

The TOC at Bagram Air Base was situated in a large, heavily fortified tent, surrounded by barrier blast walls. It housed a sophisticated array of technologies, hi-def monitors, command modules and computer workstations manned by over forty JSOC technology specialists. They managed the critical satellite links to the command headquarters at Centcom, JSOC, USSOCOM, Pentagon, NSA, and the CIA.

The Agency's Special Activities Division, the CIA's paramilitary clandestine section, shared the TOC and ran Predator Drone Operations in Afghanistan out of the UAV Ground Control Station, a thirty-foot, triple-axle trailer situated eighty feet from the TOC. Their primary mission focused on guiding the predator drones by way of a line-of-sight data link for take-offs and landings by pilots and sensor operators, who used joysticks as controllers, similar to those used in operating video games.

Once the drone reached cruising altitude, the Agency passed on the controls electronically to pilots and sensor operators, who were located thousands of miles away at Indian Springs Air Field, near Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. Those operators based in the United States watched on large hi-def flat screen monitors live-video feed

from the Predator Drone cameras via satellite communications. They operated the controls in the same manner as their Agency operators at Bagram Air Base. The decision to fire the Hellfire missiles resided with the President, the National Security Council, the CIA director, and the recommendation of the Agency's station chief in Afghanistan.

Colonel Shane Dawkins stood two-inches over six-feet, his muscular physique filling his camo fatigues as a cyborg warrior rolled off of the assembly line. At forty-two years of age, the Delta-trained officer wore a military crew-cut and served as the Deputy Task Force Commander of JSOC. He struck fear in his men. No subordinate ever crossed him if he wanted to keep his rank. He took another puff of his cigar and walked back to a bank of workstations.

He stood next to Clyde, the Agency commander and chief-of-station, and Dex, the Agency's operations chief. They watched the action on the hi-def flat screen television monitors displaying the view from the Predator's cameras via the military satellite relay communications passed back to the TOC by one of their satellite uplink vehicles parked outside.

"Our Medevac and C-130s should be there momentarily," said Dawkins.

"Let's hope so. We've lost too many men already," Clyde said. Dex glanced at Dawkins' right hand gripping his satphone. He turned back to Clyde. "I better get back to the team." He supervised technical experts out of the Ground Control Station, including pilots, sensor operators, satellite communications engineers, and staff. Dawkins took a draw on his cigar, watched the smoke rings leave his mouth, and then abruptly left the TOC. He was standing thirty yards from the entrance and made a call.

"Oscar-Foxtrot-Zulu-Raven," said Pulaski.

"Raven, I have Agency decoded intercepts. Get me Gold Eagle." "Roger that." Pulaski moved closer and handed Ericksen the satphone. "The colonel just received Agency intercepts...Sadozai's a spy."

"Gold Eagle, the Agency handed me decoded intercepts with proof. Now terminate that fucking bastard. Do you copy?"

Ericksen shook his head, put his satphone down and closed his eyes for a second. He tensed his jaw, clenched his teeth and opened his eyes. "Roger that, sir." He glanced at his desert camo uniform and hands drenched with Templeton and Goldman's blood.

"Mark, kill that fucking traitor for Vinnie and our brothers." "Where the hell is he?"

"He and Delgado carried the major up to the LZ."

He grabbed Pulaski's arm and handed the satphone back to him. "Get Vinnie to the LZ, and let's get the fuck out of here."

"Right on!"

Ericksen heard the approaching Chinook MH-47 Medevac and AC-130 gunships by their increased noise levels as they sped closer. Three operators took defensive positions behind the boulders, fifteen feet apart, while the team carried the dead and wounded to the LZ.

A few minutes later, he spotted Sadozai, dressed in the traditional Afghan shalwar kameez and vest along with a wool beret. He bolted toward him. He grabbed the thirty-five-year-old Afghan, slammed him against a boulder, and hit him with a right to the jaw, sending him crashing to the ground. Ericksen kicked his AK-47 away. Sweat ran down his face.

"You fucking Talib, you set us up."

Sadozai got on his knees, his face bloodied, tears and sweat rolling down his face. He looked up at Ericksen and pleaded, "I'm not a Talib. I hate the Taliban!" He removed a photo from his vest pocket and pointed to it. Ericksen took out his Sig P226 and aimed it at him. "You're lying."

