**Here's a sample from THE COVERT ELEMENT:**

**CHAPTER 1**

August, 1985 — 25,000 feet above northeastern Mexico.

In the rear of the C-141 cargo jet five servicemen sat strapped onto wooden benches awaiting the order to jump. Their gear was typical for this sort of mission — a HAHO parachute jump. High altitude. High open.

Kevlar helmets fitted with OD oxygen systems would allow them to breathe at the extreme altitude of their release. Insulated jump suits would protect them from the -50 degree cold and 120 knot winds into which they would soon throw themselves. Under the insulation, their uniforms were plain black — bearing no insignia to reveal an affiliation of any kind.

Master Sergeant Juan Fuentes felt a particular unease as he contemplated the mission. Under most circumstances, he would be confident in his abilities, and those of his men, to carry out their assignment. But this mission was different.

His operational orders had come down just ten hours earlier. His team was expecting a training jump over Panama that day. But an opportunity to take out a high-value target had presented. Expediency was required. His team was best suited, so they had drawn the assignment.

In his opinion, the plan was sound. And his men were all Army Rangers like himself. They were squared-away soldiers . . . fully capable of executing on their Ranger training. Still . . . he would have preferred an opportunity for his team to simulate the particulars of this attack before boarding the transport. That hadn't been possible.

The emergent circumstance that had required this rapid deployment was a meeting of Mexican drug cartel leaders, to be held at a certain secluded mountainside villa. Intel from a local informer had been deemed reliable. The meeting had already begun.

The target was located 400 kilometers northwest of Tampico in Tamaulipas Province, Mexico. The villa compound had been carved into the southeastern slope of a mountain in the Sierra Madres Oriental — the geological backbone of northeastern Mexico.

Master Sergeant Fuentes' orders included a notation that the Mexican government had approved the mission. He should not anticipate interference from the Mexican military.

Local Mexican authorities were another matter. The cartels already owned many of them . . . their allegiances having been acquired with cash, or coercion, or a combination of both. Any local police forces he might encounter had to be considered "neutrals" at best, and more likely, "hostiles."

Though Fuentes was an American citizen by birth, Spanish was the language of his family and of his culture. His Mexican roots ran deep. His sympathies lay with relatives in the Tampico area who had suffered first hand the cruelty of the drug cartels. This would be more than a mission for the Sergeant. This would be a crusade of sorts . . . a strike against cartel oppression on behalf of the overmatched Tampico citizenry.

Though he was an American soldier, in Fuentes mind, he considered his Ranger team a covert element in the larger conflict between the Mexican people and the cartels. This was a war he knew he would be fighting for a long time, whether under the American flag or not.

As the target site approached, the five team members donned their helmets and oxygen masks, strapped night vision goggles around their necks and hung their rucksacks between their legs. The huge, rear ramp of the C-141 slowly swung down to a horizontal position.

The Jump Master radioed the team to get ready. A few seconds later, a green light illuminated near the tail of the plane. Master Sergeant Fuentes led and the rest of his team followed — each being sucked from the ramp as he reached the airflow vortex in the plane's wake.

As he fell, Fuentes looked up and to the west to see if he could catch a glimpse of the C-141 above him. Between the plane's lack of lights and the violent shaking of a 120-knot departure from the huge transport, he wasn't able to pick it out. He knew it was still there, though. It would continue circling the drop zone at 25,000 feet, illuminating the DZ with infrared light until Fuentes' team was safely on the ground.

After a few moments, Fuentes' lateral motion, and therefore, a good deal of the air resistance that had buffeted him, subsided. Now he focused on his wrist altimeter. He was in no rush to reach the ground, so he fell in standard spread-eagle position. As the altimeter approached 17,000 feet above sea level, he deployed his chute, knowing that his team had done likewise a few seconds earlier.

No longer descending at 120 knots, and at this lower altitude, he was now able to remove the oxygen mask and strap on his Night Observation Device — in this case, infrared goggles. Harnessing NODs in the middle of a jump was not a routine maneuver. But then, Special Forces were seldom requested to perform the routine. Clear night-vision was necessary for this jump. Their DZ was small, and the surrounding terrain hazardous.

The plan called for an approach toward the drop zone from the west. The five paratroopers would drift with the gentle westerly wind toward the DZ. With his rectangular parachute fully deployed, Fuentes concentrated on maintaining his easterly heading until, at about 15,000 feet, he could see the glow of the DZ's IR reflection on the mountainside.

