

# 1

6:00 AM

*It's Veterans Day.*

What a strange first thought of the morning. I opened my eyes and surveyed the room, trying to remember where I was. I knew I hadn't made it all the way, that much was clear.

*Where am I? Pensacola? Mobile?*

Movement in the bed next to me stirred my memory. I turned my head and saw the soft curve of a woman's hip under the thin sheet. Then I remembered.

*Ahhh, yes. Gulfport.*

I sighed and closed my eyes. Images of the previous night's events flashed in my mind like scenes in a film noir. There was the trucker. An overweight middle-aged balding man with a confederate flag sweat-stained trucker hat who'd carried me as far as the freeway's exit. Then there was the road. A main thoroughfare that passed beneath the interstate and stretched south to the Gulf of Mexico. Without so much as a wave to the trucker, I'd hefted my duffel bag up onto my shoulder and walked along the shoulder. And then there was the restaurant.

You know the one I'm talking about. The servers all wear short orange shorts and tight shirts with an owl curving around their perfectly shaped breasts. But it wasn't the siren's call of the young girls or the greasy undercooked wings beckoning me inside. The glowing sign overhead promised me something greater.

*"Hi! Welcome to..."*

I brushed aside the perky blonde hostess and walked straight to the end of the bar closest to the bathrooms. I dumped my bag

unceremoniously on the ground next to a stool and climbed on top, resting my elbows on the lacquered wood. It was just after three in the afternoon, too late for lunch-goers and too early for the after-work crowd. I had the place to myself, which suited me just fine.

The bartender smiled as she walked up, tossing a coaster in front of me. "What'll it be?"

I pulled my hat lower to hide my eyes. "Tequila."

"Patron? Or..."

"Jose," I replied, cutting off her attempt at upselling me. I wasn't drinking for the enjoyment.

Her smile vanished.

Maybe I was an asshole, but I hadn't come for small talk. She seemed to accept that and poured a shot glass to the top with the bronze liquid. I scooped it up and downed it in one fluid motion, slamming the glass back onto the coaster.

"Another," I growled.

The brunette gave me a queer look but filled it once more to the brim. She set the bottle on the bar and waited for me to down my second shot.

I obliged.

"Another?" she asked.

*Nobody likes a wiseass.*

I glanced up at her, then averted my eyes and pulled the bill of my hat even lower. I nodded.

She poured me a third shot, then leaned against the bar. "What's in the bag?"

"My stuff."

"Where ya headed?"

"New Orleans."

The liquid warmth was already spreading from my gut, numbing my aches and pains. But the memory of the damn voice was still nagging at me. It seemed the closer I got to Louisiana the more insistent it became. I picked up the shot glass and tilted my head once more, hoping the third dose would do the trick.

"What's in N'awlins?"

I glanced up at her shirt, ignoring the way her breasts spilled out. *Gulfport*, it said.

*I'm close.*

I shrugged my shoulders.

But she either wasn't the type to discourage easily or she just

wanted to kill time chatting up her only customer. "Ever been?"

The voice's echo was fading and getting quieter, muffled by a blanket of booze. All it took were three shots of Jose. Of course I'd been to New Orleans, but I didn't feel like encouraging her. I shook my head.

"Got a job?"

Again, I shook my head. I didn't know why I was telling her so much. I stole a second glance at her shirt and read the etched name on the pinned orange piece of plastic. *Jessica*.

"Want another?"

I thought about shaking my head, no. The voice was all but silent, but I didn't trust it to remain mute for long. I nodded and watched her pour a fourth shot into my glass before returning the bottle to its place of prominence on the shelf behind her.

The next few hours passed without further conversation. I camped out on my stool as more customers arrived and filled up the surrounding ones, giving Jessica plenty of people to talk to while I did my best to ignore her and nurse my fourth shot of tequila. I was already drunk. But that was never the goal.

"Time for me to leave, darlin'," Jessica said, resting her breasts against the bar as she ducked down to look under my hat. "Want to close out with me?"

I nodded and reached into my front pocket to pull out a wad of cash. She pulled the slip from the tumbler in front of me and laid it on the bar. "It's twenty-eight fifty," she said.