"Please sir, I have a wife and two daughters. I'm telling you the truth. I beg you." Two shots pierced his face as he hit the ground. His lifeless, bloody body lay a few feet away from the photo. Blood poured out of his left eye socket and from the bullet hole in his forehead.

Delgado and Ericksen made eye contact. Thirty feet distance separated the men. He motioned for him to come toward him. Delgado's eyes widened, almost surprised by the killing. He shook his head briefly.

"Fico, check his clothing for any intel."

Delgado nodded, still in disbelief and sighed, “Why did you kill him?”

His right hand trembled a bit as he put his gun back into the holster. “The Agency provided the colonel with proof Bashir was a Talib.”

Delgado shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. He had been on several missions with Ericksen, and like most soldiers in combat, especially JSOC operators, he knew killing terrorists, and collateral damage came with the territory. Ericksen bent down and picked up a photo of Sadozai’s daughters and wife, and noticed to his surprise Bashir’s wife lacked a burqa. Her unveiled face and casual clothing surprised him. He placed it in his pocket next to his wife’s photo.

The screeching, metallic sound of the Medevac and the gunships approached the LZ. The piercing noise could be heard even with their headsets on. The AC-130 gunships escorted the helo to the LZ. The pilots blasted the terrorists’ positions with 105mm and 40mm cannon rounds as the men ran down the mountain toward the village. Explosions lit up the dark sky, sending dirt and rocks downhill. If there were any terrorists still alive, they weren’t a threat to the Bravo Team now. Some of the debris hit the men. Sweat and mud covered their faces as they moved up along the trail to the LZ.

The Predator Drone launched its last Hellfire missile and within seconds hit one of the targeted houses, exploding into a giant orange fireball, spewing mud and brick in all directions. Seconds later, the next home burst into flames like a thunderbolt from Thor’s hammer, killing several people inside. The sound could be heard for miles.

The Medevac pilot landed on the LZ. The cargo door opened, and the men loaded up the wounded and the dead. The remaining operators rushed on board, and they lifted off. The risk to the Medevac would have been greater if it tried to hover above the LZ while the men hoisted up the dead and wounded, besides attempting to rope-climb up to the helo. Time was critical. The gunships escorted them back to Bagram.

Once they arrived at the air base, Ericksen went back to his tent.

This fucking hellhole! A stream of thoughts flowed through his

mind about the men on *Operation Daring Eagles*. He felt a deep sadness for his brothers who had died in the ambush, cut down like ducks in a shooting gallery. He had known many of them since arriving in Afghanistan.

They did everything as a team. They ate, drank, trained, fought, slept side-by-side and killed insurgents. In quieter moments they shared family and life stories. His brothers, which numbered six, would no longer return home and be with their loved ones again. Death delivers permanence. He would always remember the battles and the men who didn't return.

Ericksen tried processing and questioning what occurred. *Why would Bashir insist he was telling the truth? And why would a Talib have a photo of his wife in his pocket during an operation showing her without a burqa? Had Major Templeton been able to command the team, would he have followed the kill orders? Colonel Dawkins said he had solid proof from the Agency intercepts.*

The lives and missions of the teams depended on the character of their commanders and the trust the team had in them. Those threads built the fabric of moral leadership. Without that trust, their honor, duty, and country would lose its moral integrity.

On April 19, Ericksen entered the TOC wearing his desert camo fatigues, looking for the comms sergeant. He wanted answers, like those the Agency and JSOC sought from the debriefing session Bravo Team endured, shortly after they returned to the base. He rushed toward Pathfinder, the master sergeant who manned the communications console station. He glanced down on the sergeant's desk and raised his eyebrows, startled by the front page headline of *Operation Daring Eagles collateral damage report*, "Eleven Afghan family members killed by a Predator drone in a village night raid near Khost."

"Is the tribal village elder still being detained?" asked Ericksen, as his eyes focused on the sergeant. "The one who claimed Sadozai was a Talib."

"Sir, we don't have any village elders locked up here," Pathfinder replied, shrugging and staring up at him. "Sir, with all due respect, I don't know anything about Sadozai being a Talib."

"Is Colonel Dawkins available?"

"No, sir. He left for lunch a few minutes ago." "Thanks, sergeant." Ericksen turned and left the TOC.

He jogged to the Agency's headquarters office; a tent situated one-

hundred-fifty-feet from the TOC. The Agency maintained two offices, one at Bagram Air Base to control Predator drone operations and to direct high-value-target-ops with JSOC, and another known as Kabul station, located in the Ariana Hotel in Kabul, near the Afghan government offices, American Embassy, foreign embassies, and ISAF headquarters.

