

Chapter 1

The call, when it came, was completely unexpected, and to be honest, totally unwanted. Though I'd been waiting for the small phone to ring for almost two months now, it really couldn't have come at a much worse time.

I said ring, but really it just vibrated. I'd turned the ringer off yesterday.

Anyway, like I was saying, my boss's timing sucked. Big time. Here I was, hunkered down behind a Marshmallow sized clump of sagebrush, looking through my Leupold scope at the biggest pronghorn buck I've ever laid eyes on.

I'd been watching the monster for more than two hours; patiently waiting for him to stand up and give me a clear shot. My rifle was resting on my daypack, and that's also where I'd stashed the satellite phone I just mentioned.

When the damn thing went off, I thought a rattlesnake had snuck into the clump of sagebrush. It startled me so bad, I instinctively rolled to one side, and managed to put my leg into the small patch of prickly pear I'd carefully been avoiding for the past couple hours.

I was still quietly cussing after I managed to dig the phone out of my daypack, the whole time being careful to stay hidden from the telescopic view of my prey. I've often heard it said that antelope have vision that is equivalent to us using ten-power binoculars, and after hunting them for almost twenty years, I damn sure believe it.

"Talon." I said, confident that I knew who was on the other end of the scrambled transmission.

Not a great intuitive leap actually. Only two people had this number, the United States Attorney General, Richard White, and the President himself. And the last news report I'd watched had detailed the President's trip to meet with the British Prime Minister, so it wasn't likely him. Besides, the President had told me that White would be my primary contact.

"Hey Mitch, this is Rick White."

"Really? Can you call back later? I'm expecting a call from Robin Williams."

"That's one of the things I like about you Mitch, you always have a sense of humor. Now, what the hell are you waiting for? Take the damn shot!"

"Are you watching me?" I asked.

"Of course I'm watching you. I was trying to wait until after you shot, but I really couldn't wait any longer. The chopper will be at your location in about thirty minutes. Oh, in case you're having second thoughts about that buck, the boys did a quick scan of an area fifty square miles around you, and they tell me you've got the granddaddy of them all in front of you."

I rolled over onto my back and held up my middle finger.

"Better hurry, your buck just stood up. Have a good flight, and I'll see you at Quantico. White out."

I quickly rolled back over and found the pronghorn, evidently the granddaddy buck in these parts, in my crosshairs, standing just as Rick had said. Those damn satellite video cameras were something.

After slowing my breathing, I gently applied pressure on the trigger of my Ruger rifle, until the weapon leaped in my hands and roared like a creature with a life of its own.

The sound of the bullet hitting home with a satisfying "whump" reached me before I could bring the scope back on the target for a second shot. As it turned out, I didn't need one. The magnificent buck was already down.

I stood up and waved to my Dad and brother who were watching the stalk from a small butte about a half-mile away. As they started across the sagebrush flat to meet me, I made my way over to the fallen buck, wanting a few minutes of privacy before they arrived.

Hunting has always been a very private thing to me, and I never take the killing of any creature lightly. Well, except for the two-legged rodents. I'd become very proficient at hunting bad-guys over the past few months, and I could pull the trigger on them without a second's hesitation, or a moment's regret.

But whenever I walk up to a game animal I've shot, there's always a bit of regret. To me, the joy and excitement come from the hunt, the thrill of the chase, not the kill. I'm sure it's the same way for many hunters, despite the way we're often portrayed by the media.

Anyway, I have a ritual I follow after every kill, and it's a private ceremony. I guess it's my way of showing my respect for the animal I've just killed, and honoring its spirit.

I knelt down by the fallen buck and bowed my head in a prayer of thanks to the Almighty, before taking a small sprig of sage and putting it into the antelope's mouth. Symbolic sustenance for his spirit's journey, wherever that might take him.

At times like this, I almost felt like calling God the Great Spirit, although to be honest, I'm not sure He gives a rat's ass what we call Him, so long as we do it reverently.

"That's one hell of a pronghorn Son!" My Dad said, as he and my brother walked up.

"Damn good shot too, although I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever take it." My brother Jamie said, as he slapped me on the back. "Congratulations!"

"Yeah, what were you doing rolling around out here anyway?" Dad asked.

"Check out those thorns in your leg," Jamie said. "Wow, those have got to hurt."

I looked down and noted that my thigh did indeed look like a denim pincushion, but I'd forgotten all about the prickly pear incident. "Well, it's like this Dad..." I started to explain, but was interrupted by a low thump, thump, thump sound from the other side of a small ridge.

We all turned to face the sound just in time to see the black Huey cross over the ridge and swoop down towards us.

"That's my ride," I yelled over the noise of the helicopter.

"Son, you've got some explaining to do!" Dad yelled back.

The three of us watched a man dressed in black fatigues and matching baseball style hat with the letters NPSF stenciled in bright yellow across the front, as he leapt from the chopper.

I recognized him as the man who had handed me back my Stetson two months ago in Montana.

"We've got to quit meeting like this. Hell, I don't even know your name!" I said in greeting, and extended my hand.

"This time I can tell you sir. It's Spangle. You don't have a lot of time, so why don't you give me the camera I know you've got, and I'll take a picture of you and your buck."

"Mitch, what about your rig back in Forysth?" Jamie asked.

Spangle was intent on taking the picture, but still answered the question before I could. "I'll be taking Mr. Talon's Durango back to Cody."

