

## **PROLOGUE: IRAQ (March 2003)**

Jack lay in the cool sand and watched the house two hundred yards away. The moon had set over the horizon hours ago, and the overcast sky cloaked Baghdad Province in darkness. His legs felt numb, and his muscles threatened to cramp, but he avoided any movement other than wiggling his toes within his boots.

He lifted his rifle to his shoulder and peered through the scope. Nothing moved, not even the air, which was as still as the mist over a pond in the early morning back in North Carolina.

His partner Sid, lying a foot away, spoke for the first time since they had taken their positions. "What the fuck are you doing?"

His friend had been on edge since the problem with his parachute. Sid had hit the ground hard, sprained his ankle, and destroyed the scope on his rifle. It had been a bad beginning for their first assignment. Jack whispered his answer. "Looking."

"You don't need the damn scope to look." Sid raised his night view binoculars and scanned the area himself.

Jack wondered what was annoying Sid. He assumed it was because someone was going to die.

An hour passed before Sid spoke again. "Julie couldn't believe you were doing this."

Jack could not believe what he was hearing. Their orders had been clear. Tell no one about this assignment, and that included Sid's wife. "You told her?"

"She's cool." He moved his muscular frame to a more comfortable position on the hard sand. "You know what's funny?" There was nothing even remotely humorous about his tone. "She didn't give a fuck that I was going to risk my life, but she hit the roof when I said you were coming with me. Why do you think that is?"

"Beats me." Jack could barely discern Sid's face in the darkness, but his friend's features seemed to draw tight. He chose to ignore them and looked back

at the horizon, trying to refocus on their mission. Discussing Julie when their lives depended upon total concentration was not a good idea.

Neither spoke for two hours as the darkness gave way to dim light. An occasional car passed on the distant highway, but this neighborhood was a picture of serenity. That was about to change.

A light appeared in the house. Sid pointed at his watch. "Five forty-five. Won't be long now."

A black Mercedes Benz rounded the corner. It stopped in front of the stucco wall. A gate opened. The car pulled into the driveway. It parked in front of the large stone house.

A uniformed driver stepped from the front seat while a tall, stocky man carrying an AK47 exited the back door. The bodyguard looked in every direction. He turned until he faced the two snipers.

Jack held his breath, afraid even to blink. His nose itched. The ache in his back demanded that he shift position. A muscle in his thigh twitched. The man stood with his hand over his eyes as if to block the morning sun that had not yet crested over the horizon.

After a full minute, he walked around the car and continued to the house. The front door opened just as he reached the stoop.

Sid nodded toward the house and whispered, "Get ready."

Jack said nothing, but he secured the stock of his rifle against his shoulder and sighted through the scope. His hands were steady, and his breathing, easy. Nothing betrayed the fact that this would be his first kill. The moment for which he had trained had arrived. He had honed a skill that few men possessed. It was a daunting responsibility. In his hands was the power that should have been reserved for God Almighty. His chance had come to save many lives by taking one. The ultimate duty rested on his shoulders.

The crosshairs centered on the figure that appeared in the doorway. Barrel chest, tall, almost bald, thick black mustache. *There is no doubt. This is our man. It's time to make the world a better place.* He tightened his index finger.

A dark-haired woman stepped into view with a small boy holding her hand. She smiled and said something that made the man laugh.

“What are you waiting for?” Sid’s voice was way too loud. “It’s a clean shot.”

The woman wrapped her arms around her husband and kissed him. He returned her hug, tousled the boy’s hair, and then walked toward the car.

The crosshairs returned to the center of the target’s chest, but Jack’s hands were no longer steady. The woman and the boy walked beside the man. She wrapped her arm around his waist. Jack took a deep breath. He tried to keep his sight on the mark, but the dynamics had changed. The quarry had proven to be a living, breathing, human being with a wife who loved him and a young son whose world revolved around him. To make matters worse, it was now moving, and the innocent people beside it made the assignment difficult at two hundred yards.

*What if I hit the woman? What about the boy?*

“Take the damn shot.”

His finger froze on the trigger. This was not a paper bull’s eye. His orders were clear. He just could not do it. All his training and all his skill proved to be useless. He lifted his eye from the sight. “I can’t.”

Sid yanked the rifle from him. “You fucking loser.”