I thumbed through the crumpled bills, pulling out two twenties, and handed them to her. "Keep the change."

While she closed out my tab, I slid off the stool and bent over to retrieve my duffel bag. I hoisted it onto my shoulder and reached for the shot glass to pour the remaining liquid into my mouth. I set the glass back onto the coaster and nodded at her before taking a hesitant step toward the front door.

"See you 'round," she said.

*I doubt that.*

I stepped out into the still humid air and surveyed the half-full parking lot. The sun had already set, and I knew I wouldn't make it all the way that night. But I was comfortably numb and afraid of breaking the spell, so I sat down on a bench and enjoyed the silence of my mind.

The front door opened, and Jessica walked out in a hurry, yelling into her phone. "...just pick me up, you asshole!"

*So much for silence.*

She still had on her signature orange shorts but wore a hoodie over her top and had pulled her long, dark hair back in a ponytail. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, hoping she wouldn't notice me sitting there.

"I told you," she yelled. "There's nobody else, Brady! If you don't..."

She threw her head back and screamed. Brady had hung up.

I sat motionless on the bench, waiting to see if she would keep walking to the parking lot or wheel back inside the restaurant. Almost as if she could feel my eyes on her, she whipped her head around and looked at me with a scowl on her face.

"Oh, hey," she said.

"Hey."

"My boyfriend's coming to get me."

I couldn't decide if she told me that because she thought I'd overheard her conversation or because I unnerved her. Either way, I didn't look like the good guy in her eyes. I pulled my hat down low and nodded my head in reply, searching for the silence that had slipped away in a gust of brunette.

She stuffed the phone into her hoodie's front pocket and walked towards my bench. "Mind if I wait with you?"

*Yes, I do.*

I nodded my head, and she sat down, taking my silence for consent. I pushed my hands into my pockets, balling them into fists as I seethed at her invading my privacy. The spell was broken, but the voice hadn't returned yet. It was only a matter of time though, and I didn't need some twenty-something co-ed around me when it did.

"Got a ride to N'awlins?"

I shook my head but said nothing.

She took the hint and leaned back in silence, letting out an exasperated sigh every few minutes. Her legs bounced with nervous energy and I couldn't help myself from stealing glances at them. They were toned and tanned and everything I expected from a Hooters girl.

A squeal of tires drew my attention, and I looked up to see a bright yellow Ford Mustang pull into the parking lot. It raced around the building, the throaty growl of the V8 vibrating the bench and stilling Jessica's nervous legs. She glanced at me and I didn't have to make eye contact to know that her boyfriend had arrived.

And that he terrified her.

"Well," she said, standing up. "That's my ride."

I nodded, but I fixed my eyes on the coupe as it screeched to a stop in front of us. The driver's door opened and a thick-necked boy with earrings in both ears and tattoos on his arms stepped out, closing the distance to tower over Jessica. He was angry.

"Who the *fuck* is this guy?" he asked, nodding in my direction.

She put both hands on his chest and shoved. But he might as well have been a wall. He didn't budge. "He's a customer, Brady!"

"You fuckin' him too?"

She let out another exasperated sigh and moved to step around him. But for as big as he was, he was quick. His hand shot out and he grabbed her by the throat, holding her in place. Eyes wide, she clutched at his hand and struggled for air.

*HELP HER.*

I groaned.

*Great. The voice is back.*

"Answer the fuckin' question," he hissed at her. "You fuckin' him too?"

*HELP HER.*

By then I knew better than to ignore the voice. Not just because it was always right. But because unless I did what it said, it would only get louder and more insistent; a real pain in my ass. I stood up and pulled my fists from my pockets, but kept my eyes on the ground.

Brady saw the movement and released his grip on Jessica, flinging her to the side to face me. He was big. He had broad shoulders and muscular arms that were the product of countless hours in the gym, repping out bicep curls in the mirror. Curls for the girls, they say.

"Better sit your fat ass back down!" he roared at me.

*Fat?*

*HELP HER!*

The voice was getting louder and harder to ignore. If I didn't silence it soon, it would blaze in my mind like an air-raid siren. And when that happened, I'd have no control. I'd probably end up killing the kid instead of just scaring him. I had to act.

