

1

Jaco, Costa Rica

29 November 1993

07.37 hrs

The Nazi eagle and swastika were still stamped under the Mauser bolt housing. Its sniper sight looked like a pointy fence post. Most novices aimed where a thin horizontal line crossed it, about two-thirds of the way up, but that was only there so you could check for canting – weapon tilting. The correct aim was right at the pinnacle.

I squinted into the very basic x4 magnification Second World War Zeiss optic. The target building in the valley below us was a blur. Torrential rain stung my face and battered the lens; the wipe I gave it with my thumb only made things worse.

‘One shot, one kill – still sure you can do it, *hombre?*’

I nodded a yes to the black-and-white western piss-take he’d been dishing out since we’d first met, but in

fact, you know what, I wasn't sure. I was soaked to the skin, covered with mud and leaf litter, and bitten to fuck by every insect in Central America that could fly, crawl, or sit and wait for you to put your arse down alongside it.

Worse still, I felt jumpy. This was my first job for the Secret Intelligence Service. It might have been same shit, different boss, but my whole future with them could hang on this one shot, and the dickhead I'd had to drag along with me was a millstone round my neck.

I eased my head away from the weapon. Dino was partially submerged in mud; the rest of him was covered with big lumps of rainforest. His eyes were pressed against what looked like a pair of binos on steroids. For the hundredth time since we'd got there he pressed a button on the casing and fired off a beam of invisible infrared light, in case the shack might have legged it further down the valley in the last few minutes.

'Four hundred and forty-seven metres.'

'I know, Dino. I know.'

The range was adjusted via a dial on top of the casing. I had it at 450.

Dino had shaved his head to a number-one for this job, and dyed what was left blond. To look at him, you'd think that the Mauser had belonged to his granddad. Maybe it had. 'Need-to-know' didn't seem to be high on the DEA's standard operational procedure: Agent Zavagno had already told me way more about his background than I needed to know.

His Mexican grandparents had swum the Rio Grande with their kids after watching too much *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Dinner with JR and Joan Collins never

materialized, but little Dino had begun to live the American Dream in the shack next door to them in some shit-kicking town just inside the border.

I was no linguist, but he sounded more Italian to me than Mexican, and there was definitely a touch of European in Dino's DNA. Hundreds of Mussolini's old mates had joined the flood of Nazis to Central and South America immediately after the Second World War – which probably went some way towards explaining his *Boys from Brazil* hairdo.

Dino might have been in his mid-twenties with a wing forward's physique, but I felt like I'd had to drag him every centimetre of the twelve Ks from town. It wasn't that he didn't want to be there; I was sure his passion and enthusiasm ticked all the boxes at the DEA's Washington HR department. But he operated out of New Mexico, the land of tacos and dustbowls. He'd never spent time in the rainforest. He'd had no operational experience in the field, come to that, and didn't know how to pace himself.

That wasn't his only problem. He'd got it into his head that Brits liked a brew, and insisted on Lipton's – the bags in the little yellow packets.

To make things worse, the one-horse town we'd hung out in was crawling with hippies, who'd gone there for the Summer of Love, and swathes of young surfer dudes, who'd come to catch a wave or two in recent years and also forgotten to leave. The girls looked tanned, fit and up for a party. Dino wore his cock on his dyed-blond head and had been reluctant to up sticks before he'd even received an invitation.

It had taken us ten long, sweat-soaked, mosquito-bitten hours to locate Jesús Orjuela's latest hideaway. It

had then taken us three more to crawl undetected into our fire position on the high ground to its south. We'd been lying there ever since in a tropical downpour while the Wolf – as he liked to be called, these days – sat and drank coffee in the dry. The thing about wolves is that they're bold in packs but super-cautious on their own. This one knew that concealment was his best weapon.

The hardwood bungalow I could see through the Mauser sight was a far cry from the Mayfair apartments, Swiss ski chalets and Malibu beach houses that comprised the rest of his property portfolio. It stood on tree-trunk stilts, with a wiggly tin roof that also stretched across a veranda. There was a shuttered window on each gable end and a badly fitting door at the front, between two more windows with shutters, but at least everyone inside was sheltered.

And anonymous.

The only giveaway was the chunky, all-American Ford F150 pick-up parked outside. It would have been up to its axles in mud, had it not boasted the kind of lifted suspension that any redneck would have been proud to show off at the local monster-truck fest.

