

BARRICADED SUSPECT

AS I APPROACHED I heard a uniformed sheriff's captain screaming into his cell phone.

"The shit just jumped off! We got an active shooter and a deputy down. I need an incident commander and a Special Enforcement Bureau team on site now! There's an SRT unit here, but they're pinned down across the street. They're not on our frequency, so I can't communicate with them."

Just then, a four-vehicle sheriff's SEB convoy rolled in, sirens wailing, flashers on. The SWAT van squealed to a stop near the three sheriff's vehicles already parked in the center of the cul-de-sac. Two deputy cars and an armored rescue vehicle, an ARV, followed. I had done some cross-training with the LASD at their facility in Spring Ranch, so I knew how they were set up. Special Weapons Teams were comprised of a team leader, usually a

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sergeant, the second in command was a scout, who did the onsite tactical operation plan. A back-up scout assisted him. The fourth man stayed at the truck to gather intelligence. The fifth and sixth men were responsible for equipment. There were two snipers, called long guns. The weapon of choice for the long guns was a Tango 51 or its predecessor, the 40-X. Both rifles fired armor-piercing .308s. Each long gun had a spotter with him to help isolate targets and to give him tactical support and cover.

The team leader unlocked the SWAT van and the long guns swarmed inside to grab their weapons while the backup scout started passing out flash-bang grenades.

The fourth man opened the office on the side of the truck where the incident board and the weapons team roster hung. He pulled out a graphed Lucite desktop, grabbed a piece of paper, and started to diagram the house and the cul-de-sac, eyeballing it from where he stood, doing a rough but reasonably accurate layout, including all the vehicles parked on the street.

"Get in touch with the city planning office and see if you can get somebody to fax us the plans of this house," the fourth man said to the fifth.

Just then the barricaded suspect popped up again in an upstairs window, firing his AK-47. From where I was hiding, it looked like the weapon held a hundred-round drum mag. The slugs started tearing up the police cars out front and blowing holes in the brick walls where deputies were prone out trying to take cover.

The team leader grabbed his shoulder mike. "All deputies on this channel, get back! You aren't safe. This guy's using lead core rounds. You can't hide behind walls or car doors. Get behind a house, or at least find an engine block."

He opened an ammo box and started handing out .308 mags. His two long rifles and spotters jammed the clips home, then deployed quickly, running low, looking for a good place to set up shop. I ran up to the SWAT van, took cover, then glanced at

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the team roster clipped to the door. This was the Gray team. The team leader, Sergeant Scott Cook; scout, Rick Manos; first long gun, Gary Nightingale; and spotter, Michael Nightingale. *Brothers?* As I was reading the board the fourth man spun me roughly around.

"Who the fuck are you, Chester?"

"Scully. LAPD."

"Get lost. This ain't your rodeo."

I held up my Beretta. "This guy's in Kevlar. My nines are useless. Can I borrow some Teflon rounds?"

"Shit," he said, but turned, grabbed a box, and tossed it to me. "Stay behind something dense. Those lead cores he's using are brutal."

"Right."

I moved away and ducked down behind the engine compartment of a sheriff's car. The deputies pinned behind the brick wall were trying to retreat, but every thirty seconds or so the shooter would appear in another window of his house and start firing. His twenty-round bursts tore up everything they hit. I knelt and thumbed the useless, standard 9 mm Winchesters out of my clip, then started feeding in the Teflon mag rounds. Once I had all thirteen loaded, I slammed the clip home, chambered the gun, then peeked up over the hood of the car. Emo was still up on the porch. It didn't look like he'd moved at all. Nobody had the stones to try and go up there. If you made a run and timed it wrong, it was pretty much suicide. You were gonna get chopped in half by that AK.

I told myself that even though Emo wasn't moving, it didn't mean he was dead.

Ten yards away I spotted Sonny Lopez crouched down behind a squad car with another deputy. Both held shotguns at port arms. Their Ithacas were useless in this situation, and you could tell from their strained expressions that they knew it. I moved up from behind and tapped Sonny on the shoulder.

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He jerked around to look at me. His face was pulled tight. "Scully, whatta you doin' here?"

"Not to be a critic, but shouldn't we go get our guy off the porch?"

"Can't. The perp's got armor-piercing shit. He's blowing holes right through car doors. We're calling for more backup."