"Carpet in sight. Heading North 78 degrees East. Report." Fuentes' English had never been great. His speech was heavily laced with a Mexican accent.

"Mongoose, this is Can Slinger. I've got it."

"Mongoose, this is Trophy Wife. I have a visual."

The remaining team members all confirmed their sightings of the DZ. No one had had any problems with chutes, and everyone's night vision was online. Fuentes took a cleansing breath. He had envisioned his confrontation with the cartels often. It would end in bloody, hand to hand combat — mano a mano. This precision military assault was never what he had in mind.

Tonight's coordinated attack left no room for machete fantasies. He needed to keep his focus on the mission at hand.

Descending to a height of approximately 100 feet above the DZ, Fuentes released the catch on his duffle lanyard. The eighty-pound ruck dropped until it dangled fifteen feet below him. The ruck touched down first, leaving Fuentes to land with his legs free to deal with any terrain issues.

There were none.

Fuentes gathered his chute, clearing the way for other jumpers.

All of the team members wore glint tabs on their jumps suits and helmets. Through the IR goggles, the glint tabs glowed brightly in the infrared light, ensuring the last jumpers down would not collide with those who had landed earlier.

Upon landing, each soldier shucked his primary and secondary chutes, his oxygen system, and finally, his brown jump suit. The chutes and OD systems fit neatly inside duffle-like "kit bags," enclosing the gear in a tidy package for swift extraction. Even though the Mexican government had approved the strike, the Rangers knew better than to leave clear evidence of American involvement behind. One never knew when politicians might recant or deny their approval. The Rangers' gear must depart with them.

Maintaining communication silence, the team members, including the Master Sergeant, stacked the kit bags along one edge of the small mesa. Then, gathering near the pinion pines on the uphill side of the DZ, they reviewed their plan of attack.

The target was on the other side of the mountain, some three to five klicks easterly of the DZ, depending upon the approach route each would be taking. Two would round the peak low along the north side of the mountain, gradually climbing the remaining 150 meters upward to a position just below the villa. Fuentes would lead the others along a higher route on the southern slope. It was a longer hike, but it would allow them prime observational positions above the target and its surroundings.

Each soldier wore a military-precision GPS locator to complement his wrist altimeter. The two pieces of twentieth century technology would guide them unerringly to the target. The infrared NODs would allow them to detect any unanticipated hostiles before they, themselves, could be discovered.

Any team communications from here on would be whispered through encrypted VHF radios inside the soldier's helmets. As an extra precaution, they would use code names rather than given name or rank.

Although the Rangers had cross-trained in multiple tactical and operational specialties, each brought a particular expertise to this mission.

Can Slinger was the team's machine gunner and carried a Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW). His largest and heaviest gear was the ammo box containing 200 rounds of 5.56 mm linked ammunition. The SAW was designed for use in hostile force suppression. In the present operation, Can Slinger's role would likely be to facilitate his team's withdrawal from the target area after the objective had been destroyed.

Mongoose (Fuentes) was a sniper. His primary on-person weaponry was a Colt M4 multi-purpose assault rifle, modified with a telescopic sight and sound suppressor. In addition to his own supplies, his ruck also contained extra ammunition for the machine gunner.

Trophy Wife was the team's Forward Observer, also known as a 13 Fox. Forward Observers typically serve to target artillery barrages or to call in close air support. On this night, Trophy Wife's main responsibility would be reconnaissance. He carried an M4 rifle, like the sniper rifle, but with an aim point — red dot — scope and no sound suppression. His rifle also had a grenade launcher attached under its barrel. It was no RPG, but even "lobbed" grenades added to the team's potency.

"Alpha Team," as these three soldiers would be known for the remainder of the operation, would approach the objective via the uphill southerly route, ultimately establishing a high-ground vantage point well above the target.

"Bravo Team" would take the northerly, down-slope route.

Bravo Team was charged with placing explosives to assure complete destruction of the target. Red Fox was an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Specialist (EOD). His rucksack contained thirty, half-kilogram bricks of C4 plastic explosive, together with a matching number of radio-controlled blasting caps. He carried an M4 rifle, configured identically to Trophy wife's — an aim point scope with no sound suppression.