A rusty barbed-wire fence encircled about half an acre of long grass that drifted to the edge of the canopy. A swollen stream the width of a road snaked along the valley a hundred metres or so beyond it; I could see several other shacks spread out on its bank, each with its own patch of mud for the pigs to have fun in. Half a dozen crocodiles lazed nearby, jaws propped open as if they were playing raindrop catch or waiting for some fresh pork to wander in. They looked as laid-back as the country they called home.

Big government had protected this place from the nightmare civil wars and American-backed insurgency that had contaminated most of Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. Costa Rica didn't even have an army. All it cared about was developing tourism and protecting the rainforest. Hardwoods towered forty metres above us, man-made buttresses a couple of metres high supporting them like stabilizers on a Christmas-tree stand.

I felt a little sorry that some of the shit spreading from the south was about to stick to this garden paradise.

I focused once more on the view through the blurred optic. I had the door and windows covered. Wherever the Wolf emerged, I'd have him. One good shot and he'd be flat on the veranda floor, victim of an old-fashioned assassination by a rival drugs cartel based beyond the horizon.

2

The Wolf was Colombian to his lizard-skin loafers. I couldn't help smiling when I was shown photographs of him at the briefing in MI6's Vauxhall HQ. I'd always associated wolves with lean and hungry; this boy could have fitted a whole pack into the waistband of his jeans. But there was no mistaking the sharpness of his teeth – or those of the cartel he ran in conjunction with his old schoolmate, Pablo Escobar.

Both born in 1949, they had grown up together in the hills around Medellín; right place, right time – if your career of choice happened to be drugs baron. Colombia has direct sea access to both the west and east coasts of the United States, and that puts you in the box seat when you're shipping illegal gear on an industrial scale.

Jesús and Pablo had started out as debt collectors and gang enforcers in their early teens. They soon developed a reputation for casual and lethal violence. Kidnap for ransom was one of their favourite tricks. If the family refused to pay or couldn't come up with the cash, the dynamic duo would torture their captive, then

kill them. Sometimes they'd do it anyway, just to make a point. '*Pour encourager les autres,*' Jesús liked to say. 'That means to encourage the others.' According to an associate turned DEA informer, he was never without a book, and had a particular weakness for Voltaire, another great defender of civil liberties.

He knew that guns and torture would not be enough to protect their growing fortune. The pool around Medellín teemed with sharks, ever circling, always looking for the kill. They had to show they were capable of defending what was theirs. And, as the military memoirs he devoured had taught him, the best form of defence was attack.

Jesús and Pablo took terror to new levels. Women were raped as punishment for a crime by a family member – and every relative, children included, was rounded up to witness it. They made their victims beg and scream in front of their loved ones, and left their mutilated corpses on display. Sometimes he and Pablo put their heads on stakes and hung their intestines from trees. Male victims had their cocks chopped off and stuffed into their mouths. Women had their breasts sliced off with machetes, their stomachs cut open and their wombs stretched over their heads.

The Wolf soon perfected the signature dish that earned him his nickname: he'd rip open the throat of a victim and pull his tongue through the gash like some grotesque necktie – which went to show that your worst enemy was the psychopath with a library card.

The Wolf and Escobar wielded the raw power that only terror can bring. In its wake came so much wealth they offered to pay off Colombia's national debt. Escobar even became a congressman, a respectable

citizen, a representative of the people. His new status gave him judicial immunity, which meant he could no longer be prosecuted for crimes under Colombian law – and he made sure the Wolf couldn't either.

Escobar also had a shiny new passport that gave him international diplomatic immunity. He took his family north of the border for their holidays, even posed for happy snaps in front of the White House. The DEA were pulling their hair out – not just because he could mince around his Miami mansions with impunity, but because they knew he planned to become president of Colombia and there was nothing they could do to stop him.

Ironically, it only went tits up for the congressman and his mate when some bright spark in the US discovered that everyday baking soda provided a simple, low-cost alternative for the highly flammable diethyl ether used in the manufacture of freebase cocaine – and the new cocktail was also much more addictive. Crack spread like wildfire through the USA's inner-city streets and was soon a social epidemic. Almost overnight, the white stuff lost its chic. It was no longer the recreational substance of choice for the well-heeled trendsetter. Washington had no choice but to grip the situation – and that meant gripping the cartels.

