

May 1, 2011. 11.20pm. The Afghanistan-Pakistan border

There were thirteen Navy Seals sitting on the floor of the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter. All the seats had been stripped out to keep the payload to a minimum. The Seals weren't in any way superstitious and thirteen was the maximum number that could be squeezed into the belly of the helicopter. They were all dressed in the same desert camouflage fatigues and bullet-proof vests but their headwear varied. Some favoured Kevlar helmets, others wore scarves or floppy hats. Their weapons varied, too. Most cradled M4 rifles fitted with noise suppressors but there were several Heckler & Koch MP7 carbines and one pump-action shotgun. They all wore noise-cancelling headsets to neutralise the roar of the Blackhawk's two General Electric T700 turboshaft engines. They would be on the helicopter for just an hour and a half but that would be long enough to play havoc with their hearing so the headsets were mandatory.

The Seals were from the Naval Special Warfare Development Group but everyone knew them as Team Six. So far as US special forces went, they were the best of the best. They had been training for the mission for more than six weeks in North Carolina followed by another three weeks at Camp Alpha, a highly-secure area of Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. They had planned to carry out the mission on April 30 but bad weather had forced a twenty-four hour postponement.

On the day prior to the mission the Seals had flown to Jalalabad Air Field in eastern Afghanistan and it was from there that two Black Hawk helicopters had slipped undetected across the mountainous border and into Pakistani airspace. The helicopters were in full stealth mode, their engines quietened, their bodies covered with a radar-dampening fabric coating, modified tail sections including extra blades on the tail rotors. The Pakistanis were supposedly America's allies in the war against terrorism, but no one in the White House took that alliance seriously and the Pakistani authorities had not been informed of the mission.

The 160 mile flight had been carefully planned to avoid Pakistani radar stations and the helicopters hugged the rugged terrain wherever possible. The radios were silent, there was no one that the pilots needed to talk to. There was no moon and they wore night-vision goggles that gave the desert landscape a greenish tint. The Seals were all equipped with similar goggles but they wouldn't be switching theirs on until they were ready to leave the helicopter.

Flying about a hundred feet behind them and fifty feet higher was a second Black Hawk, this one containing twelve men. They were both flying at close to their maximum speed of 183 miles per hour and keeping as low as possible

over the rugged terrain. Their target was a Waziristan Mansion, a three-storey house in a one acre compound in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad, home to the Pakistan Military Academy. The town was in the Orash valley, surrounded on all sides by the Sarban Hills and was popular with tourists because of its clement weather and breathtaking views.

When the CIA had first been told who was living in the compound, President Obama had first considered demolishing the building using B2 stealth bombers and then had discussed using armed drones with Hellfire missiles but had been advised that neither offered a cast-iron guarantee of success. The only way to be sure was to send in a team of Seals which is when they had begun to plan Operation Neptune's Spear. In less than an hour the President would know whether or not he had made the correct decision. Two pilotless drones fitted with high resolution infra-red cameras were already three miles above the compound sending back live visual feeds to the other side of the world where the President and his staff were gathered in the White House's situation room.

Just as the Black Hawks reached the half-way point in the mission, four larger Chinook MH-47 helicopters took off from Jalalabad. They headed for the border, following the route that the Black Hawks had taken. There were a dozen Seals in each of two of the Chinooks and they would remain on standby on the Afghanistan side of the border in case anything went wrong with the original mission. The other two Chinook had been configured as gunships with M134 Miniguns capable of firing up to four thousand rounds a minute. They would fly on towards Abbottabad in case the Black Hawks needed support. The Seals hoped to get in and out before the Pakistani military could react, but if necessary the Chinooks were prepared to fire on anything or anyone that endangered the lives of the American soldiers.

The Black Hawks kept low as they approached Abbottabad, using the mountains to the north-west as cover, circled around to the south and then headed for the city centre.

The ranking non-commissioned officer and leader of the mission was a senior chief petty officer who had spent more than four years in Iraq and Afghanistan. His name was Adam Croft and he had hand-picked all but one of the men on the mission. He was Seal Alpha. The co-pilot twisted around in his seat, waved at Croft and held up his hand, fingers splayed. Five minutes.

Croft stood up, bracing himself against the fuselage. 'Lock and load!' he shouted. 'Five minutes and counting.'

The Seals started chambering rounds as Croft and the Black Hawk crew chief readied the four ropes that they would be using to abseil down into the courtyard close to the main house.

The co-pilot waved again. Three fingers. 'Three minutes, guys!' shouted Croft. He peered through a window. They were flying over houses and roads, but

there were no street lights and almost all the homes were in darkness. Abbottabad didn't have much in the way of nightlife and it was now almost one o'clock in the morning.

