

CHAPTER 1

Santini opened his eyes, gasping for air. Pain scorched his throat, spasms tore across his back. He tried lifting his head but his body wouldn't respond. His right leg was mangled, his left shattered. A memory swirled through his mind: He was falling feetfirst through the air, arms flailing at his sides. One leg came crashing down onto a boulder. The sound of splintering bones echoed in his head.

As quickly as it had appeared, the scene vanished. Liquid was pooling in Santini's mouth, but he was incapable of spitting or swallowing. He could, however, taste the metallic bitterness of blood as it trickled down his lip.

Santini remained facedown with his cheek to the snow, his body sprawled on the frozen ground. The shivers running through his limbs did little to warm the glacial winds deadening his muscles. His socks, cargo pants, and thin top were no match for the elements. If his injuries didn't kill him, hypothermia would.

As he lay in the snow, laboring to breathe, he glimpsed a faint light shimmering on the horizon. The sun would soon emerge over the soaring stone-faced cliffs. Vincente, his twelve-year-old son, would wake up within the hour and see that his father was gone. The memory of kissing the boy good night a few short hours ago flashed by, but Santini kept his emotions in check. His next actions would be decisive, not only for his son, but for countless others.

High above, the first rays of dawn pierced the gray skies. As the sun crept into view, a beam of light sliced through the morning haze, infusing it with a steel blue sheen. Within minutes the highest mountain peaks and towering spires were transformed. Dark grays gave way to muted silvers; deep browns were overtaken by fiery oranges. The Dolomites were waking up.

Santini slid his head backward and examined the bloodied whiteness before him. Pulling his right hand in toward his chest, he molded snow into four fist-sized balls. He curled his frozen hand under two of them and pushed them farther out, each about an arm's length from the other. Hoping for a momentary reprieve he let his body go limp, but the pain continued to pound. He picked up the two remaining snowballs and, using his left elbow and hips as leverage, inched himself forward. He stretched out his arm as far as he could and carefully positioned the balls several inches above the first two, establishing the four corners of a square.

Almost all the bloodied snow had now been used to make the four orbs. Reaching below his hip Santini swept some clean snow toward his chest and shaped it into a fifth ball. He smeared it over his nose and mouth, covering it with blood. This ball he positioned closer to his body, below the lower section of the square. The five reddish snowballs now formed a U-like pattern.

Santini gathered more snow into a final heap. He bent his torso, reached down toward his ankle, and gripped his icy sock between thumb and forefinger. In one swift move he ripped it

off his foot. Violent bouts of coughing sent globules of blood spewing from his mouth.

Breathing against the pain, Santini placed the sock by his mouth and opened one side of it with his teeth. He stuffed the sock with snow and patted it into a round shape. Then, lifting himself onto his elbow, he aimed and lobbed the sock. It landed where he had hoped. The pattern was now made up of the reddish U-shaped constellation, with the dark mass he had just fashioned out of his sock centered above it.

Exhausted, he laid his head on the ground and closed his eyes. He shoved his right hand under his left armpit, hoping for warmth, but found little. He forced his forearm down into his pants, toward his crotch. Better.

After he felt a little warmer, he removed his hand and pulled back the Velcro on the side pocket of his pants. He reached inside, wrapped his fingers around his multi-tool, and brought it up to his face. No need for the scissors, wire cutters, serrated blade, or screwdriver. The pliers would do the trick. He unfolded the multi-tool, exposing the stainless-steel pliers. Santini placed his weight over his injured hand and positioned the lower metal prong under his thumbnail. He stared at the pliers and took a steadying breath. His jaw clenched as the cold metal prong penetrated his skin. His thumbnail began to rise, slowly tearing away from the raw tissue beneath. He pushed the pliers as far as they would go, then ripped the nail right off. Fighting the urge to shriek, he gritted his teeth as blood seeped from his thumb. With his nail still dangling from the end of the metal prongs, he reached out and embedded it onto the top of the nearest snowball.

He raised the pliers into view and examined the grooves running down the metal spines. Steeling himself, he used the same torturous technique, ripping each remaining fingernail from his left hand. Each bloodied nail was then, in turn, carefully pressed onto the surface of one of the four remaining snowballs.

The man stared at his butchered fingers and plunged them into the snow to ease the bleeding and dull the pain. Almost done. He took his hand out of the white ground and with the blood still dripping off his fingertips, he drew eight letters in the snow. The word was messy but legible: "INVICTUS." He rolled onto his back and reached for the silver chain he had worn since childhood. With the round medallion centered in his palm, he yanked the chain off his neck. Clutching the medallion, broken ends dangling out of the sides of his fist, he pressed his hand to his chest and stared up at the sky.

A wintry gust swept down the face of the mountain but Santini remained unaffected; no longer did he hear or feel the bitter winds swirling about him. His body was blanketed by the numbing cold and his mind had receded into a distant calm. A tear welled up in the corner of his eye. Before the cold could freeze it in place, it grew and drifted from the corner of his eye, down his frostbitten cheek. Santini closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and welcomed the burst of icy air flowing into his lungs.