What had started as a profit bonanza was the beginning of the end for the dynamic duo. Their political platform disintegrated beneath them; they'd become plague-carrying rats, enemies of the state. Which was when the SAS was called in to help.

Me, Pablo and Jesús went way back.

3

Dino fired the infrared beam for the hundred and first time. 'Four hundred and forty-seven, *hombre*. Don't screw up, will you?'

His voice was too high-pitched for someone his size. It had been funny to start with, but now it was starting to get on my nerves even more than the fucking rain. The finger I invited him to swivel on was white and wrinkled, like I'd been in a bath all day.

Margaret Thatcher had been in Number Ten when crack cocaine appeared on UK streets, and she took it very personally indeed. I was a corporal in the Regiment at the time she offered us to Reagan as part of the First Strike Policy to stop the drugs at source. But it was easier said than done. With twenty thousand drug-related murders a year, Colombia, a country the size of Spain, Portugal and France combined, had become the most dangerous place on earth. A Colombian male between the ages of eighteen and sixty was more likely to die of gunshot wounds than any other cause.

We had flown down in 1988 to train the anti-narcotics

police, first to penetrate the rainforest, then to find and destroy the manufacturing plants. The problem was, these guys were only on about a hundred US a month. For that, they risked getting killed – their families raped and murdered – by Pablo and the Wolf. So they didn't give a shit if rich, overfed North American gringos were off their heads on coke.

Colombia, I soon learned, was all about self-interest. An airliner went down in the jungle while I was there. When the police arrived on the scene they found the local villagers scavenging through the wreckage. Quite a few passengers had survived, but were badly injured. The villagers didn't give them a second glance in their rush to rip the watches, rings and wallets off the nearby corpses.

Life was cheap in this neck of the woods. And everyone had a price.

4

The village was dead – not surprisingly, beneath this weight of rainfall. Ahead of me was a solid wall of water, thumping into the ground with such force it created mini mud-craters. Even the scabby chickens and the pot-bellied pigs had got their heads down. Raindrops stitched the mud all around them like machine-gun fire. At least it washed the leaf litter off our faces.

I had the continuous fuck-ups by the Blokada de Búsqueda (Search Bloc) to thank for this. The Colombian Police unit's sole purpose was to hunt down Orjuela and his mates, and if they'd done a proper job I wouldn't have been turning into a human prune.

The US Army's secret electronic surveillance unit, codenamed Centra Spike, crammed the small Beechcraft turboprop with high-tech gear that tracked mobile-phone and radio transmissions. The theory: pinpoint Escobar and the Wolf by finding their voices. It hadn't taken them long – Jesús was always gobbing off about something – but high-level corruption and

incompetence in Search Bloc meant they were too slow reacting. Its commanders didn't know which of their two hundred officers they could trust not to alert the Wolf in time for him to do a runner.

I couldn't blame them: there were life-changing amounts of money on offer. The bad guys had bags of the stuff stashed along every escape route so they could instantly pay their way out of any drama. Even the low-tech drug-manufacturing plants in the rainforests had cash close to hand for the runners. They'd already cut tracks or tunnels to the riverbank where fast boats were hidden. The key was always to keep things simple – as they need to be when you're under pressure.

But that didn't mean I enjoyed being at the shitty end of the stick, getting pounded by the rain, while a bunch of Centra Spike geeks sat in cosy ground-listening stations all around Medellín or aboard Beechcraft at 30,000 feet as the USAF U2 spy planes buzzed about at twice that height in search of the other fat man, Pablo.

The Americans wanted Escobar's head on their wall more than that of any other member of the cartel – which left me aiming for second prize, alongside a DEA newbie whose mind was perpetually elsewhere, with a strong chance of getting banged up for murder.

As I lay there with the rain drumming through my hair, I thought, Why the fuck did I leave the Regiment? I was a K, a deniable operator, working for the SIS. I didn't pay tax, everything was cash in hand, but even that wasn't a perk – if I got caught, it meant they could deny I existed.

I kept my eyes on the Mauser's back lens, hoping the Wolf was just waiting for the rain to stop. I wanted to get this thing over and done with. As Dino kept

reminding me, the time it would take him to get the three or four metres from the veranda to his wagon would allow me one shot.

