

Prologue

2011 - Sunday, September 11

8:35 p.m.

The remote-controlled drone hovered high out of sight above and to the west of the target with a payload of a single deadly hellfire missile. If successful, the explosive would eliminate two terrorist leaders: a top Al Qaeda general and a Taliban military planner. The meeting of these two normally opposing factions offered a rare opportunity for the United States to eliminate key principals of the two groups.

Setting the powerful laser in place atop a short, tripod stand, Sergeant Jeffrey Grumen checked his notes, ensuring he targeted the correct building, the objective of the mission. He had just minutes to verify the operation of the laser and communicate with the command center that the drone could launch its deadly payload. Through heat waves from the desert floor, with the sun at his back, the sighting scope on the laser provided a direct view of the targeted structure on the western edge of Kabul. Sweat ran down his forehead into his eyes, a product of high tension and oppressive heat. He wiped his face with a free hand then turned to Rifle Team Charlie leader, Corporal Rayshon Mack.

“Corporal Mack, verify laser is on target.”

Mack scooted along the rocky hill, feeling the strain in every muscle in his body. He moved into position, looked through the sighting scope, checked the coordinates on the laser against those on the paper that Grumen held. The laser had been sighted and locked on a building that stood in a tight cluster of other beige structures.

Mack confirmed, “Laser locked on target.”

Grumen knew that Mack had no way of knowing if the laser had been locked on the correct target. Mack’s only job - confirm that the device worked properly and that the coordinates on the sheet of paper he had been handed matched the laser’s

digital read-out. He did not have the paygrade to determine whether the correct target had been selected.

Grumen keyed his satellite radio, “Laser is locked on target.”

The reply came back, “Laser locked on target, roger.”

Within seconds, members of the rifle team heard the unmistakable sound of an incoming missile screaming out of the sky. They were nearly three miles away in the hills to the west of the Kabul neighborhood, well out of harm’s way.

The team had provided support for many drone strikes and they anticipated the ensuing destruction. Some team members drew out their field glasses and watched as the missile screeched towards its target from the clear sky.

The tremendous blast sent a fireball into the air, chunks of concrete, steel, and dirt from the once-sturdy structure scattered in all directions. After the initial fireball, a plume of smoke rose above the shattered remains. Several adjacent buildings showed severe damage but not enough to cause collapse. Once the smoke cleared, a crater nearly twenty feet in diameter and six feet deep - surrounded by debris – replaced the building that had stood there just seconds before.

Neighbors spilled into the street, approaching the hole in the ground, women crying, men looking around for survivors, some on their knees near bodies apparently thrown from the building.

Mack saw movement on the hill to the north, just fifty yards from their position. He swiveled to get a better view of Private Randall Parish, a member of Rifle Team Bravo. They were supposed to be securing their position’s northern flank. Rifle Team Alpha performed the same job to the south. The approaching Marine ran straight at Grumen, his expression showing distress.

When he reached Grumen, he shouted, “You hit the wrong ...”

Grumen immediately shouted, “Stand down, Private.” He paused, thinking fast, then roughly pulled the soldier down the hill, away from Rifle Team Charlie and out of line of sight of the city in case anyone looked their way. Grumen glared directly in Parish’s eyes and asked, “Are you trying to get us

killed, running up here, waving your arms like that?” He paused, looked around at his team members, who were all staring at their sergeant. “We had direct orders from our chain of command and we executed those orders. You will not speak of this again. Understood, Private?”

The Marine started to protest, but he saw the look in Grumen’s eyes. “Yes, sir!”

“Now get back with your unit and do your job!”

The Marine turned and ran back the way he had come.

Confident that the strike had accomplished its mission, he switched off the laser, ordered Corporal Mack to secure the laser, prepare his team to move out, and head back to base. He had paperwork to do.

As he was headed down the hill, a member of Rifle Team Alpha approached him, apparently in distress. He mumbled to himself, “Crap, what now?”

* * *

Moska Aziz felt nauseous as she walked out the back door of her friend’s home in Kabul. The intense heat only added to her physical discomfort and mental anguish. Her secret became more difficult to hide with each passing day. She had told no one of her predicament, but that would undoubtedly change, inevitable once her belly started to show. She intended to tell her closest friend, but she knew Zahra could not keep a secret and would tell her own parents. They were certain to tell Moska’s parents and then the entire neighborhood would know. She would suffer the torment of a community that would view her as a promiscuous whore with no morals. Why else would she be pregnant outside of marriage?