"Why doesn't somebody get him on a cell phone, try and cool this down?"

"The lieutenant tried talking to him. Guy won't come out. An incident commander's on his way. Captain Matthews wants to sit tight and wait for him."

Then, in an attempt to explain why all these cops were on their faces eating dirt, Sonny added, "This asshole's nuts," which was more or less obvious.

"Look, that's Emo Rojas up there, right?" I said.

"You know him?"

"Yeah. If we could get one of those two SWAT teams to work the right side of the house, maybe they could draw the guy over there and you and I could make a run and pull Emo off the porch."

"You outta your mind?" Lopez said.

"Probably," I answered. "Wanta try it?"

He thought about it for a moment, looked skeptically toward the house.

Just then the shooter popped up again. He was upstairs this time, and let go with a five-second burst, aiming at the squad car we were hiding behind. The black and white rocked hard with the impact from a stream of lead that sliced through the door panels like they were plywood. Windshield glass and side mirrors shattered and flew. Then the man ducked back down. It seemed to help Sonny make up his mind.

"Let's go," he said hotly. "Lemme get my Loo to sign off on it." He moved off to find his lieutenant.

There was walkie-talkie madness all around me. People

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screaming, shouting counter-instructions, stepping on each others' transmissions. While all this was happening, I decided if I was going to try to get Emo off that porch, I was going to need some better intel. I looked up and saw that there were now three news helicopters swirling overhead. Pinned down, I couldn't really risk rising up to case the situation. I looked behind me. The neighbors' houses across the street had all been evacuated. I waited until the shooter popped up and greased off another burst. After he finished I sprinted across the street to the nearest house. Luckily, the front door had been left ajar. I hit the front porch, crossed it in two steps, and kicked the door wide, entering the house.

I ran through the downstairs and collected two small portable TVs, one in the kitchen and one in the office. Then, carrying one in each arm, I ran through an Early American-style living room into the den, where I found a big-screen TV. I turned it on and plugged in the two portables. Every thirty seconds or so, the AK cut loose out front. Bullets whined and ricocheted in a deadly concert of tortured metal. I couldn't hook up all three sets to cable, but I was able to pick up the local news stations with the rabbit ears on the portables. I flipped around the channels, stopping at three different stations that were carrying the shootout. KTLA had a bird up. So did KTTV and KNBC. For the first time, I could see the entire scene.

The sheriffs had the house completely surrounded, front and back. The long lenses from the news cameras kept zooming in tight, and now, when the shooter appeared and fired, I got a pretty good look at him. This asshole was dressed head-to-toe in black body armor and was wearing a gas mask. He would pop up, looking like an extra in a Steven Seagal movie, and squeeze off a five-second burst, then disappear. His window choices seemed random.

I took off my watch, set it on the table in front of me, and

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started to time him. First he worked the downstairs. He'd shoot through three or four different windows at random, then move upstairs. After watching for about three minutes I could see the pattern.

Downstairs, he was all over the place shooting short, twenty-round bursts. But he always ended at the window on the far left side of the house. He'd fire a long stream of lead from that position, and then be gone for thirty to forty seconds before reappearing upstairs. He'd shoot randomly out of the upstairs windows, then be downstairs again. But his last firing position on the ground floor was always that same window on the far left of the house. My guess was that the staircase was over there.

It took him thirty seconds to get upstairs and start shooting again. He was triggering off five-second bursts, which I estimated at about fifteen or twenty rounds. He probably needed another ten seconds to change C-clips at the top of the stairs before again going to work in the upstairs windows. The time for me to make my move up to the porch was after he shot the long burst through the far left downstairs window.

I turned off the TVs and decided to test my theory. Moving to the front door, I waited for him to shoot out of the last window downstairs, then ran out of the house and across the street. I settled down behind the same squad car where I had been earlier, easily beating the next burst of gunfire from the upstairs window.

Sonny was already there and turned when I arrived. "Where were you?" he asked.

"Watching TV."

Sonny gave me a strange look, so I said, "Are we good to go?"

"Loo says no. The captain wants to wait for the incident commander from the downtown bureau."

"What is he, some kinda desk commander?" I said.

"More or less," Sonny agreed.

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"Then I say screw him. Emo could be pumping dry. He could be dying. We can't just leave him up there."

Sonny didn't speak, but after a second he nodded.

