

Chapter One

Andre Diaz lurched upright, disoriented and unable to see through the thick smoke swirling in his bedroom. He sucked in a breath and instantly choked, even as his tired brain attempted to figure out what was happening.

“Andre! Get up!”

His older brother’s voice cut through his growing fear and Andre threw off his covers and jumped out of bed, almost tripping.

“We have to move,” Cole told him, his ever-calm voice laced with barely contained panic.

Andre stumbled through the dark room, each breath labored. Out in the hallway, light beckoned, but as he joined his brothers in the doorway, he realized it wasn’t because someone had flicked a switch.

The house was on fire.

“Hold on to me,” Cole insisted. “Marcos, grab Andre. Don’t let go. Come on.”

Andre clutched his older brother’s shirt and he felt his younger brother’s hand on his shoulder as the three of them hurried toward the stairwell. They ducked low to avoid the flames that seemed to be leaping all around them.

The walls were on fire. Andre looked up. The ceiling was on fire, too.

Finally, they reached the stairs and Cole picked up the pace. They were both coughing now, so whatever Cole yelled back at him, Andre couldn’t understand.

His eyes were watering, too, and he couldn’t see anything but flames lunging closer as he stumbled down the stairs, faster and faster, desperate for air. But every breath brought smoke deeper into his lungs.

Then, he could see it. The door was open. He could see outside.

But could he reach it? His lungs hurt, and his body was starting to shut down from lack of air. His eyes felt swollen and useless, and even though Cole was a step ahead of him, he knew it only because he still clutched his brother’s shirt. All he could see was that open doorway ahead, the sun beginning to rise on the horizon.

But finally, he was stepping into the fresh air, falling onto the newly cut grass, coughing and coughing, feeling as if he’d never get oxygen into his aching throat.

Through his haze, he heard Cole screaming. Then he saw one word form on his brother's lips: "Marcos!"

Andre looked back and realized Marcos hadn't made it out behind him. The doorway he'd come through was now engulfed, flames reaching for the front porch.

Andre tried to get to his feet so he could race back to the house, but his knees kept buckling. Then Cole's arms were around him, holding him in place, even as Andre yelled for his younger brother. But no one else was coming through that flaming doorway, and suddenly sparks flew from the post on the front porch, and half of the roof collapsed.

Andre jerked awake in his bed, his heart thundering against his ribs. He was drenched in sweat, his breathing erratic, as though he was still inside that burning house.

"You got out," he reminded himself, throwing his covers aside and getting out of bed on unsteady feet. "We all got out."

The fire had happened eighteen years ago, when he'd been just fourteen. The first few years afterward, he'd woken up regularly, panicking until he remembered that his younger brother had escaped another way. He hadn't dreamed about that night in years.

But he knew what had brought it on: the call he'd gotten last night at work. A family trapped inside their house. The father had set it on fire and was holding a gun on his wife and son, determined that they'd all die together. The firefighters couldn't go inside to save them without being shot.

The FBI had gotten the call from the local police, whose only sniper was out of commission. Andre's team had gone in, and he'd been the one to take the shot from the roof of the house across the street, through the second-story bedroom window.

He'd killed a man in front of his family, but it meant the firefighters had been able to enter the house. They'd gotten the wife and son out, alive and amazingly unharmed. Except for the nightmares they'd both surely have for years, too.

Beside his bed, a persistent buzzing caught his attention and he realized he'd been receiving texts. He swiped a hand over his forehead and grabbed the work cell phone he always kept close.

It was a triple-eight call from his boss at the FBI's elite Hostage Rescue Team, where he'd worked for the past four years as a sniper. Triple eight meant an emergency.

Of course, at HRT, they were already part of what the FBI called their Critical Incident Response Group. So no call was low priority. But triple eight was as high as it got.

It meant no time for even a two-minute shower, so he tossed aside the boxers he'd been wearing and traded them for cargos and a T-shirt, yanking up his flight suit over it. His FBI-issued rifle and the rest of the gear he carried on a mission were in a lockbox in the trunk of his sedan.

Andre double-timed it down the stairs of his little house and hopped in his car, still trying to shake off his dream, and hoping it wasn't an omen for what was to come today.

The information in the text was minimal, but it was enough to get his adrenaline going for a different reason. They were going to a hostage call at an office building not far from where he worked at Quantico. Multiple gunmen, multiple hostages.

At 7:00 a.m., the sun was just beginning to rise, and it instantly took him back to the dream he'd just left, those moments outside the house, frantic to get to Marcos. He slapped his siren on the roof, punched down on the gas and wove around a long line of cars. "Mind on the mission," he told himself.

He dialed his partner, Scott Delacorte, and soon Scott's gruff voice filled his car. "We don't know much. The gunmen are in a marketing company office up on the third floor. Employees there start early and leave early, to avoid some of the rush-hour traffic. So we could have a lot of hostages, but we're hoping none of the other companies in that building have started the day yet. Police are holding the scene."

"Any news on what the gunmen are after? Any communications? Do we know if they've fired shots?" Was this a hostage-taking situation or an active shooter?

"The call came in to 911 ten minutes ago from a secretary who managed to hide in the storage room. She told the operator there were multiple armed men—at least three—and at the time of the call, they hadn't started shooting. She thought they were searching for someone."

