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DEATH IN THE DESERT

JIM ELDRIDGE

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1

As Mitch fell from the plane, the exhilaration of flying hit him. He felt that sudden blast of air ripping at his body as gravity took over.

'When you're jumping at night you have to be visible for three miles in any direction,' his instructor had once told him. That was then. Tonight, his life depended on being invisible. The same went for his comrades.

Mitch brought his legs together and his arms to his sides and rocketed down to the two men who were plummeting towards the Earth below. When he came level with them he opened his arms and legs wide to slow himself, and gripped hands with Gaz on his left and Two Moons on his right to complete the triangular formation. Benny's Texan

accent came through the earpiece in his helmet. 'OK, guys. Point of no return. Take it down to 2,000 feet, then separate and open the chutes. We'll keep radio silence from now until you hit the ground. Next contact after the plastic's ready to blow.'

And then there was quiet. The three special-forces soldiers flew downwards through the darkness, riding the air. The sensation of flying was so incredible it was hard to remember they were actually falling at 120 miles per hour.

Below, the outside walls of the castle glowed orange, lit by security lights. Mitch checked the digital display of the altimeter on his wrist, watching the numbers go down. At just the right moment, the men released their grip and moved apart, ready to open their chutes.

Mitch pulled the pilot chute from the bottom of his rig. There was a second's delay while it caught the wind, then it pulled the main chute out. He felt the G-force of deceleration as he slowed to twelve miles per hour. Then he was floating, pulling on the

toggles that would steer him directly over the dark surrounds of the castle.

Mitch hit the ground and rolled, hauling his parachute in fast. He heard growling and the thud of running paws: three guard dogs were coming at him, jaws open, their vicious teeth glinting in the moonlight. He pulled out the tranquiliser gun and fired, and the leading dog crumpled to the ground, then lay still. The other dogs also collapsed as Gaz and Two Moons appeared, holstering their own tranquiliser guns. The dogs would be out for about half an hour.

'Right, let's move,' whispered Two Moons.

The three of them made for the castle and then spread out along the front of the building. As he ran, Mitch took the pack from his back and opened it, revealing the explosives inside.

Reaching the castle wall, he worked swiftly, pressing explosives against the stone and at points in the enormous ground-floor windows. When the explosives went off they would take out the

supports, leaving the lintel straining under the enormous weight above. If the other guys had fixed their explosives correctly, the stone alcove would come crashing down when they blew. Mitch pushed the detonators into place in the plastic, and then headed for the high outer wall.

Suddenly Mitch sensed a movement to his right. He ducked just in time as a metal bar whistled past his head, glinting in the dim light. Mitch dropped and kicked out at the man, smashing his heel into the side of his assailant's knee. As the man let out a yell of pain, Mitch jumped up and ran for the wall. He could see Two Moons and Gaz already on their way.

Search lights now illuminated the whole area. A voice boomed out from a loud speaker: 'Stop where you are or you will be shot!'

Mitch, Gaz and Two Moons stopped and looked at each other expectantly. From the castle came shouts and the sound of running feet. Armed men were spilling out from the doors.

In Mitch's earpiece, Benny's voice called out, 'What's happening? Situation report!'

Mitch took a deep breath, then said firmly into his mic, 'Plastic's in position! Blow the place up!'