If I didn't drop him with the first round, that was it, game over. He could have an M60 machine-gun in that shack for all I knew. And if he disappeared beneath the canopy instead, he'd be gone for good. We couldn't chase him: we couldn't risk our faces being seen. This was supposed to be a revenge killing by a rival cartel, not an assassination by a government-sponsored gringo and the grandson of a couple of Mexican wetbacks.

5

We'd pinged the target two days ago outside the grocery store in Jaco, loading bottled water and provisions into the back of the pick-up. And once I found the shack I knew why. He wasn't in Costa Rica alone. I recognized them all – the three small children, two girls and a boy, and the much younger wife – from the Vauxhall photos. She had shoulder-length jet-black hair, high cheekbones and dark-brown eyes, the classic South American beauty queen. I reckoned Jesús would die a happy man.

If you take the knock-on-the-door option, there's a decision to be made: do you wait until it's fully open so you can ID the target before firing? That's high risk. You'll be in the killing area longer than is healthy, and whoever answers the door may take the trouble to check who's delivering the good news.

So why not start blasting as soon as you hear someone approaching, then barge inside to check who you've hit? I didn't want any of that. The Wolf was a player; he practically invented the game. But drop the

family as well? That was the Wolf's favourite trick, not mine.

Another option had been to wait until he went back into town for food and water. But drop him on the move or close up and in an urban environment? There's always a third party with eyes-on. At least we had a concealed fire position in the jungle, a clear arc of fire, and the capacity to exfiltrate unnoticed.

I'd opted for a distance shoot and picked up the Mauser from an embassy-sponsored dead letterbox. The weapon was used by hundreds of thousands of hunters around the world. The German Army still used them for ceremonial duties. Best of all, it wasn't only quick for the spooks to acquire covertly when the Wolf was in-country, it was untraceable. And that's harder to manage than you might think.

6

‘Still four hundred and forty-seven metres, is it, Dino? It hasn’t been scared off by that fucking haircut of yours and legged it down the valley?’

Dino turned to me and grinned. Flecks of the Spam he’d been munching speckled his teeth and its unmistakable aroma wafted towards me.

We were on hard routine. On the way in and all the time we were in the fire position, there was no cooking, no flames, no smoking – not that either of us did. Even our shit travelled with us in plastic bags. If the target didn’t show because we’d fucked up and missed him, or if for any reason I couldn’t take the shot, we might have to come back again. Nothing could be left to give away our presence, even after he’d been dropped.

Which was a pity, because right now I was quite tempted to stake Dino out on the ground and leave him to the insects that still hadn’t finished with me.

‘Mate, do you always dye your hair?’

‘Of course.’

‘Why?’

'The chicks love it, *hombre*.'

'Platinum blond? They obviously can't see that what's inside your nut is dark brown.'

He looked puzzled for a moment. Then his face collapsed into an enormous grin. His chin headed east and his nose headed west.

He'd been in a lot of fights, he said, and most of them were over women. He loved them all: any shape, age or vocabulary. His basic philosophy was that everything in life boils down to getting laid. And why not? He was in his late twenties with a cock instead of a brain: how else was he to think? Certainly not about this job. He didn't seem to give a fuck if it was a success. He was wasting time here in the jungle, without an eligible woman in sight. 'You take the shot, *hombre*. Then we bug out to Miami, right, and I show you some things.'

I knew what was going through his head as he got busy with the range finder again, and it had nothing to do with the target.

'Not Toronto?'

He'd met a couple of Canadian tour-company reps in one of the Gulf-coast bars a couple of months back, taken them both to dinner, then back to his king-size bed. Or so he claimed.

'My head might be full of shit, man, but those babes will be full of me as soon as you finish this job, you know what I'm saying?' His shoulders shook with laughter. 'Four-four-seven, man. No pressure.'

I wasn't going to bite. 'No, mate. No pressure.'

7

Your bones are your weapon platform. Your muscles are the cushioning. I made a tripod of my elbows and the left side of my ribcage. The Mauser didn't have a stand so I had to use the conventional method of support: left hand forward on the wooden stock with my forearm resting on a log. A bipod would have allowed me to bring it across my body and into the butt, but you have to work with what you've got.

I peered through the sight, making sure there was no shadowing around the edges of the optic. I took aim at the centre of the door, emptied my lungs, stopped breathing, and closed my eyes. I relaxed my muscles slightly, started to breathe normally, and looked through the sight again. My point of aim had shifted to the left-hand edge of the door.

