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FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER
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The killer, like many assassins, came in the night.

The distant, echoing boom of gunfire and the lazy but deadly arc of machine guns' tracer rounds seeking out their target across the windswept countryside would help hide his presence. And tonight would be one of his easiest assignments. His victim was a fifteen-year-old boy, so he was in no doubt as to the success of his night's work.

He checked his watch. His timing was good. He was in position. First choice: make it look like an accident - a broken neck. Second choice: a shot to the head and dispose of the body. It made no difference to him. The wind had veered from the east to the north - there was a colder bite to it and he thought of the soldiers lying out there on the waterlogged ground. They would not have slept for days and, with almost constant gunfire and the demands of patrolling, exhaustion and the cold would have eaten into them. Not him, though; his zipped roll-neck was mohair and his topcoat a padded Timberland (no external Gore-Tex to make any rustling sound) and his Rockport boots were waterproof. It was good kit that kept his muscles warm and ready to move in that split second when speed and agility were needed. The killer's random thoughts eased away the remaining few minutes until his target would appear.

The steady chattering of the soldiers' machine guns, a couple of kilometres away, was a comfort to him, the staccato rhythm like music to his ears. The ground-sucking crump of mortar fire and the thud of distant artillery blended in his senses. Some of his happiest days as a soldier had been spent killing, but nowadays he offered a more personal service in his lucrative trade of murder. He was being paid impressive money for this job - so, whoever this kid was, someone badly wanted him dead. He checked his watch again, and then eased a 9-mm semi-automatic pistol from his waistband - better to have it ready.

Out in the darkness, a few minutes away from where the killer waited, fifteen-year-old Max Gordon jogged along the thin strip of tarmac. His dad had been right in sending him to school here; these past three years had built up his strength and agility, and he'd decided to enter for one of the junior triathlon contests: extreme sports were the real test of nerve and skill. Next year there would be a Junior X-treme Competition in the French Pyrenees and Max wanted to compete in the downhill mountain-bike race, snowboarding and wildwater kayaking - every one a big adrenalin rush. He knew it was ambitious, but he had the stamina and physical strength now. These extra late-night training runs were paying off. Although it was nearly pitch black, especially when the North Atlantic weather fronts roared in from the coast, there was always enough ambient light to see the tarmac ribbon guiding him around the dinosaur-like boulders.

His breathing settled as he locked into a perfect pace. Across the landscape firepower criss-crossed the night. Explosions were much further away and parachute flares jiggled ineffectively in the sky as the buffeting wind swept them away. But he was safe where he was. The commandos and paratroopers were in a designated training area and were no threat to him here. Another four kilometres on the loop back and he'd turn for home, have a hot shower and then bed.

Then he heard a sound that didn't belong. Instincts focused his senses. A soft metallic click - about twenty metres ahead. There was a curved bowl worn away into the hillside, probably made by animals seeking shelter over the years, and that's where the noise had come from. Max knew there shouldn't be any soldiers about here and caution slowed his pace. The wind had shifted slightly, to dead ahead, and that was why he had heard the noise. Like a car door being pressed gently closed. Or an automatic pistol being cocked. He knew that sound well enough.

In less time than it took to think, he veered off the road and into the gorse, putting on a turn of speed and feeling the needle-sharp foliage scratching his legs. Just as he glanced back, a shadow moved from behind a sheltering boulder and then disappeared again. Whoever was out there knew what he was doing, and there was no doubt in Max's mind that the shadow was after him.

He pounded across the dangerously uneven ground, risking a twisted or broken ankle. A fall would put him at the mercy of whoever was chasing him, but he had no choice - he needed to put distance between himself and his pursuer. Arms pumping, eyes streaming with tears from the cold, he glanced around and saw the blurred shadow coming at an angle towards him, but it looked as though the man's bulky clothing was slowing him down. Max was heading straight into the military danger zone - the terrifying crackle of gunfire ahead of him was louder than he'd ever heard it before and the lethal stream of bullets scythed across the sky; he ducked instinctively from the ripped air above his head.