He approached two armed soldiers guarding the office.

"I have an appointment with Clyde." The guard waved him forward. No one knew the last name of the Agency men at Bagram and understood their first names were an alias.

The guard took out a phone and called. "Dex here," said the voice.

"Sir, Lieutenant Ericksen has an appointment with Clyde. What should I tell him?"

"Send him in."

Dex opened the tent flap, greeted Ericksen, and escorted him into his office. The room had the latest high-tech predator drone scientific equipment, signal intelligence devices, three hi-def flat screen monitors on a large table, several computers, and cipher locks on file cabinets. Dex appeared to be in his late-thirties, with short brown hair, medium build, and wearing a nameless military desert camo uniform.

"Clyde stepped out and should be back in a few minutes. Please be seated."

Dex moved toward his desk, stood, turned, and faced him. "I just want a confirmation," Ericksen said, as he stared with his deep-set blue eyes at Dex. "Did you or Clyde provide intercepts to Colonel Dawkins during Operation Daring Eagles that confirmed Bashir Sadozai conspired with members of the Taliban?"

Dex's jaw dropped, and he shook his head, "Hell no! We never had anything on Sadozai."

At that moment Clyde rushed into Dex's office. He was tall, bald, lean and muscular. His posture and military bearing were reminiscent of a man who had spent several years in a combat command. After serving fourteen years as a US Marine intelligence officer,

Clyde resigned his commission as a major and joined the CIA's paramilitary group.

"What's up, lieutenant?"

Ericksen's face flushed red. "Dex just gave me my answer, sir. Dawkins is a lying, fucking bastard! He first claimed a village elder fingered Sadozai as being a Talib. Then he claimed your Agency gave him intercepts with proof." He shook his head, "The colonel ordered me to kill him."

The forty-two-year-old Clyde motioned with his right hand, "Lt. Ericksen, please follow me to my office." He turned to Dex; his lips tightened with a scowl on his face.

"You too."

He thought Clyde seemed unhappy that Dex got involved. His office appeared larger and also loaded with high-tech equipment, computers, monitors, and maps. He and Dex sat down on two chairs facing the Agency station chief. Clyde shook his head, "Colonel Dawkins told me insurgents killed Sadozai during the ambush." He lifted up a water bottle, took a sip, and placed it back down on his desk.

"Did your satellite communications record the conversation between the colonel and me?"

Clyde's face tensed up, surprised by the question. He looked at Dex and then at Ericksen, "Sorry, we don't."

Dex interrupted, "That's right."

"Shit." Ericksen shook his head and made a fist. "That leaves me with only one witness."

"Sorry, I wish we could help you," said Dex, as he shook his head and cupped his chin.

Ericksen gritted his teeth and glanced back at Clyde. "I'm going to confront him."

Clyde shook his head, looked directly at him and slammed his hands on the table, "Be careful with Dawkins. I had a couple of run-ins with him when he served as the military attaché in Riyadh several years ago. Listen up, the Admiral recommended you for the Silver Star two months ago and got you registered at the Naval Postgraduate

School. If you keep your mouth shut you'll probably get promoted to lieutenant commander once you complete your master's program."

Ericksen sighed. "Sir, I killed an innocent team member." He looked down for a moment, and then raised his head, "Tell me how the hell I'm going to live with that memory the rest of my life!"

"You're in a dangerous environment, and all kinds of shit can occur. Do you get my drift?"

Ericksen shook his long sandy-colored head, "Don't forget your squadron rotates back to the States in two weeks. Stay alert and be smart."

"Do you believe Sadozai had anything to do with this ambush or any in the past?" Clyde turned to Dex and then back to Ericksen.

"I doubt it. Three days after receiving the intel, we sent Sadozai, Delgado, and one of our officers to Khost to meet the informant at a safe house. We had Sadozai under our control. The next day Sadozai impersonated a livestock broker, and along with a vetted Pashtun asset, entered the village to collect the on-the-ground assessment and check out the foothills nearby to determine the best place to serve as our LZ insertion and extraction point besides the video provided by the Predator."

"So tell me, sir, why do you think the colonel ordered me to kill Sadozai?"

"I can't answer your question," he said, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders.

He began walking out, stopped, turned and looked at Clyde, "Why did you shoot the missile into the house?"

