

PROLOGUE

SOMEWHERE ABOVE FRANCE

1944

The sound of suppressed gunfire in the narrow fuselage was drowned out by the roar of the slipstream coupled with the plane's engines. The soldiers accompanying the crates of documents back to Berlin lay dead and dying, their uniforms soaked with blood. Twenty-two-year-old Jacqueline Marceau ejected the spent magazine from her MP40 and inserted a fresh one.

Keeping an eye trained on the cockpit door, she shackled her prisoner, then retrieved her parachute and struggled into it.

She pulled a cap over her head and tucked her long blond hair inside so it wouldn't whip her face on the way down. Next came goggles and a pair of leather gloves. It might have been summertime on the ground, but at this altitude it was bitterly cold.

She gave her gear one final check and then helped her prisoner to his feet. "Time to move, Herr Stiegler."

The SS officer tried to fight back, but Marceau was ready for him. She slammed her weapon into his groin and as he doubled over, wrapped a webbing harness around his torso.

Stepping behind him, Marceau grabbed his chin and yanked his

head back, causing him to stand up straighter. As he did, she ran the two final straps between his legs and clipped them in to the back of the harness.

“I hope you’re not afraid of heights,” she quipped, shoving the man toward the Arado’s rear loading ramp.

Displeased with his pace, Marceau jabbed him in the kidney with the MP40 and told him, “*Mach schnell!*”

Stiegler tried to call out to the cockpit for help, but it was no use. Marceau gave him another punch with her weapon and drove him to the edge of the ramp.

The Arado 232 might have been the Luftwaffe’s general-purpose transport aircraft, but this one was armed like a Messerschmitt. The navigator operated a 13 mm machine gun in the nose, the radio operator a 20 mm gun in a rotating turret on the roof, and the loadmaster—now deceased—another 13 mm gun from above the cargo bay at the rear ramp. They’d be floating ducks until they hit the ground and were able to take cover. The best thing they could do was get out before anyone knew they were gone.

At the ramp, Marceau looked for the wiring that led to the cockpit and the indicator lamp that would light up as soon as she opened the hydraulically powered clamshell doors. She fished a diagram from her pocket and tried to zero in on the right wire to cut. That’s when Stiegler tried to overpower her once more.

Using his shoulder as a ram, he charged right into her, toppling her over backward. Marceau lost her grip on her weapon and threw her hands out, looking for something to grab as she fell. What she found was the cargo door release.

A red light began flashing as the doors started to open. Marceau was about to let a curse fly when the red light was obscured by something else—Stiegler’s head snapping forward right toward the bridge of her nose.

Marceau moved, but not fast enough. Stiegler’s head glanced off the side of hers, sending a searing bolt of pain through her skull. What was worse was that he was on top of her now. Nearly seven inches taller and almost twice her weight, he definitely had the advantage, even in manacles.

She tried to bring her knee up to get him in the groin again, but he had her legs and arms pinned. He knew he had won, and his lips began to curl into a smile. Marceau relaxed her body and turned her head away. The message could not have been any clearer. *I give up.*

Stiegler bent down, his mouth hovering inches away from her face, and she could smell the red wine he had been consuming before they took off from Paris. With the thick parachute between her and the floor, she felt like a turtle that had been flipped onto its back.

“You have been a very bad girl,” he began to whisper to her. That’s when she struck.

Whipping her head to the side, she grabbed as much of Stiegler’s right ear in her mouth as she could, bit down, and tore.

The SS officer screamed in pain and scrambled to get off the twenty-two-year-old.

Blood gushed from the side of his head, down his neck, and onto his coat. Marceau spat a portion of Stiegler’s ear out and leaped to her feet. As she did, she was greeted with a hail of bullets.

Hitting the deck, she rolled and recovered her weapon. Raising it to engage the threat, she saw that the copilot had emerged from the cockpit, most likely in response to the cargo doors having been engaged. He had emptied the magazine of his Luger and was hastily trying to insert a new one when Marceau put a tight group of rounds into his chest and he fell to the floor.

The navigator would be out next, followed by the radio operator. It was past time to bail out.

