

CHAPTER 1

THE SUN WAS ALREADY rising as he moved into his final hide site. At this point, he had been radio silent for the past 12 hours and hoped that with the lack of communication his primary exfiltration point was still a go, even though he didn't care for the means of extraction.

He was alone, and wishing that he had his sniper buddy, but this time he had volunteered to conduct the operation unaccompanied based on mission requirements. He had only completed one other lone sniper operation, and that was during a training exercise in Nevada. At that time his team was conducting a Full Mission Profile, a training event that simulates real world events and conditions to test the men's planning and preparation. The mission was complex and required multiple teams to conduct simultaneous hits in various locations in order to successfully rescue a hostage from a warehouse near area 51. The training area was significant because of the extensive tunnel systems. For the upcoming mission, the team had learned

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that the rebel group they were targeting had access to unused tunnels that they were now using to smuggle people, weapons and drugs. Conducting the mission as a singleton shooter came with risks, sniper school teaches you to operate in pairs as a team, a shooter and a spotter. This not only helps maintain overall situational awareness while moving, but it also allows the shooter to focus on one thing, taking the shot. His team was selected to rescue the hostage, and during planning they realized that because of the lack of terrain features or concealment areas in the flat desert, the sniper team would have to move through an unused underground rail system in order to get into position. It had been used to move equipment into certain buildings located throughout the compound, probably to avoid the appearance of traffic on the surface of the very secretive plot of land. Though the tunnel could accommodate two individuals without a problem, the movement detection system that was installed in it would not. It would require one sniper with limited gear to move it alone in order to remain undetected, so he volunteered to conduct the mission unaccompanied.

The Remington 700 long action was the weapon of choice for the U.S. Army when it came to sniper operations. The military spec model had a stainless-steel floating barrel, with a two-and-a-half-pound trigger. It was capable of shooting one half minute of angle when used with match grade ammunition. He had a Leupold Mark 4 scope with mildot reticle attached to his rifle, which allowed him to compensate for holds and judge distances out to one statute

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mile. His rifle was slung on his back. He carried ten rounds of ammunition in the carrier affixed to the butt stock of his rifle. He wore no ghillie suit and abandoned his survival backpack. All he had for personal protection while moving was his 9mm pistol and forty-five rounds, three magazines of 15 bullets each, of paint filled ammunition.

During his movement he wondered if this had been a real-world mission, a single man sniper operation, would he really have volunteered for it? Training is one thing, but even the best scenarios can't shake out every possibility of your unpredictable enemy. If the mission called for it, and no other course of action was viable, he would like to think so, but the stakes were high, and detection would certainly lead to capture or worse.

His movement was slow and deliberate through the tunnel; he paused to take breaks when he felt rushed, or tired to avoid making a mistake. It took him nearly six hours to make the one-mile movement in total darkness and with no communication. When he emerged from the tunnel, he was five hundred meters away from the warehouse, and in a perfect position to take his shot. The remainder of the team was staged to arrive by helicopter. The hostage takers would attempt to move the detainee once they heard the inbound aircraft and that is when he would be able to take his shot. As the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters began flying into the target area, the plastic and paper targets began moving out of the warehouse and popping up into windows. He took multiple shots, putting down each target, and lifting his fires before

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the team made entrance into the building. He took solace in the fact that had it been a real mission, under similar circumstances, he would have made it to his final shooting position without compromise. It gave him the confidence that the training mission was designed to instill.

However, the jungle was a very different environment; in the desert you worried more about heat exhaustion, scorpions and rattlesnakes. The triple canopy seemed to change almost mystically; it would rain from the condensation, and then quickly turn into a sauna as the sun punished the lavish topside vegetation. Birds would squawk and chirp, and in an instant fall silent as predators moved through their areas. Monkeys would give away your position if you upset them in any way so if they found you, it was in your best interest to make them happy. The good thing about this well-balanced ecosystem was the endless number of options it presented for concealment. The vegetation was difficult to move through at times. You could move fairly quickly in some areas, and in others you couldn't move without first swinging a machete to cut a path. This could pose a myriad of problems sometimes, but at least anyone tracking you had to deal with the same issues. You could only move during the day because of the wild life. You didn't want to inadvertently enter into their food chain and be forced to break silence with a weapon. Having a hammock with you wasn't an option, if you didn't, you would only last a few nights on the ground.