I took a step towards Brady, my eyes still on the ground in front of me as I clutched at the remaining shreds of restraint.

"You gonna get yo' ass beat, old man!"

*Old?*

My head flicked up and my eyes locked on his. Brady might have been all biceps and pecs and fueled by 'roid rage, but his eyes betrayed

the truth. He was just a frightened boy, pretending to be a man. Pretending to be tough. Hard. A badass. But Brady was a fraud and a phony. And I knew that made him dangerous. I knew he would fight me to keep his secret hidden.

I took another step, and Brady reacted. He lunged at me, his right fist cocked back to deliver a cross aimed at my face. With morbid curiosity, I watched it racing towards me without attempting to block or parry the strike.

*I wonder how hard he hits...*

It connected with a sickening crunch and I knew he had broken my nose. I stumbled back into the bench with tears in my eyes and blood spurting down the front of my shirt.

*Not bad.*

But Brady didn't stop. He followed through and drove into me, swinging wildly with his fists, connecting his left fist with my jaw and his right fist with the side of my face. My hat fell off and my long hair fell around my face as my head snapped back and bounced against the restaurant's wood siding.

"Brady! Stop it!" Jessica yelled. Her delicate hand wrapped around his cocked right arm as he prepared to deliver another crushing blow.

He jerked free from her grasp and spun, punching her in the ribs with a left hook.

*HELP HER! HELP HER! HELP HER!*

The voice raged inside my skull and threatened to strip away my remaining control. My eyes shifted up to his, and I smiled, my blood-stained teeth flashing in the darkness through my thick beard. He stared at me with a stupid, stunned look on his face. Poor Brady had no idea what was about to happen.

"My turn," I growled.

I jumped to my feet and threw my head towards his. My forehead connected with his face and I almost giggled when I felt his nose break.

*An eye for an eye.*

Keeping my head low, I swung my fists in wide arcs and connected hooks with his chiseled torso. Left, right, left, right. With each punch, I stepped forward, pushing Brady off balance as he tried in vain to parry my strikes. I saw him reach his right arm back, telegraphing his intent to connect another haymaker. I watched it arcing through the air and ducked at the last moment, feeling his fist brush over the top of my hair.

His miss stunned him, and he tried to break contact. He made a half-

assed attempt to throw a jab at my face and retreat to his car. I weaved my head to the side and twisted, lowering my body in preparation. With his arm outstretched, I launched upward and connected my fist with the underside of his jaw in an uppercut that lifted him off the ground and sent him flying into the Mustang's open door.

Jessica gasped and stepped back, but I didn't notice. I was in a blind rage by then, fueled by the siren in my head and metallic taste on my lips. I bent over and grasped Brady by the neck and slammed my fist into his bloody face. My swollen knuckles continued raining down on him until blood splattered in every direction.

When he went limp, I released my grip and his body collapsed. His legs were sprawled out on the pavement and his arms hung at his sides. His battered head rested on the doorsill and bloody spittle bubbled at the corner of his mouth.

*At least he's still breathing,* I thought as I stepped back.

"Is he..." she whispered over my shoulder.

I shook my head. I grasped the open door and slammed it as hard as I could. The door bounced off his skull with a hollow thud and I turned away to retrieve my duffel bag from the bench. The spell was officially broken.

She took me by the arm and led me away from the idling Mustang with the body of her beaten boyfriend splayed out next to it. I felt her arm hooked in mine but ignored her and walked to the adjacent hotel. I ran my tongue across my teeth and the insides of my cheeks, then spit a mouthful of blood onto the ground in front of me.

The adrenaline had worn off, and I just wanted a place to sleep. But by the way Jessica kept pressing her breasts into my arm, I knew she had something other than sleep in mind.

*She can't be serious.*

"I was going to break up with him anyway," she said, almost as if she didn't care that I had beaten him to within an inch of his life.

"Don't you have somewhere to go?"

She stopped walking, her firm grasp holding me in place. I looked down at her and saw it in her eyes. She wasn't scared of me. It didn't even bother her I had almost killed her boyfriend. The violence had aroused her. She was a victim, and I was her savior.

"Can I stay with you tonight?"

