CHAPTER 1

Under the opaque light of a blazing full moon, eight horseback mounted smugglers trudged along a well-worn desert trail. Meandering single file through the cool, crisp night air, the modern day drug runners laughed, cursed and smoked cigarettes while hauling a ton of cocaine and marijuana towards the inner city drug markets of El Paso, Texas. Always ready and willing to inflict violence, the heavily armed gang brandished an assortment of weaponry to include automatic rifles, pistols, and shotguns. Prepared to fight if practical and run if necessary, the smugglers worried little about incarceration or even death. All felt supremely confident that this night could only end as it always did, with the cargo safely delivered, pockets bulging with cash and a quick dash back into Mexico and safety.

Watching in silence from a hidden redoubt on the U.S. side of the border, a camouflaged figure lay motionless in the sand, perfectly hidden amongst the sagebrush and cactus. Peering through the green haze of a long-range, infrared night vision scope, he spied the slow-moving procession, carefully counting the number of riders and horses. As the smugglers splashed across the swirling Rio Grande River, he silently raised his rifle and whispered into a radio headset, “Psycho Six, this is Psycho one, Bingo, over."

Lying in wait along the same trail a couple hundred yards away, Master Sergeant “Mad” Jack Braden and three other heavily armed commandos heard the brief radio transmission. Instantly jolted into a high state of alert, Braden and his men checked their weapons and gear one last time, preparing for the smugglers imminent arrival. Spitting a wad of chewing tobacco into the sand, Braden picked up an electronic mine detonator, flipped the safety to off and turned his attention to the open kill zone thirty meters in front. Satisfied that all was set, he quietly waited, ready to pull the trigger and spring the trap.

“Somethings not right!” the smuggler boss thought. A grizzled veteran of countless illegal border crossings, the man leading the group felt especially attuned to his surroundings and tonight for some reason, the atmosphere seemed wrong. With the hair standing straight up on the back of his neck, he peered into the darkness, scanning the cactus lined trail for the cause of his anxiety. Detecting nothing out of the ordinary, he tried to force himself to relax by thinking of all the money and fun he'd have upon the successful conclusion of tonight’s drop. Realizing there was no movement, or sound, coming from the darkness ahead, he rationalized away his concern. “Perhaps that’s the problem,” he thought, “there’s no sound.” But then again, his group was making enough noise for everyone. That could explain why the rest of the desert remained eerily silent.

Minutes after receiving the radio alert, Braden listened as the sound of Spanish voices faintly echoed from somewhere up the trail. Previous intelligence estimated the smugglers ring consisted of eight riders and two packhorses. The riverbank surveillance man confirmed the count. Now, with the sounds of guttural border slang and horses hooves filling the night, Braden and his men slowly picked up the faint, shadowy outline of a group moving towards them in the darkness.

“Calm down” the smuggler boss whispered, the drug stash house was only another mile up the path. No problem, besides, the local Border Patrol had already been paid off and even if a rogue cop decided to try and make a bust, he would be outgunned eight to one. “Easy day,” he thought “drop off the drugs, collect the cash, split back to Mexico, drink some tequila, chase some whores, everything's cool, no problem, absolutely no problem.”

Grasping the detonator with both hands, Braden watched with near amusement as the smugglers lazily wandered into a carefully constructed kill-zone. Disregarding the basic principles of tactical movement, the unknowing men traveled in a tight cluster, making it easy for one well placed explosive to destroy them all. Calmly watching the first three riders carelessly stroll past, Braden decided it was time to strike. Tucking his chin tightly to his chest, he closed his eyes and pumped the detonator handle three times in rapid succession. A split second later, an ear-shattering explosion rocked the still desert night.