That might be good or bad. Good if the person they were after hadn't arrived yet; maybe the gunmen would leave, and HRT could nab them on the way out. Bad if the gunmen had a specific target they wanted to take out. Once they did, they might eliminate anyone else in their way.

Still, the setup was strange. A single gunman searching for a particular victim—maybe a spouse or stalking target—wasn't that unusual. But multiple gunmen, after one target? That was overkill. What single target at a small, independently owned marketing company would warrant that kind of firepower? It didn't quite fit.

"That's odd," was all Andre said aloud.

"Agreed. But the secretary's in the storage room. Who knows how well she's pegged the situation?" The screaming siren from Scott's end stopped. "I'm here. Gonna set up and get on the

scope. Northwest corner, we've got woods, a nice trail that actually leads right out the back door of the office building and up a little hill. The whole thing is pretty hidden. I'm looking through my binoculars right now and I see a good sniper perch about a quarter mile up. How far out are you?"

"One minute."

"Make it faster," Scott said and cut the connection.

Andre pushed the gas pedal down to the floor, blaring his horn over the siren and whipping around the few drivers obnoxious enough not to get out of his way. Thirty seconds later, he was at the office complex.

He flashed his badge to the police officers stationed at the entrance to the complex, which was nestled in the woods. Thankfully it was off the beaten track enough that they shouldn't have to worry about the potential collateral of the pedestrians and gawkers they'd get if they were closer to the city.

The cops let him pass, and he flew into the parking lot, screeching to a stop next to his boss's big green SUV. He yanked his gear out of the trunk as his boss gave him the rundown.

"We don't know much more than what Scott already gave you," Froggy told him. The guy had been a navy SEAL before joining the FBI, and the nickname was a humorous nod to his past. "Go join Scott and get me some more intel."

"You got it." Andre slung his rifle over his back, slipped his gear bag over his shoulder and slid his Glock pistol out of the holster he'd put on while he drove. He popped his earbud in, and turned on the bone mic at his neck. It nestled against his voice box, so all he'd need to do was speak and his whole team could hear him. Then, he was on the move.

He ran around the corner of the office building, Glock ready in case one of the gunmen decided to try to rabbit out the back. Then he spotted the half-hidden trail Scott had mentioned and jogged onto it, increasing his pace even as the incline up the hill got more and more steep. Every minute counted for the hostages inside.

"I cleared you a spot," Scott said, not taking his eyes off the scope as Andre settled into the patch of dirt his partner indicated.

Andre dropped his gear beside him and set up his rifle, dialing in the specifics for wind and altitude that Scott read off to him. And then he was peering through his own rifle scope, into the third floor of the office building.

He scanned from left to right across the whole floor, taking in the situation. A gunman stood in the front room, a Bluetooth receiver in his ear and tattoos climbing out the top of his shirt. He clutched a semiautomatic pistol with both hands, but he kept checking the paper he held

crumpled against the stock of his gun. On the floor around him were eight men and women in business clothes. Some held on to one another, two were in tears, and they were all avoiding the gunman's gaze as though he'd already warned them not to look at him. But no one appeared to be injured. Not yet.

Andre pulled back up to the gunman, dialing in a little closer, trying to see what was on the paper that was so interesting. He was speaking angrily, but Andre didn't think he was talking to the hostages.

"Phone's on," Scott said, seeming to read Andre's mind.

They'd been partners for two years now, and Scott had become practically a third brother to Andre. Half the time on missions, they didn't need words at all. "We know who he's talking to?"

"I think it's the second gunman."

Andre swung farther right and found the other guy. He, too, had a cell phone, clipped to his waist, with an earphone in one ear. He held a semiautomatic, and he kept glaring down at a piece of paper as he wrenched open one door after the next, clearly searching for someone.

He pulled open another door and aimed his weapon at the woman cowering inside on the floor, surrounded by stacks of paper and printer cartridges. She yanked her hands up over her head, a phone dropping to the floor.

"Shit," Scott said as the gunman's grip shifted and Andre was able to zoom in closer and get a glimpse of what was on the paper he held.

"It's not her he's looking for," Andre said, keying his mic so the rest of the team could hear. "This guy's carrying a picture of a woman. Mid-to late-twenties, blondish-brown hair." A beautiful woman, with a sad smile. Not an easy face to miss. "She's not one of the hostages in the front room."

Andre widened his view again as the gunman waved the woman in the storage closet toward the other hostages. She scurried out of the room, then dropped down next to her coworkers, as the second guy continued to open doors, looking angrier and more frustrated with every empty room.

"I thought the secretary told us there were at least three shooters," Andre said, continuing his search.

"She did, but I've only seen two. We've got operators in place right outside the front door. They're ready to storm the building if these guys start shooting, but ideally we identify the location of all the shooters first. If this goes bad, I've got the one with the hostages, okay? You take the other guy."

“Got it,” Andre affirmed. But only Froggy could give the word to take any shots. If that happened, he’d have to shoot through the window and time it when the second gunman was in his line of sight, which could get dicey. The guy was heading into the back of the office now, where Andre didn’t have an angle on him.

Scott swore and Andre asked what was wrong at the same time as Froggy.

“I found the last gunman.”

“Where is he?” Andre asked, continuing his methodical search.

“He slipped out the back door. He’s heading up the trail right now, straight for us. And the woman they were hunting for? She’s with him, and he’s got a gun pointed at her head.

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