

COUNTDOWN

Jonathan Maberry

-a prequel story to Patient Zero-

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"Countdown"

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(1)

I didn't plan to kill anyone.

I wasn't totally against the idea, either.

Sometimes things just fall that way, and either you roll with it or it rolls over you. Letting the bad guys win isn't how I roll.

(2)

When I woke up this morning it was going to be another day on the job. I've been Baltimore PD for eight years now. I did four in the Army before rotating back to my life with a Rangers patch but no ribbons for doing anything of note because nothing of note was happening at the time. I got out right before 9/11.

It was different on the cops. Baltimore's been a war zone ever since crack hit the streets during the 80s. Families fell apart, kids took to the street in packs, and

every corner belonged to one of the drug gangs. Down there, “murder” is so common a word it doesn’t even give people pause. I wore the blue and knocked a few heads, made some busts, climbed the ladder. Couple of times it got Old West on me and there was gunplay. They taught me well in the Rangers, and the other older beat cops taught me even better. It’s never been about who draws fast or draws first—it’s only ever been about who hits what he aims at. I’m good at that. And if the scuffle is hands or knives or broken broom handles, well, I’m okay there, too. Baltimore isn’t the richest city in the world, and it definitely has its issues, but it doesn’t breed weaklings. The streets taught me a lot I didn’t learn from the Army or in a dojo.

In the years since the planes hit the towers, every police department in the country grew an umbilical chord attached to the bureaucratic monster that is Homeland Security. Shortly after I got my shield I got “volunteered” to be part of a joint task force that was cobbled together by lend-lease cops from Baltimore, Philly, and D.C., and all of us on Homeland’s leash. We profiled suspects, invaded a lot of personal privacy, listened to thousands of hours of wiretaps, and tried to build cases—mostly against people whose closest ties to Middle Eastern terrorists was a collection of Sinbad movies at home. Every once in a while we’d get a minnow, but we never even caught a whiff of a shark.

Until we did.

I was sitting wiretap on a warehouse down by the docks. Our big break started as a fragment of info here and another fragment there—sketchy stuff, but we started seeing some movement patterns that looked covert. Conversations over the tapped phones started sounding like code, people talking about importing agricultural

products when the warehouse was licensed to a shoe business. Stuff like that. Then somewhere in the middle of the night I caught a brief conversation on a cell phone line that was hardly ever used. Just a little bit of back-and-forth in which one of the players dropped the name “El Mujahid.” The immediate response from the other party was to hang the hell up.

El Mujahid.

The name was so frigging big that I had about three seconds of thinking it was a joke, like everyday Schmoes might drop the name Bin Laden into the middle of a conversation or as the punchline to a joke. We all do it. But this didn’t have that feel.

The transcript of the line I’d heard was this: “. . . that will all change when El Mujahid—”

At which point the other guy curses in Farsi and hangs up. Farsi’s one of the languages I know. Actually, I know a lot of languages—that stuff’s always been easy for me.

I called my lieutenant and he called the major who woke up the colonel who woke up the Homeland supervisor. Suddenly I was the golden boy, and when a full-team hit was planned on the warehouse, I got to play. Perks of ringing the bell.

El Mujahid was the right name to hear on the wire. It means “the fighter of the way of Allah.” That son of a bitch was only a short step down from Bin Laden. If U.S. soldiers roll their Bradley over a landmine, chances are this asshole is responsible. If there was even the slightest chance to get a lead to him we had to move and move fast.

(3)

There were thirty of us the next morning, everyone in black BDUs, helmet-cams and full SWAT gear. Each unit was split into four-man teams: two guys with MP-5s, a pointman with a Glock .40 and a ballistic shield, and one guy with a Remington 870 pump. I was the shotgunner on our team. The task force hit the warehouse hard and fast, coming in every door and window in the place. Flashbangs, snipers on the surrounding buildings, multiple entry points, and a whole lot of yelling. Domestic shock and awe, the idea being to startle and overpower so that everyone inside is too dazed and confused to offer violent resistance. Last thing anyone wanted was an O.K. Corral.