The turbines powered down and the nose pitched up as the helicopter transitioned into a hover.

'This is it guys, go to night vision!' shouted Croft.

The men removed their noise-cancelling headsets and pulled on their night vision goggles, pressing the button on the right hand side that activated him. Croft pulled on his own and blinked as they flicked on, casting everything in a green hue.

The Black Hawk's nose pitched up as the pilot put it into a hover about a hundred feet above the building. It was a manoeuvre he had practised a hundred times over a mock-up of the compound that had been built at Camp Alpha in Afghanistan. Contractors had built a replica of the compound and the three-storey building, complete with contents. The pilot eased back on the power and the helicopter began to descend. He scanned the instruments but he was flying by feel, as if the helicopter was a living extension of his own body.

'One hundred feet,' said his co-pilot.

The helicopter slowly dropped, the backwash kicking up dust in the compound below.

'Ninety feet,' said the co-pilot.

The pilot smiled to himself. He didn't need the verbal reminder of how high they were, he could do this bit with his eyes closed.

'Eighty feet,' said the co-pilot. 'All good.'

The pilot grinned. He knew it was all good. Compared to some of the missions he'd been on in Iraq this was a piece of cake. At least no one was firing missiles at him.

The helicopter began to shudder and he had to fight the pedals to keep it from swinging around.

'What's the problem?' asked the co-pilot.

The nose pitched forward and then just as quickly reared up. Both men scanned the instruments, trying to see if there was a technical problem but everything seemed to be working perfectly, it was just that the helicopter was refusing to respond. It began to spin to the left as it continued to descend, faster now.

'Seventy feet,' said the co-pilot.

The juddering intensified and the pilot felt the rudder pedals banging up and down beating a rapid tattoo on the soles of his feet. 'I'm losing it,' said the pilot. 'We're going to have to abort.'

The helicopter began to spin and the pilot pulled back on the collective to increase power then pushed the cyclic forward trying to get the helicopter moving forward.

'We're going down!' shouted the co-pilot.

The pilot gritted his teeth as he fought to regain control of the helicopter but nothing seemed to be working. It bucked and tossed like a living thing and his hands were aching from the strain of gripping the controls. 'Help me with the cyclic!' he shouted. 'I'm losing it.'

The co-pilot grabbed at the cyclic between his legs but it was too late, the helicopter was spinning out of control and losing height rapidly.

The pilot twisted around in his seat. 'We're going down!' he shouted. 'Brace, brace, brace!'

His words were lost in the roar of the turbines but the Seals knew that they were in trouble and they grabbed on to whatever support they could find.

The pilot turned back to the instruments but realised immediately that there was no point, if they were going to survive he'd have to fly by instinct alone. The helicopter was still spinning in an anticlockwise direction so he pushed the cyclic to the right to try and counteract it and pulled the collective up to full power. They were going to hit the ground, he was sure of that, so all he could do was to try to lessen the impact.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the other Black Hawk, hovering just outside the northeast corner of the compound. He yanked the cyclic, trying to push away the spinning helicopter to the west. If he collided with the other helicopter it would all be over.

'Thirty feet!' shouted the co-pilot.

They were still over the compound, spinning out of control. The perimeter wall was eighteen feet high,

'Brace for impact!' he screamed, though he knew that no one would hear him over the noise of the engines.

He saw the house flash by and realised that he was too far away to hit it but he still had to worry about the wall. The power was on full and the turbines were screaming but the rotor blades just didn't seem to be generating any lift.

'Twenty feet!'

Below him was the wall and then they were over it but as he struggled to stop the spinning there was the sound of tortured metal and the helicopter lurched to the left. The tail rotor had slammed into the wall and almost certainly disintegrated in the impact.

The pilot reacted immediately, thrusting the cyclic forward so that the Black Hawk would hit the ground nose first. If they hit side on the main rotor would slam into the ground and the resulting crash would destroy the main rotor blades and send lethal shrapnel through the cabin. He saw the ground rushing up at him and then they hit hard, the cockpit shattering and the harness biting into his shoulders with such force that his right collarbone snapped. He could hear panicked shouts from behind him and then everything went black.

* * *

‘Go left, left, left!’ shouted the co-pilot of Helo Two but the pilot was already pushing the cyclic to the left to get it away from Helo One. He was also pulling the collective up so that they gained height. He concentrated on the instrument panel which meant that he lost sight of the other helicopter but they way that it had been spinning left him in no doubt that it had crashed.

A Seal appeared behind him. ‘What’s happening?’ screamed the Seal but the pilot ignored him and concentrated on flying the helicopter. The crew chief grabbed the Seal’s arm and pushed him down on the floor, then pointed a warning finger at the man. While they were in the air the aircrew were in charge and the last thing they needed was soldiers in full combat gear moving around when they weren’t supposed to.