Rushing over to Stiegler, she clipped herself to the back of his harness and began dragging him toward the rear of the plane. When he tried to swing his head backward and connect with her face, she slammed her MP40 into what remained of his right ear.

The pain must have been intense. She felt the man’s knees buckle, and she almost lost her balance trying to keep him upright.

Dragging Stiegler back to the cargo doors, Marceau activated the ramp and watched as it slowly began to lower.

One of the dead soldiers at the rear of the plane had two stick grenades tucked inside his belt. With Stiegler still woozy from the blow,

Marceau planted her feet, then carefully reached down and withdrew both grenades.

Hobbling back to the ramp with her captive, she could now see daylight behind the plane. It was maddening how long the ramp lowering process took. She couldn't afford to wait any longer. Pushing Stiegler forward, she began walking him out onto it.

Once there, she gave the briefcase a final tug to make sure it was still firmly attached to his wrist. Ten seconds more and the ramp would be down far enough for them to jump. After that, all that mattered was that her primary chute open. With the auxiliary chute, or Belly Wart as it was known, sandwiched between them, there was no way it would deploy if she needed it. She'd have to cut him loose and let him fall to his death, which wasn't an option.

As far as she knew, a "tandem" jump, as she had termed it, had never been done before, but her mission was to bring back both Stiegler *and* the briefcase he had chained to his wrist. It had been considered suicidal. In fact, no one in her organization actually believed it could be done. That had only made Marceau more determined to succeed.

With less than five seconds left, she inched Stiegler forward. It was then that she suddenly heard a shout from behind.

"Halt!"

Marceau spun her captive around just in time to see the navigator, armed with an MP40 like hers, bring his weapon up and fire.

Bullets ricocheted and punched holes along the fuselage. They also punched holes in Josef Stiegler.

Marceau felt him begin to slump forward. As strong as she was, there was no way she could hold him up and return fire.

The navigator advanced. He was using shorter, more controlled bursts. Almost all of the rounds were now hitting Stiegler. Marceau dragged him backward, only feet from the edge of the ramp.

Stiegler's body went limp and the dead weight caused her to stumble. When she did, she caught not one, but two rounds through her right shoulder, and her weapon clattered to the deck. There was no time to pick it up.

Ignoring the pain, she wrapped her arm around Stiegler's midsection and continued to drag him. *How was she not at the end of the ramp already? How much farther could it be?*

Stiegler's legs finally gave out and his body folded in half. The only thing keeping him up was Marceau's remaining strength, coupled with her intense force of will.

The navigator looked at Marceau and smiled. It was the same smile Stiegler had given her. Marceau smiled back as the man leveled his weapon, steadied his aim, and pulled the trigger.

Whether it was a lack of training, the noise from the engines, or the heat of combat, the navigator had failed to notice that his weapon was empty.

Raising the stick grenades, their base caps already unscrewed, Marceau put the priming cords between her teeth. The navigator's smile instantly disappeared and the color drained from his face.

Jacqueline Marceau yanked both cords at once and tossed the navigator a wink as she threw the grenades over his head into the interior of the plane. She then stepped backward with Stiegler and leaped off the ramp.

As the Luftwaffe plane erupted into a billowing fireball, Marceau deployed her chute and steered herself and her captive toward a long, green valley dotted with a handful of cows and a small chalet.



CHAPTER 1

PARAGUAYAN CHACO
TRIPLE-BORDER “SANCTUARY”
SOUTH AMERICA
PRESENT DAY

The heat was unbearable. Ryan Naylor was drenched with sweat and the butt of his Glock pistol chafed against the small of his back. Some might have said it served him right. Doctors shouldn't be carrying weapons; even here. But Ryan Naylor wasn't just a doctor.

As the thirty-two-year-old surgeon slapped another mosquito trying to drain the blood from his neck, he wondered if he was being led into a trap.

“How much farther?” he asked in Spanish.

“Not much,” said one of the men in front of him. It was the same answer he'd been given repeatedly since they'd gotten out of their Land Cruisers to push deeper into the jungle on foot.

In the canopy of trees above, multiple species of birds and monkeys called down, upset at the alien presence.

