

Prologue

By 1968, the delicate sweet songs of native birds had long ago been replaced by the whine of helicopters and the screech of incoming artillery shells. Also gone were the local poetic names for geological formations. The Breath of Heaven Mountain had been rechristened by the military, solely appreciative of its elevation, as remote fire support base Hill 816. An armada of these pock-marked brown hills floated like turds in a latrine on the vast misty green plateau of Vietnam's Central Highlands. American artillery bases topped each of them.

At the bottom of Hill 816, the unseen enemy padded silently in the wilderness, tunnels, and villages. Above, only American boots walked atop the isolated muddy mound called FSB Crockett, defending their base and neighboring firebases while providing artillery support for military missions.

A young duo standing on the sandbagged perimeter watched clouds of steam rise from their tiny yellow rivers of piss flowing down the desolate hill. The breaking sun dissolved the cool restless fog, and a hidden forest of bare gnarled tree trunks below, denuded victims of the war, was exposed. As the war machine slowly awakened, the valley remained deceptively quiet until distant muffled artillery explosions from a nearby firebase announced the beginning of another day in the Vietnam War.

"Looks like 632's finished their breakfast."

The two young men, barely out of their teens, had only been in-country for a month but had already seen enough action to make them wary. One nervously scanned the valley below as he relieved himself. "Jed...I see something movin' down there."

Startled, the other soldier jumped. "Skip the bullshit, Carl. Thanks to you, I pissed my hand."

"I'm not kiddin'...something moved," he said quietly. "I did see something."

"Jesus. Relax." Jed shook his head. "We got enough heat on us already."

Soon their urine resumed its flow.

"Sorry...I'm draggin' my ass. No sleep. And too much fuckin' noise."

Mission completed, they shook off, reholstered their equipment, and stood silently.

"Nothin' like a good piss."

Jed nodded and gazed over the valley. "You know...this reminds me of home."

"How's that?"

"The Smokies in the spring. But you wouldn't know about mountains."

"Nope. This is the only mountain I care about."

"Well, we're better off up here. I wouldn't want to be street fighting in Saigon."

“No shit.”

“Tet is for real. Charlie’s down there. Somewhere. This is the big event. And we landed here just in time.”

“Aren’t we lucky? I’ll tell my grandchildren. I just hope we’re making his life miserable. Round after round. Hour after hour,” said Carl. “At least we gotta be slowin’ ‘em down.” He lit a cigarette and blew out the smoke. They watched it drift away, melting into the mist. “You gotta wonder if we ever hit anything. We never see the bastards.” He shook his head. “Someday, the gooks might try to take this hill.”

“They say they always mortar attack first. Let them try. We’ll pound them into the ground. We’re not the only canon cockers in the area.”

“Maybe, but it only takes one lucky RPG round in the dump.” Carl tossed his cigarette, crushed it with his boot, and gazed down the hill. Armless tree trunks, scattered scrub bushes, and small trees dotted the dirtball they defended. During the day, unwanted visitors would be easy to spot. But after dark, the artillery base was vulnerable. Sensors, radar, night vision observation, helicopter patrols, and trip flares at the perimeter provided early warning for the men of the firebase.

As ‘Fucking New Guys,’ they knew nothing except that their firebase had never been attacked. Not yet. Again something caught nervous Carl’s attention. “What’s that?” This time there was no doubt in his voice.

His buddy shot back. “Where?”

“Ten o’clock. Hundred fifty yards out. Just beyond the outer wire. Something’s moving.”

“Not seeing it. Wait...I see it. Christ. It’s either a giant lizard or a goddamned sapper. Looks like he’s heading our way.”

“What should we do?”

“Go! Tell the Top. Now!”

With the news, the base snapped into full alert. Infantry assembled at the perimeter. An officer with binoculars focused on the intruder. “It’s a man. Shorts. No shirt. Blackened body. I don’t see any weapons or satchels. He’s not moving. Just laying flat with arms outstretched.” The officer stood silent for a moment. “Let’s wait,” he said. “Keep your eyes open.”

They waited for fifteen minutes. Others around the base scanned past the perimeter, looking for more sappers. No other alarms had been raised.

“Zeke...we’re not going out there,” said the officer. “There’s a tree branch right above our man. Think you can hit it?”