The second Bravo Team member was Blue Hawk. He would accompany Red Fox on the lower route. Blue Hawk would assist with placement of the C4 beneath the villa. He carried an additional sixteen bricks of the high explosive. Blue Hawk's rifle was also an M4.

The fact that four of the five team members carried the same make of rifle was no accident. This tactic allowed sharing of ammunition among team members . . . often a detail of critical import.

The riflemen's weapons were capable of single shot or three-shot bursts. It was not practical for them to carry SAWs, like the machine gunner. They had had to pack light for the jump and would need to conserve their ammo supplies.

Thusly outfitted, and eager to accomplish their objective, the team split up and moved toward their respective target positions.

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When Master Sergeant "Mongoose" Fuentes and Alpha Team arrived on station above the villa, they got a pretty clear picture of the scope of the gathering being held there. Twenty-seven black limos and Mercedes sedans lined the edges of the courtyard between the buildings. Some even had to park along the narrow crushed-limestone drive leading to the secluded compound.

Fuentes radioed Trophy Wife to scout the area further east to determine if there were additional hostiles in that direction. Can Slinger and Fuentes selected well-concealed positions beneath the low scrub pinions, which grew thicker on this easterly, and therefore wetter, side of the Sierra Madres.

After choosing a position for his M4's bipod and establishing clear lines of sight around the objective, Fuentes proceeded to assess the target's characteristics.

The villa compound consisted of the main villa — a luxury home of approximately 5,000 square feet — an oversized attached garage, and an auxiliary building that appeared to contain barracks-style accommodations. The latter probably served as housing for drivers, guards and other personnel who would provide for the safety and comfort of the drug lords and their immediate families.

One of Alpha Team's first duties was to confirm the accuracy of the intel on which their mission was based . . . namely, that this was, indeed, a meeting of drug cartel leaders and not a simple family gathering. Fuentes had memorized the faces of many of the cartel leaders. But everyone was inside the buildings, so that wouldn't help him now.

Reaching into his ruck, he acquired one of the combination communications units which both he and the 13-Fox carried. Observation satellites had not been able to identify the vehicle licenses at this gathering owing to the heat distortion projected by the slowly cooling shale. Fuentes would accomplish that task now.

Using the secure satellite link, he radioed his base asking for confirmation of the license numbers of the cars at the villa. He couldn't see all of them from his position. But with the aid of his sniper scope, he could read and relay many to HQ for validation.

The intelligence operatives in the communications center at Fort Benning, Georgia were expecting his call. They were ready with a previously prepared list of license plates, as well as the information connections necessary to determine ownership of other vehicles. It took them less than a minute to confirm that at least eight of the cars belonged to cartel higher-ups. This information sufficed to green light the attack.

Fuentes was relieved they would proceed with their mission. No sane person wants to kill people. But to Fuentes, cartel members were less than people . . . less even than animals.

There was also the adrenaline rush he had felt in planning the attack, the execution of the technically difficult night jump, and now the visual confirmation of his cartel targets . . . it would be a shame if his team's preparations had been for naught. All his training, not to mention his loathing for the drug lords, drove him toward a single goal — completing this mission.

He had his orders. His men were was ready to execute them. The American Army had provided him with means, motive and opportunity. Of course, he would take it!

The radio in his helmet crackled.

"Mongoose, this is Trophy Wife. Over."

"What you got, Trophy Wife? Over."

"The lawn is clean. Two guys manning the garden gate. One jeep with a fifty. Over."

"Copy that, Trophy Wife. Keep watch on garden men. Come home when you hear the party. Over."

"Roger that, Mongoose. Out."

Fuentes wasn't too concerned about the men with the jeep at the end of the driveway. He knew from mission prep that the road was at least a klick and a half away. That'd be a couple long minutes before they could be on site with their .50 caliber machine gun. We should be long gone by then. And the jeep couldn't follow the path he and Alpha Team would be taking home.

"Red Fox to Mongoose. Over."

"Go ahead, Red Fox. Over."

Bravo Team, having the shorter route, had arrived at its position on the slope below the target a few minutes before Alpha. They had assessed the target's structural vulnerabilities and now were reporting to their leader.

"Brick house down here. Need charges up top, too. Over."

Fuentes understood what Red Fox was saying. In addition to the explosives to be positioned beneath the home, Bravo Team needed to place charges along the villa's front foundation. While placing the explosives, they would be in plain view of anyone in the courtyard, even from many of the parked cars.

