

# **Kill Zone**

## **The Specialist, #1**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead or actual events is purely coincidental.



*„Strike fast, strike hard... and make the bastards pay.“*  
—General George S. Patton

## One

FBI Special Agent Jim Webb fired a slashing burst from his MP5K machine pistol. It was a desperate bid to drive his enemies back and buy precious time. The probe had gone to hell and his only option was to attempt an escape before the opposition snared him.

Destroyed him.

A Klaxon alarm blared as he kicked off. He sprinted through the darkness away from the hostile mansion. He fired another machine pistol burst and reloaded on the run. Enemy rifles exploded behind him and bullets hurtled past his skull.

He grimaced and sped toward his waiting car. He covered thirty yards before the Mafia hit squad converged on him. A bullet struck his chest with the force of a hammer blow and his legs buckled. His fingers went numb and his weapon slipped away.

He lay stretched on his back. He heard footsteps. A moment later someone was looming over him. He peered up and recognized Vince Falco. He recognized the mobster's black slitted eyes.

The eyes of a serpent.

The eyes of a devil.

Falco gripped a Magnum revolver. But he did not unleash a killing shot. Instead he stowed the wheelgun and stepped back several paces.

Webb rolled onto his stomach and squirmed forward. A frantic bid for escape. He clenched his teeth and covered ten feet. Fifteen. Then he stopped moving. A man blocked his way. The man gripped a weapon. Webb recognized the weapon's distinctive shape. It looked like a giant spraygun. A drooping hose connected it to a metal tank strapped to the man's back.

A flamethrower.

Webb's gut twisted. Terror rising. The flamethrower's muzzle was aimed at his face and he was powerless to respond. He was trapped inside the kill zone.

Falco stepped back into view. He raised a fist high in the air. A signal to his henchman. "Ready!" He was glaring now and there was murder in his eyes. "Fire!"

Red-orange flame tore through the darkness and surged with a banshee howl toward Webb. He opened his mouth to scream. But superheated air seared his tongue and throat. Hungry flames devoured his skin and flesh. Ate ravenously toward the bone.

In the next instant Webb's nerve-system shut down and blocked the pain forever. As death claimed him his final demand was for justice.

For skilled hands to strike Vince Falco.

And make the bastard pay.

## Two

### *New York City, JFK Airport*

The MH-60 Blackhawk helicopter touched down at midnight. Its lone passenger gave the crew-chief a curt nod and leapt onto the helipad.

Matt Thorn was alert for danger the instant his boots hit the ground. His combat senses were active and probing for a hostile presence. He found no sign of enemy forces in the immediate area. No sign of an ambush.

Nothing visible at least.

He bolted across the helipad toward a nearby parking lot and his waiting car. He knew that absent solid cover the key to survival was constant motion. The night hid countless threats. Forces inimical to Thorn's presence. Even the weather was hostile. On this Christmas Eve the sky above him was a rain-lashed tempest. It was dark and cold. As dark and cold as the grave.

The Blackhawk surged upward and disappeared into the storm-ravaged sky.

Thorn wished the pilot good luck and returned his attention to the terrain around him. His right hand slid toward the Glock 17 autopistol holstered beneath his jacket. He would have a fighting chance if he was attacked. In theory. Unless he was nailed by a sniper or shredded by an IED. Anything was possible given the brute power of his opposition. Maybe he should resign himself to sudden disaster. Sudden defeat. After all life was mostly pain and grief. Anguish and sorrow. A universe where no good deed went unpunished.

He shut down the bleak line of thought. It was a do or die mission. Fifty-fifty. Right. Those were decent odds and he meant to play them with grit and skill.

He pressed on. He needed heavy weapons and he would have them soon. Until then the Glock was his primary firearm. His only firearm. So be it. A Black Talon hollow-point in the chest would give the toughest assailant serious pause. It would mangle flesh and shatter bone. It would pulverize vital organs.

Thorn also carried a Cold Steel Tanto fighting knife in a quick-draw sheath on his left hip. The Tanto's wicked blade could hack through human targets with

savage efficiency. Thorn was a believer in edged weapons. He was a student of edged weapons. He could wield any knife with devastating skill. He had studied advanced knife fighting under Ninjitsu edged weapon instructors. Ninjitsu emphasized rapid disposal of multiple attackers. It emphasized a maximum aggression approach to combat training.

Maximum aggression. In Thorn's bitter experience there was no other way. Still a quick-and-easy operation would suit him fine. Provided the hostile troops complied. Provided his enemies were stupid enough to let him accomplish his objectives unchallenged. A nice little row of targets organized neatly for mass destruction.

That would be ideal.

But unlikely.

Jagged lightning flashed overhead. A crack of thunder. Icy rain stung Thorn's exposed skin. He pulled his watch cap down and flipped up the collar of his bomber jacket. He quickened his pace and focused on his assignment. He had to pinpoint the Godfather of NYC. Vince Falco. And kill him.

According to the mission intel Falco and his Mafia crew had launched a massive crime wave. A vast heroin operation responsible for destroying countless lives. Falco's heroin was a unique synthetic compound. It was bio-engineered for rapid mass production. Users called it Monster Rush for the extreme physical and mental high it triggered. The narcotic could be smoked or snorted or eaten. Needles were obsolete and access was easy.

Too easy.

Monster Rush addicts ranged from the poorest to the wealthiest Americans. No one was immune. No one was safe. Even children were targets with victims younger than ten years old. It was substance addiction on a vast scale. A scale unprecedented in human history.

Thorn understood the problem on a professional level and also on a personal level. He was no stranger to addiction. Alcohol had stricken his past. He had spent agonizing years in the grip of dependence. He had clawed his way from the edge of the abyss. He had recovered at the last instant before the darkness swallowed him alive.

So the curse of addiction was a personal struggle for Matt Thorn. A personal struggle that made tonight's quest doubly imperative.

According to Thorn's intel Falco had smashed all opposition. He had killed and maimed all opposition. That included more than two hundred police officers and Federal agents. Yet there had been zero arrests and zero indictments. Falco was operating with impunity. He was protected by corruption that reached the highest levels of U.S. government. Corruption and incompetence in equal measure.

Business as usual.

The blame did not stop there. A massive prescription opioid epidemic had paved the way for Monster Rush. Pharmaceutical executives had pushed hyper-addictive opioids onto American society for decades. Greedy physicians had taken huge kickbacks to over-prescribe malicious drugs. Instead of healing the sick they had acted like street-corner dope-pushers. They were crooks in white coats. Their scam had earned them billions of dollars.

Those involved showed little conscience.

Or zero conscience.

Their greed was enormous.

It was unlimited.

Inevitably Wall Street was involved. Rapacious bankers had invested in opioid stocks for maximum gain. Maximum loot. They had profited immensely from the suffering and misfortune of average Americans.

And so it went.

On and on.

Like always.

Meantime American cities were crashing into drug-fueled chaos. American prisons were overflowing with zombie-like drug addicts. Most were repeat offenders gripped by Monster Rush.

The result was a tragedy.

A catastrophe.

A nightmare.

Absent effective opposition Falco had reached new heights of power. The only solution was an emergency response to destroy the threat. Total war against the Godfather and his poison machine. A policy of scorched earth.

Enter Matt Thorn.

His mission was to assault an evil empire. To destroy a latent evil. He was a battle-hardened expert in covert warfare. He was a Punisher. An Executioner. A Jedi.

A Specialist.

His specialty was to pinpoint the opposition. Then exterminate the opposition. Search and destroy. It was a simple concept and simplicity was its power. It was battle tested. It reduced even the toughest foe to a vulnerable target.

The key was savage resolve.

A stony drive to isolate the hostile team.

And send them to hell.

By fire and steel Thorn would bring the Godfather to a full and harsh reckoning. His mission was clear and his tactics defined. He had to forge ahead and kill everyone who got in his way. He had to smash Vince Falco into bloody pulp.

Justice or revenge?

Was there a lasting difference?

Did it ultimately matter?

Every victim of Monster Rush diminished America's value as a nation. Every victim threatened America's survival.

Someone had to do something.

Emergency action.

Thorn angled toward a nearby parking lot. A vehicle loomed ahead of him. A Dodge Challenger SRT coupe. It was painted Phantom Black. He verified the Challenger's tag number. This was his ride for the mission. The modern coupe boasted retro styling and was reminiscent of a bygone era.

The muscle car era.

Detroit steel.

Real steel.

The younger Thorn would have gladly worked five shit jobs to pay for this black bomber. But the coupe boasted more than just styling. A supercharged 707 horsepower HEMI powerplant lurked behind the coupe's shark-mouth nose. The HEMI's monstrous torque could vaporize the highway and everything on it.

The Dodge brothers would be proud.

Granted a nondescript sedan would merge better with NYC's rush hour traffic. But the Challenger gave Thorn a distinct advantage on the road. It allowed him to outpace and outmaneuver his adversaries in an emergency. Unless his enemies combined horsepower with firepower. While the Challenger granted Thorn brutal acceleration it was not bulletproof. Not even close. The coupe did not boast Kevlar panels or armored glass. It was nothing like the car driven by a famous British superspy.

Too bad.

Thorn pulled a remote control from his pocket and hit a button. A squawk from the Challenger's alarm confirmed the pickup. He sprang the driver door and settled behind the wheel. He adjusted the driver seat and wing mirrors. Then he tapped SUPER SPORT on the Challenger's touch-screen performance control display. That would maximize the coupe's high-speed handling. It would force the coupe's powertrain to deliver 110 percent effort in a crisis.

All systems go.

He fired the HEMI and felt a massive surge of power. Moments later he was rolling on the highway and cruising like a boss. Directly ahead and filling the horizon he saw the glittering skyline of NYC. It was a striking panorama emphasized by the full moon and bolts of lightning that surged across the sky.

He drove on. He recognized the unmistakable profile of One World Trade Center. It was a modern marvel of glass and steel rising 1,776 feet toward the stratosphere. It was a superb testament to American engineering. It was also a testament to the heinous terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Thorn was awed and humbled. His heart swelled with overwhelming reverence and respect. The colossal tower inspired him and lent him inner strength. Its gleaming structure seemed to transmit a secret signal.

Urging him forward.

Urging him to victory.

He powered on and relaxed a fraction. The night was clear with no threats in sight. He had evaded the opposition through careful planning and cautious movement.

He grinned.

Sometimes a plan just worked.

Hell yes.

His grin faded. He felt a churning in the pit of his stomach. It was a twinge of primal fear. A premonition of danger.

Something was wrong.

Dead wrong.

He sensed a hostile presence on the road close behind. A tremor ran down his spine. It set his nerves on edge. The sensation was sharp and urgent. It signaled an unseen threat. A ticking bomb ready to explode in his face.

Headlights flared behind the Challenger. A blast of icy white light.

Thorn checked his wing mirror. He saw a low-slung coupe hurtling toward him. It was painted gunmetal gray. It was locked on and homing like a missile.

A chase car.

He recognized the unmistakable profile of a Ford Mustang. A GT500. The feared Super Cobra.

Dammit!

The enemy had organized an ambush. That meant a tipoff. Thorn's jaw tightened. Anger surged inside. Someone had leaked precise details of his mission and set him up for disaster. But there was no time to contemplate revenge. He had to focus on his immediate danger. He had to focus on the mechanics of survival.

He checked his wing mirror and saw a burst of dirty orange flame.

Muzzle flash!

Another stabbing flash.

Another.

Then another.

The Challenger shuddered. Bullets struck like hammer blows.

Wham!

A heavy slug punched through Thorn's seat. He grunted as the slug tore an agonizing track along his raised right arm. Blood spurted across the Challenger's dash.

He crushed the coupe's accelerator to the floor. He was rocketing through the night. His digital speed readout was soaring. The coupe's HEMI supercharger was engaged and turning at maximum boost. He was blazing across the blacktop like Mad Max.

But he could not outrun a supersonic bullet.

His wounds were survivable. So far. But how long before he was hit in the skull or torso? He hunched low. He was trying to minimize the target profile he presented to the hostile gunmen. He clenched his teeth and braced for a slug to sever his spine or drill a lung. He was caught in a deadly trap and he saw no clear means of escape. No effective way to evade the opposition. He remembered the Army's oldest catch-phrase.

No plan survives contact with the enemy.

It fit his mission tonight.

It fit too damn well.

More gunshots exploded close behind. A fierce roar of Magnum slugs. Deadly pills of lead designed to maim and kill. Designed to crush and smash and destroy.

Thorn tightened his hands on the coupe's wheel. A death grip. He leaned forward as if his posture might extract more speed from the roaring HEMI. Around him the night was an eerie blur of light and shadow.

He checked his wing mirror and saw the chase car hanging tough. Headlights blazing. Then he saw a second car swerve into position beside it. Another Super Cobra. It was also painted gunmetal gray. A carbon-copy of the lead Mustang.

The enemy cars filled both lanes behind him. They were rocketing toward their prey with lethal intent. The fast and the furious. Their task was to smash him before his quest had properly begun. Of course he could end his mission right now. He could pull to a halt and surrender. Let the blackhats prevail.

Like hell.

Again he checked his wing mirror. The Cobras were punching ahead. Superchargers roaring. It was a determined pursuit. A ferocious pursuit. But there was no margin for error. The enemy wheelmen were risking disaster. Even a slight miscalculation meant they could lose control. They could hurtle into oblivion.

Thorn saw his chance. He had to pull a devious move if he meant to shave the odds. It would take a NASCAR driver's nerve and split-second timing. It would take a heavy dose of luck.

So be it.

He meant to try.

In fact he had no damn choice if he intended to succeed.

If he intended to survive.

He narrowed his eyes to slits and started a doomsday countdown in his mind.

Five.

He surged forward. That caused his pursuers to accelerate and increased their danger.

Four.

He wiped blood and sweat from his face.

Three.

He angled his foot...ready to hit his brake pedal.

Two.

He slowed abruptly.

One.

When the lead chase car was almost on top of his rear bumper he stomped his brakes and swerved left-right. It was a wild ploy meant to throw his closest pursuer into chaos.

A long shot.

Yeah.

But it paid off.

The startled chase driver hit his own brakes and the Mustang stood on its nose. It skidded along the curb in a shower of glittering sparks. Then it rocked to starboard. Tires screaming.

Gravity seized control. The coupe flipped twice. It disintegrated in a hail of shattered metal. A ragdoll figure crashed through the windshield and crumpled on the road in a bloody heap.

The coupe's mangled wreckage skidded to a halt. It spewed black smoke. One high-performance wheel broke from its axle and hurtled into the darkness. Another broken wheel bounced madly across the blacktop.

Thorn focused on the road ahead. He knew the second chase car was still on his tail. It was still in dogged pursuit. Its headlights were blazing more fiercely than ever. They were throwing nightmare shadows across the highway.

Just then several weapons fired together. Their muzzles spat flame from either side of the Mustang. Spent shell casings and propellant gasses were blown away by the roaring slipstream.

Bullets drilled the Challenger's trunk and rear fender. The enemy gunners were probing for a hotspot. The fuel lines or the fuel tank. If the coupe caught fire Thorn would be forced to stop and bail out. That meant he would be stranded and exposed.



Doomed.

There was one alternative. He pulled the Glock. The sleek pistol was a cold and deadly extension of himself. Its Black Talon ammo left the muzzle at 1,400 feet per second and hit like Thor's Hammer.

He gunned the coupe. He was seeking a place to stop and find cover. He needed a strikepoint. Someplace to hunker down and return fire.

He kept searching. Then he saw his error. He had picked a dead end. A road closed off for construction. It was sealed with concrete blocks and heavy equipment.

The Specialist was boxed in with gunners at his back. He was hurtling on a collision course with death at 130 miles per hour.

## Three

Thorn scanned the road ahead. He saw one chance for survival. It was a narrow exit on his left. It led to a bridge that spanned a murky river. If he could make the turn at high speed he could buy precious time to set up a strikepoint.

Assuming his moves were smooth and precise.

If not...

He hit his accelerator and used another burst of speed to gain a vital lead on the chase car. Then he cranked his wheel and made a screaming turn. Then he was drifting. He blew through a yellow-striped barricade that read KEEP OUT.

Then he was on the bridge. He slammed his brakes and hauled his wheel once more to rip the Challenger through a smoking U-turn. The coupe's fat performance tires screamed like something from beyond the rim of hell.

He killed the Challenger's headlights and completed his maneuver in near total darkness. He was out of the coupe before it rocked to a halt. Now he was facing his enemy head-on.

The Glock was in his hand. He double-checked its load. A live cartridge rode in the chamber and the magazine was firmly seated. The pistol was primed for action. Primed for combat. All he had to do was aim and pull the trigger.

Point and shoot.

Point and kill.

He set his jaw. He was ready to spring an ambush. It was a risky move. Sure. But he was committed and there was no turning back. There was no time to revise his plan of action.

Of course he was not eager to die.

Not at all.

He was eager to make his enemies die.

He crouched behind the open driver door. It would serve as a decent shield against hostile gunfire. In theory. Unless his opponents had loaded armor-piercing ammo.

He lowered the door window and leveled the Glock through the opening. He narrowed his eyes and saw the Mustang hurtling toward him. Headlights glaring.

He clamped the Glock in a firm two-handed grip and aimed across the pistol's glowing night sights. The Mustang was dead-center in his line of fire and there was no sign the driver was taking evasive action. It seemed Thorn's enemy had expected him to run and hide. Not stand and fight.

So bring it on.

He had nothing left to lose. He was tactically compromised. In other words he was fucked. The best he could say was that he had eighty-six cartridges on tap and he meant to expend them all. He meant to fire them all before the world exploded in his face.

He would go down fighting.

He tensed his trigger finger. Shoot! He fired a rapid burst at the advancing Mustang. Its grille exploded. Black Talon slugs gouged metal and shattered a headlight.

He fired again. The Glock recoiled solidly against his palm. Spent 9-millimeter shell casings flew from the pistol's ejection port. The casings clattered on the asphalt and rolled away.

He fired again. He needed effective hits. The Mustang was closing. He had to inflict lethal damage if there was time.

Everything depended on time.

He triggered another rapid-fire burst. Ten blazing slugs cored the Mustang's windshield. The front passenger snapped back against his seat and shuddered in a death spasm. Weapon lost.

Thorn tracked on with the Glock and fired with lethal determination. His tactic worked. The Mustang's windshield imploded in an avalanche of pebbled safety glass. The driver screamed and clawed at the mangled ruin of his face.

The coupe skidded and fishtailed. Clouds of smoke unspooled behind it. In a flash it lurched sideways and rammed a concrete lane divider. There was a screech of tortured metal. Dark oily vapor spewed from under the coupe's buckled hood. Both front tires exploded. There was a violent eruption of black rubber debris. Yards of high-performance tread whipped through the air.

The vehicle was disabled.

Damn right.

But the threat was still active.

Thorn saw motion in the rear of the car. A passenger stirring. The guy was stunned by the crash. But he was still a serious danger. He grasped a sawn-off shotgun with his finger on its trigger.

Thorn did not hesitate in his aggression. He unleashed another 9-millimeter salvo.

Black Talons stitched tidy holes across the Mustang's metalwork. Bullets struck the gunner's sweaty forehead and bored through his skull and brain. He tumbled backward. His finger clenched and triggered the shotgun. A 12-gauge shell exploded. Buckshot punched through the Mustang's headliner and tore through the roof. The weapon's report sounded like muffled thunder. Its muzzle flash was brief and bright.

The Glock's slide froze on an empty smoking chamber. Thorn ejected the spent magazine and slapped it away so it would not fall under his feet. He palmed a

backup mag and got it seated. He drew a sharp breath. He had trashed two pursuit cars and he had won the advantage.

At least for now.

Then a third pursuit car suddenly appeared. A sleek Jaguar V12. It was painted Inferno Red. It was hell on wheels. It was death in motion. Its driver was accelerating hard and muzzle flashes were stuttering from its open windows.

Thorn recoiled as a swarm of bullets hurtled past his face. He realized the Jag gunners were unloading with full-auto weapons.

He was badly outgunned.

He grimaced.

He had exactly one second to decide his course of action.

He rocked forward in a fighting crouch with the Glock up and tracking. The Jag was almost on top of him. He triggered another blazing salvo. Another windshield shot.

Three Black Talons punched smartly through car glass and ripped across the driver's face. His head snapped back and his skull exploded above the jawline. Bloody fragments painted the inside of the Jag in grisly patterns. The front passenger recoiled in shock. His mouth was gaping and he was shouting something incoherent.

Thorn fired again. There was no conscious thought involved in his action. Only reflex. Killing reflex. A warrior's fierce determination. Above all fear of death sharpened his resolve and concentration to a knife point.

Pistol slugs gashed and punctured the Jag's metalwork. Thorn was seeking a hotspot. It was the same tactic his enemies had tried against *him*.

Now it was time for payback.

He found his mark and the Jag's fuel tank detonated in a blinding yellow flash. Hungry flames erupted and spread in searing waves. He saw passengers ablaze and screaming. He saw hair and skin dissolve and flesh melt like hot wax. He saw a hand stab through an open rear window then shrivel and blacken as it was ravaged by blow-torch heat.

The Jag swerved across the bridge toward a safety railing. It smashed through the railing in a burst of shattered metal. Suddenly it was airborne. It twisted into a barrel roll. It trailed smoke and flame as it plunged toward the river.

Wham!

There was an explosion of foaming water and an obscene gurgling sound. The Jag's cabin flooded and the car sank rapidly and vanished into liquid blackness. Its occupants vanished with it.

After a few moments the ripples in the water subsided. Nothing broke the surface. There was no sign that anyone had survived the sinking. There was no sign that anyone was swimming for safety. The men in the car had been dragged into a cold black abyss.

A cold black grave.

Thorn scuttled along the Challenger's length. He leapt upright with the Glock raised and ready. He could not leave the scene yet. Not just yet. He had to verify the identity of the hit squad. If possible.

His pulse was thudding. He surged toward the wrecked Mustang. Broken auto glass crunched under the soles of his boots. Spent shell casings littered the

ground. He saw 10-millimeter and .357-SIG. Heavy stuff. Nasty stuff. "Damn it to hell," he said through gritted teeth.

He pushed ahead. Grim. His nostrils flared at the reek of gasoline and burned rubber. There was an acrid stink of burned gunpowder. It hung thick in the air. Like heavy-duty fireworks. Like the Fourth of July.

But this was no celebration.

It was carnage.

It was all-out war.

He paused and stooped to retrieve a fallen RONI machine pistol. It had been ejected from the crashed Mustang. He flung the weapon into the river. He had no use for it and he did not want it ending up in the hands of a passing civilian.

He pressed toward the Mustang. He was closing on its mangled cabin. He saw blood everywhere. He saw it clearly and he also smelled it. There was a stench of feces. A sharp tang of urine. The opened-up bowels of dead men. He was expecting that. He remembered that. It was the gut-wrenching perfume of warfare.

The rank scent of violent death.

He grimaced and kept moving. But he was moving too fast. He needed to use caution. He slowed his approach. He crouch-walked and hugged the shadows with the Glock leading.

Take it slow and take it careful.

Do *not* get your ass shot.

He saw the Mustang's driver tangled in his smashed steering wheel. One eye stared blankly. The other eye was torn from its socket. The man's face was gouged open. The massive wound exposed bone and teeth and bloody sinew. It was a grisly testament to the destructive force of the high-speed impact.

The Mustang's passenger door burst open. A gunman emerged. He gripped a Beretta pistol. He staggered and stumbled. He looked like a drunkard. He was dazed and bleeding from a nasty scalp wound. Blood streaked down his forehead and face and neck. It stained his white silk shirt. He took several more awkward steps away from the shattered Mustang.

Thorn stood inside deep shadow and watched the man coldly.

You won't make it far.

Maybe you think you will.

But you won't.

The man halted and swallowed hard. He sucked a ragged breath. He tightened his grip on the Beretta. His eyes darted in search of a target.

Thorn gave a low whistle. "Over here."

The man spun around. His features were twisted in panic. Shaky hands swung the Beretta into action.

Too late.

Thorn stroked the Glock's trigger. A Black Talon hollow-point hurtled downrange and blew a rat-hole in the gunner's skull. He toppled forward. His legs kicked and his torso shuddered. He went stiff. The Beretta clattered across the bridge and tumbled into the river.

The night fell silent. An eerie stillness. The violence had ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Time stopped.

Then it expanded.

Then it deepened.

Suddenly it restarted.

Thorn clenched his teeth. His gut tightened. His vision tunneled. He rode out the pulse-pounding adrenaline rush that always hit him after combat.

The rush of cheating death.

He stood motionless. A long moment passed. He drew a deep breath. His respiration stabilized. He drew another breath. His heart rate slowed back down to its normal forty-five beats per minute.

Again he approached the crippled Mustang. He was searching for clues. Signs of the strike team's origin.

He opened the driver door to inspect the dead wheelman. He studied the guy's expensive Italian suit. He studied the gold bling and the ivory-handled pistol slung beneath the man's arm.

It fit the profile. All of it. The guy was a mobster. An enforcer. Had been. Now he was a mangled corpse drenched in blood. He had lived a violent life and died a violent death.

Thorn saw a distinctive tattoo on the dead man's wrist. It was a hissing cobra. He had seen that tattoo in the mission file. It was a powerful symbol that was tied to a powerful criminal order.

*La Cosa Nostra.*

The Mafia.

He scowled. His cover was definitely blown. The enemy knew of his presence in NYC. That meant he faced two tough choices. He could forge ahead and take the risk that he would be ambushed again. Or he could scrub the mission and retreat.

Tough choices. Right. Retreating admitted disaster. But pushing forward could also spell disaster.

There was another problem. The hostile strike team had not stumbled upon him by chance. That meant a traitor in Thorn's camp. A Judas willing to leak intel to the opposition. That fact complicated his mission vastly. It thwarted his plans and curbed his options.

He felt the weight of failure heavy on his shoulders. Anguish welled inside him. Black despair. He cursed out loud. He felt his cool slipping. With grave effort he checked himself. It would not be the first time a mission had started badly and it would not be the last. He would handle it as he had done before. He would improvise and adapt. Quitting was not in him.

He assessed his tactical situation. He had been ambushed. But he had survived. More than survived. His enemies had suffered bloody defeat and that fact gave him inner strength. He vowed not to retreat if he was still functional and able to attack the Mafia savages in NYC. His mission was to kill them all. He would keep hunting until his targets were cornered and crushed. That meant total war. Like Iraq and Afghanistan. Like a dozen other warzones he had fought in.

