

PROLOGUE

Present Day

Dmitri chewed a piece of dried meat, then swallowed a lump of gristle. Camp was a cave in the mountainside, three hundred meters above the valley floor. Rain dripped past the entranceway, and cold snaked through layers of cloth and bit into his flesh like the metal teeth of a gin trap. He heaved on his heavy sheepskin jerkin, the muscles across his shoulders burning from wear and tear. Skin itched where coarse wool met his neck. The sun had risen but the world outside remained as empty and barren as his carved-out heart.

Charcoal boulders merged with steep scree slopes, forming an impenetrable wall of bleak granite. He drained his coffee and cleaned out his cup with a small splash of river water he'd carried up the narrow path yesterday. He checked the homemade receiver and GPS unit and picked up his hunting rifle. Cautiously he peered from his cave and raised his whiskered chin to the sky, testing the clouds for any hint of pity for an old man's bones.

And found none.

Dmitri grabbed his water canteen and filled his pocket with ammunition. He pulled his pakol hat low over his brow and stepped into the murk of the day. He wore the clothes of local herders, though up-close his fair hair, towering height and distant blue eyes betrayed a different heritage. He walked cautiously along a path made by goatherds and yaks. The snow was gone from the lower gullies, the grass beginning to ripen and green. Perhaps the weather would aid his cause. Perhaps not.

He checked the receiver again and froze. The target was close. Very close. He used a large boulder for support, sank to his knees, and scanned the countryside. He flipped the safety off the rifle and waited. Less than a minute later one of the most beautiful creatures in the world padded into view.

The snow leopard's tread was silent. Blue-gray eyes and smoky coloring blended perfectly into the landscape. Even though Dmitri knew the animal was right there in front of him, it was

still hard to pick out. He held his breath in awe. Then the image of his grandson's sallow face filled his mind, and his finger stroked over the trigger. For one split second the leopard met his gaze and his tail snapped taut. Dmitri exhaled and pulled the trigger.

Percussion pounded the rocks, and a smattering of shale clattered down the hillside behind him. Dmitri checked his shoulder but it was just a small rockslide, nothing to worry about.

He picked his way carefully to the valley floor. His aim was true. The animal was dead. His stomach churned. Thirty years ago, he'd stopped his own men from shooting these beautiful beasts, prevented uneducated pigs from raping the land. But he'd been one man in the giant Soviet machine. Now he was performing his own desecration—not for sport or out of anger, but for cold hard cash and desperation born of need.

He sank to his knees beside the carcass. Dug his fingers into the luxurious fur on the leopard's neck and popped the animal's radio collar. Then he began his trek. Laying down bait. A mile or more, up, and over the ridge, onto the top of a high sheer cliff that overlooked the plains below. He stood, breathing heavily, on the edge of the rocky escarpment, and flung the collar with all his might through the fragile mountain air.

Permanent winter cloaked the Pamirs in the north. His homeland. The home of his heart.

Time was slipping through his gnarled fingers. So many years wasted, so little time left. His grandson was dying. Sergei's son, dying. And the only person willing to save him was Dmitri Volkov. Defector. Betrayer. Child killer.

CHAPTER 1

It looked and felt like the dominion of Gods.

Special Air Service trooper Ty Dempsey had been catapulted from a rural English market town into the heart of a colossal mountain range full of pristine snow-capped peaks which glowed against a glassy blue sky. Many of the summits in the Hindu Kush were over five miles high. The utter peace and tranquility of this region was an illusion that hid death, danger and uncertainty beneath every elegant precipice. No place on earth was more treacherous or more beautiful than the high mountains.

He was an anomaly here.

Life was an anomaly here.

Thin sharp needles pierced his lungs every time he took a breath. But his prey was as hampered by the landscape as they were, and Ty Dempsey wasn't going to let a former Russian Special Forces operative-turned-terrorist get the better of an elite modern-day military force. Especially a man who'd shockingly betrayed not only his country, but humanity itself.

They needed to find him. They needed to stop the bastard from killing again.

The only noise in this arena was boots punching through the crust of frozen snow, and the harshness of puny human lungs struggling to draw oxygen out of the fragile atmosphere. The shriek of a golden eagle pierced the vastness overhead, warning the world that there were strangers here and to beware. Dempsey raised his sunglasses to peer back over his shoulder at the snaking trail he and his squad had laid down. Any fool could follow that trail, but only a real fool would track them across the Roof of the World to a place so remote not even war lingered.

But the world was full of fools.

