

# **Miami Massacre**

**The Executioner - Mafia Wars, #4**

**by Don Pendleton, 1927-1995**

**Published: 1970**



## **Table of Contents**

**Prologue**



**Chapter 1 ...**

**Chapter 2 ...**

**Chapter 3 ...**

**Skirmish in Phoenix.**

**The Screen.**

**The Soft Sweep.**

<b>Chapter 4 ...</b>	<b>Sandbagged.</b>
<b>Chapter 5 ...</b>	<b>Case of Prosecution.</b>
<b>Chapter 6 ...</b>	<b>Council of Kings.</b>
<b>Chapter 7 ...</b>	<b>A Difference.</b>
<b>Chapter 8 ...</b>	<b>Channel Deep and Swift.</b>
<b>Chapter 9 ...</b>	<b>The Exiles.</b>
<b>Chapter 10 ...</b>	<b>El Matador.</b>
<b>Chapter 11 ...</b>	<b>A Matter for Competition.</b>
<b>Chapter 12 ...</b>	<b>The Soldados.</b>
<b>Chapter 13 ...</b>	<b>And Gone!</b>
<b>Chapter 14 ...</b>	<b>Of Death Traps.</b>
<b>Chapter 15 ...</b>	<b>Requiem for a Soldada.</b>
<b>Chapter 16 ...</b>	<b>Bolan's Battleground.</b>
<b>Chapter 17 ...</b>	<b>Holideath Inn.</b>
<b>Chapter 18 ...</b>	<b>Living Large.</b>
<b>Epilogue</b>	



*Many commit the same crime  
with a very different result.  
One bears a cross for his  
crime; another a crown.*  
—Juvenal

*I am unjust, but I can strive for justice.  
My life's unkind, but I can vote for kindness.  
I, the unloving, say life should be lovely.  
I, that am blind, cry out against my blindness.*  
—Vachel Lindsay

*I know that what I do is wrong, but my reasons for doing it are right.  
I hate blood and killing, but I hate the Mafia cancer even more.*  
—Mack Bolan, The Executioner

## **Prologue**

Trained by his government to kill methodically and selectively, Sgt. Mack Bolan became a death machine during two consecutive tours of combat duty in Vietnam. An expert sniper, Bolan's specialty involved deep penetration of enemy territory with specific objectives marked for each mission—North Vietnamese field commanders, Viet Cong leaders, important defectors, etc. So successful was the young sergeant in this highly personal brand of warfare that he became known as The Executioner, feared by the enemy, regarded with awe and admiration by his own comrades and superiors.

Toward the close of his second combat tour in Vietnam, Bolan was sent home to bury his own family—mother, father, and teenage sister—who themselves had died by the gun. Police records showed that the elder Bolan, a steelworker, had gone berserk and murdered his wife and daughter, then turned his gun on himself. Mack Bolan, however, became convinced that a sinister underworld design was actually responsible for his family's deaths; it also appeared to Bolan that the police were powerless to act against this "home-front enemy," known variously as The Mafia and La Cosa Nostra.

Executioner Bolan decamped from the Vietnam theater and declared a one-man holy war against "the greater enemy," bringing his jungle-warfare concepts into the American civil community. Noting that the legal authorities were being hamstrung and largely neutralized by underworld manipulation of constitutional rights and judicial processes, Bolan "disqualified" the Mafia from these protections and applied the rules of international warfare to his personal challenge of the powerful crime combine. His plan was simple: seek and destroy the enemy. The execution of this plan was not so simple. Bolan saw it as:

1. *Penetration!*
2. *Target Identification and Confirmation!*
3. *DESTRUCTION!*

In a series of daring strikes originating in his home town, Sgt. Bolan put his battle plan to the test in challenging the awesome might of the Sergio Frenchi Family. His lightning tactics and contempt of death resulted in the virtual extinction of that Mafia arm and set up reverberations throughout the syndicate.

Bolan was himself operating outside the law, and though many lawmen were sympathetic to his cause, he quickly became one of the most wanted "criminals" in America. He was also marked for death by the most powerful and pervasive criminal organization in existence, with a \$100,000 price tag on his death certificate. Sought by virtually every law enforcement agency in the nation and hounded by murder contractors and a horde of underworld bounty hunters, Mack Bolan turned up in Los Angeles where he quickly formed a "death squad" of former Vietnam buddies. The Executioner was not retreating; he was attacking to the rear, as the Mafia family of Julian DiGeorge, Southern California *Capo*, immediately learned. Bolan and his highly skilled band of Vietnam heroes came to grief in Los Angeles, however, thanks largely to Detective Captain Tim Braddock and his special "get Bolan" detail. Seven of Bolan's squad fell to the Mafia guns

and the other two were apprehended by the police, but not before the DiGeorge Family had suffered grievous wounds which would prove to be fatal.

DiGeorge himself escaped The Executioner's wrath, however, and went into seclusion at a secret Palm Springs retreat, regrouping his shattered forces with an all-consuming determination to "once and for all smash this bastard Bolan!"

Mack Bolan now knew with a grim certainty that he was running out his last bloody mile of life. With the full resources of the Los Angeles Police Department geared to his apprehension and an enraged criminal "invisible second government" vowing his extinction, he sought refuge in the professional abilities of another former Vietnam friend, plastic surgeon Jim Brantzen. Brantzen gave Bolan a new face and a new lease on life, but Bolan refused to pick up the option on that lease. His new face opened a new identity and a new set of tactics for his one-man war on the Mafia, and he infiltrated the DiGeorge Family as Franky (Lucky) Lambretta, triggerman and almost heir-apparent to DiGeorge himself. This gambit ended in the complete disintegration of another Mafia arm, and at least one federal agency was beginning to see Mack Bolan as perhaps a godsent answer to the spreading menace of syndicated crime.

There was little comfort in all this for Bolan himself, however. The influence and power of *La Cosa Nostra* was still on his head every day he lived increased the odds against his living another day. His new face was now well known by the police and the underworld alike. Every step he took was echoed by the sounds of pursuing feet, every place he touched down was quickly jarred by a determined pouncing by the hounds of hell, and every hand stretched out to him in friendship was immediately severed by the forces arrayed against him.

There was nothing left for Mack Bolan but unending warfare. He had no illusions regarding the ultimate outcome. One man could not forever persevere against infinite odds. Mack Bolan, however, did not waste much time in contemplating his own death. He merely acknowledged that he was travelling his last bloody mile, and he was not conceding a single step to the enemy. Mack Bolan's war with the Mafia was to the death.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Skirmish in Phoenix.**

Mack Bolan waited until the last possible moment, then viciously swung the wheel and powered into a screaming turn, his attention evenly divided between the isolated desert road ahead and the receding images in his rearview mirror. A heavy car braked into the intersection behind, swinging broadside and overshooting the turn to careen into the shallow ditch at the side of the road. The pursuing vehicle quickly regained the blacktop and the twin headlights once again began crowding Bolan's mirror. Bolan smiled grimly and pushed his accelerator pedal into the floorboard, then removed a Luger from concealment, thumbed off the safety, and

placed the weapon on the seat beside him, fully aware now that he had tarried too long in Phoenix.

The shadowy outlines of an industrial park loomed above the desert horizon. Bolan's mind leaped ahead to the implications thus presented; the road very probably terminated in that cluster of buildings. If so, he could only hope that the complex was unfenced—otherwise, he was trapped on a dead-end road to an executioner's hell. Almost too late, at 95 miles per hour, he flashed past the warning sign and saw the light-reflectors on the heavy chainlink gate just ahead. His mind still racing furiously forward, Bolan hit his brakes and his headlights at the same instant and fought the little car to a fishtailing halt, coming to a broadside rest just inches from the barrier. Then he immediately backed off onto the powdery soil, halting again well away from the blacktop. He left the engine running and jumped out, Luger in hand, and ran to the gate. The chase car's headlights were spotting the road less than a hundred yards distant when Bolan finished smashing the gate reflectors with the butt of the Luger.

Seconds later, Bolan was back alongside his vehicle and leaning in with one hand on the headlamp switch. The heavy car of his pursuers was eating the roadway in smooth gulps when it passed the warning sign, then seemed to falter momentarily halfway to the gate before nosing down in a squealing spasm of locked brakes. Obviously aware that the sliding vehicle could not be halted in time, the driver made a last minute effort to turn away from the impact. The big car slammed into the fence broadside, sheared a steel post, teetered into a sideways roll, then was shudderingly righted and flung back by the tensile strength of the heavy fencing. Both doors on the side nearest Bolan were popped open by the buckling contraction, and a man was flung from the rear seat to flop out onto the roadway.

Bolan had switched on his headlights, catching the other car in their full glare, and was running into the collision scene, his Luger up and ready, even before the car finally settled. A big man with a bloodied face staggered out of the front of the wrecked vehicle and stared dazedly into Bolan's headlights, then raised a pistol into view and wheeled drunkenly toward cover. The Luger roared and dropped him on his second step, and Bolan was already moving swiftly to the other side, firing on the run at the two men still inside.

The horn began sounding, grotesquely perpetuating the noisy invasion of the desert stillness. Bolan moved cautiously into the close inspection. The man in the rear seat had taken a bullet through the throat; a .45 automatic lay on the seat beside him, a sawed-off shotgun on the floor. The driver had an obviously broken neck, in addition to a bullet in the shoulder. The man who had been ejected by the collision was groaning feebly through blood-flecked lips. The first of the group to taste Bolan's lead was dead with a bullet through the heart.

A vehicle with a blue beacon flashing from its roof was approaching from inside the industrial complex. Bolan snatched the registration display from the wrecked car and quickly returned to his own vehicle. He extinguished his lights and made a rapid departure, switching them on again just before reaching the highway junction. He paused there to examine the registry paper he had removed from the wrecked vehicle, then growled deep in his throat as cool anger began to replace survivalist excitement. The car was registered to John J. Portocci; the address

shown was in a Phoenix suburb. Bolan recognized the name. Johnny (the Musician) Portocci was the underboss of a Phoenix-based Mafia family.

If Bolan had learned any full-dimensional truth in Vietnam, it was that an aggressor holds all the aces when the defense is limited to purely reaction and containment. Bolan had been in a reaction-only posture for two full weeks, ever since the close of the Palm Springs battle with the DiGeorge Family. He was tired of “reacting”—and the truth was growing on him that his only way out of Arizona probably lay in a power sweep right through the middle.

Now that the shooting had started, the Arizona Troopers would undoubtedly be getting into the act. Roadblocks, in a sparsely-inhabited state such as Arizona, could be a powerfully effective device.

Bolan weighed the registration slip on an index finger, gazed longingly toward the east, then sighed resignedly and turned back west toward Phoenix. A long-forgotten item of information tugged at his brain lobes, something he had read once in a study of ancient history. The phoenix was the fire-bird of Egyptian mythology, the symbol of regeneration or resurrection. Bolan grinned to himself and sent the little speedster hurtling along the backtrack to the city.

The two-story residence of Johnny the Musician was in Mediterranean villa style and set back about fifty yards from the road. The neighborhood was one of the best in the area, a settlement of curving roads, circular drives, and executive homes. Bolan idly wondered if Portocci had been accepted by the country-club set, as he cruised past in an inspection of the Mafia boss’s mansion. Several vehicles occupied the circular drive at the front of the house. A limousine was parked outside the attached garage which was linked to the rear of the house by a short breezeway; extra living quarters were above the garage. A single floodlight illuminated the front area and light spilled through several ground-floor windows.

The upper story of the house and the garage-apartment were darkened. Two men in the front drive leaned against the fender of a car in the full glare of the floodlight. Bolan went on by, turned onto the next intersecting street, and parked. The neighborhood was quiet and dark. Bolan removed his suit coat, pulled a black, tight-fitting jumpsuit from the rear seat, and stepped out onto the street to get into it. Next he buckled on a web belt with a flap holster, affixed a silencer to the muzzle of the Luger, re-loaded, and checked his spare clips. Then he changed into lightweight, crepe-soled “cat shoes” and melted into the darkness. Moments later The Executioner dropped lightly over a low stone wall at the rear of the Portocci property and stepped silently into the shadow of a wooden-slatted windbreak, beyond which lay an oval swimming pool.

The pool was dry and showed signs of neglect. A man, fully clothed, sat at the end of a low diving board, his feet dangling in the air, head thrown back, obviously star-gazing. Bolan watched the man for a full minute, noting the shadowy outline of an object lying across the man’s lap and deciding his best move. The decision made, Bolan scooped up a piece of rotted wood which had fallen from the windbreak and sailed it into the shadows of a patio at the far side of the pool. It hit with a soft clatter and slid along for several feet.

The man on the diving board reacted instantly, coming to both knees and peering awkwardly toward the sound of the disturbance, precariously off balance as he swivelled and swung a short shotgun at chest level. Bolan stepped into the

open, some twenty feet from the man's position, weapon at arm's length, and said, "Hey!"

The guard jerked about with a startled grunt, trying to bring the shotgun around with him. The Luger bucked in Bolan's hand and reported with a dull phut through the silencer. The guard's head snapped back grotesquely, and man and gun continued the pirouette into thin air and disappeared from Bolan's view. The shotgun clattered as it struck the cement bottom of the pool and skittered noisily along the incline. Bolan was already streaking across the open area around the end of the pool. He made the shadows of the garage just as another man leaned over the railing of the porch from the upstairs apartment and called out, "Al? Al! What is it?"

Bolan's Luger whispered again and another body abruptly took to the air, impacting almost at Bolan's feet. His progress unchecked, Bolan went on to the stairway and quickly ascended to the porch, then stepped off onto the roof of the breezeway and crossed to a flat overhang of the roof of the main house. The second window he came to stood invitingly open. Bolan entered, and found himself in an alcove of an upstairs hallway, dimly illuminated by a small nightlight in the baseboard. He began a methodical search of the upper story, found two darkened and obviously unused bedrooms with doors ajar, a third with male clothing scattered about but also unoccupied, and a large bath which smelled faintly of disinfectant. A door at the end of the hall was showing a sliver of light at the bottom.

Bolan had to move past the stairwell to reach the end room. Men's voices floated up as he passed, mixed with the sounds of a television late movie. He went on to the closed door and pressed an ear against it. Agitated voices, muffled in excitement, were coming through. A man's and a woman's. Bed sounds. Bolan frowned, hesitated, then tried the doorknob. The door was locked. He moved cautiously to the nearest open bedroom and exited onto the roof through a window, then made his way back to the corner of the end bedroom. It was at the front of the house. Kneeling on the flat overhang, Bolan could see the two outside men in the front drive, still leaning against the automobile and conversing in low tones, backs to the house.

Bolan inched along to the window. It was open, but the drapes were closed, allowing only a muted spillage of light although hardly muffling the impassioned voices on the other side. Bolan surmised that the bed was positioned directly beyond the window. A woman's breathlessly urgent tones implored, "God, Freddie, hurry—hurry up—come on, huh!"

Bolan's scowl deepened. He had hoped to find Johnny Portocci in that bedroom. A playful male voice was replying, "Hurry and do what? How d'you know I'm not just gonna get up, get dressed, and walk outta here and leave you like that? Eh?"

"God, don't tease me, Freddie," the woman was saying as Bolan stepped into the room. She lay crosswise on the bed, a beautifully proportioned blond—late twenties, Bolan guessed—flat on her back and fighting for a scissors-lock on the nude man who knelt on the edge of the bed.

The blond, also totally unclothed, did not see Bolan immediately; the man did, facing him head-on across the bed. His face went momentarily blank as his eyes lingered on the big silencer-tipped Luger in Bolan's hand, then he flipped back in a

panicky reaction. Failing to understand his reason for the sudden move toward disinvolvement, the blond lunged after him and wrapped him up with both legs about the waist. He dragged her off the bed with him in a futile attempt to reach a gun belt which was draped across a nearby chair. The Luger phutted a bullet into his ear, and he hit the floor with the blond still in tow. She stared at him stupidly for a moment then made a sick face and lifted stunned eyes to Bolan, apparently noticing his presence for the first time.

She quickly disentangled from the dead, shuddering, and declared, "God, you sh-shot 'im."

Bolan pulled her to her feet gently pushed her toward the bed. She grabbed a pillow and held it in front of her and began talking in a sudden rush of words. "That big ape was trying to rape me. I told 'im Johnny would kill 'im for this. I told 'im Johnny always had somebody watching. God, he was trying to rape me!"

Bolan was busily shaking down the room. "Yeah, I could see you were putting up a hell of a fight," he told her.

"Well h-he threatened me. Said he'd shoot off my nipples if I didn't play ball."

"Yeah," Bolan replied. He was going through the dead man's clothes. "Where's Portocci?" he asked, fixing the girl with a baleful gaze.

She laughed in near-hysteria and said, "God, he don't check in and out with *me*. Look, you don't have to tell 'im about this—I mean, about me 'n Freddie. When he gets back, we can tell 'im—"

Bolan had crossed to the girl. She fell back onto the bed, retreating from the ominous advance, eyes on the Luger. The pillow fell away. She raised arms and knees in one supplicating motion and gurgled, "God, give me a break. I can make you glad you did."

Bolan grabbed an outstretched hand and jerked her to her feet, then pushed her towards the door. "Downstairs," he muttered.

She planted her feet at the door and looked back over a soft shoulder at him. "Like this?" she asked weakly.

"That's right," Bolan growled. "You walk straight through the hall and down the stairs, and don't you say a word, not one word."

"Wh-what do you want me to do?" she asked dully.

"I just told you. I'll be watching from up here, so don't get cute."

The blond opened the door, then turned back to Bolan in obvious confusion. "But Ralph and his boys are down there," she protested. "Shouldn't I put something on first?"

Bolan placed a hand between her shoulder blades and gently shoved her on out the door. "Just do what I told you to do."

"Johnny'll kill you when he finds out what you did to me."

"And when will he do that?"

"Soon as he gets back from this trip."

"What trip?"

The blond swivelled about and regarded Bolan with a curious stare. "Say... who *are* you?"

"I'm Mack Bolan."

The girl's eyes flared wide. She wet her lips nervously with her tongue, said, "Well I'll be," and went on toward the staircase in a wooden walk. She threw a final



look over her shoulder, smiled archly and, seemingly finding something perversely comforting in the sudden twist of circumstances, began humming lightly and swinging her hips in a provocatively swaying descent of the staircase. As soon as her head dropped from sight, Bolan trotted back along the hallway to the bedroom, stepped across the lifeless body, extinguished the bedlamp, and moved to the open window.

When he heard the girl's shrill voice proclaiming the presence of "a nut, upstairs," and the ensuing bedlam, he stepped quickly out the window and dropped to the ground. The two front men were staring curiously toward the house when Bolan touched down directly in front of them. One of them reacted immediately, clawing toward a shoulder-holster. He took Bolan's first muffled shot squarely between the eyes and fell over backwards without a sound. The other man was sprinting toward the rear of the car and jerking to free a revolver from a holster on his hip; Bolan's second shot tore into the back of his head and sent him sprawling face down on the driveway.

Bolan added a fresh clip of ammo to the Luger as he ran for the front entrance to the house. The door was locked. He seized an iron lawn chair and heaved it through the picture-window, following closely with his own diving body. The blond stood at a far wall, gawking at him. A pair of feet hesitated on the stairway, then hastily descended. A heavy man, big pistol in hand, bent low to peer back into the living room, grunted an exclamation, and quickly swung in against the railing for firing position. Bolan got there first, however, firing from the prone position with three rapid shots up the stairwell. The heavy body jerked and sagged as two more men charged down, became entangled in the crumpled body, and slid the remainder of the descent with guns roaring wildly.

Bolan had regained his feet and was whirling to the attack, the Luger phutting unnoticeably against the louder concert of exploding weapons. The firefight was brief, and ended with a tangle of bodies at the bottom of the stairs. Bolan was inspecting them with a probing foot when a fourth man appeared at the top railing and sent a new volley spraying down. Bolan fired twice. The man fell back with a moan and his pistol crashed onto the floor below.

The blond woman, still nude, had sunk to her knees and was trembling violently. Bolan crossed to her, knelt and gripped her shoulder. He clamped down hard with the hand and said, "About that trip... where is Portocci?"

"G-god I d-don't know," she stammered. "I th-think I'm sick. Yeah I am, I'm sick."

Bolan moved the heat of the Luger close to her glowing flesh and said, "I can make you a lot sicker, doll. I want some words about Portocci."

"I told you, I don't know," the girl moaned. "Flying. He's flying somewhere. Some meeting. I don't know."

"Private plane?"

"Huh?"

"How's he flying? Does he have his own plane?"

"Naw, he had reservations, that's all I know. God, I'm sick, mister, I'm sick. Let me get out of here, huh?"

"In a minute—if I get the right words. Are you Johnny Portocci's woman?"

The girl grimaced ruefully. "Yeah, I guess—one of 'em. I got some clothes upstairs. Please let me—"

"You recognized my name a while ago when I mentioned it. How?"

She laughed shrilly. "God, I ain't heard nothing *but* for weeks."

"But you've heard it very recently," Bolan persisted. "Tonight. Right?"

The girl miserably nodded her head. "A guy called in awhile ago, some restaurant, some truck stop, out east of town. Said you was eating in his joint. Freddie sent a car to check it out."

Bolan nodded. "And just who is Freddie?"

"He works for Johnny Musician. Fred Apostini. He's dead, you killed 'im. And all his boys. You killed 'em all." A crafty thought reflected in her face. "But there's a car-full out looking for you right now. You better get outta here."

"They found me," Bolan told her. "They won't be coming back."

She crumpled again, under that news. "God, you killed them all then. Look, I'm not no moll. Johnny Musician keeps me around for kicks, that's all. Let me go, huh?"

"I want the rest of them first," Bolan said, carefully measuring the amount of strain the girl could bear.

"God, there ain't any left! I told you! They all went off with Johnny. God, you killed all the rest o'them!"

"If I find out you've lied to me," Bolan said ominously, "I'll be looking you up, doll."

"I ain't lying! Please, mister. I got my clothes upstairs. Let me get out of here, huh? Before the cops come?"

Bolan was satisfied. He said, "Sure," patted her shoulder, and made his exit through the shattered window. He circled to the rear and went back the way he had come, over the back wall and across the adjacent property to the side street. Houselights were coming on up and down the street. A man stepped out on his porch and curiously watched Bolan as he stripped off the black jumpsuit and got into his car.

Ten minutes and several miles later, Bolan stepped out of a public telephone booth, his face dark with speculation. The airline reservations clerk had most helpfully given him some food for thought. "Mr Portocci and party" had departed Phoenix earlier that evening on a flight to Miami. This information, in itself, held very little interest for The Executioner. Added, however, to several other items of intelligence he had accumulated on his trek of the past few days—and with the blond woman's disclosure; "He's flying somewhere—some meeting..."—a picture was beginning to form in Bolan's inquisitive mind, an image of palm trees and bikinis and a swank playground onto which were descending top-goncho *Mafiosi* from various family trees—and Mack Bolan was beginning to smell an Appalachian style summit conference.

As he stood beside his car, pondering the possible implications of his suspicions, a police car screamed by a block away, followed closely by an ambulance. Another siren could be heard in the distance. Bolan smiled and climbed into his car. The time had come for The Executioner to take leave of the desert scene. Miami, he was thinking, should be entirely pleasant at this time of year. If he could line up a quiet air charter, he reflected, he could even get there in

time for the hunting season—and, if his suspicions were correct, the Florida playground would be teeming with big game.

Bolan turned his car around and headed it toward the airport. He had tried to smash up the middle in Phoenix and it had proved at least momentarily successful. Perhaps he could smash with equal success right through the middle of the Mafia ruling council. Discovering that he was breathing very shallow, he chuckled to himself and tried to relax. What did he have to lose? Just his own life—and he would undoubtedly be losing that sooner or later anyway. What did he have to *gain*? Bolan chuckled again. This one would be for all the marbles. He found himself relaxing. He knew now how the VC suicide troops felt when they swept into a government stronghold. A walking dead man has everything to gain and nothing, absolutely nothing, to lose. Bolan understood this.