In her entire life, Moska had never seen peace in Kabul or the rest of her country. Prior to the Americans, the Russians had tried their best to conquer the Afghans and install their own puppet government. It had cost the Russians dearly. Now the Americans and their NATO henchmen thought they knew better than the Russians. They wished to improve the lot of Afghan people, to westernize their lifestyle, to unite the tribes of the country. They promised peace and prosperity through democracy. In her eyes, they simply made life harder and her

people more miserable. The Americans extended a war that no one wanted in the first place, and there was no end in sight.

As her nausea built, Aslam Sayed, one of Zahra's older brothers, came out the back door and saw her there holding her stomach. He looked at her, puzzled, as he approached.

"Moska, Zahra is looking for you. Why are you out here in this heat?"

She looked at Aslam with contempt. She hoped that he would just turn around and go back inside. She wanted nothing to do with him. A scoundrel and a fraud, he pretended to be politically connected. A narcissist, he believed he would lead Kabul to better times. Little more than an actor, he hoped real leaders would notice him and elevate him to a position of respect. He would never be like his and Zahra's older brother, Amir.

Amir. Moska adored Amir. A man of deep thought and few words, but his words carried weight. At only nineteen years of age, local leaders, both political and religious, listened to him. He had ideas that many hoped would lead Kabul to a brighter future, which included modernized infrastructure, better schools that included education for girls as well as boys, and economic changes that would bring investment into Kabul from other nations. In short, a visionary. But more than that, he dreamed of peace in Afghanistan, something that the country had not seen for decades.

Thoughts of Amir brought Moska back to her dilemma. Being pregnant with another man's child, regardless of how the child was conceived, Amir would never court her, never love her, and certainly never marry her. He would look down on her with the same contempt as the rest of her village. She would be an outcast for the rest of her life, and her child would be branded, a bastard, forced to bear the sins of its mother.

She turned back to Aslam. "I had to get away for a moment. I'm not feeling well."

She felt self-conscious, worrying, wondering if Aslam knew she was pregnant. But how could he know? He could only guess based on seeing her nausea, her mood swings, her diet. But she avoided him as best she could. She should not have any concerns about Aslam. Everyone she knew thought him a fool.

Another wave of nausea began to overwhelm her. She ducked behind a low wall near the back of the property and began to wretch. Just as she did, she heard a loud screeching sound followed by a blast that seemed to explode in her ears. She felt pain along her back as the ground shook with a violence that she had never experienced. The air filled with dust and sand. Her eyes burned. She inhaled smoke with each breath. Lying face-down, the wall next to her had been demolished, a chunk of rock landing near her head. She tried to stand, but could only get as far as her knees.

Trying to remember the moments before the explosion, she shook her head, pain rippling through her neck and back. Then she remembered talking with Aslam. She looked next to her and saw him sprawled on the ground some twenty feet from her. His body not moving, blood covering his clothing. She slowly turned back towards Zahra's house.

Except for pulverized stone and a massive, smoldering hole in the ground, it was gone.

* * *

Captain Charles "Chip" Chandler stormed into Colonel Virgil Vance's office breezing right past Captain Colleen Temple who normally announced any visitors. Chandler was incensed. Private Rusty Parish came to him, distraught, after the drone strike on the Taliban meeting place. Parish had gone directly to Chandler, bypassing his chain of command, which put Parish's career in peril for such a move. He had been given a direct order from Sergeant Grumen to never speak of the drone strike again. He ignored that order and took his grievance directly to his captain, skipping two levels of command in the process. Parish told Captain Chandler that the home of Amir Sayed, a trusted informant and long-time interpreter for the U. S. Marine Corps, had been destroyed by the drone strike.

At first, Chandler questioned why he had not taken his complaint to his team leader or his sergeant. Parish had replied that he did and his concerns were dismissed, that he was ordered to keep his mouth shut. Chandler then questioned Sergeant Grumen who confirmed that he had ordered Parish to stand down. He also denied that they bombed the wrong house. He

cited that they had good intelligence and proper orders to carry out the strike.