As part of the British SAS's Sabre Squadron A's Mountain Troop, Dempsey was familiar with the terrain. He knew the perils of mountains and altitude, understood the raw omnipotent power of nature. This was what he trained for. This was his job. This was his life. He'd climbed Everest and K2, though the latter had nearly killed him. He understood that there were places on

earth that were blisteringly hostile, that could obliterate you in a split second, but they held no malice, no evil. Unlike people...

He relaxed his grip on his carbine and adjusted the weight of his bergen. None of the men said a word as they climbed ever higher, one by one disappearing over the crest of the ridge and dropping down into the snowy wilderness beyond. With an icy breath Dempsey followed his men on the next impossible mission. Hunting a ghost.

The small plane taxied down the runway at Kurut in the Wakhan Corridor, a tiny panhandle of land in the far northeast of Afghanistan. Thankfully the runway was clear of snow—a miracle in itself.

Dr. Axelle Dehn stared out of the plane window and tried to relax her grip on the seat in front of her. She'd been traveling for thirty hours straight, leveraging every contact she'd ever made to get flights and temporary visas for her and her graduate student. Something was going on with her leopards and she was determined to find out what.

Last fall, they'd attached satellite radio collars to ten highly-endangered snow leopards here in the Wakhan. This past week, in the space of a few days, they'd lost one signal completely, and another signal was now coming from a talus-riddled slope where no shelter existed. This latter signal was from a collar that had been attached to a leopard called Sheba, one of only two female snow leopards they'd caught. Just ten days ago, for the first time ever, they'd captured photos from one of their remote camera traps of the same leopard moving two newborn cubs. If Sheba had been killed, the cubs were out there, hungry and defenseless. Emotion tried to crowd her mind but she thrust it aside.

The cats might be fine.

The collar might have malfunctioned and dropped off before it was programmed to. Or maybe she hadn't fastened it tight enough when they'd trapped Sheba, and the leopard had somehow slipped it off.

But two collars in two days...?

The plane came to a stop and the pilot turned off the propellers. The glacier-fed river gushed silkily down the wide, flat valley. Goats grazed beside a couple of rough adobe houses where

smoke drifted through the holes in the roof. Bactrian camels and small, sturdy horses were corralled nearby. A line of yaks packed with supplies waited patiently in a row. Yaks were the backbone of survival in this remote valley, especially once you headed east beyond the so-called *road*. People used them for everything from milk, food, transportation and even fuel in this frigid treeless moonscape.

It was early spring—the fields were being tilled in preparation to plant barley in the short but vital growing season. A group of children ran toward the plane, the girls dressed in red dresses with pink headscarves, the boys wearing jewel-bright green and blue sweaters over dusty pants. Hospitality was legendary in this savagely poor region, but with the possibility of only a few hundred snow leopards left in Afghanistan’s wilderness, Axelle didn’t have time to squander.

Her assistant, a Dane called Josef Vidler, gathered his things beside her. She adjusted her hat and scarf to cover her hair. The type of Islam practiced here was moderate and respectful.

“Hello, Dr. Dehn,” the children chimed as the pilot opened the door. A mix of different colored irises and features reflected the diverse genetic makeup of this ancient spit of land.

“*As-Salaam Alaikum.*” She gave them a tired smile. The children’s faces were gaunt but wreathed in happiness. Malnourishment was common in the Wakhan, and after a brutal winter most families were only a goat short of starvation.

Despite the worry for her cats, it humbled her. These people, who struggled with survival every single day, were doing their best to live in harmony with the snow leopard. And a large part of this change in attitude toward one of the region’s top predators was due to the work of the Conservation Trust. It was a privilege to work for them, a privilege she didn’t intend to screw up. She dug into her day pack and pulled out two canisters of children’s multi-vitamins she’d found in Frankfurt Airport. She rattled one of the canisters and they all jumped back in surprise. She pointed to Keeta, a teenage girl whose eyes were as blue as Josef’s and whose English was excellent thanks to some recent schooling. “These are *not* candy so only eat one a day.” She held up a single finger. Then handed them over and the children chorused a thank you before running back to their homes.

Anji Waheed, their local guide and wildlife ranger-in-training, rattled toward them in their sturdy Russian van.

“*As-Salaam Alaikum*, Mr. Josef, Doctor Axelle,” Anji called out as he pulled up beside them. The relief in the Wakhi man’s deep brown eyes reinforced the seriousness of the situation.

“*Wa-Alaikum Salaam.*” They could all do with a little peace. The men patted each other on the back, and they began hauling their belongings out of the plane and into the van.

Axelle took a deep breath. “Did you find any sign of the cubs?”

Anji shook his head. “No, but as soon as I heard you were on your way, I took some men up to base camp to set up the yurts, then came back to get you.” Although only a few miles up the side valley, it was two bone-rattling hours of travel on a barely-there gravel road to their encampment. During winter, they did their tracking online from back home at Montana State University. In summer, they took a more hands-on approach.

