

## Chapter 2

### Menlo Park

A biting December chill had settled over Silicon Valley. To the East, the sun was just beginning its ascent over the Fremont hills, painting the horizon in bruised shades of orange and crimson.

Eric finished cinching his laces and stood from one of the crimson adirondack chairs on his expansive front porch.

"Going solo today," he muttered, adjusting the hem of his shirt and tightening his shorts.

"Keep it smart, no ego," he told himself, toggling his watch to the outdoor run setting and the Snivel app.

With seven months left until the 100-miler, today wasn't about chasing a PR; it was about the grind.

His breath trailed behind him like steam as he pushed off into the pre-dawn gloom. The cold bit at his knuckles, a familiar sting that pulled him back to a national championship race in Grinnell, Iowa.

The frostbite from that day was a permanent ghost in his nerves.

Dressed in navy specialized gear and azurite Saucony Hurricanes, he moved with the economical grace of a man who had spent years in the Teams.

He was forty, but his tall, corded physique and the disciplined set of his jaw spoke of a former Navy SEAL who hadn't let the civilian world soften him.

He took a quiet pride in that history. The large "N" on his chest wasn't just a logo; it was a standard he still lived by.

Early mornings were his sanctuary. At 5:00 AM, the air was scrubbed clean of the day's pollution, and the only souls brave enough to face the 50-degree Bay water or the freezing Peninsula air were those looking to disappear into the effort.

"Nothing like a clear morning," he said to the empty street, drawing a long, cold draft of air deep into his lungs.

He checked the Series 10 on his wrist. "42 degrees. Should've grabbed the gloves."

His focus was split between two horizons: the grueling solo crossings of the Oceans 7 and the high-altitude suffering of the Western States 100.

Completing Oceans 7 was a feat fewer than fifty people on the planet could claim.

He'd punched his ticket to Western States with a 100K qualifying time at Lake Sonoma months earlier, a day defined by pure endurance.

He logged three days on the road, often joined by Veronica, his old training partner from the Navy.

They'd finished the Sonoma 100K together, side-by-side.

She lived just a few blocks away, and their long weekend grinds—lasting up to six hours—were essential preparation for the altitude of the 100-miler.

Lately, she was nursing a stubborn case of plantar fasciitis, a lingering parting gift from Sonoma.

The other five days were spent in the water, splitting time between Menlo Masters and the South End Swimming and Rowing Club up in the city.

He never carried a phone on these runs, just the watch. The miles were his escape—a way to outrun the echoes of international counter-terrorism and the current frustrations of hunting financial syndicates.

He had three go-to routes. The 11-mile Baylands loop took him past Meta and into the salt-crusted silence of Bedwell Park. It was a former landfill that had shed its stench, now home to the quiet wildlife of the Don Edwards Refuge.

Then there was the Atherton 10-miler, a path through the palatial 20-million-dollar estates of Lindenwood. It was an island of concentrated wealth, where the masters of the tech universe and professional athletes retreated behind massive oaks and neoclassical gates.

Eric lived in Menlo Park's Flood Triangle, just three blocks from that manicured luxury. The Lindenwood loop was a favorite for its lack of traffic. At that hour, he shared the road only with deer and the occasional newspaper courier.

But Mondays were for the half-marathon loop: a trek from the Triangle through the heart of Stanford, up to the Dish, and back down through the venture capital gauntlet of Sand Hill Road.

He was on a clock to finish before 7:00 AM. He hit the base of the Dish with seven miles already in the bank. His watch chirped another sub-six-minute mile, but the real work was just beginning.

"Dig in," he whispered.

He'd already threaded through the Stanford Shopping Center and down Palm Drive, passing the hushed shadows of Memorial Church and the student housing. He'd even glanced at Nixon Elementary, where he'd spent his first six years of schooling.

"Ground zero," he said, passing the school sign.