“Lookout, Miami,” he said aloud, “I’m sweeping in.”

## Chapter 2

### The Screen.

Johnny (The Musician) Portocci, at 39, had everything going for him. Handsome, virile, educated, an instinctive and aggressive businessman—these attributes alone would have assured him some success in life. Add to all this the power, the wealth, and the influence of the organization, and Johnny simply could see no way to lose. He actually had been a musician once, and had financed two years of college through occasional stands at recording studios, dance halls, and night clubs in the Los Angeles area, filling temporary openings in musical groups, bands, and even an occasional symphonic orchestra. He had played in the Hollywood Bowl, and once with a nationally televised band. Johnny thought of this period, however, as “the bad old days.” Often he had gone to bed hungry, attended classes while giddy with malnutrition and groggy from lack of sleep, and had slept under the stars during frequent periods when he was locked out of his rooming house for non-payment of rent.

“That’s what you call being honest, dumb, and poor,” Johnny would say, when relating the story. “I wouldn’t have stolen a nickel from Rockefeller and I couldn’t have conned anybody, not even that old bag of a landlady.”

Johnny’s “education” improved dramatically toward the end of his second college year. He did not learn to steal, not immediately, but he did learn to “con,” and he was doing so well by the end of that summer that he decided to not return to classes that fall. He never returned.

Johnny the Musician had become a runner for a numbers operation in East Los Angeles. At that time Ciro Lavaretta had been an underboss in the DiGeorge Family. Johnny was “running” for one of Lavaretta’s lieutenants, “Sunset Sam” Cavallente. Cavallente had been an “old-days” acquaintance of Johnny’s father, long dead. During his Cavallente days, Johnny Portocci had enjoyed employee status only—that is, he worked for a salary and had no access to family rank and rights.

During one particularly hairy episode with the Los Angeles police, Johnny came under the direct notice of Ciro Lavangetta who was impressed by the youngster's poise and "manners." A short while later, Lavangetta sponsored Johnny for full-fledged status in the DiGeorge Family. When Lavangetta moved into the Arizona territory some years later, setting up his own little empire there, he took Johnny Portocci along as a ranking member of his administration.

Ciro had plans in which Johnny could prominently figure. He meant to take over the music business in Arizona, all of it—jukes, record distribution, live entertainment, unions, everything. He very nearly succeeded, thanks largely to Johnny's efforts, but the prize was found unworthy of the labor. Arizona was not that big on entertainment. The big thing, at that time, was construction, labor relations, and land manipulation—and Johnny the Musician became the genius and the power behind a multi-million dollar operation that exacted a heavy tribute for the peaceful progress of Arizona's land boom of the fifties and sixties.

And he became an underboss to Ciro Lavangetta. Some friction developed between the two, due perhaps to the *Capo's* uneasiness over Johnny's ambitious nature. Portocci was relieved of the land office responsibilities and was moved in to manage Ciro's narcotics operation. He also began independently building a call girl service. Ciro promptly slapped him away from the girl operation, suggesting that Johnny should learn a lesson from the fact that alcoholics never run bars, and also suggesting that perhaps Johnny himself would do better in the bar business. So Johnny the Musician quietly bought into outlets for illegal whiskey, and later added mobile casinos to the circuit. This turned out to be his largest blessing; the entertainment business was finally beginning to come of age in Arizona, and Johnny was in on the ground floor of the swell. He added two dude ranches and a large resort hotel to his holdings, surreptitiously adding "girls" to the latter, capturing a large share of Arizona's convention trade.

Yes, Johnny the Musician had everything going for him. Some day he would no doubt succeed Ciro as *Capo* of the Arizona empire; one day there would be a Portocci Family. Johnny could wait, and grow wealthier and more powerful in the process. He had it made.

Except for one unpleasant development. Mack Bolan. The wise-guy had been running amuk throughout the southwestern territories, piece by piece destroying and looting the finest moneytree west of Chicago. In just two weeks he had knocked over three money-drops and half a dozen distributors of Johnny's lucrative narcotics operation. In one hit alone the guy had walked off with 60 thou of hard-gotten gains, and the entire Lavangetta Family had begun to rock from the reverberations of the bastard's raids. They'd had to shut down the entire business and lay low, waiting for a chance to trap the illusive smartass, with each day of idleness reflected in mounting thousands of dollars in lost income. And, if that wasn't enough, now the old men had decided that everyone should go to Miami and talk about it. *Talk!* While this guy was tearing 'em apart! And stealing their money and then using it against them! Johnny the Musician could not think of Mack Bolan without experiencing a revulsion approaching nausea.

And so it was with considerable displeasure that Johnny received "the news from Arizona" shortly after stepping off the plane at Miami International. Vin Balderone, Ciro's representative in the open city of Miami Beach, quietly reported,

“That Bolan bastard hit your place a little while ago, Johnny, and just tore hell out of everything.”

Portocci marched woodenly on toward the cars as though he had not heard. Balderone added, “Freddie the Swinger is dead, so’s Ralph Apples, Toadie Pangini, and all your soldiers. Did you hear me? He got ‘em all.”

Salvadore Di Carlo, another Lavangetta underboss headquartered at Tucson, cleared his throat nervously and curled his fingers into the sleeve of Balderone’s coat. “Any action down in my territory?” he inquired.

Balderone shook his head, “Not that we heard, Sal.” He glanced about for a quick check of the faces in the Arizona delegation. “Who’d you leave the store with? Marty?”

“Yeah,” Di Carlo growled. “I’m gonna call.” He split off from the main group and walked rapidly toward a line of telephone booths.

Portocci did not speak until the party reached the vehicles, then he turned to Balderone and said, “Does Ciro know?”

“Sure he knows,” Balderone replied. “He’s the one told me.”

“What’d he have to say?”

“He said he was glad you got out when you did. He also said he wonders if you left a trail outta Phoenix.”

“Yeah, I left a trail,” the musician muttered. “A condensation trail, at thirty thousand feet.”

“Huh?”

Portocci grimaced impatiently and said, “Where’s Ciro?”

“He’s out at the joint. He says you should go straight to the Sandbank and stay there until he calls.”

“Grapeshit. What kind of a dump is this Sandbank?”

“It’s okay, Johnny,” Balderone replied nervously. “Nice place, right on the beach.”

Portocci was scowling. “Why can’t we go out to the joint?”

“The bosses say no more Appalachians, Johnny. We’re not mobbing up down here. Guys are scattered all around. They’re setting up a schedule for the meetings and we’ll have some parties, don’t worry about that, but we ain’t living together. I mean, we ain’t setting up for no bust down here, like at Appalachian.”

Portocci soberly nodded his head in understanding. “So why’d we have to come in the first place, eh?” he asked sourly.

“Christ, Johnny, you know how things have been going. The bosses are plenty nervous. We’re getting busted everywhere. They even got Sammy—”

“I know about Sammy and his big damn mouth!” Portocci interrupted. “So did he make it for the meet?”

“Sure!” Balderone scoffed. “You don’t think a little bust like that is going to put down Sam the—”

“So the *Commissione* is in full session. So now you tell me, Vin—is there any reason why the rest of us have to come down here and lay out in a crummy fleabag motel? I don’t like this slinking around bit, Vin, and Ciro knows that. Listen. You get back inside there and give him a call. Tell Ciro that Johnny Portocci is going back to Phoenix. I got too much to lose back there to—”

“Hell no, I’m not doing that, Johnny,” Balderone protested. “Don’t drag me in the middle of you and Ciro.”

Portocci seemed to be pondering the idea. “You think he wouldn’t like it, eh?”

“You know damn well he wouldn’t like it. All the other bosses got their administrations here with ’em. That would be embarrassing to Ciro, if you up and took a walk on ’im.”

“Is that the way it would look, Vin? Like I was taking a walk?”

“That’s the way it would look to me, Johnny. Ciro too. I know him and so do you.”

“What would *you* do, Vin, if some wild man had just shot up your *palazzo*?”

Balderone frowned and shrugged his shoulders. “Like Ciro, I’d figure that wild man was long gone from Phoenix by now, Johnny. You can’t use that as an excuse to go back. The bosses are already taking steps about Bolan, don’t worry. They figure he maybe will track you here.”

Portocci screwed his face into a thoughtful scowl and quietly watched the approach of Salvatore Di Carlo, who was then descending the steps to the vehicle area. The other members of the party stood about in a strained silence.

Balderone tried again. “Go on out to the Sandbank, Johnny. Ciro will get in touch with you there. That’s *instructions*, Johnny—and, hell, you know not from me.”

“What’re you going to be doing, Vin?” Portocci asked in a quiet drawl.

“I’m... we... the bosses want a screen at every airport. I’m in charge of this one.”

“You mean you got soldiers crawling all over this place, that’s what you mean, huh. I spotted some, so don’t tell me different. You’ve got something on this Bolan and you’re just waiting for him to show, huh.”

Balderone licked his lips and studied Portocci with reproachful eyes. “Don’t you go telling Ciro I told you that,” he said angrily. “He don’t want you in this, Johnny. He wants you at the Sandbank.”

“That’s what I figured,” Portocci said, his voice sullen. “He wants me covered up in a fleabag while somebody else does my work. I don’t like that, Vin. You know I don’t like that at all. It turns my guts over.”

Di Carlo rejoined them at that moment. He asked, “What turns your guts over? This Bolan? Hey, he hasn’t made any tracks around *my* territory.”

“Course not,” Portocci growled. “He’s coming here. Everybody seems to know that but you and me, Sal.”

“Now look, Johnny,” Balderone put in anxiously. “We’re using all local talent for this job. The bosses don’t want no tie-back to a national convention here. Anyway, we don’t *know* he’ll show up. We’re just getting ready, just in case. Why should you spend the whole night just standing around here, huh? Hell, you’re too big a man for stake-out jobs. These local boys ain’t got nothing better to do than—”

“I don’t know how good your local talent is, Vin,” Portocci said musingly. “I mean, a lot of people come through this airport, right? How’re they going to spot this Bolan, huh?”

“Hell, we got those sketches, Johnny. We all know what he looks like.”

“Naw, you don’t, Vin, you don’t know what this boy looks like. Nobody knows what this boy looks like for sure, ’cept maybe a bunch of dead men. It’s got to be a thing of instinct, Vin, spotting this Bolan. And I’m not so sure of local instincts.”

“Look, you let us worry about that. And you worry about *Ciro Lavangetta*, or you better. He says you go to the Sandbank. I think you better be at the Sandbank when he calls, eh. You know what I mean, Johnny?”

“Don’t get flip with me, *Miami Vino*.”

Balderone colored furiously. “This ain’t *Miami Vino* talking, Johnny. This is *Ciro* talking, and the words say that *Mr. Portocci* checks in at the Sandbank in *Miami Beach*. Now of course I can go back in there to a telephone and tell *Mr. Lavangetta* that *Mr. Portocci* says to go to—”

Johnny the Musician interrupted the angry speech with a loud laugh. He opened the door of the lead vehicle and gently shoved *Di Carlo* in ahead of him. “Okay okay,” he said agreeably. “We’ll go to the damn Sandbag, but I just wish to god I was still in *Phoenix*. I’ll bet there’s not a ready broad in this whole damn town.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Johnny,” Balderone replied, smirking. “I got broads all over the Beach, the cream of the country, too. And I already sent some out to the Sandbank. That’s *bank*, not *bag*. Don’t go calling it no Sandbag. I got a half-int in that place, Johnny, and I’m telling you it’s nothing but first class. The broads too.”

“Forget the baggy broads!” *Portocci* snarled, his anger resurfacing. “You bring me *Bolan*! Hear? I got *full* int in that boy, and I want ’im! Not dead, either, but alive enough to kick and scream awhile! You know what I mean, *Vin*? No quick’n easy bullet for this boy!” He stepped into the car and slammed the door.

Balderone’s face was flushed as he leaned down to peer through the open window. “From what I hear,” he said in a calm voice, “you better be glad to get ’im any way we can bring ’im in. I ain’t guaranteeing no condition on delivery.”

The other members of the *Arizona* delegation were scrambling into a line of cars to the rear. As the small caravan eased out of the terminal area, Balderone stepped quickly into the shadows of the terminal and whistled softly. A man in an airline uniform moved out to join him. Balderone breathed a relieved sigh and said, “Okay, we got *Mr. Tough* out of the way, now let’s get set. You got your boy up in the tower?”

The uniformed man nodded and tapped finger on a small device at his ear. “He’s up and I’m tuned in,” he reported.

“Okay, that’s great.” The thickset *Mafia* veteran withdrew a small transistorized two-way radio from his pocket. He grinned, extended the antenna, and said, “To hell with that guy. We got instincts and *more*. We got a sure thing, ain’t that right.”

His companion smiled back. “Yes, sir, I’d say so. That *Cessna* business jet out of *Phoenix* looks like the real article. According to his flight plan, he’ll arrive just before dawn.”

Balderone soberly nodded his head. “Okay, you take your station now. I’ll be up on the observation deck. You give us a quick make on every plane landing. Don’t you try to decide which ones are important. You let me decide.”

“Sure, *Mr. Balderone*.”

“Tell your boy upstairs the same thing. I ain’t paying no five thou for decisions, I’m paying for solid info and I don’t wanna see nothing dropped.”

“Sure thing. Uh, I hope you have some men at the flying service, sir. That’s where these private charter jobs tie up.”

“Listen I even got boys on the damn gas trucks, don’t you worry about that. You just keep...” His words trailed off as he turned an expectant gaze toward the awkward approach of two men burdened with equipment cases and other paraphernalia—apparently photographic equipment. “You got all the stuff?” he asked.

One of the new arrivals grinned and extended an oblong leather case. “If you mean this, yeah. It will drop a charging rhino, and you can see the man on the moon’s pimples through that scope.”

Balderone smiled and patted the case, then slung it over his shoulder. “I’ll carry the tripod, too,” he offered. “You boys ain’t never gonna make it to the roof with all this. Hey, don’t forget my press card.”

The man in the airline uniform was exhibiting a troubled frown. “You aren’t, uh, planning on doing any shooting from up there, are you?”

“Naw, we’re not planning,” Balderone replied. “This’s just our little handy dandy screen patcher, just in case a hole develops. Instant reweaving, see, right on the spot.” He chuckled and walked away, the other two men following closely. The Miami screen was about to be lowered firmly into place.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Soft Sweep.**

The gray November dawn at Miami International revealed a scene of relative inactivity. Several airliners were loading, sleepy-eyed passengers moving quietly and unhurriedly along the ramps and into the planes. A small Caribe Airlines arrival was unloading in the customs area. An Eastern Airlines flight had just completed its landing roll and was turning onto a taxiway. At the far end of the airport, the low-slung building and hangars of the private flying service were just as quiet, with very little sign of activity.

Inside the terminal, 50 to 60 between-flight travelers slumped tiredly in lounge chairs or wandered restlessly about the quietened building; a lively breakfast trade in the restaurant provided the only signs of bustling activity, and even here the sounds were subdued and in keeping with the solemnity of sunrise.

On a parapet above the observation deck, outside the main terminal, two men continued a quiet vigil—surrounded by an impressive array of photographic equipment. Below them, leaning against the deck railing, a large man in a baby blue suit was peering onto the field through powerful binoculars. He lowered the glasses, allowing them to swing from a strap about his neck, and spoke into a small radio. “How ’bout this big jet just landed?”

The reply came instantly. “Eastern flight from New York. Made stops at Washington and Jacksonville. I just gave that to you.”

“Just checking.” The big man sighed and rubbed at his eyes, then again lifted the binoculars to follow the progress of the jetliner along the taxiway. A man in a porter’s uniform stepped through the doorway and approached the man at the railing.



“Like some more coffee, sir?” the porter asked.

“Naw, we’re floating now,” Balderone replied.

“Well... I’m going off duty now. I’ll tell my relief to take good care of you. Hope you get some good pictures.”

Balderone dropped the binoculars to dig in his pockets. He found a bill and thrust it at the porter. “Tell ’im to just sort of keep spectators out of our way, eh.”

The porter smiled and murmured his thanks and went back inside. Balderone was returning to the binoculars when his radio again crackled. “That charter job out of Phoenix finally reported into the Miami control area. Don’t understand the delay but he’ll land in about... say... ten minutes... and go into the flying service terminal.”

“Okay. You hear that, Morry?”

“Yeah, I heard,” came a bored voice from another distant location.

“Okay, I’m gonna run down and check these people offa the Eastern flight. Then I’m coming over with you. One of these has got to be it, so let’s everyone get fully woke up.”

A man on the parapet leaned forward to give Balderone a high sign. The big *Mafioso* waved back as he disappeared through the doorway. He went directly to the Eastern terminal area, carefully noting the positions of his screen men along the way, arriving just as the passengers were making their entrance. *Instincts*, Portocci had said. Ha! Vin Balderone would match his instincts against a pup like Johnny Portocci any day of the week. Johnny had come into the business when things were humming along and easy. Any old soldier, like Vin Balderone for example, who’d made it through those uncertain early days of the Maranzano era knew a thing or two about *instincts*.

He positioned himself in the narrow passageway so that each deplaning passenger would have to pass his close scrutiny. Then he scowled at one of his screen men farther back and unholstered an impressive looking press camera. The flashgun of the big camera would be the tip-off. Any passenger Vin “flashed” would be further scrutinized and shaken-down in some remote reach of the terminal by screen men with forged customs office credentials. No fireworks right out here on the floor, hell no, and no obvious strong-arming either. The damn Miami terminal had already been a source of considerable embarrassment to the family; the damn FBI had killed a perfect betting setup right there in that terminal. There was no telling even now how many secret spy-drops they had about the place.

The first group to pass was a party of young women, excitedly giggling and chattering over a projected holiday in Nassau. Balderone passed them on with hardly a flicker of interest. Next came two elderly couples, moving sprightly and with almost as much enthusiasm as the young women. The procession continued, with Balderone “passing” young couples with babies, family groups, and assorted loners. About halfway through, a quiet group of weirdly-dressed youths appeared, about a dozen equally divided by sex. Most of the males sported shoulder-length hair and facial bush. The girls wore their hair in free-flowing cascades down their backs. Arm bands and ankle bracelets showed here and there. Some were barefoot, others wore high Indian boots or moccasins with buckskin leggings. Balderone experienced a surge of irritation mixed with apprehension. He quickly raised his camera and stepped into their path.

A bearded male moved quickly forward and placed a hand over the camera lens. "Peace, man," he said in a soft voice. "Where does it say groovy group poses for pix at plane palace?"

The traffic had halted and there was some impatient pushing from the rear. Balderone covered his irritation with a forced smile as he looked the youth over. "If you're not ashamed to look that way," he replied amiably, "you shouldn't mind someone taking a picture. You could wind up on the cover of Newsweek, eh?"

Another of the group stepped forward, a tall man in buckskins with a thin leather thong tightly crossing his forehead, from which dangled a tiny peace symbol. A black bandanna was knotted about his head, Arab style, and covered his shoulders. A small guitar hung upside-down on his chest. The face was smooth-shaven but tiny blue tattoo marks dotted the chin and each side of the nose. "Let him shoot," he suggested to the bearded one. "Just get the name of the group right, that's all. It's *Love's Family*. Ed Sullivan introduced us as *Lovers*—"

Balderone cut off the quiet statement with an impatient grunt. Other passengers had begun to push past and Balderone was greatly agitated over this. "Yeah, yeah, wait for me out front, I'll shoot you," he snapped, swinging quickly against the wall. "We're blocking the passageway, go on, go on."

The men shrugged and exchanged smiles and went on, the others following unhurriedly and eyeing Balderone with unconcealed interest. He was inwardly cursing himself for allowing his attention to be diverted by "a hippie band" and anxiously screening the faces that were now hurrying by in the wake of the traffic jam. Moments later the final straggler had passed his scrutiny. He sent a signal to his nearest screen man which would put a search party aboard the plane, then he dashed outside to a waiting service vehicle. "Let's go!" he commanded the driver. They dodged around a small train of baggage carts and sped along the service ramp, hitting the access road to the flying service terminal just as a sleek little red and white Cessna jet touched wheels to the runway far across the field.

"That's it," advised a voice from Balderone's radio. "The charter job. It'll take him about five minutes to get crossed over and down to the hangar area."

"He's gotta be on there!" Balderone snapped back. "Stay covered till I give the signal. And no gunplay unless you just gotta. Let's keep this as quiet as possible."

The red and white Cessna seemed to be taking its time in approaching the service apron. It had paused twice on the taxiway and now stood with engines idling about 50 yards downrange from the private terminal. A man in white coveralls had emerged from the service hangar and stood by the fuel pumps, hands on hips, gazing curiously toward the plane. As he began walking slowly toward it, the Cessna lurched forward and taxied clear of the runway and onto the service apron.

Vin Balderone, seated in the service vehicle in the shadows of the terminal, quickly thumbed his transmitter and said, "Hey Tommy, are you sure nobody jumped out during those stops?"

The voice from the man atop the main terminal came back reassuringly. "Nobody got out, Vin. He just stopped and sat there awhile, both places."

Balderone growled something unintelligible and craned forward to study the aircraft. The man in coveralls was marking a spot for the plane to stop. It rolled to

a halt and the engines immediately went dead. Balderone again thumbed the transmitter button. "Get set but keep outta sight."

A man with thinning blond hair swung down from the cabin of the Cessna, a mapcase under his arm, and said something to the service attendant. The attendant nodded his head and the pilot walked toward the terminal. Balderone said, "What th' hell..." and hastily emerged from his vehicle. "Check out that plane!" he snarled into the radio.

Several men in business suits immediately came out of the service hangar and quickly approached the Cessna. Balderone headed over to intercept the pilot just as five other men filed out of the flying service office and hurried toward the plane. The pilot glanced at Balderone, then halted and watched his approach with an expectant half-smile.

The *Mafioso* growled, "Where's your passenger?"

"He got off at Jax," the pilot replied, his smile fading. "Are you Mr. Portocci?"

The unexpected query threw Balderone momentarily off balance. He said, thickly, "He got off at Jacksonville? How come he—didn't he charter you through to Miami?"

The pilot repeated, "Are you Mr. Portocci?"

"I represent him," the confused Balderone snapped. A sudden thought crashed through his racing mind and he swung the tiny radio into position and barked, "Hey, he must've switched to that Eastern plane at Jacksonville. We missed the bastard somehow... fan around, fan around up there good and goddammit let's at least get a smell!"

The pilot was staring at him curiously. He had opened the mapcase and was fishing out a small package, giftwrapped in colorful paper and topped with a satin bow. "My charter said someone would be on hand to meet me here," he said. "Listen... if there's something illegal going on here, I don't know a thing about it. The man asked me to deliver the package—now if it's..."

Balderone was glaring at the man with undisguised irritation. He took the package and said, "Now what the hell is this supposed to be?"

"The name is on the tag," the pilot snapped, his own tone matching the other's irritation. "It's addressed, if you can read, to John J. Portocci, and that's all I know about it." He glanced over his shoulder, noting the men swarming over his small plane. "Look, I fly airplanes," he added dismally. "For a salary plus expenses. I didn't know this guy was—"

"No no, you got the wrong idea," Balderone said hastily. "We just can't figger out why he ain't here hisself, but don't you give it another thought, there ain't nothing illegal." He spun away, waved to the men around the plane, and marched back to his vehicle, tossing the small package from hand to hand as though it were too hot to handle.

"Instincts," he muttered as he settled into the vehicle.

"What's in the package?" the driver asked.

