

Brady Harrison

Gone to Ground

I.

They moved quietly, avoiding the endless switchbacks up and down the steep pitch, wary of landmines and patrols, dropping their night vision into place when the cloud cover obscured the stars. The air was thin and cold and Cal could hear the labored breathing of the others as they climbed without break, struggling for footing when the terrain became particularly sheer or strewn with sand and scree.

When Barrett fell back from point, signaling that he had to piss, the LT motioned for Cal to take the lead and he pushed ahead, his heart pounding, lungs rasping, remembering that the first time they'd had to climb a mountain and then bushwhack across it before dropping down to their target he'd had a blistering headache and kept retching—as silently as possible—even though his guts were long empty. His hands had become so swollen that he could barely close them, and he couldn't remember the name or the number of the mountain or the target. Then, as now, there was no turning back. The target and extraction point were ahead and unless one of them started blacking out or their lungs filled with fluids the LT would not call for an evac: the target would learn of the intrusion, and slip away and it could be months or even years before they found him again, if at all. Now, the altitude didn't bother him.

They had been climbing since just after sunset and had, at least according to the altimeter in his watch, about another fifteen-hundred feet to ascend before turning and circling to the west and then north in order to arrive above the village and then descend into it, on the hunt, just before dawn.

As he brushed past, Cal recalled Barrett's aside from a few briefings ago:

—Village? Three huts and a cave? It's five thousand years ago in this country. And you see how they treat their women? Worst people on the planet. The only ones who come close are the Pukeistanis—acid in the face, cutting off noses and heads, marrying little girls to ancient creeps.

Cal had nodded to himself—it was difficult to like the Hajis—but then M&M had said:

—I know, right? It's like locking your sister in a room with football players and hoping she'll be all right.

Barrett had muttered that he didn't find M&M all that funny, but he laughed anyway.

Cal heard the LT whisper for a halt and he dropped to one knee to allow the rest to close on his position. Once gathered, the LT double-checked his watch against theirs, took a GPS reading, and verified it on a topo. He shook his head:

—We're moving too damn slow. We're at least half an hour behind.

The way ahead looked to be even steeper than the terrain they had been covering.

—I'd just as soon not get stuck out here in the daylight.

The LT looked from one to another, and the three nodded in turn. He passed around a Ziploc filled with jerky:

—Cal on point. Keep hydrating, and keep on the look-out for bad guys.

By the time they had reached their marker to begin traversing to the west, they had gained back some of the time. Climbing above a path that ran both east and west from a

short switchback, they spread out, Cal in the lead, moving quickly, trying not to dislodge rocks and send them tumbling and echoing downslope. They had nearly a four mile hike around the mountain until they arrived above the village, and Cal set a blistering pace: better to have lots of time to scout the descent than to be rushing as they closed on the target. Keeping the trail about twenty yards below him, he zigzagged up and down as the terrain necessitated, skirting boulders and climbing above abrupt ledges and fields of clanking talus. They were well above twelve thousand feet, but his legs felt strong and elastic, and he enjoyed the scrambling. Gaining back the lost time, and then some, they pressed on without stopping until they were forced to slow as the slope became more and more sheer. Holding his position, Cal waited for the LT:

—Try to climb above this face, or drop to the trail?

They lowered their night vision into place. The crag seemed to rise five-hundred feet or more, and the path below turned into a wide ledge that bent around the base of the jagged, weathered escarpment. They knelt for several minutes, listening intently, but neither heard anything beyond the wind and the occasional clack of shifting stone.

The LT signaled for Cal to cut down to the path:

—Let's keep moving.

Slipping and sidestepping his way down the steep drop, Cal reached the track and moved as silently as possible, staying near to the scarp. As he rounded the corner, he almost bumped into two men. Automatically, he dropped to one knee, simultaneously raising his rifle. The men, as shocked as Cal, stopped abruptly. Seeing no weapons at the ready, Cal hesitated.

In that instant, he realized his error. He heard the LT curse softly.

Even as the men began to raise their hands, Barrett swept past the LT and Cal and struck the nearest man in the neck with the heel of his hand. The man crumpled and, without losing a step, Barrett stepped over the falling man and struck the other in the temple with his fist. The second man staggered backwards, almost losing the trail, and Barrett swung around behind him, his right arm around the neck, and choked him into unconsciousness.