Half of Naylor's Camelback was already empty, but he'd yet to see any of the Guaranis he was traveling with raise their canteens.

The men marched in small-unit fashion, keeping five yards between each other in case of ambush. They carried rifles that looked like relics from the Gran Chaco War of the 1930s. How they managed to keep them from rusting in the oppressive humidity was beyond him. But as he had learned early on, the Guaranis had a much different way of doing just about everything.

Naylor had been sent to Paraguay by the U.S. military to gather intelligence. He was based out of Ciudad del Este, Spanish for City of the East and capital of the Alto Paraná region.

Begun as a small village originally named after a Paraguayan dictator, it had grown to a bustling city of over 250,000 and was an illicit paradise, with trafficking in everything from pirated software and DVDs to drugs, weapons, and money laundering. But there was something else that had attracted the U.S. military's interest. It was also home to a large Middle Eastern community.

Upward of twenty thousand of the city's inhabitants were either themselves from or descendants of people from places like Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza. The city even boasted two Arabic-language television stations.

Set against the backdrop of Paraguay's corrupt government, Ciudad del Este's Middle Eastern community provided the perfect human camouflage for transient Arab men involved in Islamic terrorism.

Organizations such as al Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, Al Gamaat, and Al Islamiyya had all set up shop there. The Hezbollah operation alone was believed to have sent more than fifty million dollars back to the Middle East. In the remote deserts and jungles of the shared border area of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil were multiple terror training camps, more extensive and professional than anything ever seen in Afghanistan or Sudan.

Techniques for building IEDs and explosively formed projectiles were taught and perfected daily with instructors from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Syrian secret service, and Libyan intelligence service whose operatives rotated in and out as "visiting professors."

As if that wasn't enough to worry American authorities, Sunni and

Shia extremist groups had joined forces to work and train together in the region.

A team of over forty FBI agents had been permanently encamped in Ciudad del Este to map out and dismantle the business dealings of the terrorist organizations, but it was the U.S. military, in particular Army intelligence, that had been charged with locating the terrorist training camps and gathering as much information about them as possible. That's where Ryan Naylor came in.

Born and raised in New Haven, Connecticut, Naylor had served in the National Guard and attended college on the GI Bill. The Army then paid for him to attend medical school where he trained as a trauma surgeon. Like most surgeons, Naylor had a healthy ego, but it had never blossomed into arrogance. He was actually a very well-grounded doctor.

He stood a little over six feet tall, had brown hair, green eyes, and a handsome face. His mother had been of Dutch descent. He never knew his father.

After completing his residency, he'd pursued a fellowship in plastic surgery. He wanted to do more than simply repair damage, he wanted to make people normal, make them whole again. During his fellowship, he'd found himself drawn to facial surgery, in particular fixing cleft lips and cleft palates. Whether or not the Army felt this was a waste of his time and their money, they never said. All they cared about was that he complete his training and report for duty.

Having done tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, he fully expected to be sent back to a field hospital, but the Army had other plans for him. They wanted Naylor to become a missionary.

He spent the next year in what he euphemistically referred to as "Spy School." His high-school Spanish was taken to a level he never would have thought himself capable of, he learned to pilot a variety of light aircraft, the ins and outs of tradecraft, how to conduct deep reconnaissance assignments, radio and satellite communications, and at night, he attended church and Bible study classes.

When his training was complete and he was activated, Naylor volunteered for a Christian medical organization with missions scattered

throughout South America. One of their locations was in Ciudad del Este.

There were very few ways an American could get far enough into the Paraguayan sticks to gather effective intelligence. Posing as a doctor was one of the best. By delivering medical care to remote communities, Naylor was in a position to build effective relationships with the people most likely to hear and know about terrorist activities. And that was exactly what he had been doing. He had quickly developed an exceptional human network throughout most of the villages he served.

Out of the handful of operatives the United States had working in Paraguay, Naylor produced the best reports. Not only did he bring back grade A material from the field every time, but his sources continued to feed high-quality intelligence back to him when he was in Ciudad del Este.