"Too small for a bomb," Balderone replied, sighing. "But I got a feeling it's just as bad. It's addressed to Johnny. Imagine that?" A new thought crossed his mind, and his face reflected the new hope. "Hey, you think I should open it? Maybe we been wrong all the way, about this plane, I mean. Maybe this is some of Johnny's business. Something he forgot, maybe, at Phoenix. You think maybe...?"

The driver shrugged his shoulders. "There's only one way to find out real quick."

"Yeah," the big *Mafioso* growled. He eyed the little package for another deliberative moment, then sighed and carefully removed the ribbon, folded back the paper, and opened the top of the small oblong box. Inside and resting on a velvet pad was a U.S. Army marksman's medal. Balderone's face blanched, and he whispered, "Oh geez."

From a distance of less than a hundred yards, the watchers were being watched. A tall man in a shiny rental car was focusing his binoculars with considerable interest upon the men who were pacing about the service apron outside the flying service, studying the faces, memorizing them, with particular attention going to the heavysset man who had accepted the package from the pilot. He grinned at the look of consternation that swept the thick man's face as the tiny box was opened, then he laid the binoculars in the seat and awaited the next move. A small crease across his forehead was the only evidence remaining of the leather thong which had adorned that head only minutes earlier; a small blue "tattoo" mark showed faintly on the chin where a hasty cleansing had not quite removed all traces of the color pencil.

He tensed in the seat of the rented car and quickly started the engine as the service vehicle suddenly wheeled about and lurched to another stop in the parking area beside the flying service. He watched as the thick man transferred to a dark Lincoln, waving his arms in some signal to the other men congregated there. Then a small cavern, led by the Lincoln, pulled onto the service road and sped off toward the perimeter highway.

Inside the private terminal, a charter pilot was ruefully relating his "weird experience" to the flying service manager. "...and chartered me to Miami, see. Then ten minutes out of New Orleans, he decides he wants to go to Jax until he makes this phone call, and then he gives me this precise schedule to Miami, see. I got to come in at a such and such time... well, hell, I guess it's okay, I picked up an extra hundred for my trouble, plus the deadleg fee... but did you see that guy who picked up the package? Brrr, there's a Murder Incorporated type if I ever heard of one. I'm wondering what the hell I got myself into, see, and I'm wondering if a hundred bucks is worth it, but I..."

On a parapet overlooking the fast-awakening international airport, a pair of disgruntled "photographers" were hastily packing up their gear and preparing to depart. Down below, anxious-eyed men in hand-tailored suits were spreading energetically throughout the facility, inspecting rest rooms and lounges and waiting rooms in a final, almost frantic search for an illusive quarry.

In an airporter bus just then clearing the terminal area, the members of an obscure rock music group, bound for a music festival in a Miami suburb, were discussing their "adventure" in solemn and dignified elation.

A round-eyed girl, still a bit breathless with suppressed tension, said, "We should've, you know, found out who he was and why he was hiding. I mean, wow, he could be anybody. I mean it was groovy, sure, but wow! He could be anybody."

"Sometime you just have to go on instincts," their bearded leader observed. "Like with chicks, you know. You just have to like the look in their eyes and like take it from there. I mean I just looked in those eyes, dig?—and I said, 'sure,

man—I'll let you carry my guitar.' And the cat fit, didn't he? I mean, he was a real cool Aquarian, wasn't he?"

The real cool Aquarian was, at that moment, pacing along at a discreet distance, following a Mafia motorcade to Miami Beach. For The Executioner, it had been a highly successful soft sweep.

## Chapter 4

### Sandbagged.

Mack Bolan did not regard himself as a superman. He knew who and what he was. But he had learned, in the school of life-and-death, that knowledge coupled with action and wedded to total commitment would elevate any ordinary man into the ranks of the extraordinary. Superman, no; extraordinary weapon of war, yes—this was Mack Bolan. Sgt. Bolan was a craftsman. His craft was warfare; a particular type of warfare in which a man became either extraordinary or dead. The sergeant remained alive. He had learned his lessons well in the do-or-die theaters of Southeast Asia—and he had brought his diploma home to ply his craft in the untidy junglelands of America.

He did not think of himself as a crusader, nor even a patriot. He felt no grand exaltation in his self-appointed role as nemesis of the American underworld, and he did not have time or inclination to wonder if his sacrifice would have any meaning in the ultimate outcome of this highly personal war of his.

In speaking of Bolan and his pre-Mafia days, friends invariably described him as a friendly, thoughtful, and kindly man. Aside from his programmed forays against the enemy in Southeast Asia, there exists no evidence whatever to indicate that he possessed a violent nature; even in Vietnam the record reveals again and again that he was respectful of the Vietnamese people, responsive to the suffering of the children of that war-torn land, that he inspired lasting friendships and fierce loyalty from his comrades.

Bolan would not alibi his Vietnam "specialty" to anyone, newsmen and war historians included. He would, and did, tell them simply that he had not chosen this war; it had chosen him. He had not requested permission to kill the enemy; he had been trained to do so. He did not war *against* men but *for* ideals.

And now he did not alibi his American specialty to himself. The conditions were the same. A different place, a new enemy, but the same rotten situation and the very same call to duty.

It is doubtful, though, that any such contemplations occupied Bolan's mind on that pleasant Miami morning of November 5th. It is much more likely that his finely tuned and disciplined mind was occupied with such considerations as range, azimuth, wind-direction and velocity, trajectory-drop, and so forth. He lay prone on a balcony outside a tenth-floor beachside apartment, a high-powered rifle angling toward another patio several buildings removed and around a gentle curve of beachline, calmly studying a face which occupied the vision-field of his sniperscope.

He made a fine adjustment to the scope and intently watched the rangemarks climb into the crosshairs, then he sighed audibly and murmured, "So there you are." Bolan knew his target by reputation only. The name had been a household word at the DiGeorge *palazzo* in Palm Springs, a prime link in the chain of narcotics distribution from Mexico into the U.S. Bolan had no personal grudge with Johnny the Musician. Untold thousands of school kids, however, hooked on an insatiable appetite for expensive "kicks," had ample reason for begrudging the continued life and good health of the man in The Executioner's crosshairs.

He made a rough calculation on a note pad, then eased the long rifle into a slow scan of the target area. He did not want any innocent bystanders hovering in the sidelines, nor in the background. He scanned on, then returned quickly to a flag atop the diving platform for another check on the wind condition. Another quick calculation on the note pad and Bolan was ready. The rest was up to the fates.

Portocci was seated lazily on a chaise lounge at poolside, a frosted glass in one hand, the other hand idly toying with the thick hair of his chest, legs crossed at the ankles and the toes of one foot jerking to some inaudible rhythm. Directly across from him, perched tensely on an aluminum folding chair and paying nervous little attentions to an upswept hairdo, was a stunning young woman in a flowered bikini. Portocci was giving her no attention whatever, but was scowling at a large man who stood at the foot of the lounge.

"Now look, Johnny," the large man was saying, "I don't have to take no abuse from you, and what's more I ain't gonna. You don't like the way I handled the Bolan screen, then you get one of your own. But don't go telling me—"

"Ah, hell, forget it, Vinnie," Portocci growled. He sighed and sipped at his drink. "You ain't the first to flub on this boy."

Balderone said, "Well I can appreciate how you feel, I mean getting that little medal addressed to you and all that. But, hell, we still don't even know for sure the guy's here."

"He's here," Portocci assured his host. He nibbled on his knuckles for a moment, then asked, "So what did *Ciro* have to say about it?"

Balderone studied the rhythmic snapping of Portocci's toes as though fascinated by the unvarying movements. "I told you," he said slowly. "He wants you to stay put, right here at the Sandbank. Relax and enjoy your vacation, he says. When he needs you, he'll let you know. Meanwhile, they're in session right now over what do do about this Bolan."

Portocci followed Balderone's gaze to the snapping toes. He said, in a suddenly soft tone, "Look, Vinnie... *Ciro* didn't see what this guy left behind him at Palm Springs. *I* saw. Those old men sitting in session over there... *they* didn't see. *You* didn't see, and this stupid broad here didn't see. Johnny Portocci *saw*, Vinnie. And he isn't going to relax and enjoy any vacation with this guy's shooting medal hanging over his head. You go tell that to *Ciro il Capo* Lavangetta. You tell him that Johnny Portocci says Miami Beach stinks with the smell of Bolan, and it's about time this thing of ours put out the smell... eh? You tell him, Vinnie, that—"

"Hell, no, Johnny, I'm not telling *Ciro* nothing. You tell 'im for yourself."

Portocci's nostrils flared and his hands quivered as he yelled, "Then tell that stupid broad there to get rid of that stupid damn top! Tell 'er Johnny Portocci likes titties, and right now he couldn't even swear she's got any!"

The girl's head snapped up and her eyes glazed under an indefinable emotion—fear, or perhaps anger. Her hands dropped to her side and the glazed eyes sought the gaze of Vin Balderone. She knew, the eyes said, that Johnny was taking out his frustrations on her—and she was seeking help from the only possible source.

Weakly, Balderone said, “F’Christ’s sake, Johnny, this’s a public pool. She can’t go taking off her top *here!* God, don’t go getting... hey, take her back to your room, f’Christ’s sake. She’ll show you her titties, f’God’s sake, Johnny.”

“I’ll do it myself!” Portocci snarled, his anger seemingly feeding on itself. He shifted his weight to one elbow and seemed ready to lunge toward the girl. He halted, however, in mid-lunge as something incomprehensible happened to his face. The snarl disappeared and became a distorted grimace around the suddenly enlarged mouth, the tip of the chiseled Roman nose caving in and becoming lost in the collapsing structure just below as bits of flesh and bone and teeth seemed to explode outward in a frothy red fountain. In that same electrifying instant, he was flung rigidly back to the cushions of the lounge with a bounce of rapidly relaxing muscles.

Balderone’s stunned eyes swept the length of the still body and became riveted on the toes, as though he were wondering why their rhythmic motions had ceased. Only then did the distant *cra-ack* of a high-powered rifle pierce his consciousness.

The girl was screaming, crouched just off her chair and bent oddly off balance in a time-stopping inspection of the messy remains of Johnny the Musician Portocci.

Balderone took a confused step backwards, one hand clawing toward the hardware inside his jacket, instinctively reacting to the presence of sudden and violent death. In that micro-instant of understanding, a deeper instinct moved him and he began running for the cover of the building—sprinting with both hands pumping him on, the weapon forgotten. Perhaps, in that electric moment, he realized that no instinct could save him now.

And perhaps he remembered some of those many times in the past when Miami Vino had been on the opposite end of the gun, when others had been running just as he was now doing, with that last breath of life charging into the nostrils.

He leapt into the air suddenly as he reached the corner of the pool, twisting grotesquely in a side-wise and uncoordinated fling into the purified waters in which he proudly owned a “solid half-int,” defiled now with his own geysering blood, and Miami Vino sank slowly to the bottom without hearing that second *cra-ack* of a distant sniper’s special.

## Chapter 5

### Case of Prosecution.

A deeply disturbed Captain of Detectives left his vehicle beneath the portico of the curving drive and entered the synthetic luxury of the motel lobby. He paused to get his bearings, then pushed on through the hushed atmosphere, beyond a line of potted palms, and through another doorway opening onto the pool-patio. Here uniformed officers stood in quiet consultations with guests and employees

while men in civilian suits conversed among themselves and moved purposefully about the flag-stoned patio to point out specific features and to jot findings in small, identical notebooks. Two others stood beside a chaise lounge, bending to a close inspection of the still form of a man clad in bathing trunks. A few yards away a medical examiner knelt beside another corpse, this one fully clothed and obviously recently reclaimed from the waters of the pool.

A man at the chaise lounge looked up and noted the Captain's arrival then hurried over to greet him. "Looks for sure like a sniper's work, Captain Hannon," he announced. "Doc says high velocity and big calibre steel jackets made this mess."

The captain nodded curtly and proceeded on to the lounge. The other detective, Lt. Robert Wilson, kept him company. Hannon stared down at the corpse and said, "So that was Johnny Portocci."

Wilson nodded. "Checked in late last night. What's your interest, Captain? Was he one of your VIPs?"

The Captain grunted and reached into his pocket for a cigarette, lit it, and let the smoke drift out slowly as he replied. "No, but I've heard of him. Thought I'd better come down and check it out. Doesn't the name mean anything to you, Lieutenant?"

Wilson shook his head and stared at the mangled face. "All I have is the make from the hotel register. John J. Portocci, Phoenix. That's all."

"Big man in the rackets out there," Hannon explained. He swung about and cast an oblique gaze toward the pool. "Who's the other victim?"

"One of the owners of the hotel." Wilson followed the captain to the other body, adding, "His name was Vincent Anthony Balderone, age 56, single, kept an apartment here. That's about the only info we have at this point."

The captain stood behind the medical examiner, gazing down at the lifeless form. "I can add something to your make," he said musingly. "So can you, if you'll think about it a moment. Does the sound of Miami Vino ring any bells for you?"

The younger detective had moved to the other side of the body. He caught his breath and murmured, "Sure, sure, that's the guy the Crime Commission was investigating last... wasn't it just last year?"

"Yeah. And the year before that, and the year before that, and just keep going back. We have a file on this guy a foot thick. He's had his finger in every illegal operation in the state for the past few years... *a la Cosa Nostra*, Lieutenant. Big man in the Mafia's Florida territory. Before that, he'd beaten eleven murder raps in three states, all of them gangland rub-outs in which he was either directly or indirectly involved. *Nol-pros* in each case, lack of evidence. Yeah, we've got a file."

"You can close it now for sure," the medical examiner commented, rising with a sigh from his examination. "An inch of his jugular vein is missing, along with assorted other bits and pieces. Dead before he hit the water, I'd say."

"Guess he ran out of *nol-pros*'s" Wilson said soberly.

"You bet he did," the captain replied. He nodded to the M.E. and led the Lieutenant a short distance away to speak to him privately. "The Dade Force is taking over this case, Bob," he said in a quiet voice. "There's much more involved here than simple homicide."

Wilson started to say something then checked himself and grunted a, "Yeah?"



“Yeah. Looks as though we have The Executioner in our town.”

“Aw, hell. You serious?”

Hannon said, “Entirely. Portocci’s Phoenix headquarters was shot up last night, bunch of his gang killed.”

The Lieutenant whistled softly. “Then he’s moving pretty fast. Is there anything to definitely place him here?”

The captain shook his head. “No hard items, if that’s what you mean. But this is the jet age, you know. A pilot flew a private charter down here from Phoenix last night. Left shortly after the hit on Portocci’s place. His passenger got off in Jacksonville, but instructed the pilot to continue on to Miami and to deliver a package to a man who would meet him at the airport. He was met by not one man but about *twenty*. The pilot got suspicious and reported the incident before he departed on his return trip. I came upon the report by the merest chance. The package, Bob, was addressed to our friend Portocci there... and the description of the man who claimed it matches our late buddy Balderone.”

The Lieutenant’s brow was furrowed with thought. “But I don’t see... I mean... how does that connect with Mack Bolan? If Balderone was there to pick up a package, and...”

“Bolan outsmarted them, way I read it. They got word of the hit in Phoenix, learned of the chartered flight following closely on Portocci’s heels, and were waiting here for Bolan to show his face at the airport. But he foxed them. He got off at Jacksonville instead, hopped another plane down, maybe even got here ahead of the other flight and tailed Balderone from the airport. Then *blaam*. Here lie two *Cosa Nostra* bigwigs dead at our feet. It’s just too perfect for coincidence... it’s Bolan’s way.”

“The package, then, was just a diversion... or a grandstand play.”

“More than likely,” Hannon replied, “a clever ploy. He had it timed to get here ahead of the chartered plane. He was expecting a welcoming committee, so he sent them something to welcome, then lay back somewhere out of play where he could make an identification. The rest was a simple tail job.”

“Sounds pretty thin to me,” Wilson argued.

“It’s thick enough to activate the Dade Force,” the captain said heavily. “I’m here to tell you, in fact, that we’re taking over. You can make your routine reports to Homicide, Lieutenant, but you see that I get it first. Understood?”

Wilson frowned and said, “Yessir, that’s understood.”

“All right, so wipe the frown away. The metropolitan police have one large-sized problem on their hands, Lieutenant, and it involves a helluva lot more than solving a couple of murders. How many more would you say are on The Executioner’s list? Who and where are they? Our winter season is just gearing up. Thousands of people arriving daily in this city. Hotels filling up, the beach teeming, a music festival just about to get underway, the Caribbean traffic in high hypo ... you know the scene. Now, who among those many thousands are marked for execution? How do we isolate them, and how do we find a phantom executioner before open warfare breaks upon our tourist season?”

“Okay,” Wilson replied quietly. “So it’s a job for the Dade Force. I want to stay on it, though. Can you swing it?”

Hannon grinned. "I already did. You're my Homicide Liaison. So let's get to work. Haven't you come up with any leads as to where those shots were fired from?"

The young lieutenant pursed his lips and crossed his arms over his chest. He crooked a finger at the captain and returned to the chaise lounge. "Let's run through it once," he said thoughtfully. "Our only eyewitness is a hysterical girl. She was apparently right here at the scene, in that folding chair there. Portocci was on the lounge. Balderone standing here somewhere, talking to Portocci. The girl says that Portocci was stretched out just about the way he is now, but sort of twisted to the side and staring at the girl. She said he reached toward her at the moment he was hit. Then he fell back to the lounge, present position. Doc says he got it right through the upper lip. The bullet tore through directly beneath the nose, took out the roof of the mouth, the palate, on through the throat and emerged at the base of the neck, severing the spinal cord. That's a superficial and might be changed some by a full pathology. Now, figuring that angle of entry and the fact that Portocci was lying back and turned toward the girl, we figure it came from up the beach... lord knows how far up... and from a considerable height. I have a small army up the beach now, canvassing for witnesses to the gunfire—but god, do you know how many buildings they have to cover?"

"How do these conclusions check with the hit on Balderone? Can't you come up with a triangulation?"

"There's the rub," Wilson replied, smiling ruefully. "The girl didn't even know that Balderone was shot until his body was found in the pool. She doesn't remember what his actions were when Portocci was hit. So we don't know where he was when he caught his, not precisely. We can guess that he was running for cover, toward the building there. If so, he lost the race by about two steps. We found blood at the corner of the pool, on the flagstones, so we assume that he went into the water at that point."

Hannon was strolling toward the bloodstains at the pool's edge. He stood just off of them and looked back toward the lounge, then swivelled about to peer up the beach. "Yes, that sounds solid," he said, sighing. "And I can see your problem."

"A man is on his way over with a theodolite. In the meantime, I've arbitrarily ruled out the first three buildings. That still leaves about four within firing range—or, wait a minute! If Bolan is our man, I'd better scale that up some. Let's say there are six possibles. I'll get some men over to those other two buildings." He spun on his heel and trotted quickly across the patio.

"Any way you look at it," the captain said to no one at all, gazing down at the bloodstained flagstones, "we've got a large-sized problem on our hands."

Lt. Wilson hurried through the lobby and into the front parking area where a number of police cruisers were congregated. Several uniformed patrolmen moved forward to meet him. They conversed rapidly in low tones, then the patrolmen went to their vehicles and made a quiet departure.

Wilson lit a cigarette, flipped the spent match into air, murmured beneath his exhalation, "The Executioner, well, well..." and went back inside.

Across the street, leaning against a palm tree and conversing easily with another interested onlooker, a tall man in a denim casual suit and dark

sunglasses watched the detective reenter the hotel. “Well,” he remarked, “I guess it’s all over. The cops seem to be leaving.”

The other man laughed nervously and replied, “I wish they’d let us in. I don’t know... call it morbid, there’s something about a shooting... I mean, wouldn’t you like to get in there and see it?”

“No, I don’t like blood,” replied the denimed one.

The other man emitted another nervous laugh and began talking to an onlooker at his other side. The tall man moved away and returned to a parked vehicle. He lit a cigarette and continued the watch. A short while later the bodies were brought out and the ambulances quietly departed. Then the young plainclothes cop reappeared, talking soberly with a larger, older man. The detectives got into their cars and left. Onlookers began to drift away. The tall man quietly smoked and watched. Some twenty minutes later, a stunning young woman with an upswept hairdo came out and was escorted to a police cruiser. It was apparent, from the actions of her escort, that she was not under arrest. When the police vehicle moved into the stream of beachfront traffic, the tall man in the denim suit started his car and swung in a short distance behind. The Executioner was sniffing along another hot trail.

## Chapter 6

### Council of Kings.

For the first time in many years, the “invisible second government of the nation” was convened in full session. It was called the *Commissione* and consisted of the head of each of the thirteen U.S. *Cosa Nostra* families. *La Cosa Nostra*, literally “this thing of ours,” was operated as a republic within a republic. Despite much official and public conjecture on the matter, there was no “boss of all the bosses” who functioned as a sovereign head of the massive underground organization. The *Commissione* itself established interfamily policies and procedures, policed its members, and enforced the council’s rulings.

Rebellions and power plays within the *Commissione* were rare and singularly unsuccessful. Though he was the undisputed lord of his own domain, a *Capo* generally saw the wisdom of submerging his own ego in a larger fealty to the majority view of the ruling council; those who did, prospered; those who did not were notable chiefly for their shortened life-expectancy.

Ciro Lavangetta privately thought of the *Commissione* as “the council of kings,” though in this view *Ciro* himself was more in the nature of a crown prince. He was a boss, sure, but the youngest and among the newest of the lot, with the poorest kingdom represented in the council. He had been given all the rights and honors of a full-fledged *Capo*, but he had forever reigned in the shadow of Julian DiGeorge and had been greatly dependent upon that Southern California family from which *Ciro* had sprung. Now with DiGeorge dead and his family in a state of virtual dissolution, thanks to Mack The Bastard Bolan, *Ciro* regarded his position as definitely pivotal—perhaps even perilous. He had come to this “council of kings”

with the hopes of making a strong bid for a more substantial power base for his family; he hoped, in fact, to “inherit” the DiGeorge empire and to consolidate it into his southwestern territory.

There was a fly in Lavangetta’s ointment, however. The old man from San Francisco, George the Butcher Aggravante, had been casting lecherous glances toward the now open L.A. territory—and Aggravante had been the sole dissenter in the council which, some years earlier, had deeded the desert southwest to Lavangetta. George the Butcher would love to gobble up Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas and thus give himself full sway over the Western U.S. Ciro was certain of this. Sure, now that Ciro had built up a thriving territory out of desert sand, the old man would gladly relieve him of it. Perhaps Ciro would be allowed to remain on as a “paper Capo” of his original territory, or maybe as an underboss to the butcher. Well, no thanks. George the Butcher could just go to hell. Ciro knew the L.A. territory better than anyone now living. If there was to be a division of DiGeorge’s legacy, no man alive stood closer in the line of succession than Ciro Lavangetta. Ciro would give Aggravante the area from the San Fernando Valley north. But the rest belonged to Ciro. He had earned it. And the fantastic revenues from L.A. County alone would insure a strong base for this newest and youngest family, the Lavangettas. Ciro’s own brother-in-law was the only ranking member of the DiGeorge family yet alive, “Tony Danger” Cupaletto, a lightweight *Caporegime* based at San Diego. It didn’t take a council of kings to recognize the fact that Tony Danger was far too light to bear DiGeorge’s crown. And that empty chair at the council table, DiGeorge’s chair, was the paramount consideration in Ciro’s mind as the first Miami session got underway. As an irritating symbol of the importance of this council to Lavangetta, that empty chair stood between the chairs of Ciro and George the Butcher.

Ciro nodded pleasantly to the grand old man from San Francisco and said, “Hi, Georgie. How’s the meat business?”

Aggravante tossed him a cold glance and replied, “Couldn’t be better, Ciro. How are things in Bolan’s playground?”