Sergeant Zeke grabbed the field glasses and studied the situation. Thirty seconds later, he returned the glasses. He nodded. “I think so. A couple of rounds should do it.” He took the sniper

rifle from one of his men, and standing in the trench, he used a perimeter sandbag as a gun rest. After making a sight adjustment and focusing on his target, he fired one shot hitting the two-inch-thick branch an inch above the crotch. The wood split, and the leafy branch swung down. Still partially attached, it struck the intruder in the head and momentarily covered the upper part of his body.

“That did it. He’s moving. He’s on his knees looking up at us.” Fire another shot over his head. But don’t hit him. He doesn’t look like a sapper.”

Zeke fired again.

“He’s crawling toward the outer wire. Waving at us. Now he’s got both hands up. He’s giving us the double finger. Smiling. He’s no sapper. He’s a white man covered in mud.” In a lowered voice, the officer faced his sergeant and said, “Send three of your best guys down there and bring him up. There’s no time limit. Careful and cautious. OK?”

Thirty minutes later, the three volunteers returned from their slow, dangerous trip outside the perimeter; two guided the ‘lizard man’ up the hill and into the base. They let him collapse on the ground, far away from anyone and anything of value. “He’s clean,” said one of the soldiers.

The man’s hands and knees were blackened from crawling, and open wounds covered his body. He wore cut-off shorts and beat-up Ho Chi Minh sandals too tiny for his feet. If it wasn’t for the fact that he was a six-foot-tall white man, he might pass for an enemy sapper. He had no dog tags, tattoos, or any form of identification.

The officer cut to the chase. “What’s your name, and what’s your game?”

The man sat with his knees to his chest, head bowed, face streaked, sweat dripping from his forehead. He looked up. “Sergeant Michael T. Buck...S.O.G,” he replied in a voice so dry and raspy his words could hardly be understood. He tried again, but the officer stopped him.

“Save it, Buck. Welcome to Fire Support Base Crockett.”

CHAPTER ONE

Early morning thirty-two years later, in the dark of a new moon, Mike Buck exited his car. He stood motionless and took a deep breath. Lake Michigan was bleak, black, and dead calm, animated only by the twinkling lights of ore boats gliding along the faint grey horizon. It offered little hope for the new day. A few premature sailboats, buoy bells chiming, bobbed up and down in the harbor. Across Grant Park, Soldier Field waited for the morning light to waken its famous façade as empty city buses on Lake Shore Drive snaked around the sports complex, hissing in the darkness. Cabs filled with drunks drifted away from the Loop watering holes, carrying their sleepy, vomitus loads back to the suburbs. Instinctively Buck patted his body in three places, checking his holstered weapons. Then he headed for the action.

Bright yellow sodium-vapor lighting illuminated the parking lot. About fifty people, mostly men, milled about talking loudly and laughing nervously in a scene resembling a Chicago Bear tailgate party. Buck joined them.

After a few minutes, they drifted together, marching in loose formation around the curved colonnaded front, finally squeezing through a green-copper door leading to a meeting room. Crowded together, their chatter echoed in the wedge-shaped, concrete tomb. They stood shuffling and rocking in place under the harsh light of bare fluorescent lamps, noshing on coffee and donuts. A few smoked. They all wore guns and protective vests.

Buck found Elliot, the short, stocky leader of Domestic Terrorism Squad 7, in the crowd taking charge of the troops. Elliot had handpicked Buck and the other hybrid law enforcement officers forming the Task Force. Elliot and Buck were FBI, but others were Chicago cops. The team combined street-savvy and aggressive cops with technically robust and rigidly professional Bureau agents. Although this amalgamation did not sit well with some old-school cops and elitist agents, the Task Force, protective of their own and suspicious of outsiders, remained an exceptional crime-fighting team. Secrecy and teamwork were essential elements of their job. They were good, and they knew it.

Elliot stood atop a table and spoke into the bullhorn with authority. "All right, my friends. It's time."

Buck smiled as Elliot began and quipped to the man next to him. "I see Mother Hen's not fooling around tonight. Three-fifteen on the head and a fucking bullhorn."

The cop replied, "He's gettin' into it."

"Quiet down," the bullhorn spoke, and the crowd noise disappeared. "Five weeks of planning have brought us to this point. I think you'll agree we have covered every detail ad nauseam."

A chorus of groans signified agreement.