Thankfully, the voice had gone dormant again. The last thing I needed was a guilt trip. Jessica pressed her body against me and I felt another familiar sensation awakened by an instinct even the voice

couldn't quell.

And that's how she ended up in my bed.

She rolled over, letting the sheet fall away as she turned towards me. As if sensing I was awake, she opened her eyes and smiled at me. "Morning," she cooed.

My nose was swollen and my face felt bruised, but otherwise I was in pretty good shape. Brady had definitely received the short end of the stick. I didn't smile back at her, already thinking about how to get her out of my bed so I could shower and find a ride across the state line.

"Are you mad at me?" she asked, puzzled by my continued silence.

It wasn't the first time I'd met someone like Jessica. A perpetual victim who walked into every room like a storm cloud, darkening the sky and choking off the birds. She sought a savior, a knight in blemished armor, to rescue her from herself. But I was flawed, and closer to a scoundrel than a savior. She would be better off if she walked away and never looked back.

"I think you should leave," I said, my voice more ominous than I intended.

She recoiled from me as if I had struck her, pulling the sheet up to cover her perfect breasts. I closed my eyes again, hoping that when I opened them, I would see her short, orange shorts walking out of my room and my life for good.

"So, that's it? You just fuck me and throw me out? Like trash?"

She was angry. And she had every right to be. She had shitty taste in men, a shitty job in a shitty town, and would probably only meet more shitty men who would treat her like shit. If I were in her shoes, I'd be angry too.

I felt her get out of bed and walk across the room to pick up the clothing we had discarded the night before. I opened my eyes and watched her scurry around, donning each article as she found it. She wasn't crying, but was obviously upset I had shunned her.

*I'm no knight, sweetheart.*

She paused with her hand on the doorknob and looked over her shoulder at me.

"Can you at least tell me your name?"

"Ronan," I said.

With a disgusted grunt, Jessica opened the door and walked out of my life.



## 2

September 2006

Panjwayi Valley, Afghanistan

“Ronan, get your fucking ass out here!”

My eyes snapped open, and I turned to look at Rick who was crouching next to Joe. We were on top of a ridge overlooking the Arghandab River, the landscape before us a haphazard scattering of fields full of pomegranate shrubs bordered by mud walls and broken up by flat-roofed houses.

It was quiet. For now.

I groaned and climbed out of the rear seat, stepping over the ammo cans lining the rocker panels, and smoothed back my greasy hair, topping it with my worn baseball cap. The uniform I wore was a three color desert pattern but had absorbed so much Kandahar dust that it had a unique appearance I don't think the Army ever intended. A chest rig of my design, a harness just large enough to hold a single armor plate in the front and pouches for spare ammunition and MBITR radio covered most of my torso.

“What's up, Rick?” I asked, sauntering up to the group of soldiers.

He studied me for a moment while I put on my Oakley sunglasses and knelt down next to Joe across from his makeshift sand table. Joe, or Joma, was our Afghan interpreter, and he gave me a wide smile as he rocked back on his feet with nervous anticipation.

“The Canadians were ambushed and have set up a defensive perimeter.”

“How far from the objective?”

Rick glanced up at me. “They only made it five hundred meters.”

"Fuck," I said.

We had arrived at our current location after an arduous journey south in our Ground Mobility Vehicles from Kandahar towards Spin Buldak before cutting west across the Red Sand Desert. Our modified Humvees were lighter than their conventional brethren, but heavier than the Ford Rangers our Afghan partners drove. After digging ourselves out in 120 degree heat several times, the trip had taken its toll on all of us.

And that was before the fight to take the hill.

We'd had our own casualties to contend with, but unlike the Canadians, we continued advancing until we had taken Sperwan Ghar, three hundred feet above the valley floor.

"So, what's the plan?"

I knew Rick hadn't interrupted my beauty sleep for no reason. Hell, I had been working non-stop through the night with Close Air Support assets to keep the Taliban from getting any bright ideas of retaking the high ground.

"A company from 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain is coming to clear the low ground north of us. We've been tasked with setting up a blocking position to the northeast." He pointed to an area between the clumps of dirt representing our current location and Ma'sum Ghar to the north. "Unfortunately, the terrain between here and there is impassable by vehicle, so we're taking half our ANA company and moving out on foot. Your request for air support was approved and will provide overwatch for our movement. You're going to be busy."