When the man walking in front of him suddenly stopped, Naylor, whose mind had been wandering, chastised himself for not staying focused. Even though the jungle was monotonous and the heat stifling, it was no excuse to get lazy and let his guard down. He knew better.

Two men at the head of their column were having a discussion. In the distance, Naylor thought he could hear a river. Breaking ranks, he walked up to them. "What's going on?" he asked in Spanish.

"The others don't want to go any farther," said one of the men. "I will take you the rest of the way myself."

"Wait a second. Why?"

"Because they're afraid."

"Afraid of what? Sickness? Whatever the people there died from?"

The older man shook his head. "From what we were told, the people there did not die from sickness."

Naylor had no idea what the people had died from. All he knew was that a villager had stumbled across several dead bodies in a remote part of the jungle, a place no one lived in. The bodies belonged to foreigners, the man had said. Shortly after recounting his tale he had stopped talking. It was almost as if he had slipped into shock, though some sort of catatonic state was more likely. Naylor wasn't a psychiatrist, but whatever the man had seen had deeply disturbed him.

The area they were now in was rumored to have housed an al Qaeda training camp at one point, though no one could ever say exactly where. Add to that a report of “dead foreigners,” and that was all Naylor had needed to hear. He had no idea what had so spooked the villager who had stumbled upon the bodies, but his interest had been piqued, and once his mind was set on something, it was impossible to dissuade him from it.

The other men of their party made camp, while Ryan and the old man trudged deeper into the jungle.

Forty-five minutes later, the soft earth beneath their feet turned to what Naylor at first thought were rocks and then realized were actually pavers. Though choked with weeds, it appeared that they were on some sort of long-abandoned road.

They followed the path as it wound down into a wide gully. There were enormous stones, some twenty feet high and fifteen feet across in places. Some appeared to have been worked with tools. Despite their having been eroded by time and the elements, Naylor could make out letters or strange symbols of some sort on them.

Ryan reached out to touch one of the monoliths, but the old man caught his wrist and pulled his hand back. “The stones are evil,” he said. “Don’t touch them.”

“Where are we?” Ryan asked.

“We are close,” replied the old man as he let go of Naylor and continued. “Close to the dead.”

The gully was unusually cool. Naylor hadn’t noticed it at first, but the temperature had to be at least fifteen to twenty degrees cooler. The trees on the ridges above them were full enough that the thick jungle canopy remained intact. Even if somebody in an airplane knew what he was looking for, this little valley would be impossible to spot.

Wildly overgrown, it stretched on for a hundred yards before leveling out and being swallowed back up again by the jungle. Naylor kept his eyes peeled for any sign of recent human habitation, but there were no remains of campfires, no shelters, no refuse, nothing. It was also eerily quiet. He’d been so focused on the road and then the tall stones that he hadn’t noticed that the jungle around them was now

completely silent. The screaming birds and monkeys had completely disappeared.

“This way,” the old man said, pointing off to the right, into the jungle.

Naylor didn’t bother responding, he simply nodded and followed behind.

They walked until the pavers ended and kept going. Ryan wondered if this had once been the site of some ancient civilization. He had his digital camera with him and he made a mental note to snap some pictures of the monoliths on their way back. They would add color to his next report.

As Naylor swung his pack over to one shoulder to fish out his camera, the old man stopped and held up his hand. This time, Ryan was paying attention and he came to an immediate stop. He knew better than to speak.

The old man peered into the distance and then said, “Do you see it?”

Naylor moved up alongside him and looked. He could see shapes, but he wasn’t exactly sure what he was looking at. “Is that a jeep?”

The old man nodded. “And something else. Something bigger.”

All of the Muslims were known by a single term among the Guaranis. “Arabs?” asked Naylor.

The old man shrugged and moved slowly forward. Though the gun had been rubbing his skin raw for hours, Ryan reached back anyway to make sure it was still there.

The closer they got to the objects, the slower the old man moved. They appeared to have been camouflaged. The hairs on the back of Ryan’s neck were starting to stand up.

The first shape turned out to be a truck. The old man raised his index finger to his lips and motioned for Naylor to remain quiet. Ryan didn’t need to be reminded.

As they neared, Naylor could see that the vehicle hadn’t been intentionally camouflaged at all. It had been consumed by the jungle.