He drew another deep breath. He focused on the Rule of Five. The five core elements any soldier needed to complete a successful mission.

Tactics.

Skill.

Mindset.

Gear.

Luck.

The Rule of Five.

Yeah.

He would need all of them working together in order to prevail.

In order to survive.

He shifted vibrations. He focused on the misery spread by Falco's poison machine. The countless lives destroyed by Monster Rush. Cold rage tore through him. A familiar emotion. The Pentagon had channeled his rage and shaped him into an effective warrior. Military service had saved him from a troubled past. He had grown up on the streets—grown up wild and mean. He had sharpened his fighting skills in backstreet brawls.

His life was an endless battle.

It was constant warfare.

So he would make warfare his profession.

He had enlisted in the U.S. Army. From there he had braved the rigors of Special Forces training. But no amount of training could have prepared him for actual combat. He had nearly frozen in a savage battle against ISIS rebels. Fear had almost consumed him...scrotum shrinking and urine staining his pants. But he had recovered swiftly. It was do or die. Kill or be killed. He had fired his weapon on blazing full-auto and ripped his enemies apart.

Then he had understood.

War really *is* hell.

Now he was a Delta Force specialist. His resolve had been sharpened by the horror of battle. It had also been honed by devastating personal loss. Three years earlier his wife had been raped and murdered. The shock and sadness of her loss hit him every day. Like a hard fist beneath his heart.

His darling Kate.

Heaven keep her.

His reaction to her murder had been swift and decisive. He had tracked the men responsible and slaughtered them all. He had intended to crush his enemies without remorse. He had succeeded and collected all outstanding debts.

In blood.

When it was over he had turned himself into his Delta Force commander at Fort Bragg. He had expected a life prison sentence or the electric chair. But his commander had other ideas. His commander needed Thorn for a special purpose. He needed a soldier who was prepared to operate above and beyond the limits of the Law. He needed a soldier who was prepared to use initiative and skill to unleash deadly vengeance.

Unleash hell on earth.

So he had recruited Thorn into SOG: the Special Operations Group. It was an ultra-secret black-ops program. It was meant to engage high-value targets. Engage them and kill them. Those targets included extreme criminals and terrorists. The worst of the worst.

SOG did not exist on any Pentagon roster. It was not authorized by any Pentagon committee. It was not sanctioned by the Oval Office. It was not subject to the whims of ass-kissing bureaucrats or venal politicians. It had its roots in World

War 2. A hard-charging U.S. Army General had seen the need for a special tactical unit. A unit whose operatives would be free from asinine rules and red tape.

Operatives who could strike hard and make the bastards pay.

The General in question had died shortly after World War 2. But his concept had survived. His unit had survived. SOG would be run by fighting men and answerable only to fighting men.

Men who knew justice must be swift and punishment must have no limits.

With SOG Thorn would specialize in solo operations. The concept was to maximize stealth and combat flexibility. It was a grim and lonely way to fight. But Thorn had long since adjusted to it. In some primal way he thrived on it. He was at his core a lone-wolf hunter. He understood that against certain enemies one man had a better chance than five.

Or ten.

Or fifty.

He was a specialist. Right. He was also a realist. He held no illusion. He was a killer. A bringer of desolation and death. In that respect he was exactly like Vince Falco. The two men were mirror images of each other. Their motivations differed. But their methods were the same.

Scorched earth.

Grim reality made Thorn's teeth clench. It made his gut tighten. But he understood his destiny. He understood it and accepted it.

He knew that it took a demon to hunt a demon.

It took a devil to vanquish a devil.

He peered at the dead men crumpled around him. Their sightless eyes locked open. Their mouths gaping. Their blood oozing. The end of their lives. Here in this place. A dark lonely bridge that spanned a dark lonely river.

He stood with the Glock held at his side and listened to the moaning wind. The rumble of a distant train. The dim yapping of a junkyard dog.

Shadows merged and thickened and coiled around him. His own shadow seemed to blacken. An ominous feeling. An ugly feeling.

He set his jaw. He stowed the Glock. He knew with dead certainty that he would need the pistol again before the night was over.

And other weapons.

And explosives.

And savage resolve.

A sudden wail of sirens demanded his attention. He glanced across the bridge toward the highway and saw the flashing lights of NYPD squad cars. That meant it was time to go. Time to leave. He was not inclined to answer tough questions inside a police interrogation room.

He sprinted toward the Challenger and leapt inside its cabin and fired the engine. He punched the throttle and watched the tachometer spike into its normal range. He was relieved to hear the big V8 running smoothly. With any luck the coupe would see him to his next waypoint.

With any luck.

Barring another ambush.

He threw the coupe's shifter into Drive and tightened his grip on the wheel. He hit the accelerator and rocketed back onto the open highway.

## Four

The Challenger's HEMI growled as Thorn surged north on Interstate 278. He was calculating angles of attack. He still had to complete stage one of his mission. He had to pinpoint his target. He had a plan in mind. But he had to move swiftly.

He left the interstate. He was stopped at a junction when he registered glaring headlights. A vehicle was closing on him from behind. He palmed the Glock and braced for another ambush.

The vehicle was an ambulance. As it angled around him he peered through its side windows. He glimpsed bloody bundles in the back. It took no huge mental effort to figure the mangled bodies inside were those of the men he had killed.

He watched the ambulance speed away. No doubt it was heading for the city morgue. The Medical Examiner would be kept busy for the rest of the night. He would inspect the dead men. He would record horrific car crash injuries and grisly wounds from small-arms fire.

Merry Christmas.

Thorn pulled into a service station and parked. He reached inside his bomber jacket and palmed his I-phone. He had an urgent call to make. He had a number memorized and he dialed it now. He had to connect with his contact: FBI Special Agent Max Van Damme. The mission called for close cooperation between Thorn and the Bureau.

The private line rang twice before Van Damme answered. "Yes." It was neither a question nor a greeting.

"The opposition pinned me." Thorn's tone was ice cold.

"Shit. How did—"

"The point is, Falco knows I'm onto him. That means he's running. Hiding. I need to find out where."

"You need to stand down."

Thorn scowled. "No way."

"Don't be stupid. You can't win this. It's over."

"Not unless I say so."

Van Damme paused. "Tell me where you are."

Thorn's scowl darkened. Revealing his exact location was strictly against protocol and Van Damme knew that.

So why ask?

Thorn severed the line. A cold worm of suspicion crawled in his gut. Urgent questions crowded his mind. Was Van Damme concealing a secret that jeopardized the mission? Was he connected to Vince Falco and tonight's ambush?

Thorn recalled the FBI agent's biography. The mission file stated that Van Damme was a twenty-year Law Enforcement veteran. He had won commendations for solid police work. His courage and combat skill had earned him major respect within the Bureau. His record was excellent. It was outstanding. Of course there



might be some dark secret lurking in his background. But Thorn did not have time to speculate.

If Van Damme *was* a traitor?

He would pay.

Absolutely.

Thorn turned his thoughts to the task at hand. He refueled the Challenger and got rolling. His immediate priority was to obtain the gear to complete his objectives. He had a list of items in mind and a local vendor pre-selected to fill his needs. The vendor was part of SOG's backup network. If a disaster occurred Thorn would be supplied with covert resources to get him back in the fight.

But first he had to make the connection. He navigated through NYC's lower east side and entered Chinatown. He passed Confucius Square. The Asian-American Museum. He was heading toward a specific address. He found the Golden Lotus Medicine Shop with its colorful façade. A sign in the shop's front window read OPEN...even though it was long past midnight.

He drove for another block. He nosed the Challenger into a dark alley and killed the engine. Now his car was concealed from prying eyes.

He checked the Glock's load to confirm it was ready for action. He was prepared to defend himself when he moved out on foot. But he did not want to open fire in the middle of Chinatown. The din of gunshots would trigger rapid police intervention. In addition bystanders might record the confrontation with their camera phones. They would try to capture the bloody action as it happened.

And that would not be good.

The last thing Thorn needed was to see his face plastered all over YouTube. His mission winning Likes on Facebook? Not a great idea.

The good news was that he did not have far to walk. That would minimize the danger of violent conflict. At least he hoped so. Fighting at close-quarters was an ugly business. One mistake and he was dead. There would be no second chance to get it right. End game.

So move smartly.

Just hope it works.

He quit the Challenger and strode ahead with grim determination.

He scanned the shadows.

Sudden motion caught his eye. Ten feet ahead a black tomcat arched his back and hissed. Then he bolted for cover. Thorn wished the furry predator good luck and sped his pace. He reached the Golden Lotus and entered quickly.

Inside the shop a slender Asian man with a Fu Manchu mustache greeted Thorn. He offered a solemn bow. "The city brings much intrigue."

"And much danger," Thorn replied.

Passcode completed.

The shop owner smiled. His shrunken skin crinkled. His eyes were magnified behind wire-rimmed spectacles. He introduced himself as Doctor Zo. The mission file confirmed that Zo was a refugee from North Korea. He had been recruited by SOG and had settled in Chinatown. He had been tasked with providing covert support for special operatives like Thorn.

Zo listened intently while Thorn explained what he needed. Wasting no time he led Thorn to the rear of the shop. He unlocked a secret door to reveal an oblong room lit by a fluorescent light.

Thorn entered the clandestine chamber. There he saw small-arms mounted on the walls. He saw crates of ammunition and explosives and other battlefield accessories. Everything was labeled neatly like merchandise in a hardware store.

He examined the gear. He already had the Glock. But now he added another handgun: a Heckler & Koch SOCOM. He was familiar with the SOCOM from previous missions. He had used it to eradicate multiple enemies in close-combat. He called the big pistol Black Thunder. That was a nod to its deep black finish and wicked muzzle blast. The SOCOM fired .45 Auto cartridges that were loaded to +P+ power levels. That doubled the impact energy of standard .45 ammo.

Black Thunder.

Yeah.

A true hand-cannon.

He continued to scan the room. He was matching Zo's inventory to his anticipated needs. He selected an UZI PRO 9-millimeter submachine gun. The PRO was a modernized version of the venerable UZI design. It combined the rugged dependability of the original model with improved accuracy and ergonomics.

The UZI was supplied with a Sionics sound-suppressor and twenty extra magazines. The magazines were loaded with solid copper Terminal Shock hollow-points. The ammo had a proven track record. It was devastating in close-combat. Great Britain's Special Air Service had filled many graves with it. They had used Terminal Shocks in Operation Nimrod. That was the famed 1980 Iranian Embassy raid. SAS troopers had rescued nineteen hostages and smoked five terrorist thugs.

Thorn moved on. He picked an FN SCAR assault rifle. It was chambered in 5.56-millimeter NATO. It was equipped with an AimPoint optical gunsight. The SCAR also boasted an integrated M1 rocket launcher. An expert could place five rockets on target in ten seconds flat.

He reached another table. It was decked with explosives. He chose ten Semtex demolition bombs. Each bomb was the size of a cigarette pack and weighed twenty ounces. Each bomb's compact size belied hellish destructive power.

Next he snagged nylon bandoleers to hold gun and rocket ammo. He also opted for a quick-draw shoulder holster custom-made for Black Thunder. Other items included a Kevlar helmet and night-vision goggles. An insulated wire-cutter. Fire-resistant gloves. A combat face-mask.

Zo supplied two stout duffel bags to carry the selected items. Together the men packed rapidly and in silence.

Thorn lifted the bags and tested their weight as they hung by his sides. He had a small arsenal at his disposal and he was ready to unleash a burst of cleansing flame. When it was time he would let his enemies see that flame and feel its heat.

When it was time.

Soon.

Zo met his gaze and asked, "Do you ever tire of it?"

"What?"

"Killing."

"I'm a soldier. It's part of the job."

Thorn left the armorer's shop and stowed his gear inside the Challenger. He slid behind the coupe's wheel. But he did not start the engine. His business in Chinatown was not finished. His task was to discover where Falco was hiding.

He knew a possible source for that information.

But he had to act swiftly.

He pulled his I-phone and checked its GPS to verify his next rendezvous. The Red Dragon Martial Arts Gym was three blocks away. That would be his meeting place. He typed a quick text message and got confirmation the meet was on.

His plan was to link up with a Chinatown informant. Someone who could give him a reliable fix on Falco's current location. It was known that Falco had aligned with the Chinese underworld. He had combined forces with the Tongs and Triads to distribute Monster Rush. The resulting pact had created a heroin-fueled war machine.

So far Falco had profited hugely.

So far.

But Falco was blinded by his own arrogance. He was blinded by the myth of his own invincibility. Every tyrant had the same resources and none of it was enough to save them from a deadly and determined warrior.

A lone assassin.

Thorn was not interested in making arrests or seeking indictments. He was not working toward a trial that would be derailed by high-powered lawyers. He represented a more direct solution. It was akin to exterminating diseased vermin.

That meant Falco was a marked man.

A dead man walking.

Meantime Monster Rush was devouring millions of new addicts across the world.

Grim reality.

Right.

According to the mission file Monster Rush was a product of bio-engineering. It was accidentally discovered by a renowned pesticide research team. It was chemically similar to a human hormone called Dopa-Tri-Hexamine—or DTH. Monster Rush imitated DTH in human brain cells to produce intense exhilaration... alongside violent paranoia.

A devil's brew.

No doubt.

Better living through science.

Thorn quit the Challenger and got moving on foot. He strode along a side-street and picked out thin figures illuminated by street lights. The figures resolved into several young women of Asian descent. All wore low-cut tops and short skirts and stilettos. They were prostitutes. They were doubtless victims of Monster Rush.

The nearest woman was stunningly beautiful. That seemed to amplify her personal tragedy. Instead of a life on the streets she could have made a career for herself and married a man she loved. Yet she was here in the damp and cold. She was devoid of hope and mired in gloom.

A wasted life.

Thorn could do nothing to help. His chest felt hollow. He pressed on. Minutes later he reached the Red Dragon Gym. He noted a sign that read OPEN 24 HOURS. The gym's dragon motif was etched in glowing red and green neon.

He stepped inside the gym and turned toward a crowd of men. They formed a rough circle. They were shoving and shouting and jeering. Most were puffing cigarettes and waving fists crammed with money. Blue smoke swirled through the air and there was a stench of aromatic tobacco.

In the middle of the crowd two sweat-covered men were locked in a brutal kickboxing fight. Those in the crowd had placed bets on the outcome of the mêlée. They were backing whichever hard-muscled combatant they favored.

Thorn had no interest in the brawl. His mission was to locate a wiry Asian named Hannibal Chang. He scanned the crowd. He found the sharp-featured snitch almost immediately. He was standing a few feet away.

Informants had many reasons to leak information and Chang's motivation was revenge. His teenage brother—a small-time car thief—had been murdered by Mafia thugs six months earlier. His payback was to supply details of Mob activities when the need arose.

Like tonight.

Thorn linked up with his contact and the pair retreated to a private corner. Wasting no time Thorn said, "I need to pinpoint Vince Falco."

Before Chang could reply the crowd roared and cut him off. There was another roar as one fighter kicked his opponent backward in a spray of blood.

When the roar died down Thorn said, "I need Falco's location. An exact fix."

Chang frowned. "That could take a few days."

"You've got thirty minutes."

Chang drew a deep breath. He pulled his smartphone and cycled through a list of contacts. "I'll ask around. But don't expect miracles."

## Five

Thorn exited the Red Dragon Gym and strode toward his car. Ahead in the darkness he recognized a stunning woman. It was the prostitute he had seen earlier. But now she was surrounded by four brutish men. The men were advancing on her aggressively. They were hurling insults and backing her against a brick wall.

The Specialist had a choice. He could ignore the lady's plight and keep moving. Or he could intervene.

No choice at all.

He quickened his pace. The lady saw him coming and relief was visible in her eyes. When he was a dozen steps out he made his presence known. "Enough!"

The four tuffs spun to face him. Obviously startled. Obviously spooked. Their leader recovered his composure and stepped forward. Scowling.

Thorn stood his ground. "One question."

The thug paused. "Yeah?"

"That tattoo. On your throat. Is that a gun...or a penis?"

The punk's face turned crimson. He thrust forward with a snarl of rage and launched his right fist at Thorn's temple.

Thorn ducked and pivoted. He moved with the skill and grace of a martial arts Black Belt. He thrust out his own fist to slam the target's kidney with the force of a jackhammer. The thug doubled over and vomited on the sidewalk. Thorn slashed a stiffened hand across the back of his neck.

A classic Judo chop.

The guy toppled. Coughing blood. He lay on the pavement. He was twitching like a poisoned cockroach. His partners watched the grim display. They realized their plight and opted for a desperate counter-move. One man lunged for Thorn's front while the other assaulted his flank. Each thug had his fists up in the style of a trained boxer. But training in a gym would only take these men so far.

By contrast Thorn had been on the razor's edge of lethal combat most of his adult life. A nearly constant battle for survival. And when the battle came down to bare-knuckle brawling he was an avid student of Combat Judo. The fighting technique had been developed for U.S. Army Rangers during the Vietnam War. It emphasized lightning-fast strikes with hands and feet. It emphasized savage retaliation in a close-quarters battle.

Thorn ducked again. He drove an elbow into his target's ribcage with enough force to crack bone and rip sinew. He seized a sweaty wrist and wrenched the man's arm until its socket exploded. The chump shrieked and collapsed.

That left number three. This thug was bigger and meaner than the rest. He was a 300-pound gorilla with fists like sledgehammers. He surged forward. His face was twisted with rage.

Thorn dodged. Too late. The brute slammed a hard fist into his solar plexus. The impact drove the air out of his lungs. A bolt of agony shot through him and the coppery taste of blood filled his mouth. He stumbled. Lungs burning. Vision rippling and red-blurred.

In the next instant training took over. Thorn rebounded with a savage Judo kick that smashed the thug's groin. The guy howled in agony. Next Thorn landed a stunning double punch that cracked the thug's jaw. Blood and jagged teeth hurtled through the air. The guy staggered backward. Wailing. His legs buckled and he crumpled into a flaccid heap.

Three targets down. Elapsed time: twenty-two seconds. Not exactly textbook. But good enough.

Combat Judo.

Yeah.

The fourth man lingered nearby. His ferret-face was deathly pale and his eyes bulged in horror.

Thorn angled toward the guy with his hands raised in a menacing Judo pose. "I'll give you a choice."

The punk took the second option. Avoiding Thorn's wrath he ran like hell.

Thorn turned toward the lady. Her face was bruised along one side and tears etched tracks down her cheeks.

She wiped her eyes and regained her composure. She met Thorn's steady gaze. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

The lady studied her savior. "Who are you?"

"A friend."

"Really?" Her tone was skeptical.

"You needed help," Thorn said. "So I'm here. It's that simple."

The lady nodded. A single fresh tear made a glistening track down one cheek.

Thorn stepped toward her. He was pleased she did not flinch away. He cupped her face gently in his palm and tenderly wiped away the tear. She relaxed visibly at his touch. She managed a faint smile and Thorn returned it. Then his smile faded. It was replaced by a frown of concern. "You need to get away from here. Find someplace safe."

The lady's expression betrayed fear. "I've got nowhere to go."

"Yes, you do." Thorn spoke without hesitation. He raised a hand to hail a passing cab. He produced a wad of cash as the yellow sedan pulled alongside him. The money was earmarked for the mission. But Thorn intended to use a portion of it to help the lady. The U.S. Army could take it out of his paycheck when the mission was complete.

Assuming he survived.

He gave the cab driver a serious tip and said, "Take the lady to Long Island. A five-star hotel. Understand?"

The cab driver grabbed his cash. "You're the boss."

Thorn turned to the lady and handed her a stack of bills. She could spend the money on a good room and good food for a few nights or she might spend it all on Monster Rush. Maybe it was inevitable. But Thorn had no control over that. His immediate objective was to help the lady. Get her off the streets for the rest of the night. If it took cash to solve the problem...so be it. Sometimes a soldier's job could be accomplished without guns or high explosives.

That time was now.

He opened the cab door and ushered the lady inside. She kissed him and said again, "Thank you."

Thorn smiled. "Merry Christmas."

The lady smiled back. "Merry Christmas." She settled inside the cab and Thorn closed the door. Then the cab was rolling. It turned toward the Brooklyn Bridge and faded into the darkness.

Gone.

Thorn made his way back to the Challenger and climbed inside. Moaning wind blew around the coupe and half-frozen rain battered its metalwork. Now he had to wait for Hannibal Chang's response. He used the waiting time to disassemble his Glock and clean it. He reassembled the pistol with practiced motions. Then he dry-fired several times to test the mechanism. He replaced the magazine and chambered a 9-millimeter cartridge.

The gun was ready for action.

Ready for hellfire.

He unzipped one of the duffel bags and retrieved Black Thunder with its shoulder holster. He fed the big pistol a twelve round magazine. Then he chambered a .45 Auto cartridge and closed the heavy slide with a satisfying thunk. He planned to carry Black Thunder beneath his bomber jacket. It would ride

alongside the Glock. He would be weighed down with combat hardware including the spare ammunition he carried. But he would be ready to retaliate if his enemies sprang an ambush.

He sat behind the Challenger's wheel with his I-phone and waited for Chang to call. Waiting was the hard part. But Thorn was used to it. He had long since disciplined himself to show patience when the situation demanded. He knew a hasty move might blow his game. He could not always be proactive. Conversely when he was proactive the action was intense. It was hell on earth. That was the nature of search and destroy.

Emphasis on destroy.

He listened to the rain drumming on the coupe's hood and roof. The moaning wind. He was rocked by sudden anger. Sudden rage. It was a seething hatred for his enemies. He wondered if there was any limit to the evil men could do to each other.

He quickly realized there was not.

He drew a sharp breath. His chest swelled. He would not let despair overwhelm him. He would not reject humanity. He refused to see the human race as monstrous and broken.

At least not the *entire* human race.

He stared at the coupe's wing mirror. Haunted eyes stared back. The eyes of a scarred man. Scars that made him an outcast.

An eternal loner.

His feelings of isolation had begun near the time of his mother's death. He had been ten years old when she got sick. He had noticed angry red sores on her neck and face. He had listened to her stabbing cough. She slept a lot and soon she was too sick to get out of bed. The sores were growing and some were bloody. A visiting health aide showed Matt how to dab the sores with medicine.

Time passed. His mother's sores grew worse and her limbs swelled. Finally the health aide called an ambulance. The paramedics carried Matt's mother away on a stretcher. Matt never saw his mother again. Years later he read the Hospice report. The sores had been cancerous lesions. Kaposi's Sarcoma. They were caused by HIV.

Thorn drew another deep breath. He needed to control the memories and the raging torrent of his emotion. He stared through the Challenger's windshield at a glowing Chinese lantern. It was suspended above the alley.

He focused on the light and imagined he was moving toward it. He was uniting with its radiant energy. He let his vision blur and his soul expand. He cleared his mind. With supreme effort he thrust the negative thoughts aside.

Again he peered at his reflection in the car's wing mirror. He saw eyes that burned with resolve. A resolve to complete his mission.

A resolve to smash Vince Falco.

The squawking phone caught Thorn by surprise. "Hello?"

"I've got the information you asked for."

There was a note of strain in Hannibal Chang's voice. But Thorn let it go. "I'm listening."

"Not on the phone. I need a face-to-face."

"Cut the crap."

"I've got to cover myself. I don't know who's snooping on the line. It's not safe. Do you read me? If it's too much trouble..."

"Where are you?"

Chang rattled off a location.

"I hope it's worth the trip."

"You won't be disappointed. I guarantee."

## Six

Thorn covered five blocks on foot. He was closing on Hannibal Chang's location. As instructed he found a specific side-street and veered into it. He found a metal access hatch. He lifted the hatch on creaking hinges and descended a steep flight of steps. His nostrils flared at the reek of damp and urine.

He pressed on. He entered a murky access tunnel. It was part of an abandoned subway route beneath Chinatown.

An icy gust blew through the tunnel. He flipped the collar of his bomber jacket and pulled down his watch cap. He scanned the shadows. He was alert for any sign of trouble. Any sign of a trap. All he noticed were skittering cockroaches and the drip-drip of a leaking sewer line.

He covered another fifty feet. His footsteps echoed in the tunnel. Dead ahead he saw Chang's diminutive form. He recognized the man's bony features and slicked-back hair.

"Be ready." Thorn was surprised at the sound of his own voice. It was a whisper in the dark. He slid his right hand toward the Glock and then across to Black Thunder. He felt the reassuring weight of both weapons under his jacket.

He took a cautious step forward. Eyes locked on Chang. He picked out a bulky leather satchel slung across the man's shoulder.

Chang grasped the satchel with both hands. Sweat covered his face. His eyes were bulging as he stood rigid in the gloom.

Then the darkness erupted into blazing hellfire.

Thorn watched the satchel explode. It spewed red-orange flame. He dropped to a crouch and grimaced against the heat of the fireball. Its flash was imprinted on his retinas.

He rolled sideways and dove into an adjacent tunnel. The move saved him from the brunt of the blast. But he was still dazed and gagging on acrid smoke as he shoved upright.

Breathe...gotta breathe. His chest was heaving and his lungs straining as he gulped air. He blinked hard to clear his blurred vision. He glimpsed the blast zone and saw body parts strewn across the floor. Then he saw Chang's decapitated head. The dead man's eyes were wide open and staring directly at him.

Shit!

Oh shit!

Three figures emerged near where Chang had been standing. Weapons raised.



Thorn recoiled from the ambush. The initial burst of fire struck sparks across a metal railing in front of him. He sprinted back along the tunnel. As he moved his thoughts raced in overdrive. The enemy had somehow discovered his rendezvous with Chang and set a trap. He would never know the whole story. He would never know if Chang had been tricked or coerced into carrying the satchel bomb.

At this point it no longer mattered. His priority now was survival. He had to meet the challenge of dodging coordinated fire from multiple automatic weapons. Bullets hammered the concrete around him and ricocheted past his skull. Something sharp grazed his forehead. He cursed and lunged into another tunnel. He needed to find a strikepoint. A solid position to return fire.

But where?

He saw hulking shapes in the gloom. Stacks of construction equipment. He scuttled behind the nearest stack. He was concealed and protected from enemy fire. At least for the moment. "Come and get me," he hissed. Then he pulled the Glock.

