PROLOGUE

IT DIDN'T TAKE A tactical genius to pick the spot. Humans are creatures of habit and some were more religious about it than others. Accountants, it seemed, were practically monastic in their routines. From June 1 to November 1 of every year, Marcus Boykin lived in his mountain house in Star Valley Ranch, Wyoming. Star Valley sounded far more appealing to the east and west coast real estate buyers than its previous name of Starvation Valley. It was an enclave of wealthy outsiders in otherwise rural western Wyoming, stuck into the mountainside like a well-manicured finger of civilization, full of multimillion-dollar homes in a part of the world otherwise populated by ranchers and cowboys.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, Boykin rose early and climbed into his silver Mercedes G550 SUV to drive the fifty miles to the relative metropolis of Jackson. With a summertime population of bankers and hedge fund managers that would rival the Hamptons, it was the only place within hours where he could eat a gourmet meal with an eight-hundred-dollar bottle of wine. In Jackson he could sip lattes and read the *Wall Street Journal* in the company of fellow seasonal residents from New York, Greenwich, Boston, and Los Angeles. Three days a week he could connect with real people in person instead of waiting impatiently for his friends to comment on his Facebook posts. Dinners at Rendezvous Bistro were far tastier and the conversation more stimulat-

ing than his usual meal alone on the deck, no matter how spectacular the view.

U.S. 89 runs north and south through the steep valley that straddles the line between Wyoming and Idaho. Irrigated hayfields near the roadway lie in the shadows of the rugged ten-thousand-foot peaks to the east and more gentle hills to the west. Just north of the tiny town of Alpine, the route to Jackson turns east along the Snake River and winds into the mountains of the Bridger-Teton National Forest. At this point in the journey, the jagged ridgelines of the Tetons run nearly to the roadside, like towering cruise ships moored alongside an asphalt pier. Ten feet from the well-maintained road was terrain as rugged as nearly anywhere in the Lower 48, the home of trophy mule deer and giant elk as well as plenty of black bears and the occasional moose. Having never touched a gun or hunted in his life, it would never occur to Boykin that September 15, the opening day of deer season in Wyoming's Region G, fell on a Monday that year.

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James Reece had hiked in the previous afternoon from a trailhead on the opposite side of the mountain from the U.S. highway. The trail began near the road as the crow flies, but was many miles away by vehicle. The vistas of the highway were as close to the remote backcountry as most seasonal residents like Boykin ventured. Though it was only a few hours' hike from his truck, Reece may as well have walked in from a different world. He wore a light pack with a nylon rifle scabbard strapped to the side, high-performance digital camo hunting clothing from Sitka, and the Salomon hiking boots he had worn on countless operations around the world. Walking through the Wyoming backcountry in the traditional sniper's woolly ghille suit and heavyweight rifle, he would stick out like a man wandering the mountains in a tuxedo, but clad in the garb of a hunter, he was as invisible as a guy in a blue blazer at the airport. The

anonymous tip that he'd called in about the moose poachers just south of Jackson would probably occupy every game department cop in the region, but in the unlikely event that he ran into someone of authority, the hunting license and deer tag in his pocket would verify him as just another hunter out looking for mulies on the busiest day of the year.

He could have hiked in at night with a headlamp or brought along his night vision, but he wanted to get into his spot before dark. No sense twisting an ankle or worse in this rough country, and he was anxious to get started. He had studied the topography on maps and satellite imagery hundreds of times, but he'd still hiked the route two days earlier to ensure that it looked the same on the ground as it did from the air.

The country was steep and high. It didn't matter how well you were conditioned at sea level, eight thousand feet was still eight thousand feet. He stopped to catch his breath and guzzle water from the hose clipped to his shoulder strap. His legs burned and his lungs were starved for oxygen. His base layer was covered in sweat despite temperatures in the fifties, so he zipped his top down to let some of his body heat escape. He wasn't in a rush, but he moved with purpose. It certainly wasn't the first time he had pushed himself up a mountain to a target.

His perch was just as he'd left it, a small U-shaped slot eroded into the mountainside that could only be accessed from the front. There was very little chance of a hunter or game warden wandering up on his six while he was in position, and he'd have a clear view of anyone approaching from the front long before they reached his hide site. The spot overlooked a saddle of highway that ran between two steep hills. His position was near the top of the second hill if you were driving toward Jackson.