I smiled big for the camera, "I've still got to gut and skin my buck before I go

anywhere.”

Spangle was cool, I’ve got to hand it to him. He acted like he did this every day. Hell, maybe he did, but it was still new to me. “Okay, now all three of you get in there, and then Mr. Talon has got to hit the road.”

The flash went off, and Spangle handed the camera to Jamie. He then reached down to his boot, and removed a knife. “Don’t worry sir, I grew up in Cheyenne, and I was hunting with my dad before I could walk. I think the three of us can handle the chore just fine. Damn, he sure is a beauty. You know, I’m betting he’ll go in the book.”

Since it looked like Spangle had the situation well in hand, I went over and gave my Dad and Jamie a hug goodbye. “Sorry to run off like this guys.”

“You do what you have to Son, but be careful.” Dad said.

“Don’t worry about a thing Mitch. I’ll take the cape up to Jerry in Spokane for you.” Jamie added.

I gave a nod to Spangle, and walked over to the chopper. The pilot pointed at the seat beside him and handed me headphones as I climbed in. I noticed two other men in the rear of the aircraft, both wearing the same uniform as Spangle, and holding Heckler & Koch automatic rifles.

“It’s good to meet you Sir, my name is Lincoln, and the two hooligans aft are Dante, and Ware. We’ve all been assigned to your support team.”

Jamie and Dad watched us climb into the evening magenta sky, while Spangle concentrated on his task, seemingly oblivious to anything out of the ordinary here in the sagebrush plains.

I waved as we climbed out of sight and then turned to Lincoln, “Military?”

He smiled, “Used to be.”

“And now?” I asked.

After he reached up and flipped a couple switches, he turned his head towards me and pointed up at the letters stenciled on his flight helmet, “NPSF”, the same as Spangle’s.

It took me a minute, but I finally figured it out. The letters were an acronym for the agency named on my badge, the National Presidential Security Force.

“We’re part of your support team Sir. I’m sure Mr. White will explain in more detail.”

“So where are we headed Lincoln?”

“I’m only taking you as far as Billings. There’s a Lear jet waiting for you, but that’s all I know.”

“So what’s your assignment after you drop me off?”

“I’ll be meeting you in a few days. In Washington.”

“D.C.?”

“No sir, the state, but that’s all I know.”

We flew the rest of the way in silence, and I was glad for the opportunity to think about what was coming.

Evidently White had spent the last couple months getting everything put together for me, and now it was show time. After two months, I’d begun to half wonder if it was all a joke of some kind. It wasn’t like White didn’t have anything else to do as US Attorney General, and the President’s approval rating was up in the last polls. I guess I was thinking that they had forgotten about me.

No such luck.

Lincoln had radioed ahead and the Lear was fired up and ready to go when we

touched down.

The three men in the chopper all saluted as I jumped down on the tarmac. Not sure what else to do, I returned the salute, and made a mental note to do whatever it took to stop this bullshit. Calling me sir was bad enough, but saluting? That was over the top.

A woman, wearing the same uniform as the others of course, motioned me into the jet, and pulled up the stairs as soon as I got on board. While the fatigues pretty much hid her figure, her face was pretty, even without makeup. Her brown hair was cut shoulder length in standard military fashion.

“Take a seat anywhere Sir, and please buckle your safety belt.” She said courteously, and then added, “I’ll be right there with some Jack Daniels Sir.”

I didn’t even ask how she knew what my drink of choice was, but instead thought I’d throw her a curve ball. “How ‘bout a beer instead?” I said with a smile.

She didn’t even blink. “Of course. In that case, I’ll bring you a Coors Light.”

After sticking her head into the cockpit, she went to the rear of the plane and returned seconds later with a sweating bottle of my favorite brew.

I thanked her as she sat down in a leather swivel chair opposite me.

“So what do I call you?” I asked.

“Reese. I’ve been assigned as your personal assistant whenever you leave the field.”

“Just what I fucking need, an assistant.”

“It’s not what you might be thinking sir. I’ll be handling your billet arrangements, assembling required gear, and making sure you make it to your scheduled appointments.”

“In other words, you’re my warden.”

“Hardly sir. I work directly for you. If you find anything unacceptable, I will make every effort to accommodate your wishes.”

“Okay Reese, I’m still new to this, so cut me some slack, will ya?”

“Of course sir. We’ve got four hours of flight time ahead of us, so you might want to get some sleep. There’s a bunk aft, as well as a small head and shower. I’ve taken the liberty of putting fatigues on the bunk for you.”

“You know, a shower sounds pretty good right now, and it has been a long day.”

As I got up, she noticed the thorns sticking through my jeans. “I’d better help you with those sir, we wouldn’t want them to get infected.”

“I’ll take care of it Reese.”

“Sir, I insist. I’m a RN, so I know what I’m doing. Now go aft and remove your trousers.”

“I’ve got an RN assigned to my support team?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes sir. You’ve actually got a whole medical team, including a trauma surgeon.”

“So you’re not just trying to get my pants off?”

She actually smiled at that. “No sir. If it makes you feel better, I share your taste for women.”

“You’re a lesbian?”

“You know the rules sir, don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Some thirty minutes, and two beers later, I stretched out on the bunk, my nostrils full of the pungent scent of the orange iodine that covered my thigh. Reese had put enough on to drown an elephant, let alone keep infection away from my thorn filled leg.

Seconds later, I drifted off into a fitful sleep.