The Black Hawk gained altitude and the pilot put it into a hover outside the compound and turned it around so that he could see what was happening to Helo One.

‘They’re piling out,’ said the co-pilot.

‘Any sign of fire?’ asked the pilot.

‘They look okay. The rear rotor is smashed and the tail’s broken but that’s it. The main rotor isn’t even damaged. They were lucky.’

‘If they were lucky they wouldn’t have crashed in the first place. You have control.’

The co-pilot gripped the cyclic and tested the rudders. ‘I have control,’ he said and he took over the flying while the pilot clicked on his mic so that he could speak to the Seal in command behind him. ‘Helo One is down,’ he said. ‘What do you want to do?’

Chief Petty Officer Guy Henderson cursed under his breath. ‘He peered out of one of the side windows but couldn’t see the downed helicopter. ‘They okay?’

‘There’s no fire and they’re getting out. But they’re outside the compound.’

‘Can you patch me through to Seal Alpha?’

‘I can talk to the pilot and co-pilot but they look like they’re busy right now. It has to be your call, unless you want to talk to command centre.’

‘Negative that,’ said Henderson. His mind raced. In all the rehearsals they’d carried out in North Carolina and Afghanistan they hadn’t once considered that one of the helicopters would crash. There was no contingency plan for what had just happened and he knew that if the decision as to what do next was left up to the top brass then the mission would probably be aborted. There were simply too many chiefs – the President was in ultimate control in the White House but he wasn’t a soldier so it would be up to his military advisors to make the call and that meant taking the views of the command centres in CIA headquarters at Langley Virginia, the navy Seals command centre in Afghanistan and the command centre in the American Embassy in Islamabad. By the time a consensus had been reached Pakistani jets would have been scrambled and on their way.

‘Clock’s ticking,’ said the pilot. ‘You’re going to have to make a decision here. Do we continue or do go into rescue mode?’

Henderson held up a gloved hand. By now Helo One should have been in position over the courtyard and the Seals dropping down on ropes before storming the house. Helo Two should have been dropping four of its Seals outside the compound to secure the perimeter and then Henderson and the rest of the team were to be dropped onto the roof of the main building and gain access from there. But that clearly wasn’t going to happen now.

There were so many options that his mind span. They could change the plan completely and all go to the roof, but the element of surprise had gone and the occupants might well start shooting. They could drop down into the compound and take the role of the Helo One strike team and storm the building through the front door, but they hadn’t rehearsed that and they’d be using only half the number of men they’d used in training.

Henderson jerked his thumb down. ‘Take her down, outside the compound,’ he said. ‘Let’s see what Adam says.’

* * *

Croft made sure that all his men were out safely, then hurried around to the cockpit. The pilot was slumped forward but seemed to be breathing. The co-pilot had unbuckled his harness and taken off his helmet but was having trouble opening his door which had buckled in the crash. Croft ran around and using all his strength managed to yank it open. ‘Is everyone okay?’ asked the co-pilot.

‘Shaken but nothing broken,’ said Croft. ‘What about the helo, will she blow?’

The co-pilot shook his head. ‘All the electrics are off and we the fuel tanks haven’t ruptured, so no, she won’t burn.’

The pilot groaned and the co-pilot and Croft opened the door, unbuckled his harness and helped him out. He was groggy but conscious and they sat him down next to a concrete wall. They’d landed in an animal compound, close to a feeding pen filled with grain. A small herd of scrawny cows had bolted when the helicopter crashed but were now standing a hundred feet away, watching what was going on, their tails twitching.

Croft looked across the street. The second Black Hawk was hovering a few feet above a field. It landed gently and the Seals on board piled off, bent double to keep their heads away from the spinning rotor blades.

The leader of the Helo Two Seals rushed over to Seal Alpha. ‘You okay, Adam?’

‘I’ve been better,’ said Croft.

‘Do we abort?’ asked Henderson.

‘Hell no,’ said Croft. ‘We’ve no injuries, all we’ve got to do is go through the main gate. But get your pilot to radio for a Chinook to get us out of here.’

‘Roger that,’ said Henderson, and he ran back to the Black Hawk.

The co-pilot gestured at the wrecked helicopter behind them. ‘We’re going to have to destroy the electronics and then burn the ship,’ he said.

‘Wait until we’re out,’ said Croft. He waved at his team. ‘Let’s get into the compound,’ he said. ‘The clock’s ticking.’ He jogged over to the compound wall and examined the gate.. It was metal with wheels on the bottom so that it could be pushed to the side. He tried to move it, but it was obviously locked on the inside. He kicked it hard, several times and it rattled but remained obstinately closed.