The smuggler boss spent the last moment of his forty plus years wondering, “What the hell is that strange buzzing noise.” A split second later, he and his men were ripped to shreds by the point blank, simultaneous detonation of two anti-personnel land mines. With thousands of small steel ball bearings hurtling forward at mach speed, the group was instantly transformed into a twisted mass of amputated limbs and broken, smoking corpses. Adding to the inferno, Braden and his team opened fire, methodically spraying the area with carefully timed, well aimed three round bursts from light machine guns and semi automatic rifles. Amazingly, even after the initial explosions devastated their gang, two riders remained in the saddle, dazed but unscathed. With horses bucking and reeling from the shock, both men momentarily fought to remain upright before being cut down by the overwhelming rain of small arms fire pouring into the kill zone.

Watching the last two targets drop, Braden and his men abruptly stopped firing. Jumping to their feet, they maneuvered leap frog fashion onto the body littered trail, weapons at the ready, covering each others movements. Smoke and a thin white mist hung suspended over the carnage, a leftover from the kilos of now scattered cocaine once earmarked for the black markets of the United States. With every bandit down, an eery silence momentarily reigned, broken only when the sounds of fleeing horse’s hooves shattered the quiet. Realizing that one lucky smuggler had probably escaped, Braden keyed the mike on his radio and said “Psycho 1, this is Psycho 6, Squirter over.” “Roger, out” came an icy reply.

The last rider in the column unknowingly avoided the fate of his companions by stopping to urinate. Slightly inebriated, he stood alongside the trial, struggling to zip up his pants when the ambush exploded somewhere ahead. Listening to the deafening roar of the one sided battle reverberating across the desert, he dropped to his knees, recoiling in terror. With the sounds of slaughter suddenly ending, the lone survivor decided that tonight’s drug drop was definitely over and if he didn’t want to join his friends in hell, he’d better move. Realizing that safety lay only a short distance away, the suddenly sober bandit jumped onto his startled horse and made a mad dash back towards Mexico. Pushing the steed as fast as he could go, the shaken survivor closed on the Rio Grande. Leaning low in the saddle, he splashed into the river, savagely whipping the horse into a frenzy. Quickly gaining the opposite bank, the soaked bandit emerged from the water, lungs and heart pounding. Feeling exhilarated and confident that he had cheated death, the smuggler wheeled the horse around and standing tall in the saddle, thrust his right hand high into the air. Extending the middle finger, he shouted at the top of his lungs in heavily accented English “Fuck you….”

“No, fuck you” the watching sniper whispered in reply. Placing the cross hairs of a Ruger, 7.62 bolt action rifle squarely on the fugitive’s chest, he squeezed the trigger. Hearing the rifles loud retort and feeling a slight jerk against his shoulder, the sniper smiled with satisfaction as the bullet thudded home and his target toppled backwards from the saddle. Sprawled face down in the Mexican dirt, the last smuggler twitched once and died. Rider-less, his horse bucked and then fled deep into the desert night. Standing, the sniper hoisted the heavy rifle, alerted Braden that the target was neutralized and began jogging down the trail towards his waiting teammates.

Braden and his men methodically searched the area for bodies and paraphernalia. As they worked, the sniper arrived, yelling the password “whiskey, whiskey." Survivors of the ambush, one gravely wounded bandit and two horses, were mercilessly dispatched with bullets to the head, while numerous small arms and several kilos of carefully packed cocaine and marijuana were gathered into a large pile for detonation. Carefully placing pre-prepared explosives and thermite grenades onto the cache, Staff Sergeant Lonnie White, the team’s demo man said “Anytime you’re ready Sarge” Nodding in affirmation, Braden signaled everyone to move out with a short whistle and wave of his hand.

 Thirty seconds later and a hundred yards away, the team heard a loud explosion as more than two million dollars worth of contraband drugs were carried away with the breeze. Keying his radio, Braden notified the command post that the operation was over, mission complete. “Eagle Six, this is Psycho 6, Miller Time, over. Within minutes, the whap, whap, whap of a helicopter could be heard in the distance. Pulling a small strobe light from his belt, Braden turned it on, and calmly awaited extraction. Moments later, a blacked out helicopter touched down and the team boarded. Within seconds, Braden and his men were whisked away into the night.