"Stand by, Red Fox. Out."

Fuentes needed to reassess the situation in the villa's front courtyard . . . and do it quickly. He surveyed the area with his scope. Nothing had changed since his report to HQ. There was a single guard with an automatic rifle strolling idly near the home's entry. No other hostiles were visible.

He checked the house. The drapes had been pulled on all the windows. The cartel's desire for privacy would work against them this time. No one would be able to see Bravo Team at work from there.

It wouldn't be hard to take out the sole guard under the portico. But how much noise would he make when he fell?

He could countermand the plan to rig the front of the house. But his EOD had recommended the additional charges. He wouldn't have made the decision to expose Bravo Team lightly. The charges were almost certainly necessary.

If the enemy discovered Bravo Team in action, how should the team respond? Can Slinger could provide cover fire until the charges had been laid or until Bravo was forced to retreat. That wasn't a very desirable Plan B. Fuentes hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

The situation required a quick decision.

"Red Fox, this is Mongoose. We got you cover. Advise when you ready to go. Over"

"Acknowledged. Out."

Minutes went by before Fuentes' radio crackled again.

"Go now. Over."

Fuentes already had the guard in his sights when the word arrived. He waited for the best shot, exhaled and gently squeezed the trigger on the M4. The guard dropped hard. Even up on the mountainside, Fuentes could hear the thud of the body and the rattle of the guard's weapon hitting the limestone. Both he and Can Slinger scanned the compound for any sign of reaction from the villa or the barracks. When no one appeared, Fuentes was back on the radio to his team.

"Red Fox. All clear. Out."

Alpha Team remained vigilant as it watched Red Fox and Blue Hawk dashing low along the front of the villa and past the dead guard. It only took twenty seconds to place the charges . . . but for this entire time, Bravo Team was completely vulnerable.

Fuentes used a black sleeve to wipe perspiration from his brow.

Even after Bravo Team had rounded the corner of the villa on its way back into the brush and out of sight, Fuentes remained mindful that the hostiles in either building could yet discover the dead guard, forcing him to detonate the C4 before Bravo Team had retreated to a safe distance.

Long minutes passed. Finally, Bravo Team called in.

"Mongoose, this Red Fox. We Ready. Over."

"Stand by, Red Fox. Out."

Everyone had heard Red Fox say Bravo Team was ready to demolish the villa. Hearing no objections, Fuentes gave the okay.

"Execute. Execute. Execute."

No sooner had he given the order than a young woman in a white dress came running out the front door of the villa. She stooped to check on the fallen guard.

A split-second later, the villa imploded . . . the adobe walls melting backwards and sliding off the mountain to the northeast. Bravo Team's work had been a success.

When the dust settled, Fuentes could see the woman's rubble-covered white dress lying draped over the guard, motionless. Damn. He hated killing women. But this was a cartel woman. Was she fair game?

It didn't take long for the hostiles to react. Almost immediately, two armed men ran out the barracks door in the direction of the demolished villa. Fuentes picked off the first with his sniper rifle. Can Slinger got the second with a short burst from the SAW.

More cartel soldiers stormed through the barracks doorway, scattering around the courtyard. Can Slinger sent those who had emerged running for cover. The lights that had been illuminated inside the barracks blinked out. Automatic weapon fire sprayed from inside the barracks windows up the mountain and into the trees. They were aiming too low to endanger Alpha Team.

By this time Trophy Wife was back with his team.

"Jeep is coming," he said.

After about twenty seconds of sustained, but poorly directed, fire from the barracks, all fell quiet. Gradually, a few men appeared around the sides of the barrack building.

"Extraction ready, Trophy Wife?" Fuentes said.

"On the way."

Trophy Wife had already radioed the team's extraction element to mobilize. Fuentes team would depart this mountain via the three "Little Bird" helicopters that had been idling in the desert five klicks west of the DZ. They would already be en route to the extraction point.

"Little Bird" was the nickname for the AH-6 small chopper and its troop carrying variant, the MH-6. Developed specifically for troop insertions and extractions, Little Bird had proved its worth to the military many times over since its initial deployment in the 1960s.