The guard apparently spotted the commotion. He yelled and fired his AK47. The child ran behind his father. His mother grabbed her husband by the sleeve and dragged him toward the door. Sid pulled the trigger. The target jerked, and his face disintegrated into a jumbled mass of blood and bone. He fell backward, taking his wife with him to the ground.

Bullets pounded the sand in front of Sid. He pulled the trigger again. The crack of the rifle announced the death of the bodyguard. The driver ran to the side of the house. Sid fired once more. The man crumpled into a large cactus plant.

Jack regained his voice. “Why him?”

Sid did not bother to look his way. “He’d call for help. Do you want to get out of here?”

“Yes, but—”

“Then shut the fuck up and watch.” Sid trained the rifle on the woman. Jack had seen enough. He shoved his friend’s arm as he fired. The woman tumbled to the sidewalk. Her scream pierced the air.

Holding her injured arm, the target’s wife disappeared into the house with the boy. Sid swung toward Jack, and for a moment, looked as if he would open fire on the man for whom he had lost all respect. “You asshole. You just got us both killed.”

Sid jumped to his feet. Jack followed him across the sand. Within a minute, sirens blared. Sid grimaced and glared at Jack. “Happy now?” He was breathing heavily, but the words were clear. “That woman just called for help. We’ll never make the LZ.”

Jack heard the sound of helicopter rotors and then, rifle fire. Bullets scraped the ground at his feet and whizzed past his head. One struck Sid in the thigh. He stumbled and fell to the ground, blood flowing from the wound. Jack reached for his arm. “Can you walk?”

“No, goddamn it. Just go piss on yourself. I don’t want your help.” He reached for the fallen rifle and rolled to face the enemy. “Get your worthless ass out of here.”

## **CHAPTER 1: NORTHERN VIRGINIA (March, Fifteen Years Later)**

Doctor Jack Connor lifted his duffle bag from the Reagan Airport carousel and carried it to the parking lot. Brushing the blanket of snow off his windshield, he unlocked the door and slipped into the driver's seat of his red Corvette. In spite of the winter storm, he felt glad to be home, glad to be out of uniform, and glad to be alive. The past seventy-two hours had been hell, and now all he wanted was to chill and to forget about all that had happened.

He wondered what insanity had led him to stay in the army reserves. It certainly was not the pay. Perhaps that part of his life was about to end. That extra day in Kabul had been disastrous. He had barely avoided a court-martial. At least he hoped he had.

Now all he wanted was to grab a bite to eat and to get some sleep. That was not to be. He had scheduled a twenty-four hour break before returning to work, but that day had been consumed in Afghanistan. His flight had landed at Reagan Airport at 1800, just in time to turn on his beeper.

He used his cellphone to contact his answering service to let them know he was on duty. The operator told him that he had one message. A man had called thirty minutes ago. "Wouldn't give his name. Said he was an old friend. Wants you to contact him on his cell."

Jack scribbled the number on a scrap of paper and made the call. No one answered.

The motor cranked on the third try. Jack pulled out of the lot. It felt good to be behind the wheel of the Corvette again. Soon he was driving a little too fast on the parkway. Falling snow obscured the view of the Potomac. It made the road signs undecipherable, but he didn't care. He knew the way to Ruth's Chris Steak House by heart. In thirty minutes, a Midwestern filet would soothe that ache in his stomach. He turned toward Fairfax.

Carrying the beeper was not his idea of a good time. He thought of asking his partner to take the calls, but that hardly seemed fair. After all, Willard had carried

that burden for the past two weeks. It made more sense just to hope for the best. At least for the moment, all was quiet, and he could enjoy country music from his satellite radio.

His aching back and general fatigue from the long flight made him wonder if a fancy restaurant was a bad idea. At thirty-four years of age, he was not exactly a teenager anymore. A long nap would feel mighty good. What if his bad luck held? Another night without sleep would be a bummer.

As he steered his car through thick traffic, his beeper interrupted Shania Twain, just as her man was about to walk out the door. Jack grimaced and checked the message. COMMUNITY HOSPITAL EMERGENCY ROOM, STAT.

He slowed, lifted a hand to his face to shove the hair out of his eyes, and steered the car across a snow-covered median. Providence had solved his dilemma. Neither beef nor a bed existed in his immediate future.