In a few seconds, M&M had zip-tied their arms behind their backs and gagged them with tape. When the first man began to stir and moan, Barrett let him lift his head from the rock and then stomped it back into the ground. Blood trickled from the man's nose and mouth, but he did not move.

The Rangers looked from one to another, and Cal looked down.

They all knew what had happened only a few weeks ago to a SEAL team operating on the Pakistani border. They had run into three men and, not knowing whether they were Taliban or simply villagers, had given them the benefit of the doubt and let them go. The freed men immediately returned with their buddies and had blown away all the SEALs save one who had been thrown into a crevice by an RPG and hidden by debris. Since the reports came back, the LT's squad had hedged around the question and, in not so many words, had made their call.

M&M whispered what they all were thinking:

—Now what?

They looked down at the two men at their feet. One was older, perhaps in his fifties, his long beard mostly gray; the other could have been his son, a younger man in his twenties or thirties. They were carrying AKs, but lots of Afghans carried AKs, especially in the

mountains, and they could be from the clans or Taliban or Al-Qaeda. The squad, like the SEALs before them, had no way to tell.

Cal looked from his boots to the sky. The stars were bright and clean, distinct, blue, and only began to waver as he stared. Occasional, tattered clouds ribboned past, pushed by the icy winds aloft. He lowered his gaze to the horizon, and saw ridgeline after ridgeline, mountain peak after mountain peak reaching all the way across the frontier and into Pakistan. Below them, the valley was narrow and remote and lost in black shadows. He supposed the terrain was stark and beautiful, but it was also stark and ugly, treeless and parched, and sand and chips of rock seemed always to be pitting against his clothes and helmet and face.

A country where rivers evaporated before they reached the sea. What was the good of a country without rivers?

The LT cursed again, and nodded.

Cal gasped, not realizing he had been holding his breath.

Barrett double-checked his carbine. Distracted, Cal likewise began to elevate the nose of his weapon. The LT reached out and put his hand on the short barrel and gently eased it back down:

—RHIP.

M&M said:

—We could double-zip and tape them, and tuck them behind these boulders. We'd be long gone before anybody found them or they could wiggle free.

Barrett, looking grim, shook his head:

—Do you want to take that chance?

—Do you want—

The LT cut them short:

—We have a target.

Cal, even though the temperature was near freezing, was sweating profusely, blood pounding in his chest and ears.

The LT bent and grabbed the older man by the back of his heavy vest and lifted him until he was on his knees at the edge of the path, semi-conscious, hovering over the steep incline. With his push-knife, he cut the zip-tie and gagging-tape, and put them in a vest pocket. Barrett grabbed the other and wrestled him into the same position, likewise cutting away and pocketing the tie and tape. They grasped the swaying men by the collars and held their weapons several inches away from the back of the men's turbaned heads. Exchanging a glance, they both looked back to the Afghans, and pulled the triggers.

In the flash of light, out of the corner of his eye, even as he was conscious of the two bodies falling and tumbling down the pitch, Cal had heard or seen something:

A gasp. A face. Something round and white, fifteen or twenty yards to the west, below the path, behind a rock.

Somehow, the LT had sensed it too, and he hissed:

—DT!

And waved Cal after the apparition, but Cal was already in motion. He was the best shot with a rifle, and while they all had their nicknames—LT, M&M for Martinez-Moreno, Tyler Durden for Barrett—he disliked his intensely and the squad tried not to use it: DT, double-tap, one in the chest, one in the head, as he had been trained.

Running as fast as he could along the trail, he tried to listen above the sound of his own breathing, bouncing gear, and pounding footsteps for the direction and speed of the other. As he ran, the path widened, and the slope below became less precipitous, and for a moment he could hear but not see someone fleeing ahead, seemingly leaping and skimming down the incline. Slowing every ten or fifteen yards to lift the night scope atop his rifle to his eye, he scanned the terrain below and ahead of him but he could not find a target among the shifting, ravine-cut and stony grade.

