PROLOGUE

El Petén jungle, Guatemala

May 1977

Private Diego Morales had discovered three important truths about the Petén jungle in his time in the army. The first was that every insect in Guatemala had apparently attended a meeting and unanimously agreed that soldiers tasted better than civilians. The second was that there were at least fifteen different ways to sink into mud. The third was that anyone who volunteered for jungle patrols deserved whatever happened to him. Diego hadn't volunteered. Neither had anyone else in Second Platoon. Their lieutenant believed in "volunteers" the same way a firing squad believed in conflict resolution. Everyone was a volunteer if the motivation was right.

The jungle swallowed the men as they pushed along a narrow trail that had once been a logging road. Thick vines reached across the path like fingers trying to reclaim it. Sweat soaked their uniforms before the morning sun had climbed above the towering trees. The canopy was alive with the sounds of birds and writhing with the spider monkeys glaring at the company of armed men.

By seven o'clock that morning, Diego's uniform was soaked through with sweat. It wasn't from marching. It wasn't even from the eighty-pound pack digging into his shoulders. The jungle simply extracted water from every living thing that entered it. The air itself felt wet enough to drink. Breathing was less an act of survival than a negotiation with the jungle.

The eleven-man patrol pushed slowly along what had once been a logging road, though only someone with an exceptionally vivid imagination could still call it a road. Thick vines hung across the trail like old ropes. Massive ceiba trees rose into the canopy, their buttressed roots twisting across the forest floor like the backs of enormous sleeping animals. Every few yards someone had to duck beneath hanging branches or step over fallen logs already disappearing beneath moss and fungus.

The lieutenant looked back. "Move faster." He said. Nobody answered. Talking required energy. Energy required breathing. Breathing required air. The Guatemalan jungle seemed determined to provide as little of that as possible.

Somewhere overhead a pair of scarlet macaws exploded from the treetops, screaming insults at the intruders before disappearing into the endless green ceiling above. Spider monkeys watched silently from high branches, their black faces almost human as they followed the soldiers' progress with open curiosity.

Diego adjusted the sling on his rifle and glanced behind him. The trail disappeared almost immediately into thick vegetation. Ten meters back, the world simply ceased to exist. That was another thing he disliked about the jungle. In the mountains you could see danger coming. In the Petén, danger could be standing three steps away watching you scratch mosquito bites.

He had grown up outside Chiquimula where the land rolled gently beneath an open sky. There you judged distance by hills and fences. Here, you judged it by how far ahead you could see before another wall of green swallowed the world.

Corporal Ríos wiped his face with a filthy sleeve. "I hate this place." Sergeant Cifuentes grinned. "The jungle heard you." He said with as much humor as he could find in the oppressive heat. "It can kiss my…" The sergeant held up a hand stopping the column and Corporal Rios' complaining. "Listen." He said urgently. There was nothing but silence. Not ordinary silence since the jungle was never truly quiet. There were always the insects, the birds, the continue rustle of things not seen. Monkeys arguing over invisible insults. Something.

But right now...nothing. Absolutely nothing as if even the wind seemed to have wandered elsewhere. Diego slowly looked around. "Where are the birds?" Nobody answered.

The lieutenant adjusted the map folded inside a plastic cover. "The village is another kilometer." With that statemen, he started walking again. The others followed as if they had any other choice. Nobody liked the silence. Intelligence reports claimed that guerrillas had been seen near the small village of San Miguel three days earlier. A local farmer had walked twenty kilometers to the nearest military outpost insisting that armed men had entered the village shortly after sunset. By dawn everyone had disappeared.

None of them noticed the old yellow dog standing motionless beneath the shade of a giant ceiba tree nearly a hundred yards away. The animal watched the soldiers pass without making a sound. His ears remained flat against his head. His tail stayed tucked tightly beneath him. Only after the last man disappeared around a bend in the trail did the old dog slowly turn away. He did not follow them.