"I felt the Pakistani ISI probably set up the ambush and hedged their bets. They probably threatened Walid to work with them and the Taliban; otherwise, they would have killed him. It's also possible they hatched a plan where he portrayed himself as the village informant. Our relationship with Pakistan isn't good, but there are times when they've provided us with good intel. When your team got ambushed, I had a gut feeling there was a twenty percent chance the bad guys were in the house. I recommended to Langley to kill them. Those terrorists killed lots of good men, and if they are in that house,

they are going to die. No doubt when we fuck up it turns these tribes against us.”

“Sir, thanks for your time.” He turned and left the tent.

Clyde glanced at Dex, raised his eyebrows, shook his head and placed both hands on his desk. “We have to keep our stories straight. I would advise if you heard any of their conversations to erase it from your mind. The White House, DoD (Department of Defense), and the intelligence community would wash this story before it ever reached the media, even if Dawkins is a sadistic commander. We can’t win this fight.”

“Trust me, I didn’t hear a damn word,” said Dex.

“Good.”

Dex suspected no more than twenty people at the highest levels of the DoD, CIA, and the White House heard Ericksen and the colonel’s NSA-enhanced satellite encrypted communications beside himself. Dex wasn’t his real name either. He had graduated from the Air Force Academy with a degree in electrical engineering and received his commission as a 2nd lieutenant. After spending several years as a US Air Force captain in Special Operations, he was recruited by the Agency’s Directorate of Operations into their Special Activities Division.

Dex had a streak of integrity and honor in him, with no respect for anyone who acted unethically, was dishonest, or lacked character. After he intercepted and listened to Dawkins’ encrypted satphone communications with Ericksen, he felt sad he couldn’t help him. He wasn’t about to risk his career and place himself in harm’s way, but no one could erase the truth he knew: Dawkins broke the military trust, lied, disobeyed the DoD’s Rules of Engagement and ordered Ericksen to kill Sadozai.

Ericksen jogged three hundred yards to the mess hall, entered, looked around, and spotted Dawkins seated at a table on the officers' side in the far corner along with a major and Master Sergeant Pulaski. They appeared to be halfway through lunch, eating their turkey breast, mashed potatoes, and cranberry sauce. He approached the colonel's table. "Can I talk with you outside, sir?"

"What's this about, lieutenant?" said Dawkins, as he looked up from his chair. "This matter is extremely confidential, sir."

Dawkins chuckled, "You can talk in front of my staff."

Ericksen took a few steps closer and stared into his eyes. He had a face that resembled a heavyweight boxer, with a strong jaw, scar tissue over his right eye, and a broken nose.

"I discovered your claims were all lies. What happened?" Ericksen said, his face tense and flushed red. "You ordered me to kill an innocent man."

Dawkins' jaw dropped open and stared at him. "Is that what Clyde told you?"

Ericksen shook his head, "No, Dex did."

Dawkins suddenly stood up, his face filled with anger. He dropped his fork on the table.

“All right, let’s step outside and discuss this in private.”

They stepped outside, and the other two men followed, leaving their meals on their plates. Dawkins wore US desert camo fatigues and the bird-colonel insignia. They walked 100 yards and stopped in front of the colonel’s tent. He waved Ericksen and Pulaski inside his sleeping quarters, while the major stayed outside. Dawkins put his hands on his hips and raised his voice,

“You’re a damn good officer, but I’ll bust your ass if you ever attempt to imply that I lied to you.”

“Colonel, what the hell do you call this?” Ericksen said, his anger written all over his face.

“What’s one fucking Afghan to you in this medieval country? Shit happens!” Ericksen’s piercing eyes stared at him. He had nothing but contempt for him because he had destroyed the trust and honor bestowed on him by the US military.

“I’m going to request a meeting with the Admiral as soon as he gets back. We’ll find out who’s telling the truth.”

“Listen up, don’t be stupid. You have two weeks to go before you leave this hellhole. Think again, if you pull that shit, Pulaski will testify under oath that you killed Sadozai in cold blood.”

Ericksen turned and moved inches from Pulaski’s face. “Tell the colonel exactly what you told me he said about Agency intercepts.” Pulaski smirked. “Sir, I don’t know shit about any Agency intercepts, but I saw you kill Sadozai with my own two eyes, and he wasn’t armed.”

Ericksen stared at him with a shocked expression and disgust. He yelled, “You’re a fucking liar!”

