

CHAPTER ONE

PART ONE: THE RESCUE

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November 11, 2016

7:15 AM - CST

Derek Grimsrud never saw it coming. How could he, since it was a fellow CIA agent who set everything in motion? Regardless, he was caught completely unaware for the first time in his life. In CIA circles, he was referred to only as Mr. Black for security reasons. Only a handful of people outside his team knew even his first name. The reason: he commanded a black ops team of specialists, operating out of Fort Bliss Army Airfield. He was also one of less than a dozen that knew the international assassin – code name: The Chameleon, on a personal level. The Chameleon had saved Derek’s life several years ago, and from that grew a closeness that defied logic.

Derek sauntered out of Charros Mexican Restaurant rubbing his very satisfied, very full stomach, headed for his black Jeep Rubicon. He’d eaten too much, so he decided to blame it on his chopper pilot, Craig. They usually ate breakfast together, usually at Charros. Derek ‘forced’ himself to eat both little fresh apple pies Senora Alvarez prepared especially for the duo. They’d been coming there for years and it was her way of thanking them. Derek rationalized that he HAD to eat Craig’s portion or Senora Alvarez would be offended. Logical or not, that sweet cinnamon topped pie with crust so flaky it melted in your mouth, had to be eaten. There was no way around it.

Charros was a small family owned restaurant on the West side of Laredo, Texas, across the border from the Mexican city of Juarez. Juarez had been turned into a warzone by the Drug Cartels. Trafficking in everything from pot to humans was the norm in the northern Mexican City. It was also known for its many factories that supplied parts to American automobile manufacturers. Many of the plant employees lived in El Paso, commuting daily across the border.

Derek heard a young girl scream as he was clearing the restaurant door. His head snapped to the left, immediately picking the girl out of a crowd. Two men were dragging what appeared to be an 8 to 10-year-old in a bright yellow sundress towards a brown, late model Ford F250 van. Derek sprang into action out of reflex, running towards the two men. He was so focused on the girl he didn’t see another man in the alleyway next to Charros.

“Hey!” he shouted at the two men. “Let her go!” His Kimber .45 was already coming out of his holster as he skidded to a stop. That’s when he was hit from behind with a leather sap, dropping him to his knees. Two of the men scooped him up as he fell and tossed him into the waiting van. The girl ran up the street, her part in the deception completed.

The Ford laid rubber as it pulled away from the curb, catching the attention of Senora Alvarez. She jotted down the license plate as the van sped off. She called the El Paso Police department for the umpteenth time with information about a speeding vehicle in front of her restaurant. The desk sergeant explained to Senora Alvarez, for the umpteenth time, they couldn’t send a patrol car out every time she called about a someone she thought was speeding. Had she known Derek was in the back, it might have made a difference, but she didn’t. The officer took the information and promised to investigate, mollifying Senora Alvarez enough to get her off the phone. It didn’t matter to Isabella Alvarez. She put the license number in her little card box, organized by plate number for future reference. It was her way of trying to help keep the neighborhood a little safer.

The first thing Derek noticed when he came around was the smell of potatoes. He opened his eyes to slits, not sure what he would find, and realized he was under a pile of old burlap bags. That explained the potato smell. The vehicle he was in was moving at a steady speed with few bumps along the way. They were on a

main highway; they had to be if they were in Mexico, and of that he had little doubt. The conversations he could hear were all in Spanish; Mexican Spanish and not the mix of English and Spanish found in South Texas. It made sense. If someone was kidnapping a CIA agent, in broad daylight no less, they needed to get out of the US. El Paso was almost perfect with Juarez just across the border. It wouldn't have taken more than a hundred to bribe a Mexican border guard, but the US side would be more difficult, but not impossible. The Cartels used more than money for leverage and many of the guards on the US side had family in Juarez. Derek knew it was about 8:20am when they jumped him. Although he didn't know how long he'd been out, he estimated two hours. Whoever hit him did it right; enough force to knock him out, but not crack his skull, for which he was grateful in an ironic way. Training dictated 90 to 180 minutes for a similar blow, so Derek split the difference, calling it 10:30am. He would keep track of the time mentally with his internal clock. It wasn't perfect, but it would do until sundown. Sundown was a fixed time, so it would give him a solid reference point.