It was old. At least fifty years. Maybe more. It looked military. As Naylor studied the truck, the old man moved off to the nearby jeep.

Naylor climbed up onto the running board and looked inside. It had been picked clean. By who or what, he had no idea. He worked his way to the front in the hope of discovering where the truck was from, or to whom it had belonged.

The glass of the gauges was spiderwebbed with cracks, the interior of the cab rusting away. There wasn't enough sunlight to make out any specific detail.

Naylor unslung his pack so he could grab a flashlight and pull out his camera.

He looked up to check on the old man, who had already moved on from the jeep and toward something else.

Ryan removed his flashlight and put it in his mouth as he searched for his camera. There was thunder in the distance. As he heard the rumble, he glanced at his watch. Every day in the jungle the rain came at almost the same time. He looked back up for the old man but didn't see him. *He couldn't have gone far.*

Finding his camera, Ryan zipped his backpack. He positioned himself where he could get the best shot and powered up the camera.

He took his first picture and the automatic flash kicked in, brilliantly illuminating the interior of the cab. Moving a bit to his left, he had readied his next shot when there was a flash of lightning. It was followed by a scream.

Ryan ran toward the sound of the old man. His screams were like nothing he had ever heard. They weren't screams of pain. They were screams of abject terror.

He tore through the jungle with his pistol in his hand and his lungs burning. As he ran, the screams intensified. When Naylor found him, he couldn't figure out what had so frightened him until he followed the old man's eyes off and to the right. The minute he saw them, he understood why the man was so terrified.

Then Ryan saw something else entirely, and that was when his own blood ran cold.



CHAPTER 2

VENICE, ITALY
FRIDAY, TWO DAYS LATER

Megan Rhodes studied the Palazzo Bianchi through the scope mounted on her LaRue sniper rifle. “You’ve still got two at the front door and two on the roof,” she said via the wireless bone microphone/earpiece in her left ear. “Plus three dock boys helping guests on and off their boats as they arrive out front.”

“Roger that,” came the voice of Gretchen Casey over the radio. “Jules, are you all set?”

“I’m in position,” said Julie Ericsson, “but I still want to know why every time we do an op involving a social function, I’m responsible for transport.”

“Because you can’t tell a shrimp fork from a salad fork,” replied Alex Cooper, who was closing in on the palazzo from beneath the water next to Casey.

“That’s cute,” replied Ericsson. “You know what, Coop? Fork you.”

“Easy, everybody,” Casey cautioned her team. “Let’s make sure we’re focused and that we keep everything simple, just like we rehearsed.”

“How close are you to the entry point?” asked Rhodes.

“Thirty meters,” said Casey. Like the other two women, she and

Cooper had been trained at the U.S. Army's Special Forces Combat Diver Qualification Course in Key West Florida.

They were wearing dry suits and using closed-circuit Draegar Lar V "rebreathing" devices, which recycled their spent CO₂ and prevented any bubbles from rising to the surface and giving them away.

Their DSI M48 Supermasks had integrated Aquacom communications that allowed them to talk with their other team members. Underwater propulsion devices developed for the U.S. military, called Seabob US7s, pulled them silently toward their objective with zero emissions. The high-tech water scooters, built near the Mercedes and Porsche factories in Stuttgart, Germany, came complete with sonar location technology, onboard navigation, speeds in excess of thirty miles an hour, and four hours of run time. They were among the hottest, and most expensive pieces of military equipment the United States had recently fielded. Nothing was being spared for this operation.

Fifty-two-year-old Nino Bianchi was a black-market arms merchant. No matter what the conflict or the customer's ideology, he could procure almost any weapons system and have it delivered anywhere in the world. When he provided the plastic explosives used in a bus bombing in Rome that killed more than twenty Americans, the United States decided to do something about him. And they had just the right group to do it.

America's primary counterterrorism unit, the First Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, also known as Delta Force, Combat Applications Group (CAG), or simply "The Unit" to its members, was created in 1977 by Army colonel Charles Beckwith. It was based on the British Special Air Service model and was designed to serve as a highly specialized force capable of carrying out direct-action and counterterrorism assignments anywhere in the world.