“Right. Then I expect it to go down as planned. Today’s raid will signal the beginning of the end of the Stateville Boyz. If we do our job right. I think we’ll catch them red-handed and pants-down. And when we do, you will get them into the system correctly. I’ve heard some complaints about dealing with the weekend court system. But the bad guys don’t care about our bureaucratic problems. Again. Do it by the book, and we’ll have this thing wrapped up by lunch. Screw around, and you’ll be on the phone begging the judge to skip dinner and come back downtown for arraignment.” He looked around the audience for confirmation before proceeding. “We know it’s going down soon. We’ve been eyeballing all three target locations. About three hours ago, a courier arrived at Mo’s place carrying two suitcases. Probably the weapons. But it could be just a cover. Either way, the gun deal seems to be on schedule. Remember. I don’t want any dumb heroes. Understood?”

He waited. “Everyone must wear a vest and a raid jacket. Understood?”

Mumbles.

“And we are a team. Do your job, and please watch out for each other.” For a moment, Elliot’s face betrayed a hint of his emotion. Then he returned to his talking points. “You’ll have warrants that let you peek into their Jockeys. So I expect results. No shooting unless you’re shot at or have to protect someone. Just arrest these guys. Secure and bring back the evidence. And read them their rights. I know in the heat of the action, you can sometimes forget. But don’t.”

Elliot looked around, eyeballing his troops. “These are simultaneous raids. To be successful, they must be coordinated. Maintain radio silence until five minutes before the ‘go’ signal. We will operate on channel C-4. That’s C-4. Team leaders will report to command when in position and ready. All three teams will go at exactly 5-0-1.”

“Now, in the interest of efficiency, I would like the teams to secure their warrants from the Sarge in the following order: Green Team, then Red, then Blue. We have plenty of time, so give the old Sarge room to operate, please.” Elliot smiled and gave the crowd a thumbs-up. “Good luck. See you all tonight for a beer.”

He dropped off the table with surprising grace, landing on his feet before Buck. “You loaded for bear?

“You can never have too much firepower, right, Mother?” said Buck. “Don’t worry, I brought the whole family. My SIG. And this guy.” He patted the holstered 45 on his hip. “And a snubby’s riding my ass.”

“Be careful, Mike. Where’s your vest?”

“I’m wearing it.” Buck shook his head. “Here, have a donut. You need something to calm you down.”

Elliot accepted the chocolate-covered gift and bit off a chunk. "You're right. You know me. I'm always tight before a raid."

Buck heard the gravel-voiced Sarge call out, "Red Team."

"Gotta go. Catch you at sun up." With that, Buck walked toward the large, heavy-jowled, black man dressed in a Chicago Police uniform who sat at the table sorting a pile of large manila envelopes; the man selected three envelopes and set them out on the table.

"Here you go, Buck. Read 'em and weep."

Ten minutes later, two beat cops in a blue-and-white drove into the supermarket parking lot and pulled up next to a man standing behind the open trunk of a car. They spotted the two Remington Model 870 sawed-off shotguns, fifty rounds of buckshot, an M-16, an H & K machine gun, and a large assortment of grenades. "Hey, shithead. What's up?" said the driver, a big guy with a smiling, black-sandpaper face.

The man pulled his head out of the trunk and, holding a shotgun in one hand, turned toward the cop car. "Wake-up call for some of your buddies."

The driver pulled back his smile. "Yeah. Who dat?"

"Watch the six o'clock news." Grabbing a vest, he slammed the trunk lid, turned, and walked away from them.

"Eat me, Gleason." The cop rolled up his window and pulled away. The old Chevy bounced through the parking lot and scraped its bottom noisily as it jumped over a curb on the way out.

Gleason muttered as he walked between the parked cars toward a small group of men. "Up yours too." Three of the five men held steaming cups of coffee. All wore body armor. Guns populated their bodies. The big one, six-three, two-eighty, wore a Bulls cap and a mottled hunting shirt under his vest. Night vision glasses dangled on a strap from his neck. Sipping his coffee, he watched Gleason approach.

"What's the matter, Chuckster? Your lookin' pissed."

Headlights of another car entering the lot washed Gleason's face. He squinted. "Hey, Andre. Cops are assholes."

"That's the team spirit, Chuckster. Of course, you forget you're a cop. Or at least you were until you joined us."

"Yeah. I know. It's the same old problem. Everybody wants in on everything, but nobody wants to lay it on the line."

"Friends from the Fourteenth?"

"Yeah. What's left."

The big, muscular black man offered him a coffee.

“Don’t sweat it,” said Andre. “They’re just jealous. That’s the way it is. You ready for the big one?”

Gleason gulped down the brew.

“Couldn’t sleep at all last night. I guess I’m a little bugged.”