Whoever it was, he clearly knew the land and was comfortable on it, flying down the mountain ahead of Cal. Though he couldn't be sure, they had probably dropped several hundred feet in a few minutes, and Cal was having difficulty maintaining his footing on the loose rock and steep incline and several times his feet shot out from under him and he dropped several yards as if on a luge.

All at once a face appeared above an outcropping thirty yards down the pitch, and without hesitating, Cal dropped to one knee, braced, and squeezed off a round. Through the scope, he could see the top of the target's head erupt into a fine mist, and then it disappeared behind the rock. Scrambling as quickly as he could down the rough, flinty grade, he reached the boulder and swung around it, rifle at the ready.

A kid, a boy, maybe twelve or thirteen, the top of his head split open as if by an axe.

He knelt beside the boy and checked for a pulse even though he knew he would find none. Save for beads of sweat and sandy grit, the boy's face was clear, untouched by blood or bits of scalp or gray matter as he had crumpled to the ground. Cal stood, and rocked back and forth on his heels, his chin on his chest, panting for air after the long descent and dissipation of adrenalin.

Son, father, and grandfather? Who could say.

As on other missions, he could hear M&M talking to himself, always doing his voices, an expert mimic, as he double- and triple-checked his gear while they waited for the bird:

—Are you an assassin? *I'm a soldier.* You're neither. You're just the next in line.

Cal could smell the kid's blood, and he turned away, skirting the rock and gazing upslope to see if the way was clear. As he looked up the gradient, scanning through the short optic on his carbine, he could not see the others. Maybe, while he was chasing after the boy, they had double-timed it above him, proceeding toward the primary. He would have to catch up, if he could, or otherwise hunker down in a defensible position, activate his emergency transponder—but only after he was reasonably sure the mission had played out—and wait for extraction.

During the mission briefing, the CO and IO had stressed the importance of locating and eradicating the target, and it had been clear that the bosses would rather send the SEALs or SOC Marines than the Rangers, but the other units, including the Airborne, had targets of their own and were scattered across the frontier. The Haji, whoever he was, was high on the list, an H-VT, and the Rangers would have to do, but that meant the LT and the others would have to press on without Cal if he could not rejoin them well before dawn. The underlying message at the briefings was always the same: don't screw up. And the truth was, raids and predator strikes worked. They eroded the command structure and spooked the Hajis into keeping a relatively low profile.

As he climbed toward the path, he thought he heard, on the swirling breeze, a skittering of rock well below and toward the east. He pulled up and listened as hard as he could.

The LT, Barrett and M&M had no reason to have gone in that direction even if they had suspected or detected hostiles or other unknowns. If that was the case, or if they had detected someone above them, then the mission was compromised and the LT would have sent Barrett to scoop up Cal before they beat a retreat to the original drop-off. No way the LT would have them chasing all over the place in the dark when it was clear that there was too much traffic to reach the primary.

A goat? Someone who had heard the bodies falling and was coming to investigate? A fourth with the two men and the kid? Another child? There was no way to know, but if the others were bearing down on the target, then Cal had to try and intercept whoever it was before they could reach a radio or otherwise sound the alarm.

He glanced at his watch: nearly 4:00. He rescanned the rise above him through his night scope. No Barrett. Were they laying low, trying to avoid detection until they could withdraw? He had no way of knowing, and no way of finding out, short of physically locating his team. They had strict orders: do not break radio silence. The Hajis were listening and breaking radio silence was as good as terminating the mission.

As quietly as he could, he pivoted back downslope and began moving as quickly as he could in the direction of the sound.

The image of the boy with the split-open head hovered before him as he traversed the grade. In a country where there was always war, why didn't they tell their kids that when in doubt, go to ground? Cal didn't know whether the Koran retold the story of Lot's wife, but he imagined that most cultures had similar tales: don't look back. Never look back. Run as fast as you can, or better, find a hole or a cave and drop into it, and even if the odds were always against you, at least you had a chance if you buried yourself alive. But never look back.

What if it was another child ahead of him?

He often thought about one particularly emphatic officer at Merrill telling them that they shouldn't allow one decision to make others inevitable but needed, in all situations, to assess and re-assess. On the other hand, sometimes you had to make a call and stick with it. When pressed, the officer had explained to them that, whatever else he knew, he knew that they lived in a fallen world, and that even a smart Ranger was going to be wrong most of the time:

—Let me make this simple for you. In the end, you have only two jobs: do whatever you can to complete the mission, and do whatever you can to protect the lives of your squad.

