marshall?” Jed nodded and Agent Murphy signaled to the driver to get going.

“Where are we going?” Jed asked.

“We are evacuating the area until the bomb squad guys can clear the farmhouse. We have a rally point about thirty miles from here on the other side of Jasper Mountain that we are going to.” Agent Murphy said.

“Any chance you could take these things off?” Jed said indicating his

handcuffed hands. Agent Murphy picked up a file folder and opened it up looking at a photograph and comparing it to Jed. After a moment, he pulled out some cuff keys from his pocket and reached back to unlock the cuffs.

“Yeah, sorry about that. It was necessary to verify your identity before letting you go. After all, you were the one holding the gun down there. Do you realize who the man was that you killed down there?” Agent Murphy asked.

“No.” Jed answered.

“Someone I’ve been chasing for three years.” Agent Murphy said. They drove for what seemed to Jed to take an hour before coming to the rally point. They were in the parking lot of an old Baptist church outside of town. There were cars filling the parking lot with several FBI mobile command centers in the middle. As Jed got out of the car, he saw hostages getting out of vans and hugging people by waiting cars. He scanned the crowd and saw Senator Evans standing next to a limo. Sarah got out of one of the vans and ran to meet him.

“Come on, I need you to talk to a few people.” Agent Murphy said. Jed followed Agent Murphy to one of the mobile command centers. Inside, Jed spoke with Agent Murphy and several other agents from the anti-terrorism task force. He told them about his first encounter with the men at the farm and about the men that had come to his house. Agent Murphy told Jed that they had already sent agents to his house to pick up Daven. After going over the rest with the Feds, they gave Jed a ride back to his house.

“I’ve got a call for you.” Agent Murphy said as he handed a cell phone back to Jed. The call was from Senator Evans.

“Sarah told me what you did. I can’t tell you how indebted I am. I really mean it. Thanks.” Senator Evans said.

“You’re welcome Joel. You take care of her now.” Jed said.

“I will Jed, thanks again.” Joel said before signing off.

Jed borrowed a neighbor’s car once at his house before going to get Carol and Jake, then headed to the hospital to check on Ben. The doctors said that Ben was still in surgery, but was going to be fine. He had lost a lot of blood, but they were able to get him into surgery in time to repair the damage. With Jed’s family around him in the hospital waiting room, he exhaled slowly and closed his eyes.

The End