* * *

All the Seals had climbed out of Helo One and moved some distance away as the main rotor was still turning. Henderson leaned into the belly of Helo Two and briefed the crew chief.

When he’d finished talking a soldier holding a Heckler and Koch put a hand on his arm. ‘What’s happening, Guy?’

The soldier was English, the only non-American on the team, and he was there as an observer though he had been issued with a Glock pistol and Heckler and Koch MP5 carbine complete with suppressor.

‘We’re going ahead, but through the gate,’ said Henderson. ‘We can’t risk losing the second helo.’

The crew chief appeared at the Black Hawk’s side door. ‘Chinook’s on it’s way. ETA five-zero minutes.’

‘Roger that,’ said Henderson. He nodded at the Englishman. His name was Dan Shepherd and he worked for MI5, the British intelligence agency. It was MI5 who had provided much of the intelligence on the interior of the compound and they had insisted that they were represented on the mission. Shepherd had been chosen because he had a special forces background, with the Special Air Service, the nearest thing the Brits had to the Seals. ‘I’ve got to talk to Adam, stick with me.’

Henderson jogged over to Croft with Shepherd following closely behind. Croft looked up as they reached him. ‘What’s the story?’ he asked.

‘Chinook’s on its way, ETA fifty minutes. What the plan, Adam?’

‘We breach the compound,’ said Croft. ‘Then in through the front door.’

‘What about my team?’

‘Four men to secure the perimeter, you and the rest follow me. We can’t risk using Helo Two.’

‘This is turning to shit,’ said Henderson.

‘We can turn it round,’ said Croft. He waved at a short, squat Seal who was standing looking at the downed helicopter. ‘Get the C4 out, Tommy,’ he said. ‘Blow this fucking gate in.’

Tommy was the leader of the unit’s three-man demolition team and they hurried over to the gate and started unpacking C4 charges from their backpacks.

‘You think it’s a good idea to take everyone in through the front?’ asked Shepherd.

‘Like I said, we can’t risk crashing the second helo so rope drops are out,’ said Croft. They were all wearing night vision goggles so it was impossible to read their faces but it was clear from Croft’s tone that he wasn’t happy about having his orders questioned.

‘Let’s move, Dan,’ said Henderson, turning towards his team who had gathered together a short distance from Helo Two.

Shepherd stood where he was, staring at Croft. ‘I get that, but do you think it’s smart to send everyone in through the gate?’ he said. ‘They’ll know we’re coming and if they start shooting it’ll be a massacre.’

‘We can take fire,’ said Croft.

‘I hear you, but the smart thing to do would be to move in on two fronts.’

‘I only see the one gate, and we’re not using the helo. Now get out of my face and let me get to work.’

‘Come on, Dan...’ said Henderson, putting his hand on Shepherd’s shoulder. He tried to move Shepherd away from Croft but Shepherd wouldn’t budge.

‘You could send a team over the wall at the side,’ said Shepherd. ‘If you go through the main gate you only get to the first courtyard by the guest house. You still have to get into the courtyard where the main building is. That’s going to slow you down. But if you send men over the west wall they’ll drop straight into the main courtyard and they could move around the west side of the house. If you come under fire they could deal with it.’

Croft took out a small laminated map of the compound and realised that Shepherd was right. But he still didn’t appreciate having his orders questioned. ‘Last time I looked that wall’s eighteen feet high,’ said Croft.

‘There’s a stack of oil drums over there by the cowshed and we can pull down some of the planks of wood. That and the ropes from the helo should get us over.’

‘That would work, Adam,’ said Henderson.

The two Seals stared at each other looking for all the world like two giant insects about to attack each other, then Henderson nodded. ‘Let’s do it,’ he said. ‘Leave four men watching the perimeter but take the rest over the west wall. And stay in radio contact, we don’t want any surprises in there.’

‘Roger that,’ said Henderson. He nodded at Shepherd and the two men ran back to the Black Hawk.

* * *

Croft ran over to the gate. The ground was rough red dirt that had turned to mud in recent rain and it sucked at his rubber-soled boots. Tommy and his team had finished attaching four cigarette-pack sized charges at the four corners of the gate.

‘Ready when you are,’ said Tommy running wires from the charges to a safe distance. Croft knelt down on one knee and turned his head away. ‘Fire in the hole!’ shouted Tommy, and blew the charges. The gate fell inwards and slammed into the muddy ground.

Croft led the way, his boots thudding over the gate. His team followed. There was an alleyway some twenty feet long with another locked metal gate at the end.