"Roger," I replied, groaning at the prospect of humping it to the objective.

As Rick turned to the ANA commander to explain their role, I tuned out Joe's translation and stood, turning to look out over the valley. Aside from the occasional crack of gunfire and the howl of wind, it was silent. There was no order to the landscape; no method for how the fields were stitched together. It was chaos.

"Whatcha thinkin', Ronan?"

I shook my head. My nap in the truck hadn't been nearly long enough. "I dunno, man."

Chip stood next to me and followed my gaze to the valley floor. "Fuck this place," he said.

Despite myself, I smiled. "Yeah. Fuck this place."

He slapped me on the back and walked to the rear of the rig where he had stowed his gear. I sighed, knowing I should probably check my

equipment as well. If Rick was relying on me to be our lifeline once we descended from Sperwan Ghar, I needed to make sure my radio was working. I reached across my chest and removed the can of Copenhagen in my sleeve pocket, slipping a pinch into my lower lip before getting to work.

With one more glance at the deceptive peace of the valley, I followed Chip to the rear of the truck and tugged on the ruck holding my AN/PRC-117 radio. I slid it to the edge and opened it, pulling out the radio to check the batteries' charge on the LCD screen before repackaging it inside. With the batteries, it added twelve pounds and left little room for much else. But for a Combat Controller, the radio is all that matters.

I spit a narrow stream of tobacco on the ground, missing Chip's boot by an inch. He turned to me with a mock disgusted look on his face.

"That shit'll kill you."

I ignored him and hefted my ruck upright, checking the security of the antenna that rose a foot from the top. I followed the snaking cables connecting the radio to the push-to-talk switch on the front of my plate carrier and the headset that doubled as hearing protection and my link to orbiting aircraft. I secured everything the way I wanted, and I laid the ruck back down.

I looked up at the Ma Deuce mounted in the turret and the M240 on a pintle mount in the rear and shook my head.

"Sure would be nice to have the extra firepower," I mumbled.

Chip had pulled his plate carrier on and was adjusting the hook and loop cumberbund that kept it secure around his waist. "That's what we have you for."

He hefted his ruck and left to join the others. He had a point. If we got into a situation where a gun run from an A-10 wasn't enough to turn the tide in our favor, then the machine guns in our trucks would be useless.

I just didn't want to hump down the mountain carrying all my shit.

I shouldered my ruck and turned to follow Chip. Rick had finished his sand table briefing with Dutch and the ANA commander and was standing in a circle with the rest of the detachment behind a Ranger pickup truck. As always, Joe stood next to Rick in silence.

Joe had been with our detachment since we arrived in Kandahar, but he had been our predecessor's interpreter during their entire deployment, and likely the ODA before that. It was easy to see why. Joe was intelligent and spoke flawless English, never missing a chance to educate us on the unique cultures that blended together in

Afghanistan. In his late thirties, Joe was a family man, and he never shied away from talking about his wife and daughter and his hope to bring them to the United States to give his daughter the opportunity to blossom in a country that cultivated her dreams instead of one that shattered them.

"I know you guys have been itching for a chance to stretch your legs a bit," Rick said.

There were a few grins at the joke, but the group remained silent. Chip glanced in my direction and gave me a wink.

"Dave is going to stay behind with our drivers and half the ANA company. We'll split the detachment and remaining troops and move as two coordinated elements. I'll take Chip, Tony, Mitch, Brad, and Ronan." He turned to the Team Sergeant. "Dutch, you'll take Joe, Adam, Bryan, Cory, Scott, and Kevin."

Dutch nodded, his jaw working the thick plug of tobacco in his mouth.

"We're traveling light, but make sure you bring enough to last. It might be a day or two before we get relieved."

I didn't have to read between the lines on that one. We were going to be on our own, blocking the most likely avenue of retreat to Kandahar for the Taliban fleeing the ISAF advance. Once the Canadians had their troop carriers moving again, they would roll over the resistance and there were only two directions the Taliban could go; south, across the Arghandab River and through our position towards Kandahar; or west and out of the Panjwayi Valley.