Pulling into the center traffic lane, he dispensed with Shania, picked up his mobile phone, and punched the numbers. Passing two cars as the phone rang, he drove with his left hand on the steering wheel and the right holding the cell.

After an annoying message about calling 911 for any emergency, a harried voice said. "Community Hospital Emergency Room."

"This is Doctor Connor."

"One moment, please."

A long pause followed. Then he heard Doctor Ed Randall's voice. "Jack, is that you?"

"Yeah, Ed. What have you got?" Jack had known Ed for years and knew he would not call about anything trivial.

"Car wreck. Guy got blasted with a shotgun. Lost control of the car and smashed into a ditch."

"How bad?"

"I don't think he's going to make it. Has entrance wounds in the chest and abdomen. He's having trouble breathing. I've got to go."

"Alert the OR. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

Jack pushed the accelerator to the floor. He could not believe his bad luck. A major operation was the last thing that he should be doing with his level of fatigue. Jet lag had taken its toll, and he just wanted to be left alone.

He knew he was driving too fast. Ice made the roads treacherous, and thick traffic made him temper his speed. He hoped no cop would spot him. Any delay could cost John Doe his life.

The hospital entrance came into view. He touched the brake. The Corvette skidded. It bounced over the curb and slid across the parking lot. Jack turned into the skid, regained control, and pulled into his parking space. "Should have changed those tires," he mumbled as he exited the car and rushed along the ice-covered walkway.

He passed through the automatic glass doors and entered the emergency room. The many cubicles all held patients, many with intravenous infusions and with nurses tending to them. Several people lay on stretchers in the hallway. Angela, the nurse at the desk, flashed him a seductive smile. She leaned forward, revealing her more than ample cleavage.

Jack ignored the gesture. "Which room, Angela?"

"One, Doctor Connor. You'd better hurry."

He strode into the trauma room. Bedlam prevailed. Nurses scurried back and forth. Blood coated the floor and gowns of the people around the patient. Jack's fatigue vanished. He was in his element.

A Middle Eastern man lay on his back on a stretcher in the center of the room. His bloody clothes had been cut away. They hung over the edge of the stretcher. Bruises covered his face, and small holes punctured his muscular chest and abdomen. An anesthesiologist ventilated him through a breathing tube that extended from his mouth. A plastic tube protruded from his left chest. Blood drained from it into a clear plastic container. A nurse in a white uniform stood beside him, administering a blood transfusion. The EKG monitor showed a rapid heart beat.

Doctor Ed Randall, dressed in bloody scrubs, lifted his head when Jack entered the room. In spite of the stressful situation, his voice was cheerful. "Welcome home."

Jack appreciated how the man stayed calm and maintained his sense of humor no matter how tense the situation. "Thanks, Ed. Looks like you prepared a little homecoming party."

"You almost missed it. He tried to die on us. I put in a chest tube. He's a little more stable now."

"Another bad drug deal?"

Ed shrugged. "Don't know, but apparently somebody didn't like this fellow very much. Got him with a shotgun at close range. Entrance wounds in the left chest and abdomen--probably hit his lung and spleen—at least, that's where the pellets are."

Ed pointed to the chest X-ray on the view box. Jack saw the metal fragments in the left chest and abdomen. He wondered how the man had survived this long. He walked to the stretcher and stared at the patient's face. Somehow, it looked familiar, but he could not place it. Blood and bruises distorted the face, and distended veins traversed the neck. Then his gaze locked on the tattoo of an eagle clutching a snake in its claws that was stenciled on the man's arm. He would have recognized it anywhere.

Shaken, Jack finished his physical exam. His friend had an old scar on his scalp and multiple lacerations on his face. Many round and rough entrance wounds penetrated his chest, primarily on the left, and his abdomen appeared distended and taut. A stellate scar decorated his left thigh, a souvenir from Iraq.

That injury had earned Sid a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star and had kept him out of duty for the remainder of that war to overthrow Saddam. It had also marked the end of the bond that Jack and Sid had nurtured.

Other thick, ugly scars decorated Sid's body. One disfigured the left flank, and several crossed the right leg. A jagged one marred the right shoulder. Sid had obviously not led a boring life since they had parted company those many years ago.