Croft pointed at Tommy, and then at the gate. Tommy nodded and went forward with his team. As the demolition team fixed charges to the second gate, Croft looked at his watch. It had been seven minutes since the Black Hawk had crashed. According to their game plan they should already have been inside the house. As it was they were still outside the residential part of the compound and whoever was inside would know that they were under attack.

There were two explosions and the second gate was down. 'We're almost at the outer courtyard,' Croft said into his radio mic.

'Roger that,' said Henderson. 'We're just about to go over the wall.'

Croft led his team over the second gate into a courtyard. There was a small building to the left. It was a guest house, used by a Bin Laden's trusted courier and his family. At the far end of the courtyard was another metal gate. Croft's heart was pounding and sweat was dripping down his forehead. He wiped it away with the back of his left hand. He was finding it hard to visualise the layout of the compound. All the training had started with him doing a fast rope drop directly in to the residential compound and then storming the building. Everything they'd done since the helicopter had crashed was totally new and unplanned. He reached into the top pocket of his tunic and pulled out the laminated map again. He stared at it, trying to get his bearings. According to the map, the third gate led to the inner courtyard and the house.

A three-man team headed by Seal Gamma peeled off to secure the guesthouse as Croft waved at Tommy and pointed at the third gate. 'Last one and then we're in, Tommy.'

Tommy and his team rushed forward and started attaching C4 charges.

* * *

Henderson and Shepherd studied the platform that the Seals had built against the perimeter wall using oil barrels and planks taken from the animal compound. There were three barrels on the bottom with planks on top, then two more barrels on top of that. By standing on the top barrels they'd only have to jump a few feet and clamber over the top.

'They're just about to access the inner compound so we need to go now,' said Henderson.

'I'll go first,' said Shepherd.

'You're here to observe,' said Henderson.

Shepherd tied a rope around his waist. 'It was my idea, least I can do,' he said. He handed the other end of the rope to Henderson. 'Just be gentle with me,' he said. 'Eighteen feet isn't that big of a drop but I don't want to go breaking an ankle at this stage.'

Another Seal was also getting ready to go over the wall but Shepherd slung his MP5 on his back and beat him to it, clambering up onto the wooden planks and then carefully climbing onto one of the barrels. He reached up to the top of the wall, grabbed it with his gloved hands and kicked dragged himself up with a grunt.

Henderson played the rope out between his fingers, keeping a careful eye on the Englishman as he straddled the wall and lowered himself over. Shepherd's knees scraped against the concrete wall as Henderson lowered him down. As soon as Shepherd's feet touched the ground he turned and reached for his MP5, checking that the immediate area was clear.

A small cat with a broken tail ran away but other than that the courtyard was deserted.

The Seal dropped down next to Shepherd, unhooked the rope from his waist and pulled it twice to let the man on the other side of the wall know that he was down. Shepherd did the same and the two ropes snaked back over the wall.

The rest of the Seals came over the wall in pairs, with Henderson bringing up the rear.

'We're in the compound,' Henderson said into his mic.

There was a burst of static then he heard Croft. 'About to blow the third gate and then we're in.'

Henderson motioned for his team to move forward.

* * *

'Fire in the hole!' shouted Tommy and the four charges attached to the third gate blew. The gate buckled but remained in place, but Tommy and one of his team rushed forward and finished the job with two hard kicks.

The gate went down and the Seals stormed through into the inner courtyard.

A man appeared at the doorway of the guesthouse, holding an AK-47. He was short, portly and bearded, wearing a long nightshirt. It was the courier, Croft realised, recognising him from the dozens of surveillance photographs they'd studied in North Carolina. Three red dots from the laser sights of the M4 carbines danced on the man's chest then three shots rang out and the courier fell back, the AK-47 tumbling to the ground. There were screams from a

woman and children from inside the house as four Seals stormed in, stamping over the body in the hallway.

Croft looked around, checked that the rest of the Seals were ready, and pointed at the main house. 'Here we go,' he said. 'Home stretch.'

As they approached the main house, a heavysset man with a thick moustache appeared on the patio. Next to him was a middle-aged woman in a nightdress. The man was holding an AK-47 in one hand, and he was holding up his other hand as if telling the soldier to stop where they were. The three-man unit to Croft's left fired as one and three bullets slammed into the man's chest and he slumped to the ground and almost immediately the woman's face imploded as she was hit. Even with the suppressors the noise of the shots echoed off the courtyard walls as dull thuds.

Three small children ran out of the house screaming. The soldiers let them go, keeping their weapons trained on the entrance to the house.

Croft waved his men forward. 'In we go,' he said.

* * *

Henderson flinched at the sound of shots. 'They're taking fire,' he said, and moved forward in a crouch.

