

CHAPTER ONE

US COMBAT SYSTEMS UNIT
BAGRAM AIR BASE, AFGHANISTAN
MAY 2000

The green glow shadowed Jack Penner's face as he leant toward the screen. His eyes flicked to the time indicator and he glanced at Pete Thompson on the next console. It was close to shift's end and concentration was flagging. They were flying an MQ-9 Reaper drone across the mountainous Afghan landscape of the Hindu Kush. Intelligence had said the Taliban were active in the area, but so far no success.

Penner was the pilot, Thompson the sensor operator. Both qualified pilots, they had been seconded to the Combat Systems Unit for a year, but the rumours said it was going to be a long time before they were back to flying aircraft.

Penner's eyes moved back to the screen and what he saw jerked him upright. "What the fuck?"

Thompson swung around and peered at the live feed. They saw a boy standing beside a pattern of rocks that formed an arrow.

The colonel, who had materialised behind Penner, said, "Take a closer look." As Penner, re-focused the high-powered camera, more expletives emerged from the three men. They saw the arrow was beside a separate group of rocks spelling the English word 'TALIB'. The boy lifted his head as if he knew he was being watched.

"Let him know we're here," said the colonel.

The small group fell silent. This was a breach of protocol but Penner didn't hesitate and flashed the strobe.

The boy became animated, pointing in the direction of the arrow. There was no doubt; this kid in the remote mountains was talking to them. Penner shook his head. "What's this all about? How does a kid out here know the English word for Talib?"

The colonel's response was quiet and to the point. "It doesn't matter. It's obvious he wants us to find 'em."



CHAPTER TWO

MOMASHAH VILLAGE
NURISTAN PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN
TWO YEARS EARLIER

Ahmed Taseer could not have foreseen the actions he would take many months later as he and his two companions scrambled up the steep, slippery boulders toward what remained of the old British fort. On reaching the top they fell to the ground panting and laughing. Ahmed, the oldest and the unspoken leader at 13 years, was tall like his father. He was a Pashtun, with a light complexion inherited from his mother, descended from the Kalash. Haziz, a year younger and of heavier build, inherited the darker complexion of his Pashtun parents. Yusuf, a year younger than Haziz, had a similar complexion. They were boys of the village. They were inseparable and none could do without the other. It was a friendship of which their parents were proud and one acknowledged throughout the village.

Ahmed's father told them: "You each have strengths and weaknesses and your total strengths must cancel out the weaknesses. Sometimes it will be Haziz or Yusuf with the primary strengths and sometimes Ahmed. The challenges will change, but face them you must and you will succeed if you face them together."

Ahmed, the most opinionated, often attracted the enmity of his village peer group. An attentive listener, and despite his father's cautions, Ahmed typically reflected the opinions of his parents. Haziz, who was always willing to listen to Ahmed's lectures, didn't hesitate to offer his own views. For his part, Yusuf had the confidence to speak, but deferred to his older friends.

As Ahmed was built like his father, so Haziz was built like his. Heavy shoulders and arms. Something to remember, should they encircle you in an embrace of anger.

Ahmed and Haziz protected Yusuf. With the death of his

father and his mother's struggle for survival, several older children of the compound had begun to circle Yusuf as some form of prey on which they were entitled to practice their predatory behaviour. It was during the initial phase of the bullying that the full weight of friendship found a point of focus. They were there for each other.

The derelict fort sat high above the village; part of a network used by the British 100 years ago in their policing role after the Second Afghan War. The boys had taken the direct route. The only other way was a rough, circuitous path that took hours and required risking major washaways.

On their bellies in the shade of the eroding walls, the boys looked at the village far below. The day was hot and steamy. Heavy rain overnight had become a deluge, causing the deep gutter through the village to overflow and spread across the fields. By morning the hammering heat of a new day turned the mud into hard unyielding earth.

The village comprised of about 100 houses; some timber, some mud brick and others a combination of both. The compound of the landowners, the Durrani, occupied the highest point; its imposing walls boasting observation towers on each corner. Adjacent to the compound was the mosque. The rest of the houses ran along a lower ridgeline, with terraced fields sloping down to a ledge before a steep drop to the fast-flowing torrent. The mountains behind the village featured horizontal green strips marking the route of the channels that brought water from glaciers high in the mountain range.

Haziz pointed, "There's the *mullah* and the *khan*." The boys peered over the ledge watching the two men inside the compound. The boys could see the khan, the effective head of the village, and the mullah, the leading religious figure, having an animated conversation. The khan had the mullah by the elbow while shaking a finger in the mullah's face.

Yusuf said, "They don't look very happy."

His companions remained silent. There was no other movement; most of the villagers were out in the fields. Two eagles circled overhead, and the boys heard the squeak of swallows nesting in the walls. It was a fleeting moment of peace.

"Ok, let's go," Ahmed said.

Haziz jumped to his feet and the others chased him through what had been the main portal. They liked to rummage around

after heavy rain to see if anything interesting turned up. Sometimes it was an old bullet or a coin and they once found a curved knife that Ahmed's father said was called a *kris*, as used by the Ghurkhas who fought on the side of the British against the local tribesmen.

Constructed from alternate layers of timber and rock, the fort was square with a tower on each corner; a crude but effective design that had provided security from marauding tribesmen. The alternate layers gave some protection against the earthquakes that shook the region, but time had taken its toll and only one tower remained.

The boys slipped inside the tower, picking their way through scattered rocks to the wooden stairs that circled the ancient walls rising towards the top of the tower.

