

Rave Reviews from the First Edition of The Ericksen Connection

“Moves fast, paints scenes and pictures quickly...

Celebrates the nobility of the men and women who help protect and defend us.”

San Francisco Book Review 2015

4.5 of 5 Stars

5 of 5 Stars. Reviewed by Jill Rey in the United States on April 25, 2023

Bringing his firsthand knowledge and experiences to this book, author Barry L. Becker delivers a novel penned like someone who has lived it all. Reading like a non-fiction, Jason Bourne-esque story, the level of detail is impeccable. From the code names to the locale, the action scenes, and the agency insights, it's incredible the aptitude Becker has brought so comprehensively to this read.

“The Ericksen Connection” reads like a movie. Flashing from setting to setting, big player to big player, as the story winds together, shocking readers at various turns as they unravel the plot in their heads and root for Ericksen and his partners every step of the way. The mental warfare Dawkins plays on our lead character, Mark Ericksen, builds the foundation for this book, slamming these two together as they lead separate lives. Upon rejoining civilian life, Ericksen is suffering from PTSD due to the decisions he was forced to make in the heat of battle. Readers are introduced to the realities of re-entry as we navigate civilian life alongside Mark Ericksen.

Ericksen makes an ideal lead as his upheaval from military life drops him squarely into the exciting world of biometric encryption. His new role lends well to his military experiences while maintaining the action, intrigue, and maybe even romance that have the pages practically turning themselves. Conversely, our villain is all too realistic as greed begins to cloud one's judgment, causing a masterful game of cat and mouse to ensue.

“The Ericksen Connection” is the perfect read for fans of Jason Bourne and Jack Reacher and those who love thrilling action adventures.

Some Header Rave Reader Reviews

“A well-written thriller. Keeps you guessing re: what’s next?”
SamS, 2020.

“Very thorough and engaging read,”
Jennifer Lynch, 2022.

“Fast-paced, complex thriller with a rich gallery of characters,”
Bjorn, 2022.

“An excellent international thriller that combines originality with authenticity,”
Michael Garin, 2023.

“Becker hits a home run the first time up to bat as a novelist,”
JerryWalch, 2024.

84 Ratings/Reviews: 4 out of 5 Stars.

The Ericksen Connection

A Mark Ericksen Thriller Book 1

2nd Edition

Barry L. Becker

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Dedicated To

*the brave American men and women in uniform
who risk their lives to protect our country and our freedom.*

CHAPTER ONE

ON APRIL 18, 2002, AT ZERO DARK FORTY, A CH-47 Chinook Helo lifted off from Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, into a moonless night with a roar, escorted by two Apache gunships, headed to the village of Zarghun Mekh, twenty miles from Khost, Afghanistan. Mark Ericksen, a Navy SEAL lieutenant from The Navy's Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU) and second-in-command, leaned forward on the metal seat. He took a deep breath and reflected on his wife Karen's last words to him as he gritted his teeth.

I'm proud of you for protecting our country, but I want you back home in one piece. I love you.

He glanced at several of his men, and his squadron commander, Major Jeb Templeton, from the Army's 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment Group-Delta, nodded and gave them the thumbs-up sign. Eighteen men of the Bravo Team, part of the elite tier-one operators from the Joint Special Operations Command, JSOC, were on a high-value-targets-mission. The men wore battle dress uniforms and had beards and long hair. The team's painted camo green and brown earth-tone faces highlighted the whites of their eyes. Several minutes into the flight, many men closed their eyes to rest, and silence prevailed except for the helo's noise. The rotor blades thumped in cadence to a "whop-whop-whop" beat, and the gears made a winning sound like a high-speed chainsaw.

Ericksen had been on thirty-two missions since arriving in Afghanistan at

the end of 2001. He thought about their most recent mission briefing. Eleven days before, the Agency, as the military referred to the CIA, received actionable intel on the targeted leaders' meeting for April 18 at 0900 hours. The predator drone had conducted recon and surveillance in the village over the past six days and transferred intel back to the Agency at Bagram Air Base's *Tactical Operations Center*, the TOC. Two days ago, the Predator drone's live-feed video camera had picked up the Taliban's second-in-command, along with a senior military commander.

