

Chapter 1

Operation Inherent Resolve Kunar Province Afghanistan

Weeks before it happened, before she vanished from the New York City streets, Rob was thousands of miles away, fighting a war on foreign soil. He'd had little time to think about home, or anything else. Responsibility to his country and team took precedence over anything else, at least for the time being.

A chilly wind blew steadily through the Korangal Valley, also called the Valley of Death by American troops during the longest and most drawn-out war in the nation's history. It had become one of the most dangerous places in the world, marked by intense clashes between the US-led coalition and the Taliban. With its different tribes and no apparent laws other than those observed by a council of elders, the valley had been cause for hostility between the locals and the US military for years.

But that was in the past. Special Forces no longer needed tribal approval to operate there. ISIL, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, set up shop within the surrounding mountains. It wasn't a matter of winning over hearts and minds. This time, the mission was straightforward: seek and destroy.

Beneath the gray, hazy sky, high grass and branches fluttered in the breeze beneath snow-capped mountains. Sergeant First Class Rob Walker, thirty-three, and his spotter, Staff Sergeant Kyle Branch, thirty, both with the 5th Special Forces Group, lay prone on that jagged mountainside, hundreds of meters from a suspected Islamic State stronghold.

Several years prior, ISIL had wreaked havoc in Iraq until the coalition had forced them out. But they were still attempting to spread their destructive message across the rest of the world. The US government knew they were hiding in small pockets across Afghanistan and parts of

Pakistan. Well after the United States began its official withdrawal from Afghanistan, a small network of Special Forces and Special Operations Forces had stayed in the country to hunt down remaining ISIL fighters and provide firepower against the Taliban should a peace agreement fail to materialize. Here they were, doing what they did best.

Rob Walker was a third-generation military man. His father had served as a grunt in Vietnam, and his grandfather was a B-17 bomber pilot in World War II. Growing up on the streets of Brooklyn was rough, so his family understood why he left. He'd always felt destined to do bigger things while serving his country. And that he did.

Before joining the Special Forces, Rob was a sniper with the second battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment at Joint-Base Lewis/McChord. It wasn't a requirement to attend Ranger School prior to joining the Special Forces. But many of those who earned that green beret tended to have special operations backgrounds. Rob was no exception.

He'd excelled in the Special Forces selection program, both physically and mentally. He was a team player. After graduating from the long qualification course, or Q-course as a Weapons Sergeant, they sent him to the Special Forces Sniper Course, where he finished in the top 1 percent of his class. Rob was noticed early on in his career for his superb marksmanship skills and raw talent. Adding training to that talent made him a sniper the enemy feared as he racked up nearly ninety confirmed kills in just a few years.

Like Rob, Kyle was a sniper with the Ranger Regiment for a time. He'd been assigned to the 3rd battalion out of Fort Benning, Georgia. But he'd always known he wanted to be a Special Forces operator. After serving a few years in the regiment, Kyle graduated from the qualification course, also as a Weapons Sergeant, and was sent to his team. Shortly after completing the sniper course, he and Rob were paired up as a sniper, spotter team. They became fast friends, bonding over their love for country and eradicating the nation's enemies.

Unlike special operations units like the Navy SEALs and Rangers, Special Forces had no dedicated sniper element for each team. The alpha-team captain would designate a qualified sniper and spotter who'd attended the Special Forces sniper course at Fort Bragg to perform overwatch or long range reconnaissance, sniper missions as he saw fit.

Rob and Kyle had positioned themselves at a distance to provide cover for the Special Forces team as they prepared to clear the remote Afghan village of militants and eliminate one of their top lieutenants. Special Forces had fought the Taliban and al-Qaeda for years. However, the Islamic State took savagery to a whole new level. They were brutal. The coalition could not allow ISIL to regroup and gain a foothold in Afghanistan after their defeat in Iraq and Syria. They were like a cancer that needed to be removed before it spread.

The rest of the US Army Special Forces team, Operational Detachment Alpha-595, or ODA-595, waited in position. Historically, the Special Forces, except for Operational Detachment-Delta, or Delta Force, didn't normally conduct direct action or high-value target raids like the Navy SEALs and the Army Rangers. Special Forces teams were mostly instructors to foreign military allies, going into battle with them when needed. However, the team was among some whose mission had recently changed.

On the other side of the valley, Rob looked through the glass of his M107 Barrett .50-caliber sniper rifle, its bipod resting sturdily on the flat rock surface amid the undergrowth. With a maximum effective range of eighteen hundred meters, that rifle was the optimal weapon for long-range targets in the Afghan Mountains.