He heard a scuffle of footsteps. He knew the hostile gunners were closing in. His gut tightened. He risked a glance around his cover and saw a hitman surging toward him. He leveled the Glock and triggered a rapid string of shots. He squinted against the muzzle flash. At close range precision did not matter and he kept firing. Spent 9-millimeter shell casings leapt from the Glock's ejection port. Eighteen in total. A deadly hail of Black Talon hollow-points.

It was massive overkill against a single target.

But Thorn did not care.

He wanted revenge.

The thug stumbled. Blood spewing. Blown away.

The Glock's slide froze on an empty smoking chamber. Thorn jettisoned the spent magazine and reloaded. He saw another hitman rushing his position. The guy was snarling and firing on the run.

Thorn braced the Glock across his cover and triggered a single shot.

The gunner lurched backward as a Black Talon slug drilled his throat. He staggered and tumbled as he choked on his own vital fluids. Scarlet spray erupted from his gaping maw. His crashing corpse hit the ground and his weapon clattered out of sight.

Thorn stayed low and dodged from one construction stack to the next. He glimpsed moving shapes up ahead. The dim outlines of armed men. Drifting shadows. Like souls trapped in hell.

He slid back behind cover. He was pinned down and the enemy gunners were closing fast. They were getting closer with every heartbeat.

He had to escape this trap.

But how?

By what means?

The answer was brutally simple.

He needed punch.

Massive *killing* punch.

He stowed the Glock and pulled Black Thunder. He thumbed off the big pistol's safety. He sensed a creeping gunner on the opposite side of his cover. Almost close

enough to reach out and touch. He angled Black Thunder's six-inch barrel across the edge of the nearest construction stack.

The creeping gunner swiveled and saw the mighty handgun. A panicked expression twisted his face and his eyes flared wide in shock.

Thorn shoved Black Thunder out to full arm extension. Its muzzle was almost touching the gunner's cheek. Then he pulled the trigger and a fiery explosion split the air. A .45 hollow-point roared in at 1,200 feet per second. The shockwave reverberated like a bomb blast inside the tunnel.

The thug's face and forehead disintegrated. Shattered fragments ejected in a pink spray. One eyeball exploded from its socket and hurtled into the darkness.

The man was dead. But he would not fall. Thorn fired again. The point-blank .45 impact punched that headless torso backward. It sprawled on the floor. A shuddering bag of bones. Blood spread in a murky pool.

Thorn left the fallen gunner where he lay and twisted to face new danger from another angle.

Ten paces out the next hitman was snarling with rage. Weapon primed.

Thorn rocked forward. Closing the gap. He squeezed off another .45 cartridge with his gunsight locked on his enemy. The guy died knowing he had been outmaneuvered. Thorn read the agonized frustration in his eyes. The heavy .45 bullet struck him and punched him off his feet. The impact wound released a scarlet plume that splattered his jacket and soaked through. He sank rapidly and his face distorted into the twitching aftershocks of death.

Thorn was alerted to new danger. He swung Black Thunder toward his next target. The enemy gunner loomed at the edge of the tunnel. He was hammering away with the Scorpion subgun he carried.

Black Thunder roared twice. The gunner took one slug between the eyes and another in the Adam's Apple. He was dead but his trigger finger still clenched. The Scorpion's magazine unloaded in a final aimless burst. The guy collapsed facedown with the subgun trapped beneath his lifeless body as he fell.

Eerie silence filled the tunnel and all motion ceased. But Thorn's combat instincts warned him the battle was not over. Danger was all around him. He was trapped underground and he was being hunted by enemy gunmen.

There was one hope of survival. He needed to defeat a larger force using deadly stealth. That thinking on the battlefield had worked for Alvin York and Audie Murphy.

And it could work now.

It had to work.

The alternative was disaster.

He stowed Black Thunder. He pulled his Tanto fighting knife and locked it in his fist. The Tanto's blade was coated matte dark gray. That was to keep a flash of polished metal from betraying his position. The blade was eight inches long and two inches wide. Its distinctive shape was based on a Japanese Samurai dagger. The Tanto Shakku.

Death Bringer.

Thorn stalked forward in the underground gloom with the Tanto raised and ready. He and the knife had become a unified killing machine. He was a cyborg in

the purest sense of the term: a living being whose function was enhanced by a mechanical device.

In this case the function was combat.

It was carnage.

He moved through yet another murky tunnel. A stench of gunsmoke and leaking sewer lines fouled the air. Black cockroaches skittered at his feet. He tensed his jaw and kept moving. He reached a grimy Dumpster filled with construction debris. He knew the heavy steel container would make an excellent combat shield. He knew it would absorb serious volumes of small-arms fire.

He sank behind the Dumpster and waited. Knife in hand. This would be his new strikepoint. He hunkered down with the Tanto and waited for his enemies to approach.

A lone gunman gave himself away at thirty paces out with the scuffle of a boot-heel.

Thorn edged around the Dumpster and stalked forward. He planted each step with extreme precision to maximize stealth. He reached the gunman's blind side. He watched the man take his hands off his weapon and pull a bandana to wipe his face. It was a poor move. A careless move. It was the kind of negligence that got you killed in combat.

Thorn gripped his knife tighter. A deep recess of his mind protested this was an unfair contest. Protested it was dishonorable to attack a man who was not ready to fight back.

I don't want to do this.

But I need to.

So do it.

Do it *now*.

Thorn fiercely mustered his skill and primed his muscles to strike. He surged forward. His left hand thrust out to cover the gunman's mouth. He clamped down and gave the man's head a violent twist. His right hand slashed with the Tanto. The blade severed the man's jugular and carved through his carotid artery.

The man buckled. Thorn rode him down and pinned him to the floor. Warm blood sprayed as he maintained pressure. A jet of blood shot through the gloom and hit the tunnel wall and ran down it.

A stony moment passed. The man lay jerking. Twitching. His death tremors faded quickly. Then he was still.

Thorn wiped his knife on the dead man's shirt. He rolled the man onto his back. He was surprised to find an M67 fragmentation grenade clipped to the man's assault vest.

Surprised.

Yes.

And coldly gratified.

He retrieved the grenade and slipped it into the pocket of his bomber jacket. The deadly egg belonged to him now and he meant to use it with ruthless determination.

Next he retrieved the man's firearm. He identified it as a Hawk Industries Avenger carbine. The Avenger was a special killing machine. It was compact and light weight. It held 200 rounds of .22-caliber Magnum rimfire ammunition in a

drum-type magazine. It generated a cyclic firing rate of 1,350 rounds per minute. That was enough to decimate a man-sized target with a one-second burst. A red laser-dot sight was mounted beneath the carbine's barrel. The laser-dot granted the shooter almost instant target acquisition at ranges inside twenty-five yards.

Thorn could not suppress a grim smile. The Avenger's hideous killing power would serve him well in the coming battle. There was something wickedly satisfying about shredding the enemy with their own weapons.

It was the purest form of combat.

It was the art of war.

Thorn's smile died. He shoved the fallen man out of sight. He slid into cover behind the Dumpster. He waited in a crouched position with the Avenger held firm.

He listened.

For a moment there was only quiet. Dead quiet. Then he heard a sound of approaching footsteps. A sound of men striding in his direction. He risked a glance around the Dumpster and saw four gunners approaching.

Four bringers of pain and death.

He knew he had to stop the killers. He had to slay them quickly. He snapped the Avenger to his shoulder. He flicked off the safety and let the laser find his first target. At a range of fifteen yards the red spot was clearly visible on the nearest gunner's upper sternum.

He hit the Avenger's trigger and ripped off twenty rounds in one second. He felt a quick shudder as the buzzgun spat a deadly salvo of .22-caliber slugs. He saw puffs of scarlet as all twenty slugs ripped into his target. The high-velocity hollow-points shredded flesh with gruesome efficiency.

The gunner staggered backward. Eyes bulging. He dropped his weapon and toppled back into the shadows.

The three remaining troops were caught by surprise. They fired wildly with no solid fix on their opponent. That was expected. The Avenger's laser beam was just a red strobe inside the tunnel with no clear source.

Thorn scanned for another target. He saw a crouching rifleman at a dozen yards. The Avenger's laser-dot settled onto the bridge of the man's nose.

Thorn hit his trigger.

The thug's eyes and face disintegrated into a crimson spray. His corpse toppled forward and folded in on itself.

Behind the fallen gunner two hardmen opened fire. They were unloading with vengeful fury. At last they had spotted their assailant. One thug carried a stubby shotgun and he did not bother aiming once he glimpsed his opponent.

The shotgun roared and Thorn ducked a charge of buckshot. He gasped as a pellet tore across his shoulder. It dug a bloody furrow in his flesh. He retreated rapidly and slid behind the Dumpster. He hated to give up hard-fought ground. But he was surrounded and outgunned. The next shotgun pellet might strike his face or forehead and inflict serious damage. Maybe fatal damage.

He had one option left. He pulled his captured frag grenade. He felt its cool metal body against his palm. He knew the grenade would wreak fiery havoc when it blew. It would fill the tunnel with blazing death. That would allow him to advance and escape.

Assuming he pulled it off.

It was his only hope. The knowledge that he was facing certain death compelled him to undertake desperate action. He saw no reason not to try.

He cranked his arm and wound up for an overhead pitch. He took a moment to calculate timing and trajectory. He sprang the grenade's safety pin and let it fall.

Now!

He made his pitch. He was aiming toward his enemies. He was confident the hostile troops would absorb the brunt of the grenade's jagged wrath. There was no safe haven for them inside the narrow tunnel. Nowhere to hide.

The frag bomb hurtled through the gloom. Its safety clip broke free. Its fuse was armed.

Four seconds to detonation.

Thorn did not have to check the grenade's progress to know it was flying true. Experience and training told him his pitch would do the job.

Two seconds.

From his shielded position behind the Dumpster he heard the grenade touch down with a dull thud. He heard a strangled scream and a frantic scuffle of boots as men raced for cover.

One second.

A thunderous explosion rocked the tunnel. Shrapnel buzzed through the smoky air and ricocheted off the Dumpster. It whined off into the tunnel's blackness.

Concussion from the blast hit Thorn's ears like sharp spikes. Angry shockwaves pummeled his face like invisible fists. He clenched his teeth and rode out the hellfire moment. His nostrils flared at the acrid stink of spent TNT and scorched meat. It was the stink of death. It was monstrous. It made the air almost too painful to breathe.

As the explosion subsided he sprang upright. Then he advanced with the Avenger locked in his fists. His moves required a brave disregard for the odds arrayed against him. He needed maximum grit and skill to confront whatever danger came next. There would be no time for hesitation and no time for Plan B. If he faltered he was dead. It was that simple.

He stepped over a mutilated soldier. A chunk of shrapnel had blown a ragged hole in the man's skull and killed him instantly. His sightless eyes were locked open and staring. He lay slack in a graceless sprawl of death. His arm was outstretched and his index finger was extended as if pointing the way ahead.

Thorn kept moving and focused on the troops still on their feet and still a deadly threat. One man was visible. He was drenched in blood and his weapon was raised. Thorn swept his blinding laser sight into the man's eyes. Then he triggered a fiery .22-caliber burst.

A storm of rimfire hollow-points drilled the target from belly to chin. The impact lifted him off his feet and slammed him against the tunnel wall.

The Avenger's muzzle was smoking as Thorn dropped into a defensive crouch. He scoured with his laser. Seeking targets.

Another thug staggered into view. His face was a grisly horror-mask. It was a gory mass of mangled sinew and shattered teeth. A twist of shrapnel jutted obscenely from his left temple. He was barely alive. But he clutched a .357

Magnum revolver. His knuckles were white as bone. He raised the big wheelgun toward Thorn. He was summoning desperate reserves to fight back.

Thorn swept the Avenger into target acquisition. He hit the gunner with a burst that tore his right arm off at the shoulder. He followed through with another burst that emptied the Avenger's magazine. His final salvo struck his target's chest and punched him to the ground on top of his comrade.

Both men lay stiff and still. Stone dead. A trace of crimson mist hung in the air then settled onto the corpses sprawled below.

Thorn ditched the empty buzzgun and palmed Black Thunder.

He peered ahead and saw motion.

At the end of the tunnel a black rat was gnawing on Chang's severed left leg. Meantime another rat was studying Thorn with beady rodent eyes from ten feet away. Thorn glowered and gave a choppy gesture with his pistol. The rat squealed and raced into the shadows.

There was no further movement.

All action ceased.

Thorn's ears were ringing as the echoes of combat subsided in the tunnel. He sucked gritty sweat off his lips and wiped sweat off his face and neck and forehead.

His pulse hammered. The darkness of the tunnel around him felt compressed and oppressive.

A terrible stillness.

Almost unbearable.

He clenched his teeth. His thoughts were racing. He reached a dark place inside himself. Even darker than the tunnel.

The darkness of his soul.

The deepest level.

He drew a sharp breath and summoned the strength to forge ahead. As he moved he scanned the dead gunners. Mafia hitmen. They had been sent to rub him out and they had almost succeeded.

Almost.

He spat a curse. He still needed to locate Vince Falco before he could take decisive action. He checked his watch and scowled. The odds for success were shrinking with every passing minute.

Every second.

He drew another deep breath and stowed Black Thunder. He was already planning his next move. He had another possible source for the Godfather's location.

But it was a long shot.

Still he had to try.

He strode along a narrow corridor and climbed steps that led to the street above. He navigated with measured speed.

Slow.

Take it slow and careful.

He was halfway up the steps when he sensed motion. He froze. He eased off Black Thunder's safety but left the weapon concealed under his jacket.

He stood in the dark and listened.

Combat feelers probing.

Then he knew.

Someone was loitering on the street above. They were loitering next to the tunnel entrance.

Waiting.

That left him with a choice. He could retreat into the tunnel. Backtracking. Or he could press onward and engage whoever might lurk on the street. If he met another set of enemies he would have to confront them with action.

Massive action.

He made his choice and moved cautiously upward. He covered the final section of the stairwell and reached the street.

He met two men. Both wore police uniforms. The nearest man raised his pistol and sighted down its barrel—straight into Thorn's eyes.

## Seven

Thorn saw grim resolve in the hardset face of his opposition. He recognized the man's weapon instantly. It was an STV Titan autopistol. An impressive weapon. But no real NYC police officer would carry such hardware.

The other 'officer' was armed with a stubby MAC-10 submachine gun. Again no real NYC police officer would carry such a weapon.

Thorn peered beyond the two men. A Toyota sedan was parked nearby with a decal that read SECURITY.

Yeah.

Right.

It was an obvious setup and Thorn was not fooled. But he played along. He made a sour face. "What's the trouble, officer?" he asked the nearest man.

"The *trouble* is, you're under arrest," the gunman replied. "You need to come with us, asshole."

"There must be some mistake."

The gunman waved his pistol. "Step toward me."

"Okay." Thorn lunged. A lightning move. He thrust his right hand out to snatch the gunman's pistol and wrenched it away with fearsome speed. The man gave a startled cry and Thorn shot him twice in the chest. The man toppled backward with a shocked expression etched on his face.

Thorn tracked his next target. He triggered two slugs at point-blank range. The phony patrolman crashed onto the pavement. Legs twitching.

Thorn ditched the captured pistol and rushed toward the parked Toyota. He needed wheels to get back to his own car. He needed to get rolling. He wrenched the Toyota's door open and slid behind the wheel. He reached for the ignition switch.

No keys.

He cursed. He could search the dead men's pockets. But that would burn up valuable time. His other option was to get moving on foot. Before he could decide

his combat senses tingled and set off mental alarms. He was aware of something dark and deadly on his tail. He snapped around in his seat.

He saw a Chevrolet Impala surging toward him.

The Impala slowed. Tires squealing. Doors flew open and foot soldiers leapt out onto the pavement. All brandished weapons. Several men gripped powerful flashlights. They were probing the darkness. Seeking targets.

A bark of gunfire pierced Thorn's ears. Bullets hammered the Toyota and cored its metalwork. One slug bored through the cabin and zipped past his temple. It smashed out a jagged section of the front windshield.

Time to move.

He quit the car and scrambled back toward the bodies on the sidewalk. He stooped to retrieve the MAC-10 subgun and two spare magazines.

More bullets sizzled overhead. He dropped into a crouch and backpedaled behind the Toyota. He kept moving in reverse. He raised the MAC-10 and fired several 9-millimeter bursts at the hostile troops. The subgun spat flame. Empty shell casings sprayed the air in a wide arc.

He put the car between himself and his enemies as he backed toward the mouth of a nearby alley. The import was taking repeated hits. It was rocking to the tempo of incoming autofire. He scowled. There seemed countless guns against him and he was having serious doubts about his plan.

To hell with it.

He was committed and there was no turning back.

He would fight to the death.

The MAC-10's magazine emptied out. He reloaded swiftly. He never slowed his retreat. He had to escape the line of fire or he was done.

He was dead.

Besides his own survival he was concerned about civilian casualties. He hoped innocent bystanders would have run for cover at the first sounds of gunfire. But others might linger nearby with camera phones in hand. They would try to film the bloody mayhem. They would try to capture a ghoulish real-life action movie to share on social media. Some things never changed. It was the same way people slowed to gawk at a highway smashup or watched a neighbor's house burn to the ground.

It was the dark side of human nature.

It was the age-old fascination with destruction and death.

Thorn reached the alley and ducked inside. He was out of the line of fire. He sprang up from his crouched position and turned. He was ready to sprint down the alley and make his escape. He instantly realized his error. The alley was blocked by a stout brick wall topped with barbed wire.

Dammit!

He knew his enemies were closing. He risked a glance into the street and saw the troops gaining on his position. One man spotted him and fired his assault rifle. Heavy slugs pummeled the alley and raised clouds of brick dust. A shotgun roared. A metal trash container absorbed the buckshot charge. It reverberated like a giant bass drum next to his ear.

He cursed and responded with a blazing burst from the MAC-10. A hostile fighter staggered into view. He was wounded. But he was still a grave threat.



Thorn's next blast tore the man's skull apart. The guy toppled. His shotgun hammered aimlessly into the gutter. The pistolero behind him faltered. His face was spattered with blood. A MAC-10 salvo ripped across his chest and punched him backward. He screamed and vanished from sight.

Thorn glimpsed the enemy troops scattering. He heard angry shouts echoing along the street. There was a flash of motion and he saw the hostile Impala spring forward with its headlights flaring. He ducked back inside the alley with the MAC-10 locked in both hands. He reckoned the Impala's driver planned to mow him down. Sure enough the Impala veered hard left. Rubber screamed as it roared into the alley.

Thorn was prepared. He lined up his target and triggered a fiery burst from the MAC-10. High-velocity slugs ripped across the car's grille and exploded both headlights.

Thorn dove sideways as the Impala flashed past him and smashed into the alley wall. He reloaded the MAC-10 and surged toward the stricken car. He found the driver slumped over his wheel. His forehead was gashed and he was moaning in pain. He was out of the fight. He posed no threat. Thorn lowered his weapon. There was no reason to kill this man.

Thorn was a soldier.

Not a murderer.

He took a moment to survey the Impala. It was badly damaged. But it was still running. He figured it had enough juice to get him back to his own vehicle. A distance of five blocks. It was worth a try. Besides he was running out of time and he had to get the hell out of there. Fast. He had to worry about his immediate enemies and police intervention. It was only a matter of time before the NYPD arrived in force. If they saw Thorn brandishing a submachine gun?

They'll blow you away.

So get moving.

He sprang the Impala's door and removed the driver. He jumped behind the wheel. He threw the transmission into Reverse and hit the accelerator. The crumpled sedan groaned and rolled backward out of the alley.

Once he was on the street he shoved the car's transmission into Drive and hit the accelerator again. He was heading north toward his own parked car. He was running dark with the Impala's headlights smashed. Nearby street lamps burned bright enough to guide him.

A smooth easy trip.

Yeah.

No problem.

Unless you were in the middle of a war and being hunted.

He kept a steady speed as he drove despite his urgency. He could not risk pushing the Impala too hard. If he pushed too hard he might blow its damaged engine.

He covered one block without incident. So far and so good. He was making solid headway. He was making his escape. Then he saw a hulking shape directly ahead and closing fast.

Shit!

A Ford Bronco SUV was powering toward him. Riders hung off the Bronco. They were perched on its running boards. All of them were armed.

Another kill squad.

Another looming threat.

A gunman rode on the Bronco's roof. He was crouching and grasping an automatic shotgun. He wore yellow-tinted protective goggles and a black baseball cap. He was every bit the hipster hitman.

Thorn ducked as a fiery barrage erupted from the Bronco. The Impala shuddered and its windshield starred with bullet fractures. Then it burst inward. Pebbled safety glass flew at Thorn's face and chest. He ducked lower as pistol slugs and buckshot ripped across the cabin. He straightened up and peered along the dash. He saw the Bronco looming. He realized there was no safe way around it.

He had to evade this trap.

But how?

Stopping on the street and bailing out on foot was a fool's game.

It was suicide.

Yellow flame flashed at Thorn as the Bronco's gunmen fired their weapons. More bullets drilled the Impala's metalwork. But somehow the car stayed in motion. It stayed on course with its engine turning.

Thorn grasped the MAC-10 in his right hand. He jammed the buzzgun's muzzle through the broken windshield. He tensed his trigger finger. He was ready to fire. Then he punched the accelerator. He knew the car's engine might explode at any moment. But he also knew he needed emergency power.

Emergency acceleration.

He charged toward the Bronco. At the last instant before a collision he cut the wheel and veered toward a murky side-street. As he angled away from the Bronco he saw startled faces. The gunmen had not anticipated his maneuver. It was a chance to power on and escape. But that was not enough for the Specialist.

Not even close.

He wanted revenge.

Instead of accelerating he stamped his brakes. He leveled his MAC-10 at the Bronco. It was a hasty play and there was no time for pinpoint shooting. He hit the MAC-10's trigger and ripped off a fiery burst. He knew the boxy subgun was a man-shredder with a cyclic firing rate of 1,000 rounds per minute.

Hot 9-millimeter slugs sprayed the Bronco and its riders. Two men screamed and their faces contorted in agony. Both men tumbled headlong off the Bronco and writhed on the ground like maggots.

Thorn left them to it and wished them luck.

All bad.

He fired his MAC-10 again. More bullets sprayed the air. The Bronco's roof gunner tumbled through a jerky dance of death. His goggles filled with blood and his baseball cap was blown away. He plummeted off the car with his arms flailing. The Bronco's fat tires ran over him and mashed his carcass into crimson gristle.

Meantime another burst of 9-millimeter slugs pummeled the Bronco's nose. The slugs blew out a headlight and punched through the windshield to pin the driver. At least one slug drilled the man's forehead and he went slack and melted out of sight. Then the Bronco skidded. It rammed a concrete light pole and its nose

imploded. Surviving gunners leapt for safety. They stumbled like buffoons as they hit the rain-slick sidewalk.

Thorn had seen enough. He ditched the empty subgun and clamped both hands on the Impala's wheel. He completed his turn and accelerated along a shadowy side-street. He checked his wing mirror. Behind him the surviving enemy hitmen were recovering their composure. Weapons raised.

He saw muzzle flashes in his mirror. Rapid fire hammered the Impala's trunk. One slug bored through to drill the satellite radio. A short-circuit tripped the speakers. Then a heavy-rock anthem pounded his ears.

Highway to Hell.

He clenched his teeth and roared down the block. He fought to keep the Impala under control as its engine redlined.

Behind him the gunners kept firing at his tail.

Seconds later he reached the end of the side-street and turned hard left onto the main street. Black smoke poured from the Impala's underbelly. He covered two more blocks then quit the stricken sedan and got moving on foot. He passed a Christmas-themed sign that read PEACE ON EARTH.

At last he reached the Challenger and leapt inside. He fired the HEMI and screamed out of there. As he drove his thoughts raced. He needed a brand-new plan.

Something effective.

Something massive.

Easy to say but not so easy to pull off. Still there was nothing for him to do but try. He meant to keep rolling and salvage his mission. He had one option remaining. It was another source for the information he urgently needed.

He kicked the Challenger's accelerator and piled on the speed.

Darkness enveloped him as he hurtled toward another rendezvous with death.

## **Eight**

Thorn powered through Manhattan toward his next objective. Toward a thug named Eddie Zappa. According to the mission file Zappa was a top enforcer for the NYC Mob. It made sense that Zappa would know exactly where Falco was hiding.

If he had the inside track.

If.

Thorn would find out soon.

The file confirmed that Zappa's specialty was organizing assassinations and extortion plots. He was a sadist who relished strangling his victims with a length of steel chain. That was after he had ripped out their teeth with a set of pliers. Rumor had it that he kept a single molar from each victim as a gruesome souvenir.

Thorn intended to make Zappa pay his dues tonight. That would require a bombshell raid. A lightning attack carefully timed for maximum devastation.

It sounded good. Sure. But he knew the task would not be simple. He drew grim comfort from his UZI 9-millimeter submachine gun. It lay beside him on his passenger seat.

He considered tactics. He planned to use Teppo Jutsu. A warrior skill practiced by the Japanese Samurai. Teppo Jutsu emphasized close-quarters ambush moves. It emphasized firepower and raw speed to quickly decimate a hostile force.

Thorn pulled a hard left on Broadway and nosed down Wall Street. He passed luxurious high-rise towers that housed America's financial elite. Many would argue that the bankers who did business here were more evil than any Mob boss.

More evil than Satan himself.

Thorn was not inclined to ponder the issue. His focus was on Monster Rush and Vince Falco. He had come to NYC to attack a vile cancer. Not cure the disease. But at least halt the spread of corrupt cells.

It beat doing nothing at all.

Hell yes.

He scanned his watch. It was time to check in. He palmed his I-phone and dialed a memorized number.

Another moment and a strong familiar voice addressed him. "Evening, Matt. How are you?"

"Hanging tough. Rolling with the punches."

"That's a good way to take it," Delta Force Colonel Pete Quaid told him. Then he asked, "Are you proceeding as planned?"

"Not exactly."

"Ah."

For now Thorn avoided specifics and that he suspected a traitor inside the FBI. "I'm still in the fight," he announced. "I expect a positive result."

"Understood." It was apparent that Quaid would have liked to ask him more about the night's action. But there would be time for a full debriefing after the mission was complete.

Assuming Thorn survived.

Quaid cleared his throat. "If you need anything—"

"I'll call you," Thorn told him.