My team had the back door, the one that led out to a small boat dock. There was a tidy little Cigarette boat there, and while we waited for the go/no-go, the guy next to me—my buddy Jerry Spencer from DCPD—kept looking at the boat with the calculating lust of a cop nearing early retirement. I bent close and hummed the *Miami Vice* theme and he grinned. He had a few weeks before getting out, and that boat must have looked like a ticket to paradise for him.

The “go” came down and everything suddenly got loud and fast.

I had a Shok-Lok round chambered in the shotgun and I blew the steel deadbolt to powder. We went in yelling for everyone to freeze, to lay down their weapons. Even if the bad guys don’t speak English there’s no one alive who doesn’t get the gist when SWAT waves guns, yells, and points at the floor. I’ve been on maybe fifteen, eighteen of these things in my time with Baltimore PD, and only twice was anyone stupid enough to draw a gun on us. Cops don’t hotdog it and generally neither do the

bad guys, 'cause it's not about who has the biggest balls—it's about overwhelming force so that no shots are ever fired. I remember when I went through the tac team training, the commander had a quote from the movie *Silverado* made into a plaque and hung up in the training hall: "I don't want to kill you and you don't want to be dead." That's pretty much the motto.

So, the bad guys usually stand around looking freaked out and everyone bleats about how innocent they are, yada yada.

This wasn't one of those times.

Jerry, who was the oldest man on the task force, was pointman for our team, and I was right behind him with two guys at my back. We hustled down a short corridor and then broke left into a big conference room. Eight Middle Eastern guys around a big oak table. Just inside the door was a big blue phone booth-sized container standing against the wall. "Freeze!" I yelled in three different languages. "Put your hands above your heads and—"

That was as far as I got because the eight guys threw themselves out of their chairs and pulled guns. O.K. Corral, no doubt about it.

When IAD asked me later to recollect how many shots I fired and who exactly I fired them at, I laughed. Twelve guys in a room and everyone's shooting. If they're not dressed like your buddies—and you can, to a reasonable degree of certainty, determine that they're not civilian bystanders—you shoot and duck for cover.

I shot the first guy to draw on us, taking him with two to the body. It spun him against the wall even as he opened up with a Tech-9, and as he spun he poured half a mag into one of his buddies. A ricochet burned the air three inches from my face.

The only lucky part of a free-for-all shootout is that everyone is so caught up in not getting shot that they don't have time to aim. That's a little less true for SWAT, and the ratio of aim-to-hit improves once the shock of the moment wears off.

The unlucky part—and this is a real bitch—is that no matter how much you prepare for a shootout, you never really expect one. Most people have this moment—it feels like an hour but it's really a splintered part of a second—where they don't think or move or do anything the way that they should. It's not called fatal hesitation for nothing, and in that fragment of a second I saw two of our guys take hits. One was aimed and well placed and the other was a wild shot from the melee and it could have as easily been friendly fire as a bullet from a bad guy.

I wasn't caught in that moment. For whatever reason—martial arts, Ranger training, years on the street, or maybe I'm wired different—I don't hesitate. As soon as the game started I was in my groove. I pivoted toward the guy who'd just shot one of mine and I took him off at the knees with two rounds from the shotgun. Take this message home: don't shoot at cops.

I spun out of the way of some return fire and ducked behind the big blue case. I fired the Remington dry and then dropped it so I could pull my Glock. I know the .40 is standard but I've always found the .45 to be more persuasive.

A bad guy rose up behind a stack of file boxes and pointed a SIG Sauer at me in a very professional two-handed grip. I gave him a double-tap—one to the sternum to make him stand at attention and the next round through the brain pan.

After that it was duck, scream, shoot, reload. Everyone doing the same damn dance. Jerry Spencer was near me and we covered each other during reloads.

The report says I dropped four hostiles in that initial fire fight. One of them was the *thirteenth* man.

Yeah, I know I said that there were eight of them and four of us, but during the firefight I caught movement to my immediate right and saw the door to the big blue case hanging loose, its lock ripped up by gunfire. The door swung open and a man staggered out. He wasn't armed so I didn't fire on him; instead I concentrated on the guy behind him who was tearing up the room with a QBZ-95 Chinese assault rifle, something I'd only ever seen in magazines. Why he had it and where the hell he found ammunition for it I never did find out, but those rounds punched a line of holes right through Jerry's shield, and he went down.