Kyle studied the halfway point between their position and the target area through his Leupold Mark 4 spotting scope, noting the wind swaying the grass to one side. He called out the range while examining the scope's mil-reticle. "Distance to nearest building, five hundred and fifty meters."

Peering through his scope, camouflage Mechanix gloves on his hands, Rob grasped the pistol grip on his rifle.

"Roger that, five hundred and fifty meters," he replied as he started doping or dialing the elevation turret with his other hand.

Intelligence had received a tip from a confidential source that ISIL leaders, or "Daesh" as they called them in that part of the world, had ordered the village taken over and a permanent terrorist training camp established. After taking most of the women as sex slaves for Islamic State fighters, ISIL ran off or killed the remaining villagers.

The team had also gotten a report that ISIL had a hostage, an American journalist who'd embedded with one of the Ranger battalions operating in the AO, or area of operations. Special Operations Command had given her the code name Scribe. Her rescue was a mission priority.

Rob held the butt of his rifle into his shoulder while he adjusted the tan sniper veil spread over his body.

"I don't see a damn thing," Kyle told Rob as he skimmed through his spotting scope.

"Yeah," Rob said in his New York accent as he scratched the side of his scruffy beard, his tan ball cap turned backward. "I wasn't expecting it to be this fucking quiet."

He spat a stream of Copenhagen to the side, keeping the glass right in his view. Kyle took another look as Rob moved his mouthpiece closer to his lips with his non-firing hand.

"Alpha-six," he said over the radio, feeling the light wind against the side of his face. "You see anything from over there? We got nothing at this location, over."

"Negative," Detachment Commander, Captain Wells, thirty-three, replied. "Nothing on this end yet. Hold position, over."

"Roger that, boss," Rob said, his trigger finger pointed straight over the trigger guard.

Captain Jonathan Wells had been a West Point cadet, graduating in the top 10 percent of his class. After serving in the Ranger Regiment for a stretch, he attended Special Forces selection at Fort Bragg. Upon his Q-course graduation and promotion to captain, Wells was sent straight to the 5th Special Forces Group and given his team assignment. Most of the team had already been together for a while, serving in Iraq and Afghanistan on numerous deployments. But Wells was surely gaining their confidence.

"Weren't they supposed to be here already?" Kyle asked Rob.

Rob removed his eye from the lens, momentarily glancing at his spotter and grinning, a fat dip of Copenhagen bulging in the side of his lip.

"Shit," he replied. "I forgot to call and set up the meeting."

"Funny," Kyle replied, laughing, "but I'm serious. Intel said the village was occupied."

"That's what they told us," Rob said. "When are they ever on point? It makes you wonder why they call it intelligence. Besides, when has a mission ever gone to plan?"

"You can say that again," Kyle replied while chewing on a piece of beef jerky.

Rob scanned the village below, shifting his rifle from right to left. He searched for any sign of movement through the oddly shaped windows and between the mud-brick buildings.

“You’re right, though. Something’s off. The place seems deserted. I don’t like it one damn bit.”

“Roger that,” Kyle replied. “Think they knew we were coming?”

“I hope not. If this informant is trying to double-cross us, I will deal with his ass myself.”

Kyle moved his spotting scope right. He noticed sand churning in the distance.

“Wait, I got something over here.”

He zoomed the scope for a better look.

“What you got?” Rob asked as he turned his weapon toward the cloud of dust.

“Looks like three vehicles,” replied Kyle.

Rob located them and followed their movement between the mil-lines in his scope reticle.

“It’s them,” he said. “See the black flags on the antennas?”

“Roger that, I see ‘em.”

Rob keyed the mic connected to his headset.

“Alpha-six,” he said into the mic. “We got three technicals over here. An unknown number of occupants with mounted heavy machine guns approaching from the north. Please advise, over.”

“Roger, Alpha-three,” Captain Wells replied. “I got them. Just sit tight and let’s see what they do. I repeat, hold fire. Wait for my signal. Then we’ll crash their party.”

“That’s a good copy, Alpha-six.”

Captain Wells and assistant detachment commander, Chief Warrant Officer Dylan Henderson, and team sergeant, Master Sergeant Brian Hobbs, took cover behind a low brick wall. The rest of the twelve-man team followed suit beside them a couple of hundred meters from the site.

The scout sniper team watched as three white Nissan pickups came to an immediate stop at the village’s edge. As five men hopped from the vehicles, Rob caught something he wished he hadn’t seen.