Twelve Americans and eleven Afghans were going to ensure it was the latter.

Rick turned to the sky's deepening red as the sun fell lower into the haze. "We're moving once it's dark. Complete your last-minute checks and be ready to step off. The Task Force commander wants us in place at first light."

The group broke up to prepare their gear, and I squatted down, taking the pressure off my knees.

Tony shouted at me from the back of his truck. "Hey Ronan, go to red three."

Without looking, I reached down to my intra-team radio and switched it on, turning the knob to one of our channels. A warm static filled my headset's left ear piece, and I adjusted the volume until it almost disappeared.

"Nasty zero three, this is Echo one, radio check, over."

I pressed on the push-to-talk. "Loud and clear."

"Gimme a short count."

"Five, four, three, two, one..."

"Switch to red one."

Standing up, I changed channels and gave him a thumbs up.

"Nasty zero three, this is Echo one, radio check."

"Loud and clear."

"Echo one, out."

Tony resumed checking his equipment with the detachment's other communications sergeant, and I went back to thinking about the long night ahead of us. Dutch walked up, already dressed for battle. As the team sergeant, he was the most seasoned Green Beret in the detachment. He would rather die than let somebody else on the team be the first one ready to step off.

"I'm surprised you're not hanging back with the trucks, Dutch."

"Fuck you, zoomie," he replied, shifting the plug of chewing tobacco to the other side of his mouth.

I couldn't think of anything else to say to bust his balls, so I fell silent and stared down at the valley floor below us. The sun had already fallen below the horizon and the valley was growing darker by the second. With the darkness came a still quiet, and the rest of the detachment joined us in silence.

"Nasty zero three, Anvil five one," the voice said in my right ear piece.

I reached up for the push-to-talk and pressed the button to transmit. "Anvil five one, Nasty zero three, go ahead."

"Nasty zero three, Anvil five one is a flight of two Hornets overhead in the block two four to two five. Two by GBU twelves, one by GBU thirty, and twenty mike mike each. Six zero mikes on station."

I flipped down the pouch at the front of my chest rig and scribbled notes onto the pad. Two FA-18 Hornets from the carrier in the North Arabian Sea had just arrived overhead our position to provide air support for our operation. They were holding between twenty-four and twenty-five thousand feet and were both armed with two five hundred pound laser-guided bombs, one five hundred pound GPS-guided bomb, and a 20mm gun that would be far more effective than the Ma Deuces in our trucks.

"Anvil five one, good copy. Our element is preparing to move north on foot from our previous position. Standby for objective grid coordinates."

“Ready to copy,” the Hornet pilot replied.

I read him the coordinates for our objective between Sperwan Ghar and Ma’sum Ghar. He read them back to me and went silent as he and his wingman put their sensor pods into the target location to search for threats.

With the flight of Hornets overhead, I felt a sense of calmness come over me. With bare hands, I would fight in a panic until my knuckles were bloody. Give me a gun, and I would fight without hesitation until I ran dry. But, give me capable air assets overhead, and I would be cool as a cucumber until they were winchester and headed home.

“Nasty zero three, Alpha one, over,” Rick’s voice crackled through my left ear piece, though he was standing only ten feet away from me.

“Go.”

“Where we at with air?”

Out of habit, I looked up into the sky. Even though I couldn’t see or hear the Hornets flying over our position, I knew they were there. “Two Hornets overhead for sixty mikes.”

“Dutch, your team goes first,” Rick said.

“Damn right,” Dutch replied, hefting his rifle and starting down the uneven terrain. Joe followed on Dutch’s heels, demonstrating a tactical proficiency he had developed over years of fighting side-by-side with Americans.

Adam, the detachment intelligence sergeant, was the next one down the hill. He was one of the quieter guys on the team, prone to spending his free time reviewing intel reports rather than shooting the shit with the other guys.

Bryan followed. He was the junior weapons sergeant in the detachment, but it was an argument who was more skilled between him and Chip. Both were some of the most knowledgeable soldiers I’d ever met with weapons, but Bryan was on another level. I’d never admit it, but I was disappointed that Bryan was on Dutch’s team.