As he slipped and staggered down the side of the mountain, Cal decided this was neither the place nor the time to parse words, and he wasn't sure that, as a 2.8 in three semesters of farm management at MSU-Billings, he was a smart Ranger. Several minutes had passed since he had heard the sound, and he slowed his descent and stopped, listening as intently as he could. The icy wind at his back had increased, and he couldn't hear anything other than the wind and the usual shifting and clacking of stone. Bringing down his night vision, he held his position and scanned the steep, jagged terrain below and to the east. Nothing. No one or no thing moving. He waited several minutes, rising from a kneeling position to gain as much field of vision as he could. Nothing. No sounds, nothing moving. Maybe he had only heard the groaning of the rocks, or maybe his mind had manufactured the sound. He was about to give up and begin the long process of retracing his steps back in the direction of the insertion point—and therefore away from the target

village—when, several hundred yards downslope, a tiny figure bolted into view in a draw, moving fast and almost straight down the precipitous terrain. Although it was dark, and the figure was running and disappearing in the shadows and depths of the gully, Cal could see that it was certainly another child, this one even smaller than the other.

In the last moment of visibility, the target too far away, he squeezed off a round, just missing. Leading into the absolute black, the scope unable to grab any light, his mind racing, calculating the Kentucky windage and the target's speed, he fired again but did not hear the hollow thump of contact. Rising to his feet, he ran for the draw, leapt over the lip, and dropped into the darkness, falling several yards before landing hard on his heels and falling heavily onto his side.

For a moment, he could not catch his breath, yet staggered to his feet and shuffled forward, attempting to close on the fleeing child. As his lungs began to work again, he surged ahead, slowing periodically to listen and scan with the scope. He followed the draw for close to forty minutes, but made no contact. It was already after 6:00, and the horizon to the east was showing a thin line of purple. He couldn't be in the open much longer. At the same time, if the LT, Barrett, and M&M had reached their marker, they would doubtlessly be in ready position above the village, preparing to begin the assault. M&M would stay high, providing cover and picking off unfriendlies as they appeared in the open, while the LT and Barrett would storm the hut, taking out the target and any other resisters. Cal doubted whether, at his present distance, he would hear gunfire or explosions unless the Hajis put up a strong fight or had the village wired and booby-trapped.

Pressing on, he at last reached the end of the draw and looked out over a small plateau. Several hundred yards away was a dwelling, smoke rising from its chimney, and a goat pen extending around the back half of the mud and stone hut. As he scanned the treeless, bouldered table, he detected no movement, and there appeared to be no alarm in the dwelling. The goats seemed to be doing what goats do. Had the child—certainly not a girl?—gone to ground? Had Cal run past him in the dark? Had he, impossibly, hit him with the shot in the dark, but not stumbled across the body? Was he behind him, sneaking up, ready to cut his throat?

As he scanned the tableland, the horizon turning from purple to rose, the child once more popped out from behind an outcropping of stone, like a grouse taking wing, flying toward the shelter. Instinctively firing a round, he saw the figure spin wildly, stagger, regroup, and once more take off running. He fired again, and then once more.

If he could drop the boy—judging by his size, he had to be no more than ten or eleven—before he could alert those in the house, then he could maintain a watch until he thought the LT and the others were hightailing for the extraction point.

The second shot had hit the kid in the back, but he had cried out before the third shot struck the back of his head, exploding it. A pale yellow light spilled from the dwelling as someone opened a door. Pulling tight the straps on his small backpack, and changing out the clip, Cal went to full auto as he charged, with all of his remaining strength, toward the structure.

II.

As he ran, he switched his rifle to his left hand, and snapped an M67 from a clip on his vest with his right. He flipped off the safety clasp and pulled the pin, keeping the spoon hard against the cold metal casing. Nearing the corner of the pen enclosing the back of the

hut, he let the spoon fly and, turning sharply to his left, sprinted parallel to the wooden fence. Passing in front of a window, eight or ten feet away, he tossed the grenade side-hand through the oilskin pane and raced toward the front corner of the hut. The frag exploded almost immediately, the sand-blasted walls seeming to bulge outward like a chest expanding with air, and he could hear shrapnel zinging from the pane-less window behind him. As he rounded the corner to the front of the structure, he changed the carbine back to his right hand and brought it to ready. Skidding to a stop in front of a rough-board door, he steadied himself to kick it down.