Divided into three operating squadrons (A, B, and C), the squadrons were then subdivided into troops and could be broken down into progressively smaller teams as their missions required. The smallest team

normally consisted of four operators and was referred to as a patrol, or a “brick.”

The Unit’s operators excelled in a wide array of clandestine operations, including hostage rescue, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency, as well as strikes inside hostile, off-limits, or politically sensitive areas.

Delta was headquartered in a remote section of North Carolina’s Fort Bragg. There, “behind the fence” as it was called, no expense was spared in training the world’s most elite warriors. The facility housed massive climbing walls, extensive shoot houses for close-quarters battle, sniper ranges, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a dive tank, and multiple other training ranges and facilities that strove to anticipate the kinds of environments where operators could be called upon to deploy at a moment’s notice.

Besides the three operational squadrons, there were an additional nine detachments charged with providing operators with every form of imaginable support—from intelligence, training, aviation, and medical care to the most sophisticated weaponry and technology in the U.S. military’s arsenal.

Never content to rest on its laurels, Delta was always exploring new ways to make itself better, deadlier, and more efficient. Taking a cue from the success of its Operational Support Detachment, which often used women to gather intelligence in advance of Delta missions, it asked one of its most aggressive and forward-thinking questions. *Why not train and field female operators?*

It was an exceedingly good idea. In fact, it was such a good idea that many within Delta’s ranks were surprised that it hadn’t been pursued earlier.

Women normally attracted less attention in the field than men, and when they did, it was often of a completely different kind. Give a woman a dog’s leash, one person said, and she could wander around anywhere. Put a woman in a car with a baby seat and she could sit all day surveilling a target without attracting much notice. Women were welcomed in places men were not and could get away with

things men could never dream of. A female operative capable of kicking in your door, shooting you in the head, or cuffing you and stuffing you in a trunk was the last thing most of the bad guys would ever expect.

With the approval of the Army's Special Operations Command under which Delta was chartered, a group of operatives agreed to become recruiters. At first they looked within the armed forces for highly skilled, highly motivated women. There were some, but not nearly enough to fully meet the objectives that had been set for the all-female squadron they were creating, codenamed the Athena Project. Thus, the recruiters were forced to look outside the military.

They were searching for intelligent, self-confident, polished women who could blend in and disappear into foreign cultures. They needed to be athletic and highly competitive. They needed to hate to lose, because Delta Operators never lost; they won at all costs. The women needed to be driven in such a way that success had become part of their DNA. They also needed to be attractive.

It was a fact of life that people reacted differently to others based upon how they looked. If the female operatives were attractive, their beauty disqualified them as a threat and there was no end to what they could achieve. Men would do things they shouldn't just to be near an attractive woman, extending opportunities and even information that would never be offered to their male counterparts. Men would try to impress them by bragging and inviting them to see things normally off-limits. In essence, men could often be counted on to act stupidly around an attractive woman. And those who didn't could very likely be counted on to underestimate a woman, especially an attractive one.

As the Delta recruiters cast their nets outside the military, they began haunting high-end female athletic events. They trolled for potential candidates at triathlons, winter and summer X Games, universities, and U.S. Olympic training facilities. The sport didn't matter as much as whether a candidate possessed the essential characteristics.

The selection and assessment process was extremely difficult. Many

women didn't make the cut. Standards, though, were never dropped just to fill out the ranks.

The women who did pass the selection and assessment phases were exceptional, none more so than the brick of four women about to snatch Nino Bianchi from his extremely fortified home. They were all fiercely determined, fiercely loyal, and fiercely competitive, but other than that, they couldn't have been more different.

Alex Cooper was the twenty-eight-year-old, biracial daughter of an Ethiopian mother and an American father who owned a small restaurant in Atlanta. After high school, she went on to attend the University of Arizona as a communications major. There she became attracted to ultramarathon running—a sport that saw competitors in events racing over twenty-four hours, several days, or even thousand-mile distances. The sport suited her unwavering, granitelike determination.