“Thanks.” Axelle stowed her frustration and smiled her gratitude. From their tracking data she had a good idea where Sheba might have denned up. Barring accidents or breakdowns they might get there before nightfall.

She was praying for a collar malfunction even though that would put their million-dollar project way behind schedule. The alternative meant the cubs and their mother were probably dead. Her instinct told her losing two cats in a couple of days wasn’t coincidence, nor was it a local herder protecting livestock. A professional poacher was going after her animals for their fur and bones to feed China’s ravenous appetite for traditional medicine. It was imperative to find out exactly what was going on, and with the continuing conflict in Afghanistan it wasn’t going to be easy.

“Do the elders know anything about what might be happening?” she asked. Only twelve miles wide in places, the Wakhan Valley was a tiny finger of flat fertile ground separating some of the tallest mountains in the world—the magnificent and treacherous Hindu Kush to the south and the impenetrable Pamir Range to the north. Harsh winters trapped locals inside for seven months of the year. Wildlife was scarce and the region mercilessly inaccessible, but these people knew the land better than a visitor ever could.

“No.” His eyes shot between her and Josef. “They are scared that if the snow leopards are dead, you will blame them and they will lose their clinic.”

The Trust not only had an anti-poaching scheme, they also vaccinated local livestock once a year against common diseases, *gratis*. The program promoted healthier livestock and reduced the losses herders suffered to sickness, which in turn compensated for the occasional snow leopard kill. So far the scheme was working, except now they had two missing, possibly dead leopards and two tiny cubs unaccounted for.

The weight of responsibility sat like an elephant on her chest.

“Josef, run over and reassure them while Anji and I finish loading.” She held his gaze when he looked like he’d argue. The village elders sometimes struggled to deal with a woman. She didn’t mind because she loathed politics. “Be quick. We don’t have time for tea—you’ll have to make your excuses.”

It wasn’t how things were done here and she didn’t want to offend these people, but the survival of a species trumped social niceties today. Ten more minutes and they were finished packing. Anji tied the spare gasoline canisters onto the roof and made sure both big gas tanks were full. They honked and Josef jogged over and jumped into the van.

“Everything be okay.” Lines creased Anji’s leathery skin. “*Inshallah.*”

God willing, indeed.

She and Josef exchanged a look as Anji gunned the engine over the rough road marked only by a line of pale stones. Dust flew, stirred up by the tires, the land still soft from the thaw. They bounced over rivers, ruts and alluvial fans. Axelle craned her neck to stare at the imposing mountains.

“If the collars *are* working”—Josef spoke from the backseat—“there could be some crackpot in these hills picking off critically endangered animals for money. Anyone that desperate isn’t going to care if a couple of foreigners end up as collateral damage.”

They’d left some weapons with their other belongings last fall. Her father had insisted she have some sort of protection when he’d heard she was conducting her research in Afghanistan. Now she was grateful.

She glanced at Josef sharply. “Do you want to go home?”

“I’m just saying this could be dangerous.” His hands gripped the back of the seat as they bounced over a rickety bridge.

“If you want to go back you should say so now. The pilot can fly you out in the morning.” She kept her voice soft. They were almost the same age but he was her responsibility and she had no right to place him in danger. “I don’t want you thinking you don’t have a choice. I can handle this.” He had a life. He had a future. She only had her passion for saving things that needed saving.

“Ya, I run away and leave you alone in the wilderness.” Josef sat back and crossed his arms, muttering angrily.

She held back an instinctive retort. She didn't care about being alone in the wilderness, but with this amount of ground to cover, she needed all the help she could get. "I have Anji," she said instead. "We can get more men from the village."

The Wakhi man grinned a gap-toothed smile, his eyes dancing. After generations of war and decades of being ignored by the government in Kabul, a few missing teeth were the least of anyone's problems. A few dead leopards might not rank high in the concerns of government either, not with the resurgence of the Taliban, not with the constant threat of assassination, insurgents and death.

"If we find sign of a poacher we will gather men from the village and hunt him down," the smaller man said.

Axelle nodded, but she was worried. This would be Anji's responsibility when he finished training and was appointed the wildlife officer for this region. He needed to be confident enough to take charge of dangerous situations like this. She bit her lip. He was such a sweet little guy she didn't know how he'd confront armed poachers. The idea of him hurt didn't sit well. He had a family. People who cared.

Isolation pressed down on her shoulders. All she had was an estranged father and a grandfather she hadn't visited in two long years.