While Dino delved deeper into his can of luncheon meat and store of fantasies, I swivelled to the right to correct, then repeated the whole procedure until I was comfortably aligned to the target. It's pointless trying to force your body into a position that it doesn't want

to adopt. The weapon has to point naturally towards the target.

Dino hadn't given up trying to get a rise out of me. 'That wife of his, *hombre*, she's . . . *hot* . . . Hot – and *loaded*. She'll be a vulnerable widow soon . . .'

My eye never left the optic. 'Any wind out there?'

The spotter is like the co-driver in a rally car. All the heroic stuff is done by the guy behind the wheel – changing gears and sliding round corners, waving to the girls; all that shit. But without the co-driver telling him what's ahead, when to turn into the next bend, what sort of bend it is, they'd both be history. Under the canopy, there was no wind. But out there, on the edge of the village, there might be. And that would affect my round at this distance. I needed my co-driver. Even if he was the world's biggest dickhead.

'None out there, *hombre*. Only what's leaving your ass.'

I glanced up as a shiny black thing with far too many legs for its size made its way along a leaf just above my arm in search of breakfast. It could smell me and was getting very excited. A raindrop knocked it onto my hand. It was probably still feeling pretty pleased with itself – right up to the point when I squeezed tight around its middle and broke it in two.

'Hey, *hombre* . . . We got movement.'

8

My eye shot back to the optic as Dino began his running commentary. 'I've got the door open – you copy? It's on, *hombre*, it's fucking on.'

The lens steamed up. I rubbed it with my thumb. 'Yep.'

'I've still got no wind. And I've got movement inside.'

I watched through the curtain of rain as the Wolf's two little girls tumbled out onto the veranda. They had their hair in pigtails. Both wore shorts and Disneyland T-shirts and were barefoot. They ran straight to the rail and stuck their hands out into the torrent cascading from the roof, playfully flicking water at each other.

'Nick, I got the target. It's fucking on . . .'

A pair of adult sandals appeared at the threshold. The Wolf had rolled up his baggy jeans above the knee. A very hairy gut hanging out between his waistband and a blue T-shirt completed the look.

'Yep.'

I eased the aiming post up to where his collarbones

met, a centimetre or so higher in my sight picture than the two little heads bobbing up and down in front of him. The Wolf took a cigarette from his mouth and flicked it past them into the mud.

My finger took first pressure.

Holding the post level on the centre of his chest I let out my breath and held it. Then his wife entered my sight picture. The Wolf scooped her up in his arms and they kissed. Her loosely tied hair brushed her shoulders, and the hem of her plain blue dress rode up her thigh. I began to see what Dino was so excited about.

Arms still full, the Wolf turned back towards the door. I took a gentle breath and kept first pressure – but knew that if I put a round into the target there was a good chance it would also drop her. That wouldn't be good: someone would have to look after those fatherless kids.

The couple disappeared back into the shack with the two girls in tow, but the door stayed open. At least the kids were out of the killing area. To hear a gunshot and then discover that your dad is dead is bad enough; to be standing next to him as he goes down would not be the best day out.

I knew Dino was pissed off. Maybe he thought taking a shot at this range was as easy as Arnie made it look. 'Fuck, *hombre*, maybe a change of angle . . . ?'

'No.' I gripped his arm. 'The rain's easing. He could be out again any minute. We stay where we are.'

He slumped back into the mud, muttering to himself like a down-and-out.

We were well concealed, with a great arc of fire. No one was going anywhere. I breathed slowly and deeply,

keeping a nice, easy rhythm so I could control the weapon at any moment.

Dino shook his head to clear his ears and wiped them with the back of a muddy hand.

‘Dino, we got movement.’

The Wolf and his wife appeared on the veranda again. He was now carrying a furled red-and-white golfing umbrella.

Dino resumed his commentary. ‘Still no wind . . .’

I had him at the same point of aim as he called back into the shack, probably yelling goodbye to the kids. Only one problem: Mrs Orjuela’s very attractive head was at the centre of my target. All I could see of the Wolf was his gut ballooning either side of her small frame, like the human version of a solar eclipse. I waited for her to move. I wasn’t sure if Dino was waffling or not. My brain had shrunk and pushed itself into the optic.

I breathed out; held it; took first pressure. All she had to do was move one step left or right and I’d take second pressure.

