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THEY WERE ON THE last mission of the day, skittering swiftly across the jungle canopy in lengthening shadows of the sun's final glare, when the plane in front of them just dropped out of the sky. One moment the Thrush was making a smooth sweep over a large field of coca and in the next, as it rose and began its upward arc over the trees beyond, it lurched, dipped, and was swallowed whole by the jungle.

Perched in the open door of a Bell 212, strapped in but mostly hanging out, Jake Tyler saw it happen and swept his 7.62mm Galil back and forth, looking for telltale signs of a ground-to-air assault. But the only things that seemed to be stirring as their helicopter passed overhead were the treetops, giant prehistoric-looking evergreens whose dense crowns undulated in the aerial downdraft.

"Son of a bitch!" the pilot barked into his headset. "Son of a bitch!" he screamed again, leaning forward over the instrument panel to scan the jungle terrain below, as were the other six occupants from their various vantage points in the chopper. The pilot spent the next several minutes trying to establish radio contact with the Thrush. He got nothing but dead air.

"Shit," Jake muttered, hesitating only a second. "Okay, let's go. Take her down now," he said, raising a fist in the air and hooking a thumb toward the floorboards.

The man seated beside him said, "Not so fast, Jake. We need

to get some intel, see what's down there."

"No, Alberto," Jake responded. "We don't have time to wait on intel. I'm going down. Get my medical bag and gear."

Alberto Hernandez, a former Special Forces vet from the Vietnam era, cast him a tight look, but Jake was already reaching for his gear, additional weapons and ammunition. Hernandez knew him well enough to know it was futile to dissuade Jake once his mind was made up. And truthfully, by the time they got any solid intelligence radioed from their base, the embassy, army, or police, it would be too late. They all knew it could already be too late.

Behind Hernandez, their mission commander spoke up. He, too, was former Special Forces with a similar background as that of Hernandez, the only difference being in his rank and stature; where Hernandez was slim and slight of build with short dark hair and a trim mustache, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Traynor was a tall and husky man with a full head of silver hair and beard to match. "Okay, Jake," Traynor responded, "but one of us is coming with you."

"No, let me go," Jake said, glancing dubiously at the *junglas* aboard. "I'll let you know the situation as soon as I get down there."

While the pilot, Haskell Delaney, made circuitous sweeps over the area where the plane had gone down, the copilot radioed the search and rescue in to their base commander and Hernandez helped Jake prepare for his drop. The *junglas*, a pair of Colombians manning the opposite door, were armed with slightly heavier firepower—an M60 machine gun and M79 grenade launcher between them—and Traynor took Jake's place with an M4. The copilot could be heard communicating with the Huey gunships in their fleet.

"Reaper One, Two, Three, this is Rescue. We have a flyboy down...I say again, flyboy down. SAR medic going in. Take overwatch positions and standby for further, over."

Delaney had maneuvered the Bell to a semi-cleared spot near the tree line, hovering about seventy-five feet over a thatch of brush to provide Jake some cover.

Moments later, Jake flexed his knees and sprung backward from the helicopter, tethered by the rope running smoothly and swiftly through his hands as he descended to the ground five to ten feet at a time. While the maneuver was as effortless and fundamental to him as zipping up a jacket or twisting off a bottle

cap, the dexterity and precision with which it was executed could only be mastered by many dozens of drills and even more actual operations. His feet were together, legs straight, body bent at the waist in perfect L formation. The second his boots touched the ground, he unclipped the snap link and disengaged, flipped the safety off his rifle, and radioed back to the crew.

He stood stock-still for several moments, watching and listening as the helicopter pulled up to about two hundred feet, backing off just enough to allow him to hear but hovering close enough to lay down suppressive fire if necessary. Clad in camouflage fatigues, a faded khaki head wrap worn like a do-rag, and sunglasses, Jake easily blended with the bush as he moved toward the tree line. He was composed and clear-headed, characteristics that served him well during special ops, but he could also feel the undercurrent of adrenaline beginning a steady drumline from his heart. His movements fell in cadence with his pulse, slower but on beat, eyes constantly moving as his mind worked the possible scenarios. Removing his Gargoyles shades, he slipped further into the shadowy jungle rim.

This was strange, he thought. Earlier, they had swept the area thoroughly, which was part of what they did on these missions, and declared it secure. But he knew with the number of guerrilla forces in the area that could change very quickly. He'd been doing counternarcotics work in Colombia for several months now as part of a private government contract, and today's five flights were the last scheduled for his current stint. As one of the more experienced Special Forces operatives, Jake had been recruited to work CSAR—combat search and rescue—in a dual security and medical role. This was not his first time working counternarcotics; he'd completed a contract in the late nineties, vowing at the time it was not something he would be doing again. Funny how life had a way of boomeranging on you—there had been a lot of things he said he'd never do again. Like stalking through a Colombian jungle in narcoguerrilla territory.