From the other side of the entry fire erupted, the hollow clack of an AK, raking Cal in a downward slant across his chest and armor. Each round struck like a hammer, pushing him back on his heels, and as he was falling away, a round snapped past his groin plate and buried in his hip.

He cursed as he was knocked back again, this time to the ground, and even though he could not see well due to the alternating breakers of pain and nausea, he struggled to twist toward the entry and return fire. Whoever was on the other side had continued to squeeze off rounds, but seemed no longer able to see Cal through the spaces between the boards. The bullets whined overhead, and Cal, his arms and carbine almost twisted into a knot, unleashed a burst through the center of the door.

The fire from the other side stopped at once.

Squeezing the sweat and tears from his eyes, he lay back for a moment, trying to catch his breath and control the burning pain and rising fear. Dizzy, bright white and blue spots bursting in his field of vision, he turned onto his stomach. He retched as he pushed himself to his knees, and his legs shook and almost buckled as he forced himself to stand. He could hear the sounds of movement inside the hut, and he stagger-hopped away as quickly as he could, holding his rifle by the end of the barrel and using it as a poor crutch. The jolt of each step sent shock waves up and down his right side, and even in the half-light he could see that his desert fatigues were soaked at the hip and that the blood stain was spreading down his thigh. Forcing himself to take the pain, he limped for ten or fifteen yards, finding shelter behind some boulders. He pressed his back to the rough stone and took the weight on his good leg, slid slowly into a sitting position and tried not to cry out when he hit the ground.

Glancing back around the rocks every few seconds to make sure he was not being pursued, he poured water from his camelback over his hands and then tore open a packet of disinfectant and squirted the cool, alcohol-smelling gel onto both palms. He cleaned his hands as well as he could, tore away the fabric over the wound and probed the oozing hole with a finger, almost passing out. The bullet had struck on the inside of the hip point and shattered the immediate bone, but whether it was also lodged there or had ricocheted or traveled along the pelvis toward his spine he could not say. The pain convulsed up and down his side, rattling his teeth and, as he searched the wound, he turned his face away and brought up what little food and water had been in his stomach. He loosened his backpack, half-slid it under his armpit and pulled out the first aid kit. He cleaned and packed and taped the injury as well as he could. He then forced down some ibu with a packet of AAG and a few sips of lukewarm, sour water, trying not to puke the pills and sticky-sweet gel onto his lap.

He retched again but did not bring up what he had just swallowed. He listened as closely for sounds from the hut. He could hear someone moaning, perhaps someone

whispering and trying to comfort whomever was wounded. But he thought he could also hear a man's voice. Slowly edging sideways, he peered past the rock toward the house. The door had swung in, and framed in the opening he could see a woman, small and rounded, hunched over the prone figure of a man. The old woman was touching his thickly bearded face with her fingertips, as if brushing something from his eyes. As he watched, another figure appeared beside the woman, pushing her aside, and dropping into a crouch.

Automatically, as he had been trained, and even though there were no friendlies to hear his warning, Cal yelled:

—RPG!

He had no time to pull back as the rocket wobbled rapidly at him, one of the few killing things a body could see coming. Instead of detonating, it careened off the rock and went tumbling end over end high into the air beyond Cal's position.

The Haji knew how to load and pull the trigger, but not how to arm the grenade.

Grabbing his rifle, Cal swung it around and fired. The man, still carrying the launcher, crumpled immediately, as did the woman beside him who had started to rise back to a sitting position.

Once more overtaken with nausea and disbelief at what he had called upon himself to do for the last several hours, he gagged and vomited down his chest and onto his lap. This was a nightmare. Killing children and old women. Children and old women mixed in with—who? Taliban? Taliban sympathizers? Al-Qaeda? Clansmen who had no more love for Al-Qaeda than for the Americans? Mountain people who wanted everyone else gone and were just trying to defend themselves, using the current weapons of war, weapons readily available in market towns on both sides of the border?