Chandler confirmed through his Afghan contacts that they did, in fact, bomb the home of Amir Sayed and that there were two survivors: Amir Sayed and a neighbor girl, Moska Aziz. Both were severely injured and taken to a local hospital. Chandler commandeered a Jeep and raced to the hospital where he conferred with the on-duty physician. He said that both Sayed and Aziz were in serious, but stable condition. Further treatment for both patients required treatment beyond what he could provide in Kabul.

By the time Chandler stormed into Colonel Vance's tent, the two injured Afghans were on a C-130 transport jet headed for the U.S. Military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. Chandler had arranged the move because they had provided valuable assistance to U.S. forces in the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The deep, no-nonsense voice of Colonel Virgil Vance bellowed out, "Captain, you better have a damn good reason for busting in here like this."

"You bet your ass I do, sir. We just droned one of our most trusted informants. He survived, barely, but we killed his entire family. How in the hell did this happen? Who provided the intel on the strike?"

Vance's brow furled. "Are you sure about this?"

"One-hundred percent, sir."

Vance rubbed the late-day stubble on his face and closed his eyes. He thought about his future. In the Marine Corps, limited opportunities arose to make general and his second chance was approaching. A failure of this magnitude would ruin his chances and torpedo the remainder of his career.

Instead of telling Chandler to quell any talk of the incident, he said, "Captain, write up a report asap and we'll get to the bottom of this."

Skeptical, Chandler wanted to ensure that whoever ordered the strike on the Sayed home paid for their mistake. "You're not going to let this get buried, right Colonel?"

If the question angered Vance, his face and body language did not show it. He replied, "You have my word, Captain."

Chapter 1

2021 - Saturday, September 11,

7:40 a.m.

The Savannah Morning News lay spread out on Peden Savage's office desk in the lower floor of the Bird-Baldwin House on West Liberty Street in Savannah, Georgia. The paper, thicker than on most Saturdays, had an entire section devoted to the twenty-year anniversary of nine-eleven. It was complete with pictures of the burning twin towers, the scarred and smoldering E-ring on the southwest side of the Pentagon, and the eerie aerial view of the hole in the ground and debris field at Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The spread included gut-wrenching stories of individual loss, grief, and survival as well as graphic shots of people falling through the air. The grim reminder of the life-or-death decisions faced by many tugged at his heart even twenty years later. He couldn't imagine facing such a decision: either burn to death slowly and painfully, or take the leap and end the pain after a brief feeling of freedom during the descent from nearly one hundred stories high.

The articles gave Peden pause, remembering how

he had felt watching repeated videos of the planes as they slammed into the towers, creating a fireball, smoke, shattered glass and concrete, and showering debris down on lower Manhattan. He had been in his early twenties then, having just been discharged from the United States Marine Corps, and a junior agent with the FBI. He considered emotional, gut-wrenching notions of resigning from his new position and re-enlisting, but changed his mind. He had been recruited by the FBI even before the end of his service obligation with the Marines. Peden had accepted a position with the Bureau with idealistic dreams that his new career would make a difference in the lives of everyday Americans, investigating and arresting drug dealers, fighting white collar crime, and catching pedophiles.

Then terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center

twin towers, struck the Pentagon, and tried to take out the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. At that moment, he believed he would be assigned to the FBI's anti-terrorist group. He, like most all U.S. citizens at that time, wanted to hunt down the bastards who had attacked the United States in such a cowardly way. But his assignments at the bureau did not change and he had no direct involvement in the actual investigation. He learned details about the attacks through his boss, Special Agent Roland Fosco, who told Peden that if the team required additional assistance, Peden would be up-to-date with at least a background level of information.

As his mind drifted back to the days and weeks after September 11, 2001, a sense of sadness and dread drifted over him. The country, currently in turmoil, still fought a pandemic that had killed hundreds of thousands

of his fellow citizens. The economy faced inflationary pressure not seen in four decades. Caravans of illegal immigrants flooded the southern border and made their way to cities across the country. The political climate between the two major parties smoldered; political hacks, major media outlets, and politicians threw gasoline on an already incendiary situation. The President and Vice President polled at the lowest approval ratings in modern history. The only politicians faring worse were members of Congress, whose popularity approached single digits.