Cory walked past me and slapped me on the back. Although he didn’t carry the same twelve pounds that I did, we were brothers in our love for ultra-high frequencies. Like Tony, he was anal with his communications equipment, but he reminded me of a SoCal surfer who prefaced everything with “Dude.”

Their medic was the second to last one down the hill. Scott was one of my best friends in the detachment, and not because I’d been his guinea pig for giving intravenous saline solution during training operations. Like me, Scott was a metalhead and a big Anthrax fan.

“Rock on, brother,” he said, slapping me on the back as he stepped off the hill behind Cory.

I lifted my hand and gave him the horns, a two-fingered salute with my trigger finger and pinky.

The last American off the hill in Dutch’s team was Kevin. He was an odd one I hadn’t quite figured out. Definitely one of the best engineer sergeants who knew how to blow shit up, but I got the impression he would rather read Dickens than stick det cord into a block of C4.

As they disappeared into the darkness below our position on the hill, I watched their Afghan partners descending in a lackadaisical fashion. Unlike Joe, their AK-47 rifles were slung over their backs as they joked and smoked cigarettes or spit out menthol flavored spit from the Naswar tucked in their lips. I shook my head in amazement as I watched those men follow Dutch’s team from the clearing into the unknown.

Away from the Ma Deuce. Away from the M240. And away from Dave and our three trucks.

“You ready?” Rick asked.

I reached down and adjusted the volume on my PRC-117. I nodded.

Rick was one of the good ones. A West Point graduate, but not the parochial kind who thought he learned everything at the Academy. He was an intercollegiate swimmer who had lobbied hard for an underwater operations detachment, but never looked back when they assigned him to us. He slapped me on the back and set off down the hill, following Dutch and his team.

I followed next, knowing that if things went sideways, he would want to be close to the guy calling in the air support. I didn’t have to look to know that the rest of the team followed in the same order as Dutch’s element. Chip, our weapons sergeant, followed me from the clearing. Behind him were Tony, Mitch, our doc, and Brad. Our half of the rest of the ANA company were just as careless descending into the darkness as their peers.

After almost thirty minutes of crossing the uneven terrain in silence, Rick’s voice broke through the static on my headset. “Zulu one, Alpha one, over.”

Dutch’s gravelly voice replied, “Zulu one.”

“What’s your status?”

“We’re at the last position of cover and concealment. We’ve got a complex of grape houses in front of us.”

The valley was fertile, and its residents grew corn and grapes

besides other crops. The grape houses were two-story storage sheds with two to three feet thick mud walls interspersed throughout the orchards and vineyards. Each wall had six to eight inch slits for racks used to hang the grapes. But it was the thickness of the walls that the Taliban found most useful.

“Roger. Continue your movement.”

“Zulu one.”

Our team continued moving down the hillside, but I could see the complex Dutch was preparing to move his team into. It was approximately two kilometers from our staging area on the plateau, but we needed to go an additional klick to reach the south slope of Ma’sum Ghar and choke off an avenue of retreat.

I couldn’t see Dutch’s team moving into the complex, but I knew they were there. The moon was still low on the horizon and wasn’t providing any ambient light, but the Night Optical Devices mounted on my helmet provided enough contrast to help me break out the buildings from the surrounding crops.

*It’s too quiet*, I thought.

As if responding to my unspoken observation, a single rifle shot cracked in the night, the muzzle flash visible through my goggles on the west side of the compound. I dropped into a crouch and saw several more muzzle flashes as additional Taliban rifles opened up on Dutch’s exposed team.

“Alpha one, Zulu one.” Dutch’s voice was strained and sounded like he was running.

“Alpha one,” Rick replied.

The gunfire intensified, but was answered by several bursts from the team’s M-4 rifles and the sporadic *thump* of a grenade launcher.

“Taking fire from the western compound wall. My team is scattered between the orchard and the southern grape house.”

Rick didn’t hesitate. “Nasty zero three, Alpha one.”

“Nasty zero three,” I replied, already pulling out my chart to derive grid coordinates for the western compound wall. I ignored the grenades exploding harmlessly on the thick mud walls protecting the Taliban and focused on the task at hand.

“Bring the hate.”

*Say no more.*