Contending with bugs was a never-ending battle, the sooner you conceded to

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the fact that you must coexist, the better for your sanity. At this moment though he was coping with a group of army ants that he had accidentally laid in. He was attempting to assess whether it was a nest or search party, but his attention was quickly and abruptly averted. His comfort, or lack thereof, would now have to wait because his focus now honed to the Land Rover that had just stopped outside of a suspected drug lab. It was 750 meters away from his position, winds were out of the west at a perceived 5 knots and it was a downward inclination. With this information, he quickly figured out the corrections needed to make a successful shot.

Math was never his strong suit. In sniper school he paid close attention to the portion dealing with wind and distance calculations. Luckily, the Army had years of experience training people from all background and education levels and built all of its systems, no matter how complex, to the education level of an eighth grader; and you were allowed to make a cheat sheet. Shooting in any type of elevation was a challenge. You had to take many things into consideration. The good thing about training was that you could put yourself into almost any situation and develop a shooting formula for it; it's what snipers call dope. If you kept an accurate logbook with these figures, you could easily consult it later and dial in nearly the correct information for the conditions. He had done just that, and was prepared to take his shot.

His target exited the vehicle on the passenger side and walked directly toward the open door of the lab. He was met in route, presumably by the person in

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charge of the operation. It was finally time to break radio silence after days of unaided movement. The radio switch was on his chest, and even though it wasn't that far away, he moved slow and precise until his fingers touched the knob. With a smooth clock-wise motion he turned it on. He swallowed a few times to clear his throat; now wishing he had stayed more abreast of his hydration, and prepared to whisper.

“Shark 21 this is Hammer 15,”

“Send it Hammer 15,”

“Roger, target acquired,”

“Stand-by,”

“Hammer 15, signal is confirmed, you are cleared to take the shot.”

He deliberately moved his hand back to the support position near the bipod of his rifle. With his finger on the trigger, he waited patiently for his target to stand still long enough to send a piece of lead moving 2,694 feet per second through the space between his ears. His breathing was slow and methodical, meticulously controlling every bit of air that passed through his lungs. Time seemed to slow to almost a standstill, everything could be heard; everything could be smelled. It was like being inside the eye of a hurricane, an unnatural still that heightened the senses to levels rarely experienced by individuals unafflicted by the loss of a sense. As his subject stopped to shake hands, he

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aligned his mildot reticle for the hold he had calculated, exhaled and pulled the trigger. He quickly chambered another round into his M24 and settled the sight back onto his target.

“Target down, moving to exfil point.”

Seemingly without pause, the driver of the Land Rover brought his fully automatic sub-machine gun to the ready as he moved to the rear of the vehicle to peer at the downed subject. He planted himself against the hatch back and began firing in what he thought was the general direction of the shot.

Running in a ghillie suit with a M24 sniper rifle was not easy. Add to that a 3-day assault pack with food, water and ammunition, a 5.56mm carbine rifle, and a M9 pistol and you quickly lose all desire to run very fast or very far; unless people are actively trying to kill you. He was tired and hungry, probably more than slightly dehydrated, and stiff from the lack of significant movement while lying in his hide site. But like prey he was able to move with vigor and purpose, somehow ignoring the pain of the lactic acid he had stored while laying in the prone position, now being brought to life and pushing around in his muscles as he exerted himself. His knees and ankles cracked and creaked as his feet came down unevenly at times on branches and rocks. He heaved heavily in and out of his mouth, relaxing and contracting his chest muscles while pulling air deeply into his lungs as he exchanged carbon dioxide

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for oxygen rich fuel. As he built up speed, his senses heightened out of anxiety. His attentiveness allowed his mind to take in and quickly process the pictures his eyes were snapping, and swiftly issue the order to his extremities to rapidly change course to avoid areas that would require timely passage or possibly cause him injury. In a bizarre twist, that no predator ever believes will come to fruition, he knew he was now the hunted.

As he moved to the extraction point, he could hear men yelling back and forth in Spanish very near his position, running in his general direction. *How could this be?* He thought; he had planned that location specifically for its isolation and the fact that locals didn't use that area for anything. No patrols extended out that deep into the jungle, enemy or otherwise and it wouldn't have been possible for gunmen to move to his location from the road that fast. They had to have been there already, but where, how? He took off his pack as he ran down a slight embankment. He had only run three hundred meters but at full sprint with cumbersome equipment it was enough to slow down even the most fit of individuals. He had to lose weight if he wanted to maintain his slight lead. He pulled the pin and released the spoon on the thermite grenade that was rigged in the top of his pack and threw it down just before he jumped into a shallow stream. He had given up the contents of his pack, but at this point, with his life in the balance; it was of little value.

