

CHAPTER ONE

Take it from me, getting yourself shot hurts like hell.

Not like absorbing a punch, or breaking a bone, but that fullblown, relentless, ripped inside kind of pain. The kind where I prayed for oblivion and yet feared the darkness more than anything I'd ever known.

I'd taken one 9mm round through the fleshy part of my left thigh and another through the back of my right shoulder. The first shot was nasty, but it was a through-and-through, passing clean in and out of the muscle without apparently hitting anything vital. Yes, I was bleeding and it burnt like a bastard. But under normal circumstances – like reasonably prompt medical assistance – it was not liable to be a life threatener.

The second shot was the one that worried me. The bullet had ploughed into my scapula, twelve grams of lead and copper travelling at roughly 280

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metres a second. It had hit plenty hard enough to put me on the ground and deflected off to God knows where inside my body.

The whole of my torso was screaming. When I coughed I tasted blood in my mouth and knew that, whatever other damage it had done, the round had penetrated my lung. I had a vivid mental picture of it still slowly progressing, maybe in a slowmotion tumble, contaminating whatever soft tissue it passed through, like a cancer.

The good news was that I was still conscious, my heart still pumping, my brain still functioning, more or less. But that didn't mean it wasn't still going to kill me, given time.

And, one way or another, time was not on my side.

Right now I was lying on my belly in the bottom of a snow-crustrusted shallow ditch, bleeding into the dirty trickle of icy water that had collected there, and trying to decide if I really was prepared to die here or not.

'I know you're out there!' shouted a distant voice in the trees further up the mountain. 'I know you can hear me!'

I recognised the voice, but more than that I recognised the tone. Hatred and lust. Not a good combination.

Simone's voice. My principal. Seven days ago I'd been sent to New England with the express purpose

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of protecting her against possible threat. Now she was out there somewhere in the woods with a SIG semiautomatic, while I lay here incapable of protecting anyone, least of all myself.

What a difference a week makes.

I lay quite still. Not moving was the easy part. I felt horribly vulnerable in that position, but turning over didn't seem like a good plan. Even the thought of attempting it made me break out into a cold sweat.

'Cold' was the word. The temperature was four degrees below and the wet blood round the entry wounds in my shoulder blade and leg had already started to crystallise on my clothing. My face was turned to the side so one cheek was scorched by the freezing earth and the other by the freezing air. All I could smell was blood and pine needles and ice. I think I might have been crying.

But, I decided sluggishly, cold was good. It would slow my system down, delay my bleedout – right up to the point where hypothermia got me. I tried not to shiver. Shivering hurt. I tried not to breathe too deeply. That hurt, too.

The pain was extraordinary. A biting, seething, swirling mass of it that sheathed my entire body but had pooled in my chest. My leg was pulsing like I was being rhythmically and repeatedly stabbed by a redhot blade. I didn't seem able to feel my right arm at all.

14 ZOË SHARP

A scatter of small stones cascaded down the side of the ditch and rolled towards my face. I opened one eye and watched them approaching in the light from a clear hunter's moon reflected on the stark ground.

There was a shadow above me, I realised. Someone was standing a little way up from the ditch and staring down at me sprawled below them. They were too far back among the trees for me to see a face, but instinct told me it wasn't Simone. This observer was too quiet and too controlled. *Friend or foe?*

Better to assume foe.

I closed my eye again and played dead. It wasn't a stretch.

In the near distance, higher up the slope, I could hear Simone crashing through the trees, sobbing out little grunting cries as the thin branches whipped back at her. It was like listening to an animal that had been frightened beyond reason and would kill anything within reach just through that fear. And she was heading my way.

I risked another look. The shadow had gone, making the light over me seem brighter now. Or maybe that was just my own shifting perception. Even the pain had receded slightly, dropping back to a leaden throb. But I was achingly aware of every sodden breath, of the urge to just let go of it all and sleep. I fought it with everything I'd got left.

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Something told me that if I succumbed to this bonenumbing weariness, the game was going to be over.

I'm sorry.

I formed the apology soundlessly, quickly, like I needed to go through this final absolution while I still had the chance. I pictured my parents and wondered if they'd be as disappointed by my death as they had been by my life.

And Sean, who had once *been* my life and had become so again. Sean, who'd sent me out here not expecting me to be careless enough to die on the job. Suddenly I wished I'd told him that I loved him on the day I'd left.

The light gleamed stronger all the time and had begun to flicker. It took a moment for me to realise it wasn't my vision starting to fail, but flashlights being carried up the icy incline at a jerky run. There were voices, too. Loud, and so harsh I failed to make out the words.

A thumping rumble swooped down low over the tips of the trees, making the ground quiver under me, spinning up the loose powder snow. The beam of a highwatt searchlight stabbed downwards, intense and blinding. I knew I should make some signal, offer some sign of life, but I couldn't summon the energy.

'Charlie!'

Close now.

16 ZOË SHARP

Simone was gasping for air and weeping like her heart was broken. I heard her before I saw her, lunging across the final few metres that separated us, and offered a silent curse that the helicopter should have drawn her to me in this way. I tried to form words but could barely whisper.

My gaze swivelled upwards as she staggered over the rim of the ditch, bleeding from a dozen scratches, wild-eyed, her hair a disordered mass around her face. Her left arm was rigidly outstretched. The barrel of the gun seemed to be pointing nowhere but towards me.

She lurched to a stop. I looked into her eyes and saw the pure intensity of her grief and anger and shock. Any one of those emotions in such quantity and weight would have been good enough to kill for. A mix of all three made it a certainty.

She never got the chance.

In the instant before Simone could act, the shots slammed into her. I didn't hear the shouted warning from the police officers who fired them. My senses were winding down by this time, fading to black.

I vaguely remember seeing her fall, sliding down to come to a crumpled rest only a metre or so away from me. The gun dropped and landed between us, like an offering.

Simone's face was turned towards mine so that our eyes met and held as her blood pulsed out to mingle with my own in the bottom of the ditch. The

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police were using hollowpoint Hydra Shok rounds and she'd taken four to the neck and upper body. She never stood a chance. I watched her die feeling only a kind of petty determination not to be the one who gave in first.

And I knew then that I'd just broken the cardinal rule of close protection work – never outlive your principal.

But it was a close run-thing.