Late on April 16 Bravo Team sent a small, advanced team to conduct recon and surveillance. The next morning, Delta's Fico Delgado, using a camera with a telephoto zoom lens, collected photos of Saad Al-Fulani, a key Saudi Al-Qaeda leader, leaving a compound. Al-Fulani reported directly to Osama Bin Laden. His presence confirmed to the CIA/JSOC Command the meeting's significance.

Ericksen reflected on the horrific terror attacks just seven months earlier, on 9/11: the planes that hit the World Trade Center buildings, the Pentagon, and the fourth hijacked plane, United Air Lines flight #93, on course to Washington DC. Had it not been for those brave Americans who rushed the terrorists and fought to take control of the plane, the White House or the Capitol building would have been destroyed. Sadly, the aircraft crashed in a field in Pennsylvania, killing all on board. On that day, over 3,000 people died on American soil.

With a few minutes to go before insertion, the pilot, a member of the 24th Special Tactical Squadron (STS), voiced a warning, "Ten minutes out." Ericksen and the men wore helmets and night-vision devices with their gloves. Ericksen was all about duty, honor, and country; expecting less than one hundred percent from his team was intolerable. He trusted his men and knew that should he get injured or killed in action, they would never leave him behind. Failure wasn't in his vocabulary.

The helo approached the Infrared Landing Zone (LZ), marked LZ 8E, on a plateau two kilometers from the village where the high-value targets were reported to be staying. The air turbulence shook the helo as it hovered forty feet above the landing zone, kicking up dust, sand, and rocks. The men fast

roped to the ground on the plateau perched above the village, which stood over 3,000 feet in elevation.

The team quickly assembled one hundred yards away at the staging area. The winds howled out of the east at fifteen miles an hour, the temperature held at fifty-eight degrees Fahrenheit, while the rain pelted the ground into a mud-soaked path. Their eyes began adapting to the low-level light with the phosphorus screen's intensified images to best direct their line of sight in green. The team met Bashir Sadozai, an Afghan intelligence officer who was embedded on several JSOC missions. They also met four operators from Bravo Team: Vinnie Goldman, the SEAL Team Six two-way radio/satellite comms operator; Delta Force Sergeant Delgado; a CIA paramilitary operative (from CIA's Special Activities Division); and an Air Force combat controller. The infrared technology illuminated the houses at which, two nights ago, their Pashtun informant had installed guidance beacons. They could be seen only by certain types of night vision goggles and by the Predator drones' thermal-imaging cameras. The two targeted mud and brick homes were located at the far end of the village, adjoined by three other houses and surrounded by a brick wall enclosure. Should the mission fail, the Predator operators stood ready to fire Hellfire missiles into those designated targeted homes.

By 0145 hours, they had traveled one kilometer and had another kilometer to reach the assault vantage point. The team momentarily stopped, took out their water packs, and drank some water. The vantage point sat perched on a bluff overlooking the targeted homes. Most of the operators carried *Heckler and Koch* MP5 submachine guns with suppressors, each affixed with a green laser and a white strobe light, hundreds of rounds of ammo apiece, some HK-MP4 carbines with three magazines apiece, many flashbangs velcroid to their vest, body armor, a secure two-way radio, lip mic, and headset. Some carried rocket launchers with high explosives, a couple of sniper rifles, machine guns, and explosives to breach doors.

At 0155, Goldman received a call on his encrypted satphone from the TOC. Ericksen stood twenty feet in front of the team when he and the team heard Goldman's voice through their two-way radio headsets, "Abort mission! We've been compromised!"

“Shit!” Major Templeton, the commander of the Bravo Team, said to the men through his mic. “Back to the landing zone.”

One minute later, a barrage of bullets rained down on them like a hailstorm bombarding a field of spring corn. Finding themselves targets in the kill zone, the men scrambled for cover. A bullet pierced Templeton’s shoulder, knocking him to the muddy ground. Seconds later, a rocket-propelled grenade exploded fifteen feet away from him, spraying shrapnel into his legs. His mangled leg below the knee bled heavily. Ericksen turned to Sadozai, ten feet behind him, and waved his hand in a follow-me gesture, “Bashir!” They rushed to Templeton’s aid, pulled him behind the nearest boulder, and applied a tourniquet to stop the bleeding.