Two of the three Little Birds on their way to the DZ — now the LZ (landing zone) — were MH-6s that had been outfitted to carry troops and cargo. The third, an AH-6 attack version of the Little Bird, would provide cover fire if needed. With its 7.62 mm machine gun and dual 2.75 inch rocket pods, if necessary, the Little Bird attack chopper could deliver a punch much greater than its name implied.

"Time to head out," Fuentes said. "But we will leave them a present, yes?"

On Fuentes' signal, Trophy Wife fired a grenade into the center of the compound. Then all three members of Alpha Team opened up, blanketing the kill zone with mostly random fire. Their goal was not so much to kill as many men as possible, as it was to deter zealous pursuit. It didn't take long for all of the hostiles to either fall where they stood, or retreat to the cover of the barracks.

Alpha Team ceased its fire and set off at best pace retracing its route up and around the mountain.

Although Alpha Team had a head start on the cartel soldiers, it didn't take long before bullets were zipping through the brush around them. Further deterrence was necessary.

As the others continued to the extraction site, Trophy Wife stopped to fire more grenades in the path of the cartel fighters. After he had done so and caught up to his comrades, Can Slinger took a turn, firing his SAW to saturate the enemy's estimated position with machine gun fire. Following this leap and bound retreat procedure, Alpha Team was finally nearing the LZ.

Fifty meters from the mesa, they all stopped a final time. Trophy Wife launched two more grenades and Can Slinger emptied his SAW to slow the enemy's advance.

By the time they came charging through the scrub pines on the south side of the mesa, they were relieved to see that Little Bird One had already departed with the kit bags and Little Bird Two was ready to take them onboard.

"Hot on our tails," Fuentes said into his radio. "Let's get out of here."

As the Rangers jumped aboard Little Bird Two, a white light flashed on the mountainside in the direction from which Alpha Team had come. It was followed by a puff of dust and smoke. The chopper engines drowned out any other sound.

"Guess they found one of our trip wires," Gun Slinger said into his radio, as he strapped himself onto the bench. "That should slow ëem up."

In less than ten seconds all five squad members had found places on the seating boards on either side of the chopper. Little Bird Two didn't wait for everyone to get strapped in before it lifted off, sliding sideways to the mountain's edge, then following Little Bird One downward into the canyon. The Rangers held onto their harnesses until the G-forces abated and they could buckle them properly.

As Little Bird Two headed away from the LZ, Fuentes saw that Little Bird Three, the attack chopper, had remained behind . . . apparently with good reason. While their own chopper had been diving down the mountain toward the desert valley below, the AH-6 had climbed to a position above the LZ. Its guns were strafing the mountainside. Before he lost sight of the AH-6, he saw the trail of a rocket being launched from its pod. Until the other Little Birds were safely away, the AH-6 would hold its position . . . or die trying.

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Ten minutes and several klicks away from the former villa, Little Bird Three caught up to its companions. The pilot gave the Rangers riding the buckboard outside Little Bird Two a thumbs up as he moved to lead the small air squadron. Fuentes saw the bullet holes in the cockpit bubble as the attack bird passed by.

At first, he was thankful for the brave pilots of the Little Birds and the expert extraction they had coordinated. Then, just as relief was nearly upon him, Fuentes began to feel it again. A churning in his gut. He tried to suppress what he knew was coming.

Growing slowly at first, but building as the minutes passed, it was like a bilious monster rising up in his throat. The same beast he'd fought more and more often lately. Then it was upon him. The unbridled urge to lash out . . . to slaughter . . . to annihilate. He felt the perspiration on his forehead, but knew it would disappear as quickly as it came in the turbulence of the chopper ride. This wasn't the place or the time to lose control.

Leaning back against the chopper's metal frame, he clenched his teeth and steadied his hands on the seat-board. Was it the cartel connection that had triggered this visceral response? Killing those bastards should make it better, not worse.

Maybe he'd been doing this soldier thing too long. Maybe it had been his team's close call just now. Whatever the cause of his rage, he'd deal with it in his own way. In his own time. Just as he'd always done. Right now, he just needed to breathe.

He inhaled deeply, releasing the air through his mouth.

Too damn close! To what? To death? To losing control? Just too damn close!

Fuentes took one more deep breath. Then, forcing his face into a smile, he turned to the EOD seated beside him. He needed to yell to be heard over the rushing wind.

"Got a spare cig, Red?"

Red Fox smiled.

(continued in THE COVERT ELEMENT).

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