Energetic clouds boiled over the top of the mountains. A spring storm was building, but it was nothing to the growing sense of unease that filled her when she thought of someone lining up her cats in the crosshairs of a hunting scope.

Two hours later the sun was sinking into the west. Desperation and the need to hurry pulsed through her blood and made her head pound with frustration. The van got stuck twice but they'd managed to push free of the freshly thawing ground. The shock absorbers were toast. Ahead she could make out the faint outline of pale yurts set deep in the shadow of the mountains.

A sonorous snore resonated from the back seat where Anji slept. Josef's cheeks were ruddy from the exertion of driving in such demanding conditions. They'd all taken a turn behind the wheel.

“Keep going,” she urged as they passed the yurts. To save time they needed to drive as far as they dared toward where she figured Sheba had denned up. Half a mile later they bumped over a rock the size of a football, and her head glanced off the side window. *Dammit.*

“I can’t go much further without breaking an axle,” Josef warned.

“Stop here.” She scabbled in her bag for a head-torch and flashlight. “We’ll hike the rest of the way.”

“We go now?” Anji asked groggily, throwing a blanket off his lap.

“You take the van back to camp and man the radio, Anji.” They needed someone back at base camp in case they ran into trouble. “There’s a cave over this ridge that Sheba used as a den. If the cubs aren’t there—” Her voice wavered. She didn’t want to think what would happen if the cubs weren’t there. The Hindu Kush was no place for babies to wander alone in the dark.

Even though they’d traveled as fast as they could, it was probably already too late. Swallowing her concern, she jumped out of the van. Josef joined her with a flashlight and radio.

“Let’s go.” She started along the path, running because it was still twilight and the precious light wouldn’t last long.

She tripped over a rock and Josef grabbed her arm. “Careful.”

But she didn’t want to slow down. Despite the icy mountain air, heat poured off her body and her heart thumped like her veins were empty and desperate for blood. So many predators roamed these lands—bears, wolves, lynx, leopards, humans—how could two young cubs survive without their mother’s protection?

They clambered over large rocks at the top of the ridge and moved cautiously down the steep slope on the other side. The sky shifted to velvet blackness with nothing but ice-encased peaks to cast a faint silvery haze over the lower slopes. Axelle worked her way along a tiny goat path carved in ancient stone. Slippery and dangerous. The narrow beams of their flashlights provided the only clue as to where to put her feet while strung high above a cliff face. She slipped, slamming her knee into a rock. Stones trickled down the mountainside, lending a soundtrack of granite rain to their frantic search.

Her heart revved. She held tight to Josef’s hand as he hauled her to her feet. “Thanks.”

“We should go back.” Every crease on his face told her he didn’t want to be here.

“We’re almost there.” She pulled away. “Two more minutes and we’ll know for sure if the cubs are in that den.”

Axelle inched along the path, the sound of Josef's footsteps crunching in her wake. *There.* A few yards away she saw the narrow opening of the den. There was a tingle between her shoulder blades that made her hesitate, alert for danger.

They'd rushed here worried the leopard was dead, but if they were wrong, they were approaching the den of a large feline with young cubs. Snow leopards were nowhere near the size of lions or tigers, but she and Josef were balanced on the edge of a cliff face. The leopards could dance down these rocks; she and Josef would smash and burn.

Josef went to move ahead but she raised her hand to stop him. "Wait."

"Why?"

"Because I'm the boss and I said so."

He grunted, less than impressed. She knew how he felt.

There was no clever way to do this. She inched forward on all fours, the sharp rocks digging into her knees. She held her breath, listening, then shone her beam straight into the mouth of the den. Bare rock reflected back at her.

Nothing.

She ran the beam of light across the floor of the entranceway and saw animal bones—standard snow leopard fare. This was definitely a den. She inched forward, Josef close enough she couldn't turn without knocking into him. A part of her welcomed his body heat in the ever-deepening cold. The other part didn't like to be reminded about how it felt to touch a man. Memories could be colder than an Afghan winter.

They peered silently inside the shallow cave. More bones lay scattered on the bare rock and what looked like a bed of fur was nestled against one side of the cave. There were no green reflective retinas or bad-tempered snarls. An outcrop of rock blocked her view of the back of the cave where the cubs might have wandered in search of food or warmth.

She needed to get in there and take a better look.

Tension built in her muscles and sweat suddenly slid down the groove of her spine. Her mouth went dry and she forced several swallows to moisten it. Her hands shook. God, the last thing she wanted to do was crawl inside that dark hole and take a look behind that rock. Josef grabbed the belt of her pants before she started inside.

She dangled like a rag doll. "Put me down, dammit." She managed to shake off his grip. "I've got to see if the cubs are behind that rock."