Loud crackling and pops from AK-47s and grenades spit out rocks, dust, and debris tumbling down the mountainside. A minute later, a SEAL and a Delta were killed in a hail of bullets. A Delta operator went down and shot with a bullet to his thigh. A SEAL combat medic charged to his aid and began patching him up when a bullet sliced through the medic’s neck, killing him. The Air Force combat controller and another operator ran into the kill zone to fetch the Delta, who had gone down, and as they carried him toward another boulder, bullets struck and killed both men. The acrid smell of explosives permeated the air. AK-47 rounds and rocket-propelled grenades continued to blast away at the team as they fired up the slope.

Goldman received a call on the satphone and gave it to Ericksen, who was now in command. “*Zulu-Gold Eagle, Condor* is down. Do you copy?” said Ericksen.

“Roger that. The QRF [quick reaction force] is on its way. Do you copy?” *Pathfinder* asked.

“Roger and out,” Ericksen said.

Ten minutes later, *Pathfinder* called. “The video link from the Predator spotted twenty-five armed insurgents (terrorists) moving fast up the ridge. We’ve called in several C-130 gunships and the Medevac from Jalalabad.”

“Thanks, *Pathfinder*, Roger, and out.” He had good cover behind a large boulder as the bullets continued to rain down. He readied up his lip-mic and passed the word to his team.

A few minutes later, the fighting stopped. Fear and uncertainty penetrated his mind for a moment, as one would expect of any brave SEAL Team-Six or Delta operator, but he was battle-hardened and mentally tough like many of his fellow brothers. Their focus zeroed in on their mission: capture or kill the insurgents. If it came down to a survival firefight: kill the enemy before the enemy kills you. The men carried their dead and wounded back up to the LZ. He realized the extraction would be dangerous, and the chance of the helo being blown to bits magnified his concerns for his men's safety.

Twenty minutes later, the fighting erupted again. The team ran for cover. Twenty terrorists raced down from the foothills shooting at the team. The terrorists who remained on top of the ridge fired at the pinned-down team from concealed positions.

Bravo Team immediately blasted them with their MP5 submachine guns on full auto. Three terrorists ran towards him from thirty yards away.

With his heart racing and his adrenaline pumping, he shot and killed one man, then turned to his right and shot the second man dead. The third man ran at him, stopped, and aimed to shoot, yelling, "Allahu Akbar," when Ericksen cut him down with a three-round burst and watched the man's brains and blood fly out of his skull. He swiftly turned to his left and saw Delgado firing at several terrorists. When one aimed to shoot Delgado from ten yards away, Ericksen shot him dead. Delgado glanced at the dead man as he hit the ground. He turned and nodded his head in a thank-you gesture to Ericksen as their eyes met.

The Predator shot a Hellfire missile at a group of terrorists on the ridge. The team heard the sound of the boom and felt the explosion as the ground shook around them. Rocks, dirt, and body parts tumbled down, barely missing them. Glancing to his left, Ericksen spotted a charred head and a leg rolling past him. He turned to Goldman, adjusted his helmet, and brushed the sweat off his beard with his right glove. His heart kept pounding faster.

"Vinnie, call again and get the ETA on the Medevac and the gunships." At that moment, Vinnie got hit by two rounds in the neck and thigh.

Ericksen heard a groan, turned, and saw Petty Officer First Class Vincent "Vinnie" Goldman on the wet shale and muddy rocks. He ran to Goldman,

pulled him a few feet behind the large boulder, and leaned over him. He glanced for a second at his blood-soaked camo uniform, "Extraction is minutes away, bro. You're going to make it."

"Mark, please listen. Tell my wife and son I love them."

A minute later, he coughed up more blood and died, holding Ericksen's hand. His eyes stared up at nothingness. Goldman, a SEAL Team Six operator, had been on several missions with him in Kandahar Province, and they were good friends. Both he and Goldman were former teammates on SEAL Team Eight before being selected for SEAL Team Six. Ericksen's tears rolled down his muddy, sweat-filled face.

Ten minutes later, the firefight went silent. Master Sergeant Lech Pulaski, the lead Delta non-commissioned officer, raced to his position.

"Mark just got a call from TOC; they said a Pashtun village elder they detained claimed Sadozai is a Talib (a member of the Taliban)."

