

Prologue

Max Braxton slipped a butterscotch drop between his lips. If he were to die in the next minute, he fancied a sweet taste in his mouth when he did.

He checked his Luminox watch. In thirty-three seconds two members of his team would detonate explosions in the munitions building at the other end of this sprawling North African camp—one of the world’s deadliest terrorist training bases. In forty-two seconds he would be at the doorway to the bedroom of master terrorist Anwar al Fayed, which was privately set aside to this end of camp. Tossing a concussion grenade into the room would take two seconds, entering the room and two double-taps to the man’s chest would take just under three seconds. Another three seconds and he’d be back in the hallway, joined by two other members of his five-man team.

Twelve seconds later, the team would rendezvous outside the camp, leaving members of ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hizballah, Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Algeria’s Armed Islamic Group, Northern Ireland’s IRA, the National Liberation Army in Colombia and terrorists from Uzbekistan, the Philippines, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tunisia and other countries wondering whose thunderous sword had struck at their midsection.

The entire operation would consume twenty-nine seconds if all went to plan. Of course in every man’s war, even “perfect” plans too often end up as starter paper in a barracks woodstove. He’d set a few ablaze himself.

Max prayed no freelancing would be needed on this, his birthday. He removed a photo from a shirt pocket, kissed the image of his mother and hoped time would be swift to heal her heart if this were indeed the day he punched out. He replaced the picture and held memento to his heart with affection.

The Three Sixes by Mark Alan Leslie

Darkness still enveloped the compound, even as the rising sun turned the edges of the horizon to a pale yellow. The stillness pounded in his ears. Deafening. The guards keeping watch along the camp's four borders had been forever silenced and trainees were asleep in a half-dozen barracks-type buildings scattered about the property with the tactfulness of a manic depressive.

Indeed, from what Max and his team had observed as they'd frayed lying under the desert floor in their camouflage over the last few days, these trainees were as frenzied as a band of wild gorillas in a cage. But they could do one thing: pull a trigger. And they did so with crazed abandon. One lucky squeeze and one of his men could go down. This was his biggest worry. Not Mom. Not whether they got Anwar al Fayed. Not his own safety, but his men's.

Max took three deep breaths and looked again at his Luminox. Four seconds to detonation. He removed a concussion grenade from a hip pocket, gripped the little bomb tightly, counted "two, one," then as two explosions lit up the camp like a strobe light, he took off in a sprint to al Fayed's dwelling.

The thought *C4 is a wonderful thing* crossed his mind as he closed in on the one-story building. He looked about him. Stetson was fifty yards to his left, Tolson forty yards to his right, converging with him on al Fayed. Then a series of blasts from the munitions building crunched the air and rocked the earth beneath his feet. The noise was thunderous, staggering.

At the corner of the dwelling, Max vaulted over a three-foot-high railing, turned left, leaped up two steps and burst through a side door to the dwelling. Four steps down the hall, he turned left and busted a shoulder through al Fayed's bedroom door. The terrorist was standing, about to pull a *jellaba* over his head. His two expressions: shock and alarm.

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No need for the concussion grenade. Max stepped forward and double-pumped, sending al Fayed to meet his Maker, glad he's saved two seconds.

But a scream rang through the room. A woman, sitting up in al Fayed's bed, was filled with fright, a hand over her mouth. She, Max thought, is not supposed to be here.

He turned to leave, having again lost those two seconds. Time was up. The clock in his head had counted 13 seconds since he began his sprint. Twelve left to the rendezvous. But standing before him was Stetson, pointing his assault rifle at the woman.

Startled, Max pushed down the barrel of the weapon. "Leave her," he said.

"She's an accomplice to terrorism," Stetson objected, his jaw tight.

"She's an innocent. We're losing time." Max pointed. "Out!"

But Stetson aimed his rifle. "Not until—"

Max reacted instinctively, grabbing Stetson's right elbow with his right hand. The grip twisted the rifle to the right, pushing Stetson's shoulder forward with his left hand and twisting Stetson's humerus bone backwards.

Stetson hollered in pain and struggled to keep hold of the rifle with his left hand, and glowered at Max. Max glared back at him and growled between clenched teeth, "Clock's ticking. She's collateral. Get moving!"

The woman continued to scream, non-stop like a siren, and men's shouts began to fill the camp outside. The place was chaos. Max distinguished Arabic, Farsi, German and English. Gunfire erupted.

Stetson shot a look at the woman—a gaze of hatred—and Max pushed him out the door.

Tolson, standing in the hallway, hollered, "Hurry!"

The Three Sixes by Mark Alan Leslie

The three men rushed out the building the way they'd entered, with Max at the rear. The pungent odor of gunpowder filled Max's nostrils.

A hail storm of bullets crackled in the air like the climax of Fourth of July fireworks. As Max hurdled the three-foot railing, he felt a sting in his left shoulder. Flesh wound. No problem.

Slugs puffed around his feet, sending dust into the air and splintering the railing. Then a knife-like stab, this one just above the hip, sent pain screaming along his nerves.

Max squeezed his eyes shut from the agony, but kept his feet moving. A moment later, he opened his eyes. Tolson had come back to help and offered his shoulder. He glanced ahead. Stetson was pulling away in a dead run.

He prayed Phillips and Blais, his men who had set the charges, were safe and en route to their rendezvous spot.

"Come on, captain," Tolson urged, and they began a weaving dash to dodge bullets. Each right-hand swerve sent a shock wave through Max's body. Good thing, he thought wryly, those guys are better at shooting into the sky than at a moving target.

Bullets continued to strike desert dirt around them, but faded further and further behind. Were the terrorists more compelled to remain in camp then chase the intruders?

The thirteen seconds to the rendezvous had turned into a good twenty. Max and Tolson lunged to the cover of a small clutch of desert trees. Phillips and Blais were already there. Stetson stood waiting, glaring, rubbing his shoulder. His dark eyes pierced Max's, contempt out in the open.

"They're coming!" Blais pointed back toward the compound. "Two truckloads full of 'em."

The Three Sixes by Mark Alan Leslie

Max peered at his watch. “The copter should have arrived thirty seconds ago. Where the blazes is it?”

He winced as he reached his hand to click on his earphone radio. “Five in the bush, downrange. Boocoo rats here soon. What’s your ETA?”

“Peekaboo!” came the reply.

The batter-batter of helicopter blades split the air and an MH-60G Pave Hawk rose above a high dune yards away. The aircraft had been flying low to the dunes below tree height.

The pilot added, “Sorry we’re late. Infrared system’s kaput, so we couldn’t see so well.”

With Tolson still giving him leverage on his right side, Max and his team raced toward the bird. Stetson was first aboard, with Blais and Phillips close behind.

Tolson heaved Max the three feet into the air through the Pave Hawk’s open door and onto the floor, then followed suit. Stetson noticeably slinked away, a brooding, angry look filling his face.

Just then, two flatbed trucks, engines racing and loaded with terrorists, burst over a dirt mound, aiming straight at them. Gunfire exploded from the truck. The clank of bullets hit the copter. Mixed with the piercing beat of the copter blades, the sound was like hands-full of rocks being thrown full-force at sheet metal.

The Pave Hawk slanted away and left the terrorist camp, and a dead Anwar al Fayed, in the dust.

Max reached for the wound near his hip and recoiled in pain. He pulled away his hand, slimy with blood, then gazed at Stetson. His glare was met with an fierce glower and eyes as frigid as an Ice Age.