Dawkins put his hands up, palms facing Ericksen. “Don’t forget if there’s a court-martial they could also order Delgado to testify under oath and ask what he witnessed. I would think twice about your plans. A murder conviction could send you to Leavenworth for a long time.”

Ericksen’s face was red again with anger and shouted, “Colonel, did you just go fucking nuts?”

Dawkins tensed up. He yelled loudly at the major outside the tent, "Get this fucking asshole out of here!"

"Yes sir," the major said.

He turned and left the colonel's tent on his own. He had an intense hatred for the man and recognized he couldn't do a damn thing about it. He loved serving his country, and now his career as a Navy SEAL was in jeopardy. The colonel had him by the balls. As he walked back to his tent, he felt speechless. What could he do now?



The next morning Ericksen spotted the six-foot-four, 225-pound Pulaski leaving the mess hall. He walked up to him. "You're not fit to wear that uniform." At six-foot-one and 185 pounds, he was just a pound over his collegiate wrestling weight.

"We'll find out, won't we?" Pulaski responded, his face flushed red with anger. Pulaski enjoyed beating the shit out of warriors who either challenged him or verbally disagreed with him. He hadn't lost a fight in over two years. Both men were experts in close quarters combat. Soldiers leaving the mess hall gathered to watch.

Pulaski threw the first punch at his head and missed, and in less than a tenth of a second, Ericksen delivered a swift, powerful kick, buckling Pulaski's knee. Pulaski momentarily lost his balance when Ericksen's right-hand punch landed flush on his temple, knocking him to the ground.

The former All-American college wrestler took Pulaski down with a burst of speed, pummeled him with vicious shots to his head and face, smashing his nose, cutting his right eye, and splitting his lip open. Blood flowed freely, covering his entire face. Ericksen continued pounding his face, and then finally stopped. He stood up and looked down at Pulaski. "Go to hell, you lying bastard!"

Pulaski groaned in pain as Ericksen turned and walked toward the mess hall.

Several hours later, he entered the field hospital searching for Templeton. An Army doctor and a nurse approached him. "What can we do for you, lieutenant?"

“I heard Major Templeton is scheduled to be on the afternoon flight to Ramstein Air Base, and I would like to see him.” Both of them looked at the lieutenant and thought the major could use some cheering up.

“His left leg below the knee was amputated yesterday. He’s still groggy. Five minutes, okay?” the doctor said.

He nodded, followed her into a partitioned section of the tent, and looked at Templeton’s bandaged shoulder.

“Hi, Jeb.”

Templeton pointed to his leg under the sheets. “Mark, they amputated my leg below my knee. There goes my fucking military career.”

He knew any words he expressed would not change his friend’s mental condition, but he made up his mind to try. “Jeb, I’m proud to have served under your command.”

The West Point grad nodded. “Thanks for pulling my ass to safety.”

“Bashir and I were only doing our duty.” He didn’t want to mention anything regarding Sadozai. “Let’s hope for a speedy recovery.”

“I’ll be at Landstuhl for a week, and then I’ll be off to Walter Reed for rehab.”

“Let’s stay in touch,” said Ericksen.

He went back to his tent and reached into his footlocker. He retrieved the photo of Sadozai’s wife and children, stared at the picture, and shook his head. He thought how morally wrong it was to kill another human being in cold blood, even under orders. He closed his eyes. The image of Sadozai appeared in his mind, “I’m not a Talib. Please, I beg you.”

The memory of killing an innocent man sent chills down his spine. He placed his face in his hands and whispered, “God, please forgive me.”

He retrieved a large picture of his wife from his foot locker. *Why her and not me?* Reflecting again on the last words she spoke to him a week before she was killed in June 2001: *I’m proud of you for protecting our country, but I want you back home in one piece. I love you.*

She was four months’ pregnant, and the ultrasound indicated

they were going to have a girl. He promised her that when he reached his tenth Navy anniversary in December 2002, he would resign his naval commission and find a job in civilian life. They both agreed being away on long deployments wasn't good for marriage. That memory was freshly etched in his mind like it had happened yesterday.

After her death, the glue that held him together emotionally, physically and spiritually was a renewed dedication to SEAL Team Six. In August of 2001, he made up his mind to make a lifetime career commitment to the Navy.

He couldn't get Dawkins out of his mind. He knew if he demanded a military hearing, Pulaski would serve as a prosecution witness against him in a court-martial. Dawkins might also bring in Delgado as a witness to testify. The likely outcome would be a first-degree murder conviction and a lengthy prison sentence at Fort Leavenworth. Besides the conviction, the dishonorable discharge would devastate him and his family. Right then and there, Ericksen made a decision on the only course of action available to him.