“Jesus,” he said, watching a row of civilians, hoods over their heads and arms bound behind their backs, thrown from the bed of a truck and forced at gunpoint through the entrance to one of the buildings. “Are you seeing this?”

“Yeah,” replied Kyle. “The fucking savages.”

“Alpha-six,” Rob said into the radio. “I see hostages. I say again. Multiple hostages, I count six being forced into the building. It looks like they are getting ready for an execution. I can’t identify the Scribe, but it looks like ten, maybe twelve hostiles, including our star, Abbas. The civilians are in the way. I have no clear shot on him, over.”

Adeel Abbas was the leader of ISIL in Afghanistan. His people and enemies alike called him the lion for his being ruthless with his chosen torture methods. No captive who’d ever been alone in a room with him had ever come out alive. He’d targeted civilians for a while, even ripping young boys from their homes and forcing them to fight for him. The team was there to remedy the problem. They had to deal with Abbas. JSOC, or Joint Special Operations Command, wanted his head on a platter.

Abbas moved around a lot, never sleeping in the same place twice. They had no idea when they’d ever have another chance at him. They had to deal with him now or risk many more civilian deaths.

Abbas was an Afghan. He was brought up in Kabul and highly influenced by al-Qaeda and a strict interpretation of Sharia law. But Special Forces command knew that most of the ISIL militants in Afghanistan were foreign fighters, with a tiny percentage being Afghan nationals. It was just as much a problem for the new Afghan government as it was for the Americans. Abbas grew to believe al-Qaeda to be too soft, thus turning his sights on ISIL as soon as they emerged. His brutal nature fit their ideals, and he gained rank rather quickly.

“I just lost visual on ‘em,” said Rob. “They’ve moved inside the buildings, over.”

“God damn it,” Wells replied. “Roger that.”

Rob took another glimpse through the glass, squinting his non-dominant eye while surveying the space surrounding the trucks.

“Alpha-six,” he continued. “They left two guys guarding the trucks over here. Let me send these assholes to Allah so you guys can proceed.”

“Roger, Alpha-three. Send it. Make it fast.”

Suddenly, the team heard a single gunshot from inside the house.

“Damn it!” Rob said as he aimed with his rifle. “Seems they’ve already started.”

He breathed in and out calmly, watching the rise and fall of the reticle.

“Ready,” Rob told Kyle as he held his aim.

On the spotting scope, Kyle called out the wind. “Wind, fifteen miles per hour from our three o’clock, full-value.”

With no change to distance, Rob clicked the windage knob. The tip of his finger pressed against the trigger, and he squeezed off a round. The recoil of the large-caliber rifle bumped hard into Rob’s shoulder, cracking as the bullet soared toward its intended target and splashed red mist against the vehicle’s side. The enemy fighter’s body plummeted to the earth, a baseball-sized hole left in his torso.

“Tango down.”

He slid the bolt backward and ejected a single shell casing. Catching it in midair, he pocketed it. Rob rammed another round into the chamber with one forward motion, pushing the bolt knob down into its locked position.

Rob blinked his eyes to focus his vision, glaring back into the rifle scope. Seeing the red color splashed onto the truck’s bed, the second militant wandered toward his dead partner lying on the dirt on the other side of the vehicle.

“I don’t think so,” Rob said under his breath.

Rob followed him through his scope as he strolled along in the dead man’s direction. Finger over the trigger, he squeezed and watched as the high-powered round split apart the man’s dome. The militant smacked his head on the tailgate and left a patch of blood dripping from it. Rob watched him drop to the ground hard.

“Fuck me. Somebody had to have heard that.”

“Roger that,” the captain said. “No time to wait. We’re moving in.”

“Watch your backs, Alpha-six. I can’t cover you once you are inside.”

Rob and his spotter observed through the glass. The rest of the team moved to the structure's side, hugging the wall beneath the window. He held the crosshairs on the front entrance. The wooden door came open, and a single fighter appeared, lighting up a cigarette in the doorway.

"Alpha-six, hold," said Rob. "Tango in the doorway."

"Roger," Wells whispered. "Holding position."

Rob touched the tip of his finger to the arc in the trigger.

"If I drop him, all his buddies are going to come pouring out like ants."

"Roger that," replied the captain. "Let's wait and see what he does."

Almost instantly, the hostile began walking to the corner of the house.

"Shit," Rob said as he panned the rifle left. "He's moving."