Ciro colored angrily and choked back a hot retort. He quickly covered his anger with a light chuckle and said, “I’ll export ’im cheap, Georgie.”

Aggravante nodded his handsome king of the jungle head and said, “You export ’im my way, Ciro, and I’ll make weenies out of him quick.” He turned to the man on his other side and engaged him in pleasant conversation, shutting out the upstart from Arizona from further attention.

Lavangetta, darkly flushed, sipped at his wine and shot an angry glance about the table. The kings were feeling quiet today, he observed. Okay. Why not? Things were bad all over. Cops and feds busting everybody right and left, Congressional committees calling ’em in to testify against their own selves, talking to ’em like they were a bunch of cheap rodmen... and now this fancy bastard Bolan chewing up the territories and making everybody look stupid on top of everything else. Sure, why not quiet? This was to be a strategy council ... but what strategy?

Ciro’s unhappy train of thought was broken by a direct question from Augie Marinello, one of the New York bosses and a respected power in the council. The traditional toasts had been given, and the query from Marinello could only be regarded as an official end to the quiet period of personal greetings and exchanges

which had followed. Marinello said, from across the table, "Hey *Ciro*, what's this we hear about the trouble in Phoenix last night, eh?"

Lavangetta replied soberly, "You know about as much as I do, *Augie*. Don't worry, I'm on top of it. I'll know pretty soon just what is what."

Aggravante chimed in with, "What is what is that all your Phoenix soldiers are dead, *Ciro*. If that's what you're on top of, I'd say *somebody* better start worrying."

The flustered Arizona chieftain flashed back, "Look, you let me..." He sucked in his breath and left the balance of the statement unsaid, turning back to address Marinello in a calm tone. "Like I was saying, *Augie*, I'm on top of it. This was Bolan, the crazy bastard, like everybody here knows already. I got a line on him, and we're chasing him down. Don't worry, this guy's luck is running out. He can't get away with this crap forever."

Marinello held silent for another comment from Aggravante. The old *Capo* softly observed, "You call it luck if you wanta play ostrich, *Ciro*. But this boy has knocked over already two families. Off hand, I'd say he's busy working on the third. You can't just wave it off as luck. That's this boy's secret weapon, this idea of everyone thinking he's just another punk and can be frowned into the grave. I say it again, *Ciro*—somebody better start worrying. And that somebody had better be from Arizona."

*Ciro* was trying to think of a suitable reply, silently cursing himself for allowing the old man to lead him into that trap, making him brag and then get caught looking like a silly punk with no brains. He made a series of tight fists with both hands and said, "I didn't mean *I* wasn't worrying. I was saying for no one *here* to worry. Hell, *I'm* worried, sure. Hell, I got a hundred boys out after this guy."

"Maybe that's not good enough," Marinello stated gently. "Not unless you've really got something working for you."

"Yeah, I got something working," Lavangetta replied quickly. "Look, we made this boy hotting it out of Phoenix right after his hit last night, in one of these little private planes. We watched 'im all the way, we're thinking he is no doubt tracking Johnny Portocci down here and we got all the airports covered. Sure we got something working."

Aggravante suggested, "If you know the plane, there's ways of finding it."

"Sure I know that, *Georgie*. We made the plane landing at Jacksonville. We made it landing at Miami. The guy had got off, at Jacksonville we figure, but I had boys all over that airport and—"

"You got 'im at Jacksonville then," Aggravante purred.

"No, hell, I didn't say that, *Georgie*. I said the boy got off at Jacksonville, and we weren't covered up there. But the plane came on down here, see and—"

"So what you got working, *Ciro*? An empty plane?"

Thoroughly confused now, Lavangetta fumed, "I'm trying to tell you, this Bolan is no punk. I mean, I know that. You wanta see something classy?" He reached into his coat pocket and produced a small oblong box and placed it on the table. "This thing came all gift wrapped and addressed to Johnny, ribbons and all. The pilot of this plane had it, so we know the boy was on that plane."

"That's brilliant," Aggravante said. "What's in th' box?"

Marinello was already reaching for the box. He removed the cover, stared inside for a long moment, then withdrew the contents and held it up for all to see. "It's this boy's calling card," he announced. "A marksman's medal."

"Yeah, that's classy, all right," Aggravante softly commented.

Another New York boss said, "You could almost admire this boy, you know?"

"But not from the grave," Marinello added. "Okay, *Ciro*. This seems to be your apple and I guess you got a right to eat it. Just don't get no stomach ache from it. But if this Bolan has served notice that he's making our convention, I guess we might all have to take a bite. You better tell us what you got going."

"I got everything covered," Lavangetta quickly replied. "Airports, bus and train stations, everything. And I got a thousand pictures of this Bolan in circulation around town. I got all the drops, all the kicks, all the—"

"Pictures, where'd you get pictures?" Aggravante growled.

"Sketches," Lavangetta amended. "We got one of those artists like the cops use. You know, these composite pictures." He saw a chance to make a point, and quickly seized it. "Remember, my boys were the first into Palm Springs after this guy left his mess there. Somebody had to pick up the pieces. We picked up also a trail, that's why so much action in Arizona here lately. We been right on this boy's tail all the way."

"Yeah, you got some piece o' tail all right," Aggravante observed sourly. "Looks like it swung you all the way to Miami."

Speaking between tight lips, Lavangetta said, "Look, I come to council, just like you. Now I don't wanta be disrespectful, Mr. Aggravante, but you got your ass showing a mile. You better tuck it back in, 'cause I'm not in any mood for—"

Marinello hurried into the heated exchange with, "*Ay ay, fratelli, fratelli.*" He thoughtfully rubbed his chin and said, "*Ciro's* right, Georgie. You been diggin' him pretty good, and he's got enough on his mind without that. What happened in Arizona could have happened to any of us at a time like this. Now we came here to discuss our problems. This Bolan boy is one of 'em. I think we better start establishing priorities and I think maybe we should start right here, with Bolan."

"The big mistake," Aggravante said pleasantly, as though no rebuke had been uttered, "is that we been sitting around waiting for someone else to fix the problem for us. Bolan, I mean. We hope the cops will get him. We hope some freelancer will cash in on that open contract. We hope, we hope, and we don't *do* anything."

"Speak for yourself," Lavangetta muttered. "I gotta bury about a dozen boys when I get back home."

"I'm speaking for all of us," the old man replied. "You're talking about priorities, Augie." He reached over and picked up the marksman's medal. "There's number one. Anyone thinks otherwise is *sciocco*—a fool. This Bolan is a fox that chases hounds, no?"

"Look, you're crying about nothing!" Lavangetta declared emotionally. "I'm telling you I'm on top of it! You watch what happens to this fox when he gets to Miami, eh? You watch!"

A man at the other side of the table spoke into the sudden silence. "Don't nobody forget where this Bolan got started," he said. "Anybody thinks Sergio was an old lady had better step outside and fight me right now. This Bolan is a one-

man army, never mind about foxes and hounds. And if he's in Miami, I'm telling you right now we better move our convention somewhere else."

The speaker was Frank Milano, successor to the late Sergio Frenchi, the first Mafia boss to bite The Executioner's dust. Noting, with some surprise, that he still held the floor, Milano added, "That is, if we expect to get any business done. I mean..."

"We know what you mean, Frank," Marinello said quietly. "And you're right. Sergio was a man among men, nobody won't ever say otherwise."

Aggravante was staring at his hands. He said, "Tell Father Sergio, Frankie, that Ciro Lavangetta guards his grave."

"Look, I wasn't meaning to cut anybody down," Lavangetta said, his tone clearly apologetic. "I just want everybody here to know that I'm on top of this Bolan thing. If he gets within 50 miles of this room, he's a dead man. I just want you all to know that. And we can get on with our business. We got important things to discuss. Right, Augie?"

Marinello started to say something in reply but checked himself as the door cracked open and a roving eye caught his attention. He flashed a glance at Lavangetta and said, "I think one of your boys wants you, Ciro."

Lavangetta quickly left his chair and went to the door for a whispered consultation. When he returned to the table his face was ashen and his hands shook as he lit a cigar. The other members were staring at him curiously, none speaking. When he'd gotten the cigar going, Marinello quietly asked, "Bad news, Ciro?"

"Yeah, bad news," Lavangetta croaked. He was staring intently at a package of matches and speaking around the furiously smoking cigar. "Tommy Janno just called in from the Sandbank. Johnny the Musician and Miami Vino just got hit."

A brief silence followed, then: "You mean they're dead?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean. Sittin' there right by the pool, right there at the Sandbank. And somebody pumped a bullet into both of 'em. Imagine that. Somebody just—"

"Somebody!" Aggravante yelped.

Lavangetta sighed. "I guess it was Bolan."

Aggravante turned an angry gaze to Augie Marinello. "He means the guy he's right on top of," he said nastily.

Marinello snapped, "Get me the Talifero brothers!" His brooding gaze swept the assembled bosses and he amended the demand by adding, "I mean, I make a motion that we delegate this problem to Pat and Mike Talifero. Do I hear any objections?"

Aggravante said, "You don't hear any objections and neither do I." He got to his feet and went to the door, swung it open, and leaned into the open doorway to speak to the guard stationed there. "Tell the Talifero brothers that they're wanted in here."

Ciro Lavangetta wet his lips and nervously rolled the cigar between them. He'd tried, he was telling himself. And he'd done no worse than any other boss had done since that blacksuited bastard had started hitting them. So now it was to be Pat and Mike. Lavangetta shivered inwardly. He was glad they were to be sicced onto Bolan instead of onto Ciro Lavangetta. The *Commissione's* own lord high

enforcers, activated only by unanimous consent of the high council, with their own elite Gestapo—this was the Talifero brothers—remorseless human missiles with a one-way switch and with the power of life and death over even a *Capo*. Yes, classy Bolan with the fancy medals, just wait you smart bastard until Pat and Mike get your scent. You're going to die, Bolan the Bastard, you're going to *die screaming!* In the council of kings, it was preordained.

## Chapter 7

### A Difference.

He was in a modest residential area of Miami Beach. The neighborhood was clean and the neat rows of stucco homes in glaring white contrast to the green lawns and tropical shrubs. He noted the house number where the police car was stopped and went on by and took his time circling the block. When he came around the second time, the squad car was gone. Again he passed the house and pulled in to the curb several doors beyond, angled his rearview mirror for a casual surveillance, lit a cigarette, and settled in for a patient wait. Five minutes passed. Two little boys came around the side of the house just opposite his position, looked him over in that frank display of youthful curiosity, and one of them waved to him. He grinned and waved back. The tots looked at each other and giggled, then ran back out of sight.

Bolan lit another cigarette and returned his attention to the mirror. When he'd finished the smoke, he carefully crushed it in the ashtray, got out of the car, and walked briskly to the stucco bungalow which had been occupying his attention. A hooked screen door offered the only discouragement to an uninvited caller. He ran the blade of his penknife through the flimsy wire screen, opened the door, and went in.

He found the girl lying across the bed in bra and panties, face down, the rise of ample rump presiding majestically over other interesting topographical features. She raised her head in a mute inspection of the intruder. Her makeup was smudged from persistent tears, but this offered no contradiction of Bolan's earlier assessment of her beauty. The enormous dark eyes were wide with undisguised fear, but she met his level gaze and said, "Wh-who are you? What do you want?"

Bolan removed his sunglasses and dropped them into his pocket. "We nearly met this morning," he told her, "but at a distance of about 500 meters."

"Wh-what?"

"You didn't see me," he assured her. "But I saw you. In the crosshairs of my scope. And I could have punched a hole through that lovely head just as nasty as the other two." He smiled. "But I didn't, you see."

She lay very still, staring at him with growing apprehension. She whispered, "I don't even know why you killed them, or anything about you. You have no reason to kill me."

"Maybe you're right. What do you know about Portocci?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I never saw him before this morning."



“What’s your name?”

“J-Jean. Kirkpatrick. I’m a model.”

“What were you modeling this morning?”

“I... I...” Her eyes dropped in embarrassment and confusion.

“What?”

“Sometimes... when I don’t have any modeling assignments... Mr. Balderone hires me to... as a companion for... his friends.”

“Who is Balderone?”

“You k-killed him, and you don’t even know him?”

“How would I go about getting a date with you, Jean?”

“Huh? You mean...?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. If I’d never met you, and knew nothing about you, how would I go about getting an introduction?”

“You, uh, you don’t understand.”

“I’ll listen while you give me an understanding.”

She had decided that Bolan was not going to murder her. She said, “Can I get up?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. Let’s get this understanding first.”

“I’m not a prostitute, if that’s what you’re thinking. I mean, there’s a difference, a very important difference.”

“All right, there’s a difference. Tell me about it.”

“I work for Mr. Balderone. He pays me himself. Between me and his friends it was just like fun, like a party... you know. I mean, no money passed. No business arrangements. You know what I mean?”

“Were all of Mr. Balderone’s friends Italians?”

Her eyes blinked rapidly. “Not all the time.”

“Look, kid, let’s get something straight. How you make your living is your business. I’m not interested in that. I just want some live information, and I want it straight and quick. Are you reading me?”

The girl had begun to cry. Bolan was feeling miserable for her, but his face kept the secret. “You’re mixed up with the Mafia,” he told her.

“The *what?*”

“Portocci was the junior boss of a western family. Now I want to know... who was Balderone? What was his connection to Portocci?”

The girl shook her head. The tears were rapidly drying up. Bolan snared a box of Kleenex from a dressing table and tossed it on the bed. She rose to hands and knees, rocked back in a kneeling position, grabbed a tissue, and dabbed at her eyes and nose. Bolan understood the maneuver. She was giving him a good look at the object of his abuse.

He let her know that he was looking and not buying. He pressed on. “You ever hear the name *Ciro Lavangetta?*”

“Yes. He’s a... he was in business with Mr. Balderone.”

“That’s a good answer,” Bolan murmured. “Okay. How many other girls are on Balderone’s payroll?”

“Quite a few. Sometimes there are—*were* big parties.”

“Always at the same place? That same hotel?”

She sighed and shook her head. “No. Different places. Sometimes on a boat, a yacht, the MERRY DREW.”

“How are the bookings right now?”

“Uh...” Her eyes dropped from his intent gaze. “Things are booming.”

“Tell me about it.”

“A lot of his friends are in town. Some sort of convention, I believe. They’re all over the beach, though, here and there. Too many, really. He had to bring some girls in from the Gulf Coast.”

“Okay, get a pencil and paper.”

“What for?”

“I want a list. Every place Balderone has girls booked for this week.”

“That’s crazy. I don’t know all that. Are you a cop? You can’t use any of—”

“Shut up!” Bolan snarled.

She blinked and recoiled, as though expecting physical violence. “So you’re not a cop,” she said breathlessly. “I’m sorry, I don’t know all the places.”

“But you do know a few.”

“Well, yes. I know a few.”

“Then get to writing.”

“I believe you’re getting me into a lot of trouble, mister.”

Bolan shook his head. “You’re already there, kid. I didn’t put you there. I *found* you there.”

The tearworks went back into operation. Bolan pulled out his notebook and placed it in her hand, then gave her his pen. “Start writing,” he said coldly. “And keep it straight. I wouldn’t want to see that beautiful head in my crosshairs again.”

“I didn’t know they were M-Mafia,” she blubbered.

“You know it now.”

She sprawled out across the bed, pen and pad in hand, and began the list. She paused to dab at her eyes and to shoot a reproachful look at Bolan. “I’ll bet I know who you are, too,” she announced.

“Yeah? Just write, kid.”

“Yeah,” she said, imitating his voice. “I know *what* you are, too. And *they* know it. I heard them talking about you. I didn’t understand it then, but now it all makes sense. You’re in more trouble than *I* am, Mack Bolan. I wouldn’t change places with you for all the money in Miami. You think you’re their judge and jury. You’re as wrong as they are.”

“It takes one to know one,” Bolan replied curtly.

“And it takes a killer to kill,” the girl fired back. She seemed more in command of herself now, and not at all frightened of Bolan. She finished the list and returned his notebook and pen. “There’s your information. Go on out and drown yourself in other people’s blood.”

Bolan said, “Thanks.” He pocketed the book. “If you mention any of this to *them*, you know you’re as good as dead. And not from *my* hand. I’ll keep the secret if you will.”

“I guess I’ve been dead a long time already,” she said, falling back to the pillow. “How much deader can you get?”

Bolan smiled. “I’d like to discuss that with you some time.”

“Sure.”

“Seriously. I’ll be checking back—and not on business.”

She showed him a frown, then dropped her eyes. “Just for the record, I didn’t do it very often. You’d never believe it if I told you what a rotten jungle this modeling business is. A girl sort of loses her ... sense of value.”

Bolan bent over the bed and lightly kissed her lips. “Thanks for the information,” he said.

“You threaten me and then thank me,” she said, sighing. “Goodbye, killer.”

“Executioner,” he corrected her. “There is a difference.”

“Sure, your difference is like my difference. But I’m just as ruined and you’re just as bloody, difference or no.”

Bolan patted her leg, replied, “I’d still like to discuss that with you some time,” and then he went out of there. The “party” list in his pocket held portents of a party the likes of which Miami Beach had never hosted. He reminded himself that there was nothing personal in his war with the Mafia. He was a soldier doing a soldier’s job. The chief difference between this war and the one in which he had learned his craft was a simple matter of geography. Miami was the new battleground, but his mission remained the same. Kill. Decimate the enemy. Fight the war of attrition until one side is down and out.

That word “difference” kept surfacing in his mind. The encounter with Jean Kirkpatrick had raised troublesome ghosts. As he cranked the engine of his car, the two little boys reappeared briefly and took imaginary shots at him, using fingers for guns. Bolan gazed at them for a moment then kicked the car into gear and put the scene behind him.

“Sure I’m wrong,” he told his rearview mirror. “The *difference*, Miss Kirkpatrick, is that I’m not quite as wrong as they are.” A wan smile played briefly upon his lips. The girl had been correct, of course. It takes a killer to kill. The difference, as Bolan tried to see it, lay in  *motive*. What motivated Mack Bolan to kill? His smile disappeared and was replaced by a brooding frown. Wasn’t that question asked repeatedly by every soldier who’d ever found himself in a combat situation? *What am I here for?*

He lit a cigarette, set his course for the beach drive, then pulled out his party list for a quick inspection. Bolan knew damn well why he was in Miami. He’d come to crash a party. From the looks of the list, his task was mushrooming. How many parties could he “crash” before one of them rolled over atop him? He sighed. It was the same old story. The rules of warfare for an inferior force would always remain the same. *Kill quicker* than the other side. Hit and fade. Find another weak spot and *kill again*, then quickly withdraw. Maintain mobility and audacity and *the will to kill*. Forget philosophies, moralisms, and the accusing eyes of a frightened young woman.

Bolan’s lips were clamped grimly upon the cigarette. A long ash fell into his lap. He brushed it away and, in that same motion, the girl also. Bolan had not come to Miami to examine his soul. He had come to *dispatch* a number of others. And the dispatcher had a busy schedule. Miami Beach was about to become a battleground. He had to hit again, and quickly, and keep hitting until they were falling apart and breaking ranks and fleeing into their sanctuaries—and The

Executioner observed no rules of sanction, there would be no sanctuaries for the mob in Miami.

## Chapter 8

### Channel Deep and Swift.

Captain John Hannon had wasted no time in gearing the police machinery to the emergency. Queries had gone to every section of the nation which had experienced the private war of Mack Bolan, and every law office contacted to the effect of acquiring all available information which could be used to avert a Miami explosion. For several years the veteran policeman had headed a special unit which was designed to cope with the extraordinary situations in the Miami area, such as security for vacationing and transiting VIPs, providing intelligence for civil unrest and disturbance cases, and various other problems not usually associated with normal police routines. Referred to officially as "the Dade Force," the special unit was staffed by members of various police agencies in Dade County and held jurisdiction which crossed all law agencies in that area.

Robert Wilson, Lieutenant, Homicide, had worked on infrequent occasions with the special force. As investigating officer in the Sandbank incident, he had been assigned as direct liaison officer between the Dade Force and the metropolitan homicide division.

Assigned as a special advisor to the group was Stewart Dunlap of the U.S. Justice Department's Racketeering Investigative Branch, Miami Field Office. Dunlap was a regular member of the Dade Force, but on a standby basis only. He was known to have a strong interest in the Bolan case.

These three officers were sifting through the accumulation of joint data which had been developed during the short few hours of the Miami chapter of the Bolan story. Dunlap rubbed his chin reflectively and said, "I believe you have a bad situation here, John. Bolan is very obviously in town, and it just doesn't seem to be his way to go chasing specific targets around the country. He is just as obviously on the offensive... not running, I mean. I'd have to say that he's here for something big."

Hannon was studying an intelligence report from the metropolitan vice division. "You're probably right," he murmured. "According to the dossier on Balderone, he was *Ciro Lavangetta's* field man for the Miami area. If I could just tie this all together..."

Lt. Wilson commented, "I thought Lavangetta was *Portocci's* boss back in Arizona."

"That's true," Dunlap said. "But the *Cosa Nostra* isn't all that geographically oriented. Each family has a territory, right. But major resort centers have traditionally been regarded as open to all the families. Las Vegas, for instance, and Miami Beach. Some of the families are quite active in Miami, others have no interest whatever in the action here. It depends on their ties. Apparently the

Arizona faction has very strong ties in this area.” He smiled. “As a matter of fact, Justice has been watching them with great interest, and for some time.”

“Just what was Balderone’s function?” Wilson asked.

“Sort of ambassadorial,” the federal man replied. “You might think of him as Chief of the Arizona Embassy in Miami. He made business contacts, arranged deals, kept the trade lanes open to the Caribbean and South America.”

“What sort of trade lanes?”

“Just name it, you’ve hit it. Narcotics, illegal booze, hot money, gambling, any channel where the bucks run fast. He also, incidentally, had quite a reputation as a dealer in women.”

“White slavery?”

Dunlap smiled and shook his head. “Not that we’re aware of. No, that was part of his public relations routine. He wined, dined, and bedded his visiting royalty in a truly regal manner, and he had quite a discerning eye for feminine beauty. According to a couple of phone conversations we tapped into last year, he was quite proud of his hostly image. Liked to brag that he had the hottest stable in the country.”

“The young woman, Jean Kirkpatrick,” Wilson mused, “...chances are pretty good, then, that she was part of Balderone’s girl operation, right?”

“Your report states that she was there to model swimwear,” Hannon said, looking up quickly. “Did you check that out thoroughly?”

Wilson nodded. “Yes, sir, I did. The boutique shop in the lobby confirmed her story. She was wearing one of their suits when the shooting occurred. But it’s starting to smell. With Balderone straddling both worlds...” He sighed. “Such a beautiful kid. Dammit. I guess I better question her again.”

“It can keep,” the captain said. “Right now we’d better start trying to get a line on this Bolan character. And half of the Dade Force is tied down on that music festival out at the raceway.”

“Count me into your foot force,” the federal man volunteered.

“Thanks. Uh, you were saying something a while ago about the guy in Los Angeles.”

“Brognola? Yes, he was very close to the Bolan case out there. Left word for him to call. Possibly he can fill us in on the Bolan M.O. in ways that others can’t. I thought it might be helpful.”

“Hell, yes,” Hannon quietly agreed.

“Who’s Brognola?” Wilson inquired.

“Justice Department,” Dunlap explained. “He has actually spoken with Bolan and... well, I guess he was even working *with* him toward the big Mafia bust out there!” He aimed a pencil toward a manila folder on the desk. “That *Project Pointer* report there tells all about it.”

“Doesn’t sound exactly kosher,” Wilson commented uneasily.