Who the hell could say?

He doubted command always knew who was on whose side, let alone who needed killing and who didn't.

What if he had just spent the last few hours destroying generations and branches of the same family? About all they seemed to own were a mud hut, a few weapons, and a handful of goats, and he had brought all of his arsenal and training down on them.

Pain and grief churned and rose together in his chest. Taking deep breaths, he tried to force them back down, to calm himself so he could think and get himself out of this place. Unconsciously, he had brought his hands together and interlaced the fingers, palms down, pushing downward slowly, as if the agony and sorrow were a ball hovering outside his body that he had to press into the ground. He shook his head, trying to concentrate.

He needed pain killers and energy if he were going to move, but he decided to wait until his stomach calmed, if it would. He slid off his pack and pulled out his comm headset—the time for silence had passed; he needed an emergency evac—and pushed the toggle. Immediately, he heard the LT's voice.

He was panting, his voice broken and raspy between gasps, clearly on the run, and Cal could hear steady, proximate gunfire.

The LT was asking for support, was under attack and climbing in an effort to keep the high ground. Both M&M and Barrett were dead, killed by Hajis commanded, no doubt, by the very one they had been sent to kill. The bad guys had been waiting, and had blown M&M away with an RPG, and Barrett had been shot in the head with something big, probably a .50 cal. The LT was calm, giving what was probably his last report, fighting a rearguard action. Cal broke in:

—Are they sending help, LT?

—Cal?

—Can you make it?

Before the LT could reply, the link went dead.

III.

The squad, the men he'd been living and training and fighting with for nearly three years, was gone. He especially could not imagine the LT dead: he was too decent, too tough, too dedicated to the job and his responsibilities to be killed. And although the LT had never said a word about where he was from or about his private life—and certainly nobody had ever dared to ask him a personal question—Cal thought maybe he had heard onetime, from someone, maybe Barrett, that the LT had a family somewhere, and maybe a couple of daughters.

Cal leaned back against the rock and tipped his head back and stared at the sky.

And Barrett and M&M. Barrett was rough and often obscene, but he believed in what they were doing as much or more than the LT. And if he began to get wound up about the Hajis and what creeps they were, M&M would give him a little nudge:

—I know, man. These fucking people. But think of it this way: what if we'd been sent to invade New Jersey? Think how much we'd hate those inbred fuckers.

Looking back at his hip, he could see that blood had soaked through the dressing and was dripping from his fatigues onto the dusty ground.

He hoped the Hajis would leave the bodies of his team alone, but some had a history of mutilating corpses, including chopping off heads, and posting the videos on the web. They always carried a camera or a phone, and one of them always seemed to pack a sword or ceremonial knife. Rangers or another 373 team would do their best to recover the bodies and bring them home, but they might all be in pieces, unrecognizable, gnawed on by dogs and whatever else. The thought of the LT, Barrett, and M&M hacked to pieces made him wretched, the bile rising through him once more.

Taking slow, deep breaths in an effort to still the nausea and the pounding in his head, he hoped, as well, that the growing ache and watery heaviness in his guts wasn't because his intestines were draining into his abdomen. Maybe the bullet had fragmented—or had shattered bone into slivers—and shredded his insides.

He activated his emergency transponder and called through the headset for an evac: he was alone and wounded and in danger of going into shock. Send the cavalry.

Painfully shifting around the boulders on his palms, he stopped when he was facing the hut—just in case there was another Haji hiding in there, somewhere, trying to figure out how to arm an RPG or to chamber a round in an AK.

The morning was calm, and the light intense, and he could see the bodies and the gathering flies as if they were only a few feet, instead of a few yards, away. And even though there seemed to be no breeze, dust and sand swirled in the air, and apart from a few of the low, thorny bushes he had seen elsewhere on the mountain, there was very little vegetation on the tableland, and only sparse, already cropped patches of something grass-like. He couldn't see a water source. How could anybody ranch here?

The few goats were still crowded nervously into the farthest corner of the pen, save for one. He hadn't noticed it before, but it was lying in the dirt, torn-up and bloody, below the window of the hut. Evidently the frag had got it.

