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For MG 

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PROLOGUE

The Amazon jungle. Fifteen years ago.

It had taken them five days to make the journey, cutting their way through the dense, suffocating undergrowth, fighting through the very air, which hung heavy, moist and still. Trees as tall as cathedrals surrounded them, and a strange, green light – almost holy – shimmered through the vast canopy of leaves. The rainforest seemed to have an intelligence of its own. Its voice was the sudden screech of a parrot, the flicker of a monkey swinging through the branches overhead. It knew they were there.

But so far they had been lucky. They had been attacked, of course, by leeches and mosquitoes and stinging ants. But the snakes and scorpions had left them alone. The rivers they had crossed

had been free of piranhas. They had been allowed to go on.

They were travelling light. They carried with them only their basic rations: map, compass, water bottles, iodine tablets, mosquito nets and machetes. Their single heaviest item was the 88 Winchester rifle with Sniperscope that they were going to use to kill the man who lived here in this impenetrable place, one hundred miles south of Iquitos in Peru.

The two men knew each other's names but never used them. It was part of their training. The older of the two called himself Hunter. He was English, although he spoke seven languages so fluently that he could pass himself off as a native of many of the countries he found himself in. He was about thirty, handsome, with the close-cut hair and watchful eyes of a trained soldier. The other man was slim, fair-haired and twitching with nervous energy. He had chosen the name of Cossack. He was just nineteen years old. This was his first kill.

Both men were dressed in khaki – standard jungle camouflage. Their faces were also painted green, with dark brown stripes across their cheeks. They had reached their destination just as the sun had begun to rise, and were standing there now, utterly still, ignoring the insects that buzzed around their faces, tasting their sweat.

In front of them was a clearing, man-made, separated from the jungle by a ten metre high fence. An elegant colonial house with wooden verandas and shutters, white curtains and slowly rotating fans stood at the heart of it, with two more low brick buildings about twenty metres behind. Accommodation for the guards. There must have been about a dozen of them patrolling the perimeter and watching from rusting metal towers. Perhaps there were more inside. But they were lazy. They were shuffling around, not concentrating on what they were supposed to be doing. They were in the middle of the jungle. They thought they were safe.

A four-seater helicopter stood waiting on a square of asphalt. It would take the owner of the house just twenty steps to walk from the front door to the helicopter. That was the only time he would be visible. That was when he would have to die.

The two men knew the name of the man they had come to kill, but they didn't use that either. Cossack had spoken it once but Hunter had corrected him.

"Never call a target by his real name. It personalizes him. It opens a door into his life and, when the time comes, it may remind you what you are doing and make you hesitate."

Just one of the many lessons Cossack had learnt

from Hunter. They referred to the target only as the Commander. He was a military man – or he had been. He still liked to wear military-style clothes. With so many bodyguards he was in command of a small army. The name suited him.

The Commander was not a good man. He was a drug dealer, exporting cocaine on a massive scale. He also controlled one of the most vicious gangs in Peru, torturing and killing anyone who got in his way. But all this meant nothing to Hunter and Cossack. They were here because they had been paid twenty thousand pounds to take him out – and if the Commander had been a doctor or a priest it would have made no difference to them.

Hunter glanced at his watch. It was two minutes to eight in the morning and he had been told the Commander would be leaving for Lima on the hour. He also knew that the Commander was a punctual man. He loaded a single .308 cartridge into the Winchester and adjusted the Sniperscope. One shot was all he would need.

Meanwhile Cossack had taken out his field glasses and was scanning the compound for any sign of movement. The younger man was not afraid, but he was tense and excited. A trickle of perspiration curved behind his ear and ran down his neck. His mouth was dry. Something tapped gently against

his back and he wondered if Hunter had touched him, warning him to stay calm. But Hunter was some distance away, concentrating on the gun.

Something moved.

Cossack only knew for certain it was there when it climbed over his shoulder and onto his neck – and by then it was too late. Very slowly, he turned his head. And there it was, at the very edge of his field of vision. A spider, clinging to the side of his neck, just underneath the line of his chin. He swallowed. From the weight of it he had thought it was a tarantula – but this was worse, much worse. It was very black with a small head and an obscene, swollen body, like a fruit about to burst. He knew that if he could have turned it over, he would have found a red hourglass marking on its abdomen.