Dunlap shrugged. “Sometimes we have to go for the end, and not the means. I guess Brognola figured the Mafia was the greater enemy. That’s our big hangup right now, anyway, you know. Federally speaking.” He smiled. “Not to put down the local cops, you understand, but we’re not nearly as interested in everyday street crime as we are in the big underworld combines.”

"I hope you're not speaking of the present case," Hannon said heavily. "This is no everyday street crime staring at us. We have one goal, and that's to prevent a hot war from erupting on our streets. Agreed?"

The federal agent showed his usual cheery smile and said, "I'm yours to command, Captain." He got to his feet and headed for the door. "I'll be upstairs. I want to stick close by in case Brognola calls. But yell if you need me."

Hannon nodded his head and Dunlap went on out. Wilson said, "I get the feeling that guy knows more than he's telling us. You get that feeling?"

"Hell, I'm sure of it," Hannon replied dismally. He went over and closed the door, then returned to the desk and sat down with a heavy sigh. "The Justice Department would like to play footsy with Bolan, and that's the whole truth of the matter. Maybe not the department per se, but someone up there with authority is trying to make intercessions with the police forces around the country. You don't see the FBI getting all lathered up over Bolan, do you?"

"What do you mean, what kind of intercessions?"

"They're suggesting it might be in the greater national interest if we just try to contain Bolan. Sort of turn our backs, you know, unless he really gets out of line."

"And what does he have to do to really get out of line? I mean, sure, so far today all he's done is gun down a couple of people who were peacefully passing the time of day around the old swimming hole. Where do we draw the line? When Miami Beach starts sliding into the Atlantic?"

The captain grimaced and reached for his pipe. The battered meerschaum in his hand was always a symbol of an inner agitation. "So far Bolan has reserved his gunsights for his natural enemy," he explained. "He has never harmed a law officer or an innocent bystander. Someone in Washington seems to think he's performing a national service."

"Miami isn't buying that crap, are we?"

"You better bet we're not, son," Hannon growled. "They'll be no Mafia massacres in Miami. I have a request in to the chief now. I've asked for an additional fifty men, all motorized. The Executioner is going to strike out in this town, Bob. Or else."

"Or else what?"

The captain shrugged. "Or else there's going to be a massacre like we've never witnessed." He pointed a quivering pipestem at the pile of papers atop his desk. "That intelligence data there points conclusively to one thing. A mob-up in Miami. The mob is here. And Bolan must know it."

"What mob-up? You mean a convention? Like at Appalachian?"

"That is precisely what I mean."

"Well, goddammit, let's bust 'em!"

"We can't bust 'em unless we can find 'em. And I have a feeling that Bolan has the edge in this footrace."

"Oh, hell," Wilson said miserably.

"Yeah, that's what it's going to be," said the captain. "Just hell."

Bolan checked into the Tideland Plaza, a swank hostelry in the lower beach area, using the name Michael Blanski, and went directly to his room. There he unpacked a new suitcase, removed the tags from a recently purchased Palm Beach suit, and called for service from the valet shop. Next he called room service and

put in an order, then carried a small spray-can into the bathroom and silverized the hair at his temples. He critically inspected the job, then added a touch of silver to the locks directly above his eyes. Satisfied, he capped the can and dropped it into the water tank of the toilet.

The door buzzer sounded. He donned his sunglasses and admitted the bellman who brought in a covered tray with bottle, mix, and ice. Bolan inspected the man closely, taking note of his dark hair and skin and slightly foreign manner. "That's fast service," he said gruffly, and handed the man a large bill. "Keep it," he added grandly.

The bellman said, "Thank you, sir. I brought also the late newspaper, it is on the tray. You had something also for the valet shop, sir?"

Bolan took note of the stiffly constructed speech, the soft and barely noticeable improper stressing of syllables. He said, "Yeah," and pointed to the suit on the bed. "Just get th' wrinkles out so I'll look irresistible to the girls, eh."

The bellman smiled dutifully and crossed to the bed to pick up the suit. "Prettiest girls in the States right here at the Beach, sir," he advised Bolan.

"Yeah, but they're spookish. What's the best way to get introduced in this town, eh?"

The bellman draped the suit over his arm. "There are ways, sir. I mean, channels."

Bolan laughed. "Yeah, I'll bet. How much?"

"The price for every taste, sir." He was moving toward the door. "Fifty to a hundred and fifty. Even more for more expensive tastes. One simply makes the right contacts."

"Yeah, well, I'll think that over," Bolan said.

"I wasn't inferring, sir, that I—"

"Sure, sure," Bolan said.

The man went out and pulled the door softly shut. Bolan grinned and went to the service tray, opened the bottle, and poured a water glass full of bourbon. He went to the bathroom, washed his mouth with the whiskey, and spat it out, then dumped the remainder of the glass and flushed it down the toilet. He returned to the tray and filled the glass with crushed ice, added some mix, and sipped it as he undressed. He could not allow his mind to become fogged with alcohol, but the scene also needed to be properly set.

His eye fell on the newspaper, precisely folded to afford a quick look at the page one feature story. His own face glared up at him from the newspaper. He set the glass down and picked up the paper. The headline above the story read, HAS THE EXECUTIONER COME TO TOWN? The picture was a pretty close artists' sketch, close enough to make Bolan feel uneasy. The story was a rehash of the Executioner story, from Pittsfield to Palm Springs, coupled to some strong hints of the morning's work at the Sandbank. He put the newspaper down and returned to the bathroom, shaved and showered, taking care to preserve the color added to his hair, and had just finished towelling dry when the bellman returned with his suit.

Bolan watched curiously as the man leaned into the closet to hang the suit. He was looking for the telltale bulge of concealed hardware, but found none. The man was a head shorter than Bolan, but thickly built and powerful looking. Bolan just

did not read him as a bellman. He gave the man another tip and growled, "How's th' food around here?"

"Very good, sir. The Surfers' Lounge offers very tasty short orders, and you may order from poolside. The dining room opens at six, but the kitchen is always open for room service. May I bring you a menu?"

"Naw, I'll try the lounge," Bolan replied. "It's a bit early for stuffin'." His face creased into a perplexed scowl, as though he were undecided about something.

The bellman hesitated with one hand on the doorknob and said, "Sir?"

"I, uh, got some friends here," Bolan said hesitantly. "I missed a plane, got here late. I'm not sure, uh, how they registered. Know what I mean?"

A bland mask seemed to slide into place across the dark man's face. He said, "No, sir."

"Hell, Balderone made the arrangements, and I'm not sure how he gave out th' names. Now you know?"

A muscle twitched in the bellman's face. He said, "I believe you have found your channel, sir. What are you asking me to do?"

Bolan passed another bill into the man's hand. "Get me my pals' room numbers. Hell, I don't know what names they're using. Catch?"

The bellman seemed to have reached a decision about Bolan. He nodded his head and replied, "Discretion is the better part of valor, sir. I believe I can help you."

"You talk like a teacher, not no bellboy," Bolan commented harshly.

"I *was* a school teacher, sir... in Cuba. I will locate your friends for you... discreetly."

"That's th' stuff." Bolan spun around and stalked over to the room service tray. He lifted the bourbon and began pouring into his glass. He heard the door softly close. He smiled, again dumped the bourbon into the toilet, and got dressed. So the bellman was a Cuban exile, he was thinking. That could explain a lot of things. And yet... Bolan was not entirely sold and he was beginning to wonder about the wisdom of his maneuver when the buzzer sounded again. He cautiously answered the ring. The Cuban stood in the hallway and passed an envelope in to Bolan. He was wearing the same bland mask and inspecting Bolan's face closely as he said, "I believe this is what you wanted, sir."

Bolan quickly opened the envelope, glanced inside, then smiled and put another bill in the bellman's hand. "Go liberate Cuba with that," he said, and closed the door.

He scanned the list of names and room numbers—obtained, he was sure, from a girl-assignment roster, if it were valid. That was the big question. Was it a valid list? Well, he reasoned, one way or another that list was his ticket to an audience with *Mafiosi*. Trap or not, it was what he was here for.

He went to his suitcase and put on his shoulder harness, inspected the Luger and shoved in a fresh clip, then affixed the silencer. The list went into his coat pocket and the Luger into the side leather, two extra clips in the reserve pocket.

## Chapter 9



## The Exiles.

The Tidewater Plaza was a large squared horseshoe, four stories high, with gardens, patios, and pools inside the horseshoe at ground level. All rooms boasted an outside exposure via glass doors opening onto private patios or balconies. The winter season boom had not fully descended upon the Plaza, and at this hour of the afternoon the main lobby was quiet, the lounge all but deserted. Outside, around the pool, no more than ten tables were occupied. Several shapely young women were cavorting in the water. A middle-aged woman who already bore evidence of having defected to a darker race lay on a sunning board and watched Bolan with frank interest as he crossed the patio. He winked at her and she winked back and sat up quickly. Bolan grinned and went on into the other wing of the building, then ascended the stairway to the third floor.

He briefly consulted his list and proceeded directly to the fourth door beyond the stairwell, gripped the Luger, and pushed the doorbuzzer. A deep voice beyond the door replied with a bored, "Yeah?"

Bolan buzzed again and said, "Ay, Al, come on, open up."

The door cracked open, the chainlock remaining intact, to reveal an eye and a sliver of face. The surly voice demanded, "Who the hell is that?"

The Luger phutted into the crack and the face rapidly receded with a dying grunt, a glass hit the floor just inside and liquids sloshed through the crack, then a heavy weight clicked the door fully shut.

Bolan walked up the hallway and around the curve, then stopped to press another doorbuzzer. The door opened at the first summons and a disinterested man of about 25 said, "Oh, I thought you was room service."

Bolan told him, "I was just over to Al's," and pushed on inside. A television was blaring unattended. On the balcony overlooking the pool, two other men sat at a small table, drinks and cards in front of them. "Hey, deal me in," Bolan told the man who had opened the door.

The man was looking him over with casual interest. "I know th' face," he said, "but I can't get th' name. Let's see now, don't tell me, waitaminnit, we oughta hold these get-togethers more often, eh? Let's see, uh, it's..."

"Bolan."

"Huh?"

Bolan's hand and the Luger were sliding into view. The *Mafioso* reacted then, whirling toward an open closet, his hand scrabbling along an overhead shelf. The Luger whispered and its issue splatted into the base of the man's skull, sending him spinning on into the closet.

The two men on the balcony, less than 20 feet away, were fighting clear of the table and trying to come to their feet, one of them tugging at something in the waistband of his trousers. The Luger arced into the new target area, phutted twice in rapid fire, and the tuggger lurched onto the table, overturning it with a crash of glass and metal. The other man was making a dive for the balcony railing. The Luger's silent chasers overtook him, doubled him into a convulsive knot poised for a frozen instant above the railing, and then he was over and gone. A horrified shriek immediately arose from the patio.

Bolan knelt into the closet and pinned a marksman's medal to the seat of his first victim's trousers, then quickly withdrew.

He went to the fourth floor and jogged on around the horseshoe bend, reaching his next stop in a matter of seconds. He did not bother with the buzzer but rapid-fired three rounds of his new clip into the door mechanism, following immediately with a crashing kick. The door bounded open and Bolan was inside before the vibrations of the assault had subsided. A nude man was on the dishevelled bed, on his back and raised to both elbows, glaring at the intruder in startled anger. A girl stood just outside the doorway to the balcony, her back to Bolan. She was nude also, but dangling a large towel in front of her from the shoulders and obviously trying to peer down onto the patio below without exposing herself. She jumped visibly upon noting Bolan's presence and whirled about with a frightened scowl, the towel flying high and defeating its purpose. In a confused voice, she announced, "Somebody just fell off a balcony over there, I think."

The outraged man on the bed was picking up on his delayed reflexes. He snarled, "You got no right bustin' in here like that! You got a warrant? Lemme see your warrant!"

Bolan stepped to the foot of the bed, said, "Sure, Julio, here you go," extended the Luger at arm's length, and gave the *Mafioso* his last rites.

The girl stumbled into the room, the towel dropped and forgotten, and gave Bolan the silent horror treatment. He assured her, "I'm not going to hurt you. Get your clothes on and get out of here. Quick!"

She murmured, "Ohgodohgod," and staggered on into the bathroom.

Bolan reached the hallway with his list in his hand. He consulted his wristwatch, wavered momentarily, then ran along to the stairway and headed for the floor above and his final call at Tidewater Plaza.

Lt. Wilson panted down the stone steps and flung himself into the waiting vehicle. The car was screeching forward before his door was fully closed. He glanced at the driver, then swiveled about to regard Captain Hannon who shared the rear seat with another member of the Dade Force. "I got no details," Wilson puffed. "What's up?"

Hannon replied, "Something's going on down at the Tidewater Plaza. Sounds like a possible Bolan hit."

Wilson nodded and settled into his seat, nervously dug for a cigarette, and commented, "Isn't the Tidewater on that list of Mafia tie-ins?"

The captain's reply was lost as the car squealed onto the beach drive, heeling and swaying in the abrupt turn as a marked patrol car leapt alongside then powered smoothly into the lead, beacon flashing and siren screaming. Hannon snapped, "Mike!" and extended a hand into the front seat. Wilson passed the radio microphone back and watched the captain through narrowed eyes as the leader of the Dade Force passed instructions into the command net. "No sirens! Marked cars form a perimeter of standard containment and hold all traffic. Dade Specials form on me, outside front, and await further."

The clipped tones of the special dispatcher immediately began relaying the instructions and assigning stations. Hannon turned the microphone over to Wilson. "They're sending a couple of boats down, also. If that character is in there, maybe our problem is smaller than we thought."

"And what if he's not?" Wilson muttered.

"Then we're already treading deeper water than I enjoy. Tallahassee is in the act already, bunch from the attorney general's office on the way down. And the governor's office has been on the horn. Plus, Dunlap tells me that this Brognola fella is being flown here in a government jet."

"Aw, piss," Wilson commented dismally.

"Well, maybe we'll have our turkey on ice by the time the congregation arrives," Hannon said.

"I'll buy that," Wilson said. He took out his revolver and checked it, sighed, and added, "They say this guy has several faces. How do we know which one to look for?"

"Just look for a big graceful cat with graveyard eyes. All the pictures and sketches I've seen of this youngster have that one thing in common. Those eyes. You noticed?"

Wilson nodded, twirled the cylinder of his revolver and replaced it in the leather. "I noticed."

"Just ahead, cap'n," the driver advised.

"All right, let's get set," Hannon commanded, his voice tightening. "A lot of people have left this world with that vision carrying them out."

"*What* vision?" asked the detective.

"Those eyes, Sergeant. Those graveyard eyes."

The "big graceful cat" had stumbled into a full nest, obviously a honcho's pad, in the fifth floor penthouse—and a firefight was in hot progress. Three semi-nude women were racing across the roof sundeck and screaming at the limit of their lungs; two others lay in petrified curls beside a shattered plate-glass window, another was having a loud nervous breakdown in one of the bedrooms, a blood-spattered companion pinning her to the bed beneath his lifeless bulk. Four men—two in bathing trunks, one in flowered shorts, one fully dressed—sprawled in various poses of death about the apartment.

Bolan had run out of ammo for the Luger, and had abandoned it. A snubnosed .32 was in one hand, a .45 automatic in the other, both acquired during the course of the battle. He was bleeding slightly from the right hand, where a sliver of flying glass had nicked him, and he was surveying the carnage from behind the cover of an overturned couch, seeking another live target. A man in a white suit broke from a doorway across the room and made a run for the front door, firing wildly toward the couch as he ran. Bolan raised up and fired both guns simultaneously. The man broke stride and fell in a twisting crumble.

The Executioner was well aware that he had pushed his luck a bit too far. The thunder of a firefight he had not desired, and his timing had suffered grievously from being pinned down too long in the penthouse. He tossed the .45 across the room, retrieved his Luger and jammed it into the sideleather, and dropped the .32 into the pocket of his coat. The girl in the bedroom was running out of breath and had wound down to a rhythmic moaning.

Bolan hesitated, then stepped inside the bedroom and pulled her to her feet, stood her against the wall, and began gently working her over with methodical slaps to the face. Her eyes rolled down almost immediately and the glaze

disappeared from them. He muttered, "Sorry, kid. Your bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Grab your clothes and beat it."

She nodded her head in understanding. Satisfied that she was in control, Bolan released her and moved quickly through to the living room. The girls by the window were beginning to lift themselves up and look around. At Bolan's reappearance, they again dropped quickly to the floor. He went on out, entering the penthouse foyer with senses quivering alert, and ran down the winding stairway to the fourth level hallway. A window there overlooked the front grounds, revealing a scene of considerable activity below. Vehicles were entering the circular drive from both directions; others had already reached the portico and men were spilling from them. In the distance he could see two police cruisers pulled broadside across the beach drive, beacons flashing.

Bolan came to a quick decision and descended quickly to the ground level, passing into the now very much alive lobby at the same moment that a group of grimfaced men came through the main entrance. He quickly stepped into the lounge. The bartender was hovering just inside the doorway, anxiously peering into the lobby. Bolan said, "What the hell is going on around here?"

The bartender replied, "Christ, I don't know. Th' house dicks are running around like wild men, and it looks like the cops just made the scene. I heard explosions. I dunno, maybe we're on fire."

Bolan said, "Oh," and went out the other door, along the hallway, and to his room.

He knew that he had a visitor even before he closed the door. The .32 cleared his pocket in a lightening sweep, the small hairs at the back of his neck stiffening in the automatic reflex, then relaxing in the instant recognition of his visitor. Bolan kept the little .32 steady and said, "Naughty, naughty. What did you teach in Cuba, breaking and entering?"

The bellman, now wearing swim trunks beneath a short terrycloth robe, smiled and replied, "Relax, Senor Bolan. I am your friend."

"How does *Blanski* come out Bolan?" The Executioner inquired, though well aware that his cover had been penetrated.

"I have followed your campaigns with great admiration," the Cuban said, ignoring the question. He waved his arm in the direction of a chair, on which were draped swim trunks and a robe similar to his. "Right now we must get you out. I will explain while you change, but you must hurry."

Bolan had never been noted for indecision. His mind examined the situation in a quick scan and he immediately began undressing.

"You may call me *Toro*," the Cuban told him. "And that is the Spanish bull, not the Italian. Not that I have anything at all against the Italians, but just to clear your own mind."

Bolan was kicking off his jockeys. He stepped into the trunks and said, "Okay, Toro the Spanish bull. What's the plan?"

"The plan is *escape*, and the *via* is the sea. We Cubans are noted masters of such an event."

Bolan smiled and adjusted the trunks to his crotch. "So all we have to do is find the sea. Great." He shrugged into the robe. "Do you have a magic carpet?"

Toro smiled broadly. "*Si*, maybe. But you must leave your possessions behind."

"I've done that before, too," Bolan replied. "Nothing here I can't replace." He gazed regretfully at the Luger, then wrapped it carefully and stowed it in the suitcase.

The Cuban said, "Maybe you can return for it later." He pulled a chair into position beneath a ceiling grating, stood on it, and carefully elevated the metal screen. "Air conditioning shaft," he explained, smiling at Bolan. "Remain at my very feet and make not a sound."

Bolan nodded, jammed the .32 into the waistband of his trunks, and followed Toro into the shaft. It was cramped and dark, but delightfully cool. Bolan replaced the grating and snaked along in pursuit of the fastmoving Cuban.

The shaft obviously traversed the entire length of that wing of the building, with periodic offshoots to the upper floors. They moved warily across a dozen gratings opening into rooms below; once Bolan passed directly above a nude couple, entertwined and apparently asleep on a bed. He made a mental note for future reference to avoid hotel rooms with overhead air-conditioning, and quietly passed on. After a long period of uncomfortable slithering along the narrow shaft, his guide halted and signalled Bolan. They lay still for a long moment, then a crack of light ahead momentarily blinded Bolan. Another quiet wait, then the crack suddenly became a wide rectangle and Toro was again moving forward. Then he was gone from sight and whispering urgently, "Quickly, senior, swing down."

Bolan found the hand rail and tumbled through the access hatch. He performed a somersault and landed on his feet in soft sand. They were at the end of the horseshoe and one low wall removed from open beach. Toro was scrambling over the wall. Bolan quickly followed and glanced about for a quick recon. Few bathers were present, though there was fresh evidence of a recent crowd in the vicinity. Bolan presumed that they had been drawn back to the hotel by the ruckus. A man lying beneath a beach umbrella stared at them curiously as they walked by.

The Cuban had begun to dance about in the sand and laugh loudly, as though Bolan had said something funny, which he had not. Bolan picked it up, talking and laughing in a loud voice. They were approaching the center of the hotel's private section of the beach. Three very obvious policemen in plainclothes, standing stiffly near the wall in an attitude of tense watchfulness, gave the merrymakers an intent scrutiny. One of the officers shifted his weight in a half-pivot and seemed to be about to step into their path. Toro whipped off his robe and danced wildly around Bolan as he wadded the robe into a ball, then he threw it into Bolan's face with a wild shriek and raced toward the water.

Bolan yelled, "Okay, buddy, you asked for it!"—and chased after Toro, removing his own robe on the run. He hit the surf in an arching dive. The .32 left him under the onslaught of the foaming water. Bolan let it go and threshed on in pursuit of the Cuban. A glance over his shoulder showed that the policemen had bought the act. They were splitting up and moving toward the ends of the building.

Toro was floating and getting his breath beyond the rollers when Bolan reached him. "Some carpet," Bolan panted. "And some act. Now I know what you taught. Drama, right?"

Toro grinned. "We will work slowly and casually northward. A boat awaits us. Or if you become too tired, senior, we can go ashore farther on and walk a little."

Bolan was gazing toward the open sea. "Couple of boats right out there," he observed.

"Si, and they await you also. Police boats, Senor Bolan."

"How do you know so much?" Bolan asked, though not really expecting an answer. He flipped onto his back and idled northward with his guide who, incidentally, Bolan was now certain was something more than a hotel bellman. Just how much more, Bolan was equally certain that he would soon learn. For the moment, he was only grateful for the strange twist of destiny that had placed him in the hands of Toro, the Spanish bull. He hoped that they would continue to be friendly hands. He liked the little Cuban; more, he respected him. Also, in some dark instinctive corner of his mind, he feared him. Bolan paddled on, watching the luxury hotels slipping slowly past, and found the entire scene suddenly incredible. He had just slain a dozen men. And now he was lolling in the warm Miami currents, lazily making his way "northward," guided by an unknown entity and to an unimaginable destination.

Yes, it was incredible. Very well. Bolan accepted the incredible. His entire life, since returning from Vietnam, had been woven of same threads.

He smiled and caught Toro's eye. "By the way, thanks," he said.

"My pleasure, senor, to work with a man of your accomplishments."

Bolan said, "I had a flanker like you once," in his own mind paying the man a huge tribute. "He died in a place called Balboa."

"Si, I read of that tragedy."

"You seem to know a lot more about me than I know about you," Bolan observed.

"In time," Toro replied, smiling, "that will not be so. For now, know this. When *this* flanker dies, he hopes it to be in a place called *Cuba*."

Bolan said nothing. He was beginning to understand the new friendship. Impossible causes, he was thinking, had a way of branding their champions—brands which made brothers of the bearers, regardless of their other differences. Their eyes met and the unspoken understanding passed between them. "It must be very lonely to be an exile," Bolan murmured.

"Can you not answer that for yourself, senor?" Toro replied quietly.

"Yes, I suppose I can." Bolan turned his face toward the line of hotels, and the two exiles paddled on northward.

## Chapter 10

### El Matador.

John Hannon stood broodingly in the doorway of the manager's office at the Tidewater Plaza, watching the approach of the Homicide lieutenant. Wilson's face showed no evidence of impending good news. Hannon dug into a pocket for his pipe, clamped it between his teeth, and waited the report.

Wilson shook his head and said, "I don't know, cap'n. This place is like a small city. Over 500 rooms, barber shops, clothiers, restaurants, bars, the whole bit."