Derek could see one man well through the burlap. He was sitting to the right, on a folding chair in the back of what had to be a full-sized van. It was too roomy for a mini, and not big enough for a cargo van. He spotted a tattoo of a shoe on the man's left earlobe; Los Zapatos de la Muerte Cartel insignia.

Derek wasn't surprised. Six months ago, he'd led an off the book's operation for the hitman known as The Chameleon. It was a rescue mission; an extraction of three innocent civilians from the small town of Los Trios, southeast of Juarez. It went off without a hitch; if you don't count the two SUV's that his pilot Young Bear took out with their Sikorsky CH53-E and four well placed rockets. Derek could have let them go, except as an ex-Navy Seal, who had lost eight of his operatives to the Cartels in the last 18 months, it was an opportunity to thin the herd. He took it. He wouldn't regret it in retrospect.

Nothing the crew was discussing was of any intelligence value, so Derek decided to sleep, saving his strength for later. The bags were comfortable enough, and the floor was smooth. He also had the secure knowledge of the GPS locator embedded in his sinus cavity. He might not know where he was, but sooner or later someone would.

Camacho's men were under strict orders to keep the CIA agent alive under any conditions. Otherwise, there wasn't much they couldn't do to the operative.

Andres Camacho was the new head of Los Zapatos; taking over after the Chameleon executed his uncle, Carlos Torano. Torano had gone to Argentina expecting to recover over 12 million dollars of Cartel money from his half-brother, Enrique Garza. Garza had embezzled the funds from the money he laundered through Gulf Coast Bank and Trust while president of the Corpus Christi location. Neither got what they were expecting. Enrique had paid the Chameleon to relocate him, and Torano had been sent to Argentina to get his money back at the behest of the same man.

The Chameleon wanted both men dead; eliminating any potential threat towards Angelique Shaloub, the woman who had captured his heart. They died when over twelve pounds of Semtex detonated; the two pounds in the laptop Torano was holding and the ten pounds L. J., the Chameleon's associate, had packed into the stove and a brand-new BMW sitting in the garage.

The death of Torano created a vacuum that Andres quickly filled, eliminating any competition for the position. He was ruthless as his uncle, having proven his loyalty to the Cartel by killing his own father, Carlos Torano's first cousin, Reynaldo Camacho.

Reynaldo had been selling cocaine through alternate distribution lanes, skimming product from the pipeline to feed his new suppliers. He managed to keep it going for over a year before Torano figured it out. Torano called Andres to the compound, not certain that the boy wasn't involved, even having been told otherwise. It didn't stop Torano from torturing the 19-year-old. In the end, he was satisfied that Andres wasn't involved, ordering the boy to execute his own father to prove his loyalty.

He learned a lesson the hard way from the experience. Torano denigrated and humiliated him in front of his peers for killing his father while the man slept. "A woman can kill a man in his sleep," Torano had shouted at him. "It takes a man to kill a man face to face, mano y mano." As punishment, he made Andres a mule for the man who replaced his father, rather than giving Andres the position he had been promised. Resentment grew in Andres until he eventually reached out to Phillip Weaver, a well-known CIA agent operating out of the American Embassy in Mexico City, his cover being a cultural attaché. Andres cultivated a relationship with

the agent, becoming an informant. He provided information undermining his enemies wherever possible, all the while plotting revenge on his uncle. In the end, the Chameleon took care of his vengeance for him when he killed Torano in Argentina. Andres quickly took over control of the Cartel.

Andres avoided mentioning what he had in mind for Derek Grimsrud. He knew there was no love lost between the two men, but CIA is CIA and he didn't want Weaver interfering in his plans. Perhaps if he had been a little more devious, he would have learned of the GPS locator, but such was not the case. Weaver had no knowledge of the actual kidnapping of Agent Grimsrud. If Camacho had told him of his plans, Weaver wouldn't have been all that unhappy to hear of Derek's position. Weaver was a decent agent, but he carried grudges, and the one he carried against Derek would never be forgiven, let alone forgotten.

It wasn't like Andres didn't have Intel on Grimsrud. Weaver often spoke of the ex-Seal's abilities and habits when drunk. The agent made little effort to disguise his feelings about Derek, but Camacho didn't believe Weaver. He found it difficult to comprehend any man could be that good at warfare and not be hardened in his heart. Andres thought of Derek as he thought of himself; ruthless, cunning and willing to go to any length to complete the mission. He was wrong on several counts which one day would come back to haunt him.