Not more than an hour ago their Bell, as part of a four-chopper escort team for a pair of Turbo Thrushes, had taken the lead in securing the area to be sprayed. Normally, as the SAR bird, they would be hovering high overhead and above it all, out of play, but they were training the Colombians and therefore leading by example. Flying low and fast at treetop level, they were close enough to spot any movement below and if, after several passes, they had not drawn any ground fire, the Thrushes

would begin their dive-and-dump of herbicide. The four choppers then lined up at the corners of the field and began an intricate do-si-do, nearly rotor tip to rotor tip, one pair flying high and the other low, alternating positions. They would make a continual circuit until the planes had completed overlapping swaths and roared off, returning to base.

But something had obviously gone wrong here. Whether from a mechanical malfunction or a guerrilla strike, one plane would not be returning tonight. Jake just hoped its pilot would be.

THIRTY-FIVE MINUTES INTO his search, dark smoke and the distinctively alcoholic vapors of burnt or burning JP4 drew Jake to the downed plane—or what was left of it. It lay smoldering in its own heat, seared and twisted metal in a pit of severed tree limbs, stripped bare and disfigured by a combination of the crash and human pillage. Either natives of a nearby village had gone foraging or, more likely, guerrillas had. Checking a handheld GPS, Jake verified his position and radioed the coordinates to his team. Then, after a quick look in all directions, listening for any movement around him, he picked through the wreckage. Several yards from the debris field, he found the pilot.

He felt a knot of emotion in his throat as he looked down at the skinny middle-aged man, clad in an olive drab flight suit with a University of Iowa t-shirt visible beneath. Wayne Gilby was a crop-duster, as were most of the civilian pilots recruited for counter-narcotic eradication missions; they had the specialized flying skills needed for coca fumigation. Jake knew this had been Gilby's last pass on the last day of his last mission, and it was a job the man had never wanted. From a conversation he'd had with Gilby, Jake learned that the Iowan had accepted the contract as a last resort because jobs were scarce in the farm-belt. He had a wife and five children to provide for, and in taking the counternarcotics contract he had been given assurances that the next non-combat job would be his. Earlier today, Jake had seen him high-five one of his fellow pilots, probably already thinking about a fishing trip with his kids or catching a movie with his wife, looking forward to going home.

A cursory inspection revealed that, like the plane, Gilby had been stripped of his equipment: weapons, radio, survival gear. It was impossible to tell if he'd been alive after the crash, but from the pulverized body parts, Jake doubted it. At least he hoped the crash had killed Gilby, and quick; the pilot's throat gaped open

from the slash of a broad blade, the gelatinous glob of blood still sticky. Now, gazing down at the gruesome remains of Wayne Gilby, Jake's thoughts turned to getting his body back to the chopper.

Surveying the dense woods around him, listening even more intently now that he knew others had been here, Jake could hear the distant drone of the helicopters but little else. From indeterminate depths of the jungle, branches creaked and palm fronds swished with the play of monkeys and other small creatures. That was a good sign as it gave indications of nature undisturbed. But then he picked up something from another direction that tripped the hair-trigger on his internal warning system, something that simultaneously sent a bevy of large-winged birds fluttering noisily off toward a skylight in the tree canopy. That deep green ceiling had darkened appreciably since he'd last looked up; day was tilting toward dusk, and in the Amazon the sun could show its dark side with jarringly sudden stealth. Like the outline of an assassin caught in a passing shadow. Now he could clearly hear sounds he recognized, a mashing of spongy bog alternated with crunching thatch—boots marching across and through brush, many pairs of boots.

Boots. Here, where he was, boots meant guerrillas or paramilitaries.

Glancing back at Gilby, Jake weighed whether to take him now or come back later with reinforcements. "Oh fuck it," he murmured. "Got to get you outta this shithole, buddy."

Hefting Gilby's body over his shoulder, Jake struck out in the opposite direction, sweating and breathing heavier with the additional cargo and his quickening pace. Though slight of build at five-foot-ten, 165 pounds, he was hard-bodied and well-accustomed to hauling a weighty rucksack, medical kit, weapons and ammo, but he was grateful Gilby was a little guy. Even as the latent sun receded, its darkening heat sweltered through the jungle canopy and Jake could feel his perspiration spreading, plastering clothing to skin. Flies and mosquitoes buzzed around his face, drawn by the stench of death draped over his shoulder. Behind him, the jungle had become ominously quiet. There were different kinds of quiet, and this was not the good kind.