Just before the militant reached Wells's position, Rob pressed the trigger. A single shot tore through the man's torso, leaving a gaping hole in his chest and thrusting him backward against the wall before smashing face-down into a rock.

"He's down."

Rob guided his scope to the door.

"But there are more headed your way!"

A second man appeared in the doorway, and Rob dropped him.

"Take cover!" he yelled as he watched his team reposition behind a few large boulders.

"They're coming fast!"

"Roger that, Alpha-three! We need to rescue these civilians!"

"Let's kill these bastards first, huh? Then we'll worry about getting them out of here!"

Wells and the rest of the team sent fire into the hostiles fleeing the house as Rob and Kyle looked on from hundreds of meters away.

"Fuck!" Rob yelled, watching one of the ISIL fighters appear, holding an RPG or rocket-propelled grenade launcher pointed in the team's direction. "RPG!"

"Allahu Akbar!" a voice echoed through the valley.

In no time, Rob took aim. As he squeezed the trigger, the RPG launched and shot through the air, exploding within a few meters of the team before the militant's body collapsed to the dirt.

“Shit!” Rob shouted into the radio as he looked for them through the large, fiery dust cloud.
“You guys all right?”

Rob watched as the captain rose to one knee and continued shooting from cover.

“We’re good, Alpha-three!” Captain Wells yelled between bursts of gunfire. “Just cover us!”

Hearing the constant fire from their position on the mountainside, Rob and Kyle knew they couldn’t remain there much longer. The team was compromised. As quick as the captain could utter a single word, Rob engaged, ejecting shell casings and firing single shots into each militant. The team sent rounds into the sand-colored structure.

“Move, Alpha-six!” he said as bullets pinged off the surrounding rocks. “You’re going to get pinned down! I’ll cover you. Just move!”

Right then, he noticed an ISIL fighter clutching his AK-47 through the window, pointed in the team’s direction.

“Big mistake, asshole,” Rob said, squeezing the trigger. The man’s covered head came apart by the weight of a .50-caliber rifle round flying at breakneck speed.

Suddenly, another truck appeared down the uneven dirt road, speeding toward the Special Forces team as they scrambled across the yard.

“We have a problem here, Alpha-six,” said Rob. “Looks like a suicide bomber coming in hot!”

“You have a shot on him?” Wells asked over the radio. “I repeat, do you have a shot?”

“Working on it!” he replied as he followed the roof of the vehicle, partly obscured by the mountainous terrain.

The truck barreled around the curve, headed straight for the middle of the square, near to the team’s location. Rob knew he’d only have one shot at it. He positioned his rifle toward the vehicle’s grill and followed the truck as it grew closer.

Exhaling softly, he held his finger over the trigger. With a calm exhale, he squeezed. The bullet rocketed forward, striking the grill, and entered the center of the radiator, leaving a wet trail of antifreeze across the ground. The truck coasted down the hill and came to a slow stop in the middle of the square. Shifting the reticle and sliding another round forward, Rob fired once

more into the windshield, killing the driver. His dead body slid sideways down the seat, a bloody mess left on the back glass.

The truck sat idling, white smoke rising from the engine. Then, without warning, a giant blast shook the entire area, the shock wave sending Wells and a couple of his teammates flying backward behind the hardcover.

“Fuck!” they heard Wells bellow, coughing and gasping from a mixture of smoke and dust filling the air.

“Alpha-six,” Rob said, hearing his team grumble over the radio as he watched from his position. “That was close! You guys still in one piece?”

“Yeah,” the captain said, spitting a glob of dirt from his mouth. “Yeah, we’re good, I think. My ears are fucking ringing like crazy. Holy shit, that was nuts!”

“You should’ve seen it from up here,” Rob joked as debris rained down on the team from above. “I’m glad you guys didn’t get cooked in that inferno!”

Walker watched as Wells and Henderson stumbled to their knees and peeked around the corner at the vehicle, the ball of flames climbing high into the sky.

“Nice shot, man!” continued Wells. “Any closer, we would have been barbecue.”

“Seriously,” Chief Henderson said. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“Dude, I’m buying you a whole fucking case of beer when we get home,” Communications Sergeant, Javier López, told him.

“We can all hug and kiss later,” Rob replied. “They are still inside. And I am pretty sure they won’t come out quietly.”

He glanced over at Kyle with a half-witted smirk as his spotter patted him on the shoulder.

“Nice shooting, man,” said Kyle.

Rob smiled and peeped back once more through his rifle scope.