'Three shots, all suppressed M4s,' said Shepherd. 'And they weren't from the house.'

They came around the corner of the house just in time to see Croft and his men burst through the front door and into the house.

Shepherd looked up at the upper levels of the house. All the windows were in darkness. If the occupants had any intention of fighting back the best time would have been when the Seals had moved into the compound. Then they'd have been firing from cover and with advantage of the high ground. Now that the Seals were moving into the house the advantage switched to the Americans. They were highly-trained in close-quarter combat and the night vision goggles gave them an extra edge.

Shepherd moved forward but Henderson held him back. 'They go in first,' said Henderson. 'You're an observer, remember?'

* * *

Seal Alpha moved through the hallway with his team, covering all the angles with the weapons. They had spent hours practising clearing the mock-up house in Afghanistan, and the exercises had always included dealing with booby traps

– trip wires, alarms, and explosives. But the fact that there were children in the house suggested that it hadn't been booby-trapped which would make their life easier.

There was a metal cage around the staircase that led to the upper floors and the three-man demolition team hurried over to it and began attaching charges as the rest of the Seals cleared the ground floor. There were four rooms including a kitchen and a bathroom, one a sitting room with an old-fashioned television and karaoke machine, the rest with single beds. The Seals were thorough, opening all the cupboards and overturning the mattresses.

When they were satisfied that the ground floor was clear they moved to the far end of the hallway while the demolition team finish attaching explosive charges to the cage.

* * *

Shepherd walked up to the house with Henderson in tow. Behind them Henderson's team fanned out, covering the upper floors of the house with their M4s. Shepherd stared down at the dead man and woman on the patio. Blood was still pooling around the woman's chest as she lay face down on the tiles. 'We're shooting women are we now?' asked Shepherd.

Henderson gestured at the AK-47 by the dead man's feet. 'What's that, chopped liver?'

'You've been around as long as I have, Guy,' said Shepherd. 'The only sounds we've heard have been fired by suppressed M4s. No AK-47s have been fired.'

'Maybe that's because we got our defence in first.'

'Yeah, well that doesn't explain the woman. When did Seals start killing women?'

'We can't take any chances, those baggy clothes she's wearing, she could be rigged up with a suicide vest.'

'It's a nightdress,' said Shepherd scornfully. 'It's well after midnight. They were in bed, they came out to see what was going on.'

'With an AK-47?'

'Guy, mate, you're from Texas. I'm betting you'd have a gun in your hand if you heard noises in your garden late at night. We've just crashed a bloody helicopter in their garden.'

They heard two dull thuds from inside the house, small explosive charges. Shepherd looked across at Guy, wondering if he'd been right about the suicide vest. Henderson read his mind and shook his head. 'That's C4, our guys are blowing the staircase cages.'

Shepherd nodded. 'Let's go,' he said, and headed inside. Henderson hurried after him.

* * *

Croft pulled open the mangled mesh gate and led the charge up the stairs. As he reached the halfway point he saw a man peering around the hallway at the top and he pulled the trigger of his MP4, sending a bullet smashing into the wall inches away from the man's ear.

The man jerked back. Croft had recognised him from the photographs they'd studied back in the States. It was Bin Laden's twenty-three year old son. He'd been seen in the compound most mornings lifting weights and doing push-ups.

Croft ran up the stairs just as the man reached the end of the hallway. He fired again as the man turned but his shot went wide and Croft cursed. He flinched as a gun went off behind him, two shots in quick succession. Both shots hit the man in the chest, just above the heart, and he fell backwards, hit a wall and then slid down it, his eyes wide and staring as blood spurted from the two wounds. He was one of four adult males that the Americans knew were living in the compound. Now three of them were dead.

The Seals piled up the stairs and began clearing the rooms. There were four, including a foul-smelling bathroom. They found two women hiding under a double bed in one of the bedrooms and roughly patted them down for explosives before one of the Seals hurried them out and down the stairs. They screamed and cursed and spat at him every step of the way.

The stairway leading up to the top floor was caged and the demolition team went to work, attaching charges to the metalwork.

* * *

Shepherd ducked as he heard the shots, then smiles ruefully as he realised that it was his instincts that had taken over. The gunfire was upstairs and the shots had been fired from a single M4. Then he heard rapid shouts and Arabic cursing and saw two middle-aged women being pushed down the stairs by one of the Seals. The women were both in the fifties with weathered skin and bad teeth and hooked noses peppered with blackheads. Their faces were contorted with hatred and one of them spat at Shepherd as she went by and screamed something at him in Arabic.

'Nice,' said Henderson. 'Something about your mother.'

'Hearts and minds,' said Shepherd sarcastically as he wiped away the phlegm with the back of his hand.'