On May 9, 2002, Ericksen arrived at his condo in Virginia Beach. He shaved off his beard and mustache and drove his Silverado pickup truck down Virginia Beach Blvd for his appointment at Ship Ahoy Hair Salon. The hair stylist led him to chair number one. The middle-aged woman said with a strong Southern accent, “Wow! You sure need a haircut honey. What would you like?”

He looked in the mirror. “I need a trim, Ma’am.”

“Okay honey,” she said with rosy cheeks and a big smile.

She stared into his blue eyes and turned to another hair stylist. Her mouth opened wide as to silently lip the words *wow*, as her head did a little movement side to side to suggest *this handsome guy is hot*.

The other hair stylist lady silently agreed with her by motioning her head up and down, and thinking *damn right*.

“I’ll bet you don’t have trouble getting a date with the ladies.

“I lost my beautiful wife last year. She was killed in an automobile accident.”

“Very sorry...Would you like a shampoo too?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”



The next day he left the US Naval Special Warfare Development Group's building at Dam Creek, Virginia, dressed in his white summer service uniform, his military separation papers in hand. He had officially resigned his commission from the US Navy. When he entered his master bedroom, he glanced at the top of his dresser at their framed wedding photograph stood. They were married in May 2000, at a church in Charlottesville, Virginia. His wife had brown shoulder-length hair and sparkling brown eyes. She looked stunning in an elegant bridal gown. He wore his full Navy white dress uniform, his Navy SEAL Trident breast insignia over his service badges and below, the Naval Parachutist insignia.

For a few seconds, he rubbed his eyes and lowered his head. She had been a certified maternity nurse at a Virginia Beach Hospital. She loved her job. They both were looking forward to the arrival of their baby girl when tragedy struck and robbed their future. On June 24, 2001, her car got hit head-on by a drunken driver on the road from Richmond to Virginia Beach. She died instantly.

He whispered to the photograph, "My God, I loved you very much." He didn't have time to bereave during his deployment time, and each time he entered the condo he felt a deep sadness and loneliness.

The next two weeks were spent fixing up his two-bedroom-two-bath condominium and selecting a realtor to sell the unit. He and his wife had purchased the oceanfront condo on Atlantic Avenue in November 2000, for close to \$400,000. Between his wife's death in June 2001, and his current deployment from the end of December 2001, till now, his clothing, furniture, and personal effects had remained in the condo. He gave her clothing away to a charity, except two dress outfits and a pair of her high-heel shoes.

The handsome ex-Seal wore a designer blue sports shirt, khaki tan slacks, and shiny, Sperry Top-Sider loafers. He could easily pass for a yachtsman. He sat down by the computer and printed out a letter thanking the Admiral for his efforts in getting him accepted at The Naval Postgraduate School, and explained his decision to enter

civilian life. He couldn't risk telling him the truth as long as Dawkins and Pulaski were willing to seek a hearing and ultimately a court-martial against him. He dropped off the letter at the post office an hour later.

A few days later, he got into his pickup truck and headed to Charlottesville, to the Monticello Memorial Garden Cemetery. He glanced at all the graves in her section and finally approached her gravesite. Looking down at the inscription on her headstone, he read: Karen Graham Ericksen, December 10, 1974– June 24, 2001. His in-laws lived in Charlottesville and maintained the gravesite on a regular basis. Ericksen held a bouquet of red roses, knelt down on the grass, placed the flowers on the right side of the headstone, and closed his eyes.

He thought about Karen, remembering one summertime when they went backpacking in the North Cascades of Washington State. They had laughed and enjoyed each other's company on that special vacation, smelled the food they cooked over a campfire stove, drank fine wine, and held hands while they hiked along paths in the forest and mountains. Those memories captured love, the serenity, being part of nature, and sharing the natural beauty of the old growth trees, plants, and flowers that created a glowing, calm within their hearts.

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he continued thinking about her kindness, her sense of humor, and holding her in his arms. He removed a picture of her from his wallet and glanced at her kind and beautiful face. In one moment Karen was full of life, and in a split second, she left his world forever. Now he confronted life without her. The numb feeling and emptiness compounded his other problems.

He remembered a profound anonymous quote etched on a tombstone in Ireland that appealed to him:

Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, Love leaves a memory no one can steal.