"Right. Good luck and Godspeed."

There was nothing more to say and Quaid severed the line. Thorn's commander had recruited him into the Special Operations Group. He had given Thorn the mandate to attack high-value targets with ruthless precision. That mandate had given Thorn a purpose. A destiny.

In return Thorn had saved Quaid's life. There could be no forgetting that.

They had been tracking a savage ISIS commander. Intel told them the bastard was somewhere in Syria. They had pinpointed his exact location. He was hiding in a safe house eighty miles north of Damascus. So a pre-dawn raid was planned. Quaid had taken the lead. Thorn had covered him as they approached the house. Before they reached the terrorist's front door he had met them with an AK47 assault rifle. The AK had been aimed at Quaid's chest. But Thorn had unleashed a blast from his subgun to nail the terrorist and end the fight.

Now the battle was in NYC.

On Christmas Eve.

A battle against organized crime.

Thorn drove on. Twenty minutes later he reached his destination. A flashing sign read CLUB DIABLO. The sleaze joint was owned by Eddie Zappa. He could be found there any night of the week based on Thorn's information.

At least he hoped so.

He was counting on it.

He parked the Challenger. He fixed his gaze on a mirror-polished Mercedes-Benz limousine stationed outside the club. Its tag number checked out as Zappa's ride.

Three beefy guards stood ready near the Benz. Thorn knew he would have to neutralize all three goons to snag the main man. And he would have to do it quickly to prevent the opposition from repelling his assault.

An easy task.

No sweat.

Like storming the gates of hell.

He palmed the UZI. He slid a thirty round magazine into the weapon's pistol grip. Then he racked the firing bolt to chamber a Terminal Shock cartridge.

As if on cue a pudgy man emerged from the club. He sported a fox fur coat and a green fedora. He puffed a fat cigar as he waddled toward the Benz.

Thorn narrowed his eyes and recognized Eddie Zappa from his mugshot. He watched the guards snap to attention and salute as their master approached. He drew a sharp breath. The play was now or never. He flicked the UZI's trigger selector from SAFE to FIRE. He leapt from the Challenger and hit the sidewalk with the UZI leading.

The nearest hardman saw Thorn approaching. His jaw dropped as he registered the stubby buzzgun. His two comrades reacted a heartbeat later and pivoted to check Thorn's advance. What they saw was not welcome since it could only spell one thing.

Death.

Thorn targeted the guncocks rapidly. He unleashed zigzag bursts with the UZI spitting flame. The little Israeli subgun never faltered. It fired at a cyclic rate of 650 rounds per minute. Its British-made ammunition punched through flesh and bone with savage efficiency.

The Specialist clenched his teeth and kept firing. Spent shell casings littered the sidewalk. His targets spun like demented ballerinas and crashed on the ground.

Teppo Jutsu.

He reloaded the UZI. As he did Zappa lunged toward him. Snarling. Fists flying.

It was a bold move.

But it was not bold enough.

Thorn side-stepped. Pivoting. He drove a hard elbow into Zappa's ribcage and smashed the wind out of him. Then he seized the mobster's left arm and twisted it behind his back. He put his full weight into action as he slammed his captive against the Benz. He used enough force to dent the rear passenger door. He reached to grab a handful of Zappa's greasy hair. Then he gave Zappa's head a violent forward thrust. He smashed his nose to bloody pulp against the limo's tinted glass.

Take *that*.

Thorn spun his quarry around. He pinned him against the limo and shoved the UZI in his face. "I need information, Eddie. And I need it fast. So, it's talk or die."

Zappa managed a sneer of defiance. "Fuck you."

"Language, Eddie." Thorn rocketed a knee into Zappa's groin.

The hood screamed and his fat face turned purple. He swallowed hard. "Waddya want?"

"Your boss. Where's he hiding?"

The mobster scowled. "No idea."

Thorn pressed the UZI's muzzle against Zappa's temple. "Goodbye, Eddie."

"Wait! If I tell... you'll let me live?"

Thorn gave a curt nod.

Zappa gulped air. He blinked hard. Then he spewed the information.

Thorn took a moment to process the details. "That's all?"

"That's all. I swear!"

Thorn raised the UZI and aimed at Zappa's quivering face.

The mobster's eyes flared wide in panic. "You said—"

"I lied."

## Nine

Thorn cut a hard right onto Locust Avenue. He entered NYC's tough and gritty Rockford district. His objective was to confirm Eddie Zappa's information. Confirm that it was correct.

He needed answers and he needed truth.

He kept rolling and scanning for the meeting site. Soon he found the location. It was screened by tall trees. It was bounded by a wrought-iron fence topped with speartip spikes. A sign on the front gate read BLACK HILL CEMETERY.

He parked the Challenger and secured it. He moved briskly on foot through the darkness. He used the shadows to cloak him. He knew hoodlums might prowl these mean streets.

But that did not deter him.

Not at all.

He was accustomed to the urban jungle and he was ready to respond. He was a city boy. He had grown up on the hard-scrabble streets of Chicago. Likewise he knew Chicago had been Scarface Capone's legendary base of operations. It was ironic that Thorn's birthplace had spawned La Cosa Nostra's most storied chieftain.

Ironic.

And bitter to the core.

In Thorn's view the concrete jungle was a breeding ground for violent crime. Too often big cities bred rampant law-breaking and made police work almost impossible. Sometimes the police took a firm stand. But the perps knew City Hall would rather pay massive hush money than take any case to trial.

Meantime street thugs embraced the chaos and thrived on it.

Fed on it.

If a pack of thugs confronted Thorn he would retaliate. Damn right. He would deliver harsh justice as he had done in Chinatown. It would be a pleasure. But he had to focus on his immediate mission.

He was a soldier.

Not a vigilante.

He sped his pace. It was common knowledge that Rockford was a ghetto. Its streets were once fashionable and thriving. Now they were blighted and ravaged by Monster Rush. Drug violence had torn the neighborhood apart in recent years. Every public official knew that Falco's poison fueled the chaos.

They conceded it was a disaster.

A nightmare.

Ten more strides and Thorn reached the cemetery's entrance. He slipped through the unlocked gate then scanned for prowlers. He was hyper-alert and he was prepared to defend himself. The Glock rode with him alongside four spare magazines. He knew that he would also need luck.

Always luck.

He forged ahead. He passed stone crypts and looming tombstones. His contact had chosen Black Hill for the meet. Specifically a dense stand of trees in the middle of the cemetery. It was a secluded dark-zone and there was plenty of stretch to run for cover if anything went wrong.

In theory.

Assuming the enemy had not already organized a hellfire ambush.

He shut down the dismal thoughts. He kept moving and focused on his objective.

Fifty paces out he spotted his mark. A solitary man-shape in front of the trees. The guy was puffing a cigarette as Thorn approached. At twenty paces out he made the ID. There was no mistaking that profile: a tall thin figure with a hawk nose and dark hair swept back in a widow's peak. The man was Thomas Stompano—also known as Tommy Stomps.

According to the mission file Stomps was a key Mob informant. He had been pressed into service with an indictment hanging over him for the murder of a rival dope dealer. He had accepted his new role as an underworld snitch without debate. The stark alternative was execution by electric chair.

Thorn had arranged the meet to validate Zappa's information. It had taken several phone calls. That had burned up valuable time. But there was no choice. If Stomps delivered Thorn would have two independent sources confirming the Godfather's present location. That would give him greater confidence when he made his next move.

Stomps flinched as Thorn appeared. When they were close enough to speak in whispers Stomps said, "I was afraid you might not find me." He lit another cigarette. "These things can kill you. What the hell. Lots of shit can kill you."

"I don't have much time, Tommy."

Stomps exhaled smoke. "What ya wanna know?"

Thorn rattled off Zappa's information and asked, "Does that ring any bells?"

Stomps thought about it. "Falco's winter home."

"You've been there?"

"Delivering booze and girls."

"Go on."

"He spent millions building that place. It's a fortress. A death trap." Stomps puffed his cigarette. "I'd say fifty troops guarding him. At least."

Thorn scowled. He knew those troops would be heavily armed and highly motivated. Fifty men. A private militia. It made for nearly impossible odds. But the Specialist had to fight on. Just then an Army catch-phrase hit him.

The difficult we do now. The impossible takes a little longer.

The difficult he had already faced. Now he was ready to proceed with the next phase of his mission. Granted he could not trust Tommy Stomps one hundred percent. But this was the best information he was likely to obtain on short notice.

"Good luck," Stomps blurted. "What I mean is, make sure you win. Burn that asshole. Send him to hell."

Thorn read the emotion in Stomps' voice and realized it was genuine. "I'm working on it." He pulled cash and passed it to the snitch. "Five bills. As agreed."

Stomps ditched his cigarette. "If you need anything else, call me."

Before Thorn could respond a sharp crack reverberated through the cemetery.

Stomps lurched backward. His chest exploded in a burst of blood. His corpse flopped on the ground and went stiff.

Sniper!

Thorn dove into the treeline. Another crack echoed across the cemetery. Another heavy slug zipped over him and clipped his collar.

He drew the Glock and curled his index finger around its trigger. He scanned for the enemy sniper. There! He saw the gunman fifty feet ahead. He was crouched beside a tombstone. He was hauling a 7.62-millimeter Panther Arms carbine equipped with a night vision scope. It was enough gun for the job. And then some.

Abruptly the guy broke into a run. He was angling for the cemetery's exit. Maybe he thought he had nailed both of his targets and opted to retreat. Or maybe he had lost his nerve. It was hard to say.

Whatever the case it was a serious mistake and Thorn meant to exploit it. He surged forward and vectored the Glock into target acquisition. His mark was thirty feet away. He hit the Glock's trigger and the pistol barked in response.

A Black Talon hollow-point punched through the man's left temple. The impact exploded bone and brain. The guy lurched like a zombie and crashed onto the ground. Rifle lost.

Another gunner stepped into view. He grasped a compact subgun. He spotted his mark and ripped off a hasty burst.

Thorn was already moving. A flying shoulder roll. He cleared the hostile salvo by ten feet. He snapped out of the roll with the Glock gripped firmly in both hands and ready for action. He triggered a searing double punch from the autoloader. He put both slugs on target with lethal precision.

The two Black Talons struck home inches apart. The man vaulted backward. Crimson erupted from his chest. Incredibly the guy had enough strength to stay upright with his subgun pointed downrange.

Thorn snarled and hit his trigger again.

Another Black Talon slug struck its target just above the jawline. It bored through with shocking power. The man's face imploded. Teeth and lips and nose



collapsed inward. The useless subgun tumbled from his slack fingers. Another moment and the last reserves of life drained out of him. He toppled forward. His blood pooled beneath him and soaked into the dirt.

Two down.

How many left?

Thorn stayed low and loitered inside the treeline. The slender Furs around him would not stop bullets. But they provided decent camouflage. Instinct warned him more threats lurked in the cemetery. He kept scanning and saw movement.

A scattergun roared from the shadows on the far side of the cemetery.

He saw the shotgunner advancing. He raised the Glock and squeezed off in rapid fire. Three slugs tore bloody holes in the man's chest. The impact crucified him against a nearby tree. His pallid face contorted into a pale mask of death.

Thorn sprang up and surged ahead. His pulse was pounding in his ears. He reached the dead hitman and grabbed his shotgun. It was a semi-auto Winchester ATAC. Its barrel was cut off at fifteen inches. Its magazine held nine 12-gauge rounds plus one in the chamber. He recognized the ATAC as a standard issue weapon of the FBI. He stooped to recover an ID card that identified the man as an agent of the Bureau's NYC Division. Specifically the Office of Counter Narcotics or OCN.

The chief of the OCN was Max Van Damme.

Thorn scowled. He focused his thoughts and arrived at a grim conclusion. Somehow Van Damme had caught a tipoff about tonight's meet with Tommy Stomps. Then he had ordered an ambush.

Thorn's gut tightened. He cursed and slid the dead man's ID into his pocket. He would view the agent's file later using SOG's database. He was not expecting any major surprises. Simple logic told him these men were dirty cops and Van Damme was their ringleader.

He slung the ATAC across his chest. He lifted an ammo bandoleer off the dead man and draped it over his shoulder. He peered ahead and saw a flash. A weapon exploding in his direction.

He was caught in the open. Adrenaline filled his veins like ice water. He dove and crouched behind a tombstone. He imagined its inscription read FOOLS DIE.

There was another blast of gunfire and bullets ricocheted off the tombstone. It was a weak position. There was space on either flank for his enemies to nail him if they coordinated their fire. Or they could pin him down until reinforcements arrived to rush him.

He had to find new cover. He saw a prefab shed. It was fifty feet away.

Another gun exploded downrange.

He had to move.

The shed.

If he could make it...

He bolted along a flagstone path toward his objective. He had to stay in motion. As long as he kept moving there was hope of survival. Standing still he could only be cut to shreds by the gun crew.

He reached the shed and blew its door with a flying kick. He charged inside and hit a low crouch with the ATAC up and ready. He was surrounded by landscaping tools and a blocky riding mower. He shifted behind the equipment seeking cover. A

line of bullets stitched the shed's flimsy wall. The slugs punched through and ricocheted inside. A bullet snapped off the mower and whined past his face. Another slug punctured a chemical tank and spilled orange fluid. Swirling noxious fumes made him gasp.

More bullets drilled the shed. A window imploded. He recoiled from a storm of fractured glass. He was isolated inside a claustrophobic space. A smothering darkness.

Another heavy salvo raked the shed and threatened to rip it apart. This was a full-scale assault. A gnawing ache in Thorn's gut told him it was a disaster. He felt the stirrings of desperation. But with grave effort he controlled them.

Panic meant death.

Footsteps echoed along the walkway outside the shed. The footsteps slowed and became a rapid scuffling. An unseen enemy was maneuvering in the darkness. It sounded to Thorn like a gunner was sneaking into position outside the shed.

Damn!

He raised the ATAC and aimed toward the sounds. Then he triggered a three-shot burst. Buckshot drilled the wall. There was a dull thump as .33-caliber lead pellets smacked into flesh on the other side. The unseen hitman screamed and fell silent.

Meantime the hostile gunfire ceased. But it signaled no reprieve. Far from it. Thorn reckoned the enemy troops were closing for the kill. He reckoned it was only a matter of time before they converged on the shed and blew it apart.

Still inside the shed he moved sideways toward a door. He inched it open and peered outside. He saw an armed figure advancing. He raised the ATAC to his shoulder and hit the trigger. The scattergun roared and his target vaulted backward.

Another gunner lurched into view. Thorn aimed the ATAC and fired twice. A double charge of buckshot hit the man chest-high and hurled him against a tombstone. He slid to the ground. The tombstone was streaked with blood.

Thorn scanned the darkness. He saw no visible threats. It was time to move. He bolted from the shed and surged through the cemetery's open gate and hit the sidewalk.

He reached his car. He opened the door and was about to climb inside when he glimpsed motion. A Ford Fusion sedan was roaring toward him. He saw two men inside and saw the passenger raise a pistol.

He realized this was the backup team.

He knew they wanted revenge.

The Fusion surged toward him with its headlights blazing. He had exactly one second to react or he was dead.

He pulled the ATAC to his shoulder. It occurred to him that the men in the car might be wearing body armor.

It did not matter.

The ATAC's buckshot could not penetrate Kevlar. But it would still mangle faces and shatter skulls. He aimed the ATAC at the Fusion's windshield and fired a rapid three-shot burst.

The windshield imploded under the impact of several dozen pellets. At a range of thirty feet the buckshot never had a chance to spread. It slammed the driver's mug

and he lurched back in his seat. Blood and brain matter showered the inside of the cabin.

A dead foot jammed the accelerator and the Fusion leapt toward Thorn. He sprang sideways and dove headlong across the car's hood. He bounced once and slithered off the other side.

He hit the ground and wobbled and stabilized into a low crouch. He saw the Fusion flash past and saw it plow through the cemetery's wrought-iron fence.

A hellish grinding sound pierced the night.

He raised the ATAC and fired two more buckshot rounds that sprayed the car's starboard side. Heavy pellets bored ragged holes through the car's metalwork.

He watched the Fusion slam into a heavy tombstone topped with a grinning gargoyle. The Fusion's front tires exploded. Its engine cracked and spewed gray vapor. The engine spluttered and died. The gargoyle kept grinning.

Thorn braced the ATAC. He saw the Fusion's passenger door swing open and saw an armed figure emerge. He unleashed the ATAC's final three rounds as fast as he could pull the trigger. His target lurched backward. Riddled with buckshot.

Abruptly the night fell silent.

He ditched the empty ATAC and spun toward the Challenger. He slid behind its wheel and fired the engine. Momentum slammed the door as he burned rubber out of there. His priority was escape.

A rapid egress from the kill zone.

He angled back onto Locust Avenue. He kicked the coupe's accelerator and he was driven back into his seat by the sudden blast of power. He kept a tight grip on the wheel and checked his wing mirror.

No blazing headlights.

No sign of hostile pursuit.

He was running clear.

He pulled his I-phone and ran the ID he had recovered from the dead shotgunner. The result came back in seconds. It confirmed the man was under the direct supervision of Max Van Damme. The confirmation was no big surprise. It was an obvious link. Van Damme was a traitor and his men were rotten as well.

Thorn stowed his phone. He punched the coupe and surged along Great Kills Expressway.

Great Kills.

Yeah.

He let the Challenger gain momentum. But he was careful not to exceed the posted speed limit. If he was stopped for speeding he would be questioned about multiple bullet holes in his car. And that would not be good.

His train of thought shifted. Now he had a second major objective for his mission. He had to settle accounts with a Judas inside the FBI.

But first he had to accomplish his primary objective.

He had to strike Vince Falco's outfit with fire and steel.

## Ten

Angry lightning flashed across the sky as Thorn entered NYC's Zion Park warehouse district. He reached a specific building. Inside he expected to find a major part of Falco's narcotics operation.

At least in theory.

According to the mission file.

He would find out soon.

It was a fifty-fifty shot and that was good enough for Thorn. It was good enough to launch a lightning assault. His attack was impromptu and unscheduled. But he could not resist hitting a target of opportunity on his way to Falco's hideout in Upstate New York. All that mattered was boosting his kill-count and inflicting bloody havoc.

That was the purpose of his war.

He circled the warehouse and kept rolling. He parked the Challenger in a dark alley two blocks away. He took a moment to palm the UZI and attach its sound-suppressor. Next he retrieved a bandoleer that contained six spare magazines for the subgun. He draped the bandoleer across his chest. Finally he pocketed four of the compact Semtex bombs he had acquired earlier.

All systems were go.

He quit the Challenger and strode toward the warehouse. He was closing on its main gate. He braced the UZI under his open bomber jacket with its safety off and a live cartridge riding in its chamber.

Both man and gun were primed for action.

Primed for hellfire.

He pressed on. He saw two beefy guards at the gate. He made no attempt at evasion. There was no time for stealth. He had to make his entry quick and dirty.

Emphasis on dirty.

The guards saw him and exchanged whispers. One guy raised a hand. "Stop right there, mister."

"Take a hike," the other man cut in.

Thorn whipped the UZI from under his jacket and pointed its fat suppressor at the nearest guard. The guy made a desperate reach for his holstered pistol. But there was no way he could draw and fire fast enough to save himself. In practical terms he was already dead.

The UZI breathed flame. Five Terminal Shock hollow-points ripped across the target's forehead and he toppled backward. Another UZI burst hit target number two and spun him into oblivion. Both men lay stiff on the ground.

Thorn scanned 360. He was checking for more guards. He saw none. He took a moment to search the bodies. He found a magnetic access card that would serve him well when he made his entry into the warehouse.

He stepped through the open gate. He was a one-man invasion force. If he preserved the element of surprise he might prevail. Might. Assuming he did not overplay his hand.

The warehouse in front of him was a large prefab structure with a sign that read ELITE DISTRIBUTION. He recognized the name as one of Falco's bogus shipping companies. According to Thorn's information the facility stored and shipped Monster Rush.

He studied the warehouse. He saw a loading dock with a steel access door. He reached the door and swiped the captured access card. The door lock disengaged. He was on a roll. But he knew his luck might run out at any moment.

That moment was now.

The door swung outward and almost hit Thorn before he sidestepped. A dark figure appeared in the doorway with a sawn-off shotgun slung across his chest.

Thorn knew what had happened. At the same instant that he had reached the door from the outside a sentry had reached the door from the inside. And so the two men had met on a deadly collision course.

A matter of lethal coincidence.

Thorn had to dispatch the guard silently and swiftly or his mission was over. But there was no time to engage with the UZI. A swift tug and the Tanto knife was locked in his right fist. He swept the black-coated blade around in a savage thrust.

Simultaneously the gunner was reacting. He saw the death-blow coming and he began his counter move.

Too late.

The Tanto's eight-inch blade pierced deep as Thorn found the man's jugular. He slashed back and forth to release a geyser of blood. He withdrew the blade and stabbed again. He aimed for the gunner's face. His blade punched through a cheekbone and sheared through an eyeball. Then he ripped the blade free. The guy toppled backward and hit the ground with a dull thud.

Thorn stowed his knife and brought the UZI up. He deployed its folding stock and pulled it against his shoulder. He clenched his teeth and stepped inside the warehouse. He moved along a corridor lit by a caged red bulb.

He saw an open door halfway along the corridor with a sign that read MANAGER. He leveled the UZI and stepped inside the office. He saw a jowly man sitting at a desk. The guy was peering at lurid images on a PC screen. It took a heartbeat for him to realize Thorn's presence. Then he lunged for a revolver that lay on his desk.

Thorn triggered a single shot from the UZI. The Terminal Shock slug drilled the man's forehead in a puff of crimson. He snapped back in his chair and went limp.

Instant karma.

Thorn stepped deeper inside the room. He was searching for items of interest. Anything that concerned Elite Distribution's activities. He found several flash drives next to the PC and slid them into his pocket. He hoped their contents would prove useful to Law Enforcement.

He retrieved the dead man's revolver. It was a gloss-blue Colt Python and it was chambered in .357 Magnum. A bone-crusher. A man-killer. He stowed the Python. It was another weapon to add to his arsenal. In case he ran out of 9-millimeter ammunition. In case he needed Magnum punch.

In case.

Always plan for the unexpected.

Bitter experience had taught him that.

He exited the room and continued his trek along the red-lit corridor. He was making decent progress. He had to keep moving and maintain stealth. He had to flatten anyone who got in his way. If his plan worked he should reach the center of

the warehouse in a few minutes. Then he would plant his Semtex bombs and make a quick escape.

Simple.

But that would be *too* simple.

He understood that anything could go wrong and most likely would go wrong. They called it Murphy's Law and it fit the grim reality of combat.

It fit too damn well.

He stopped abruptly as the sound of a flushing toilet reached his ears. Ten paces ahead a door sprang open on the corridor and a figure emerged. The guy wore a bulky autoloading pistol in a shoulder holster. He turned and saw Thorn standing directly in front of him. His face was a study in shock as he witnessed the UZI pointing at his chest. As he witnessed Grim Death crashing down on him.

The thug reached for his pistol as he retreated into the washroom. Thorn hustled him along with a short burst from the UZI. Six hollow-points ripped across the man's chest and punched him backward. He tumbled through the doorway. He sprawled on the washroom floor and his blood oozed over dingy tile.

Thorn shut the bathroom door. He stepped ahead and reached another door that was partly open. He leveled the UZI and peered inside the room. A man was sitting on a sofa. He was grasping an ice-cold Bud and watching a movie on a big-screen TV. There was an exciting car chase. Steve McQueen was at the wheel. He was kicking ass. Like always.

Thorn stepped inside the room and gave a low whistle.

The man twisted around. His eyes locked onto the UZI. He kept his cool. He was every inch the Mafia tough guy. He met Thorn's steely gaze. "Bastard."

"Definitely."

The thug tossed his beer. He twisted back around to reach for a Smith & Wesson .380 pistol on the glass coffee table in front of him. But he fumbled in his rising panic. The pistol clattered off the table. "Shit!" He scuttled on hands and knees. Angrily searching.

He found the .380 and retrieved it. As he straightened up his skull clipped the sharp edge of the table. Tears welled up in his eyes as he lurched erect. He stumbled against the sofa with the .380 wobbling in his gun hand.

Thorn had seen enough. The UZI stuttered and six Terminal Shock slugs ripped through fabric and flesh. The guy lurched backward and crashed through the table's glass top. At the sound of breaking glass Thorn cringed. He knew the commotion might alert nearby guards and send them running.

No one showed.

He quit the room and found a flight of stairs. He climbed the stairs and reached a door with a sign that read OPERATIONS. He tried the door and found it unlocked. He stepped inside the room with the UZI ready. He discovered no opposition.

He scanned the room. He saw a large map of North America fixed on a wall with truck-routes traced in red. Besides the map he saw a dozen PC workstations. The far end of the room was glassed-in. It was a giant observation window that overlooked the cavernous heart of the warehouse.

He peered through the window. He saw shipping crates on tall shelves alongside stout forklifts and Rhino mini-trucks. He saw an automated pulley system with

dangling chains and cables. It was an impressive setup. But the warehouse was quiet now and showed no sign of operational activity. He guessed shutting the place down at night was a deliberate choice. A tactic to avoid unwanted attention.

He turned from the window and swept the room. He found a manager's workstation and spotted a lock-box. He pulled the Tanto and gave the lock a sharp strike that popped the lid. Inside the box he found several flash drives and claimed them.

He turned to leave the room. As he did so a figure appeared in the doorway. An M4 carbine was draped over the man's shoulder. He looked stunned and confused. Then he reached for his carbine.

Too late.

Thorn cranked his arm and threw his Tanto with killing precision. The blade hurtled across the room and struck the man's chest above his heart. He staggered backward. Eyes bulging.

Thorn surged forward. He seized the man's throat to cut off air. A Judo chokehold. He used his free hand to pull the Tanto and stow it. Then he slammed the gunner facedown on the floor and smashed an elbow into the base of his skull. He put all his weight behind the strike. It was sufficient. The sentry died with a stunned expression on his face.

Thorn lifted the dead man by his ankles and dragged him under a desk. He turned to leave the room. Just then he heard a sound of pounding footsteps. He figured several men were charging up the stairs. It had to be a strike team rushing in response to a Red Alert.

He had finally been discovered.

He slammed the door and locked it from the inside. Then he took cover behind a desk. It was not an ideal defensive position. But it was far better than standing in the open and exposing himself to enemy fire.

