

PROLOGUE

A cold March darkness descended over the Colorado mountains. Violent winds banked a caldron of clouds across the sky and slammed sheets of rain into the trees as if intentionally trying to destroy them. The deluge stung Garrison's skin as he crept through the forest and eyed the armed soldiers patrolling the compound. He had tried to purge his self-doubts, but the overwhelming odds against him had formed an indestructible barrier of dread.

There he is! Garrison gasped when he saw his target round the corner of the building. He instantly knew he was in trouble. The construction foreman passing in front of him was gigantic. Standing six feet, six inches and wearing a Patagonia rain suit, the giant looked like a granite mountain carved into human form. Garrison tried to breathe, force his muscles to move. *He had to move!* Another twenty seconds and the foreman would circle into the halogen lights of the compound. *He could not let that happen!*

Garrison edged out of the shadows and drew closer.

Now!

He lunged forward covering fifteen yards in four steps. He rammed the larger man to unbalance him and seized a sleeper-hold around the twenty-inch neck.

The surprise attack didn't work. The foreman wielded his two hundred and fifty pounds like a well-honed weapon. He lurched forward pulling Garrison off his feet, then like the Greco-Roman wrestler, threw his weight back into the hold. Both men tumbled backward.

In mid air, there was no time to parry the move. Garrison leaned into the fall, the action barely saving his ribs from being crushed by the weight of the giant. Instead, his shoulder led the fall into the mud. It went instantly numb with fiery pain. The hulk slammed his head backwards catching Garrison in the face. A gash erupted across his cheek, a spray of blood flooding into his eyes. The giant's second blow shattered his nose—the snapping sounds of cartilage exploded like gunfire inside Garrison's head.

Desperation triggered a surge of adrenaline. He ratcheted the sleeper hold and locked it by throwing his weight forward.

The foreman writhed, lashing out with his legs. The bone-splintering kicks hammered into Garrison's shins. *Hold on!*

The foreman found his voice and yelled out.

No! Garrison dug his fingers into the man's larynx, choking off the words. The giant jerked spasmodically. Then again. *He's weakening. Hold on!*

Twenty seconds later, the giant fell limp—the reduced flow of blood to his brain rendering him unconscious. Garrison rolled away and lay gasping for breath. Rain washed the blood from face; it both soothed and stung the gash. He ran his fingers along the bridge of his nose. It was definitely broken, but not a compound fracture. Either way, it would have to be forgotten.

He struggled to his feet and looked down. Lying, sprawled before him was two

hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight—weight that he'd have to move. He'd made a mistake, he thought . . . If the foreman woke up, he'd never subdue him a second time.

Garrison readied himself and gripped the collar of the foreman's raincoat. Jerking backwards three feet at a time, he dragged the unconscious man in the trees.

The muscles in Garrison's legs and biceps seized after traversing seventy yards. He could go no further. He dropped the limp body facing a pine tree, and using strips of material cut from the lining of the foreman's coat, tied the bulky arms and legs around the trunk. He shoved material into the man's mouth, tied it in place, and rechecked the knots. Secure.

Now it was time to kill the lights.

He sprinted into the compound toward the first of the three generators.

He removed the caps of the diesel and oil reservoirs and scooped handfuls mud into the cavities, adding several pebbles for extra assurance.

Replacing the caps, he raced for the second generator a hundred yards to the east.

He was running out of time!

He ducked under a branch and stopped abruptly. Ten feet away, a guard, looking like an angry sea lion in his sleek raincoat, stood towering over the generator—his rifle held in position as he scanned the shadows. He was smoking a cigarette, and made no move to help the electrician who was dragging a heavy roll of cable into position.

Garrison swore under his breath. His thoughts raced . . . but there was only one option. He inched his way to the ground and felt for an improvised weapon. He could wait sixty seconds. After that he had no choice—he had to attack.

The electrician patched the cable into the generator and picked up the coil. He

shot an irritated look at the soldier who made no move to help. “You want to give me a light here?”

The soldier grumbled, tossed his cigarette aside, and switched on a flashlight. He went ahead, taking the lead into the compound. The electrician followed, letting the coil unravel three feet at a time.

Thank God! The instant the men vanished into the shadows, Garrison leapt to the generator and shoved handfuls of mud into the reservoirs.

At the last of the power-makers, the machine that gave life to the compound’s exterior lights, Garrison opened the oil cap and set it aside. But he had to wait. *Timing had to be perfect!*

In the distance, he could hear the other two generators—pulses of power surging through the units, struggling to keep them operating despite the alien material that had invaded them. At last, one machine pulsated a final time and heaved a piston through the metal wall.

A chorus of shouts rattled through the compound. Soldiers rushed from their posts to investigate. Two minutes later, the second generator clanged to its mechanical death.

Scott shoved a handful of pebbles into the openings of the last generator, and pulled the twelve connecting cables from their receptacles. The compound crashed into instant blackness as every field lamp went dark. Soldiers clicked on flashlights, but the beams created only useless spits of light.

“Nothing drains the courage from a man more than confusion combined with darkness.” Soaring High Eagle. Garrison’s mentor had taught him that an untrained man denied even one of their senses could be rendered impotent in an emergency.

Scott rushed past the soldiers toward the southern point of the compound. He approached a green-painted backhoe tractor and pulled himself into the cab. The key was in the ignition, but he didn't touch it. Not yet.

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The sleek helicopter crept over the lip of the arena and hovered ten feet above the landing pad. Its rotors whipped the rain around it in a cacophonous frenzy. The pilots peered out their windows, uncertain about the darkened situation beneath them.

Do it. Do it. Do it! Garrison roared silently, trying to force his thoughts through the metal hull. As if obeying his command, the aircraft began to descend.

Garrison plunged his foot against the clutch pedal and wrenched the key. On the fourth crank the tractor roared to life. He pulled the closest knobbed lever, and in front of him the hinged dirt-scooping bucket smashed into the ground. *The other way, damnit!* He shoved the lever forward and hydraulic juices flooded the mechanical arteries. The bucket jerked upward until it was twenty feet above ground. Garrison jammed the tractor into gear and released the clutch. The machine lurched forward.

Thirty yards ahead, the aircraft was settling onto the helipad—interior lights revealed the concerned pilots. One of them flipped a switch on the dash and powerful spotlights streaked from a recess in the hull, illuminating the surrounding forest. At that instant, the pilot saw the tractor barreling toward him.

Twenty yards.

Garrison switched gears and pressed the accelerator to the floor. He stood out of the seat trying to time his escape. Directly over the hood, he saw too late, the cavernous

hole—remnants of an uprooted tree. The violent jolt ripped the steering wheel from his hands and tossed him into the controls.

Ten yards!

The tractor rocked back to four wheels and swerved wildly to the right. Scott steadied himself and corrected the course. The front of the machine bucked over another rut, and when the rear tires hit it, Garrison jumped. The jarring backlash catapulted him into the air. He crumbled to the ground knocking the breath from his lungs. He pulled his legs to his chest and covered his head. There was nothing else he could do.

The extended arm of the tractor took the violent impact of the helicopter blade. The explosion of metal against metal was deafening. A sheared piece of rotor slammed into the ground near Garrison's feet and ricocheted over him slicing through a pocket of aspen trees. He looked forward in horror as the back end of the helicopter whipped around in an inevitable revolution. He threw his body to the left. Two inches spared his life. The spinning tail blades careened past him and pounded broadside into the tractor. The aircraft spotlights exploded in a shower of sparks. The impact flung both machines into the darkness as if roughly treated children's toys. Seconds later, it was silent.

All except the terrified screams of the pilots inside.