A cyclist whipped past him at the crossing, nearly taking his shoulder. "Watch it!" The guy didn't even turn his head. Eric didn't give him the satisfaction of a reaction. Save the heart rate for the incline.

The Dish was still officially closed, the gates locked to the public. Eric didn't have time to wait for the rangers, so he scaled the fence at the seven-mile mark and dropped onto the trail, heading straight for the ascent.

Stanford's 8,000-acre footprint was a legacy of the late 1800s, with the Dish preserve claiming a rugged 850-acre slice of that history.

He'd been running these hills since he was a kid at Pinewood High, back when he'd founded the school's cross-country team.

As he crested the first ridge, he looked south toward Manuela Court. He could see his childhood home from here, the place where he'd grown up with his sisters on a dead-end street that bordered Palo Alto.

"Best seat in the house," he thought, the endorphins finally flooding his system.

The hills were an electric green, the air smelling of damp earth and morning song. A light rain had passed through earlier, leaving the conditions crisp and clean.

The main Dish, a 150-foot radio telescope, had been probing the ionosphere since the sixties, a Cold War collaboration between SRI and the Air Force.

Now it was just a landmark for hikers and rangers, but for Eric, it was a checkpoint in his own personal battle.

He was alone on the trail, though he knew other "early birds" were likely hopping fences in the shadows.

"Not today, fellas."

From the summit, Silicon Valley looked like a sprawling electric circuit. The lights of the East Bay bridges were still shimmering, and the silhouette of San Francisco poked through the fog to the North.

"Never gets old," he murmured, slowing for a fleeting second to take it in.

The clock was ticking. He still needed to eat, shower, and bike the two miles to the Menlo Park station for the 35-minute commute to the city. He was only doing the office grind three days a week now, a reprieve from the daily slog he'd endured when he first joined Scurry.

He'd moved to the fintech startup after his previous CEO and GC had decided that "reckless growth" was more important than actual compliance.

The ghost of a Slack notification flickered in his mind:

"Eric, your reckless freezing of MoonCoin and Torncito may cost us 20% of next year's crypto revenue," his former boss had raged.

Eric remembered his reply: "17 wire recalls. The bank's asking questions."

The typing bubbles had danced for a long time.

Then: "Let ME handle the bank. No more freezes without my sign-off."

Same pathetic script. Different executive.

The GC had called minutes later. "Eric, we need to discuss your 'approach' to compliance."

"My approach is the law," Eric had said, voice like ice.

"Your approach is creating problems. For everyone."

"Some problems need creating," he'd thought then.

"The pattern is clear. 17 recalls, same window, same entities."

"Coincidence," the GC had shouted.

"Coordination," Eric replied, closing his laptop. "I've seen it in Kandahar."

He knew that shop was a laundromat for dirty money, hiding its failures from regulators.

"I'm going to short the hell out of that stock if they ever IPO," he laughed, his pace quickening as he hit the flat of the creek trail.

"Slow down," he warned himself. "They aren't your concern anymore."

He was grateful for the clean slate at Scurry, a place with a mature leadership that actually understood the stakes.

He hit mile nine, holding a steady 5:52 pace as he tracked San Francisquito Creek. A few deer darted across the path, startled by his approach. He scanned the oaks, remembering the mountain lion he'd spotted a few weeks back.

Sweat stung his eyes as he recalled the GC's tight, condescending smile. "We appreciate your... thoroughness."

The Taliban financiers he'd dismantled in Kandahar hadn't been nearly as appreciative.

He crossed the tracks into Palo Alto with two miles left. Despite the 40-degree air, his shirt was a heavy, sodden weight against his chest.

He looked to the dry creek bed, where the encampments of former veterans clung to the dirt.

"Bringing food by soon," he called out as he passed.

He clicked his watch as he hit his front walk. One hour and 18 minutes.

Heart rate 155. Pace 5:52. "Good enough," he muttered. It wasn't his best, but it would have to do.

The workout was over. Now, it was time to clock into Scurry and resume the invisible war.