He had gone about a hundred paces when he came to a savanna of grasses that ranged from ankle- to shin-high. In the opening above, the sky was mockingly blue, a last seduction to the escaping day. The shadows below, around him, seemed to

momentarily disappear as the atmospheric balance shifted. The grasses seemed impossibly green. He crossed to the far side of the small field and propped Gilby's stiffening body against the broad base of a tree, and spoke into the tiny boom mic that curved around his jaw.

"Reaper Rescue, come in...requesting—" Jake's transmission was abruptly cut off by a rattling from within the trees. Now brush crackled and popped around him, dust kicking up at his feet as thudding objects pocked the ground. Bullets. He raised the Galil and pivoted, right then left, then right again. And saw the guerrillas, about a hundred or more, closing in from the periphery. He was about to be ambushed.

"Reaper Rescue, do you read me?" he called again, more emphatically, "Reaper Rescue, I have company!"

His radio stuttered, but the eruption of gunfire all around him obliterated the communication. Jake emptied a clip from his Galil as he scrambled around the tree, bark flying off in chunks as bullets struck the buttress. A large limb cracked overhead and thumped down beside him. By the time he snapped another clip in the gun, automatic fire was raining down from the choppers, driving most of the guerrilla force back beyond the tree line. A few troops continued to dart forward until Jake's fire repelled them, but a determined pair managed to slip behind a pocket of trees adjacent to him.

Risking quick exposure, Jake swung around the front of the tree and came up behind the pair, unsheathing his Glock 17 and firing two rounds into the backs of their heads before they even knew he had moved. They fell forward into the brush with a soft thud.

"*Reaper Rescue to Medic,*" he heard in his earpiece. Paul Traynor's voice. "*Advise with status, over.*"

"Ready for exfil if you are," Jake called back. "Recovery is DOA and in custody, over."

Just then he heard the Bell 212 lowering to the clearing, the Hueys still firing steadily into the trees. Jake shouldered Gilby's body once more and made a dash for the chopper, pushing into the vortex created by its spinning rotors. Several pairs of arms reached out to assist him, taking Gilby. He hoisted himself into the Bell as bullets pocked its titanium skin. Seconds later, it sped off in a cyclone of dust and smoke.

Watching as clusters of guerrillas reemerged and swarmed through the swaying grasses below, Jake guzzled a bottle of

water in one big gulp, wiped his mouth with a sweat-drenched sleeve, and said grimly, "Another day at the office, boys." Unfortunately not one of the better ones, he thought, as he gazed at the now-covered body of the fallen pilot whose wife was a new widow of war—another kind of war, but war nevertheless.

DUSK WAS FINALLY DROPPING her heavy lids on the day as the Bell 212 headed back to base camp. It was located near the juncture of the Colombian departments of Caquetá, Putumayo, and Amazonas, within a small counternarcotics police outpost surrounded by grasslands and jungle. Except for a rural town and military compound about ten kilometers to the east, the base camp was pretty well isolated from everything but *narcotraficante* activity and conflicts between the armed forces, paramilitaries, and guerrillas. The evening sky was cloudless and already sprinkled with stars, but as the helicopter began its descent, stars were not the only thing twinkling.

They were flying at less than a thousand feet when the ground below lit up with a profusion of flashes, and within seconds the armored floor plating began to vibrate as bullets struck. Jake could feel the sensation through the soles of his boots, causing his feet to actually itch. "A little too close for comfort, bro!" he remarked to the cockpit. With their lower altitude, slower speed, and open-door exposure, they were most vulnerable; their best asset now was upward mobility.

Haskell Delaney gave him a thumbs-up in acknowledgment and lifted the Bell to the safety of higher altitudes, where the temperature immediately dropped a good twenty degrees. Jake tugged on his night vision goggles and stuck his head into the chilled air to survey the scope of activity. Through the nvgs, the artillery seemed to float weightlessly through the atmosphere like bright green blips on a radar screen.

Relaying reports from his satcom radio communications, Alberto Hernandez said, "There is a front of about five hundred troops just outside of the base. Apparently they knew our schedule and approach path and figured out about where we would come into firing range."

"That's an awfully tall order for our gunships," Paul Traynor replied. "How are we doing on fuel? Think we can bypass and make it to the forward base?"

"We're light," Delaney said from the cockpit, "but it's within range." But under his breath, he muttered, "Fuck. Fuck, fuck,

fuck. “

After they'd been circling the base camp for thirty minutes, Jake heard the copilot, a young Puerto Rican named Juan Castro, nervously tell Delaney that the low fuel light had flashed on, indicating about twenty minutes of fuel left.