The chirping of his cell phone interrupted his funk. He shook his head and looked around his desk, lifting the newspaper and some other paperwork. Finding his cell within arm's reach, he looked at the display but did not recognize the number. He hesitated, believing the

spam callers were starting early. He brushed a finger across the red handset, ending the call before it started. He went back to the newspaper and noticed a story about a body found in Screven County near the Savannah River. He scanned the narrative, noting that the Screven County Sheriff suggested the death may have been a drug overdose, but that final determination would come from the Medical Examiner. The decedents name had been withheld pending notification of next of kin.

Peden had just turned the page after scanning two other short stories of local interest when his phone chirped again: same number as before. He thought back to his former partner from the FBI, Megan Moore, telling him to answer all calls because it might be important.

Still annoyed at the interruption, he answered,

“Savage Investigative Consultants.”

A voice with a mild southern accent said, “Hi Peden. Chip Chandler.”

Peden recognized the voice but it took him a moment to place Chandler. Then it hit him. It had been more than twenty years since he last spoke with Chandler. He and Charles “Chip” Chandler had been in the same unit when they deployed to Kandahar Province in Afghanistan. They spent nearly a year together, helping train the Afghan Army with limited success. Even then, Peden believed that these Afghan recruits had little chance of defending their country from any serious threat. The Afghans remained loyal to their individual clans, much more than to the country as-a-whole. Being equipped with military supplies from the United States, both small arms and heavy armor, made little difference.

The language barrier alone presented a major obstacle. Army trainers feared being killed by radicals within the ranks. The training had been nearly impossible.

“Chip Chandler. Now there’s a blast from the past. How have you been?”

“I’ve been good, generally speaking. Making a living, happily married. How about you? You and Susan still together?”

Peden leaned back in his office chair and looked up at the ceiling. He hated to talk about his family. He and Susan divorced after a bitter battle, and his two girls, now both in college, milked him for every penny they could squeeze from his bank account. Plus, all three of them hated the ground he walked on. But he did not want to paint a terrible picture of his situation so he said, “No. Susan and I split up several years ago, but it was for the

best. I have two college-age girls. And I have my own business, but you probably know that since you called my business number. So, I take it you're not calling to chat about the old days?"

"You're right." Chandler paused and Peden could hear him taking a deep breath. "Ya know I stayed in the Corps after you left, right?"

"Yeah, Chip. I remember. You planned to make it a career. Did you?"

"No, I didn't." Again, he hesitated. "What I'm going to tell you has to remain between us, at least for now." He did not wait for Peden to answer. "In 2011, I was captain of three regiments in Afghanistan. We were stationed in Kandahar Province, but we had a platoon sent north to carry out an op in support of a drone strike."

Peden's unease ramped up hearing details of a military operation over a non-secure cell phone. If Chandler wanted to keep this private, between the two of them, a face-to-face meeting would be more appropriate. He cut his old friend off.

"Chip, hold on for a second. Where are you right now?"

"I'm at home, in Holly Ridge, just outside of Camp Lejeune. Why?"

"Cause I'd rather we didn't discuss anything classified over the phone."

"Yeah, you're right, but if we can't talk soon, it might be too late."

"What do you mean?"

"One of our guys was just found dead in Georgia. The county sheriff called it a drug overdose, but that

doesn't wash. Rusty – he was Private Randall Parish when in the Corps - he didn't use dope of any kind. He drank a lot but he was totally against drugs. His older brother OD'd while Rusty was in high school. He used to tell the story to anybody who would listen. He joined the Corps because he didn't want to end up like his brother. He wanted to learn self-discipline, self-respect. And he was serious about it.”

“How did he end up being a drunk then. Alcohol can be just as bad, or worse, than some drugs.”

Chandler took a deep breath. “Yeah, true. Rusty was fine when I first met him; never put anything harmful in his body ... a real health nut, all based on his brother's death. He was almost like an evangelist for clean living. Then something happened over there. I think it's related to the drone strike.”

Peden let several seconds pass before talking again. “When did this alleged suicide happen?”

“The sheriff found his body yesterday morning by the Savannah River in Georgia. Screven County.”