“Shit. Nobody slept last night. Except maybe Buck,” said a little wiry guy in blue jeans and a grey sweatshirt who sat propped up on the blunt end of a device, which looked like a miniature Cruise missile with handles. “Don’t worry. You’ll do fine. After this, you’ll be a Task Force veteran.”

Gleason nodded. “OK, Rat. I’m with you.”

Rat reached up and poked Andre in the gut with his finger. “What happened to your Bullies last night? They stunk up the stadium.”

The big man looked down. “Got me. Still five over five hundred. No worries. Anyone can have an off-night.”

The little man tossed his empty cup on the ground. “Fuckin’ right.” He recognized another car that entered the lot. “Let’s go. Here comes Buck and Hansen.” Rat stood and let the heavy door-buster, which had served as his chair, fall, clanging to the ground.

They gathered their weapons and Kevlar vests and headed toward the group forming around the new arrival. Buck shut off the ignition and checked his watch before opening the car door: 4:15. They were running out of time, so he would keep it brief. He got out but left the door as a prop for his right arm. The other man in the car, Hansen, greying, tall, and bony, exited the other door and joined Buck around the vehicle. Seven cops and six agents, one a woman, faced the two men.

“OK, Red Team. Listen up.” He waited for the small talk to subside. “Glad you could make it. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to miss this one. Everything looks right for this thing to go down exactly as planned. You know your assignments. Three teams of five. Hansen, Andre, and I will take the lead. Your carriage awaits...” Buck pointed to the small moving van at the edge of the lot. “That should minimize the pipeline to the brothers. Pete and I will ride together in my car. We’re going to move in quietly. We want to take them all without a fight. Got it?”

He looked at each, one by one. While the clock ticked, some smoked, inhaling to the point of coughing; others, like Gleason, were beginning to hyperventilate; some just bounced on the balls of their feet. “Any questions?”

Gleason, the new man, cleared his throat first. “How many will there be?”

“Expect three or four adult males. We have warrants for Big Mo and Elvin Sanders. But figure there may be some women in there too. Just do it by the book. Take them one by one, and we’ll get it done.”

“How ‘bout Granny. You forgot her.” Rat laughed.

They all forced a laugh. Buck smiled and turned to Hansen.

“Pete...you want to do it?”

Hansen stepped forward, and everyone dropped their heads and went silent. “Heavenly Father. We pray you will watch over and protect us as we do our duty. We ask for your guidance and assistance to help us do what we have been trained to do, and we ask that you keep us from any harm. Amen.”

A chorus responded. “Amen.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

CHAPTER TWO

At Mike Buck's direction, the Task Force members headed toward the van slipping on their black and yellow raid jackets as they walked.

"Just like the Superbowl," said the rookie Gleason to Buck while adjusting the collar of his jacket.

Buck glanced back, ignoring the comment. The team gathered their equipment and loaded it. They all piled in the back except Andre, who drove, and Rat, who rode shotgun. Blue smoke filled the air as the engine started. Andre released the brake, and the purple truck claiming to be DB Movers motored out of the lot and advanced into the early-morning traffic. Buck and Hansen followed in the black Chevy. They headed south toward the high-rise projects, now visible as shadowed blocks, a half-mile distant beyond the Illinois Central Railroad tracks which paralleled the highway.

The lake to his left wore the faint pink glow of a coming day. He checked the luminous face of his watch. Thirty-five minutes to sunrise. Ahead, the truck rolling along the twisting, tree-lined boulevard pulled off at the first exit and headed west on the empty mean streets of Chicago's Southside. It bounced along a road littered with abandoned cars and lined on one side with ugly concrete apartment towers built for poor people but run by gangs.

"This is it," said Hansen. "Pull in."

Buck followed the van as it entered a service drive and parked behind one of the buildings. Men jumped out of the truck, grabbed weapons and equipment passed down to them, and slid into the night. Buck pulled in, and he and Hansen joined the action. Nobody spoke. They followed the plan which Buck had drilled into their heads. Two men stayed with the truck, and the other thirteen dodged through a junkyard of garbage and debris to the base of the massive building. One man waited at the elevator; two others covered the stair exits at either end of the stark, rectangular structure. The rest began the climb toward their eighth-floor destination.

Buck, Hansen, and three others, including Rat, climbed the south tower stairs, a convenient toilet for kids and a shoot-up place for addicts. In the darkness, Buck, the pathfinder, wore night-vision goggles. He climbed ahead, his flashlight toggling on and off only as necessary. Stepping onto the first riser of the stairs leading to the second floor, he spoke into his walkie-talkie, "Team One to Team Two. Second Floor."