Bark began dancing off of trees near him almost choreographed, as the stereo sounding snap and crackle of gunfire from the ensuing gunmen riddled the

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areas around him. They were gaining ground. He could hear the helicopter in the distance, moving into position near the extraction point and wondered if he should call it off. A few meters after crossing the stream he quickly turned around and took a knee, bringing his rifle up to the ready and listening for movement to his rear, now front and flanks. He heard movement to the right and peered through his scope in that direction. He hastily placed his reticle on the chest of the man and pulled the trigger. He was hit, but he couldn't wait to assess the effectiveness. As he scanned quickly before continuing movement he noticed a pale-faced male with blonde hair. *An American?* he thought as dirt began kicking up near him. He contemplated holding on him to find out, reasoning to himself that getting his identity might be worth catching a bullet. But mortality got the best of him and he quickly slung his rifle and continued to run.

“Hammer 15 this is Shark 21, you are a go for extraction.”

He continued running in the direction of the clearing. He had no idea if it would still be a viable area to posture. He continued to put forth all the energy he could muster in an attempt to put distance between him and his aggressors. He hoped that the helicopter had made it to its staging point before he took his shot. It was only twenty nautical miles away, far enough not to be heard in route, but still close enough to pull him out in an emergency; which is what he now had.

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As he ran the remaining fifty meters, he could hear the bird begin to slow down. The sound that the blades of the aircraft made while cutting through the air as it pitched back to slow its forward momentum was distinct. He could see the shadow of his freedom bird begin to crest the trees in the distance; bending vegetation as it submitted to the wind the aircraft generated to maintain altitude.

The aircraft was now playing in full high-fidelity; he could feel but no longer hear the snapping of bullets as they rapidly warmed the air before whizzing past and clipping or burying into nearby foliage. He was now feeling the full effect of the rotor wash from the helicopter as he moved into his primary exfil point, a small opening in the thick jungle canopy. The wait for the rope to be kicked out seemed like a lifetime. At that moment he thought he would almost rather continue running than be gunned down standing under a hovering hunk of metal. Looking up, he watched the aluminum carabineers ballet movements, as they gradually grew larger with each foot they were lowered. Twinkling as they caught light from the sun as they bounced back and forth on their way down. He continued to anxiously divide his attention between the crew chief and the wood line never forgetting for a second that he was being pursued. He stretched his arms upward and retrieved the line, now almost frantic in his need to secure it. He connected the rope that had lowered to his harness and extended his arms outward while looking up at the crew chief; the signal that you were ready to be lifted.

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SPIES or Special Purpose Insertion Extraction System was the means in which he was to travel back to the staging area. He had first experienced this system in Survival Evasion, Resistance, Escape or SERE School and didn't much like the exposure of hanging from a rope, dangling under a moving helicopter, but it was part of the price of admission into this elite group. Back then; he was also being chased by aggressors, only this time the bullets being used had the possibility of leaving a soulless carcass and not just bruising.

As he was lifted off of the ground, he noticed that the crew chief was returning fire with the 7.62mm machine gun mounted in the aircraft; they must be close. With his right hand he reached for his pistol that was on his hip, through a cut out on the ghillie suit. Suddenly he felt his stomach rise as if he was on a roller coaster, to sharp a change of direction to have been the bird. As he looked up toward the helicopter wondering why he was not moving in same direction as the aircraft, his back violently made contact with the ground and he could no longer breath. He tried to move but couldn't make his brain connect to his limbs; he raised his head slowly off the ground. The helicopter was still beating the air loudly, though he couldn't feel the wind from the blades anymore, and his ears were ringing slightly. The sun on his face and in his eyes was warm and bright and for a minute he thought he was waking up from an exhilarating dream. The kind with a very bad finale, but in the end are extremely relieving. For when you awake and realize it was all a nasty game being played on you by your brain, the sigh of relief is elating.

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But the pain was all too real, and when a shadow appeared over him, the looming figure of a man; he knew this horror was reality. *Was his hair really blonde?* At that moment, the moment that he thought he could make out his face, he was struck in the head with the butt stock of a weapon and knocked unconscious.