He detached the UZI's suppressor and stowed it. He was beyond the need for quiet killing. And the subgun was far more maneuverable without a bulky sound can screwed to its muzzle.

He heard more heavy footsteps outside the room. Then multiple weapons thundered in the corridor. Bullets shattered the door's locking mechanism. A moment of eerie quiet followed. Then there was a sound of heated voices.

Thorn knew his enemies were preparing to charge the room.

Wham!

The door blew inward and a gunner lunged through. Thorn held the UZI's trigger down. A salvo of Terminal Shocks punched the thug back out into the corridor.

In the next moment another gunner shoved through the portal. He was tracking with an automatic shotgun. Before he could aim a 9-millimeter hellstorm broke around him. Bullets ripped across his chest. The impact slammed him face-first into a wall and he slithered down.

The hostile gunfire faltered as Thorn backpedaled. He kept the UZI up and fired short bursts at the open doorway as he retreated. He reached the room's observation window. He knew it was his only way out. He shielded his face with one arm. Then he aimed his subgun and shattered the window with a zigzag burst.

He leapt through the opening and landed on a catwalk. He saw a dozen hardmen rushing across the warehouse floor beneath him. Autoloading rifles angled up and blasted in his direction. Bullets hurtled around him. One slug clipped his boot heel and another drilled his sleeve.

He searched for a target on the floor below. He saw his chance. He aimed the UZI and fired a precision burst. His bullets struck a yellow canister marked FLAMMABLE and pierced its metal body. The canister detonated with a hollow roar. Seething shockwaves punched enemy gunners off their feet. Flames gushed. He watched grimly as superheated cinders rained down on the crippled men.

Like fallout from an A-bomb.

Welcome to hell.

He flinched as a hot wind singed his exposed skin. A giant spider hurtled past his face. A severed hand. In that moment he felt a twinge of pity for his enemies.

Only a twinge.

Gunfire erupted from the opposite catwalk. Thorn swung the UZI and fired at the sniper. He saw the man lurch and tumble into oblivion. He fed the UZI a fresh magazine. He was painfully aware that he only had three reload mags left. If he ran out of ammunition he was done.

He was dead.

He had to move. He had to fly. He vaulted high over the catwalk railing and reached to grab a dangling cable. Then he was swinging like Tarzan. Momentum propelled him through the air.

When his swing neared its apex he released his grip. He dropped into freefall and made a four-point touchdown on the warehouse floor. He staggered and regained his balance. He was flanked by shipping crates and high shelves. The sound of motion was all around him. Men running and shouting.

The hostile troops were closing.

Hunting.

He forged ahead. A gunner materialized in front of him and brandished an AR15 pistol. He slammed a hard fist into the man's chin and knocked him back several paces. Then he raised the UZI with its muzzle almost touching the man's upper lip. He hit his trigger and the man's skull exploded. The headless body spun and sprawled on the floor.

Thorn wiped blood from his face and stooped to grab the fallen AR pistol. It was made by Olympic Arms and equipped with a 6.5-inch barrel. It was a compact version of the AR15 rifle/carbine. The pistol's recoil system was integrated into its upper receiver. That eliminated the need for a buttstock.

Thorn gladly accepted the new weapon.

He badly needed the extra firepower.

He dropped into a crouch and peered around the edge of a crate. As he did so the crack of a rifle echoed through the warehouse. That's good he told himself...because you never hear the shot that kills you.

A heavy bullet zipped past his temple. Multiple guns exploded. The hitmen were sacrificing accuracy in their haste. But they would soon find their range and hit their mark.



There was a flash of motion and Thorn saw his opponents splitting up. They were dodging left and right. It was a circling maneuver. It was designed to trap him and destroy him.

A scuffle of boots alerted him to danger at his back. He spun and saw two thugs closing. He snapped off a defensive fire-burst. The UZI was locked in his right fist and the AR pistol in his left. The technique was called Akimbo. It was a Samurai method of wielding duel weapons. It was effective when a combat emergency demanded extreme firepower.

Like now.

The downside: accuracy was minimized. But at nearly point-blank range sniper-grade precision did not matter.

What mattered was carnage.

What mattered was destruction.

Spent shell casings leapt from the ejection ports of both weapons as Thorn fired. The startling blast of the gunfire was amplified by the confines of the warehouse.

Thorn didn't care.

He kept firing.

Akimbo.

The nearest enemy soldier reeled under multiple bullet strikes. He collapsed and sprawled into a bloody heap. A dying reflex made his trigger finger twitch. That sent a volley of pistol slugs through the building's wall. He dropped his weapon and moaned and fell silent.

Another thug was pumping wild rounds in Thorn's direction. The Specialist pointed his UZI-AR combo and stroked both triggers. Both weapons emptied their magazines and spat hot slugs downrange.

It was a shocking blow.

Yeah.

A killing blow.

The gunner stumbled and dropped his handgun as he took the brunt of Thorn's reflexive fire. He spewed blood from a dozen wounds and toppled face-first. He squirmed forward and clawed for his fallen pistol. He was choking on the contents of his ruptured lungs. He shivered and curled into a fetal ball. He did not move again.

Thorn ditched the spent AR. He reloaded the UZI and scuttled toward another row of crates. More rifles were barking and bullets hurtled past his face. He pulled the UZI's stock tight against his shoulder with his finger on the trigger.

He saw another target twenty feet away.

But he never got a chance to fire.

He felt a sharp blow to his left side. Then searing pain. Lightning bolts exploded inside his skull. His mouth filled with salty blood and his legs buckled.

The UZI spun from his grasp.

His vision swam out of focus and his world went black.

## Eleven

Delta Force Colonel Pete Quaid drew a sharp breath and scowled. He sat stiffly at his metal Army-issue desk. His cramped office in the basement of the Pentagon felt especially claustrophobic tonight. It was filled with shadows lit only by a small reading lamp.

Quaid held a loaded .45-caliber magazine in one hand. His battle-worn M1911 autopistol with its slide locked back filled his other fist. The gun had belonged to his father. It had seen heavy combat in the blood-soaked jungles of Laos and Vietnam.

He inserted the magazine into the pistol's grip. He closed the slide to chamber a full metal jacket cartridge. Then he made the weapon safe and stowed it in his desk drawer.

Technically he was not allowed to keep a loaded firearm in his office. Some bullshit rule. But rules were made to be broken. Besides he was a soldier and soldiers understood that it was always smart to be ready for combat.

At least *some* soldiers.

His scowl darkened. He thought about the military bureaucracy that infested the levels above him. Pencil-pushers mostly. Professional ass-kissers who wasted billions of tax dollars on weapons that did not work. Then they pulled overtime to bury the evidence. To escape the blame.

He grimaced.

The corruption and stupidity was staggering.

It was nauseating.

Some things never changed.

Then there was the 4-star General who had slept with a beautiful journalist half his age. He had given her Top Secret information as a reward. Not realizing that the woman was also sleeping with a Colonel in the Russian KGB.

So yeah.

Some things never changed.

Tense seconds passed as Quaid sat still and rigid in the shadows that cloaked him. In the solitude that enveloped him. He clenched his teeth and let his anger and resentment subside.

He drew another sharp breath. He shifted vibrations. His mind was grimly preoccupied and his thoughts were miles away.

In New York.

With Matt Thorn.

Turning his most lethal operative loose on the Big Apple was a calculated risk. He knew there would be massive destruction and relentless carnage. In fact he was counting on it. He had been down this stony path before. A trail of savage justice.

A trail of devastation and slaughter.

Tonight would be no exception. The bodies were piling up fast and high. Quaid knew he would have to shoulder responsibility for the mayhem. So be it. He had set the war in motion and lit the fuse. He had identified targets and secured intel. Finally he had given the order to proceed.

A full-scale assault.

He set his jaw. The fate of the nation hung in the balance. The fate of civilization. He could almost smell the stench of gunsmoke and feel the heat of ravenous flames.

Above all he felt a fierce rage. A bitter hatred for the cannibals who fed off human misery. A bitter hatred for the chieftains of international terror and crime.

Like Vince Falco.

The Godfather would taste harsh justice if Thorn reached his target and if he made the kill. If. There was no guarantee of success Quaid knew.

The mission could easily end in disaster.

He drew another breath. He refused to dwell on negatives and depressing thoughts of failure. Instead he focused on Matt Thorn. He wished him a warrior's righteous luck as he battled across the kill zone. Likewise he wished Thorn's enemies nothing but ruin and desolation.

He wished them hell on earth.

Stuck in the bowels of the Pentagon Quaid could not directly influence the battle. He was a man of action and he desperately wanted to join the fight. Yet he had no choice but to wait for Thorn's next call.

Assuming there was a next call.

"Dammit!" His voice was a hoarse whisper. He rubbed his temples to ease the aching tension that throbbed inside his skull. He glared at his phone as if by force of will he could make it ring. But the phone remained silent. So he had to wait. One thing he knew: if anyone could pull off a mission this deadly it was Thorn.

Then why hasn't he called?

Quaid's throat constricted. His stomach churned. He grimly conceded something must be wrong. But he could not know the exact nature or extent of the problem. He could not assess Thorn's tactical situation. He could not even speculate. What he needed was information. Specific details. Hard intel.

Meantime the phone stayed silent.

He spat a curse and clenched his fists. He had lost men before. The grim reality of combat. The pain of every loss pierced his soul. A heartsick grief that felt like broken glass in his chest. Yet there was no turning back. Tonight's clash had begun with a vengeance and that meant one thing above all else.

A bloodbath.

## Twelve

Thorn lay crumpled on the warehouse floor. His consciousness dwindled from lack of oxygen. His senses began to shut down. The threshold of death.

Breathe... gotta breathe. He gasped and gulped air. His lungs painfully reflatd. His pulse thundered and his ears were ringing. With vast effort he opened his eyes. His blurred vision rippled back into focus.

He reached toward the gnawing pain on his left side. His fingers probed and found a bullet had glanced off one of his spare UZI mags. That had saved him from

serious injury. But if he did not get up and get moving quickly he was in grave peril.

He was a dead man.

He willed himself to rise and get back on his feet. With fierce exertion he pushed upward. His muscles ached and his sinews knotted. His shoulder muscles and sinews pulled tight like steel cables. The sour taste of adrenaline filled his mouth and a stink of gunsmoke filled his nostrils. His lungs burned.

He lurched up on one knee and found the fallen UZI and grabbed it. In his peripheral vision he saw more gunners closing. At least two men firing in his direction.

Another weapon joined the attack.

Another.

Then another.

He rolled sideways to dodge coordinated fire. He was surrounded and hostile troops were circling his position. A bullet grazed his shoulder and something sharp struck his face. He slid low under the enemy fire and felt its fierce heat. Then he was in motion and seeking new cover. The metallic taste of adrenaline filled his mouth. He was physically agile but he was not superhuman.

He could not outrun a bullet.

Hot rounds chased him as he slid behind a parked forklift. The steel-clad vehicle would serve as his new strikepoint. It would block enemy fire. At least he hoped so.

He heard the enemy troops rushing from two sides. He heard their boots thudding. Slugs hammered the forklift and the walls around him. Ricochets whined and buzzed past his skull.

He pulled the Colt Python revolver he had captured earlier. He braced it across the forklift's engine block. Then he triggered a roaring Magnum shot that nailed a creeping gunner twenty feet ahead.

In the next instant another thug burst into view. He was charging like a madman and his face was a mask of rage. He gripped a ten-inch dagger and held it high in his right fist. It was a traditional Mafia weapon. A stiletto.

The knifeman leapt forward and thrust his polished blade at Thorn's face. Thorn pivoted evasively. He felt the stiletto's razor sharp tip graze his neck near his jugular. With no time to think he swung the Python up and triggered its five remaining cartridges. He grimaced against the hellish muzzle blast. He knew the .357's brute power would equalize the odds in an emergency.

And it did.

All five Magnum slugs struck the knifeman's chest. The heavy slugs punched through and exited to release streams of blood. The guy vaulted backward and sprawled on the floor. Stiletto lost.

Thorn ditched the spent Python. He yanked the UZI's empty magazine and replaced it. He had only two reloads left. So he was perilously low on ammunition.

He scanned left-right and saw a Rhino mini-truck hurtling in his direction. Its driver was visible behind the truck's small square windshield. His face was twisted in a vicious snarl.

Thorn leapt forward. An evasive headlong dive. His own face was carved by a stony grimace. He rolled through his dive and stabilized into a crouch. He swung the UZI up then locked onto his target and hit the buzzgun's trigger.

Multiple slugs struck the Rhino and drilled its metalwork. Several slugs cored its windshield and punched through the driver's chest and face. Dead hands jerked the steering wheel. The mini-truck skidded broadside. It rammed a steel I-beam and flipped over inverted. The driver's corpse was expelled by the impact and crumpled into a grisly heap. The Rhino's engine sputtered and died.

Thorn turned away from the wreck. He drew a deep breath. He raked a sleeve across his face to clear sweat and blood. The residue of deadly conflict. The residue of mortal combat.

He drew another breath. His grimace faded. His expression was now deadpan. It was devoid of all emotion. The heaving in his chest subsided as his pulse and blood pressure returned to their normal range.

He listened. The small-arms fire on his flanks had trailed off to nothing. There were no more shouts or sounds of rushing troops. There were no more signs of imminent danger.

He stepped forward. Suddenly a new sound reached his ears. A throbbing sound. Another truck engine.

No.

Scrub that.

It was something else and it was rising quickly in pitch.

A powerful chopping sound.

Helicopter rotors.

He raced toward the building's rear emergency exit door and kicked it open.

He emerged into the night.

Scanning.

Outside the warehouse a Jet Ranger helo was gathering power for lift-off. Rotors spinning.

Two guards stood ready near the helipad with weapons raised. Thorn drove them backward with a slashing burst from the UZI. Both men stumbled and vanished from sight. But they would soon recover their footing and resolve. That was certain.

Meantime Thorn had to focus on the Jet Ranger and its occupants.

He narrowed his eyes and recognized the man sitting next to the helo's pilot. It was Caesar Ciccone. He was head of Falco's east coast heroin distribution network. It made sense that Ciccone would be on-site to oversee Monster Rush shipments. To ensure smooth distribution of the vile poison. He was a cannibal who fed off the misery of others. That meant he was a prime target and he could not be allowed to escape.

Right.

Damn right.

The Jet Ranger gained full lift-off power. Its turbine whined with a rising shriek that quickly became a deafening roar. It sprang from its helipad like a giant insect. It ascended rapidly. As it did Ciccone's pallid face seemed to brighten. He was no doubt expecting a quick and clean escape. His shifty rodent's eyes scanned the ground below and fixed on Thorn.

Thorn peered back and scowled. He had to retaliate. He had to respond with massive action.

He dropped to one knee and raised the UZI. Granted the stubby subgun was not an ideal anti-aircraft weapon. But there was no other option. No other weapon was available.

He braced the UZI and ripped off thirty rounds in two seconds flat.

The Jet Ranger's Plexiglas windshield shuddered as a dozen Terminal Shock slugs bored through. The slugs hammered the men inside.

The pilot lurched under multiple bullet strikes and slumped against his controls. Ciccone seemed to shiver and blur. His chest erupted in red streamers. Black smoke filled the cockpit and swallowed both men.

Instead of gaining more altitude the chopper wobbled erratically. It nosed over and plunged downward. Two of its main rotor blades tore free and whipped through the air. One rotor plummeted like a dagger and pierced the roof of the warehouse. The other rotor vanished into the darkness.

The chopper's stricken hulk hit ground zero and exploded in an epic fireball. Twisted shrapnel and mangled human remains pelted the earth in a gruesome downpour.

Thorn recoiled from rippling shockwaves and blast furnace heat. In that same instant he saw motion near the helipad.

He narrowed his eyes.

Scanning.

Then he realized.

One helipad guard had been decapitated by a broken rotor blade. His headless corpse lay crumpled.

Another man was crawling across the ground. His severed left leg made a bloody trail. He glanced over his shoulder. His face was crazed with pain. He saw Thorn and cursed through gritted teeth.

A short burst from the UZI silenced him forever.

Thorn retreated inside the warehouse. Backtracking. He passed ravaged bodies. He watched a few live stragglers bolt for the exits. Their guns and grudges were forgotten as they fled from Death Itself.

He let them go. Let them scatter into the night. He was no longer interested in the small-fry now that the main man was down and out. In any event these bloodied thugs had been taught a savage lesson. They had seen brutal justice. They could serve as Thorn's messengers.

They could spread word of Vince Falco's deadly misfortune.

Thorn powered on. He was still inside the warehouse with unfinished business. He planted three Semtex bombs and set their microchip timers. He placed bomb number four on a large chemical tank marked PROPANE GAS. The resulting inferno would consume the warehouse and devour its stockpiled heroin.

Falco's poison depot was being shut down...forever.

Thorn suppressed the urge to shout in triumph and beat his chest. The Law of the Jungle.

Sixty seconds to detonation.

He backtracked and bolted outside. He raced for the Challenger. Moments later he was behind the coupe's wheel and surging away.

Four seconds to detonation.

Three.

Two.

One.

The warehouse dissolved in fire and thunder. A churning orange toadstool shot into the black sky.

A fire alarm wailed.

Too late.

Thorn focused on the road ahead. He was powering toward his ultimate destination. He drew a sharp breath. The memory of a previous assignment arrived unbidden. It was an emergency rescue job that had gone hideously wrong. He had been diverted to assist a U.S. diplomatic outpost under siege in Benghazi, Libya.

But he had arrived too late.

By that time the U.S. Ambassador and twelve U.S. security operatives had been slaughtered. It proved that failure was always a looming prospect. It proved the Specialist could fail again tonight.

Still he had to press on. His course was dead ahead and damn the enemy's defenses.

He was on a hellfire trail.

He had to attack savagely.

Only absolute victory would satisfy him now.

## **Thirteen**

Thorn surged north on Interstate 89. He gunned the Challenger as he entered Upstate New York. His destination was Tomahawk Valley. It was a remote area known for its scenic hills...and deep dark woods. The menacing gloom captured his mood precisely as he pushed toward his target.

He peered ahead and saw snow-capped bluffs lit by eerie moonlight. Iroquois Native Americans had ambushed a U.S. Cavalry Troop in this vicinity around 1879. The Iroquois braves had used stealth techniques to defeat a larger and better-armed force. It was a lesson in tactics. It was bloody proof guerrilla warfare could extract a devastating toll on any army.

That lesson would be repeated tonight if Thorn's mission succeeded.

He checked his GPS. It was programmed with the location he had extracted from Eddie Zappa. He left the main highway for an isolated stretch of two-lane blacktop. His ETA was twenty minutes. Assuming his information proved correct. He rated his odds at fifty-fifty. He needed to hit the bastards with maximum aggression.

Above all he needed to believe righteous fate was guiding him in his battle against evil. The Japanese Samurai had believed strongly in righteous fate. They had believed in a divine spirit controlling their destiny on the battlefield.

Thorn's survival tonight convinced him he was under divine protection. It was surely no coincidence his enemies had failed to kill him while he had cut them to bloody shreds. Of course some would argue he got lucky. And Thorn himself believed in luck to some extent. But maybe luck was another way—an ignorant way—to describe divine protection.

A warrior's righteous fate.

He punched the Challenger's accelerator. According to the GPS he had two options. He could continue north along the highway. Or he could use an indirect route through the surrounding woodlands. The indirect route should provide him with the cover he needed to avoid enemy patrols.

In theory.

The GPS squawked. "Turn left, one hundred feet."

He saw a chain link gate with a sign that read KEEP OUT. He angled off the main road and smashed through the gate. Moments later he was driving on a forested trail and climbing uphill.

He met no resistance as he advanced. He was gambling. He could not be certain of anything. He might hit an enemy ambush or an IED. He blanked his mind to the danger and forged ahead.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. He kept rolling. His speed was barely five miles per hour. He had to take it slow and careful.

At last he reached the end of the trail. He was intact and unseen by the enemy.

So far and so good.

He parked on a rocky bluff that overlooked a sprawling house. It was a Gothic monstrosity. It was dark and brooding. If his intel was correct he knew he was looking at Vince Falco's mansion.

More correctly—his lair.

An evil fortress.

The place was filled with danger. But that did not relieve Thorn of his duty: target confirmation. Then hard-site penetration. Finally destruction. His blood and thunder war had brought him here. It was inevitable and there was no turning back.

Fate.

Sudden motion caught Thorn's eye. The mansion's powered gates were opening to admit a stunning limousine. A Rolls-Royce Phantom. Its headlights flared as it powered along the driveway. It stopped in front of the mansion's tall front doors.

Thorn noted a large ceramic crest above the doors. The crest displayed the ancient emblem of the Sicilian Mafia.

A deadly reptile.

A hissing cobra.

Three guards leapt from the Phantom and covered with assault rifles. The driver sprang the limo's rear door and a VIP emerged.

Thorn focused on the VIP. He recognized Danté LaValle from his mugshot. LaValle was Falco's top lieutenant. He was a bearlike man with thick eyebrows and a broken nose. He was the Mob's most blood-thirsty enforcer. He tortured his victims with power-drills and blow-torches. Sometimes over a period of days. Then he dissected them while they were still alive.



Thorn's instincts quickened. He had seen LaValle before. At a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. LaValle had been sent by the Godfather to secure heroin supplies from ISIS warlords. Thorn had scuttled the meeting by attacking the camp and killing most of its occupants.

Most.

But not all.

Evidently LaValle had escaped.

Thorn scowled. He was determined not to miss LaValle a second time. The mobster was a high-value target. Besides his connection to narcotics LaValle was a mercenary arms dealer. He sold guns and explosives to the highest bidder without regard to politics or creed. His weapons had been connected to a dozen of the worst terrorist atrocities in recent memory.

So yes. LaValle was a must-kill target.

Thorn switched his gaze to the next man who emerged from the Phantom. The guy was short and wiry. His face was pale and ghoulish. His mouth was a cruel slit and his eyes glistened like serpent's eyes.

Vince Falco.

Il Capo de Capa.

The Boss of Bosses.

Thorn replayed the mobster's biography in his mind. He was the son of legendary NYC Mafia boss Salvatore Falco. In his prime Salvatore had been the ultimate tough and wily Mafioso. The ultimate bad and bold Sicilian. It was rumored that a world-renowned actor had met with Salvatore to research a movie role. The resulting motion picture was considered a Hollywood classic. It had earned prestigious awards and broken box-office records.

Salvatore was suitably amused. It was said that he kept a special print of the movie for private screenings at his Long Island estate.

Meantime Salvatore had grown his business in the late 1960s. Then Cuban cigars from Canada had brought in the cash along with cannabis from Mexico. His interests had expanded to heroin from Asia as the 1970s progressed. By the 1980s he was leading the charge with a fast-growing cocaine network. Rival gangs had scattered in his wake or were crushed beneath his heel. By the 1990s he had added meth-amphetamine—or crystal meth—to his inventory. He had established a network of sales and supply pipelines across the globe. He had selected overseas partners he could trust.

As long as they understood the price of failure.

As long as they took their share of the profits and never forget that the Godfather ruled supreme.

It was an offer they could not refuse.

Growing up Falco Junior had learned every aspect of the narcotics business from his old man. Above all he had learned that in the drug trade you had to crush the opposition without remorse.

Without hesitation.

Without mercy.

As a result Falco Junior had killed his first man—a rival crime chief—at the age of seventeen. By the age of twenty he had killed eleven more men with guns and knives. Even bare hands. By the age of thirty he had ordered hits against 600

adversaries across the globe. His deadly reach extended everywhere. There were no places for his enemies to hide. There were no safe havens.

In North America Falco Junior's enemies filled vast bone yards across the continent. Their secrets were kept in the darkness of shallow graves. Other victims were dumped in deep lakes and rivers. To use Mafia slang they had been sent to swim with the fishes. Countless skeletons were drifting in those frigid waters. Eyeless sockets staring into the abyss.

A prime example of Falco Junior's wrath had been Abe Slingbaum. Abe had been head of the so-called Yiddish Gang that had operated in Las Vegas during the 1970s and 80s. Slingbaum's outfit had controlled seventy percent of vice revenues in Sin City. That situation displeased Falco Junior and he had resolved to correct the issue.

Forever.

In December 1989 Abe was celebrating Hanukkah at his Vegas mansion. But the festivities were spoiled when someone broke in and hacked him to shreds with a machete. Slingbaum's reign was suddenly over... and Falco Junior had moved swiftly to seize control.

To command absolute power.

No one had challenged the Falco dynasty until late 2009. Two days after Thanksgiving Salvatore was shot dead during a Mafia insurrection. It was a mobster's bitter dispute in Atlantic City.

Falco Junior's violent rage hit overdrive. He vowed to avenge his father's murder. He captured the men responsible. He dismembered them with a chainsaw and mailed the body parts to various rivals. He included a blood-spattered card that read YOU NEXT.

From that point on the younger Falco had profited hugely from his terror tactics. He had ruled with an iron fist. He had built his network into a multi-billion-dollar machine. A machine fueled by heinous crime.

He had also established an array of 'legitimate' businesses. His concerns ranged from food and furniture imports to car dealerships and heavy construction. Other projects involved buying massive stakes in the alcohol and tobacco industries. Those activities allowed Falco to launder millions of dollars in drug money every month.

So far his plan had worked perfectly.

So far.

But his fortunes were about to change. They were about to implode. He was being stalked by a ruthless enemy. Granted a solo assault like this was considered beyond extreme. But every other option had been tried and all of them had failed.

So the Specialist had to act.

Thorn kept his eyes on Falco. He considered trying for a head shot with the SCAR assault rifle that he had acquired in Chinatown. A single 5.56-millimeter Power Core slug through the brain would end this war right now.

Game over.

He quashed the temptation. At this range and angle he could not guarantee a pinpoint strike. He had to get close to confirm the kill.

Very close.

Falco and LaValle stepped toward the mansion. They disappeared inside with their hard-eyed gunmen.

Thorn scowled. How many guards in the house? How many more guards prowling the grounds? How much firepower aimed against him? Tommy Stomps had mentioned fifty troops. But that was only an estimate. The real number could be far greater.

Especially on *this* night.

So Thorn was hindered by a lack of battlefield intel. Every piece of information he lacked increased the odds of failure. The odds of disaster. He clenched his teeth. His chest tightened. The darkness around him seemed to thicken.