"Son of a bitch!" I yelled and put two in the shooter's chest.

Then this other guy, the thirteenth guy, comes crashing right into me. He was pale and sweaty, stank like raw sewage, and had a glazed bug-eyed stare. I thought, *drug addict*. He wasn't armed, so I gave him a flat kick in the upper leg to drive him off. That usually takes a man down with a knot of screaming cramps in the dense meat of the thigh, but all it did to him was knock him against the edge of the conference table. He rebounded and lunged at one of my guys—a tough little monkey named McGoran—and I swear to God the dope fiend tried to bite him. McGoran butt-stroked him with his rifle stock and the pale guy went down.

I turned to offer cover fire while McGoran dragged Jerry to cover, but I caught movement to my left and there he was again: the fruitcake with the bug eyes. He snarled at me, his lips peeling back from green and grimy teeth. I don't know what kind of drugs this guy was taking, but he was having a really freaky high.

I stepped back to avoid his lunge, but my back slammed hard into a file cabinet and the sweaty guy clamped his teeth on the forearm I put up to ward him off. He tried to tear a chunk out, but he had a mouthful of sleeve and Kevlar. All I could feel was a bad pinch, and in the madness of the moment part of my mind lingered to marvel at how determined he was to chow down on my arm.

"Get off!" I screamed and gave him an overhand left that should have dropped him, but only shook him loose. He dropped to a crouch and scuttled away like a cockroach, pushing past me to make for the back door. The firefight was still hot so I couldn't give chase even though I figured he was making for that sweet Cigarette outside—Jerry's boat—so I leaned out into the hall and parked two in his back, quick and easy. He hit the deck and skidded five feet before he stopped, then he simply sagged against the floor and stopped moving. I spun back into the room and now McGoran provided cover fire so I could pull Jerry behind the table.

A second team crowded into the room and now we had the numbers to turn the place into a shooting gallery.

I heard gunfire coming from a different part of the warehouse so I peeled off from the pack to see what was happening and immediately spotted a trio of hostiles in a nice shooting-blind laying down a lot of fire at one of the other teams. The team under fire had a wooden crate for cover and the automatic fire was chopping it to kindling. The hostiles knew their business, too: they fired in sequence so that there was always a continuous barrage while the others reloaded.

Screw this, I thought as I raced forward.

I ran as fast as silence would allow, well out of their line of sight. I had my pistol out, but to open fire from that distance would have been suicide. I might get one or two but the other would turn and chop me up. There was no cover at all between me and the hostiles, but I hugged the wall, running on cat feet, making no noise that could have been heard above the din of the gunfire.

When I was ten feet out I opened fire. My first shot caught one of the hostiles in the back of the neck, and the impact slammed him into the crates. As the other two turned I closed to zero distance and fired one more shot which hurled the second hostile backward, but then the slide on my gun locked open. There was no time to change magazines. The third shooter instantly lunged at me, swinging his rifle barrel to bear. I parried it one-handed with my gun arm, and while I was still in full stride I used the empty pistol to check the swing of his rifle while simultaneously jabbing forward with my left hand, fingers folded in half and stiffened so that the secondary line of knuckles drove into the attacker's windpipe. A Leopard Paw punch, nasty but useful. As this was happening I made a quick change midstep so that my left foot went from a regular running step into a longer lunge and the tip of my combat boot crunched into the cartilage under the hostile's kneecap. Immediately I brought my gun hand up and jabbed the exposed barrel of the pistol into the hostile's left eye socket.

The attacker flew backward as if he'd been hit by a shotgun blast.

As I completed my step I reached to my belt for a fresh magazine.

But this alley fight was over and all the dogs were down.

The main warehouse doors blew open and a second wave of SWAT came in like a swarm of pissed-off scorpions and anyone dumb enough to be still holding a gun went to meet Jesus—or whoever—in nothing flat.