As Ahmed reached the fourth step, the fastening broke and with a cry of surprise, he found himself unhurt, but winded on the floor of the tower surrounded by pieces of dislodged timber. Haziz and Yusuf's laughter at his unceremonious tumble turned to sounds of surprise when they saw Ahmed pull himself away from a hole that had appeared without warning where he fell, accompanied by the sound of falling stones.

Poking at the edge of the hole, the three boys watched as stones and earth dropped into the depths, doubling the hole in size. Another section collapsed to reveal a broken wooden frame.

Haziz knelt and peered into the darkness. Below them, he could see the beginning of a set of stone steps covered with the remains of a rotted trapdoor.

The dark hole was too inviting to ignore, and Ahmed rummaged in his pockets for the piece of flint his father said he should always carry. Holding it in the flat of his hand, he turned to his companions. "Let's get something to burn."

They scrambled for dry grass and twigs, and with these and a piece of cloth from the bottom of Ahmed's worn *shameez*, they made a crude torch. The flint struck and the torch burst into flame.

Easing onto the top step, Ahmed kicked away the debris with Yusuf and Haziz following, their breath loud in their ears.

Light splashed in a wider arc as they descended the twelve steps to a bare, cold room cut from the rock. Stone blocks formed an arched ceiling. A doorway with a prominent lintel stood at

one end bearing a carved symbol: the outspread wings and tail of a bird, with the profile of a man forming the body. A line of small figures was carved into the rock next to the doorway.

The boys stood staring in wonder; then, as one, they stepped up to the doorway, the torchlight spilling into a smaller second room revealing a wooden chest covered with a thick layer of dust.

With some effort they pulled it away from the wall. Although secured by a heavy lock, the wood around the hasp was rotten, and with a few blows the padlock fell to the floor. They peered inside. It contained a canvas satchel tied with cord and bearing a faint insignia. As the sputtering torch faded, Ahmed grabbed the satchel and the boys ran up the steps, out of the tower and into the familiar sunlight.

Squatting down to examine their prize, they found a heavy book bound in brown linen, a compass and a worn leather tube that held a brass telescope. The words on the cover of the book had no meaning for the boys, but they recognised the contents. It was a book of maps. Later they were told by Ahmed's father, Adeeb, that it was called an atlas, and it showed the world as it was known in 1872.

They went through the book page by page, marvelling at the different shapes and colours and the amount of writing, the meaning of which they couldn't comprehend. Each map was surrounded by images of the animals of the country shown. They had only known animals with four legs, but now they saw images of those with two legs. Each took a turn with the telescope before they returned everything to the satchel and clambered down the cliff-face in the fading summer light. It was understood the satchel and its contents would remain with Ahmed.

In later years Ahmed couldn't recall why they decided to conceal the existence of the underground room. But, before leaving the mountain, they went back and hid the entrance. Perhaps it was a childish desire to keep a secret; whatever the reason, the decision was prescient.

That evening, Ahmed and his sister Nazdana sat quietly as Adeeb, their father, flicked through the atlas showing the world of 100 years ago. He paused at one page and pointed. "This is where we live. In those days it was called Kafiristan."

Fluent in English from his army days, Adeeb was able to read the atlas and tell his children of its contents. Running his finger over the map that showed Kafiristan, he told of how the Kafirs had been followers of an ancient religion that predated Islam by many centuries, and how that religion was still followed by the Kalash. Mina, their mother, a pretty, petite woman, stood by her husband's shoulder as he spoke. The children knew the Kalash were their mother's people who lived in remote valleys over the border in Pakistan.

"The people in our region," Adeeb said, "had been followers of similar Kalash traditions until over 100 years ago when the Emir destroyed the shrines and forced everyone to convert to Islam. That was when Kafiristan was renamed Nuristan."

Ahmed asked about the symbols they saw of the man with wings. That was when Mina spoke. "They are the people who worship the purity of fire and the triumph of good over evil. The Zoroastrians. Many live in India in Gujarat and also Iran. My father worked with some of them many years ago. It is a religion that precedes Islam by several thousand years."

The children were perplexed. From what they were taught at the mosque, they believed the Prophet and the Koran had existed from the beginning of time and there was only one true word and one true religion.

When Nazdana questioned her father, he said there were many religions, each with its own beliefs and followers. "Islam," he said, "is also made up a various competing sects, who disagree over the correct interpretation of the Koran."

The more the children heard, the more confusion crept into their world. This was nothing like what they were taught in the mosque. Where there had been certainty, albeit poorly understood by the children, was now doubt. As he looked at his puzzled children, Adeeb wondered whether he'd said too much.

The atlas, bound in heavy cardboard, embossed and overlaid with brown linen, had been published by William Collins, Sons and Co of London, with a list of other available educational publications on the inside of the back cover.

Some time later, Adeeb and Mina would use the atlas to continue the education of their children. The villagers spoke Pashto and Dari, often interchanging during a conversation, and now Adeeb decided it was time for Nazdana and Ahmed to learn English.

Mina, also fluent in English, had a simple primer and several children's books in English. Her parents had been insistent on her learning English and she told the children: "That was how I met your father. I was in the market helping some foreigners in their dealings with a stall owner. Your father was standing with his back to us and on hearing my voice, he turned and our eyes met. He agrees with me, that was when we fell in love." She always smiled when she told that story.

Adeeb used the publications list at the back of the atlas as a prompt into other subjects, including mathematics, geography and systems of measurement. From his own school days and subsequent military experience, he was able to pass on the sense of what the more esoteric subjects were about, without delving into the technicalities.

The atlas provided the children with an opportunity to learn; but it would become a double-edged sword. Education can be a dangerous thing when it threatens the standing of others who see themselves as the primary controllers of knowledge.