Almost smothering.

In his soul he knew the only way to drive the shadows back was with a burning torch. A purifying flame. He would carry that flame to the enemy's doorstep. He would spread its cleansing heat. He would triumph or he would die in the attempt.

And if he died a lot of vicious bastards would die with him.

A flash of motion caught his eye. A woman emerged from the house and stepped briskly toward the Phantom. Two young children clutched her hands.

Thorn recognized the woman from photos in the mission file. She was Ultima Falco. She was the Godfather's younger sister. The children were hers. Their ages were six and nine.

Dammit!

Thorn's ironclad rule was never to engage the enemy when innocents were present. In a heartbeat he scrubbed his mission. He was an ethical soldier and he gave himself no choice.

He hit the Challenger's engine START button and prepared to

## **Fourteen**

Vince Falco sat stiffly in his high-backed chair. His hands were spread on top of his massive desk. He was alone in the shadows of his dark-paneled study. He was alone with his rising fear. A rising apprehension that churned in his gut like an icy worm. Aching tension made his skull throb and his eyes bulge.

He sucked a sharp breath and struggled to regain his composure. Until tonight business had been superb. Until tonight he had looked on his empire with utmost assurance.

Until tonight.

Suddenly he was under attack. Savage attack. For the first time in his adult life he doubted his ability to control his fate.

It was a terrifying sensation.

Under normal circumstances the mobster never worried and certainly never panicked. But tonight's circumstances were entirely abnormal. He welcomed none of the reports he had received from his contacts on the streets of NYC. His commanders in the field were pressing him with shocking and painful news.

Blood was spilling and heroin was burning.

His outfit was absorbing massive damage.

He scowled. He had always believed he was invincible. Now that belief was being stretched to breaking point. Tonight's action had been catastrophic. It had devoured over sixty of his front-line troops. He could see the dead men in his mind. He could see their throats slashed and flesh torn by gunfire. Others burned alive or crushed in grisly car wrecks. Those men could be replaced. Granted. But that did not solve the problem.

Falco had a war on his hands.

And he was losing.

His scowl deepened. He had already retreated from NYC and now he wondered if it was sensible to retreat even farther. To flee the east coast. His sister and her children were already on their way to his villa on Spain's Costa Del Sol. They would soon be far removed from tonight's bloody disaster.

But where would he go?

There were several options. He owned lavish apartments in Paris and Rome and London. He owned palatial estates in Fiji and Grand Bahama. He thought about his mansion in Los Angeles. It was a modern Nordic design. He used it to wine and dine high-ranking politicians and judges on occasion. Most importantly it was perched on top of a rugged cliff in the Hollywood Hills. It was only accessible by helicopter or by a narrow canyon road. He could deploy extra troops to defend the mansion if necessary.

His face flushed with hot anger and he spat a vile curse. He had retreated once and that was enough. He decided that to keep running was cowardly. It was disgusting. It admitted defeat and defeat on any scale was unacceptable.

Besides that he had a reputation to maintain. A ferocious reputation. He could not afford the appearance of weakness. Of incompetence. If it was known that he was under attack opposing cartels would challenge him boldly. They would force him to fight defensive actions on all fronts. His profits would decline and his empire would lose power.

Eventually it would collapse.

Another curse. He told himself vengeance must be harsh. It must be swift and merciless. He clenched his fists. He vowed to prevail. He vowed to use every weapon at his disposal. Again with vigor he told himself defeat was not an acceptable outcome.

It sounded good. But in reality he knew defeat was looming over him. It was staring him in the face. The worst part was that he did not know the enemy's identity. He could not retaliate if he did not know the enemy's identity. He could not organize a meaningful counter-attack. A tipoff from his FBI contact had warned of an experienced soldier sent on a mission of vengeance. But how could one man wreak so much havoc? Inflict so much destruction?

It was impossible.

Yet it was happening.

Falco gritted his teeth. The enemy plan made ghoulish sense to him the more he considered it. A classic hit-and-run set up. A deadly specialist working under cover of darkness. If the specialist moved efficiently there would be ample time to orchestrate a massacre.

It was a devious plan.

It was almost perfect.

Yet Falco could not suppress the idea that his enemy was moving with inhuman speed. Inhuman precision. Again he confronted the unnerving notion that the impossible was happening. So much devastation. So much death. His empire torn asunder. His master plan derailed. All triggered by one man! He was reminded of a movie he had seen years before. A muscular commando destroying legions of enemy troops with savage and single-minded fury.

Rambo.

He swallowed hard. He brooded in the desolate silence that enveloped him. He had never been a superstitious man. Until now. In the space of a heartbeat he understood.

Something unnatural had been unleashed this night.

Something unholy.

The weight of that revelation crushed down on him. It choked off breath and his sense of a world that was real and solid. Now he felt trapped in another world. A hellish domain filled with rage and vengeance. A nightmare world where lone avengers could extract brutal justice.

He reached out with his left hand. He reflexively grabbed an object on his desktop. He held the object over his heart. The amulet had been a gift from Tariq Nazir...commander of ISIS. It offered protection in time of war. It was a supernatural defense against enemy action.

Evil against evil.

He opened his hand. He stared at the amulet. It was a black stone figure. An ancient Assyrian demon. Its name was Valek. Jesus had warned of it. He had warned of its power.

Valek. Its domain was terror and torment. Disease and devastation. Nazir had worn the amulet as a shield. Protection against Allied guns. Allied drones. It had served him well. Now it belonged to Falco.

"Evil against evil." Falco's own whispered voice surprised him. Again he swallowed hard. The shadows around him seemed to coil and thicken. An oppressive stillness.

The stillness of a tomb.

He put a fist to his mouth as his throat made a soft convulsive sound of dread. His every nerve and fiber cried out for answers to his predicament.

There were none.

In roaring silence he stared at the amulet. He gazed on its hideous form. Valek. Prince of Darkness. He studied its slanted eyes and feral grin. He studied its taut mouth filled with jagged fangs. Its taloned hands and feet.

He closed his left hand over the amulet. With his right hand he reached for the snub-nose .44 Magnum revolver that also lay on his desk. Would the amulet and the gun and his private army be enough to save him? Could he vanquish a spectral enemy whose face he had never seen?

Once more he was struck by the thought of fleeing. Of quickly escaping. The notion of running from danger made him nauseous. But he had to face grim reality. He had to be pragmatic. There was no profit in stupidly exposing himself to danger. He could run and live to fight another day. Who would fault him for that?

No one.

At least not to his face.

He thought of simply paying off his opposition. A bribe. Millions of dollars if necessary. The bastard must have a price. Everyone had a price. Falco had paid off many opponents through the years. After all corruption made the world go around.

Corruption and greed in equal measure.

A powerful combination.

He would have it no other way.

His skull throbbed again. Despair soaring. His chest tightened. A sixth sense warned him that bribes would not work. He could not buy his way out of trouble. Not this time. He could not reason with his current adversary. It was the same way that he could not reason with a savage dog.

Abruptly he sagged. His features contorted. A painful grimace. He was hit by a memory from his boyhood. A memory from Catholic Mass. It was a line from a Psalm.

He who sows great evil shall perish by a mighty sword.

In his mind he saw his enemy advancing.

Sword in hand.

## Fifteen

Thorn saw Ultima Falco reach the Phantom limo with her children and climb inside. A moment later the limo was gliding down the estate's gravel driveway. It passed through the electric gates and surged toward Interstate 7.

At once Thorn understood. Falco had sent his sister and her children to safer ground. He had removed them from potential danger. Thorn gave the Godfather maximum credit for that decision.

Meantime Thorn's mission was back on track. It was time and past time to launch his assault. He switched off the Challenger's engine and then unpacked his combat gear. He suited up. He was dressed to kill and ready for the dangers that lay ahead. Ready for the hellfire battle that lay ahead.

He unpacked his guns. He carried Black Thunder as his primary sidearm. He planned to bring his trusted UZI with its suppressor attached. He also carried his SCAR 5.56-millimeter assault rifle. It fired Power Core anti-personnel and M995 NATO armor-piercing projectiles. Its cyclic rate was 550 rounds per minute.

In addition the SCAR's under-barrel M1 rocket launcher provided extra punch. Thorn carried a mix of Dragon and Stinger rockets for the M1. Each Dragon contained a devastating HE-incendiary warhead. Each Stinger contained a payload of finned steel darts. Thorn also carried Piranha chemical warfare rockets for the M1. Each Piranha packed a charge of Phenol-Tetra-Chloride. Riot gas. The riot gas caused acute respiratory pain and vomiting and temporary blindness.

Nasty stuff.

Sure.

But effective.

Finally Thorn retrieved his six remaining Semtex demolition bombs. The bombs were keyed to a compact UHF radio detonator that he carried.

He slung the gear against his body in a specific sequence. The setup allowed him to find each item by touch alone in the heat of battle. Bandoleers of gun and rocket ammo criss-crossed his chest. Smaller belts angled from shoulders to waist to accommodate extra ammo. All of that combined with his helmet and combat garb made him resemble a nightmare version of GI-Joe.

He checked his doomsday gear once more. He ensured his guns were loaded and spare magazines arranged for swift availability.

Swift destruction.

He quit the Challenger and made his way downslope. He used a stand of Pine trees to screen his advance. Their pungent resin fragrance made his nostrils flare.

Beyond the sharp fragrance there was something more. A tension. A rapid pulsing and thickening of the air. Like opposing energies surging toward critical mass.

Surging toward a colossal explosion.

He forged on. As he moved he heard a chilling sound. A timber-wolf howling at the moon.

Another predator in search of prey.

He wished the beast good luck and kept moving. Soon he reached the estate's outer perimeter. It was marked by a seven feet high stone wall. He placed a Semtex bomb against the wall. He moved on. He covered one hundred feet and placed another bomb against the wall. He copied the procedure every hundred feet until he had placed all six bombs.

Now the bombs were armed and ready for detonation.

He backtracked to his starting point. The bombs were keyed to the remote detonator clipped to his waist belt. With the press of a button he could blow them together or in rapid succession. It was an effective system. It was useful to create a fiery diversion.

He double-checked his remote detonator. Its encrypted firing signal could not be jammed by the opposition. At least not easily. That would require military grade electronic counter-measures. Still he could not rule out the possibility that Falco had such gear on hand.

Damn.

He approached the wall and climbed with nimble motions. Vine leaves scratched across his helmet and gloves as he ascended.

Atop the wall he gained his balance and crouched like a gargoyle. He let the darkness shroud him. But the darkness could not totally conceal him from the sharp eyes of sentries.

Or snipers with night vision gear.

Or trained attack dogs.

Or—

He shrugged off the bleak thoughts and pulled his goggles. They were called Razors. He slid them over his eyes. The Razors used coated lenses to vastly improve night vision. The coatings amplified moonlight and starlight to illuminate the darkness. The system was called electro-photonic transmission. It had been

developed by NASA for astronaut helmet visors. Military experts had quickly realized the potential. The technology had been adapted for combat use.

Thorn adjusted the goggles. They made him look bug-eyed. The goggles worked their magic and the darkness lifted. It brightened into a green-tinged twilight. Now he could observe his surroundings almost as clearly as if it was midday.

He swept the terrain ahead. The sprawling grounds of Falco's estate were shrouded in fog. And in the fog there were ghosts. He felt them as he crouched on the wall. He could almost see them. They were gliding toward Falco's house and shaking their fists in anger. He heard their voices as they whispered to him on the night wind.

They spoke to him in urgent terms.

Demanding justice.

Demanding vengeance.

They were the ghosts of the fallen. The ghosts of those who had come here before seeking to destroy Falco.

Thorn let the specters fade and focused on the living. On enemies yet unseen.

He scanned left-right. Searching. There was a tall shape at the edge of his sight.

He took a moment to identify the object. It was a thirty feet high watch tower.

And it was occupied.

A lookout stood inside the sentry box. From his elevated position the man could cover the front and rear approaches to the house. At any sign of trouble he could alert his comrades and bring them running.

Which meant he had to go.

Thorn swung the UZI into action. Its suppressor was locked tight. He made the range to target fifty yards adjusting for elevation. He tightened his index finger. The UZI's trigger yielded to firm pressure. It broke at six pounds to release the firing bolt. The suppressor coughed and a Terminal Shock slug hurtled downrange.

The sentry stumbled and his weapon slipped out of reach. He sat down hard and blood spilled from a ragged hole in his larynx. He was struggling to shout. The effort threw scarlet bubbles across his lips and chin.

Thorn triggered the UZI. Another Terminal Shock slug bored in and ripped through the sentry's left eye. The force of the impact snapped his head back. He toppled sideways onto the floor of the sentry box and did not move again.

One down.

How many left?

Thorn waited. The thickening fog crawled over him. Its chill was bone-deep. Yet he called the fog an ally. He planned to use it as a cloak to shield his advance.

He gripped the UZI and kept scanning. He spotted a Quonset hut. The hut's exterior was painted foliage green to blend with the surrounding terrain. A stand of Cedars masked its sides and rear. Finally a black-brown fabric net was draped over the Quonset's entrance.

It was a judicious use of natural and man-made camouflage.

It was a cunning scheme to defeat prying eyes.

But it was not enough to defeat high-resolution surveillance.



Thorn recognized the Quonset from a satellite recon photo. It was Falco's heroin research lab. No drugs were stored here. Instead a team of Mafia chemists were laboring to perfect new strains of Monster Rush.

New strains of misery and death.

The Specialist made a quick decision. He would infiltrate the lab and seek targets of opportunity. Then he would assault the main house. It was an abrupt change in plans. Sure. But Thorn accepted the challenge. In fact he had no damn choice if he meant to succeed.

He estimated he would need ten minutes to move from his present position to the Quonset. And from the Quonset to the house another fifteen minutes. So twenty-five minutes on enemy turf. Twenty-five minutes to reach his objectives safely or get shot to bloody shreds.

A simple calculation.

Life or death.

He saw motion and located several more guards roving the estate's outer perimeter. The troops were moving solo. Not in pairs. That was a tactical mistake and Thorn meant to exploit it.

Another edge.

He let a sentry pass by. He chose not to kill him. Instead he traced the man's patrol route. The guy was swaggering like a rock star. If Falco's troops were cocky and overconfident it could work to Thorn's advantage.

The Specialist clenched his teeth. It was time to launch. He pushed off the wall and dropped inside the estate.

Whump!

He landed in a crouch. His combat feelers were probing and his UZI was braced for action. He was operating on instinct. A primal sense of self-preservation on enemy turf. There was no such thing as too much caution on the battlefield. And a smart warrior expected the unexpected.

Like voices in the fog.

Two men were heading Thorn's way. Obviously not all the guards were working solo. The voices grew louder. It was two versus one. Thorn's only option was to neutralize the guards before they saw him.

He had to strike with lethal precision.

He had one chance to do it right.

Or die in the attempt.

## Sixteen

Thorn slid the UZI into play and peered ahead. He saw two guards approaching. He aimed quickly and stroked the UZI's trigger. The nearest gunner folded. He hit the dirt and went stiff. His partner raised a weapon. Thorn triggered the UZI again. The man staggered under the impact of multiple bullet strikes. His jacket rippled and emitted puffs of crimson. He toppled next to his comrade. His weapon lay useless on the ground.

Thorn scanned for more guards. He found none. What threats hid beyond his line of sight? He swallowed his apprehension. Soon he would be within striking range of his target.

Nothing else mattered.

He pushed off toward the Quonset. As he moved he noticed a hulking granite lion perched at the end of the driveway. The lion had to be at least twelve feet tall and weigh several thousand pounds. He had seen that creature before.

Where?

Then he remembered: a history book. It was the Lion of Babylon. It was a mythic beast. A superbeast. It was another symbol of Falco's twisted ego. Another symbol of his poisoned psyche.

Thorn braced the UZI and kept moving. He reached a chain-link fence that encircled the Quonset. A simple test showed him the fence was not electrified. Small favors. Right. That was uncommon in the kill zone where favors were rare and disfavor was the norm.

He pulled his wire-cutter and snipped the fence links to create an oblong flap. Moments later he was inside the compound and treading with caution. He scanned the Quonset and saw a metal door. That would be his point of entry.

He quickened his pace and reached the door. He tried the door handle and found it locked. No big surprise. It would be too much to expect easy access. He would have to defeat the door lock quickly and quietly. The alternative was to blast his way inside without planning.

Which would be stupid.

Dead stupid.

So how to defeat the lock? He pulled his Tanto knife and aimed its hardened tip. He intended to break the lock with a powerful thrust. It might work or it might not. It was worth a try.

He caught a sound of footsteps from behind the door. He backed away with the Tanto held firm.

The door was unbolted and shoved open. A guard emerged with a large semi-auto pistol slung against his hip. The man saw Thorn and stared at the UZI and the weird goggles. His eyes flared wide in shock. For a moment he was frozen in place. Then he reached for his weapon.

Too late.

Thorn surged with the Tanto. A smooth and deadly swoop. He slashed vertically with the eight-inch blade. He released a torrent of blood as he split the gunman's larynx. The man staggered backward and collapsed. Gagging. He went stiff and the gagging stopped.

Thorn stowed the Tanto and raised his UZI. As he did so another guard stepped into view. The man saw his fallen comrade. He saw Thorn. He stumbled backward and reached for a shotgun slung across his shoulder.

He never made it.

Thorn nailed him with the UZI. A rising burst that spun him into final darkness. The subgun with its suppressor emitted only a dull rattle.

A voice emanated from a two-way radio clipped to the dead man's belt. "Vito, report!" the voice snapped. "What's your situation?"

Thorn's gut tightened. He had to act swiftly. He clenched his teeth. He shouldered through the Quonset's open doorway with the UZI leading. He stalked through a short corridor that opened up into the main laboratory. As soon as he entered the room he felt an ugly sensation. An ominous sensation. There was an odd smell in the air. A sharp tang. A medical edge to it.

He pressed on and glimpsed a lanky figure bolting toward the far end of the room. The man wore a white lab coat. Thorn saw his face and recognized Saul Katz.

According to the mission file Katz was a Harvard-trained chemist. He had ditched a career in pesticide research to make a fortune 'cooking' heroin for the Mob. Katz had perfected the formula for Monster Rush and he was its chief architect.

Which meant he had to die.

Thorn sprang forward with the UZI tracking. Before he could fire Katz ducked and vanished from sight.

There was a moment of tense silence. Then the Mob chemist called out. "There must be some mistake."

"You made it."

Another stony pause as Katz shifted behind his cover. "You'll never pull this off."

"Yeah? I'm kicking ass, so far."

"Just tell me what you want."

"Your head."

"Dammit! You know what I mean. Name your price, to walk away."

Thorn did not answer. Instead he edged forward. He spotted his mark crouched behind a metal drum marked TOXIC WASTE. Then he triggered the UZI. A short precision burst.

Three slugs punctured the drum and released torrents of yellow slime.

The gunk hit Katz. He screamed as his face was devoured by the caustic sludge. He toppled onto the floor. He was twitching and squirming. His flesh was sizzling and turning black. It was melting off the bone.

Thorn leveled the UZI and sent a mercy shot through the man's forehead. That ended his pain. His torment.

It was more than he deserved.

Thorn reloaded his subgun. Another flash of motion caught his eye. He watched a second man bolt from the shadows at the far end of the lab. This guy also wore a lab coat. He grasped a silver briefcase as he scuttled toward an emergency exit.

Thorn tracked the runner with his UZI and fired once. A single spent case leapt from the UZI's ejection port and hit the floor and rolled away.

The 9-millimeter bullet struck hard. The guy spun like a drunken dancer and flopped on his back. The bullet had blown a fist sized hole in the base of his skull and vaporized his brain stem. His mouth gaped to expel a final wheezing breath as his lungs collapsed.

The briefcase tumbled and hit a metal bench. It sprang open.

Thorn watched fat wads of cash scatter across the lab. His expression was impassive. He returned his attention to the task at hand. He searched the lab for more targets.

He found none.

He assessed his progress so far. Two Mob chemists had been eliminated plus several guards. But his job was not complete. Not even close. Additional targets waited for him inside the main house.

He quit the lab and slipped through the breeched fence. He stalked toward Falco's mansion. He covered one hundred yards and reached a blue-lit swimming pool.

Suddenly a guard appeared on his flank. The man emerged into the glow of the pool lights.

Thorn reacted swiftly. The UZI stuttered and a salvo of Terminal Shocks ripped through the man's chest. Two bullets exploded his pulmonary artery and two more shattered his cervical vertebrae. He toppled into the pool and his rifle sank. His blood oozed through the water. The fog closed over him as he drifted.

Thorn circled the pool and closed on the house. Just then another guard emerged into view. He was approaching fast with an AK47 assault rifle locked in his fists.

Thorn halted and dropped into a crouch. Hardly breathing.

The man edged closer. He veered around the edge of the pool. He had not noticed his drifting comrade.

Not yet.

The pool was ringed with marble statues. They were Greek gods. The man stopped in front of one. It was Apollo. God of fire. God of thunder.

Thorn made his move. A burst from his UZI ripped through the guard's torso and pitched him backward.

The man flattened against Apollo. Then he dropped into a seated posture. His eyes were bulging and his mouth was gaping. Released from lifeless hands the AK47 dropped between his outstretched legs. His blood had splattered Apollo's chest. It glistened in the moonlight.

Thorn took a moment to scan for more guards. He found none. He pushed ahead. He stopped fifty yards from the mansion and crouched under the cover of an Oak tree. He paused to listen for any unnatural sounds. He scanned for any hint of man-shapes in the fog.

Nothing.

He slid into deep shadow at the building's north corner. Again he waited for patrols that never came and warning shouts that never sounded.

All clear.

Above him was a second-floor balcony supported by a wrought iron trellis. His goal was to scale the trellis and reach the balcony undetected. From there he would make his penetration through a set of French windows.

It sounded good. Assuming the trellis would support his weight. Assuming he was not spotted while he climbed or once he reached the balcony. In which case he would be vulnerable to snipers on the ground. But there was no other option. Attempting an entry on the ground floor would certainly provoke a violent response.

It would trigger Armageddon.

He reached the trellis and began his climb. Vine leaves rustled under his boots. Anxious seconds passed as he ascended. It was impossible to cover his flanks or the ground below his feet. If a sentry passed below and saw him he was done.

He was dead.

He pushed upward with arms and legs outstretched. His progress was agonizingly slow. But he had to climb carefully and quietly to avoid slipping and avoid detection. All he could do was grit his teeth and keep climbing.

At last he reached the balcony and vaulted over the safety railing. He let his pulse and respiration stabilize. Then he approached the French windows. He was alert for any sign of movement from within the house. Any warning of an ambush. He found no immediate sign of jeopardy. No looming threats blocked his way.

He bent close to examine the lock on the windows. No one expected intruders on the second floor and the lock did not appear heavy duty. His entry looked feasible.

Unless the windows were booby-trapped.

Still he had to proceed.

He pulled the Tanto. He intended to crack the lock. His fingers tightened around the knife's handle. Then his jaw tensed reflexively. He felt a sharp prickling at the base of his skull. A warning tingle. A soldier's sixth sense that told him something was wrong.

Badly wrong.

Just then headlights gleamed from the grounds below. He crouched to minimize his profile. He saw a car rolling along the driveway.

It was powering toward the house.

In a heartbeat Thorn scrubbed his entry and moved to protect his flank. He stowed the Tanto and swung the UZI into action. He knew he was exposed. He knew the odds of survival were next to zero if the enemy found him.

He crouched lower.

Waiting.

Watching.

A Buick sedan pulled beside the house and stopped below the balcony. The driver door flew open and a man emerged. He peered through the drifting fog. Searching. It was impossible to say what had alerted him to trouble. Whether it was simple chance or smart detective work.

The man drew his pistol. But he never got the chance to fire. A single 9-millimeter bullet drilled his face. He staggered and toppled. Pistol lost.

Thorn's mind was racing. He was weighing options. He could resume his stealthy mode of entry. Or he could blow the French windows with his subgun. He could charge inside and blast everything that moved. Blast every target he saw.

Before his next thought was complete a harsh wailing sound hit his ears.

A Klaxon alarm.

In the next instant a squad of troops burst through the mansion's front doors. Their weapons were raised and ready for action.

Thorn's jaw muscles pulled tight. He briefly wondered how he might have been discovered. Maybe he had tripped an alarm. Or maybe the dead men had been found. Either way the enemy was on his trail and he was being hunted.

So much for stealth.

He had lost the crucial element of surprise.

He had tried to avoid Armageddon.

But Armageddon was here.

It was exploding in his face.

His thoughts shifted. If he allowed himself to become surrounded on enemy turf he was doomed. Instead he had to maneuver before his enemies gained an overwhelming advantage.

Before they destroyed him.

He leapt from the balcony and plunged through the darkness. He landed on the Buick's roof with a loud bang and a crunch of fractured auto glass. He sprang off the Buick and hit the ground in a fighting crouch.

Enemy guns exploded from the shadows around the house.

He dropped behind the Buick. He stowed his UZI and grasped the SCAR. Then he aimed at the hostile formation. He drew a breath and squeezed the SCAR's trigger. He let the rifle's stock recoil smartly against his shoulder.

A salvo of 5.56-millimeter Power Core slugs drove the nearest gunmen backward. Seeking cover.

Other gunners regrouped and fired in Thorn's direction. Their AK47s spat jagged flame. These men were determined and it was only a matter of time before they converged on their prey.

Maybe a few minutes.

Maybe seconds.

Thorn's gut twisted as a powerful searchlight flashed on. Its glaring beam swept from the house across the landscape and veered his way.

Shit!

Oh shit!

Caught in the open Thorn had no choice but to react swiftly. He swung the SCAR toward the light and triggered a slashing burst. He knew he had struck flesh when the searchlight tilted crazily toward the sky. He followed through with another SCAR burst that exploded the searchlight. It flickered and went dark.

His blood roared in his ears. He had to find a new strikepoint. He had to find tactical cover from which to return fire.

In other words he had to get the fuck out of there.

He tensed his legs. He was ready to make a headlong charge that would take him to safer ground. If he moved at full speed he might just make it. Unless he was hit by a sniper. Or stepped on a mine. Or met an ambush.

So many ways to die.

He focused on the task at hand. He raised the SCAR to his shoulder and held its trigger down. The weapon roared and its muzzle spewed flame.

Enemy weapons answered at point-blank range.