She was a quiet person by nature, and her boisterous teammates were always trying to get her to come “out of her shell.” They needled her constantly about being too reserved, too serious. She could be too hard on herself, and they saw it as their job to keep things in perspective for her. And as much as they teased her, they all knew how deep her still waters ran. Cooper was an outstanding operator.

So was thirty-year-old Julie Ericsson, a triathlete who had grown up on the big island of Hawaii and had studied multiple subjects at the University of Hawaii. Her father ran fishing charters, while her mother was a schoolteacher. Julie, like Alex, was about five-foot-nine. Though she was of Spanish and Welsh descent, her parents' genetics combined in such a way that she had an exotic, Brazilian look about her.

She was the epitome of grace under fire and was easily the most organized member of the team. She had a real eye for detail, with equipment and logistics being her specialty. If the team needed anything done, Julie was the person they always turned to.

Megan Rhodes was the quintessential “American” girl; blond-haired and blue-eyed. The thirty-one-year-old grew up in the Chicago suburbs. Her father was a cop and her mother passed away when she was very young. Rhodes attended college at the University of Illinois, where

she continued a successful high-school athletic career as a competitive swimmer. Back in her teenage years, her five-foot-eleven height, as well as her striking Nordic features, had earned her the nickname “Viking Princess,” which had stuck with her all the way to Delta. It made those who knew her laugh. Megan was every bit the Viking, but there wasn’t an ounce of princess in her. She endured the worst situations any assignment could throw at them without ever complaining. A stone-cold killer when she had to be, Megan Rhodes’s glass was always half full. She was always the first one to volunteer to go into a dangerous situation and was also an extremely talented interrogator.

The final woman on the team was Gretchen Casey. “Gretch,” as she was known by her teammates, was Texas tough. She had grown up in East Texas and had attended Texas A&M, where she was a prelaw student. Her dad was a former Army Ranger who owned a gunsmithing business and her mother was a semisuccessful artist. Gretchen’s father had her shooting from the day she could first hold a rifle. Her love of cross-country and shooting had led her to become a world-class summer biathlete who had been picked up by the U.S. Olympic Team. She competed for a while, but gave it up when she fell in love with a hedge fund manager in New York.

The relationship was good, for a while. Gretchen secured her law degree at NYU, but when she discovered that the hedge fund manager was running around on her, the Texas girl lost her taste not only for him, but for the Big Apple and the law as well.

Not really knowing what she wanted to do, she began training again and picked up her career as a summer biathlete. She was eight months into it when a Delta Force recruiter spotted her and made her an offer that sounded like it might be fun.

At five-foot-six, she was the smallest of the bunch, but height had nothing to do with her leadership abilities, which were exceptional and which had seen her put in charge of the group.

As Casey and Cooper anchored their scooters on the canal bottom, Casey said over the radio, “We’re at the entry point.”

Ericsson, who was cradling a small device in her lap that looked like

an iPad or eReader of some sort, pressed a button and said, “Grafting a clean loop to the cameras in the boat garage now.”

“Let us know when we’re good to go.”

“Ten seconds.”

When the live security footage had been replaced by the team’s repeating loop, Ericsson said, “It’s all yours.”



CHAPTER 3

The entry point was Nino Bianchi's boat garage. But getting in wouldn't simply be a matter of swimming under the doors and popping up on the other side. Bianchi took his security much too seriously to allow that sort of thing to happen.

The brightly painted wooden doors, which looked like any others along the Grand Canal, hid two sheets of titanium, three inches thick, descending several feet below the water level. The titanium doors came to rest upon a wall of metal bars that went all the way down and were bolted to the bedrock beneath the canal bottom.

Under the murky water, Cooper and Casey unloaded their gear. When they were ready, Casey said over the radio, "I'm going to wrap the bars."

"Roger that," replied Rhodes, who was concealed in the window of an apartment across the canal. She adjusted her face against the cheek pad of her rifle and prepared to take Bianchi's guards if they noticed what was going on below them.

Gripping the bars, Casey inched herself up as close to the surface as she dared. Though it was evening and the water cloudy, there was still a lot of ambient light spilling onto the surface. If she was seen, that would be the end of the entire operation.