‘Stop, stop!’ Dino’s hand fell onto my right shoulder.

I couldn’t see what was wrong. The couple were still on the veranda. She was still obstructing the shot.

‘Fuck . . . They—’

I didn’t need to know the reason. ‘Shut up. Just tell me when.’

I waited on the target, top of the aiming post still where it needed to be, rising up gently as I breathed in. I’d also have him if he moved towards the pick-up, as long as she got the fuck out of the way.

Still nothing existed in my head but the sight picture, the water pounding on my back, and the wait for Dino’s OK.

I held the weapon firmly but gently, not wanting to grip it so tightly that my muscles started to shake. I just wanted to keep the weapon as it should be: a natural extension to my body. I took slow, deep breaths to keep myself oxygenated, ready for when I stopped breathing and squeezed the trigger.

9

It didn't take long to see what the closedown was about. Just beyond the target, inside the shack, the kids were criss-crossing the doorway in some sort of game. There were three of them now. The boy was a lot bigger than his sisters.

'Here we go.'

'What?'

I realized I'd spoken aloud.

I wiped as much rain as I could off the optic without shifting my elbows from their anchor points and returned to the firing position. The Wolf took his wife's arm.

'Nick, she's going with him. She's in the fucking way . . . The shot, she's in the way . . .'

The target held the umbrella at an angle to protect them as they emerged from cover. They moved down the steps together. The pick-up was only three or four paces. It was parked nose-out from the shack, which meant if I couldn't take the shot before he reached the cab, she'd still be in the way.

I crawled out of my position.

'Nick . . . What you doing, man?'

There was no time to explain. I started legging it to the right, but the mud tugged heavily at my Rohan tourist-on-safari shirt and trousers. Maybe I could put a round through the windscreen. Hugging the high ground, I tried to protect the weapon as I tore through the foliage. I didn't want to damage the optic or dislodge it and fuck up the zero.

I was starting to breathe heavily, and that could jeopardize the shoot as badly. But I didn't have a choice. I had to keep running to get ahead of the target.

I reached the treeline again, overlooking the valley. With luck, I'd be in front of them, or at least at a better angle to take the shot. My lungs burned; my throat was dry.

I was in time to see them dodging puddles beside the pick-up. She had the umbrella now. The Wolf was between her and the driver's door. The height of the vehicle meant that he was completely obscured, but I had an angle on the windscreen.

I fell into the mud, trying to slow my heart rate, trying to stop my chest heaving, then realized I didn't have enough muzzle clearance. The slope wasn't steep enough. All I could see through the optic was a haze of green.

I got to my feet again as the driver's door opened. I couldn't see the Wolf. The umbrella was still up and static.

I ran to the nearest tree, jammed myself between two of its buttresses, arse in the mud, back firmly against the trunk. Heels dug in, elbows inside my knees, I tried to make a quick but stable platform for the weapon.

Dino crashed down the other side of the buttress, his breathing noisier than the water still pouring from the canopy. He pressed the range-finder button. 'I got four—'

'Dino, shut *up*.'

Eighteen years in the military gave me enough experience to know that this was a bit further than 447, but no way was it 500. I'd still aim a fraction higher. There was no time to mince about, bring the weapon out of the aim and adjust the sights. I kept the aiming post slightly above the steering wheel as the Wolf fell into his seat.

I waited. My chest heaves slowed as I took control of my breathing. The wife closed her door.

'Nick, take the shot! He'll be gone . . .'

I waited. Two seconds later, the massive V8 engine roared into life. Smoke belched from the exhaust.

'Nick – fuck . . .'

I breathed out, moved the centre of the top pad of my right index finger gently against the trigger. The wind-screen wipers began their sweep and cleared my sight picture for me. The post was slightly lower than it needed to be. I adjusted up a millimetre so it rested dead centre of his collar.

I took three deep breaths. If you're not oxygenated you can't see correctly and your muscles start to tremble. I squeezed until I felt resistance; second pressure. I emptied my lungs and stopped breathing in order to steady the weapon.

And then I took the shot.

10

I didn't even hear the crack. I was too busy maintaining concentration while the firing pin struck the round and the expanding gases forced the bullet up the barrel and out towards the target. But the parakeets heard it. They screeched and catapulted from their perches high in the canopy as the weapon jumped up and back into my shoulder.