The village consisted of fourteen small houses with roughhewn plank walls and roofs patched together from corrugated tin and palm thatch surrounding a small plaza with a weathered wooden church at one end leaning ever so slightly as if tired of standing watch over generations of hard lives. Beside it sat a battered basketball court where the concrete had long ago surrendered to weeds pushing up through the cracks. It had teemed with life on other trips through. Now it consisted of fourteen empty houses. Smoke drifted lazily from a cooking fire that had burned itself nearly out. A pot of black beans still rested over glowing coals. A wooden rocking chair moved gently on the porch of one hut.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

No breeze stirred the trees and the surrounding jungle continued in deathly silence creating an eerie feeling of doom. Diego stared at the chair. He didn't like it. Where were the dogs? Dogs should have barked by now. Children should have been curious. Someone should have demanded to know why soldiers were entering the village.

Instead...nothing.

The lieutenant raised his rifle a gave a short, crisp order. "Spread out." The men fanned out searching for...something, anything. Diego approached the nearest house, its front door stood wide open. Inside, tortillas lay half-cooked on a clay comal. A coffee cup had been knocked onto the dirt floor. The coffee had dried into a dark stain. It was old, but not ancient, perhaps a day since the coffee spilled, perhaps less. Someone had obviously left in a hurry.

Outside, Sergeant Cifuentes called softly. "Lieutenant." The officer crossed the village. Diego followed. Behind the church stood the village well. Around it...blood. Not a little, lots of it. Dark crimson stains soaked into the packed earth. Some had splashed against the whitewashed wall of the church. One long smear led toward the jungle. Then simply...stopped.

The lieutenant held back a desire to vomit and instead knelt to touch the ground. There were no flies, no smell, and strangely, no bodies. Corporal Ríos looked around nervously. "Guerrillas?" he said softly. The lieutenant stood. "If it was guerrillas, where are the dead?" said the lieutenant. Nobody answered. It was a reasonable question. Even guerrillas rarely cleaned up after themselves. Dead men were heavy.

The dogs appeared an hour later. Three of them. Thin village mongrels with ribs showing beneath dusty coats. They emerged cautiously from the trees. Diego smiled. Finally, something alive. Something moved near the edge of the plaza. Three dogs stepped cautiously from between the trees. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the last piece of dried beef he'd been saving since breakfast. "Ven aquí." The youngest dog took one uncertain step forward. Before it could come any closer, an old yellow dog emerged silently from behind it. His muzzle had turned almost white with age. He walked directly between Diego and the younger dogs. He stared directly into Diego's face. Then he began backing away. Not turning. Backing away very slowly, his tail tucked tightly beneath him. The other two copied him backing away in that strange way. The lieutenant frowned. "They're afraid." "No," Sergeant Cifuentes said quietly. "They're warning us." The lieutenant snorted. "They're dogs." The sergeant didn't argue. He simply watched the animals disappear into the jungle.

They searched until late afternoon, as far into the jungle as they dared. They found nothing. No villagers, no guerrillas, no spent ammo, no footprints leaving the village. It made absolutely no sense. People simply did not vanish.

The lieutenant finally ordered camp as far away from the village as the clearing allowed but let in the light from the moon. "We'll continue tomorrow." He said. The men welcomed the decision. The village felt wrong. Even the mosquitoes seemed reluctant to remain there. The men set about making camp with the efficiency born of routine. Two ponchos became a crude shelter beside the church. A small cooking fire was lit, using dry wood scavenged from behind one of the houses. As the sun drifted toward the western horizon, the jungle slowly began reclaiming the village. Long shadows stretched across the plaza. The white walls of the church turned gray. Mist gathered in the low places between the houses, rising from the damp earth like breath.

The old yellow dog appeared once more just before sunset. He emerged silently from between two abandoned houses and stopped thirty yards from the soldiers. No barking. No growling. He simply watched. Ríos tore off a piece of tortilla and tossed it toward him. The old dog ignored it.