“Shit,” Delaney sputtered. “Okay, listen up boys and girls...I gotta put this bird down, so smoke 'em if you see 'em!”

Everyone else on board anchored themselves into position with their weapons and prepared to fire as necessary. With the Huey gunships leading the way, the Bell once again began its descent. Below, the ground was still alight with gunfire, but now it appeared to be moving away from the compound.

Hernandez was grinning. “Looks like the Colombians rallied their troops and are pushing them—”

The rest of Hernandez's sentence was lost in a screechy cough from the Lycoming's just before the chopper hit the ground with a jolt that caused it to teeter sideways on one skid. When it reeled down on the other skid, Delaney jerked himself out of his harness and vaulted from the pilot's seat.

Jake turned to congratulate his friend for making the landing, but Delaney was already gone.

WHEN JAKE TYLER HAD stepped off the aircraft that March evening, the suffocating heat hit him like a sledgehammer. The next thing to hit him was a gurney with a soldier missing half of his chest, another right behind him with pulverized bone and hunks of muscle protruding from a hemorrhaging arm. “Got your medical bag?” he was asked. “Need you to fix these two first, and there are more waiting. Come on, let's go!”

That had been his welcome to Colombia some thirteen years ago, when he'd flown in from Bogotá on a small plane, wearing a black wool turtleneck and slacks—clothing suited for the mountain cool of Bogotá but nothing short of ridiculous for the tropical Amazonian climate. He had been recruited by Alberto Hernandez to sign on with the Virginia-based defense contractor for what had been described as “a lucrative but short-term counternarcotics gig.” As it turned out, the lucrative part was truthful enough; short-termed it was not. But that, he conceded, was partly his own fault.

The infamous Drug War that raged and ravaged Colombia had seemed to turn the corner at the break of the millennium, with significant crop reduction by eradication efforts, a dramatic

increase in combat-ready Colombian troops trained by the U.S. military, hundreds of tons of cocaine seized and labs destroyed, thousands of guerrillas and paramilitaries captured and again as many arms confiscated. But after 9/11, Colombia's problems became a forgotten fly lazily circling the remains of a freshly stripped rack of ribs, searching for just one fissure with a dangling piece of meat. It wasn't long before eggs were laid, maggots hatched, and new outcrops of flies emerged. Consequently, as the world order began to re-brick into its defensive wall against terrorism, a new "Plan Colombia" was hastily and half-heartedly drawn, renamed the Andean Counterdrug Initiative. After years of renewed efforts—despite recent setbacks to the enemy—cocaine production had spiked and now there was military intelligence of a new guerrilla offensive dubbed *Plan Renacer* or "Plan Rebirth." The new counternarcotics ops would start by picking up where the last left off, resuming eradication and interdiction operations but on a much smaller scale. Once again, the call went out to special operatives for hire, and once again Alberto Hernandez had placed a call to Jake Tyler.

Once again, he'd said yes.

When Hernandez initially contacted him back in the mid-nineties, Jake was twenty-six and just out of the military, but—as was the case with so many combat veterans—quickly discovered the military machine was not quite ready to let him go and the military mindset was not quite ready to leave him. The counternarcotics gig seemed to be a good transition, or so he'd thought at the time. Unlike Jake, Hernandez had found his niche in life and was happily living it, working in Colombia for close to twenty years and dividing his time between inspired medical missions, a thriving emerald business, and working counternarcotics. A rather odd mix on the surface, but Hernandez knew everybody on both sides of the fence, which made him the perfect point man for staging operations of all kinds in this volatile theater.

Now, as Jake hopped off the Bell 212 and looked around for Delaney, the irony of the unfolding scenario struck him like those gurneys; the heat was still oppressive, and he was being approached by several Colombian soldiers on the run, shouting, "*Medico! Medico!*"

He drew in a tight breath, checked his weapons, resettled his gear, and trotted briskly toward them. "*Qué? Dónde?*" he asked.

In a fusillade of Spanish, the soldiers directed him to a triage

area inside the compound where the wounded had been brought. Weapons and ammunition lay scattered like abandoned toys, the acrid smell of urine, body fluids, vomit, and sweat was pervasively sour. Hernandez was already making assessments on the half-dozen men sitting or lying on the blood-smeared floor. He gestured to Jake with one hand. "Here, this one first. A couple of guys were patrolling the perimeter and got hit by a command-detonated claymore."