"What!" said Ericksen with a puzzled look. "Can't be."

"They said Bashir Sadozai," Pulaski said.

He had established a bond with Sadozai, who was recently assigned to Bravo Team. In several firefights, he fought side-by-side with the team, killing many terrorists. He had intelligence, dedication, and performed courageously. The men trusted him.

Ericksen shook his head in disbelief. "I don't believe it. Get me, Colonel Dawkins."

"*Foxtrot-Raven*...Do you copy?" said Pulaski.

"Roger that. Sadozai is a fucking Talib spy. Put *Gold Eagle* on."

"*Gold Eagle*, we have confirmation Sadozai is a Talib who provided intel to the Taliban about our missions...Do you copy?"

"Roger that, *Iron Fist*." *Iron Fist* was Colonel Dawkins' code name.

"Sir, let me take him back for interrogation. It wouldn't be the first time a tribal village informant flat-out lied!"

"*Gold Eagle*, goddammit! Now terminate Sadozai, and that's a fucking order. Do you copy?"

He knew killing an unarmed person violated the Rules of Engagement and the UCMJ. He wished Dawkins' boss at JSOC, a Rear Admiral, was available,

but the Pentagon had called him back for a briefing. Ericksen didn't respond.

"*Gold Eagle*, I've given you a fucking order, so you best not give me any shit! Do you copy?"

He handed the satphone back to Pulaski. He shook his head and didn't say a word. He needed time to think. "What the fuck!"

Ericksen thought. *The ambush could be attributed to any number of possibilities: It could have been the local tribal village informant who set us up; maybe the first team had been spotted or heard during infiltration. Based on Bravo Team's briefing, Pakistan's Inter-Intelligence Services (ISI) provided the intel. Did they double-cross us? Perhaps Bashir Sadozai was a spy. The colonel said he had hard evidence. But why wouldn't he let me take Sadozai back for interrogation and give him a chance to disprove the allegations against him? Disobeying his orders in the heat of battle would have grave consequences for me, even though my instincts might later prove me right.*

Time was running out. He had to make a decision.

CHAPTER TWO

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 through a line-of-sight data link for take-offs and landings by pilots and sensor operators, who used joysticks as controllers, like those used in operating video games.

Once the drone reached cruising altitude, the Agency passed on the controls electronically to pilots and sensor operators, located thousands of miles away at Indian Springs Airfield, 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 returned 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 Predator's cameras' view 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 from 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.

"*Foxtrot-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 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 vest and 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 it.

Ericksen took out his *Sig-Sauer 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. 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 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, picked up a photo of Sadozai’s daughters and wife, and noticed that, 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 climb up to the helo. Time was critical. The gunships escorted them back to Bagram.

Once they arrived at the airbase, 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 and were cut down like ducks in a shooting gallery. He had known many of them since arriving in Afghanistan.

They did everything as a team: ate, drank, trained, fought, slept side-by-side, and killed insurgents. In quieter moments, they shared family and life stories. His brothers, who 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 had occurred.

Why would Bashir insist he was telling the truth? And why would Sadozai

have a photo of his wife 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 teams' lives and missions depended on their commanders' character and the team's trust in them. Those threads built the fabric of moral leadership. Without that trust, their honor, duty, and the country would lose their moral integrity.

CHAPTER THREE

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. Ericksen rushed toward *Pathfinder*, the master sergeant who operated the communications console station. He glanced down at the sergeant's desk and raised his eyebrows, startled by the front-page headline of the *Operation Daring Eagles* collateral damage report.

"Eleven Afghan family members were killed by a Predator drone 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 one hundred fifty feet from the TOC. The Agency maintained two offices. One is at Bagram Air Base to control Predator drone operations and direct high-value-target-ops with JSOC, and another is known as Kabul station, located in the Ariana

Hotel in Kabul, near the Afghan government offices, the 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, a medium build, and 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 at *Dex* with his deep-set blue eyes. “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 from his commission as a major and joined the CIA's para-military 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 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 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 registered you 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 and appeared puzzled by *Clyde's* comment.

“Don’t forget your squadron rotates back to the States in two weeks. Stay alert and be smart,” *Clyde* said.