Another quick look over his shoulder told him that the shadow had gone, but then Max lost his footing. Stumbling, he fell; his arm scraped granite and flint, and the raw pain made him yelp. He rolled and scrambled to his feet again - but now in almost complete darkness. The machine-gun firing had stopped; the artillery and mortars had fallen silent. He was running into a black void where the low, ground-hugging fug of smoke stung his eyes and the acrid taste of cordite burned the back of his throat. It was like the aftermath of a massive fireworks display - except these fireworks could rip you apart. He realized, too late, that he'd underestimated the shadow pursuing him. He thought he could outrun him but the man had cut

behind him, keeping himself out of sight, and Max could still hear the thump of his feet, getting closer now. Desperation powered him on, his feet came free of the gorse and found a scratch of track through the bracken. Sucking in as much air as his lungs could bear, he ran blindly onwards. The whiplash of a bullet cracked past his ear, followed almost immediately by the sound of the gunshot from behind him. No doubt now - his pursuer was out to kill. Max felt his legs give a little, but that was the ground falling away into a dip. And the man behind him was getting closer, homing right in on his target like a heat-seeking missile.

Max ducked and weaved and then he almost cried out in fright as the night sky exploded. A criss-cross of tracer tore low across the sky, and a part of his brain told him that these were fixed-position machine guns, sweeping arcs of fire. Thousands of rounds a minute were perforating the darkness, less than a metre above his head. He was in what the soldiers called 'dead ground', a belly dip in the earth where bullets couldn't reach him, only now the ground was rising again.

Thoughts raced through his mind. Run? Fall? Crawl? Too late. He had to make a run for it. As he reached the crest he felt a powerful thud into his back as the killer tackled him, and the weight carried him, face down, into the gorse and bog. Max squirmed and fought until he'd twisted his body under the man, who then sat on his chest, pinning Max's arms with his knees. The pain bit into his biceps but he couldn't buck the man off.

The dull glint of the pistol nestled next to his face reflected the crimson gun flashes and explosions around them. The assassin was catching his breath; his eyes stayed firmly on Max's face. Cold, relentless eyes. Max knew in that instant that the man had no feelings, so nothing he could say would stop him. More than anything else, the killer was irritated. He had a job to do and this kid had taken him by surprise. The boy was kicking and bucking, and he was stronger than the man had thought, but he had him pinned. He put the pistol on the ground next to the boy's face so there was no chance of him reaching it. He'd break his neck, that'd save him the bother of disposing of the body. A bad fall against these rocks would look like an accident.

Max was gagging, losing consciousness as the man's hand palmed his face sideways into the stench of the bogland sludge. Lights were flickering in his head - explosions of pain - but he didn't know whether it was him dying or the army's firepower above him. The killer held Max's head with both hands, ready to twist and snap his neck.

And then suddenly it felt as if a tremendous gust of wind swept the man from Max's chest. It whipped him away, but, as it did, something splattered across Max's face. It wasn't the cold sting of rain, it was

warm - the man's blood. Sitting on Max's chest he'd pushed himself above the skyline and exposed himself to the machine-gun fire. One round in three was red tracer, and there was a lot of red tracer tonight. It smashed the killer's body, pulverizing bone and muscle, the rounds burning his clothing.

For a moment Max was numb. This was a surreal glimpse into hell. He got to his knees, felt for his throat and gulped in air, tasting the dull, metallic stench of blood. He had to get out of here. The noise was deafening now. He gazed, mesmerized, across the black void in front of him, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car, unable to move, watching as the red fingers of death swung back towards him.

A shape loomed out of the darkness and what felt like a lorry smashing into his chest knocked all the wind out of him as his back thumped into the ground. Barely conscious, he was aware of fleeting images: the feel of the rough material of a soldier's camouflage jacket, the dim sight of his white-edged eyes in a face streaked with camouflage cream beneath his helmet, and the far-off sound of his voice yelling 'Cease fire! CEASE FIRE!'

Max sank into a black, silent, bottomless pool.

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