Instead, he looked beyond the campfire. Toward the jungle. His ears flattened. Then, without warning, he lay down. Deliberately. His eyes never left the darkness beyond the church.

Diego frowned. "I've never seen a dog do that." Sergeant Cifuentes didn't look up from sharpening his machete. "Old dogs know when fighting is pointless." "You really believe that?" The sergeant ran his thumb lightly along the blade's edge. "I believe dogs survive longer than foolish men."

Diego volunteered for first watch. Actually, the lieutenant volunteered him. Close enough. The fire burned low. The deep of night settled over San Miguel and the jungle slowly awakened. Insects resumed singing. Frogs croaked. Somewhere in the distance, a troop of howler monkeys announced to the entire Petén jungle that they were profoundly offended by something no one else would ever understand. Normal sounds. Comforting sounds. With the return to the cacophony of sounds that normally filled the night, Diego relaxed slightly.

Then every sound stopped again. He frowned as the hairs on his arms rose. A dog whined somewhere beyond the church. Another answered. Then both fell silent. Something moved among the trees. He raised his rifle toward the sound straining to see what danger lurked in the darkness. Nothing. No more movement, no sound at all. Probably a deer. Probably.

The old yellow dog stood. Very slowly. His hackles rose. He took three careful steps backward without turning around. Then he sat. Still facing the jungle. Still refusing to run.

Then he heard it. A whistle. A soft, high sound that descended, almost musical. It drifted through the darkness as if carried by the wind. Except there was no wind. Next to him was Sergeant Cifuentes. Diego nudged him, "You hear that?" he whispered softly. The older man had gone pale and he slowly crossed himself. "What is it?" Diego insisted. The sergeant swallowed. "Don't whistle back." He said. "I wasn't going to." Then another whistle floated through the trees. Closer this time. Or perhaps farther. It was impossible to tell. The sound seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Private Hernández whispered from the other side of the fire. "My grandmother..." No one looked at him. "...used to tell us..." His voice trembled. "...if you hear him close..." The sentence remained unfinished. Nobody wanted him to finish. The lieutenant stood abruptly. "Oh, for God's sake." He grabbed his flashlight. Stood and started to head into the darkness. "It's one man trying to frighten us." The whistle came again. Longer. Lower. Almost sad. The lieutenant laughed. "A ghost?" Nobody answered. At that precise moment, as they heard the lieutenant, the dogs began howling. Not barking. Howling. Long mournful cries that echoed across the abandoned village.

Every dog in the darkness joined them. Dozens. Perhaps hundreds. The sound rolled through the jungle like a funeral hymn. Private Hernández whispered one word. "El Silbón." The lieutenant turned, and with fury in his voice, said forcefully, "Enough." "It's him." "It's a story." "My grandfather…" "Your grandfather was superstitious." The whistle sounded once more. Very faint. Almost impossibly far away. Sergeant Cifuentes slowly lowered his rifle. His face had become the color of ash. Without taking his eyes off the trees, he spoke so quietly that Diego

almost missed it. "If you hear him far away..." The lieutenant smiled impatiently. "...then he's standing beside you."

The smile remained on the lieutenant's face for another heartbeat before it disappeared. He stopped the edge of the firelight and his expression changed. Not fear. Recognition. As though he had seen something impossible. "What..." It was the last word he ever spoke. The campfire cracked loudly. A horse screamed somewhere beyond the church. The dogs stopped howling. The whistle drifted through the darkness one final time. Soft. Lonely. Almost gentle.

By sunrise, the village was empty once again. The campfire had burned itself to white ash. Eleven rifles lay scattered in the dirt. Several packs remained where they had been dropped. There were fresh stains in the dust. Just as dark and sticky as the ones the soldiers had found, leading toward the jungle. After twenty yards they ended, as though the earth itself had decided to keep its secrets. Far away, hidden beneath the endless green canopy of the jungle, something whistled.

And the jungle answered with silence.