‘We tend to find shock and awe works better,’ said Henderson. ‘We don’t have time for please and thank you and tea and crumpets. And don’t think for one moment that those bitches wouldn’t blow you away in a heartbeat if they were the ones with the guns.’

They went up the stairs to the hallway where Croft was watching the demolition team attach their charges.

‘You guys get down the hallway,’ said Croft. ‘We’re just about to blow the cage.’

‘You’ve not taken any fire, have you?’ asked Shepherd.

‘What?’ said Croft.

‘You’ve not taken any fire,’ repeated Shepherd. ‘No one’s shot at you.’

Croft turned to Henderson. ‘Get him the fuck away from me,’ he said.

Henderson put a hand on Shepherd’s shoulder. ‘Come on, we need to get away from the charges.’

Shepherd continued to stare at Croft. The man’s eyes were hidden by his night vision goggles but Shepherd could tell from his stiffening posture how angry he was. Croft’s finger tightened on the trigger of his M4, which was aimed at Shepherd’s stomach.

Henderson stepped in between the two men and pushed Shepherd down the hallway. They almost stumbled over the dead man lying there. Fresh blood glistened greenly through Shepherd’s goggles, a slightly darker green than the man’s t-shirt. Two black dots showed where the bullets had struck home. Shepherd looked around the floor but there was no sign of a weapon.

He ducked involuntarily as the explosive charges went off, two dull thuds that echoed off the concrete walls of the building.

* * *

The charges had wreaked havoc on the cage around the stairway, mangling the metal frame and twisting the hinges, but it was still in place and blocking the stairs. Tommy and his number two on the demolition team grabbed it and pulled hard. It came away from the wall and they dragged it into the hallway.

Croft led the charge up the final staircase. As his feet pounded on the concrete staircase a door opened in the hallway on the top floor and Croft caught a glimpse of a bearded man and then the door slammed shut.

He reached the top floor, hurried along to the bedroom door and paused for a second for the rest of his team to join him. He stepped to the side and Seal Delta kicked the door hard, just below the handle. The jamb splintered and the door crashed open.

Croft went in first, just as they'd rehearsed, bent forward to keep his centre of gravity low, his carbine sweeping the room. One step into the room then a quick shuffle to the right so that they next man had a clear view.

There were three targets in the room. There was a man standing by the bed. A craggy face with a long straggly beard. Two women, both wearing long cotton nightgowns.

The women began screaming in Arabic. The younger one took a step towards the Seal, her hands curved into claws, her face contorted with hatred. 'Neek Hallak!' she screamed. Croft knew enough Arabic to know that she was telling them to go fuck themselves.

The older woman stepped to the side, putting herself between the soldiers and the old man. Her husband. They were both his wives, and both would die to protect him.

Seal Charlie shouted at the woman. 'Shut the fuck up, bitch!' The woman continued to scream at the Americans in Arabic shaking her fist, her eyes blazing then suddenly she charged at Seal Bravo, wailing like a banshee. Seal Bravo lowered his aim and shot the woman in the left calf. Her leg collapsed and she staggered against the wall, her screams of anger turning into howls of pain.

The older wife grabbed hold of the injured woman and she too began to curse. Seal Charlie let his weapon fall on its sling and he dashed forward, shoving the two women against the wall.

Croft brought his gun to bear on the man who was still standing next to the bed, a look of quiet serenity on his face. There was no fear, no anger, just blankness as if he couldn't comprehend what was going on around him. The old man let his hands fall by his sides. Croft raised his weapon, his finger tightening on the trigger.

Off to his left, the injured woman had slumped to the floor, blood streaming from the wound in her leg, and the second woman was trying to stem the flow with her nightdress. Croft was barely aware of the women, he was totally focussed on the man in front of him. Two more Seals moved into the room, their M4s sweeping left and right.

The man was still raising his arms, and now he stood almost as if he was crucified, his palms open, fingers extended. His eyes stared blankly at the soldier and a smile slowly spread across his face. It was the smile of a man at peace with himself. Croft pulled the trigger and a small dark green rose

blossomed in the centre of the man's chest and his whole body shuddered and even before he began to fall Croft fired again, this time at the man's face. The bullet blew away most of the man's skull above the eyeline, splattering blood, brain and bone over the wall behind him. The target fell backwards onto the bed, his arms still outstretched.

Two more Seals piled into the room. They began whooping when they saw the dead man on the bed. Croft clicked on his radio mic. 'For God and country – Geronimo, Geronimo.' His breath came in ragged gasps, the adrenaline still coursing through his system. He took a deep breath to steady himself before clicking the mic again. 'Geronimo EKIA.'