He stared down at the headstone, closed his eyes for a few seconds, then turned and walked away.

He contacted a moving company to pick up the furniture and personal belongings and place them in storage until he decided

where his next move would be in the DC area. While in Virginia Beach, he didn't want to meet any of his old SEAL buddies. His nightmares and flashbacks had begun taking a toll on him, and his only thoughts centered on going home to visit his family. He jumped into his Chevy Silverado and left town. He figured it would take several days before he finally reached his parents' home in Washington State.

He gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Heading toward home at last." Dating was the furthest thing from his mind. It was like being submerged in ice, frozen without feelings.

He didn't have any desire to discuss his PTSD or his nightmares. He hoped for the day to come when he could manage them, but right now all that mattered was the love and warmth of being with family.

Six days later, at 7 pm, he pulled up the driveway to his parents' Tudor-style home on SE 61st street in an upper-middle class neighborhood on Mercer Island, Washington. Ericksen and his sister Mia had immigrated to the United States from Denmark in 1981 with their parents. His father accepted a position with a Danish shipping company in Seattle. In the privacy of their home, the family spoke Danish.

His mother enjoyed being a homemaker. Over the years she had taken him to Boy Scout meetings, judo, soccer, football and swimming practice as well as taking his sister Mia to soccer, piano and ballet lessons. Both he and Mia were well-behaved children.

He made the varsity football, wrestling, and swim teams at Mercer Island High School and graduated in the top one percent of his class. He received All-State honors in football and wrestling. When he received a full scholarship for wrestling at Oregon State University, he and his family celebrated at the Space Needle Restaurant in Seattle.

When he walked up to the door carrying his luggage, his parents' eight-year-old German shepherd dog Bjorn started barking. When his father opened the door, Bjorn jumped up on him, and he immediately dropped his luggage and gave the dog a hug. He walked into the living room and embraced his parents. Over the next several minutes

they shared a teary-eyed reunion and updated each other on the latest news.

On the mantel above the fireplace in the living room were several family pictures, including him catching a football in the end zone against their biggest rival, Bellevue High School, and one of him with Karen on their wedding day.

“We only hope one day you’ll find the right woman again and start a family,” his mother said in Danish, as she smiled and looked right into her son’s eyes. “Maybe one day, Mor,” said Ericksen. By the time he left for college he had begun answering them in English, with only one exception, he still called his Mom by the Danish word *Mor*, and his Dad, *Far*.

He heard several knocks on the door and advanced towards it, and opened it. He smiled and overjoyed at the sight of his sister Mia, her husband, and their two boys, seven and nine. They entered the house and immediately hugged each other. Mia looked at her younger brother. “I hope you’re going to stay awhile,” said Mia in English.

“I’m planning to stay a few weeks and then head back to DC to search for a job.” She looked directly into his eyes and said, “We missed you all those years and more than ever, we need you back home.” She gently placed her right hand on his shoulder, as tears began flowing from her eyes, “Why not submit your resume to one of those tech companies like Microsoft or Amazon?”

“Mia, I’m not interested in being a computer programmer or software engineer.” He knew his parents, sister, and her family was precious to him, but he recognized his JSOC and SEAL Team-Six background would generate more career opportunities as a defense contractor. His father walked toward him and spoke in Danish as he escorted him into the dining room, “You’re home now, and that’s what counts.”

Dawkins hunkered down on the couch in his hotel room in Geneva, Switzerland, on June 5, 2002, reading a novel entitled *Absolute Power* by David Baldacci. He heard four knocks on the door and walked up to the peephole. He viewed a slim, tall man in his mid-thirties, with light brown hair, wearing a business suit.

“The code.”

“Andromeda,” the man said.

He turned the knob and opened the door. The man carried a small suitcase with a combination lock on it and handed it to Dawkins. “Timberwolf gave it to me yesterday at Ramstein Air Force Base. He told me it’s a present from Shogun.” The man removed a large envelope from his portfolio. “This is for you too.”

“Thanks, Randy,” he said, as he shook the hand of a former British SAS officer who had served as a junior military attaché for Great Britain in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from 1998 to 2000. He had resigned his commission in 2000 and worked as a freelancer.

Randy didn’t know the contents of the briefcase or the letter in the envelope. He just followed orders, and like some of his duties, he didn’t have a need to know. Dawkins had flown to Nassau, the

Bahamas, to set up a private numbered account for his company, The Conestoga Fund. This procedure provided him with another shield of security in protecting his identity at the Swiss bank he intended to use in opening up a private numbered account.