I told Sonny my plan. We both tried to watch the shooter take one more lap around the house so Sonny could see for himself. But in truth, it was damn hard to keep your head up while he was pouring those lead cores down on us.

"Next time, after he does the last downstairs window on the left, we go," I said. "Okay?"

Sonny licked his lips and nodded grimly.

We waited until the shooter finished his last downstairs pop-up, then both of us exploded out from behind the car and ran low, heads down, across the lawn and dove under the porch. I don't think the shooter saw us, but then I wasn't looking either. The minute we started our run there was a lot of yelling from the sheriff's troops behind us. Somebody started screaming and calling us assholes.

Once we were under the porch, Sonny pulled his transmitter off his Tac vest and spoke clearly into it. "We're gonna pull Emo off there," he said. "Lay down some cover fire, but aim high. Don't hit us! Get our SWAT van up here on the lawn. Give us a place to take him. This is going down after the next time he shoots."

A few seconds later another lead burp ripped the air: BLAP-BLAPBLAPBLAP! Fifty sheriffs and two SWAT teams responded, pouring lead into the house as Sonny and I rolled up simultaneously and grabbed Emo by the ankles. Bullets thumped and glass shattered from the sheriffs' volley as we started pulling Emo off the deck. He streaked a wide stripe of bright red blood and brown stomach matter on the porch behind him before flopping down onto the lawn with us. As soon as he hit I knew he was dead. There was a huge hole in his gut, another in the center of his chest, his pants were messed. His bowels had let go; urine soaked his leg.

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I held his head anyway.

Just then six SWAT guys who were all tricked out in black jumpsuits opened up with grenade launchers, mortaring hot gas canisters through half a dozen windows in the house: THUNK-THUNK-THUNK. A few remaining windows shattered. Smoke billowed.

"Who the hell are those guys?" I asked Sonny. "That's hot gas. They should use the cold canisters. They're gonna set the house on fire. The whole hillside could go."

Sonny shook his head. "Don't know," he said.

They looked like SRT to me.

Two minutes later the house flamed. Black smoke billowed out of the upstairs windows. But the barricaded suspect had a gas mask, and kept shooting, popping up, firing short bursts. Sonny and I were trapped under the porch.

After about ten minutes we heard on the radio that the man had stopped shooting out of the upstairs window and was now running back and forth downstairs. The roaring fire covered the sound of everything but the occasional high, shrill wail of a late-arriving fire unit and the short, choppy bursts from the AK-47. Eventually, as the fire raged, his gun went silent.

It was getting so hot where Sonny and I were that we had to pull back or be incinerated. The shooter hadn't fired for more than two minutes, so we grabbed Emo's body and dragged him across the lawn to the SWAT van. The sheriff's department SEB long rifles covered us, firing a deadly volley into the raging fire and billowing smoke. The heat from the blaze seared my back as we dragged Emo's body behind the van and laid him down.

When I turned I wasn't at all prepared for what I saw. Every room in the house had flames and black smoke pouring out of the windows. The roof was on fire. Ten minutes later the entire second floor collapsed. Then, one by one, boxes of ammo started going off in the garage. Armor-piercing .308s and .223s whizzed through the neighborhood like deadly hornets. Without

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warning, huge explosions rocked the cars we hid behind. Whatever just went up, it wasn't conventional ordnance. It was some kind of high-grade explosive. Everybody out front hit the deck and stayed down until it was over.

Finally, when they were sure that whatever caused the explosions had detonated, the fire units moved in, concentrating on keeping the dry brush in the foothills from going up, and working to keep the sparks from igniting the houses next door.

I found out from one of the deputies that Emo Rojas, who was a sheriff's motorcycle officer, had volunteered at roll call that morning to serve the warrant at end of watch.

Apparently, one of the home owners, a guy named Vincent Smiley, had been walking around the Hidden Ranch neighborhood flashing a badge and impersonating a sheriff's deputy. The neighbors called the department and found out that Smiley wasn't a sheriff. A warrant to pick him up was issued. Emo borrowed a D-car at the substation and came out here with his partner, Dave Brill. It was a nothing bust. A class-B felony. So Emo just walked up and rang the front doorbell with the arrest warrant in his hand while Brill stayed in the car filling out the incident report. Nobody was expecting trouble.

Then Smiley opened the front door and shot twice.

Emo was probably dead before he hit the ground.