

## CHAPTER I

### *Recon*

Hank stopped to catch his breath and wait for his team. The altimeter showed 2300 meters and he marveled that the jagged peaks surrounding him towered at least another 2000. The snowy slopes above glistened pale pink and were pierced by jutting gray-blue slabs of rock. It was only mid-afternoon but the valleys below were already shrouded in deepening shades of purple. The icy crystalline air burned his lungs. This was what Hank really loved about doing advanced recon—getting to see a place before it was blown to hell.

In Afghanistan for only two weeks, he and his squad had been dropped outside Gardez the previous night and they'd been working their way into the Shai-Kot range since first light. Hank had spotted some black-turbaned herders lower on the range but, so far, the team hadn't encountered any resistance.

He was beginning to question the intel. Command reported that Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda crew were heading northeast through the mountains toward Ali Kheyl and the Pakistani border. But if they were here, they were sure as hell keeping a low profile.

The sound of shifting rocks startled him. Scrambling behind a cluster of granite boulders, he slipped the safety off his M-16 and sighted it down the trail toward the sound. As he laid his finger on the trigger, Smitty and Rico climbed into view. He spotted Jamal working his way down from above, about 20 meters to his left.

"Christ," he hissed. "Why don't you pull out a bugle and sound reveille?"

"Sorry Sarge," Rico said as they reached his position. "This loose scree is a bitch."

"We haven't seen sign one of these fuckers," Smitty added. "I'm thinking maybe we should go back to that last fork and try another ridge."

Hank considered the suggestion as he scanned a cliff about 40 meters ahead on the south side of the trail. “Half hour or so and it’s going to be too dark to do any serious tracking. Let’s check that cliff line. You and Jamal start on this end. Rico and I will take that track just to the east. Once we know it’s clear, we’ll make camp up there and head out again at sun up.”

“Works for me,” Jamal smiled. “K-Rats or not, I’m ready for some food.” He moved away from the boulders and started climbing toward the cliff.

Hank shouldered his weapon and hauled himself back onto the narrow trail as Jamal and Smitty moved out. An instant later, Jamal’s helmet flew by in a spray of blood as a sharp crack split the glacial air. Diving back into the rock pile, Hank opened fire toward the shadowed caves along the ridge. Smitty and Rico scrambled in beside him and started firing in the same direction.

“Goddamn son of a bitch!” Smitty roared. “That motherfucker’s mine!” He’d sliced his hand getting back to cover and blood dripped from the stock of his weapon as he took aim and unleashed a barrage of rounds.

Rico slipped his pack off and unloaded additional clips. As he did, gunfire erupted from the north side of the ridge only 25 meters ahead. He pulled the pin on one of the olive green grenades from his belt and, crouching behind a boulder, lobbed one toward their attackers. It rolled back down the slope, unexploded.

“Shit,” he shouted as he dropped down. “Where’d they buy these? Fuckin’ Wal-Mart?”

“Smitty! Radio!” Hank yelled. “NOW!”

There was no response. Looking behind him he saw Smitty, struggling to pull the radio from his pack. Blood stained the left leg of his desert fatigues a deep red. “Oh, man.”

“Here you go, Sarge.” Smitty held the radio out toward him.

“It’s going to be okay, Smitty. They’ll get us out of here,” Hank said, not at all sure it was true. Flicking the power switch, he shouted into the transmitter. “Tango 7, Tango 7, this is Delta 6! We are under attack! I repeat we are under attack!”

He pressed a small button next to the volume control. “GPS locator activated! Two men down, we need immediate air support and medevac. I repeat, need immediate...”

It was the last thing Hank remembered.