Camacho's men whiled away the hours as they traveled south. They understood Andres' reasons for taking the gringo to the jungle but wondered about the wisdom – though never aloud. It was Carlos Torano who started the tradition with Los Zapatos, the tradition of the hunt.

The hunt was something that appealed to the men in the van. Each of them had lost one or more family members to the Sikorsky's rockets outside of Los Trios. The fact they had been ordered not to kill the gringo left a sour taste in more than one mouth, not that anyone had voiced their objections directly to Camacho. One of the men, Marcos Martinez, wanted Derek dead despite orders from the Hefe. Marcos lost two brothers that fateful day outside Los Trios and he wanted blood for blood.

Camacho had placed his most trusted man, Ben de la Sedro, in charge of the operation. Ben would make certain orders were followed, no matter his personal feelings. Yes, Ben had lost a relative in the attack, his nephew Jorge, but that was business to him. He had spent 20 years in the Cartel knowing that death was as much a part of the business as anything. He didn't want revenge on the gringo, but not for any reason related to the attack. His nephew was dead. Many of his friends were dead, too. It was life in Cartel – few if any, got out alive unless they went to prison.

Antonio Ybarra was Ben's right hand, as it were. He had grown up with de la Sedro on the streets of Juarez and owed his life to the older man. If not for Ben, he would have been beaten to death by members of a rival street gang. There was nothing Antonio wouldn't do for the man he saw as savior and brother.

The rest of the team included Jesus Veracruz, Rene Gutierrez and Carlos Martinez. Rene and Carlos both lost brothers, while Jesus lost two nephews, the brothers of Marcos Martinez. Rene and Carlos were good soldiers in the Cartel. They had no real ambition to move up and were satisfied with the money and the fear they wielded as Zapatos. Jesus was less inclined to toe the Cartel line. He was Marcos' brother and shared the desire for revenge on the CIA operative, as well as the rest of Derek's team.

Ben, Antonio and Jesus executed the kidnapping and were now headed to the *Selva Lacandona*, the Lacandon Jungle which spread from the southern tip of Mexico through Nicaragua. Their destination, a remote cabin east of the village of Ocosingo, in the Mexican State of Chiapas. The only time Derek was allowed out of the van was to take a leak and drink some water. It wasn't much but Derek took what he could get. The added benefit was identifying the occasional landmark that let him know they were headed south, at least for now. Derek spent some of the time sleeping. When he was awake, he worked his muscle groups carefully to avoid attention and to keep the blood circulating. No matter where they were headed, or to what end, there was little chance Derek would die alone; at least not the way he looked at it. If it was his time, he would go out as a soldier, taking with him as many Cartel thugs as possible.

CHAPTER TWO

November 11

9:00 AM – CST

USAF Captain Jason Van Welkin was ready for wheels up by 9:00. He was semi-patiently waiting for one Derek Grimsrud, civilian GS15 attached to Fort Bliss from God only knows where. Van Welkin knew Grimsrud was CIA, but that meant nothing to him. Right now, the captain's only concern regarding Grimsrud was his delaying the take-off.

There was no hurry, Captain Welkin just didn't like delays. His C-17 Globemaster was fully fueled, with a KC-10 tanker scheduled for mid-air refueling if need be, somewhere over Ohio. With a range of over 6000 miles, it seemed completely unnecessary to the Captain, but it wasn't his call. More than once he'd been diverted mid-flight and having full tanks made pretty much the world his onion.

His co-pilot, First Lieutenant Isabella Cantonal, suggested they reach out to General Fischer to check status. They hadn't gotten a phone call from Derek, which wasn't like the agent. She reminded Welkin General Fischer had personally requested the favor. The fact Fischer was a Marine wasn't as important as his current title, Director of Covert Operations for the Central Intelligence Agency. That tipped the scales in Derek's favor, so Van Welkin made the call.

It took a couple minutes to get through to the General. They were first told he was in a meeting. Captain Van Welkin ignored the answer. "I understand what you're telling me corporal, but this is a classified call with high priority on a personal matter involving the General."