"Confirm," voiced a muffled response through his earphone.

They climbed, stopping at each floor to coordinate their location with the other team.

Buck whispered into the mike. "Dropping one off on seven."

The walkie-talkie returned, "Confirm."

Buck's goggles allowed him to spot an empty pint bottle on the next stair tread. He placed it out of the way in the corner of the stair landing and looked back. The men behind, their flashlights brightening only a few feet ahead, made the turn on the landing below. Eighty feet of climbing and fearing unknown danger had them sweating and breathing heavily. He whispered to them. "Stay cool, boys. Almost there."

"Team One to Team Two. We're at eight. Sending one to nine. Switching to C-4 to call Mother. Hold your position."

"Confirm."

Buck adjusted the radio and checked his watch: four-fifty-seven. Four minutes to go. "Red Team to Mother."

A moment later, the radio crackled. "Mother here. Are you in position?"

"Red Team secure and ready for the countdown."

The Command Post logged in the other two teams. Buck checked his watch: ten seconds.

The radio spoke. "This is your Mother. Go."

"Red Team confirm." Buck switched back to the original frequency. "Bear to Andre. Let's roll."

"Affirmative."

Buck removed his goggles, and as he pulled the steel door open, a welcome blast of fresh air rushed past him. He poked his head out of the doorway. Flickering fluorescent lamps jumbled his view of the apartment access corridor. A graffiti-laden brick wall with weather-worn steel-framed doors and windows filled one side of his vision, and opposite, a patched, floor-to-ceiling chain-link fence allowed Buck a quick look at the sparse pre-rush hour traffic snaking along the expressway below.

Buck reached into his jacket and felt for the conspiracy-to-commit murder warrant, which outlined Maurice X. Jackson's criminal exploits as a gun runner, terrorist, and hitman. He knew Big Mo, who had a reputation for knowing his way around a courtroom, would try to get off on a technicality. But he had the warrant, and that made everything legal.

Buck strained to see the other team. Just then, he caught a glimpse of a Bulls cap and the bearded cherubic face of Andre, poking out of the north stairwell doorway a couple hundred feet ahead. Three flashes of a penlight, and Buck returned the recognition signal. He looked back at his team, giving them a thumbs-up. Hansen pursed his lips and nodded. The two teams moved out of the stairwells into the corridor, approaching each other like gunfighters on a narrow street. Andre cradled the heavy door-buster and proceeded toward Buck and Hansen. Buck orchestrated Andre, Hansen, and the others into position using hand signals only.

Andre stood directly in front of the gang's apartment door. Hansen, his face taut and his back against the wall, waited to the right, holding a sawed-off shotgun close to his armored chest. Buck gripped a flash-bang grenade in his right hand and moved to the left, hugging the wall. The other two flanked them. Water dripped from a rusty crack above into a small puddle. Reflected in the pool of water, a glint of light escaped from under the bottom of the door. Buck wondered about the light.

In a quiet voice, Buck spoke. "FBI. Open the door." He nodded at Hansen. Their administrative duties were now complete.

Then the light from under the door went dark. Buck motioned to Andre. At once, the big man moved into position. He swung the doorbuster back and, in a smooth pendulum motion, drove it forward, thudding into the door and banging it open. Buck ripped the pin on the stun grenade and tossed it into the apartment. A second later, it exploded. He raised his 45, and Hansen snapped off the wall, his shotgun pointed into the dark opening.

Inside, people yelled and screamed. Buck took the lead. His flashlight lit up the living room, revealing two men still groggy from the concussion of the flash-bang. One remained on a makeshift bed holding his head. The other stumbled as a cold wind drove through a broken window, flapping the cheap-yellowed curtains and swirling dust. The stale smell of old beer and fried food mixed with the grenade's unmistakable odor. Four team members were now in the apartment, and two others stood guard outside the door. Buck signaled Andre and Rat to take the two stunned gangbangers as he and Hansen took defensive positions in the hallway leading to the bedrooms. Andre grabbed the standing man by the neck and squeezed, tossing him to the floor, then slammed his knee into the man's back and applied flexi-cuffs. The two men were also bound at the knees and ankles. The concussion grenade did its job, as neither captive offered resistance.

Less than a minute had passed since the explosion. The two unidentified men now lay face down in the center of the room guarded by Rat and his shotgun.

No human sounds could be heard other than the quiet moans of the two captives in the living room. The three law enforcement officers eased down the hallway having just enough daylight to approach without flashlights. Nearing the first door, Buck leaned against the corridor wall with the others close behind. He could hear someone inside the room.