“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 felt I had to kill them. Those terrorists killed many good men, and if they are in that house, they will 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, erase them from your mind. The White House, the DoD (Department of Defense), and the intelligence community would wash this story before it 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 intercepting and listening to Dawkins's encrypted satphone communications with Ericksen, he felt sad that he couldn't help. 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.

CHAPTER FOUR

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 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, looking 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 *Chyde* 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 privately."

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 and raised his voice, “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,” said the major.

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?” said Pulaski. 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 and pummeled him with vicious shots to his head and face, smashing his nose, cutting his right eye, and splitting his lip open. Ericksen continued pounding his bloody 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 Airbase, and I would like to see him.” They both 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 decided 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 a photo of Sadozai’s wife and children. He stared at the picture and shook his head. He thought it was morally wrong 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 footlocker. 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 would have a girl. He promised her that when he reached his tenth Navy anniversary in December 2002, he would resign from his naval commission and find a job in civilian life. They both agreed that 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 decided 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 ruling, 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.

CHAPTER FIVE

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 Ship Ahoy Hair Salon appointment. The hairstylist 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 hairstylist. Her mouth opened wide to silently lip the words wow, as her head moved from side to side to suggest this handsome guy is hot.

The other hairstylist 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 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. He wore his full Navy white dress uniform, Navy SEAL Trident breast insignia over his service badges, and the Naval Parachutist insignia below.

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 was hit head-on by a drunken driver on Richmond's road to Virginia Beach. She died instantly.

He whispered to the photograph, "My God, I loved you very much." He didn't have time to be bereaved 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 purchased the oceanfront condominium on Atlantic Avenue in November 2000 for nearly \$400,000. His clothing, furniture, and personal effects had remained in the condo. He gave her clothing away to a charity, except for 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 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 if 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 regularly. 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 backpacked in the North Cascades of Washington State. They had laughed and enjoyed each other's company on that memorable 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, serenity, being part of nature, and sharing the natural beauty of the old-growth trees, plants, and flowers, creating 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 at the headstone, closed his eyes briefly, 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 to finally reach his parent's 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 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 took him to Boy Scout meetings, judo, soccer, football, and swimming practice and took 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 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 upon 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, advanced towards it, and opened it. He smiled and was overjoyed at seeing 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 plan 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 were 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.”

Ericksen now had a critical mission facing the challenges that would await him: dealing with his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), losing his wife from the previous year, regaining his mental toughness, and his self-confidence in his pursuit of landing a good position in the defense establishment.

CHAPTER SIX

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 wearing a business suit with light brown hair in his thirties.

“The code.”

“Andromeda,” the man said.

He turned the knob and opened the door. The man carried a small suitcase with a combination lock and handed it to Dawkins.

“*Timberwolf* gave it to me yesterday at Ramstein Air Force Base. He told me it was a present from *Sbogun*.” 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 resigned from 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 security shield to protect 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 cellphone 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 then on, you'll be our sole contact for depositing funds in our Swiss and Liechtenstein banks. I've scheduled you to meet Jurgen Reiter at 1400 hours today. Swiss respect punctuality, so don't be late."

"Yes, sir."

Dawkins was chief of staff when *Shogun* was the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2000. He was a squadron leader in the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta when *Shogun* commanded the Delta Forces many years earlier.

The Banque Matthias Reiter SA was located in Geneva's business section on the Rue du Rhône. The building had five floors of office space, and global financial investors considered the Bank one of Switzerland's leading small private banks. Founded in 1907 by Jurgen's great-grandfather Matthias Reiter, the bank 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 the bank's executive vice president of wealth management. Two older brothers held the top positions, CEO, and COO, respectively.

The conference room conveyed exquisite paintings: pictures of racing cars, seascapes, abstract art, the 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 his suitcase and 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 making 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 number 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 represent our headquarters location where you opened your account. I will be your primary contact. If you call me, you will ask for my employee number and my grandmother’s maiden name. My number is 0145, and my name is Keller. I will ask you for your account number, date of birth, passcode, and 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, and personal and corporate information, he signed the agreement and returned it 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 onto the table. He stood up. “Please tell *Shogun* we’ll take good care of your company’s numbered account. Welcome to Banque Matthias Reiter. We value your business and 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 the 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.