The room overlooked Lake Lemman and offered a panoramic view of the majestic mountains. The clear blue skies with daytime highs in the upper seventies created a perfect day for the average tourist strolling along the lake's promenade. However, Dawkins focused more on the contents of the small suitcase. Shogun was the code name for the leader of their group.

His secure smartphone rang and he picked it up. "Iron Fist."

"Shogun," the booming voice said. "The combination number is 0502. Two months ago I deposited four million dollars into Banque Matthias Reiter. From this point on you'll be our sole contact for depositing funds in our Swiss and Liechtenstein banks. I've made an appointment for you to meet Jurgen Reiter at 1400 hours today. The Swiss respect punctuality, so don't be late."

"Yes, sir."



The Banque Matthias Reiter SA was located on the Rue du Rhône in Geneva's business section. The building had five floors of office space, and global financial investors considered the Bank one of the leading small private banks in Switzerland. Founded in 1907 by Jurgen's great-grandfather Matthias Reiter, the bank had started in Geneva and added branches in Lugano, Lucerne, Zurich, and Bern. By 1990, the bank established offices in Vaduz, Sao Paolo, Frankfurt, London, Paris, Tokyo, Singapore, Grand Caymans, and Dubai. Their total assets reported in 2000 exceeded thirty billion dollars, and they had over 1,000 employees.

Dawkins faced Jurgen Reiter, an athletic-looking man in his mid-forties, who served as executive vice-president of wealth management at the bank. Two older brothers held the top positions, CEO, and COO, respectively.

The conference room conveyed exquisite paintings: pictures of

racing cars, seascapes, abstract art, Zermatt and Jungfrau Mountains, and a portrait of the founding father of the bank. Reiter sat at the head of the table with Dawkins to his left. Behind Reiter hung a beautiful stained-glass painting on the wall. It was about ten-feet-in-height by seven-feet-wide and featured a scene of Bellagio, Italy.

Dawkins opened up his suitcase; counted one-million-two-hundred-thousand dollars in \$10,000 packets of shrink-wrapped one hundred dollar bills. After a few minutes of counting the money, Reiter issued him a form to sign and gave him a card with only the private number of the account on it.

“Please read this carefully, Mr. Dawkins, because this form explains our bank operations and instructions on how to make deposits, wire-transfers-of-funds, and withdrawals, either in person, by phone, or online. Please excuse me; I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Three minutes later, Reiter re-entered the conference room and sat down. Dawkins looked at the card and read the numbers BMR7073385JR/1.

“Please memorize your company’s private bank number. BMR stands for the name of our bank. After the seven numbers, you’ll notice my initials JR and 1 represents our headquarters location where you opened your account. I will be your primary contact. If you call me, you’re to ask for my employee number and my grandmother’s maiden name. My number is 0145, and the name is Keller. I will respond by asking you for your account number, your date of birth, passcode and an access code. We will provide a new access code to you every three months. Your new access code will be Jungfrau.”

After ten minutes of further discussions regarding private numbered accounts, filling out the bank terms, bank intranet access, personal and corporate information, he signed the agreement and gave it back to Reiter.

“Excellent. We have your date of birth and your passcode. I find it interesting you would choose Terminator for your passcode,” said Reiter, cupping his chin with his hand.

“It has a ring of finality, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, a ring of finality,” Reiter said, with a tight-lipped smile. He pressed a button.

Fifteen seconds later, a female administrative assistant entered the conference room, took possession of the cash, and placed it in a large zippered bank bag. “Here’s your transaction receipt. Please put the receipt in a safe deposit box with the card. If you like, we can provide a safe deposit box for your convenience.”

“Thank you, but I’m covered.”

Reiter slid the papers in his portfolio on the table. He stood up. “Please tell your chairman we’ll take good care of your company’s numbered account. Welcome to Banque Matthias Reiter. We value your business, and we assure you of our commitment to protecting your identity.”

“On my next visit I would like to invite you for dinner and discuss our mutually profitable arrangement,” said Dawkins as both men stood and shook hands. Reiter escorted him out of the conference room.

He rode the elevator down to the lobby and left the bank. He entered a coffee shop at Rue du Mont Blanc 26 and ordered a hot latte. A smile appeared on his face as he thought of the upcoming opportunities to profit from the Afghan War.