Like a cave without a roof, the spot would protect him from the prying eyes of hunters glassing for deer the afternoon before the season opened and would keep him out of the wind as the temperature dropped into the low thirties overnight. He pulled his rifle out of the scabbard and laid his pack down just short of the mouth of the slot so his muzzle

would not be visible from below. The rifle was an Echols Legend, built by a master in Utah whose handmade rifles sold for several months of his Navy salary. It was a gift from his father after his first post-9/11 deployment and was one of his most prized possessions. He had planned to hunt more after he retired and entered the private sector. The rifle was chambered in .300 Winchester Magnum and, despite weighing far less than the sniper rifles he'd used overseas, was even more accurate. Instead of a traditional hunting scope, he had installed a Nightforce NXS 2.5-10x32mm, the same glass he used at work. The pack supported the rifle's forend and a small beanbag steadied the butt. Lying prone, with the front and back of the rifle supported, he was able to hold the rifle as steady as any bench rest. As cars and trucks crested the hill to his west, he would dry-fire at the driver's position of the windshield to get the timing right. The vacationers and local residents traveling this mountain road in the fall afternoon had no idea that they were in the crosshairs of one of the nation's deadliest warriors.

Satisfied that his position was solid and that he'd have the right angle on the target, he retreated to the back of his mountain cubby and fired up his backpacking stove to heat water for his freeze-dried dinner. When the sun dropped below the skyline and the temperature fell by double digits, he crawled into his sleeping bag. He thought about his little girl, all blond curls, tears welling up in her brave blue eyes as she saw daddy off on his last deployment. Six months away and he would be home for good, *promise*. He could still see her face, pressed up against the airport glass for one last look as he boarded the plane. The hardest parts of a deployment were the first couple of weeks when you'd just left home, and the last couple when you started anticipating your return. That it was his last trip overseas made the light at the end of the tunnel brighter. Finally the end of the train/deploy/train treadmill he and his SEAL brothers had been on for well over a decade.

Curled up in his sleeping bag underneath a light show of stars that

a city dweller couldn't comprehend, he slept sounder than he had in weeks. No waking up to realize that the nightmare was real. No reaching across the bed for a wife who wasn't there. No hearing the soft cries of a daughter who would never again crawl into his bed for protection from the boogeyman.

He was already awake, staring at Orion, when his watch chirped at 0500. A swig from his water bottle and an energy bar would be his breakfast. He got into position behind his rifle and waited patiently for the sun to rise.

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Marcus Boykin was an early riser, as was nearly everyone in the financial sector. You were either up and at the table in his line of work, or you were asleep and on the menu. He looked at the weather forecast on his iPhone before slipping on a pair of designer jeans and some tan Italian loafers. He wore a Patagonia fleece over his pink Lacoste polo and put on a Yankees cap to hide his bald spot from the twenty-something waitress he was currently trying to bed. To him, she wasn't Sarah with the degree in environmental engineering working to save up for her master's, she was "the waitress." He'd been unsuccessful in getting into her pants so far, but she was broke and he was rich. One night, sooner or later, she'd get drunk and slip up, and he'd be there to take advantage. Living this far out was part of the challenge, though he knew that to better his chances he might have to get a condo in town at some point to help seal the deal. He grabbed his keys from the marble kitchen counter and pressed the remote start. It was freezing, and Boykin wanted the SUV nice and toasty with the heater running and the seats warmed by the time he made his to-go coffee and headed out. He opened his giant oak front door and took out his phone to tweet a photo of the orange glow of sunrise making its way over the mountain before he lost Wi-Fi coverage; the cell service was crap until you got to Jackson. He didn't really care about the view. In his

mind the sun would do the same thing tomorrow, but it would make his friends on both coasts jealous, a thought that he relished. As he climbed into the SUV and headed down the mountain road to U.S. 89, his mind turned to thoughts of what he'd say to the waitress when he saw her.

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Combat is sensory overload, total chaos, especially if you're in command. The noise is deafening, both from the incoming and outgoing fire, while the overpressure of muzzle blasts and explosions rock your body down to its DNA. Men are yelling, not out of fear or panic, but to communicate above the roar. Tracers come in, rockets fly past, dust from explosions and bullet strikes shroud your immediate world in a tactile cloud of dust. Radio traffic in your ears adds to the storm and demands a conscious response, which means one's actions in the moment must be subconscious. Identifying targets, firing weapons, changing magazines: all must happen automatically, as seamless as steering, shifting gears, and working the gas pedal of a car while talking on a cell phone. As a leader, you must rise even further above the storm and look beyond your own survival. You must direct the fire and movement of the entire element and resist the instinct to become just another gun in the fight. The whole thing is one tachy-psyche blur of constant decision making.