“Wait. There’s a story in the Savannah paper. They didn’t put his name in the paper because they had to notify next of kin. Is that your guy?”

“Yeah, most likely. And they’re never going to find a next of kin. His parents were killed right after he joined the Corps. Car accident, both killed, though his mom lingered for weeks before she passed. He was a mess for a long time.”

“I’m not surprised.”

An extended silence filled the line until Peden finally said, “Could that have been the start of his alcohol problems?”

“It might have contributed to it in the long run, but he was fine for about a year after the accident. Then, kind of suddenly, he started drinking. You and I know, drinking over there, especially off base, is seriously discouraged. You could get court-martialed and booted out if you got caught, and Rusty drank heavily, almost like he didn’t care if he got caught. Maybe even trying to get caught. But he made it to his EAOS (End of Active Obligated Service) and got shipped home with an honorable discharge.”

“What did he do after that, once he got back stateside?”

“Another guy from our platoon got out about the same time. They were both from South Carolina. Ray Mack. Big black dude - hell of a great guy. He kind of took Rusty under his wing. Got him jobs and tried to

keep him off the booze. I'm friends with him on social media and I call him about once a year, just to keep up. But Ray couldn't be with Rusty twenty-four-seven. So, Ray tells me that Rusty didn't come into work at the hunting lodge the other day. When he tried to contact Rusty on Wednesday, Rusty didn't answer his cell. Ray figured that he went on a bender, so Ray let it go. When he couldn't reach him again Thursday, he started to worry and called me, wondering what he should do. I told him that Rusty was a grown-assed man, that he had to face his demons and there wasn't anything we could do about it. We just decided to wait it out.

“This morning I got a call from some woman. I didn't get her name, but she said she was a friend of Rusty. Said that he was the guy in the newspaper article in the Savannah paper. I hadn't read it at that time, so I

didn't know what she was talking about. I tried again to get her name and number, but she hung up.

“After I read the story, I called the sheriff in Screven County and tried to get a positive ID. I told him that I suspected it might be Rusty. He didn't want to confirm it until I told him that Rusty didn't have any living relatives. Then he told me it was probably Rusty. Said he had his driver's license on him and a little cash.”

Peden thought for a few minutes then said, “Tell me about this op, in general terms. Don't give me any details that could be construed as classified.”

“Okay. Three rifle teams were sent to target a location in Kabul because there were some leaders from two different factions meeting at this house. Some intel we got said it was a planning meeting for a strike against U.S. and Afghan troops. We had to set up the targeting

for the drone strike. The strike went off without a hitch, with one big problem. We bombed the wrong house, my interpreter's house. He lived there with his entire family. Only two people survived; my interpreter and a friend of his younger sister."

Peden was shocked. "Are you sure your interpreter wasn't also working for these other groups? It wouldn't be the first time guys worked both sides."

Chandler was adamant, "Nope. No way. He hated the Taliban and other splinter groups. He fought every day, with words and deeds, to do something good for his country. He knew we were trying to help his cause."

Peden figured that Chandler had gone this far, he might as well find out all the details. "When was the strike?"

"September 11, 2011, the ten-year anniversary.

I'll never forget it. When I found out what happened, I stormed into my commander's office and read him the riot act. I came close to a court-martial, but he promised to get to the bottom of it; told me to write up a report and get it to him asap."

"What did he do?"

"Squat. The bastard buried it."

"How do you know that he didn't carry it up the chain of command and it got buried higher up?"

"Because his aid at the time, is now my wife. She worked directly for the colonel. She handled all the communications into and out of the office. My report stopped in his office. He sent a different report, the official report, proclaimed the strike was a great success. It was a sham. Shortly after that Rusty's drinking got very heavy. At that point, he didn't even try to hide it."

Peden had heard enough to know that something went wrong with the strike and someone had a vested interest in making sure the truth remained buried in the crater that had once been a family home in a war-torn country. Chip's story compelled Peden to look deeper.

“Hey Chip, you've got my attention. I need the names of everyone in the regiment who assisted in the strike and anything else you can tell me. But not over the phone. Send me an email attachment with the names and contact information for the men in your squad. After I dig into this a bit, can we meet half way between here and Holly Ridge?”

“You bet. Thanks, Peden.”

“Nothing to thank me for ... yet.”