(4)

In the end, eleven alleged terrorists were shot, six fatally including the cowboy with the Chinese assault rifle and the biter I nailed in the back—who according to his false ID was named Javad Mustapha. A terrorist with ties to El Mujahid. Turned out that none of our team was killed, though eight of them needed treatment, mostly for broken ribs. We were all rattled, but in the end it was a damn good day's work.

I checked on Jerry. Kevlar stops bullets but it can't stop foot-pounds of impact. Jerry had a cracked sternum and was one hurting pup.

"How you feeling, ya old fart?" I asked, squatting next to the gurney to which the EMTs had strapped him.

"Steal me that Cigarette boat and I'll feel right as rain." He ticked his chin toward my arm. "Hey, how's your arm? EMT said you got bit."

"Didn't even break the skin. Weird sumbitch though, wasn't he?"

"Looked to me like he came out of that blue box. The lock blew off and he stepped out, batshit crazy and looking at us like we're Sunday dinner. McGoran said you popped him."

"Seemed like the thing to do at the time."

Jerry nodded, then gave me a faint smile. "Everybody's talking about you, Joe. You saved some fellow officers today. I been hearing the 'H' word floating around."

When I looked puzzled he explained, "Hero, son. That's what they're calling you."

"Oh, please. I'm just one of the crowd, doing my job."

He gave me a funny look, but it might have been the painkillers. The EMTs took him away and I watched as a bunch of federal agents in unmarked black BDUs came in to take over the crime scene.

Far as I was concerned it was all over.

Funny how wrong you can be about some things.

(5)

Nobody who worked for him or with him knew his real name. The President called him Mr. Church, and that would do for now. He sat in a temporary office in a disused records storage warehouse in Easton, Maryland. He had a laptop on his desk, a glass of water, and a plate of cookies. Nothing else.

Mr. Church selected a vanilla wafer and munched it thoughtfully as he watched the replay of the video feeds from the raid in Baltimore. He punched the pause button and turned the laptop around toward the three big federal agents who sat across from him. A man's face filled the screen.

"His name is Detective Joe Ledger," said Mr. Church. His eyes were almost invisible behind the tinted lenses of his glasses, and his face wore no expression.

"Baltimore PD, attached to a Homeland task force. This footage was taken two days ago. This is the one I want. Bring him in."

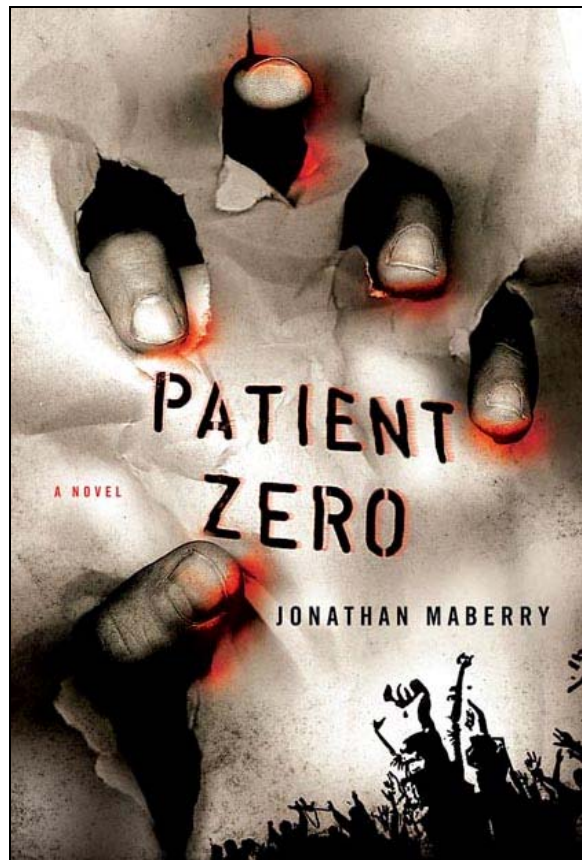
The agents exchanged looks, but they left without comment. Questioning Mr. Church was never fruitful.

When they were gone, Mr. Church restarted the video and watched it again.

And again.

-end-

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