"You're saying we're not going to find him," Hannon snapped.

"No sir, it's too soon to say that. I just want you to know that it's going to take a while for a thorough shake. We're still finding victims. The count is now up to ten."

"How about the young women? They have anything to offer?"

The detective grinned. "Yes sir, but not while I'm on duty."

"Cut it out," Hannon growled. "I'm in no mood for wisecracks."

Wilson sobbered. "Uh, every one of them gave a different description of the assailant. They can't even agree on how many. You know how numbing it can be when hell explodes right out of the blue. One of the girls is under sedation. The others are still shaking. I believe we'll get better accounts after they've settled down some."

"In the meantime," the captain fumed, "we're getting no closer at all to Bolan."

"One very stark picture does emerge," Wilson thoughtfully pointed out. "Bolan hits fast and hard. He comes in like a lightning bolt and leaves in a clap of thunder—and when it's over, those left alive are sitting around wondering just what the hell happened."

Hannon nodded and started to comment, then checked himself as a telephone rang behind him. He stepped into the office, conversed briefly on the phone, then returned to the doorway. "Another stiff," he told Wilson, sighing. "Room 342. Better get up there and look it over. Wait... I'll go with you." He caught the attention of a uniformed officer and called him over. "Watch the phone," Hannon ordered. "Relay anything for me to 342."

The patrolman murmured his understanding and went into the office. As the two detectives walked to the elevator, Hannon said, "Somehow Bolan penetrated their security—obviously knew precisely where they were quartered. I don't know how, yet... but I guess we better try to find out. It might be our only finger on him. This deal up in 342, now there's a case in point."

"What point?" Wilson asked.

"Bolan had 'em fingered. Peters says the victim was crumpled against the door, inside the room. Chainlock still intact. Got it right in the face. Cracked the door, see, left the chain on, looked out to see who was calling. Then *splat*, a bullet up the nose. Guy had a drink in his hand, half-undressed, television turned on... all relaxed, see? A .38 revolver lying on his dresser, didn't even take it to the door with him, took his drink instead. Suspected nothing, felt safe and secure. The door chain was a normal caution, I'd do it that way myself. Then *splat*, right up the nose."

Wilson was frowning as he stepped into the elevator car. "He's just hunting them down, then, and Killing them on sight," he commented, a growl in his voice. "Look, I don't like these people myself... but I can't buy that kind of shit. The guy's an animal, cap'n. An animal with a strong smell for blood."

Hannon was grimacing in deep thought. "I don't think so, Bob," he muttered. "Is that the way you'd describe our boys in Vietnam? As bloodthirsty animals?"

"That's different," Wilson replied.

The car eased to a smooth halt and the door slid open. The two men stepped out, paused to check the directions on the wall, then strode along the carpeted hallway as the captain picked up the conversation. "It's different only because of time and place," he argued. "These are the rules of combat, the new rules, as

prescribed for Vietnam. It's a hunt and kill war over there, Bob. These young fellas are taught to fight that way. The enemy is something to track down and exterminate. Bolan's been through several years of that hell, and I guess he learned his lessons well. Now he's fighting the same kind of war, right here in our town. We don't want to hate the kid, Bob. We want to try to understand him. Otherwise, I'm getting the feeling that we'll never nail him."

"He's no *kid*," Wilson sniffed. "Not unless I am too."

The veteran cop chuckled. "You're both kids to me, lieutenant. Here we are. The scene is undisturbed... we'll have to climb the balcony."

A uniformed officer stood in the open doorway of room 340. He touched his cap respectfully and said, "340 is unoccupied, sir. Go through to the terrace and over the wall to your right."

The detectives went on through without a word. As Wilson was hoisting himself over the dividing wall, he muttered, "Goddamn war anyhow, sending these guys back with blood in their nose."

The captain did not comment on that until they were standing over the bloodied remains of Al Capistrano, an enforcer in the Philadelphia family of Ralph The Barber Calipatria. He sighed and said, "They don't all come back with this big a hard-on, lieutenant. We've got to get this boy. We have got to get him quick." He dropped to his knees for a closer look.

"I'll buy that," Wilson replied.

The captain rose hastily to his feet and passed a hand wearily across his face. "I just hope you can, lieutenant... and that the price won't be too high. How many victims does this make today?"

Wilson performed a quick mental calculation and replied, "Thirteen that we know of."

"Uh-huh. Well, I guess the massacre is on. We won't find Bolan at the Tidewater Plaza, I'm sure of that now. He isn't hanging around waiting for us to seal him in. I'd say he's a perfectionist. Knows precisely what he is doing, every step of the way. In matters of war, that is."

"So which way do we go from here?"

Hannon sighed. "You go down and take the seal off, it's a useless exercise. I'm going to stay up here for a while. I feel very close to that boy right now, I could almost touch him. I'm getting his feel and his smell."

Wilson went back out the way he'd come, nodded to the patrolman, and headed for the elevator. If the captain wanted to sit in that death room and think, then Bob Wilson allowed that this was the captain's own business. But Wilson had just remembered something regarding the tough old chief of the Dade Force. Hannon's only son had died in Vietnam, torn to bits when he stepped on a land mine. The lieutenant was hoping that the captain was not becoming confused as to the identity of The Executioner. The name was Mack Bolan—not John Hannon, Jr. And a guy had to know when to stop being a war hero. Bolan was no hero in Miami. He was the same as any other killer, and he was going to meet a killer's fate in Miami. Lt. Wilson had already bought that fact. And *no* cost would prove too high.

Wilson felt, moreover, that this was no case for the silk gloves, VIP handling of the Dade Force. It was a homicide matter, and only homicide routines would tip



the balance of advantage away from Bolan. Let Hannon sit in a death room and ponder M.O. The homicide cop would conduct a standard investigation. He would begin with the hotel staff, and he'd milk them dry of all they could possibly offer. He'd backtrack on Bolan's trail and sift through it all again. He'd call in every informant in town and he'd comb the city for every presence of the Mafia and he'd, by god, meet Bolan on Bolan's own ground. What was more, he would gun the son of a bitch down without once thinking of all those glory medals from Vietnam.

*Hate* the kid? Wilson's lips twisted in a rueful smile. Hell no, he didn't hate him. But he hated what he stood for, he hated the idea that some combat-crazy sergeant could forget what it had all been about, and come back to destroy the very thing he had fought to preserve.

After all, Wilson had put in his share of military service, too. If Hannon wanted to "understand the kid," he should ask a... Wilson stood stockstill in the elevator doorway, gripping his hands together tightly in the sudden "revelation." Of course! The military mind was...

The Lieutenant was mentally chastising himself—had he so easily forgotten all of his war training? The success of every commando-like strike was geared to the *intelligence* factor! So where was Bolan getting his intelligence? From a beautiful whore in a flowered bikini? Was Jean Kirkpatrick an innocent witness... or was she an accomplice to a killer?

Bolan *had* to have an accomplice! Those lightning strikes didn't just materialize spontaneously! They were planned to the closest detail, and executed with military precision!

Wilson punched the elevator button and, in the same motion, made a grab into his breast pocket for his notebook and hurriedly flipped the pages to his notes of the Sandbank investigation. Uh-huh, there she was. 2015 Palmetto Lane. There was the start... and maybe the ending.

The boat had picked them up at the north end of Miami Beach and then headed south, backtracking along their earlier route, past the seaquarium and across Biscayne Bay. Then Bolan was outfitted in ragged jeans which were several inches too short and thonged sandals, also too small. It was at this point that Toro had apologetically applied the blindfold, explaining while not explaining, "You understand, *amigo*, the necessity for secrecy."

Some time later they bumped ashore and Bolan was guided up over the bow and into grassy marshland. After a twenty minute hike with difficult footing, Bolan's blindfold was removed. They were in rough country and quite removed from the water. Bolan oriented his directions by the setting sun, but could arrive at no meaningful analysis of their course. They seemed to be zig-zagging, travelling on first one heading and then another. In the last faint light of dusk they emerged from thick underbrush onto a narrow dirt lane and a waiting jeep. A pretty *senorita* sat behind the wheel. She was clad in tight-fitting combat fatigues and wore a U.S. Army .45 in a flap holster. A field hat with the brim snapped up did little to imprison a thick sheen of luxurious raven hair.

Toro performed a quiet introduction. Her name was Margarita, and the lustrous dark eyes did not miss a detail of Bolan's physical presence. He became awkwardly aware of his ill-fitting jeans and dust-sweat-caked torso, mumbling an acknowledgement of the introduction as he slid onto the rear seat of the jeep. Toro

climbed in beside the girl and they conversed in rapid Spanish as the vehicle sped along the lane at suicidal speeds—or so it seemed to Bolan, considering the terrain. The girl's statements at times took on an agitated quality and she would toss her head angrily with an occasional quick snap toward their visitor. Bolan began to feel like an unwelcome dinner guest.

The night had firmly settled in when they reached the compound, and a chill was falling upon the air. As the jeep bounced to a halt, Toro stood on the floor and hurled an authoritative string of Spanish phrases toward a guard tower, high above them. A floodlight flashed on and washed the jeep with a brilliant glare. Bolan closed his eyes but kept his face elevated, in his mind visualizing an armed camp with machine-gun towers, barbed wire, and nervous sentries with willing fingers. Someone opened a gate, Toro sat down, the floodlight went off, and the jeep went in.

Bolan experienced a surge of uneasiness as the gate closed behind him. He had played a hunch and ridden it to the bitter end... but what if his instincts had gone awry? How did he know that Toro was a friend... or a militant exile... or even a Cuban? And even if it were all true, the Cuban bit and all, how could Bolan be sure that the Mafia cancer had not spread to include such groups for one purpose or another? He discovered that he was breathing too shallow, his stomach tight and queasy. He forced himself to relax and to still the disquieting doubts. They were speeding along a smoother road, headlamps extinguished, and with a total cessation of conversation in the front seat.

A dip, a wild turn, then an abrupt climb and they broke into a large clearing. Dismal yellow light seeped from the open windows of a dozen or more long and lowslung barracks-type wooden buildings. Somewhere a man was strumming a guitar and singing in soft Spanish. The jeep slowed and swerved between several buildings, then again broke open ground and jounced to a halt in front of a crumbling stucco house. A number of men in varying styles of dress filed out through the wide doorway and lined the rail of the veranda, staring quietly at the new arrivals.

The girl leapt from the jeep and went into the house without a backward look. Toro showed Bolan a flashing smile, then stepped to the ground and delivered a flourishing statement in Spanish to the men on the veranda.

Bolan caught only the last few words, "...*Senor Mack Bolan, El Matador!*"

The announcement produced a startled reaction from the men on the porch. Then they made a rush for the jeep. A fat man with a cigar clenched between his teeth grabbed Bolan's hand and helped him to the ground. The others milled about, exclaiming excitedly in hushed Spanish, and pressing warm handshakes upon the surprised visitor.

Toro caught Bolan's amazed reaction and quietly extricated him from the welcoming, moving him insistently toward the house. "Is it so surprising, *Senor Bolan*," he said, grinning, "that courage and daring is admired in this place?"

"I guess not," Bolan replied. His doubts had left him. *El Matador*, he was certain, was in the very best of hands.

# Chapter 11

## A Matter for Competition.

Ciro Lavangetta had put in a rough day... and it was getting rougher by the minute. George the Butcher had been needling him mercilessly, with at least the tacit approval of the eastern bosses—right up to the moment when the electrifying news came in from the Tidewater Plaza. From that point on it had been sheer turmoil, with Ciro on the hotseat, being required to repeat over and over each tiny detail of his entirely second-hand knowledge of Mack the Bastard Bolan.

The Talifero brothers had presented the worst ordeal, with their suavely cold manners and often coolly mocking attitude during the interrogation. At least five times they had insisted that he repeat his complete impressions of the scene at Palm Springs, site of Bolan's latest big operation. They even tried crossing Ciro up, interviewing him one at a time in a closed room and each one asking identical questions—and Ciro never knew which one he was talking to. Stand those two boys side by side and you couldn't tell which was which.

The whole thing was terribly unnerving to Ciro and of course he blamed Mack Bolan for the entire ordeal. What the hell, Ciro had never done anything to Mack Bolan, or to Bolan's old man or old lady or the damn kid sister. Was it Ciro's fault the bastard comes roaring home from the war on a vendetta against the organization? Hell no. Was it Ciro's fault the bastard slams Sergio and Deej and tumbles their whole territories into ruins? Hell no. And now these Talifero brothers acting like Ciro was to blame for it all! Well, screw the Taliferos, this was Ciro's reaction. If they were such goddamn hot stuff, let them find the bastard themselves and put him through the ordeal—why take it out on Ciro Lavangetta?

The Arizona chieftain's discomfiture was understandable enough. The Talifero brothers were not every day items in the life of a Costa Nostra boss. They occupied a unique niche in the family hierarchy, answering to no particular Capo or family, but to the invisible and impersonal body of the *Commissione* itself. Indeed, the Taliferos constituted a "family" of their own, also largely invisible, impersonal and loyal only to the unified concept of "this thing of ours," or *La Cosa Nostra*.

It is not certain as to just how, when, or by whom the brothers were originally empowered to carry out the *Commissione's* edicts. It is not even known if Talifero is the true family name (a constructed name could be suggested by the Italian *tale*, meaning "such," and *ferro*, "iron") but that they were brothers is beyond contest. They were, it seems, identical twins. Each stood about six feet tall, weighed about 175, had dark hair, light skin, blue eyes, and were evidently well educated. Legend has it that they were graduated from the Harvard Law School; if so, they did not attend under the name Talifero.

At the time of the Miami convention, the brothers were about 40 years of age. They dressed immaculately, spoke precise English in the Harvard manner, and were said to be in athletic good health. If they ever smiled, there is no record of this rare event. Perhaps they had little to smile about. Or perhaps they felt too strongly the weight of their grave responsibilities to "this thing of ours." The Taliferos were, in the deeper analysis, that much debated entity of international

crime, “the boss of all the bosses.” Not in decision-making functions, nor in the normal run of business—but they constituted the physical *will* of the council of *Capo*’s. As such, the Talifero brothers were the final word in family discipline. They served not themselves, not the *Capo*’s, but *this thing* itself.

A normal Mafia family was actually a business enterprise, geared to the accumulation of money by whatever means available. Contrary to their public image, the Families did not normally indulge in overt criminal activities, such as armed robbery, burglary, etc. Occasionally an individual *Mafioso*, short of funds and seeking a new stake, might pull a stick-up or a hijack, but this type of activity was generally frowned on by the Family itself, considered far too risky for the rewards available. Relative safety with rich rewards was much more likely along the “trade routes” of the underworld, in endeavors such as gambling, loan-sharking, narcotics wholesaling (*never* retailing), smuggling, and brokerages in illegal whiskey, stolen automobiles and appliances, etc. Labor racketeering had also proven lucrative, and millions of illegally acquired dollars had moved into legitimate trade areas like banking, construction, trucking, vending machines, garbage collection, nightclubs and casinos, restaurants and bars, and virtually anywhere that profits could be reaped by unscrupulous and non-regulated manipulating.

Violence upon the outside world, then, was not a normal Mafia pursuit; that is, it was not regarded as profitable. A certain amount of strong-arming was perhaps inevitable in some minority of business pursuits; for the most part, however, violence was a thing of, in, and around the underworld itself. Protection of trade routes, for example, against invasion by outside or competitive interests; enforcement of Family fealty and territorial rights against over-ambitious *Mafiosi*; and, of course, protection of the Families themselves against unwarranted persecution by members of the “straight” community and legal establishment. In this connection, the major obstruction to court prosecution of known *Mafiosi* lay in the difficulty of keeping prosecution witnesses alive long enough to get their testimony into the court records.

From all this emerges the true picture of a Mafia Family. Except for a small number of “enforcers” working within each Family group, the average *Mafioso* was little more than a shrewd businessman with a total disregard for legal restraints. He might be called upon from time to time to bear arms, to protect the Family estate, or even tapped for an execution of an errant brother—and he might hire “rodmen” from outside the Family to discourage competition or to provide for his own protection. He could be, and often was, a vicious and conscienceless killer—when the cause was right. Torture killings were a favorite method of vengeance against those foolish enough to betray or threaten the Family, from within or without, and some of these were hideously perpetrated.

Even so, life inside the Mafia was generally quiet and businesslike, with as few ripples upon the surface of society as was possible to make. The general inclination was toward total non-recognition, and to foster the idea that stories and charges of La Cosa Nostra’s existence were entirely mythical.

The Talifero brothers did not operate a typical Mafia Family. Their business was murder, intimidation, espionage, and violence of every stripe. Their cadre had never been officially numbered, but it is known that their influence was ever

present throughout the scattered provinces of Mafiadom, and that they were feared more than any other force of *La Cosa Nostra*.

When the brothers left the council chambers that evening, they knew Mack Bolan's professional background as perhaps no other persons living. They had wrung dry the memories of both Ciro Lavangetta and Frank Milano; they had carefully and painstakingly reconstructed the strikes at Pitts-field, Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Phoenix, and Miami Beach; and they had a fairly valid working model of The Executioner for their specialized minds to ponder.

Lavangetta gratefully closed the door behind their departure and told Augie Marinello, "I don't want to ever be put through anything like that again. I'd rather face a Congressional committee."

Marinello smiled and replied, "You know, we wouldn't have asked you to, Ciro, except that we thought it just had to be."

"We should of put them on the job a long time ago," George Aggravante growled. "And then maybe we wouldn't have this mess to face right now."

"You know how I hate to see those boys activated, Georgie," Marinello said quietly.

Aggravante snickered and replied, "Yeah, it's sort of like starting nuclear warfare, huh. This's a job for massive retaliation though, Augie. I don't see how we could of done otherwise."

"That's exactly what I'm telling Ciro here. We just had to turn those boys loose. I'm sorry if they ruffled your dignity any, Ciro."

"Dignity is a thing you get buried with," Lavangetta replied. "The Taliferos can dig at me anytime they want to, so long as they're not burying me. I just want them to bury that Bolan. I'd put up with anything to see that."

"You better get your eyes rested, then, 'cause you're going to be seeing it pretty soon."

Lavangetta laughed nervously, lit a cigar, and excused himself. He wanted some fresh air. He wanted to sit by some pure water and sip some fine wine and maybe even feel up some wild women. The day had been a nightmare. He hoped that the night would prove to be of a far better quality.

In fact, it would not.

Within 30 minutes after the Taliferos had been "activated" by the *Commissione*, and long before the completion of the skull sessions with Lavangetta and Milano, a "ring of steel" had gone into place to protect the "Miami Convention" from further Bolan raids. Under Talifero direction, the dispersal rule for visiting *Mafiosi* had been reversed, and three "centers" had been established wherein the Families would dwell, in strength, throughout the remainder of the summit conference.

The council meetings were to be held in a different center each day, with the location to be decided by the brothers in each instance and at the last moment. This decision created quite a problem in logistics. Two beachfront hotels, wholly owned by Mafia interests, were selected as the major strongholds. A phoney "strike" by employees of those establishments would be engineered as a pretext to cancel reservations and to empty those accomodations already retained by the "straight" public. Handpicked "employees," hastily recruited through underworld contacts, would be retained to serve the special guests who were already arriving.

The third “center” was a large cruise boat, also Mafia-owned and crewed, the MV MERRY DREW—infrequently used as a party yacht, more often as a gambling casino and floating pleasure palace, and occasionally as a contraband carrier to and from Latin American ports.

These arrangements were more aesthetically pleasing to the visiting Families than the earlier plan. A convention was a place for business, certainly, but it was also a time for renewing old friendships and relaxing with large numbers of one’s own kind. Even with the Bolan menace in town, it was regarded as natural and right that a Family reunion be a thing of good-natured celebration and cheer. The general consensus among the visitors was that Mack Bolan was not going to spoil their holiday. The Talifero boys would take care of Bolan. Probably before the next dawn Bolan’s head would be in a Talifero basket. It was even beginning to seem, in some minds, that a kindly fate had maneuvered The Bastard into this confrontation with the reality of *La Cosa Nostra*. Maybe even Bolan’s head would serve as a new chalice to restore the confidence of the faltering brotherhood. There had been too many reverses lately, too many successful challenges to the omnipotence of the organization.

Yes, Bolan had been sent to them, C.O.D. The Taliferos would do the collecting, Bolan would do the paying, and *La Cosa Nostra*, this consecrated thing of theirs, would reap the profits of this most productive convention in their history. Or so the feeling went among certain of the rank and file.

One or two bosses, though, were not so certain of the “profits” to be realized from this enclave. There was a territory to be deeded, a most lucrative property, and hungrily eyed by the feudal kings of the adjoining estates. What businessman would not gamble a small piece of his soul for an opportunity to double his fortunes overnight? Bolan’s presence in Miami, and especially during this convention, seemed to represent an unknown value to the disposition of these lands, at least to one or two among the visiting royalty. Somehow, went this feeling, the Bolan presence could be used to powerful advantage, and for a more specific form of profit. But how? As the Talifero brothers stepped into high gear and the rest of the convention appeared to relax and take comfort, this question was uppermost in a line of thought which replaced “this thing of ours” with “this thing of mine.”

Even in *La Cosa Nostra*, it seems, there existed competitive kings.

## **Chapter 12**

### **The Soldados.**

Bolan had bathed away an accumulation of Atlantic salt, sweat, and dust. The clothing remained a problem; he had elected to stick with the swim trunks. During the meal, quietly supplied by Margarita, Toro advised Bolan that his personal effects at the Tidewater Plaza had been “sent for,” and were being delivered to the camp in Bolan’s rented car.

Bolan thought about that for a moment, then replied, "I guess you considered the possibility of a police stake-out."

"Si. This is not for concern. There was no search of unoccupied rooms." He smiled and produced a watersogged registration card from the hotel. "As you see, there is no record of a *Senor* Blanski at the Plaza."

Bolan grinned. "You're pretty sharp, Toro. And I envy your intelligence network."

"It is in our good interests to have the knowledge, *senor*."

Bolan accepted that without further question. He finished the simple meal and declined a cigar from his host. Margarita eased into a chair next to Bolan and offered him an odd-looking cigarette from an unfamiliar package. He accepted it. The dark tobacco grains were rolled in leaf instead of paper. The girl watched his face as she lit the cigarette. He did not disappoint her, grimacing under the impact of the harsh smoke.

She laughed delightedly and said, "*Gringo no fum—*" then cut it off and gazed guiltily into the disapproving eyes of Toro.

"Margarita does not speak the English well," he told Bolan. "I teach her but she does not apply the lessons. I tell her she must speak the English with *El Matador*."

Bolan took a long drag on the cigarette and wafted the smoke over the girl's head. He smiled at her and told Toro, "Anyone who looks that good, *amigo*, doesn't need to be worried about diction."

Toro laughed and translated the compliment to Margarita. It embarrassed her. She hastily left the chair and began busily clearing the table.

Bolan watched the girl and idly asked, "How's your strike force, Toro?"

The Cuban sighed, puffed at his cigar, then replied, "We grow daily."

"I don't mean size, I'm thinking about effectiveness. How good are you?"

Toro shrugged. "Good enough to every now and then step upon *El Culebra de Cuba*. We are—"

"I didn't get that," Bolan protested, grinning.

"Sorry—the snake. Is it not the *snake* who beguiles the innocents and then perverts them? And so this *Culebra de Cuba*, yes—he is the betrayer of my country, my Cuba. And we walk upon him with each opportunity."

"You launch your raids from this base? Against Cuba?"

Toro smiled. "Did I say that?"

Bolan grinned back. "No, I didn't hear you say that, Toro. How are your weapons? Modern?"

The stocky Cuban again shrugged his shoulders. "The very best our modest funds can acquire, *senor*."