The corporal was used to people trying to bully their way through to the General, but there was something in the tone of the Captain's voice that got his attention. The Captain never raised his voice or changed tone or pitch. He stated the message as a fact beyond question. The corporal made the call. "Stand by Sir," he stated, "I'll let the General know you're on the line".

"Thank you, Corporal," said Van Welkin without gloating. "I appreciate this." You get more flies with honey, etc.

Five seconds later Major General Nick Fischer, USMC, picked up the phone and cut to the chase. "Sit-rep, Captain Van Welkin."

"Copy that, sir," responded Van Welkin. "Our expected passenger is MIA sir, fifteen minutes overdue as of 0915 local."

General Fischer took a deep breath before responding. "Understood, Captain; you are cleared for take-off without Mr. Grimsrud."

That caught the Captain off-guard. "Excuse me sir, but I need to confirm your last order."

"Understood, and respected, Captain. I repeat, you are cleared for takeoff without Mr. Grimsrud," repeated the General calmly. "Thank you for the check-in Captain; out." The general didn't even hang up, he simply punched another line and started dialing. The number he called answered on the first ring.

"Good morning, General Fischer," answered a slightly gravely woman's voice.

"Good morning to you, Alice," replied Fischer with a smile in his voice.

"What are your orders, sir?" asked Alice without preamble.

"Light up the GPS on Mr. Black, Alice. I need to know where he is in 5 minutes."

"Done, sir," answered Alice as she ended the call and started punching numbers into a keyboard.

Three minutes later she had General Fischer back on the line.

"Go, Alice."

"I have Mr. Black's current location at 28.6330° N, 106.0691° W, heading south on Highway 45, approximately 300 miles north of Chihuahua."

"Copy that," replied General Fischer. "I want an update every 15 minutes via text. I might not be in my office."

"Understood, sir," replied Alice as the line went dead.

General Fischer leaned back in his chair and wove his fingers together and placed them behind his head. With his eyes closed he began to run possible scenarios. After ten minutes his eyes snapped open and he reached for the phone.

"Yes sir, General," answered Corporal Kristofferson.

The corporal took notes as he made a list. It was extensive and clear. This was not a drill and the General wanted action. The corporal didn't hesitate. He was a Marine like his boss, and one of their own was missing. It was time to get him back.

His first call was to former Gunnery Sergeant, Craig Young Bear. The entire team was on R & R, and Gunny was the man who would know where everyone was.

“What,” Craig grunted into the phone, slightly annoyed that the call was so early.

“Gunnery Sergeant Young Bear, this is Corporal Kristofferson calling on behalf of Major General Fisher, Director of Covert Operations for the Central Intelligence Agency.”

Young Bear didn't respond.

“Gunny are you there?” asked Kristofferson.

“Yeah, I'm here,” said Craig offhandedly. “I was just wondering who the hell would think I didn't know who General Fischer was by name alone?”

“Understood, Gunny,” said the corporal. “That was per the General's orders. He wanted to be crystal clear that this was high priority.”

“Then get to the point, corporal,” growled Young Bear, “we've wasted enough time already.”

“Copy that, Gunny.” Corporal Kristofferson took a deep breath and stated flatly. “Agent Derek Grimsrud is missing and presumed captive by hostile forces. The General believes Los Zapatos are responsible, based on history and current Intel.”

Craig didn't hesitate. “Where does the General want me?”

“General Fischer wants the entire team in Dallas within 4 hours. If transportation is an issue, I will have fighters dispatched to pick up team members who don't have ready access to commercial or military flights.”

The corporal looked at the clock on the wall. “The sooner I know who needs a lift the better.”

Craig didn't even answer. He ended the call and started speed dialing the rest of the team.

Derek's team was an eclectic collection of operatives, even by CIA standards. Some of the most critical members weren't even US citizens. It didn't matter to Derek. They were his team, and each was the best or near best in his or her given specialty. Young Bear led the way. Former Marine Gunnery Sergeant turned chopper pilot. Young bear could handle a Sikorsky CH53-E with the best of them. Not only was he a hell of a pilot, he was deadly accurate with the weapons systems.