Jake knew immediately why this man had been pegged first priority when he glanced down and saw Hernandez's other hand clamped over splayed leg flesh, a nearly severed femoral artery spurting blood as red as rubies. Jake quickly dropped his rucksack and medical bag, rolled up his sleeves, and hunkered down across from Hernandez. He snapped on a pair of latex gloves and began to dig wads and rolls of gauze from his medical bag, lots of it. The two of them labored to staunch the bright red flow while also treating the soldier for shock. Numerous times, they thought they had lost him. Blood gurgled and geysered, but finally slowed to a manageable ooze. When he got to a point where he could leave the man to Hernandez, Jake sought the next most serious injury. Spotting the soldier grasping at his chest and hissing with every breath, he pegged him for number two. Possible tension pneumo, he gauged, and knelt before the soldier. "*Relajese, hombre,*" he said calmly, "*Me hare cargo de usted.*"

The man nodded dimly and slumped forward. Jake propped him back up, listening through his stethoscope to the rapidly decreasing breath sounds. A needle thoracentesis was going to be necessary, more likely a chest tube. He snapped a BP cuff on, moved the head of the stethoscope to the man's bicep, and confirmed what he already suspected—blood pressure dropping. In Spanish, he addressed a couple of soldiers who had been hovering anxiously, giving them instructions. When they scurried off to do and get what he'd asked, he began to select items from his bag. Pleural decompression needle, tubing, Lidocaine, Betadine, spreaders, Kelly clamp, scalpel, suture kit, dressings. It was going to be late in the evening before his head hit the pillow, pitiful lump of fabric that it was.

Palpating his patient's chest to find the second rib space for the needle insertion, Jake again surveyed the triage area. Pilots, mechanics, technicians, soldiers, and police came and went. *Where the hell was Haskell?*

IT TOOK SIX EXHAUSTING hours to dispense with all the medical emergencies, the latter part of which Alberto Hernandez spent arguing heatedly with the Colombian commander of the compound. The two most seriously wounded they had treated were still fighting for their lives and needed to be medevaced to a hospital, the nearest being some three hours away by flight. The Colombian commander, Major Ramón Grajales, insisted that they were police and as such had no authority to make the flight; they would have to wait until the military could make the arrangements, which would be sometime the next morning — *later* in the morning, as it already was.

"These men will be dead by then!" Jake protested angrily.

Major Grajales shook his head ruefully. "I am sorry. Really. But no, I just cannot allow —" He stopped abruptly as the muzzle of Hernandez's pistol touched his temple.

"*Hágalo. Haga que sucede,*" Hernandez spat. Do it. Make it happen.

The major authorized the flight.

Hernandez muttered a surly goodnight to Jake and departed for his bunk. Jake stood for several moments, exhaustion rolling over him in an almost nauseating wave, torn between collapsing on his bed and looking for Delaney. It was not like Delaney to just disappear, particularly when there was a critical need for his help. Granted, Delaney's role here was not a medical one, but he had never shirked assisting Jake with anything. Not here, not ever. So what the hell was going on? Jake knew Delaney was upset about the landing, but in the bigger assessment of their gauntlets here, it was nothing more than a minor mishap.

Stifling a yawn against the back of his hand, Jake decided he would sort things out with Delaney in a few hours. And in a few hours, they would be packing up for their last break from this mission, a two-week respite before completing the contract.

Then what? he wondered.

As he trudged over to the corner of his clinic and began to peel off his clothing, indifferent to the stench of sweat and blood now coagulating in the fibers, all he could think about was leaving here for two weeks. Two weeks and then, after the final month, done. Finished. Over. The light of that promise flickered in his mind and flashed a brief rush of reverie that quickly faded with the reality of sheer exhaustion.

He pulled on a pair of running shorts and a t-shirt and dropped onto his cot with a weary moan that seemed to resonate

in his bones. The fingers of his right hand slid sleepily through his hair, those of his left absently touched the insignia on his shorts. *De Oppresso Liber*. To liberate the oppressed. To liberate...to free. His lids twitched and images of past such liberations exploded against his irises. Then sleep crooked an enticing finger and blew titillatingly in his ear. With one final sigh, he let sleep lead him to her lair.

So he never saw Haskell Delaney's shadow pause, then pass, the clinic entrance. And he did not hear Delaney just outside the clinic's window, telling someone, "I'll fucking be there." And: "No, he doesn't know – and he won't."

Outside the window, somewhere beyond the base camp, the sun was tricking the imminent heat with a cold, flat light that spilled over the great river and sat like an oily slick. In those prescient moments before dawn, the pulses of life quivered. Then stilled. Then beat again.

The sun broke, and lay dawn bare and vulnerable.