

Chapter One

It was so fucking hot.

It was always hot. The sweat dripped from under my helmet, down my face and collected in the rag of a bandana I wore around my neck under my uniform shirt and Kevlar vest.

My squad was strung out along the sides of one of the hundreds of nameless back streets in Mosul, doing routine patrol. Sgt. Howard had point and I was at the rear, with my men between us when bullets like bats outta hell swarmed us.

“Take cover!” Howard yelled.

Everyone dove for what little cover we could find -- doorways, wrecked vehicles, and alleyways. Another splatter of bullets pocked the ground and sent small dust clouds into the air, making it hard for me to see where all my men were located.

I barked into my radio, “Call for the personnel carrier, Howard.”

“Done.”

“Where’s that fire coming from?”

“Roof,” his voice crackled back. Howard was a man of few words, but luckily they were always the right ones.

Bullets fell like confetti at a politician’s parade, pinning us down. I scanned the tops of the buildings across from us. Rifle muzzles gave their locations away.

We fired at the side of the building and made Swiss cheese out of the upper two feet, but the return fire continued. They must have been spread out up and down the street, just waiting for us.

I returned fire, but it wasn't doing a damn thing.

"Where the hell is that APC?" The noise of automatic weapons fire was deafening.

"Coming!" Howard barked back.

Machine gun bullets sprayed the buildings on our side of the street and chunks of the thin plaster that covered the rough bricks rained down on our helmets and backs.

"Rookie!" Someone shouted for Bobby Quint, a corporal whose nickname had never changed, even after two tours of duty.

Peeking around the side of the building I crouched next to, I searched for him in the dust clouds and bullets.

He lay on his side in the street.

Shit. "Man down!" I yelled, then dove forward to the nearest piece of cover, a burned out shell of a small car resting half on and half off the curb.

"Get back, Lt," Howard shouted.

"Lay down cover. I can get him."

I was only six, maybe eight feet from him. Covered in dust, he lay still. No, not quite still. His leg quivered, one clue he'd been hit. The large dark stain on the packed earth beneath him was confirmation.

"Rookie," I hoarse-whispered to him. "Can you hear me?"

Out in the street, a small clenching of his fist around his M16A2 answered me.

Good. He was thinking. Not thinking, *that* was bad.

My men were laying down fire, so I took my chance and went for him. Bursting from cover, I crouch-ran to his side and knelt in the blood soaked mud.

“Lt Richmond?” he choked on dust and fear.

“I’m here, Rookie.” I did a quick inspection. His leg had taken a bullet. I dropped my rifle, ripped my pack off, pulled out a tourniquet, and tied it around his upper thigh to stem the bleeding. Slinging the pack over my shoulders, I grabbed his flak jacket from the back. “Let’s get outta here, boy.”

He groaned, his rifle clutched across his chest, as I dragged him behind the burned car. The dust settled, and a new round of fire exploded around us.

I’d made the car, and had gotten Quint to what could just be called safety. I should have stayed put.

In hindsight, I realize that’s where I went wrong.

Not in going for Quint. I’ll never regret that.

No. I went back for my rifle. I’d left the bitch lying in the street when I’d knelt next to my wounded man.

It’s drummed into us, you know. Never leave your men; never leave your weapons. Both can be used against you.

I raced back to the damn rifle and as my hand touched it I thought, “get your fucking ass out of the middle of the fucking street, you fucking idiot,” when the blast hit.

I remember flying backwards through the air.

I don’t remember hitting the ground.