"Comin' out, comin' out." said a deep voice.

"Hands in front. Come out. One at a time. Slowly," said Buck.

"There's just me, gentlemen. Just me."

All three hundred pounds of Big Mo appeared at the door. Arms in front of him, the fingers of both pudgy hands spread wide, he smiled at the two men holding guns to either side of his head. Andre took hold of the man while Buck checked the bedroom—empty.

“Where’s Elvin, Mo?” asked Buck, using his pointed 45 for emphasis.

The illustrious ruler of the Stateville Boyz continued to smile. “I’m not in charge of bed checks, Mr. Bossman. I ain’t done nothin’. Just tryin’ to sleep. I want my lawyer.”

Buck nodded at Andre, who waltzed Big Mo down the corridor. Hansen took the lead, with Buck following. The situation became more dangerous, with each step bringing them closer to the end of the hall. The two agents leaned against the wall separating them from the last bedroom. Hansen readied his shotgun. Buck held his 45 in one hand; his other had the 9 mm.

Big Mo was protesting in the living room. “No rough stuff now. I’m cooperating.” By now, Mo had been cuffed and laid next to his brothers. Mid-sentence, Mo stopped talking. Andre must have shoved the barrel of a shotgun into his neck.

Something caught Buck’s eye. A dirty sock or a dead rat lay limp in the crusty corner of the corridor. They listened but heard nothing. Hints of daylight drifted through the open doorway like a grey mist, a peaceful dangerous illusion. Buck reacted to Hansen’s nudge with a nod of his head. Then Hansen popped the grenade into the room, and the resulting teeth-rattling explosion shook the apartment’s walls. Hansen leaped out, his back against the opposite corridor wall, body in a crouch with the shotgun leveled at the room. A gun fired with a flash of light. A bullet chipped the paint off the steel frame to the right of Hansen’s face. He fired two quick blasts into the bedroom. A cry of pain filled the air as Hansen stood motionless, peering into the smoke-filled room. Buck reacted. He reached out, shoved Hansen to the floor, and returned to his original position. Another shot rang out. Lead slammed into the wall Buck leaned against. The slug passed through, missing him by inches, and lodged in the opposite corridor wall.

Buck let out a war whoop and spun off the wall extending his guns before him. Both were in action as soon as they cleared the jamb. He stood in the doorway, blasting the interior of the bedroom, spraying a murderous mass of projectiles. He saw the man in the corner standing on the bed for a moment, then the fusillade filled the man’s chest with holes in a tight, bloody pattern. His body landed facedown on the floor. Buck, weapons still extended, swept the room, looking for another target. Finding none, he let his arms drop to his side. In the eerie silence, he felt electrified. Blood pounded inside his head, and continuous ringing overwhelmed all other sounds. Hansen touched his shaking right arm.

Buck didn’t respond. He stared at the floor and the young man lying in a heap. Blood covered his back and oozed out of the open flesh, once covered by a tight-fitting, green T-shirt. Bullet holes had chewed the walls and pockmarked the window glass. The perp’s weapon, a black semi-auto, lay on the floor, evidence that would remain in place for others to record. An incoming breeze blew back the sour smell of the dead man’s discharged bowels.

Andre examined the two bullet holes made by the perp's gun, entered the bedroom, and approached Buck. He spoke, almost whispering, "He's dead, Mike. Relax."

Buck gathered his senses. Andre's calming words fought with the intense ringing in his head. He broke out of his trance. Slowly and carefully, he re-holstered his weapons.

"Mike, you OK?"

This time Buck heard Hansen. "Yeah. You?"

"I'm all right," Hansen replied quietly, then he raised his voice. "But what were you doing? I had control."

Buck digested his partner's words. He understood but expected more, something in the way of thanks. Hansen's ego was bruised, and he lashed out, unable to admit his mistake. Buck didn't care if the others heard him; his life was on the line too. Frustrated and straining to overcome his damaged hearing, he almost shouted. "Pete. You froze. OK? You're lucky I got you out of the way. I saved your ass."

Seconds passed, and neither man spoke. Buck's indictment hung in the air.

Hansen's face reddened. "I didn't freeze. I don't work for you, Buck. We're supposed to be partners."

Buck ignored him. They walked together down the hallway; Buck knew they were finished as partners.

Hansen continued as he walked behind Buck. "Don't go off on me because you lost your last partner. I'm not Barrett, and I didn't screw up."

Buck didn't respond.