Jack thought of the unnamed man who had tried to contact him. *It was Sid. He hates me. Why would he call? Did he know someone was after him? Who would want to kill Sid?*

Ed interrupted his thoughts. "What do you think?"

"Belly's distended. He's bleeding from the spleen."

Ed slapped a final strip of tape over the patient's intravenous tubing. "I know. He needs to get to the OR ten minutes ago."

Jack examined the chest tube collecting system. It already was full to the 800-milliliter mark and was still rising. Sid would be dead soon if he did not do something quickly.

Ed pointed to the blood. "He's bleeding from his lung. Needs his chest cracked, too."

Jack tilted his head toward Kathy Smyth, the operating room nurse who had answered the call for help. She was an energetic, young woman with pale skin covered with freckles and with dark red hair that matched the fresh bloodstains on her gown. "What's his blood pressure, Kathy?"

She shook her head to shift the hair away from her eyes. "100/60 a minute ago."

"Check it again. He looks like he's about to arrest."

Ed resumed his report. "We've given him two units of O-negative blood. The blood bank is working on six more."

"You did good, Ed. That chest tube probably saved his life, but not for long. I think a pellet struck his heart."

Kathy pumped up the cuff on the patient's arm and slowly released it. "Blood pressure's 60/30."

Jack looked at the EKG monitor. The heart rhythm had become rapid and irregular. "Get me the open chest tray."

Kathy rushed from the room

Ed squinted at Jack. "What if it's not his heart? Let's get an echocardiogram."

"It'll take too long." Jack looked into the hall. "Kathy, hurry with that tray."

Ed crossed the room and placed his hands on Jack's shoulders. "He's bleeding from his spleen. If you're wrong and you waste time opening his chest, there's no way he'll survive."

"Then he's going to die, and I'm going to make some lawyer very happy."

Ed sighed. "OK. Be a masochist. I'll help you wheel him to the OR."

Jack wished he would just shut up and help. He might be right, but this was not the time for a debate. Someone had to make a decision now, right or wrong, and act on it. "He'd be dead before we got there, Ed."

Ed closed his mouth and helped two orderlies turn the patient on his right side and tape his body in position. Kathy Smyth donned her gown and gloves and arranged her sterile tray of instruments. Jack put on a mask, washed his hands, and slipped a sterile OR gown over his clothes. Kathy helped Jack into his gloves. They threw sterile drapes over Sid's chest after Ed painted it with betadine.

Jack turned to Kathy. "Scalpel."

Kathy placed the sharp knife in his hand, and with one movement, he made a long incision across the left chest, cutting through skin and muscles. He then cut between the ribs with scissors and entered the chest. Blood gushed from the opening, soaking Jack's gown and shoes. Kathy directed a sucker into the wound.

Suresh Patel, the anesthesiologist who had placed the tube in the Sid's airway, looked over the drapes. "I don't get a blood pressure."

"Give him more fluids."

Jack threw a retractor between the ribs and spread them apart. He ignored the cracking noise as one of the ribs fractured. He peered into the chest. The sack surrounding the heart bulged outward. He opened the sack. Blood spurted from the space.

Suresh lifted his head. "Blood pressure's 70/40."

"Keep giving fluids."

The heart came into view. Blood pumped from a small hole in the ventricle, one-half inch from the coronary artery that some called the widow maker.

Jack held the beating heart in his left hand. The blood pressure plunged. He placed a tiny suture around the hole and let the heart down. He tied the suture. It pulled through the muscle, leaving a bigger hole.

Suresh dodged the jet of blood that landed on his anesthesia records.

Jack placed his finger over the hole. He tried to appear calm in spite of the burst of adrenaline that made his own heart race.

Kathy handed him a larger suture. He lifted the heart again and took bigger bites with the bigger needle on each side of the hole. The monitor flashed a blood pressure of 30/0. He let the heart down. Blood squirted from the hole. He plugged it with a finger.

A full minute passed before the pressure rose above 50. He threw a loop in the suture and pulled the ends. The muscle closed around the hole, but blood still dripped from the center. He pulled the suture tighter and prayed the muscle would not tear. The bleeding stopped.

Suresh gave him a thumbs up. "Great job, Jack."

Jack wished he could share his friend's optimism. Sid's blood pressure was still low, and his heart rate, much too fast. "We aren't out of the woods, yet. Let's turn him over and fix that spleen."