The aiming post fell back to the neat hole at the centre of the spider-webbed screen. The parakeets regrouped and flew in bomber formation, metres above the F150, as they escaped down the valley.

No one emerged from the cab.

I'd kept my right eye open throughout, followed through the shot, watched as the point of aim settled once more on the centre of the target.

Dino mumbled unintelligibly. I couldn't work out if he was excited or terrified. Then he blurted, 'Did you get him, Nick? Is he dead?'

He probably thought the shot had been loud enough to get the whole village pouring out of their shacks. But

it was nothing compared to Mrs Orjuela shrieking at her children to stay inside the shack. She slipped over in the mud, dropped the umbrella, then struggled to her feet.

'Nick, she's running, man. You got him!'

She slithered and slid towards the shack.

'Let's go, man! We've gotta go!'

I kept my eye glued to the optic as she reached the steps.

One of the little girls ran out onto the veranda, looking confused. Her mother continued screaming at her to go back, took the three steps in one bound and shepherded the child into the safety of the house.

'I don't get it, man. What the fuck we doing?'

I stayed in the fire position and watched the shadowy blob behind the wheel as the windscreen wipers bumped over the spider-webbed glass.

Dino was behind me now, maybe thinking that if he got the hell out of there, so would I.

'He's still moving.'

I braced my elbows to maintain the fire position and used my right forefinger and thumb to push the bolt handle up and back to eject the round.

'Grab it.'

Even empty cases left with us.

I pushed home the bolt to pick up another 7.92 round from the five-round mag. As the round found the chamber the driver's door opened. With agonizing slowness, the Wolf slumped sideways. I pulled the bolt handle down to close the action and got treated to a running commentary on the fucking obvious.

'He's under the truck, Nick. He's fucking crawled under the truck. What we going to do? *Fuck . . .*'

I watched the rain-stitched mud, hoping to see

Orjuela try to crawl, walrus-like, towards the shack. But he wasn't that stupid.

I sprang up, keeping eyes on the truck, scanning for movement. So far there hadn't been any sign of it from any of the other shacks along the river. They probably did enough hunting around there not to worry about a gunshot. 'Dino!'

No answer.

'Dino!' I didn't look round, just thumbed back the way we'd come. 'Go to the RV. Remember the road junction? Go there and we'll meet up. Go there now.'

He swam into my peripheral vision. 'Why, Nick? What you doing?'

'Making sure he's dead. And that doesn't need two of us. Go, fuck off.'

He was more than willing to take that order and I was more than happy to see the back of him.

I scrambled faster and faster down the hill, then slid on my arse across the wet grass, all the way to the valley floor. The rain was still hammering down. I could hear cocks crowing and, further along the valley, could see smoke belching from the stone chimneys and settling across wiggly tin rooftops like a pall. There was still no breeze to pick it up and take it away.

Less than fifty metres now to the F150 . . . I stooped as I ran towards it, weapon in the shoulder, always checking the gable end shutter, expecting it to open any minute, or the wife to storm back out onto the veranda and start shooting.

The Wolf was still under the vehicle. I could see no movement, but that meant nothing. I could hear the kids howling inside the shack, which was good. I preferred sobbing to shooting.

I dropped down next to the wheel arch. The Wolf was wedged by the driveshaft, his eyes glazed as he bled out into the mud. His retinas looked as dead as fish on a slab. I couldn't see any chest movement, any twitching. But I'd long since stopped taking anything like that on trust.

I crawled in next to him and pressed my middle and forefinger into the fatty folds of his neck to feel for a carotid pulse. There wasn't one. The round had entered high in his right shoulder and blown a king-size exit wound through his lower back.

I reversed out into the daylight and turned back towards the high ground, aiming for the cover of the canopy. As I started to move, something caught my eye at the gable end of the shack. The shutter was open. I swung up the weapon, using the crown of the optic as a battle sight.

The Wolf's son stood there, framed by the window. He had clear olive skin, short dark hair and eyes like saucers. He stared at me, unblinking. He wasn't scared. I could still hear his sisters wailing, but he looked like stone. His eyes bored into mine. They told me that while I might feature in his three a.m. nightmares, he would take his place in mine.

Then his mother appeared, her mud-covered arm reaching across the boy's shoulders – not to move him away from the threat of my raised Mauser but to bind them together. Her gaze was as dark, unblinking and devoid of emotion as her son's.

I lowered the weapon and broke into a run.