EKIA. Enemy killed in action. The most hunted man in the world was dead.

Croft turned to look at his colleagues and pumped his fist in the air. 'You do not fuck with Navy Seals!' he shouted. 'Who do you not fuck with?'

'Navy Seals!' they chorused, then began whooping and pumping the air with their fists.

* * *

Shepherd stood in the doorway, his Heckler and Koch cradled in his arms as he watched the Seals cheering and slapping each other on the backs. Henderson came up behind him and put a gloved hand on his shoulder. 'We should go, Dan. It's over.'

The woman who hadn't been shot tried to get over to the dead man but Seal Bravo pushed her back down on the floor. 'Stay where you are, bitch, or I'll shoot you too!'

'Stand down!' shouted Croft. 'I want the place searched from top to bottom, We want computers, papers, photos, anything that looks like intel we take. And let's get his body into a bag.' He saw Shepherd looking at him. Shepherd took off his night vision goggles. There were thin curtains over the windows and there was enough moonlight filtering in for him to see.

'What's your problem?' asked Croft.

'Dan, come on,' said Henderson, trying to pull Shepherd out of the room. Shepherd shrugged off Henderson's hand.

'What the fuck did you do?' shouted Shepherd.

Two Seals pushed by Shepherd and headed for a cupboard on which there was a laptop computer and a stack of DVDs. They knelt down and took off their backpacks.

Croft pushed his goggles up on top of his head. 'What do you think happened?' he growled at Shepherd.

'I think you shot an unarmed man, that's what I think.'

Croft pointed at an AK-47 leaning against the wall by the bed. 'What do you call that?'

'I call it murder, that's what I call it. He didn't make a move for the weapon and yet you double-tapped him.'

'Yeah, well I wanted to make sure he was dead. That bastard was responsible for 9-11. He deserved what he got.'

Seal Delta appeared at in the doorway, with Seal Echo close behind him. Seal Echo was holding a tube of rolled-up white plastic. 'Got the body bag,' he said.

'You and Pete put the body in it,' said Croft. He nodded at Seal Delta. 'Are they searching the rooms downstairs?'

'We're on it,' said Seal Delta. 'They've already found a stack of porn.'

'Make sure they take it with us, we need to show what degenerates these bastards are,' said Croft.

Seal Delta disappeared out of the doorway and thudded downstairs.

Seal Echo and Seal Charlie went over to the bed and unrolled the body bag. Croft realised that Shepherd was still staring at him. 'What the fuck are you looking at?' he said.

'I'm here to observe, remember?' said Shepherd. 'That's what I'm doing. Observing.'

'Get back to the chopper,' said Croft. He pointed at Henderson. 'You're supposed to keep him out of trouble Guy, and at the moment you're not doing a great job.'

'This isn't over,' said Shepherd. 'No one told me this was a kill mission. I was told that we were here to capture and remove for interrogation.'

'Yeah, well maybe you weren't in the loop,' said Croft. 'Now get back to the chopper, we're leaving as soon as the body's bagged.'

'Who authorised you to kill him?'

Seal Bravo came up behind Shepherd. He elbowed Henderson out of the way and jabbed the barrel of his weapon against the side of Shepherd's neck. 'Do as he says and get the fuck out of here,' he growled. 'You won't be the first Brit to get caught in friendly fire.'

Shepherd slowly turned to face Seal Bravo and stared at him with unblinking eyes. 'If you want to pull the trigger then you go right ahead,' he said. 'But just in case you're wondering that hard thing pressing against your leg isn't my cock it's my Glock and if you do shoot me my gun's going to go off and blow away your nuts. To be honest I'd rather be dead than live the rest of my life with no balls but maybe you're okay with that.'

Seal Bravo took a step back. Shepherd's MP5 was hanging on its sling and he'd taken his Glock out of its nylon holster and it was now pointing at the soldier's groin. Shepherd's finger was tightening on the trigger.

'Stand down!' shouted Henderson. 'Both of you.'

'Tell him to take his gun away from my neck or I will shoot him,' said Shepherd.

'Eddie, stand down,' said Henderson.

Seal Bravo snarled at Shepherd, but he took another step back and lowered his weapon.

'Shepherd, if you've got a problem with what happened, you take it up with your bosses,' said Croft. 'You've no jurisdiction here. You're an observer, you observed, now get back to the chopper or so help me God I'll leave you here for the Pakistanis to find.'

Shepherd holstered his Glock and walked out of the room. Henderson followed him. 'Dan, you've got to watch it with these guys. In a war zone, they're a law unto themselves.'

'So they can get away with murder, is that what you're saying?'

'I'm saying this is their mission, you're a passenger. If you've got a problem with anything, stow it until you're back home.'