This was the opposite of chaos. Reece's senses registered nothing unnatural, just the calm of aspens in the breeze and the relaxing melody of wildlife easing into another day to a beautiful mountain sunrise. There was no radio, no one to communicate with, just the occasional hum of a car or pickup on the asphalt of the highway. The range to the dip in the road was exactly 625 yards, which meant that the bullet would drop eighty-six inches in its path from his barrel to the target. The rifle's scope was zeroed for 100 yards, so he would have to compensate for the difference. He came up 14 clicks, 1.4 MILS, to make up for the drop. By dialing for the range, there would be no holdover. He could put the center

of the reticle right on the target. *Fight with every advantage you can get.* The winds were light this early in the morning, which was a good thing. Wind calls were always tricky in the mountains, even for a pro. The Kestrel told him it was blowing two miles per hour from his left, a full-value wind that required six inches of hold. Since winds could shift at any moment, he used the MIL-DOT reticle to "hold off" for the 0.3 MILS.

He heard the hum of the tires even before the blue halogen headlights haloed above the highway as the SUV climbed the rise. The silver Mercedes was unmistakably Boykin's; thank God this guy didn't drive an F-150. The vehicle was coming straight at him, which meant no lead was required, but it was still hauling ass. He didn't have much time to admire the success of his planning. He tracked the target as it came down the hill, just as he'd done with the two other vehicles that had passed earlier that morning. He took a full breath, briefly rested at its peak, then exhaled to find his natural respiratory pause when his lungs had expended their air, steadying and focusing him for the task at hand. Doing so caused the movement of the scope's reticle to slow from an orbit to a small tremor. Even with a solid rest, it was never as steady as in the movies. The Mercedes hit the flat spot and appeared to stop for a second as he lost the perspective of its forward progress. He couldn't see the driver, not at this range and certainly not in this light. Holding just right of the windshield's center, he slowly pressed the trigger.

His ears heard the shot but his brain barely registered the sound. His only sensation of recoil was the scope's image jolting into a blur as the rifle rocked skyward. Despite putting rounds into countless men in shitty corners of the world, his body still jolted into "fight or flight" mode, adrenaline surging into his body like a shot of heroin. He had killed plenty of men with his country's blessing in the past, but this time pressing the trigger meant breaking the most sacred bond of society; he'd just committed murder.

The monolithic bullet was a Barnes Triple Shock, made from solid

copper and scored inside the tiny hollow point to split into four petals upon impact like a deadly flower. It was engineered to penetrate deeply on big game animals and worked so well that special operations troops adopted it for use during the Global War on Terror. When it hit the nearly vertical glass windshield of the Mercedes, the petals sheared off, leaving a cylinder of copper a third of an inch in diameter and still moving faster than most handgun rounds do at the muzzle. It struck Boykin on the bridge of his nose, and angled downward slightly as it smashed cartilage, brain, and bone into jelly. It severed the first vertebra and exited the back of his neck looking much like it did on the way in, before punching through the leather headrest and terminating its flight in the foam cushioning of the backseat.

The Mercedes's cruise control was set on sixty miles per hour when its driver's brain ceased sending command signals to his body. His limbs quivered and jerked the way most animals and humans do when shot in the central nervous system, but the Teutonic engineering of the SUV kept the wheels traveling straight up the rise of the highway as if nothing had happened. When it roared past Reece's position, he thought for a second that he'd missed. As the vehicle crested the rise, having accelerated to make up for the steep grade, Boykin's lifeless body shifted forward in his restraint and caused the wheel to turn sharply to the left. The forward momentum, downward slope, and the SUV's high center of gravity created a snowball effect and caused the Mercedes to roll forward on its right front wheel, cartwheeling off the pavement and into the steep shoulder. The sound of rubber and steel meeting asphalt and rock were deafeningly loud, but only one man could hear it.

Reece smiled for the first time in many months as he pulled a Ziploc bag from a pocket inside his jacket. Out of the bag came a folded-up crayon drawing with a list of names written on the back. With a tiny stub of a pencil, he crossed the first name off the list and returned it to its home against his chest.