"Money is your big problem, huh?"

"Si, is this not always the case? We work the jobs, any—"

"That reminds me," Bolan interrupted. "As a bellman you spoke almost perfect English. Ever since we left the hotel, you've gotten more and more Cuban. If it gets any worse, *amigo*, we're going to need an interpreter."

"I am sorry, sir. Is this better?"

Bolan grinned. "No, I guess I like you better the other way."

Toro smiled and explained, "To speak the English properly, one must *think* in English. *Comprendo?* To think in Spanish is to speak the English with the accent."

As a bellman, I do not mind this thinking in the English. But, *amigo*, Toro is Cuban—not English.”

“Yeah, okay *amigo*. What were you telling me about the money problem?”

“The problem is not that much. As I was saying, we work the jobs, we pool the money, and we do what we can do with what we have. Not *all* Cubans are with us, naturally... or we would no longer be in exile.” His gaze dropped to the floor and his voice took on a sorrowing tone as he added, “Many Cubans have lost the vision of the free Cuba, you see, and have become as *Yanquis*. I do not blame them. It is a lonely vigil, *senor*, this wait to return to the homeland. But...” The eyes flashed up, with a return of the old fire. “To many of us, to lose the vision is to lose the reason for living. We work and we plan and sometimes we *strike!* And we know, *Matador*, that one day we shall walk the length and the breadth of our Cuba.”

“Killing snakes,” Bolan put in quietly.

“*Si*, killing the snakes.”

“Your war is impossible enough, Toro. You should have stayed out of mine.”

Toro laughed scornfully. “Reverse the situation, *Matador*. Could *you* have stayed out?”

“I guess not,” Bolan murmured. He made a quick decision. “If my vehicle gets here exactly the way I left it, Toro, I’m going to...”

“*Senor?*”

“What do you call a modern weapon?”

Toro intently studied his guest’s face for a moment, then replied, “A gun manufactured since the end of the first World War, this is a modern weapon in this camp.”

Bolan shot back, “How about a Stoner?—a Honeywell?—have you ever fired an M-16, an M-79, an M-60?”

An expression of vague frustration swept the Cuban’s face. “This is not modern, *Matador*, This is *ultra* modern.”

Bolan sighed. “That’s what I thought. Listen, Toro, when you’re going against the odds you’ve got to take every advantage available. And you start with *weapons*.”

“*Si, comprendo.*” He smiled and turned his palms upward. “So, now you see our nakedness. We are a ragged band, no?”

“No,” Bolan replied. “You just need some support. And I think I know how to—”

Toro winced and hastened to interrupt the declaration. “*Senor Bolan*,” he said quietly, “Toro must confess the ulterior motive.”

Bolan was getting the prickly feeling again at the nape of his neck. He said, “Okay, maybe I’m ready for that, too. Go ahead.”

“When I first recognize you, at the Plaza, I am thinking... for *La Causa de Cuba*—here is a big fish, no? Here is the thing for which Toro has prayed and pledged his life and his fortunes, here is...” He caught the look in Bolan’s eyes and quietly ran out of words.

Bolan said, “You weren’t thinking of collecting on that open contract, *amigo?*”

Toro’s eyes dropped. “The thought was there, *amigo*. One hundred thousand Yankee dollars will buy many ultra modern weapons, no?” The eyes lifted again, and this time there were lights twinkling deep within. “But I could not do a thing



like this to *El Matador*. I realize this while we swim for the boat. No, *amigo*, this I could not do. But..."

"Yeah?" Bolan prompted him, uneasily.

"But I think, maybe this fierce warrior could be persuaded to enter another cause, a finer one."

Bolan said, "I feel honored, Toro. But you know better."

"Si," the Cuban replied, sighing. "I respect your war, *amigo*, as you respect mine. How long will you stay with us, *El Matador*?"

Bolan hesitated. "I haven't slept for two days," he replied. "If I could get a couple hours sleep—How long before my car gets here?"

"Momentarily, *amigo*."

Bolan studied his wristwatch. It was just past seven p.m., far from the end of a most active day. He removed the watch and stripped the leather band between his fingers to remove the Atlantic moisture still clinging to its fibers, then returned it to his wrist. "I'll wait till the car arrives," he told Toro. "Then, if you have some place to bed me down, I'd like to catch a short nap."

Toro quickly made available upon demand the full hospitable resources of his camp. Then the two men went to the veranda and perched upon the railing and quietly talked "shop," discussing weapons, tactics and other aspects of impossible wars. Some minutes later, Bolan's rented Chevy rolled to a halt beside the jeep and the two Cubans alighted from it. They approached the veranda and one of them dropped the keys into Toro's hand, delivering them with a short speech in Spanish. Toro handed the keys over to Bolan and explained, "They took every precaution. They were not followed. Your luggage is in the rear seat."

Bolan shook hands with the men and thanked them, then went directly to the rear of the car and opened the trunk. He called to Toro, and his host joined him there. Bolan was leaning into the trunk and wrestling with a bulky package, wrapped in heavy green waxed paper. "Get the other end," Bolan instructed. Toro did so, and they carried the heavy object to the veranda. The two men who had delivered the Chevy watched with interested silence, then dropped to their haunches and assisted as Bolan began removing the wrapping paper.

Exclamations of awe accompanied the final unveiling. Bolan grinned at Toro and announced, "This is a Honeywell, the hottest little number in any arsenal."

"This is a machine gun?" Toro asked in a hushed voice.

"Sort of. Actually, *amigo*, it's a rapid firing M-79 grenade launcher. Operated like a gatling gun. Belt fed—see?—there's your firing mechanism. Maximum effective range is about 100 meters, fires a 40 millimeter round of high explosives with an effective kill radius of five feet, also handles a shotgun round of 20 double-ought buck, a tear gas round and a flare round—and you can mix 'em in the belt any way you please."

Toro was running his hands about the weapon in a reverent inspection. He declared, "This is most impressive, *Matador*."

"It would stomp a lot of snakes," Bolan replied, grinning. "It's yours, Toro, and there's a couple of cases of ammo in the car."

Toro was dumbfounded. He spluttered, "You are giving this... this... *magnifico*..."

Bolan explained, "It's too much for one man to handle, Toro. I added it to my arsenal in a weak moment, I really can't use it. It's a crew-served weapon, takes two men to operate, even better with three." He spun away suddenly and went back to the Chevy, returning immediately with another object. It was a leather golf bag with a canvas snood. Toro and the other two Cubans were still ardently occupied with the Honeywell. Bolan asked them, "Can you figure it out?"

"*Si*, we shall figure it out, *amigo*," Toro assured him. "But are you sure that you do need this magni—"

Bolan cut him off with, "Look, I don't need it. Here's why." He was removing the snood from the golf bag and removing another weapon. "This," he explained, "is the best bundle of firepower going for a man alone. It's an over'n under M-16/M-79. Great for firefights. The 16 is our standard infantry weapon now, fires a 5.56 tumbling projectile at 700 rounds per minute, gas operated auto or semi-auto, your option. I carry 30-round magazines. This baby on the underside is the M-79, a pistol-grip for this configuration and a slide action breech, handles the same stuff as your Honeywell there, but just one at a time."

"*Magnifico!*"

Toro. You want M-16's, M-79's, Honeywells, M-60 machine guns, and maybe a few Stoner Weapons Systems. You tell your supplier to dump the other junk in Africa."

Toro laughed. "My supplier, *amigo*, is one of your enemies, of this I am certain."

Bolan said, "Where the hell do you think I get mine?"

They laughed together, then Toro hefted the 16-79 configuration, gave Bolan a pleased nod, and said, regretfully, "Such weapons, I am certain, are beyond our limited means, Matador. But we thank you for the instruction. We will add it to our dream mountain."

Bolan muttered, "Well, there is one other thing, Toro." He made another trip to the car, returning this time with a leather satchel. He opened it, extracted a package of U.S. currency, riffled the edges of the packet with a thumb, then stuffed it into the waistband of his swim trunks.

Toro was watching him with puzzled eyes. Bolan closed the satchel and soberly passed it over. "*El Matador's* contribution, Toro the Spanish bull, to *La Causa de Cuba*. You will buy some snakestompers, no?"

Toro's face was split from ear to ear in a delighted grin. He cried, "We will buy the snake-stompers, *si!* Senor Bolan, I do not know how to thank—."

"Hell, you already did," Bolan assured him.

The Cuban could contain himself no longer. He turned to the other men with an excited rattling speech.

"No! No!"

"*Si! Si!*" Toro was digging into the satchel and throwing out packets of currency. "*Yanqui dollars, muchos muchos dinero, amigos, para la causa...*"

Bolan was quietly putting away his weapon. He dropped the packet of retained money into the golf bag and restored the snood, then replaced the bag in the Chevy's trunk, wrestled the Honeywell ammo cases to the ground, took his luggage from the rear seat, and passed back into the house, pushing his way through a growing crowd of excited insurgents. Margarita made way for him at the door, regarding him with glowing eyes. He went on through and into a small bedroom,

dropped his bags to the floor, and immediately sprawled out across the bed. He was bone weary. Also uncomfortable. The swim trunks were too tight, and briny from the swim in the ocean. He struggled to his feet and took them off, then lay down naked and passed almost immediately into an alert combat sleep.

There was no sensation of a passage of time, but he awoke with a start and the realization that he had slept for some time. The house was still, as though deliberately quietened for his benefit—but also there was another presence in the darkened room, a most distinctive presence which was hovering above and very near. Recognition beat reaction by one flashing synapse and his instinctive lunge into the attack was quickly converted into a soft embrace of delicately scented and delightfully resilient flesh.

“Margarita?” he whispered.

She came on down atop him then, wriggling into the embrace with a soft exhalation, the firm flesh of her chest spreading onto his in an electrifying merger. Her mouth covered his and she sighed into the union, her hips seeking an accommodation which was impossible to acquire in the existing arrangement.

Bolan rolled her to her side and dragged his lips regretfully clear. “I’m not complaining,” he assured her in a soft whisper, “...but are you sure this doesn’t exceed Toro’s sense of hospitality?”

Perhaps the only word she understood was *Toro*. In struggling English, she told Bolan, “Toro no... *habla?* ... no say thees. Margarita say thees.” She sighed and nuzzled his ear. “*Ees soldado, no? Ees time, R and R, no? El Matador say yes?*”

Bolan rubbed her hip then pushed her onto her back and kissed her throat. “Hell, yes,” he sighed.

She laughed lightly and wriggled back to her side, tossing a leg nonchalantly across his hips. “*No cansado?*” she inquired, suddenly quite sober.

“No what? Tired? No, Margarita, not that you would notice.”

“Love me, Mock. Margarita *esta soldada, tambien. Soldados R and R, yes, Mock?*”

Bolan understood. They were soldiers together. Tomorrow perhaps each would die. Tonight, they would love, as only soldiers can. He gathered her into his arms and rolled to the edge of the bed, kicked his legs over the side, and sat up, cuddling her in his lap. She was clutching him fiercely and breathlessly moving her lips across his chest and moaning, “Mock, Mock, Mock...”

*Soldados* together, they lay back down and took a respite from their respective wars, joining forces in a most engaging act of love.

## Chapter 13

### And Gone!

When Bolan next awakened he was alone on the bed and the yellow light of a kerosene lamp was dimly illuminating the room. Toro stood just inside the doorway. He said, “It is nine o’clock, *Matador.*”

Bolan surged to his feet, unmindful of his nakedness, and went over to his luggage. A man with a huge smile moved into the room and helped Bolan transfer the two suitcases to the bed, then stepped back with arms folded across his chest and glowingly watched *El Matador* get dressed.

Bolan first selected a midnight skinsuit of fine woven, tough nylon and put it on. It fit like underwear, skin tight, with elastic cuffs at ankles and wrists.

The man with the big smile nudged Toro and said something in excitedly hushed Spanish as Bolan strapped the side leather on over the skinsuit. He tied the waist strap and inserted a fresh ammo clip into the Luger, then glanced at Toro and asked, "What'd he say?"

"He was admiring your black costume, amigo. It is a psychology suit, no? To strike terror into the hearts of your enemies? This is what he asks me."

Bolan grinned. "I don't know about the psychology thing. I wear it because it blends beautifully into shadows and because it doesn't hang me up on doorknobs and fences and stuff. Sorry to spoil the illusion."

Toro rattled an explanation to the third man.

Bolan began drawing on a shirt. "So what'd you tell him?"

Toro laughed. "I tell him yes, the suit strikes terror into the hearts of your enemies."

Bolan chuckled and selected dark trousers, then canvas sneakers. As he finished dressing, he told his host, "Something is on your mind, Toro."

"Si." He leaned against the wall and lit a cigar, then turned to say something to the other man. The man nodded, tossed Bolan a final face-splitting grin and left them alone. "Your enemies begin a retrenchment, *Matador*," Toro said soberly.

Bolan found a pack of Pall Malls in the suitcase, opened it, lit up, then turned to his friend with a frown. "Just what are you calling a retrenchment?"

"They have been scattered about the Beach, no?"

Bolan nodded. "I had that understanding."

"Suddenly, *senor*, their scatterings are no more. They leave this place and that place, bag and baggage.

"Where are they going, Toro?"

The Cuban sighed heavily. "Two large Beach hotels are suddenly in the midst of labor difficulties. All workers are pulled out, and these *muy bueno* haciendas are suddenly without service. Reservations are cancelled, and with *mucho* stirrings, registered guests are transferred to other establishments."

"Uh-huh."

"Si. But... other guests come quickly, *amigo*. Bringing with them their own service. Is this not strange?"

Bolan smiled. "Yes, I'd call that a bit strange. Names, Toro."

The Cuban sighed again, almost a moan. "This would be most dangerous to attack these places, *Matador*. This would be the suicide mission."

"Who has to make that decision, Toro?"

"You are correct," Toro replied unhappily. "Starlight Palms. Beach Hacienda. You know of these?"

Bolan said, "Yes, I know them. You have one hell of an intelligence network, *amigo*."

Toro delicately shrugged his shoulders. "We are everywhere, *Matador*. A piece here, a piece there, it comes together as a whole picture." He frowned. "But we do not deserve such praise."

"No?"

"No. A something is missing. Some of your enemies, it is said, are going to a boat, a large boat, and I have not the name of this boat."

Bolan stood up and snapped the suitcases shut, then turned to Toro with a thoughtful gaze. "Some one else mentioned a boat to me today, *amigo*. A party boat. Something like that?"

Toro shrugged again. "Perhaps. Did this someone also mention the name of this boat, *senor*?"

"Yes, but I guess I wasn't paying enough attention." He shook his head, then snatched up the suitcases and headed for the door, Toro followed closely. "I have to get moving, *amigo*. You'll never know how much you've helped me. In many ways."

They went on out to the car. Bolan put the luggage in the rear seat. Toro seemed uncomfortable. Bolan hoped he wasn't about to bring up the money. He closed the gap of silence with, "You going to let me out of here without a blindfold?"

Toro grabbed Bolan and embraced him, saying, "*Para siempre hermanos*—brothers forever, yes?"

"*Siempre*," Bolan soberly repeated. Then he smiled and added, "Does that mean no blindfold?"

Toro's eyes were watery. He shook his head. "No blindfold for our *Senor El Matador*. God walk with you, Mack Bolan."

The emotion embarrassed Bolan. He opened the car door and slid in behind the wheel. Then he noticed the brown satchel on the floorboards, and he understood why Toro had made no further mention of the money. He sighed and picked up the satchel and dropped it through the window onto the ground.

The Cuban said, "Amigo, it is too much. We cannot accept your own war chest."

"It's a revolving fund, Toro. There's plenty more where that came from, just waiting to be picked up. You get yourself some *weapons*, *amigo*, and you walk the length and breadth of your Cuba with them. Which way to Miami, *hermano*?"

Toro's face was a study in restrained emotion. The eyes were watering freely and the lips trembled between a smile and a frown. He swung his gaze toward the veranda and a small figure detached itself from a chair in the shadows and stepped into the dim nightlight. It was Margarita, once more in the tight fatigues and with the businesslike .45 strapped to her waist. Toro leaned into Bolan's window and said quietly, "Margarita demands the right of guide, or I would lead you myself. Follow her, *Matador*, she will take you to the highway. And Mack, in god's name, take care. Do not die in Miami for the sake of nothing."

A final clasp of hands and then Mack Bolan, now *El Matador del Causa de Cuba*, was following the jeep back across the darkened compound, silent men lining the roadway and waving a quiet farewell. They were passed through the gate without a challenge, and some twenty minutes later the jeep executed an arc in front of Bolan and halted, facing back the way they'd come. Bolan pulled alongside and reached into the jeep to squeeze the girl's hand. "*Gracias, soldada*," he said soberly.

She stretched up and leaned into his vehicle to place a warm kiss on his lips. “*Va ya con dios, Matador,*” she whispered.

Bolan swiped at his eyes and went on to the highway junction, several hundred feet beyond. He stopped there to unbutton his shirt and withdraw the Luger, performed a final inspection, then replaced the gun in the sideleather and eased onto the highway. The glow of Miami was in the sky, far ahead. He tossed a final look behind him, to a place where he had found friendship... for so brief a time.

“I go now with *death, soldada,*” he muttered, and sent the Chevy hurtling back toward the battle line.

Preoccupied with what lay ahead, he did not see the small vehicle without lights that pulled onto the highway behind him. He went, also, with Margarita.

## Chapter 14

### Of Death Traps.

Captain Hannon rose ominously from his desk and fixed Stewart Dunlap with an angry gaze. “What the hell do you mean, *lay off?*” he asked in a thick voice.

The Justice agent’s ever-present smile hung on as he explained, “I’m just passing the word, captain—relax. The official request is coming down through channels. I just thought you’d like to—”

“Well you can think again,” Hannon rumbled. “The Dade Force is *not* laying off.” He grabbed for his pipe and thrust it between his teeth, then pulled it out and jabbed it toward his visitor. “Wholesale murder has been done in this town, Dunlap, and no self-respecting cop can turn away from something like that. Our chief, by the way, is a highly self-respecting cop.”

Dunlap shrugged and said, “It’s not for *Bolan’s* benefit, John. There’s a hell of a delicate angle to this thing, and we...”

“I’m listening,” Hannon prompted him.

Dunlap’s smile lost the battle. He dropped into a chair and soberly inspected his fingernails. “A five-year undercover operation may be at stake. Brognola says he’ll get cooperation if he has to go clear to the President.”

“Uh-huh, Brognola’s behind it,” Hannon observed. “Okay, so now you’re going to tell me that Bolan has a CIA license or something.”

The agent doggedly shook his head. “Hell, no, I told you this wasn’t for Bolan’s benefit. But we’ve got a man in there, inside *La Cosa Nostra*, John. We’re just trying to protect him. Wouldn’t you?”

“The best way to do that would be to apprehend Bolan, wouldn’t it? Does Bolan know who this guy is?”

Dunlap’s frown deepened. “He does and he doesn’t. I mean, if he meets him face to face, yes, he’ll recognize him. We’re not afraid of our man holding his own against Bolan. We’re afraid of him getting pinned into a Bolan-police firefight.”

“Who’s been telling me,” Hannon asked sarcastically, “that Bolan never shoots at cops?”

“He hasn’t in the past,” Dunlap quietly replied. “In a fire fight, though, one guy looks pretty much like another. You go busting into Bolan’s war, especially with a bunch of non-uniformed officers, most anything could happen.”

“Well,” Hannon said, sighing, “you’re talking to the wrong man anyway. I don’t make these decisions.”

“I know that, John. I was just advancing the word.”

“If the chief says lay off, I’ll have to lay off. If he doesn’t, I’ll be going in with everything I’ve got.”

“Yes, I know that, too.”

“How high up is this *inside man* of yours?”

“He has Family rank.”

“What Family?”

Dunlap sighed. “You know I can’t tell you that. He has an Eastern territory, I’ll tell you that much. And, listen, you’ve seen the success we’ve been having up in that area. We’ve been setting them up and knocking them down just like—”

“Okay, okay,” Hannon said heavily. “So what’s this Brognola doing besides talking to the President?”

“He’s trying to contact our man.”

“To what effect?”

“To get him out of there, as gracefully as possible, until things quieten down.”

“I’ll make a deal,” Hannon quickly declared.

“What kind of a deal?”

“I’ll hold off the Dade Force until Brognola gets your man out. If... *if*, Dunlap, you turn right around and scratch *our* back.”

Dunlap said uncomfortably, “Damn, you do think like a cop, don’t you. I know what you want, but go ahead and get it in the record. What sort of a back scratcher do we have to have, John?”

“I want to know where they are, *all* of them. A complete list, any place where Bolan might launch a hit. Now isn’t that painless? Who could ask for a better deal than that?”

Dunlap was chewing it. He said, “I’ll have to talk it up. I don’t know. Anything that jeopardizes our man’s cover is no deal at all. We go passing out intel like that... Look, John, we don’t gain anything by busting these people, and you know it. Their attorneys are downtown with writs before we can get the cell doors closed. We’re building cases, John, not harassment proceedings. Bolan’s been a great help in that area, also. They’re all so jittery, they’re making mistakes. Like—”

“Well, you go talk it up, Dunlap. We’re almost ready to roll. With or without your help, see, we know a few places where Bolan might show up.”

“The Kirkpatrick woman?”

Hannon nodded. “When she busted, she busted all over the place. Admitted that Bolan had visited her and that she fed him information.”

“Got her locked up?”

“Nope. Made a deal with her, too. We turn our back on her, uh, delicate indiscretions, also take her word that she spoke to Bolan only after the Sandbank hit and under duress.”

“You could hold her,” Dunlap pointed out, “as an accessory to the Plaza job.”

“Sure, but for what gain? Hell, I believe her story. She gave us what we wanted, we gave her what she wanted. No booking, no notoriety, and she gets out of Miami on the first available flight.”

“You’re not even interested in her as a material witness,” Dunlap observed. “That says plenty right there. You don’t expect to take Bolan alive.”

Hannon’s gaze wavered and broke. “You don’t really believe that boy will throw down his gun and let us take him,” he stated quietly.

“I believe he’ll fight you only if forced to,” the agent replied evenly. He got to his feet. “No deal, Hannon. I don’t barter a man’s life away.”

“Not even for the life of your own *Mafioso*?”

Dunlap said, “Get screwed, Hannon,” and quietly walked out.

The captain stared morosely at the vacant doorway, then dropped into his chair and swiveled about to gaze through the window, his face a study in frustration. He placed the pipe in his mouth and bit down savagely, winced, then removed it and depressed a button on his intercom. “Tell Lt. Wilson I want him in here double quick,” he snapped.

The report came back, “He checked out, captain. Said he’d be gone about thirty minutes.”

“Say where he’s going?”

“I believe he’s taking the Kirkpatrick woman home. Want me to try a radio contact?”

Hannon scowled at the clock. “Give him until eleven o’clock. If he isn’t back by then, get him if you have to put out an all-points.”

He flipped off the intercom and turned back to the window. Barter a life away, eh? What the hell did Stewart Dunlap know about bartering lives? For the first time in a long time, Captain Hannon seriously began to think about his retirement. He wanted out of it, he decided. He wanted out of the whole rotten mess. Stoolies, junkies, hookers, punks, muggers, rapists—what a hell of a parade for a man’s life sum. And what made a cop an appointed executioner? In whose name did an officer of the law take to the streets to gun down society’s misfits? By whose order and by what convention did John Hannon, 35-year veteran of law and order, calmly and precisely plot the death of a confused kid from Vietnam?

Executioner? Hannon sighed. The world was filled with executioners. Some were sanctioned, some not. Who decided, in the ultimate court of all the courts, which were and which were not?