Next was the 6'-7" Master Sergeant Elijah Mohammed Mumphord; former USAF Para-rescue team leader and recipient of the Air Force Cross for service in Afghanistan. Elijah single-handedly went behind enemy lines to recover an F-15 pilot who had been shot down. The pilot barely survived the ordeal. He would have died if not for the skillset of Master Sergeant Mumphord. As an Air Force Para-rescue member, Elijah was practically a field surgeon. Coupled with his expertise in small arms, it made him a vital asset to the team.

Val Wilson, the only female member of the team, was one of the most lethal. Another former Marine, Wilson had been a martial arts instructor for 6 years, and taught close combat for 5 more. Staff Sergeant Wilson knew more ways to kill a man than any other member of the team. She was as skilled with knives as she was an M-4 or handgun. The fact she could kill someone over 10 different ways without a weapon was what kept the boys respectful. Her diminutive stature at 5'1" and 120 lbs. often led to interesting encounters with drunken men who consistently underestimated the Staff Sergeant.

Army Sergeant Jason Johnson was the newest member of the team, and the only other American. Johnson had spent 6 years working counter-terrorism with Delta Force. He was good at hand to hand, and an excellent tracker. He stood an even 6 feet tall, weighing in at 210 pounds. There was zero fat on the former Delta member.

The foreign contingent was led by the flamboyant Gustaf Reichart, former member of the KSK Kommando Spezialkräfte, (Special Forces Command, KSK) is an elite special forces military unit composed of special operations soldiers selected from the ranks of Germany's Bundeswehr and organized under the Rapid Forces Division. Gustaf was a slim 165 pounds at 5'11". No one knew his former rank, and he never offered. What Gustaf *DID* offer was an almost unparalleled expertise in explosives, whether standard military or improvised. The fact he was openly gay was often the source of both humor and frustration within the team. What was never at question was his commitment and loyalty, and no one was tougher than Gustaf when it came to survival.

The UK Special Forces contribution to the team was Lieutenant Thomas Sheffield, sniper extraordinaire. His weapon of choice, the L115A3 Long Range Rifle. A bolt-action weapon chambered in .338 Lapua Magnum (8.59mm), with an effective range out to 1.2 km. It employs a Schmidt & Bender 5-25x56 PM II 25x magnification day scope. The weapon was augmented with a Sniper Thermal Imaging Capability (STIC)

night scope for low light or night ops. Sheffield's longest confirmed kill was 1525 meters, or approximately 1670 yards; 100 yards short of a full mile. Sheffield was the shortest male member of the team at 5' 6". His weight was unknown to anyone. It didn't matter; he was one of only two on the team capable of carrying the 270-pound Mumphord if it came down to it; Young Bear was the other.

The final member of the team was former French COS (Covert Operations Service), Sergeant Pierre Lafayette. Lafayette and Reichart had formed an odd but special bond in the unit. History will tell you there is little love lost between the Germans and the French. You'd never know it by those two. They looked like brothers to a degree. Both stood 5' 11" and weighed around 170 pounds. Both had blonde hair that hung to their shoulders. From a distance there was little chance of identifying which was which. Up close, it was the crystal blue eyes of the German that set him apart from the light brown eyes of the Frenchman. On or off a mission, they could generally be found in relative proximity.

It took Young Bear an hour to track everyone down. (It wouldn't have been possible if not for their satellite phones). Reichart had been hiking in the Rockies, while Lafayette was snow-boarding at Breckenridge. It took some serious coordinating, but when all was said and done, Mumphord was already in Dallas, and Sheffield would be last, coming in around 1:30; a solid 15 minutes to spare. Young Bear, Reichart, Wilson and Sheffield were coming in on military hops; Lafayette had no problem getting a commercial flight. Young bear reported back to General Fischer.

"Fischer here," answered the General.

"Young Bear here, General. The team will be in Dallas by 1330 CST. What are your orders?" asked Craig. General Fischer decided the truth was the best option at that point. "I don't have an answer now, Gunny," he growled into the handset, "but I damn sure guarantee I will by the time you are wheels down; *fucking bureaucrats, anyway.*" The General muttered the last part under his breath.

"Begging your pardon, General," said Craig. "Could you repeat the last part?"

General Fischer grunted a laugh, "Gunny, I know damn well you heard what I said."

Craig laughed. "Copy that and out, sir," he replied as he ended the call.