As the smoke from the burning vehicle passed to the east in the increasing wind, a figure appeared through the doorway. Wearing a white robe and a thick bushy beard with a white *taqiyah* covering his head, the man walked into the center of the square, holding a pistol to one hostage as he held her in place. Rob studied his face closely through his scope. It was undeniable.

“Alpha-six,” he said. “It’s him. It’s Abbas.”

Rob moved his rifle in the team’s direction and saw his captain glance out from his covered position.

“What the fuck is he doing?” the captain asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” replied Rob.

“Do you have a shot on him?” Wells asked.

Rob stared at Abbas through the glass.

“Negative. No clear shot yet. He’s using the hostage for cover.”

As Rob watched and waited from his position on the hillside, Abbas spoke.

“I know you are out there, you American infidels!” he shouted in flawless English as he held his pistol to the woman’s head. “We will continue to punish you and kidnap and kill your people and soldiers if you do not leave our Muslim lands, never to return! You have been killing Muslims for too long! You have bombed our women and children with your planes and drones! If you do not leave, you will face Allah’s wrath and mine. Unlike you, I am not afraid of death. I welcome it!”

Neither Rob nor his spotter could hear Abbas from their distant location on the rocky mountainside. But it didn’t matter. They understood his intentions loud and clear.

Abbas wrapped his arm around the woman, pulling her tight to his chest. Rob held the scope on him, trying to find a shot. But her body was just too close for comfort.

Abbas snatched the cover from the woman’s head, tossing it to the dirt.

“Is this what you’re here for?” he asked. “I will kill her right here if you do not leave now!”

Recalling the mission briefing earlier that morning, Rob recognized her face as plain as day.

“Fucking hell.”

Rob pressed the mic again.

“Alpha-six,” he said. “Alpha-three confirming priority target has the Scribe, over.”

“You sure it’s her?” asked Wells.

“Roger that, Alpha-six. I have a clear view of her face.”

Rob waited a moment for his team captain to answer.

“Hold tight,” Wells said to Rob. “I have an idea.”

Rob released the mic button and glanced over at Kyle.

“I get nervous every time he says that,” he said.

Rob viewed through the scope as Captain Wells rose to his feet, revealing himself to Abbas and his henchmen in the building.

“Damn it,” he said. “What the fuck are you doing, captain?”

Rob and Kyle watched as Wells slowly made his way toward Abbas.

“That’s some cowboy shit right there!” Kyle said in his Texas drawl.

The captain held his M4 high in the air, then tossed it to the ground a few feet away as Abbas’s men directed their AK-47s at him.

“Just give me a half a second to take the shot,” Rob said. “That’s all I need.”

He continued observing as his team captain stood there. Unable to hear the exchange between him and the ISIL lieutenant, Rob watched Abbas, hoping for a split-second of opportunity.

Then, out of nowhere, the captive journalist elbowed Abbas in the side. He lost his hold on her, dropping the pistol to the dirt as she dove away from him. Rob, already trained on his target, released a .50-caliber round at supersonic speed. It penetrated Abbas’s neck just below the chin and tore his head clean off, leaving blood spurting out from the hole. The force of the shot jolted his body a few feet back as he crashed to the earth.

Abbas’s bodyguards started firing in the team’s direction, hitting Wells in the arm as he dove for cover.

“Fuck!” he shouted.

“You all right, boss?” Rob asked, watching the captain clench his left arm as he hit the ground.

“Yeah, I’m good,” he replied. “Just a flesh wound!”

The rest of the team fired into the guards, dropping one to the ground as the journalist crawled under a nearby truck. The other was in Rob’s crosshairs.

He sent a bullet tearing into the man’s chest, leaving a baseball-sized hole as he collapsed. Sniper and spotter watched as Wells, winding a bandage around his bicep, advanced toward the

woman as she screamed. The chief took the rest of the team to clear the house. Minutes later, they appeared with four civilians, minus one dead.

The team formed a diamond formation around the remaining hostages to protect them and wait for extraction.

“Angel-one,” Rob heard Wells say over the radio as he popped and tossed a red smoke grenade into the square. “This is Alpha-six ready for extraction, over.”

“That’s a good copy, Alpha-six,” the Night Stalker pilot replied over the sound of rotor blades beating the air. “Good to hear your voice, Captain. We’re in the air and will be at your location in five mikes (minutes). Over and out.”

With one more mission chalked up as a success, Rob and Kyle traveled down the slope to assist their team in loading the freed civilians as the MH-60 Blackhawk Helicopter emerged in the distance over the mountain skyline.