## **Seventeen**

Thorn emptied the SCAR's magazine in a blazing burst. A savage burst. He reloaded swiftly and kicked off running. He covered fifty yards of no-man's land that whistled with bullets. He was surging toward the estate's wooded north quadrant.

He was seeking cover.

Deep cover.

Seconds later he reached the treeline and darted inside a stand of towering Elms. At his back the hostile troops were fanning out and giving chase with weapons drawn. He would have to kill them all if he meant to assure his own survival.

An easy task.

No problem.

Like falling into an open grave.

He mouthed a curse. His mission was damn near FUBAR. It figured. It figured too damn well. You could spend a year refining strategy and see it shot to hell in seconds flat. You could see the best-laid plans dissolve into bloody chaos in the heat of battle. All because some unanticipated problem reared its ugly head.

Like now.

He bolted through the trees. He was seeking an appropriate strikepoint. He needed the right spot to launch a counter-attack. The position he selected was a steep rise beyond the Elms. It was a place where the high ground gave him a commanding field of fire.

He reached the top of the rise and went prone to conceal his silhouette. He scanned the forest below through his Razor goggles. He saw troops charging in his direction. His vantage point was screened by shrubs and the hulk of a fallen tree. It was a good sniping position. But not perfect. If outgunned he might not succeed.

Might not survive.

He made a quick decision to swap the SCAR for the UZI. Six Terminal Shock cartridges remained in the UZI's magazine. That was enough to drop one of the advancing attackers if his aim was true. He also had eight spare mags stowed in his right-side bandoleer. In addition the UZI's suppressor would hide the bulk of its sound signature and its muzzle flash in the dark.

He braced the UZI's sound can across the fallen tree in front of him. It made for a decent gun-rest to steady his aim.

He kept scanning. The enemy troops were closing. Three men total. A scout squad.

They were moving fast.

Too fast.

Thorn reckoned these men were overconfident. It was bad form when gunners were overconfident. It was every type of stupid. You saw that stupidity on their faces sometimes.

When they were stretched out in the morgue.

The enemy point-man lunged forward. Thorn centered his gunsight on the guy's upper sternum six inches below his chin. He tightened his trigger finger and squeezed off. The UZI shuddered as he unleashed a deadly salvo. His target twisted and toppled.

The UZI's firing bolt froze on an empty smoking chamber. He ditched the spent magazine and reloaded swiftly. He watched as target number two stumbled through the undergrowth. He triggered the UZI again and a burst of slugs drilled the man's ribcage. The impact dumped him into a pool of murky water.

Meantime trooper number three was in motion. A headlong charge. He was bolting toward Thorn's position with his weapon raised. Through luck or skill he had discovered the Specialist's hiding place. At least his approximate hiding place.

Thorn lowered the UZI and pulled Black Thunder. He knew that stealth was no longer required. He thumbed off the pistol's safety and cocked its hammer. He watched the enemy soldier moving fast with his rifle braced at the hip. The man's eyes were slitted with grim determination.

Thorn dug his elbows into the muddy ground to stabilize himself. He tightened his grip on Black Thunder. It was a solid grip that provided a solid firing platform. He clenched his teeth and kept his eyes on the advancing figure.

You think you'll outgun me.

You think you'll outsmart me.

But you won't.

The enemy trooper was twenty-five yards out as Thorn aimed his hand-cannon. At fifteen yards he had the pistol's front sight dead-centered on his target.

In that same instant the enemy soldier saw him. There was a look of stupefied surprise on the guy's face as grim reality sank in. It was the last emotion the man would ever feel.

Thorn squeezed Black Thunder's trigger. A crack of doom shook the forest and rolled downrange toward the Mafia sentry. The .45 Auto hollow-point drilled him just above the heart. Explosive impact hurled him off his feet. His rifle spun away. He slammed onto the ground and twisted into a fetal ball and did not move again.

Thorn stowed his gear and pushed upright. He surged eastward on a looping course that took him back toward the mansion and his main target. He would confront the threat head-on.

So the die was cast.

Emphasis on die.

As he moved through the trees his boot hit something round and hollow. It rolled and cracked. He paused. A mine? No. He would already have been blown to bloody shreds.

He took another step and heard a brittle crunch. He peered at the forest floor. He recognized grayish-white objects. They were round in shape and scattered in a random pattern. There were other shapes also. They were longer and thinner. Some curved.

His gut twisted. An icy realization. He was staring at bones. Human bones. Skulls and skeletons were half-buried in the dirt and covered in moss and leaves. He recognized smashed ribcages and snapped femurs. Empty eye sockets and shattered teeth. One skeleton was badly charred. As if the victim had been burned alive.

Suddenly Thorn understood. To use Mafia slang this was a bone yard. It was a remote place for the Godfather to dump the bodies of his victims. The insects and animal scavengers of the wilderness would quickly devour all human remains. The stench of death and decay would not rise beyond the forest. The danger of disease would be minimal.

Thorn scowled. How many people had been murdered and dumped here? Dozens at least. He stared at the pitiful skeletal remains. He stared at human remnants discarded like so much trash.



This was a tragedy.

An abomination.

A surge of anger pierced Thorn's soul. A surge of profound grief. He bowed his head in respect and offered a silent prayer.

He pressed on. He knew time was short and danger was close. He scrambled through a maze of trees. Breathing hard. Muscles straining. He used his Razor goggles for guidance. He moved swiftly but quietly.

At last he reached the edge of the forest.

Parted a branch.

And saw the enemy mansion.

The Klaxon continued to wail. He clenched his teeth. His assault had to continue. He had to avenge the fallen.

He bolted from the treeline. Determined. Wraithlike. As he ran he leveled the SCAR and fired a scything burst that caught two troops flat-footed. Power Core bullets punched the men backward and swept them into piles of leaking flesh.

He reloaded the SCAR and kept moving. He reached a swath of Purple Asters. Their sweet fragrance was at odds with the stink of death and gunsmoke. The colorful blossoms screened his position as he dropped into a low crouch.

His combat instinct told him it was time to escalate his attack. Time to give the opposition a taste of hellfire. He reached for the remote detonator on his belt and found the doomsday button by touch.

He keyed the first Semtex bomb. A churning fireball filled his peripheral vision. It was followed by a roaring thunderclap. A section of the estate's security wall dissolved and shattered masonry was propelled skyward.

Hellfire.

Yeah.

Even at a distance of two hundred yards the shocking boom of the explosion walloped his ears. Flames gushed and he felt heat on his face like a blazing desert sun.

Enemy guards recoiled from the blast. Then they turned toward the estate's perimeter with their weapons leveled. In another minute these men would be fully composed and ready to retaliate.

In another minute.

But they did not have a minute.

Thorn punched his firing key again. He watched with grim resolve as another Semtex bomb exploded. The ground rocked beneath his feet.

He triggered another bomb and another section of wall dissolved into shards of stone. The shards were chased by plumes of smoke and fiery streamers. The eruption laid waste to everything within a hundred feet. Nearby troops were ravaged by shrapnel and superheated shockwaves. Most died instantly. Survivors retreated and scrambled for safety.

Thorn knew he had to keep the enemy horde locked in chaos. He blew the final three Semtex bombs in rapid succession. Each detonation illuminated the grim scene like a giant flashbulb. Each flash cast a harsh glow across the carnage and destruction. Running men were momentarily lit. Some halted in their tracks. Startled. Others ran faster. Sprinting for their lives. Still others cringed and cowered. Faces twisted in panic.

There was a brief pause in the action. Then there was a sudden blast of gunfire as assault rifles fired on full-auto.

Another blast of gunfire.

Another.

Then another.

Falco's troops were venting their rage and frustration. They were pulverizing empty shadows. An aimless fusillade.

Thorn dropped low to avoid strays. The Purple Asters swayed around him. They were unfazed by the lethal chaos. In every direction the darkness was lit by muzzle flashes and flickering flames. It was a nightmare landscape and it served Thorn's purpose to grim and gruesome effect. Although its timing was not as he had planned.

He aimed the SCAR and dedicated his next magazine to precision work. He spent single rounds and short selective bursts when targets emerged into view. He toppled three enemy hitmen without revealing his position.

But a fourth hitman *did* spot him. The guy carried a strange object. It looked like a giant spraygun.

A flamethrower.

The killer aimed his weapon and pulled its trigger.

Thorn lunged sideways to evade the cone of fire. His gloves and helmet were smoldering as he sprang upright. His eyes were slitted against the searing heat. He swept the SCAR toward the flame-gunner and triggered a three-shot Power Core burst.

The bullets drilled through the man's torso. The slugs punctured the fuel tank on his back. Gray vapor hissed from the tank. Then it exploded and disgorged red-orange flame. The man staggered and flapped his arms as he burned. He dropped to his knees and walked on them.

Screaming.

Trailing fire.

Then he collapsed into a smoldering heap.

Thorn forged ahead. He covered his flanks with short bursts of autofire. He was advancing on the ugly mansion. The Godfather was almost certainly inside. Barricaded most likely. But that meant he was also trapped.

Thorn glanced up and saw movement. Troops were rushing toward firing towers built into the mansion's roof. He realized with cold dread that he had missed a lethal detail. The Gothic parapets were not only decorative. They were functional and meant to defend the house. He knew the overhead snipers could easily locate him from their elevated positions.

They could easily pin him with autofire.

There was no time to retreat. He had to stand his ground and smartly neutralize the threat. He reckoned he had a decent chance to smash the opposition. Decent. But far from guaranteed. Still he was bound to try because he was wired that way.

He reached for the M1 rocket launcher mounted beneath the SCAR's fore-end. He slid his hand onto the launcher's stubby grip and thumbed off its safety. A quick check ensured the weapon was primed and ready to fire. He twisted at the waist to help absorb the recoil with his upper torso. He aimed at the nearest parapet and hit the launcher's trigger.

A Dragon HE rocket hurtled toward its target. Impact! The parapet rippled and bulged. Then it exploded in a ball of flame. Enemy gunners were devoured by the inferno.

A secondary blast rocked the night. A fiery vortex. The mansion was lit by a pulsing red glow. The glow illuminated mangled bodies and materiel devastation.

Death-screams echoed across the landscape.

Thorn reloaded his M1 launcher with another Dragon HE rocket. He spied a parked car fifty yards away. Another Rolls-Royce limo. It was painted Sapphire Blue. No driver or passengers were in sight. His instincts told him to roast the car so it could not be used for a getaway. He leveled the M1 and sighted on the limo's windshield. He curled his index finger around the launcher's trigger and took up the slack.

Then he fired.

One moment the limo was sitting still. The next it was a smoking hulk tipped over on its side. Its window glass was blown out and its metalwork was scored and blackened by the rocket's blast. Its front tires were split apart. Its fuel tank blew a second later and smothered the crippled limo in flaming gasoline.

Thorn turned away from the fiery wreckage. He was seeking new targets. He plucked another Dragon from his bandoleer and thumbed it into the M1's breech. He pivoted toward the next rooftop strongpoint and aimed swiftly. He adjusted for range and elevation. Then he drew a breath and squeezed the launcher's trigger.

The rocket struck its target dead-center. The parapet dissolved and gunners were incinerated before they fled. The ruined structure collapsed and expelled smoke and cinders. Its roof levitated on a cushion of smoke and flame and spun like a giant Frisbee. Ammunition cooked off in the searing heat like lethal fireworks.

Thorn unleashed another Dragon and saw it blow in a red-orange fireball. Its thunderclap reverberated like a belch from hell. In the wake of the explosion he heard a crackle of small-arms fire. He heard more screams and someone shouting for a medic.

Seconds later the main house burst into flame. But the flames quickly died. No doubt they were suppressed by emergency sprinklers or Halon gas. It figured the Godfather would have rigged his fortress for emergency damage.

Thorn was moving again. Black ash fell on his shoulders. The only sounds he could detect were angry shouts and screams and the crackle of hungry flames.

A gruesome symphony of death.

He scoured through the Razors and saw gunners scrambling along the mansion's north flank. He palmed a Stinger rocket and shoved it into the M1's breech. He aimed at the hostile troops and fired and reloaded and fired again. He filled the darkness with a barrage of finned steel darts.

One Stinger salvo caught a running gunner midstride and hurled him off his feet. The impact split his spine and tossed him into oblivion.

A second armed figure was peeling off to the right. He was moving fast. But not fast enough. A Stinger blast removed his face with less than surgical precision. It scattered his brains across a nearby wall.

Thorn kept firing and reloading. He was shredding stunned troops with rocket after punishing rocket. He was blowing ragged holes in their disintegrating ranks.

It was a devastating attack.

It was a ferocious assault.

He was ravaging flesh and bone at the limit of his launcher's effective range.

In that terrible instant his hunger for payback was ravenous.

It was unlimited.

Red haze and tattered clothing floated in the air. He wondered how many troops had perished so far and how many were mortally wounded. Any way he counted the total came up spelling bloodbath.

A dark and primal corner of his mind was excited by the proximity of extreme violence. By the high-voltage rush of cheating death while grinding his foes to dust.

He sucked a ragged breath and focused on his mission. Suddenly the adrenaline high was turning into fear. He had only moments remaining to nail his main target or lose it all. If the Godfather escaped his struggle would be in vain.

Of course Thorn knew he might be killed before he reached his ultimate objective.

In which case his mission would be tersely ended.

Then what?

Another Specialist—if one came—might find his decimated remains in Falco's bone yard. Those remains would be covered with dirt and fungus. Ants would infest his empty skull after they had devoured his putrefied brain. Rats would nest inside his crumpled ribcage and feast on his shriveled guts. Microbes would devour whatever else remained of him.

He shut down the despondent thoughts. Nothing was gained from defeatist thinking. He surged toward the house. He had to penetrate that evil palace. And quickly.

He fed a Dragon rocket into the M1 and hit the launcher's trigger. The mansion's broad front doors erupted in smoke and flame.

He loaded another Dragon and lobbed it through the breeched doorway. He saw the walls around the doorway shake and shudder. Then they exploded with a numbing roar. He saw Falco's cobra crest dissolve into a thousand smoking pieces.

Fuck you! he wanted to scream. Or maybe he did scream. Maybe the hideous shriek that pierced the night belonged to him.

A primal scream of rage.

A scream of vengeance.

He stayed in motion. He was intent on storming the house without further delay. His teeth were clenched and his eyes were narrowed to slits. He grasped a Piranha gas rocket and loaded it into the M1.

He aimed swiftly and hit the launcher's trigger. He saw the chemical warfare can hurtle through the mansion's ruptured doorway. Its fuse blew and a cloud of orange riot gas erupted from its warhead.

He glimpsed the mansion's interior. He glimpsed a sumptuous foyer lit by a massive chandelier. A curving staircase that led to an upper floor lined with priceless artworks. He recognized Lucifer's Concubine by Salvador Dalí and Three Pissing Monkeys by Andy Warhol.

He reloaded the M1 and unleashed another Piranha. He knew his goggles and combat face-mask would protect him from the ravages of the wicked gas. But anyone without such gear would gag and vomit. They would cough and choke. The caustic fumes would burn their skin and eyes.

Tough shit.

One man staggered from the mansion. His face was a pallid mask and his eyes were swollen shut. Tendrils of orange gas clung to his arms and shoulders as he moved. He sank to his knees. He was gagging and convulsing.

Thorn hit the SCAR's trigger and cut him down with a Power Core slug that impacted just above the belt-line.

Behind the fallen man something moved. Another hostile. In that next instant a black blob arced through the air. It hit the ground and rolled between Thorn's feet.

He glanced down.

Grenade.

He grabbed the deadly egg and hurled it back toward the house. A fiery detonation followed. A hellish roar. The blast wave thrust him off his feet and smashed him to the ground. Searing waves of heat attacked him and robbed his breath.

He groaned and gasped as he registered intense pain. He tried to sit up. But something like a cannonball hit his chest and propelled him into crimson darkness.

## **Eighteen**

Pete Quaid sat on the edge of his desk with his arms folded and fists clenched. He scowled. He could not block the gruesome images. A waking dream of death. In his mind he saw Matt Thorn consumed by flame.

Burned alive.

Quaid shifted his weight anxiously and clenched his fists tighter. He could not shake the premonition. A psychic warning of disaster. In the crypt-like gloom of his basement Pentagon office he suffered profound despair. He knew he was powerless to help if Thorn's mission had ended in disaster.

More gruesome images of defeat and devastation flashed across Quaid's mind. He swallowed hard and felt a sharp prickling across his scalp. A sour taste filled his mouth and his stomach churned.

He closed his eyes. Tense. Tormented. The gory mental images piled up. He felt a sudden rush. It was akin to panic. At the base of his neck he felt a sensation like icy hands. He reflexively lurched forward and opened his eyes.

A tremor ran down his spine.

He reached for a styrene cup on his desk. He lifted it to his lips and took several greedy gulps. He did not care if the coffee was stale and cold. He drained the cup and tossed it into the trash. He had not smoked in twenty-five years. But he now felt the desperate urge to fire up a Marlboro. Fuck the smoke alarm. His only regret was that he had no cigarettes on hand.

Stony moments passed in the darkness of the underground bunker. A windowless oblong room. Its steel-lined walls were painted battleship gray. Its only furnishings were a desk and two chairs and a filing cabinet. There was also a narrow cot. Often he would sleep here after fifteen and twenty-hour shifts. There was no suburban nest waiting for him. No family to cherish and comfort him. His wife and infant son were long gone. Long dead. Murdered by a drunk driver.

The walls tightened around him. A thick and airless silence. He stood still. Brooding. Thoughts racing. Then he heard something and cocked his head to listen.

Somewhere above there was an eerie tapping sound.

It sounded like a warning.

An omen.

He set his jaw. Blood roared in his ears. Through his being there swelled an overwhelming revelation. It was a revelation that Matt Thorn had fallen on the battlefield. He could not gauge the extent of Thorn's injuries. He could not know with certainty if he was alive or dead. He only knew the soldier had fallen. That he was wounded and near defeat.

The weight of that revelation threatened to crush Quaid where he stood. It settled on his back like a slab of concrete. Yet the core of his being refused to yield. He refused to accept the premonition.

At least not yet.

Not until he had proof.

What then? What if Thorn died without killing Vince Falco?

The answer was simple.

Quaid vowed to kill the bastard himself.

## **Nineteen**

Thorn's vision rippled back into focus. He sucked a painful breath. Every sinew in his body burned and throbbed. His scrotum was jammed against his groin. He swallowed dryly. Cold nausea churned in the pit of his stomach.

Time stopped.

Then it expanded.

Then it deepened.

Suddenly it restarted.

He was lying flat on his back and his limbs were twisted. How long had he been crumpled and unconscious?

Too long.

At least he was still alive.

He felt the oozing warmth of blood on his face where shrapnel had gashed his forehead above one eye. His chest throbbed as if he had been struck with a metal club and it hurt to breathe. He probed with his fingers to find that a twist of shrapnel had plowed a bloody trench along his ribcage.

There was pressure on his chest. Breathing through his open mouth it felt like he might be drowning. His mind dimmed. Icy numbness crept along his spine. He fought the nearly overwhelming urge to shut his eyes and sleep. The eternal slumber of the dead. Instead he gulped air. He wheezed and gasped. He clenched his fists and tried to raise his arms.

Couldn't.

Tried to raise his legs.

Couldn't.

Tried to raise his head.

Couldn't.

Snarling through the pain he remembered a movie hero who had taken a bullet in the chest and shrugged it off. Total bullshit. A false and glamorized depiction of war. If you got shot you grinned and kept firing your machine gun.

In the movies.

But he was not grinning. He knew that unless he stirred himself he would bleed out and die where he had fallen. He might as well be lying in an open grave.

His pulse roared in his ears. His chest heaved. He shifted his limbs with furious effort. His movements became more frantic. He squirmed in the dirt and dug in with elbows and heels. He felt now as if challenged to accomplish the truly impossible.

He had to sit upright.

He fiercely roused himself. With vast effort he shoved himself off the dirt. He lurched erect and wobbled. He almost vomited. His equilibrium leveled. Nausea subsiding.

He breathed deeply. He was encrusted with his blood and the blood of his enemies. His limbs and skull throbbed. His heart thumped like a jackhammer. It threatened to explode.

Under the circumstances even the pain felt good.

It felt like exhilaration.

The glorious exhilaration of survival.

His eyes were narrowed to slits. He scanned 360. He was surrounded by death. Bodies lay everywhere. Men were charred to black husks or shredded grotesquely. The fallen could not challenge him. But his danger was not over. He kept scanning. What new threats hid in the darkness? He was exposed and exposure on the battlefield meant death.

He spun toward a sound.

A hellish roar.

A massive auto engine.

He saw a Lincoln Navigator crashing toward him. He saw its huge SUV tires chewing up the mansion's front lawn. Its driver was closing with lethal determination. The shadow behind its blazing headlights seemed to stretch back forever. Its engine roared louder. The fucker was trying to mow him down.

There was no time to waste and hesitation meant death. Thorn reloaded the SCAR using a special magazine. Now he had thirty M995 NATO armor-piercing cartridges loaded and ready.

He hoped it would be enough.

It had to be.

He had no other cards to play.

The Navigator loomed in front of him. He triggered a burst of M995 autofire into its grille. It lurched to a halt. Its hood burst open and its engine bay spewed roiling smoke.

Thorn pressed his attack with grim ferocity. He fired another M995 burst that emptied the SCAR's magazine.

Steel-core slugs hurtled downrange. Heavy metal thunder echoed as the Navigator's fuel tank erupted. Red flame churned obscenely against the black sky and burning wreckage streaked overhead. Nearby trees caught fire and shriveled into smoldering kindle.

A secondary explosion followed. A Roman Candle of flame shot twenty feet into the air as munitions cooked off. Flames and shrapnel and mangled body parts pelted the ground in a gruesome firerain. A gut-churning stink of burning gasoline and charred human meat fouled the air.

Broiling shockwaves made Thorn grimace and reel backward. He saw a burning scarecrow stagger from the Navigator's blazing hulk. He saw another figure roll away from the inferno. That pitiful figure was engulfed in red-orange flame. High-pitched unearthly screams cut through the night.

Thorn pulled a fresh magazine from his bandoleer and reloaded the SCAR. He aimed and hit the burning men with autofire to end their torment. He would not stand idly and watch enemy soldiers suffer.

He pressed on through the fire-lit shadows. It was a Hadean landscape. It was filled with terror and torment.

He scanned and listened. Combat feelers probing. There was no sign of continued resistance. It was evident his enemies were out of action. Either dead or dying. He pulled the SCAR to his shoulder. He aimed toward the mansion and triggered a series of probing bursts.

There was no answering gunfire.

He moved on. And scowled. He could not be one hundred percent certain that all the enemy troops had been eliminated. Even ninety-nine percent certainty was not good enough. There might be a straggler hiding in the darkness. The man might be weak and wounded. But still capable of shutting him down.

He sped his pace. He knew the surest way to die in combat was to make himself a stationary target. His mind was preoccupied with new danger. He had to worry about police intervention. Although the estate was secluded it was only a matter of time before someone dialed 911. They would jabber to the Law in response to the din of combat. That meant a SWAT team might show up soon and they might shoot Thorn dead if they mistook him for a threat. So he was under time pressure to complete his mission.

He had to nail his primary target.

Which begged a question.

Where was Falco?

There were several possibilities. He might be hiding inside the ruins of the house. But why stay put during an attack? It was also plausible that the mobster had simply killed himself. It was plausible that he preferred death to dishonor.

Plausible.

Yes.



But unlikely.

Thorn's jaw snapped tight as he considered darker prospects. What if Falco had bolted during the firefight? What if he had summoned a rescue team? What if he was organizing a counter-attack?

Several prospects.

All bad.

Thorn narrowed his eyes. He vowed to succeed. There could be no other acceptable outcome. Like the Japanese Samurai—who never left a battle unfinished—Thorn never left an objective incomplete. The Samurai called it Bushido. A strict focus on total victory. No half-measures. It meant channeling his thoughts with the precision of a laser. It meant shutting down every negative impulse and self-doubt. The only thing left to contemplate was the enemy. And the enemy's destruction.

Bushido.

Thorn's Bushido told him to keep hunting until he nailed his prey. It told him to keep moving until he was standing over Falco's dead body. He made a rapid circuit of the mansion. He checked corpses as he passed them. He crouched to examine faces that were still intact. He was trying to verify if Falco was among the dead.

He found nothing to satisfy him.

Dammit!

Where the hell was Falco?

Before he made his next move the sound of a screaming auto engine reached his ears. A Maserati GTS hurtled around the side of the house. He glimpsed LaValle at the wheel and Falco in the shotgun seat. He knew the sleek Maserati was perfect for a swift getaway. Power under the hood with just enough room for the Godfather and his top lieutenant.

It was Falco's emergency ride.

It was his ticket out of harm's way.

The Maserati rocketed forward and its fat performance tires kicked gravel into Thorn's face. He cursed through clenched teeth. He watched the million-dollar sportster surge toward the mansion's open front gate.

His gut pulled tight. Understanding came in a grim rush. He had to intercept now or lose it all. He had to attack with maximum aggression. No half-measures and no acceptance of defeat.

Bushido.

He palmed Black Thunder and locked it in a two-handed grip. He allowed a heartbeat for target acquisition before he squeezed the trigger. The mighty autopistol roared and a .45 Auto slug hurtled downrange. It punched through the Maserati's rump with a sharp crack.

The car fishtailed. Gravel flying. Then it recovered and roared along the driveway.

Escaping.

The possibility of failure hit Thorn like an Arctic chill. He stroked Black Thunder's trigger again and kept both eyes open to assess the shot. He saw another .45 bullet strike the Maserati's rear windshield. He saw the car lurch and swerve. It plunged across the lawn and nosed toward Falco's great stone lion. The Lion of Babylon.

Impact!

A shriek of ruptured metal split the air as the Maserati met solid granite. The car's hood buckled and tore free. The gullwing doors snapped open. The engine died with a metallic screech and hissed gray vapor.

All motion ceased.

Thorn stowed Black Thunder and grasped the SCAR. He slid a Stinger rocket into the rifle's M1 launcher. He locked the breach and primed the trigger. Then he surged toward the crippled Maserati with his weapon up and ready.

At a distance of twenty feet he watched LaValle lurch from the driver seat. He watched the guy stumble and struggle to regain his footing. His bloody left arm was twisted at a sharp angle. A nicked Colt autopistol sprouted from his right fist.