Identifying the bars that they'd be working on, she wrapped them as tightly as she could with Ti wire to keep them from spreading.

Using the bars to guide herself back to the bottom, she wrapped the two bars again with wire halfway down.

Rejoining Cooper, she said, "Bars are wrapped. Let's spread 'em."

Cooper positioned a small, submersible hydraulic jack with titanium tubular extension poles between the two bars and went to work, silently creating an opening big enough for them to swim through.

They checked in repeatedly with Rhodes to make sure no one up on the dock had any idea what was going on. Each time, Rhodes replied, "You're still good to go."

After the bars had been spread far enough apart, Casey rose halfway to the surface to make sure that there was no sign of the breach. So far, so good. The wire had held.

As Cooper packed the jack back into her scooter, Casey unloaded two waterproof dry bags from hers. When they were ready, they swam through the opening, with Casey in the lead.

They quietly broke the surface of the water inside the boat garage, they came up only to eye level and took a long scan of the dimly lit room to make sure no one else was there. From what they could tell, they were alone and unnoticed.

Suspended above them, in order to keep its hull clean, was Bianchi's twenty-nine-foot 1965 Riva Super Aquarama runabout.

Casey flashed Cooper the thumbs-up and they swam to a corroded ladder at the front of the slip.

Cooper climbed out first. After removing her mask and peeling back her hood, she took off her rebreather, reached down, and accepted the two dry bags from Casey. Quickly, the two women undressed.

They wore next to nothing beneath their dry suits. Unzipping the larger of the two bags, Casey pulled out Cooper's cocktail dress and handed it to her, along with a pair of heels, jewelry, and makeup. They were followed by an inside-the-thigh garter holster, and a 9 mm Taurus "Slim" pistol.

Casey fished out her dress, heels, makeup, weapon, and holster and starting getting dressed as well.

“I hope you’re right about this guy wanting to show off his boat,” said Cooper.

Casey stepped into her dress. “You know what they say. The only difference between men and boys . . .”

“I know. The size of their toys.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll want to show us his toy.”

Cooper smiled. “But what if he doesn’t?”

Casey turned her back so her teammate could zip her up. “Then we’ll improvise. We’ll tell him we want to go skinny dipping.”

“In Venetian canal water?”

“Lex, you worry too much. Trust me, if we do this right, he’ll follow us anywhere.”

“And if we don’t, this guy is going to do everything he can to make sure we don’t leave this building alive.”

Casey shook her head. “Won’t happen.”

Cooper was easily the most serious member of the team. She was a planner and didn’t care much for improvisation. “Have you always been this sure of yourself?” she asked.

Handing her one of the miniature earpieces, Casey replied, “No, but I am this sure about men. Are you ready to go?”

“I’m guessing you don’t have a hair dryer in that bag, do you?”

“No hair dryer,” said Casey as she filled the larger bag with their dive equipment, weighted it down with a couple of items from the garage, dropped it into the water, and watched it sink out of view. “Dry suits may keep you bone dry, but the hoods are hell on your hair. Just run your fingers through it. You’ll be fine.”

“Easy for you to say,” responded Cooper as Casey searched for a place to hide the smaller dry bag. “You always look great.” In addition to being the most serious member of the team, Alex Cooper seemed to be the most critical of her own good looks.

The tarp for the Riva had been set in the corner of the garage, and Casey decided to hide the bag underneath. It contained everything the

two women would need for their exfiltration: two masks, two waterproof, red-lens flashlights, and small “spare air” supplemental oxygen bottles with built-in mouthpieces for each of them. There were also restraints and a “spare air” bottle for Bianchi.

The plan was to get him back to this point, get him restrained, and get him into the water as quickly as possible. Once they had him below the surface, they would retrieve the rest of their gear, fire up their scooters, and get out of there as quickly as possible.

Casey pushed her tiny earpiece transmitter into her ear. It was about the size of a pencil eraser, and once it was in place it was virtually impossible to detect.

They tested the signal strength between them, and then outside to Rhodes and Ericsson. Satisfied that everything was ready, Casey smoothed over her rather revealing cocktail dress and said, “Okay ladies, it’s showtime.”