It was a black widow. Latrodectus curacaviensis. One of the deadliest spiders in the world.

The spider moved, its front legs reaching out so that one was almost touching the corner of Cossack's mouth. The other legs were still attached to his neck, with the main body of the spider now hanging under his jaw. He wanted to swallow again but he didn't dare. Any movement might alarm the creature, which anyway needed no excuse to attack. Cossack guessed that this was the female of the species: a thousand times worse than the

male. If it decided to bite him, its hollow fangs would inject him with a neurotoxic venom which would paralyse his entire nervous system. He would feel nothing at first. There would just be two tiny red pricks on his skin. The pain – waves of it – would come in about an hour. His eyelids would swell. He would be unable to breathe. He would go into convulsions. Almost certainly he would die.

Cossack considered raising a hand and trying to flick the hideous thing off. If it had been anywhere else on his body he might have taken the chance. But it had settled on his throat, as if fascinated by the pulse it had found there. He wanted to call to Hunter, but he couldn't risk moving the muscles in his neck. He was barely breathing. Hunter was still making the final adjustments, unaware of what was going on. What could he do?

In the end he whistled. It was the only sound he dared make. He was horribly aware of the creature hanging off him. He felt the prick of another leg, this time touching his lip. Was it about to climb onto his face?

Hunter looked round and saw at once that something was wrong. Cossack was standing unnaturally still, his head contorted, his face, underneath the paint, completely white. Hunter took a step so that Cossack now stood between him and the compound.

He had lowered the rifle, the muzzle pointing towards the ground.

Hunter saw the spider.

At the same moment, the door of the house opened and the Commander came out: a short, plump man dressed in a dark tunic hanging open at the collar. Unshaven, he was carrying a briefcase and smoking a cigarette.

Twenty steps to the helicopter – and he was already moving briskly, talking to the two bodyguards who accompanied him. Cossack's eyes flickered over to Hunter. He knew the organization that had employed them would not forgive failure, and this was the only chance they would get. The spider moved again and, looking down, Cossack saw its head: a cluster of tiny, gleaming eyes – half a dozen of them – gazing up at him, uglier than anything in the world. His skin was itching. The whole side of his face wanted to peel itself away. But he knew that there was nothing Hunter could do. He had to fire now. The Commander was only ten steps away from the helicopter. The blades were already turning. Cossack wanted to scream at him. Do it! The sound of the gunshot would frighten the spider and it would bite. But that wasn't important. The mission had to succeed.

It took Hunter less than two seconds to make a decision. He could use the tip of the gun to brush away the black widow. He might succeed in getting rid of it before it bit Cossack. But by then the Commander would be in his helicopter, behind bullet-proof glass. Or he could shoot the Commander. But once he had fired the gun, he would have to turn and run immediately, disappear into the jungle. There would be no time to help Cossack; there would be nothing he could do.

He made his decision, swept up the gun, aimed and fired.

The bullet, white-hot, flashed past, cutting a line in Cossack's neck. The black widow disintegrated instantly, blown apart by the force of the shot. The bullet continued across the clearing and through the fence and – still carrying tiny fragments of the black widow with it – buried itself in the Commander's chest. The Commander had been about to climb into the helicopter. He stopped as if surprised, put a hand to his heart, and crumpled. The bodyguards twisted round, shouting, staring into the jungle, trying to see the enemy.

But Hunter and Cossack had already gone. The jungle swallowed them in seconds, although it was more than an hour before they stopped to catch their breath.

Cossack was bleeding. There was a red line that could have been drawn with a ruler across the side of his neck, and the blood had seeped down, soaking into his shirt. But the black widow hadn't bitten him. He held out a hand, accepting a water bottle from Hunter, and drank.

"You saved my life," he said.

Hunter considered. "To take a life and save a life with one bullet … that's not bad going."

Cossack would have the scar for the rest of his life. But that would not be a very long time. The life of the professional assassin is often short. Hunter would die first, in another country, on another mission. Later it would be his turn.

Right now he said nothing. They had done their job. That was all that mattered. He gave back the water bottle, and as the sun beat down and the jungle watched and reflected upon what had happened, the two men set off together, cutting and hacking their way through the mid-morning heat of another day.