As Thorn approached LaValle spun around. His eyes were narrowed and he was snarling. He swept the Colt up with its muzzle tracking in Thorn's direction. Then he froze with his finger on the Colt's trigger. He stared at Thorn. "Soldiers have rules. You can't shoot a wounded man. It's not permitted. Right?"

"Wrong."

The SCAR exploded. LaValle caught a bullet in the shoulder and two more in the chest. The impact punched him off his feet. He spun like a human corkscrew and crashed against the Maserati's fender. He bounced off the fender with a dull thud. The heavy Colt wobbled and tumbled free. Another SCAR salvo drilled him just above the heart and dumped him on the grass. His eyes glazed over and consciousness faded fast. He wheezed a ragged breath and then he was morto.

Dead.

There was a flash of motion from the Maserati's passenger seat. Falco was scrambling from the wreckage. Amazingly he was intact. He showed no sign of serious injury. His bony fingers grasped a snub-nose .44 Magnum revolver. He took several more steps. Then he stopped in his tracks and spun to face his opponent.

Thorn aimed the SCAR. He was ready to unleash a Stinger rocket. He stared into his opponent's eyes. A withering glare.

Falco blinked. "One man."

"One can be enough," Thorn responded. His voice was stone-cold.

Falco grimaced and sucked a ragged breath. "It doesn't have to end like this. We can make a deal."

"No deal."

Falco slumped. "I understand."

Just that and no more. Nothing more was necessary. The time for talk was over. It all came down to action. The quick draw. Two gunmen facing each other in the kill zone.

Falco sucked another breath. His face was the color of concrete. He took a short step forward. His features twisted into a vicious snarl. He swept his revolver up for a lethal shot.

Thorn dodged sideways as the .44 exploded at a range of ten feet. Its fiery breath singed his temple. He flinched against the shockwave as the Magnum slug roared past his skull. He recovered his balance and pivoted toward his target.

He stroked his trigger finger.

The M1 launcher roared and its muzzle belched flame.

A storm of finned steel darts punched through the fog and struck Falco at 1,000 feet per second. The Godfather's face seemed to distort like something in a funhouse mirror. Then it erupted in a scarlet ruin. Teeth and flesh and a punctured eye were explosively released as Falco's mug dissolved. He dropped like a puppet with the strings cut and crashed to his knees.

Thorn pulled Black Thunder. He sighted down the barrel and squeezed off three rounds in rapid fire. What remained of the Godfather's shattered skull was vaporized on impact. Fragments of brain and bone were atomized into gruesome red-gray mist.

It wasn't overkill.

It was making sure.

The headless horror toppled and shivered once on the ground... then lay stiff.

Something fell from Falco's bloody left hand. A black stone amulet. It glinted in the moonlight.

Ugly.

Ominous.

Thorn lowered his smoking pistol. His primary target was down and torn to bloody shreds. He had crushed a savage responsible for chaos and misery on a massive scale. A monster who had threatened America's future.

He stowed Black Thunder and reloaded the SCAR with its final magazine. He thumbed a brand-new Stinger into the M1's breech. He waited for more enemies to appear. He waited for the bark of hostile guns.

But the night was silent.

As silent as the grave.

He breathed deep to clear his nostrils and purge the stink of gunsmoke. The lethal contest was over and he was alone among the dead. His objectives had been accomplished.

All targets hit and all enemies destroyed.

Clean sweep.

He ran a mental checklist of the key players he had terminated this night.

Zappa.

Ciccione.

Katz.

LaValle.

Falco.

Clean sweep. Hell yes. His goal had been to kill them all and he had succeeded.

He paused. And scowled. He knew all he had won was a tactical victory. A short-term win. So his mission was both a success and a failure. It was a hard fact that Falco would be replaced by someone even worse. The new Godfather would spill rivers of blood to solidify his power. The Mafia had existed for centuries and it would continue to exist. It had met every challenge and fiercely resisted all attacks. It stood tall like a mountain of granite.

It might be scarred and cracked in places.

But it endured.

Thorn's scowl darkened. He imagined the future and saw endless conflict.

Endless warfare.

Bile surged in his throat. A bitter taste in his mouth. He conceded there was no antidote to human evil. No lasting solution for the cruelties and injustices that poisoned the world. The best he could say was that evil could be contained even if it could not be destroyed.

At least he hoped so.

He turned and stalked toward his waiting car.

## Twenty

Pete Quaid coughed harshly. His throat was painfully raw. He cursed. He acknowledged how little he knew in concrete terms about Matt Thorn's progress. Whether he was alive or dead.

Quaid cursed again and clenched his fists. The possibility of failure loomed over him like a black shadow. His father had fought in the Vietnam War. But America had lost that war. Would this war also end in defeat? Would the opposition prevail?

He clenched his fists tighter. A stony moment passed. He felt sudden pain and peered down. He saw that his finger nails had dug into his palms and drawn blood. He pulled a First Aid kit from his desk drawer and wiped his cuts with antiseptic gel.

He pushed up from his office chair. He was near exhaustion. He took several awkward steps and sank face-down onto his cot. His thoughts raced on overdrive.

Thorn.

The Mob.

Epic combat.

He must help!

But how?

Convincing answers eluded him. He tried to think harder. No success. Too tired. He drifted. A steady progression toward sleep. He saw Vince Falco's face in his mind. "Bastard," he murmured. He rolled sideways on his cot and muttered angrily.

Then suddenly he was lifting his head as he was roused by a rapid scuffling sound. Someone was crossing the room. He opened his eyes and saw a figure sitting in his desk chair. The man casually pulled a handgun. A snub-nose .44 Magnum revolver. He broke the cylinder and ejected six cartridges. He rattled them in his hand.

With rising confusion and cold dread Quaid recognized the man in the chair.

Vince Falco.

The Godfather smiled. A reptilian grin. "Well, hello!"

Quaid swung his legs and sat upright on his cot. He grimaced. "What the..."

"Sorry, Colonel. I knocked but you didn't answer. So I let myself in. And there you were. Sleeping like a baby. Too cute!"

Quaid swallowed hard. He felt a sudden harsh chill. He shivered and stiffened. He clenched his fists and forced himself to concentrate. To focus. To think clearly.

He stared at Falco.

Was it really Falco?

Or some impostor?

The man in the chair was breathing rapidly and heavily. A strange rasping.

The room grew colder. Again Quaid shivered. He narrowed his eyes and stared at the man. He studied him and remembered photos in the mission file.

Yes!

It *was* Falco.

Quaid scowled and leaned forward. "How did you find me? How did you get in here?"

No answer. Only the breathing. The eerie rasping. Alien noise from an alien shore.

Quaid clenched his fists tighter. Again his finger nails dug into his flesh. He glared at Falco. "What do you want?"

Falco licked a black lizard-like tongue across thin and bloodless lips. His deep-set eyes gleamed evilly. When at last he spoke his voice was oddly distorted. Weirdly metallic. "I'm bringing a message. From hell. Your wife and son. They're down here, with us." He gave a cruel smirk. "The two of them...oh, it isn't pretty. They're burning. And it's your fault. They're paying for your sins. Understand?"

A sudden harsh ringing of the telephone on Quaid's desk drew a startled glance from Falco. "Must run!" he blurted. "I'll see you in hell. Chao!"

Then the phone was ringing so loudly that Quaid woke and realized he had been dreaming.

A vile nightmare.

He lurched from his cot and grabbed the squawking phone.

## **Twenty-One**

Thorn steered the Challenger along an elegant tree-lined boulevard. He parked and killed the coupe's engine. He had trekked to an ultra-upscale neighborhood. It was located forty-five miles east of NYC's famed Botanical Garden. It was the final stop on his deadly warpath.

The bitter end.

Twenty-four hours had passed since his assault on Falco's mansion. His shrapnel wound had been patched by a combat medic and he was once again ready for action. He sprang Black Thunder and checked its load. A .45 Auto cartridge rode in the chamber plus twelve more in the magazine. A phone call to Pete Quaid had confirmed details of Thorn's final target. He had received authorization to proceed.

A mandate to attack.

He quit the Challenger and got moving. He was concealed by darkness. He wore his Razor goggles. The landscape was lit bright green around him. His objective lay one hundred yards ahead. It was a private estate concealed behind an eight feet

high security wall. His intel told him the wall was rigged with detection gear that barred a direct approach.

That left an indirect approach.

He veered southwest. His movement was swift but stealthy. He entered a murky Willow grove and stopped abruptly.

His instincts quickened.

He knelt to examine an object that shone brightly through the Razors. A taught filament wire glinted in the moonlight. He traced the wire to an electronic motion sensor attached to a tree. The motion sensor contained a spotting flare that would fire if it was tripped. That would alert the estate's defenders to possible intrusion.

Possible danger.

He angled left to evade the device. He was alert for more trip-wires. Still there was a chance he might stumble into a trap. Anxiety made his jaw tighten. But the disciplined core of his mind told him he had a solid chance to prevail.

Thus discipline muted anxiety.

Grim determination urged him forward.

He cleared the Willows and edged toward a lake that bordered the estate. As he approached the lake he saw Long Island Sound in the distance. The dark waters of the Atlantic Ocean beyond. To the north he picked out the city lights of Bridgeport, Connecticut. He imagined that on a clear day the view was stupendous.

But he was not concerned with sightseeing.

His focus was on the estate itself.

And the target within.

He strode along the water's edge toward a private dock. He noted a lavish powerboat and several customized Jet Skis. His intel told him they were registered to the master of the estate. Near the dock an observation tower stood sixty feet tall. That was his destination. He intended to ascend the tower and from that vantage point recon the estate.

A sentry was posted on the dock. He was smoking and gazing at the moonlit water. His weapon was slung tight across his back. That would made quick access in an emergency difficult.

Thorn pulled his Tanto knife and approached the guard from behind.

Somehow the man detected a hostile presence. He spun around. His eyes flared at the sight of an intruder. His face twisted into an expression of shock. An expression of horror. He focused on the intruder's weird goggles and the vicious-looking knife in his fist. He groped for his rifle.

But his opponent was too fast.

Thorn struck his adversary with a numbing blow to the solar plexus and felt the man's breath rush out on impact. Then he thrust the Tanto at the guy's temple and buried its eight-inch blade deep inside his brain. It was sufficient. More than sufficient. The gunner died on his feet with a stunned expression on his face. His eyes rolled back into his skull.

Thorn lowered the body. He wiped his blade on the dead man's shirt and stowed it. Then he turned toward the observation tower.

He climbed the tower's metal steps and reached the topmost platform. He peered at the terrain below. He focused on a lavish manor house complete with a massive garage. He formed a mental note of the layout. If his intel was correct this

was the home of his final adversary. It was the home of the Judas who had betrayed him to La Cosa Nostra.

FBI Special Agent Max Van Damme.

Thorn was amazed that no one had asked how a Federal employee could afford a \$7,000,000 estate. He was shocked that no red flags had been raised. It reeked of major corruption and incompetence within the U.S. government. It reeked of politicians and bureaucrats who could not find their asses with both hands.

Meantime the damage had been done and it was up to Thorn to settle the matter.

In blood.

He quit the tower. His recon was complete. He backtracked toward the Challenger. Minutes later he reached the coupe and retrieved his assault rifle. He peered through the SCAR's AimPoint gunsight at 4X magnification.

He scanned the main approach to the house and noted its barred steel entry gate. Behind the gate several guards stood watch. They were heavily armed and looked ready to repel an attack.

Fair enough. Thorn was prepared to engage his opponents with fire and steel. He thumbed his last Dragon rocket into the M1 launcher and primed the trigger. Then he swung the launcher toward the gate. He braced his elbows on the Challenger's hood and sighted quickly.

His plan was simple. He would blow the gate and crash through in his vehicle. He would plunge bravely into the heart of darkness. The Japanese Samurai had called it Zakku Banzai.

Fearless war charge.

He knew his action would raise an instant Red Alert. But there was no chance for stealthy infiltration. He could never scale the estate's massive wall. And he did not have the technology to defeat advanced surveillance gear. So he would have to shoot his way in. Blast his way in. After that he would fight like hell until he reached his main target.

Zakku Banzai.

Right.

He triggered the Dragon. It streaked forward on a tail of red flame and pulverized the gate in a fiery thunderclap. Charred shrapnel clattered across the ground. The heavy metal din of the rocket's explosion reverberated through the predawn darkness. It echoed across the nearby lake.

He leapt inside the Challenger. He stowed his rifle and pulled Black Thunder. He fired the coupe's engine and hit the accelerator. Then he surged through the shattered gate. No one stopped him. But he would meet resistance. And soon. Unless the checkpoint guards were cowards or completely inept.

Not likely.

Gravel exploded as the Challenger hit the driveway. A bloodied guard stumbled into view. He was shouting and his weapon was dangling uselessly at his side. He had a crazed expression on his face as if he knew Death Itself was crashing toward him.

And it was.

Thorn could have mowed the guy down. But instead he clipped him with the Challenger's fender. The impact spun the man and dumped him on the ground.

Thorn gunned his coupe. It was a hellfire charge toward the house. He noticed a second gate fifty feet downrange. His gut twisted. He had not anticipated a second barrier. But there was no chance to stop and pull a U-turn. His only course was straight ahead. He had to put his faith in raw speed and brute aggression.

His headlights pinned a lone gateman with their dazzling glare. He glimpsed a pistol leveled at his windshield. He hit the Challenger's horn and locked it down. A blaring shriek. Of course the sound by itself could not stop bullets or disable the gunner. But in combination with the blaze of headlights and the roar of the HEMI the guy was taken by storm. He was cringing and faltering as the big coupe rocketed toward him on a doomsday collision course.

Thorn hit his accelerator and braced himself for impact with the gate. Somehow the guard did not have time to open fire or leap for safety. Instead he froze in place as the Challenger's bumper bore down on him. Thorn had a brief image of the guy's pallid face before he was crushed against the gate. Then his torso was mangled into bloody pulp.

The gate buckled on impact. Metal twisted and hinges exploded. Thorn clenched his teeth against a hellish grinding sound. Then the gate fell away and he powered through. He could still see ahead. Two of the coupe's headlights were smashed. But two were still intact and blazing on hi-beam.

He jammed Black Thunder's muzzle through the open driver door window. He braced it across the wing mirror. He was a sentient link between the pistol and the vehicle. He was employing the tactics he had learned when he had cross-trained with the U.S. Secret Service. It was an advanced course on firing a weapon from a moving vehicle.

Directly ahead he saw hostile guards shaken and scattered by the rocket blast. He clamped his trigger finger down. His targets flew back as if yanked by cables. He fired again. Men tumbled like shattered mannequins.

Zakku Banzai.

Right.

He stomped the Challenger's accelerator. He surged forward so violently that he felt his gut press against his spine. He reloaded Black Thunder and clenched his teeth.

He was gathering strength for a final blazing assault.

## **Twenty-Two**

Max Van Damme pressed back in his leather-padded chair and lit his fifth cigarette. Ordinarily the nicotine calmed his nerves.

But tonight it did not help.

Not at all.

He narrowed his eyes and spat a curse. No matter how much he tried to reassure himself he still remained on edge. He was still anxious and expecting trouble.

Expecting disaster.



He had hunkered down inside his walled estate on Long Island. He had already lost eight of his best men in a graveyard gunfight. Now he was hearing reports that Vince Falco had been attacked. That his organization had been thrown into savage chaos.

A tremor ran down Van Damme's spine. He was locked inside his study. It was filled with big-game trophies. Lions and tigers. But nothing thrilled Van Damme more than hunting humans. His connection in Brazil—a major cocaine trafficker—sometimes invited him to the Mato Grosso jungle. There Van Damme's host would organize an exciting trip to hunt forest people... Mundurukus.

Van Damme grinned at the memory. Using a scoped pistol he had dropped five adults and two children in the depths of the jungle. What a rush! After the hunt Van Damme's host would serve refreshing piña colodas. Van Damme wished he could return to Mato Grosso right now to relax and kill a few more dirty savages. It would be a nice diversion from his current troubles in the USA.

Minutes earlier he had finished consulting with his chief of security. The man had looked and sounded tense. Verging on fearful. That was a very bad thing considering his normally ice-cool demeanor. He was a combat veteran. Yet he had been sweating and twitching based on reports about the night's action.

The night's devastation.

A goddamned bloodbath.

There had been a terse discussion of how to secure the estate's perimeter. Arrangements had been made to arm every man with extra weapons. In addition those men had been given strict orders to shoot intruders on sight. No questions and no hesitation.

No mercy.

Somehow none of that made Van Damme feel better. He crushed out his cigarette and lit another. He poured a shot of vodka and gulped it. He wiped his mouth and stared at his desk clock. Anxiety grew inside him as tense minutes ticked away. His instincts warned him that his enemy was fast approaching. It seemed inevitable. The nervy bastard would not drop the fight while he was on a winning streak.

He would not disengage.

He would press on and shoot for the kill.

Van Damme scowled. He had been counting on his enemy to make mistakes. But so far the hostile soldier had been hitting targets with lethal precision. He had ripped his opposition to bloody shreds.

Who was this guy?

Van Damme's scowl darkened. He wondered if Thorn was a hard-wired killing machine. A terminator robot sent on a mission of vengeance. It sounded crazy but the Pentagon was always testing strange new weapons. There were rumors of genetically enhanced super-soldiers bred specifically for combat.

Specifically for killing.

Either way the guy had sown deadly havoc. He had inflicted massive losses on Vince Falco's cartel. And by all reports he had launched a brutal attack on Falco's hideaway in Upstate New York. It seemed the Godfather had perished during the assault.

Grim logic told Van Damme that he was next on the hit list. He could not shake the icy conviction that his operation was about to implode. He had spent long years achieving his present level of success. And now a tenacious enemy was threatening to snatch it all away.

Burn it all to ash.

He cursed again. An aching tension made his temples throb. He nervously lit a fresh cigarette and puffed with vigor. He poured another shot of vodka. He felt a surge of anger and consciously repressed it. He could not afford to lose his cool.

Not now.

He had to control his emotion.

But that did not mean he would dismiss the need for retaliation when the time came. He always got even. Case in point: the loan shark who had challenged him during an early assignment to the Bronx. He had pressured the guy to cough up information about local hoods. But the fat pig had refused to cooperate. So Van Damme had neutralized the guy. More correctly he had ambushed the guy in a back alley. He had blown the slob's head off with a 12-gauge shotgun.

Tough justice.

Right.

There was no official record of the shooting. It was among many unauthorized attacks. So be it. Van Damme knew you had to fight fire with fire. You had to spread the cleansing flame.

Scorched earth and no mistake.

Over the next twenty-two years he had secretly eliminated dozens of criminal adversaries. Meantime he had risen through the ranks of the FBI as he displayed ruthless courage.

Along the way he had connected with Vince Falco. Then his eyes had been opened. He had realized exciting possibilities. He had understood that an alliance with the Godfather could provide riches and luxury. With that in mind it was easy for him to see that a mutually beneficial relationship could be formed.

So a deal was made.

Van Damme would provide timely intelligence about hostile investigations. In exchange large cash payments would be deposited into secret bank accounts. Other favors included gifts of exotic cars and prime real estate. The relationship had proved a huge success with both sides profiting immensely.

Until tonight.

Van Damme was about to pour himself another shot of vodka when he was startled by a hissing roar. It was followed by a crack of thunder in the direction of the front gate.

A rocket blast.

The rocket's hellish concussion was powerful enough to rattle the French windows behind him.

Next he heard men screaming in pain. Screaming in fear. His nostrils flared at a stink of TNT and roasting flesh.

It smelled like devastation.

It smelled like disaster.

For a moment he was paralyzed and his mouth was gaping. His mind went blank. Then harsh reality slapped him in the face and his thoughts came into sharp focus.

He was under attack.

He was being hunted.

He grimaced and leapt from his chair. He tossed his vodka glass and bolted from his study. He was preoccupied with evasion. The cold mechanics of survival. He raced through the house toward the garage and his means of escape. With any luck he might flee before the enemy found him.

Before the world exploded in his face.

## **Twenty-Three**

Thorn gunned the Challenger. HEMI roaring. He braced Black Thunder. In front of him a guard raised his weapon. Black Thunder roared twice. One slug ripped through the man's chest. The second slug drilled his open mouth as he screamed and tumbled backward.

The fallen man's partner sprang into view. He was cursing and hauling a long-barreled Smith & Wesson revolver. It was the fearsome X-Frame. It was chambered in 500 Magnum. It was meant to stop Texas razorbacks and Kodiak grizzlies. He braced the massive silver wheelgun in both hands and tracked his target.

At the same instant Thorn aimed Black Thunder.

The two men locked eyes with their gunsights leveled at each other's faces.

Thorn's reflexes gave him a split-second advantage. He triggered two rapid shots from the mighty autoloader.

The gunman spun like a crazed ballerina and pitched out of sight.

Thorn powered along the estate's driveway. A hellfire charge toward Van Damme's lair. He saw a parked car ahead and saw a pump shotgun explode from the open driver door window. Pellets drummed the Challenger's metalwork.

The guy in the car twisted in his seat. He worked his scattergun to chamber a fresh 12-gauge shell. Then he re-aimed at the Challenger.

Thorn sighted down Black Thunder's slide. He squeezed off twice in rapid succession. A savage double punch. His target jerked and dropped the shotgun. His hands reached to cover the bloody ruin of his face.

Thorn kept rolling and peered ahead. Another gunman crossed his line of sight. He was firing on the move with a blocky autopistol.

Savage fury took over in a heartbeat as Thorn stomped the Challenger's accelerator. He locked the wheel and aimed for the runner. A last second correction and he nailed the guy dead-center. He rolled him up across the hood so his skull smashed against the windshield. The impact cracked the glass and stained it with blood. The stricken man tumbled sideways like a ghastly ragdoll. Then he vanished from sight.

There was ringing silence. Then a screech of metallic thunder pierced Thorn's ears. A wide garage door was opening on the far side of the house. It was powered by electric motors. Next he heard a roaring auto engine.

No.

Scrub that.

This was *not* an auto engine.

It was louder and more powerful.

He listened.

Then he knew.

An aircraft engine.

He saw a small prop plane emerge from the garage. It was a Hawker Arrow and it was painted sky gray. He recognized the pilot from his photo in the mission file.

Max Van Damme.

There was no mistaking that hardset face with its pig nose. The broad slab of black mustache and black hair cut short like a scrub brush.

According to the mission file Van Damme was an avid pilot. He had several hundred hours of solo flying under his belt. Now he was rolling toward his private runway.

And he was smirking.

Thorn watched the Hawker through narrowed eyes. He saw its take-off flaps angle into position.

He drew a sharp breath.

The plane had to be disabled.

But how?

His throat constricted. He had to act swiftly or lose his target. He stomped his accelerator and rocketed toward the runway. He saw the Hawker surge forward and gain take-off power. He gave the Challenger another blast of speed. He was aiming for the bird.

Impact!

The Hawker's starboard wing snapped in half. Its engine disgorged bright cinders. The stricken plane skidded off the runway and settled in a crumpled heap. Worms of flame crawled over the ruptured engine. But there was no major fire. Not yet.

Thorn hit his brakes. Slowing. He circled the plane and stopped near its shattered cockpit. He leapt out of the coupe and saw Van Damme burst free from the wreckage. He was hefting a bulky duffel bag. Amazingly the traitor showed no sign of serious injury as he stumbled ahead.

Thorn reloaded Black Thunder. He stepped forward with his weapon held firm at waist level. He blocked his target's path. "Far enough."

Van Damme's face was a twisted mask of panic. He stared at the massive pistol in Thorn's fist. His eyes flared wide in shock. For a moment he was silent and then he found his nerve. "You can't just take me out."

"I can. I am."

The Judas swallowed hard. He tried a thin smile and gestured the duffel bag. "A cool million. Split fifty-fifty. How about it?"

Thorn's response was instant. "No sale."

Van Damme's grin faded. It was replaced by a frown carved in stone. The sweat on his brow glistened in the firelight. "I need safe passage."

Silence.

Van Damme lifted the bag. A jerky motion. "Take it all, dammit!"

"I told you. No sale."

The night became terribly still. Van Damme gulped air. Throat straining. After a moment of struggle he found his voice. "They'll find you. The Mob, I mean. They'll cut you apart. Payback, for what you've done. You're finished. Dead."

"That's two of us, I guess."

Van Damme swallowed hard.

Thorn stepped forward with Black Thunder ready. Its hammer was cocked and its muzzle was pointed at his target's chest. "One question."

"Which is..."

"Why?"

The traitor spat hard. "Call it simple greed."

Thorn's gaze was stony. He kept Black Thunder locked on target.

Van Damme narrowed his eyes and shifted position. He spread his feet and edged his right hand toward his waist.

It was a classic gunfighter stance and Thorn recognized it instantly.

One heartbeat later Van Damme drew a SIG autopistol from beneath his jacket. It was a slick offensive play and it was almost good enough.

Almost.

Thorn triggered Black Thunder with killing precision. He unleashed five center mass shots before his opponent could aim and fire.

Van Damme hurtled backward. Crimson erupted from a string of ragged blowholes in his chest. The SIG spun from his gun hand. He lost balance and sat hard on the ground. The duffel bag burst open in his lap and the cash spewed. He stared at the money with his mouth gaping. Then he wheezed a ragged breath and slumped forward.

His glassy eyes flickered and locked open.

Then he was gone.

Thorn studied Van Damme's corpse warily as he would a loathsome insect. The dead man's eyes were still open and staring. But at nothing in this world. Nothing here.

Thorn stowed Black Thunder. He knelt in front of Van Damme. He reached out and slid his eyelids down. It was a gesture of simple decency... whether the dead man deserved it or not.

Thorn stood up and turned away. He saw the sky tinted blood-red by the rising sun. To the east beyond the coastline ominous thunderheads were gathering over the Atlantic. A storm was building and it was surging directly toward him.

Like always.

He reached the bullet-scarred Challenger and slid behind the wheel. It was time to put this wicked realm behind him. But he was not heading to any place of safety. Far from it. He was moving toward another kill zone and enemies yet unnamed. He conceded there were no final wins in this savage conflict. No decisive victories.

Only endless combat.

War everlasting.

He put the Challenger in motion. His face was carved in a graveyard scowl. There was only one direction he could travel in. The only direction he had ever known.

Straight ahead.