Who would try to live here? Try to raise a few goats on no water and no vegetation? This place made his father's ranch in northeastern Montana seem like a garden. Sure, the water tasted like sulfur, and gave the shits to any outsider who had more than one cup of coffee, and the grass was never enough and the cattle were always underweight despite extra feed, and the winters were bitter and the ranches miles and miles apart and some kids still boarded in town during the week when it came time for high school, the hundred mile roundtrip too much to drive each day, and some years it never rained, or didn't seem to, and there was never any money, not really, always a slow losing, a draining away, an emptying of something that had never been more than half-full, ever, and it felt like maybe it was still 1947 anywhere near the Breaks, but compared to this stony, parched earth, it was a place where you could believe in a living even if that living never quite seemed to arrive. But it didn't matter, anyway: he was a second son—in fact, a third child—and the ranch would never be his.

In sophomore English, just before he had dropped out, they had read a play about a king and his daughters, and although Cal could make neither head nor tail of most of it, he was a little surprised that hardscrabble ranchers knew better than kings: never divide the kingdom.

In the distance, on the breeze that had just begun to freshen as the sun warmed the rock and sand, he could hear—or thought he could hear—vehicles. Rising, in anguish, he staggered past the bodies and the hut and limped to the edge of the small plateau. Bringing up his rifle and looking through the scope, he could see three of the ubiquitous white Toyota pickups, packed with men, heading his way over a narrow, rutted track switchbacking up the mountain from the valley floor. The men in the truck-beds bristled with weapons, AKs and other light arms. No doubt they also had some rockets, and maybe a decent sniper rifle.

As quickly as he could, he hobbled back to the boulders, choked down some ibu with an energy gel and water, put on his pack, and crossed the upland toward the mountain. Soon, he reached the first steep pitch and gingerly began to pick his way around rocks and sharp inclines. At intervals, a voice from somewhere would remind him that the birds were on their way, coming hot, and reassuring him that they had a GPS-lock on his emergency transponder. At others, a different voice, perhaps from someplace else, urged him to hang on. The helos were closing on his position and they were trying to re-route a drone to watch over him until they arrived. As he clambered, chewing the last of his pain pills, the voices seemed to come from further and further away. After a time, he became too tired to reply, and his tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth. In all, he guessed that he had gained less than a thousand feet in the time it took the Toyotas to traverse the miles and miles of switchback and reach the hut.

He needed cover, and he needed it now, before they spotted him, if they hadn't already. Desperate, he spied a crevice, a mere split, in a patch of wind-scoured stone, protected by a small overhang of loose rock. He worked his way across a steep drop of clacking talus, afraid of falling and of giving himself away through the racket, but at last he reached the cleft. The space was neither very deep nor very wide, but he turned around and backed and wiggled his way into it, shrieks of pain shooting from his hip and guts. It was too shallow for him to stand, but if he rested his pack against the jagged rock and bent his good leg while sticking the injured one out to the side as much as possible, he could just see the slope below over the lip of the crevice. If he straightened up, he could lift his carbine over

the edge and return fire. Taking the last sip of water from his camelback, he swirled what little there was in his mouth, trying to unstick his tongue, and radioed that he had found cover, but that there were about a dozen unfriendlies closing in on the general direction of his position.

As he peered over the edge, he could see the men from the Toyotas ascending the steep terrain. They didn't seem to be focusing on the tight shelter—at least not yet—but no doubt they had analyzed the carnage at the hut and were tracking him as well as they could over the rough and brittle ground. Maybe they were following blood droplets.

And it didn't matter who they were: they would find and kill him unless help arrived.

Finding little room for his bad leg, and wedged tightly in the rock, barely able to move his arms, he tried to fight the searing pain and nausea and the earth-heavy regret and sorrow churning all together in his already roiling, burning, watery guts.

He could hear Barrett's voice:

—You're fucked, pal.

Yet even through the fear and grief he could also hear one of Barrett's favorite refrains when anyone began to bitch:

—Suck it up, dumbass. What did you expect?

What did he expect about any of it?

He had to get squared away. Settling as deeply as he could into the rock, the pain all but unbearable, he checked his carbine, scraped a shelf in the dirt and rock for his few remaining clips, and hoped he would be conscious long enough to defend himself.