Hannon placed the pipe carefully upon his desk and went to the window. Retire to what? There was no one in John Hannon’s life now but stoolies, junkies, hookers, muggers... And an executioner. A 30-year-old kid fresh from the blood puddles of Southeast Asia... an executioner.

He went back to the desk, put on his coat, grabbed his hat, and went out. Captain John Hannon was not retired yet. He was still very much a cop. And it was time to begin the construction of a death trap... for an executioner.

The “confused kid” from Vietnam did not feel at all confused at the moment. He knew precisely what he was doing. Before the hell broke, he needed a name... the name of a boat which sometimes hosted parties for visiting Mafia dignitaries. There would not be time, once the assault was underway, to run about seeking directions to the next front. He left his car discreetly parked one street over from



Jean Kirkpatrick's place on Palmetto Lane and, stripped to the night suit, made his way quietly between the neat stucco houses, across the alleyway, and over the fence into the Kirkpatrick rear yard.

Keeping to the shadows, he followed the fence to the side of the house in a soft reconnoiter, then circled cautiously to the other side. The house was darkened and showed no signs whatever of a living presence. He found an open window near the front and crouched beneath it, breathing as softly as possible in a timed "audio" recon.

Just as he had decided that the house was secure, he heard a faint scratching sound followed immediately by the flare of a match just beyond the window. A gruff male voice quietly announced, "Kiss my ass, Tommy, you're gonna smoke yourself to death. Christ, you—"

"Aw shut up," came the response. "You're worse than the fuckin tv commercials. If I wanna smoke, goddammit, I'll smoke, so fuckya."

Bolan quietly released his Luger and got it ready. After a brief silence, the first man said, "Christ, I'm gonna go to sleep if this broad don't get home."

"Might as well. She's probably out sellin' her ass somewheres, no tellin' where she's spending the night."

"Go ask Willie if he can't get along without us. How many guys does it take to bring in one little broad, huh?"

"Fuck you, ask him yourself. I ain't askin' Willie nothing. You know how th' brothers get when they got their ass up."

"Askin' Willie ain't askin' the brothers, Tommy."

"Then ask him yourself. Whatsamatter, your ass hot or something?"

Bolan's eyes flared at the casual mention of "the brothers." He had already written off the mission as unworthy of the risks involved, but a new value had been added to the equation. He retreated quickly but cautious to the rear, again following the shadows of the fence. Something moved ahead of him. He halted and listened, his grip tensing about the Luger, then carefully moved on. Another motion as he reached the alley attracted his quivering senses. Again he halted. Something was moving along the pitch dark alleyway, but it was moving away from him. Perhaps a dog or a cat, he decided. He moved in the other direction, passed several houses above Kirkpatrick's, then circled back to Palmetto Lane, moving between the houses and into the shadow of a palm tree in the front yard for surveillance of the street.

A car was parked at the curb, some distance away. At first it appeared to be deserted, then the glow of a cigarette belied that. Again he returned to the alley and repeated the recon to the other side of the Kirkpatrick bungalow. There was another vehicle, opposite side of the street, also occupied.

It was a full set. Bolan pondered the significance of this. The Taliferos were known to be very thorough, but wasn't this pushing things a bit far? Either they were running scared, or... Or someone had set a...

*Toro?* Bolan shook his head. That would not make sense. He had been at Toro's mercy and had walked out of it with love and kisses. So. How about cops? A double set. *Mafiosi* inside, cops outside?

Bolan merged with and then melted into the night and found himself a point-blank surveillance drop, directly across from the stake-out vehicle. Huh-uh, he

decided, not cops. So Mack Bolan was getting a persecution complex. The brothers had simply decided that Jean Kirkpatrick possessed important information, and they had sent for her. The full set would be typical of those under Talifero orders. No one in the Talifero clan made two goofs. He wouldn't be around for that second one. So, went the legend, *Taliferi* took great pains to avoid that first one.

Every instinct at Bolan's command screamed at him to get away from there, to break off, retreat, and to let the brothers have their way. He could not do so. The image of a frightened girl and the quiet declaration, "I guess I've been dead a long time already," presented an insistent rebuttal to his instincts. She had asked how much deader could she get, and Bolan had not replied. The *Taliferi* would reply, and it could be a long drawn out and hideously uncomfortable statement of final truth. Possibly, argued his weaker side, the brothers merely wanted to question her about the Sandbank shooting... an eyewitness account. Possibly, added that argument, they would find her harmless and blameless and would not harm her in any way.

Bolan firmly squelched the argument and stealthily returned to the Kirkpatrick house. The two talkers had been in the front bedroom. Where was "Willie?" In one of the cars? In another room of the house? Bolan could not risk exposing his presence until he knew exactly where lay the enemy.

This time he climbed the fence near the rear of the house and sprang lightly to the roof of a low back porch, then slid quietly over the stucco parapet and onto the flat roof of the house proper. He went to the front and crouched in the shadows of the parapet, alert to every sound and movement in the neighborhood, straining even into an extrasensory "feel" of the atmospheric vibrations. He thought he heard a rustling movement in the rear yard and, moments later, something again moving quietly through the alley. As he debated whether or not to check it out, a car swept around the corner to Bolan's left and proceeded swiftly along the street.

The car slowed and slightly overshot the Kirkpatrick house, then went into reverse and backed to the curb slightly downrange from Bolan. A rustle of sound came from the house below, heavy feet moving rapidly. Bolan exposed himself momentarily to examine the car at the curb, and then his heart fell into his stomach. *A police car!*

The door on the passenger side had opened and Jean Kirkpatrick was stepping onto the sidewalk. Bolan swore beneath his breath as the young cop he had spotted earlier that day at the Sandbank climbed out of the other side and walked around to join the woman.

Bolan could *feel* the agonized reaction within the house. If that cop tried to walk through that door with Jean Kirkpatrick, there was going to be a shootout—and it would be a dead drop.

They were slowly walking across the lawn and the woman was saying something in a bantering tone to the cop. His voice drifted up, in reply, "I'd take a cup of coffee, though."

Bolan made his decision. He vaulted over the parapet, Luger in hand, yelling, "Ambush! *Scatter!*"—and impacted directly between the two, sending both sprawling to the ground. Bolan was rolling across the lawn and trying to orient himself; from the corner of an eye, he saw the cop coming to one knee and digging for hardware. Streaks of flame lanced out of the front windows with roaring

accompaniment, angry hornets zipped past Bolan from several directions, and his Luger was spontaneously answering back before his thinking mind was aware of it.

Firing on the roll, he saw the cop topple backwards—even so, the long-barreled police .38 was up and voicing its parts in the firefight. A body crashed through onto the porch, and the other sounds were being added to the uproar. A man was swearing loudly and painfully from somewhere inside the house; a door banged and running feet thudded closeby. The Luger swung and spit and the thudding feet became a falling body.

The cop was saying, “Dammit, dammit,” and trying to lift himself up. Jean Kirkpatrick was a kneeling statue in the shrubs beside the house. Another crack of glass from the house and another volley of lancing flames and Bolan felt the projectiles breezing him. He rapid-fired into the flashes and they ceased, replaced by a moan and the clatter of a heavy gun meeting wooden floor.

Bare seconds had passed. From both sides now new sounds joined the thunder of the night as automobile engines came alive. Bolan yelled, “*From the street! Down flat!*”—as he fought a new clip into his Luger. He jettisoned the silencer and ran to the police car, wrenched the door open, leaned across, and turned on the headlamps, then ejected himself in a backward leap. The uprange vehicle was surging forward, running without lights, but caught now in the glare from the police car.

Bolan’s Luger came up and he was sighting down at full extension when his heart again took a dive into his stomach. A small figure in tight-fitting fatigues was caught also in the glare of the headlamps as she ran from between two houses uprange, dropped to one knee, and began banging away with the heavy .45 at pointblank range into the approaching vehicle. The windshield shattered and the Mafia vehicle arced into the curb and halted with a squeal of rubber and a volley of returning fire.

Bolan was running forward and rapid-firing in an agonized attempt to draw the fire away from Margarita, but he was too far away and too late. He saw her spin and go down on her face, and then the threat from the other flank was bearing down upon him and he realized that he was exposed in his own light.

He saw the flame leaping from the yard in front of Kirkpatrick’s and heard the roar of the .38, the returning volley from the speeding car, and he thought *there’s a cop with guts* as he realized that the .38 was drawing fire originally intended for Bolan. He leapt into the street and let the Luger have its head. It bucked and thundered its repeated defiance of the charging vehicle until it faltered and swerved and plowed into the police car with a grinding, shearing impact, trying to climb the rear deck, and then falling to its side and going to ground like a downed rhino. A streak of fire whooshed the length of the vehicle and it exploded into a white fireball, the police car following immediately almost like a reinforced echo. Bolan poised midway between two urgent callings, Margarita at one flank, Kirkpatrick and the cop at the other. The cop he knew to be alive and in imminent danger of roasting, and the cop won the toss of Bolan’s mind.

He ran into the yard, grabbed the fallen officer by the armpits, and dragged him well clear of the inferno and into an adjoining yard. Wilson was staring at him with glazed eyes, the .38 still tightly clenched in a balled fist. He had a hole in his

shoulder and one in the leg, and bleeding like hell from both. Bolan whipped the combat kit from his belt and peeled off two compresses, quickly applying them to the wounds. He took the .38 from the cop's fist and guided both hands to the compresses, commanding, "Keep a pressure!"

Jean Kirkpatrick staggered into the scene, breathing raggedly and on the edge of hysteria. Bolan grabbed her and pulled her to her knees beside the officer. "Watch him!" he ordered. "Stop that bleeding!"

She nodded her head in understanding. Before he dashed away, Bolan squeezed her shoulder and barked, "That boat! Give me the name again!"

"What?"

"The boat, the floating palace! What's the name?"

"*Merry Drew*," the stunned girl mumbled.

Bolan ran around the inferno, recklessly charging the other flank—but there was nothing there to challenge him. The other vehicle was gone. He loped on down to the spot where he had seen Margarita fall, looked about with a growing desperation, then stooped to pick up a once-jaunty and now blood-smeared field hat. Impressions in the soft earth of the lawn showed clearly where a heavy vehicle had swung in a savage, wheel-spinning turn. He followed the marks over the curbing, and ran into the street, his eyes straining into the distance. House lights were coming on clear into the next block, but nothing was moving through his vision field. He thought he heard the sound of a laboring engine, rapidly receding, but he could not be sure of even that. All he was sure of was that they were gone... and that they had taken Margarita with them!

A curious crowd was gathering at the scene of the fire. A man in pajamas came hurrying out of the house where Bolan stood. He glared at Bolan and snapped, "What the hell is this? What is this?" But Bolan was already moving and gone himself, racing off between the houses and to the next street. He found his car and screamed off in a hopeless search for a bloodstained vehicle with shattered glass. Though the entire fire fight had consumed barely one minute, he knew that he was too late. But the *soldada* was in that shattered vehicle, and it was an even bet that she was alive and unwell and that her fate was consigned to the untender mercies of the Talifero brothers. Bolan had to try. In the name of all that Mack Bolan held holy, he had to try!

## Chapter 15

### Requiem for a Soldada.

Captain Hannon beat the ambulance to the scene by a matter of seconds. Wilson was conscious and grimacing with pain, and his first words to the captain were, "Well, I met Bolan."

Hannon said, "Okay, okay," shushing him and moving quickly aside to make room for the ambulance attendants.

An interne moved in and took over, quickly assessing the damage.

Wilson chuckled through his pain. "I'm not dying, cap'n," he said. "Don't look so worried. If you think I look bad, you oughta see the other guys."

A uniformed officer hurried the Kirkpatrick girl away. "The kid's all right," Wilson said, following the girl's departure with his eyes. "Take care of her cap'n. Somebody wants her *bad*."

"Yeah," Hannon mused. "The same guy who wouldn't think of shooting a cop."

"No nine millimeters in *me*, sir," the Lieutenant protested in a weakening voice. "Bolan had a Luger. Hell, he saved my butt—hers too."

The wounded officer was being carefully lifted onto a gurney. Pain rippled across his face. He set his jaws and spoke between tightly clenched teeth. "It was an ambush. The house... and cars, each end of the block. We were almost into it... then Bolan came sailing off the roof. Just like Batman. He had a Robin with him, too... little guy, down the block."

"He had a *what*?"

"Little guy... in army clothes... got hit... down the block."

Hannon would have liked to have heard more, but the lieutenant was being hurried to the ambulance. The attendants scampered in behind the gurney, the door closed, and the vehicle threaded between police cars and fire trucks—and Hannon's first casualty of the Bolan Wars was sped away from the scene of combat.

The captain wearily squeezed the back of his neck and began trying to reconstruct the sequence of possible events in the incredible carnage of Palmetto Lane. It was almost impossible to accept... and yet, there it was. Hannon went methodically about his business, with a growing respect for "the confused kid," and with the strengthening conviction that "a death trap" would never be the answer to the Bolan problem.

Then some one yelled from inside the house, "Captain, we've got a live one in here!"

Bolan was seething inside, tortured by jumbled emotions, damning himself for an entire series of miscalculations and imagined weaknesses. How could he have failed to spot the tail on him, by a *jeep* of all things! How could he have ignored the repeated indications of stealthy movements all about him, in the yard, in the alley, *all around the damn place!* She had reconned his recon—then lain back to protect his flank—and for what? She was a *soldada*—that was for what. A female soldier who could handle the weapons of warfare but not her female heart. *Damn damn damn*—and Bolan had failed her—he'd gone for the cop at the expense of the *soldada*—he'd turned away and consigned her to the *Taliferi*, and god knew what they would do to her—*she couldn't even speak English!*

He was speeding along the back streets, recklessly daring each intersection to halt his progress, flashing through with head snapping from side to side in a quick scan in the forlorn hope of spotting a likely movement somewhere, anywhere. He was cutting a zig-zag intersection of the back-city, feeling in his bones that the *Taliferi* would not risk an open run on a major street in that shattered vehicle—and he felt that he was at least angling in the logical direction of travel, toward the upper beach where stood two luxury hotels of conventioning *Mafiosi*.

Something in the street attracted his attention as he flashed across his dozenth intersection. He hit the brakes in a squealing slide, powered into reverse, and went

back for a closer look. Several pieces of broken glass in sizeable pieces were lying dead center just up the intersecting street. He wheeled about and lunged to the location, got out of the car and walked the area looking for skid marks, other broken glass, any evidence of a collision, and found none. Then he picked up the cobwebbed pieces of glass and inspected more closely. Safety laminated! *Windshield* glass!

Bolan leapt into his vehicle and laid rubber in a screeching takeoff. He knew now where he was headed, and to hell with the back streets. He angled east at the next intersection and made a power run for the beach drive. Possibly, he could beat them there. He *had* to beat them. Once the *Taliferi* reached the guarded palace walls of the Beach Hacienda, it would be *adios, soldada*.

Perhaps, he thought, this was what they wanted. Something to drag him in, to lure him on—maybe it was already too late for the girl, and they were carting a dead body along just to insure Bolan's continued interest in their whereabouts. Well, they could be sure of that, all right. Bolan was intensely interested. He was *deadly* interested.

Harold Brognola had come a long way in an attempt to satisfactorily engineer a highly delicate and top secret operation closely involving Mack Bolan. In the very top drawer of the department's strategy against organized crime lay a smouldering and politically dangerous piece of intrigue on which Brognola held the principal mortgage; it was his project, conceived and underwritten by him, delicately maneuvered through the top echelons of government by him, and now entirely dependent upon his ability to bring the ends together into a firm package. He had tried twice earlier to complete that package, and both times failed by a hair's shadow to tie the knot. The problem lay in Bolan's illusiveness and understandable reluctance to tarry in the shadow of the law.

The "inside man" who was conventioning with the family in Miami held a possible entrance to Bolan's presence. Brognola had not come to Miami to "rescue an undercover agent, though it was convenient for others, even those in the local field office, to think so. Brognola did feel it imperative that he contact the inside man. This man had known Bolan, had worked beside him with each of them unaware of the other's duplicity until a showdown came, and was perhaps the one man in the world who could approach Bolan safely without a gun in his hand.

And so it was, in the late evening hours of November 5th, that Harold Brognola was quietly meeting with a Mafia *caporegime* in an alleyway several hundred feet removed from the Beach Hacienda, a luxury hotel at the edge of Miami Beach's glamor strip. The two men solemnly shook hands and Brognola asked, "How are things in Bolan's battleground?"

The *Mafioso* smiled and replied, "That guy is something else, isn't he. He's got them jumping at their own shadows. And that includes me."

Brognola raised his eyebrows and said, "He wouldn't throw down on you, would he?"

The other man rocked nervously on the balls of his feet. "You never know, with Bolan." Then he chuckled and added, "I've had that guy's steel against my neck—but that was *before*. If he takes time to look, I'm O.K."

Brognola nodded. "I want a meet with that guy. I don't know how you could assist, but he runs more in your circles than in mine. I was scouring Southern

California for him when he turned up down here. Guess I should have known. So what do you think? Any ideas?"

"Well... it's just a million to one shot, Hal. I won't ask why you want the meet, and I don't want you to tell me why."

"Don't worry, I hadn't intended to."

"I guess we *could* come face to face before it's all over down here. I can't promise anything, Hal. What's the drop?"

Brognola handed over a scrap of paper with a telephone number written on it. "Memorize that and give it back," he said.

The *Mafioso* glanced at the number and passed it back. "Okay, I'll see what I can do."

Brognola said, "This is really hot stuff, and I can't—" He stepped against the other man suddenly and shoved him into a darkened doorway as an automobile wheeled suddenly into the alley, lights out and cruising slowly. They stood there, hardly breathing, as the car eased past them, an alert and grimfaced man behind the wheel.

Brognola gasped, "God's sake! Wasn't that Bolan?"

The other man shook his head, frowning. "Can't say for sure, Hal. I've never seen him in his new face."

The automobile was powering in a sudden acceleration into the next street, heading west, away from the beachfront. Brognola said, "Dammit, that was *him!* Come on!"

The two men ran to the corner, paused, then hastened up the street after the disappearing vehicle.

His heart was thudding against his ribs in the certain knowledge that he was probably too late, although a quick reconnoiter of the hotel area had produced no sign of the prey. Possibly, he was thinking, he had misread the signs entirely... maybe they weren't even headed for the hotels... maybe they were hotting it for the boat, and Bolan had not the faintest idea where that boat lay or even the approach to it.

He would try one more quick pattern through the back streets... maybe they had ditched the car and were footing it. He eased through an alleyway just above the Hacienda determined to give it one last desperate shake.

A barricade lay partly across the street two intersections up from the beach. Apparently a demolition job had just been completed there. One lane of traffic had been closed down and a wooden wall, still partially standing, extended halfway to the centerline to fence off a rubble-filled vacant lot. He was about to go around when another vehicle swerved in from the street above, running with one headlamp and rumbling along on a flattened tire.

Bolan's heart leaped, and his car along with it. He powered on into the partially-blocked street and swung his vehicle broadside across the open lane, and he was out and running up the street with Luger at the ready when the other car halted, doors flew open, and bodies began ejecting themselves.

One man stood behind the cover of an open door and leaned across it, pistol in hand, firing deliberately at the advancing figure in the black suit. Bolan fired once, on the run, the big Luger thundering across the distance. A nine-millimeter

missile punctured the glass of the car door and the *Taliferi* went down without a sound.

Three other men were racing for the demolition site. Bolan let them go, and they scurried through a break in the fencing and disappeared.

Bolan's chief interest lay inside that shattered vehicle. And he found her there, rolled into a little ball and stuffed to the floor of the back seat. She had bled profusely from a nicked vein at the side of the once-lovely neck... and they had allowed her life to bleed away with no apparent effort to stop it. More... they had done more. The fatigue jacket had been jerked away and down over the arms, imprisoning them at her side. The bra had been torn away, and they had taken a torch—probably a butane lighter, Bolan decided—to what Bolan remembered as rose-petal breasts. One nipple was charred and virtually incinerated; the entire chest area was a horribly seared and blotched abomination of once-beautiful womanhood.

In the name of god, Bolan wanted to know, what had they wanted her to tell them? What could any man *need* so desperately, so fearfully, that he could do a thing such as this to another human being?

Bolan stretched her out on the back seat and carefully arranged the jacket over the mutilated chest. His shoulders quivered and his head fell to his chest, and he was remembering the last words the little soldier had whispered to him. "*Va ya con dios, soldada,*" he whispered back, and then The Executioner walked numbly away from there and back to his own vehicle. Mechanically he removed the keys from the ignition and went to the trunk, got out the golf bag, and calmly withdrew his *magnifico* weapon. Ammo belts went around his neck, extra clips of 5.56 tumblers into his hip pouch, and he thumbed a high explosive round into the M-79, a 30-round clip into the M-16, and then he walked back up the street.

An arm appeared around the opening in the fence and one of the *Taliferi* was challenging him with the impotent yappings of a hand gun at more than a 100-foot range. Without breaking stride and without lifting the weapon, Bolan squeezed into the pistol grip and the M-79 replied.

The end of the fence exploded in flame and shredded wood and an anonymous scream from somewhere just beyond. Bolan went on, stepped around the shattered fence, and into the demolition site. A high building barricaded the west side of the lot; the high wooden fence completed the seal. He took in the scene with a single glance and knew that he had them. The only way out was past Bolan, and no one seemed inclined, at that moment, to try that perilous route. A man lay at Bolan's feet, his clothing still smoking from an almost direct hit of the HE round. He could hear the other two running along the fence.

Bolan calmly selected a flare round, thumbed it into the breech, and put a brilliant parachute in flight above the site. The running men halted in confusion, looking wildly about them, then made a break for a wooden shack near the center of the lot. Bolan watched them fight with the door, then scramble inside. He continued the deliberate advance, marching stiffly erect. A window shattered and a pistol roared. The bullet zinged harmlessly into the ground several yards ahead. Bolan's path was taking him in a slow circle of the shack as he inspected the physical dimensions. This was obviously a tool shed or something similar, no more than ten feet square, with a low flat room. Beside it and resting on a tubular steel



structure about six feet above the ground was a large tank with a hose and a nozzle, obviously a gasoline storage.

Bolan halted then, loaded an HE round into the M-79, sighted onto the tank, and let fly. He was already thumbing in another flare round when the gasoline erupted in a towering explosion. Flaming liquid spilled immediately onto the shack—and then Bolan was sighting again, and the white hot flare went to join the party.

The shack was engulfed immediately in roaring flames. Bolan stood and dispassionately watched as two human torches erupted through the doorway and flopped convulsively about the rubble. When the flopping ceased, he turned his back on them and walked stiffly away, back to their vehicle.

Bolan placed his weapon on the roof and leaned into the car for a final farewell to a too-brief friendship, and when he came back out of the car he was looking into the bore of a very large and ugly .45 automatic.

He looked beyond, then smiled faintly and said, “Hi, Leo. We meet again.”

Leo Turrin, lately elevated to an underboss role in the former Sergio Frenchi family, showed a strained smile and quietly said, “Watch the gun now, Bolan, and note that I’m putting it away.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter,” Bolan replied in a strangely flat voice. “I’m sick of this war, Leo. I am sick to death of it.”

Another man, also an Italian type, stepped into view then and commented, “If what I just saw is an example of your sickness, Bolan, I hope you never get well.”

“Who is this guy?” Bolan asked, not really caring.

“We’re telephone friends, remember?” the man replied. “I’m Harold Brognola.”

Bolan said, “Great. What do we do now, shake hands?”

Brognola stuck his hand out. “Yes, I’d like to shake your hand, Bolan,” he said soberly

Bolan unsmilingly accepted the hand. “Thanks for the assist at L.A.,” he murmured. The sound of distant sirens were beginning to break the night stillness. Bolan said, “I guess I’d better be getting along.” He glanced at Turrin and added, “How’s it been, Leo?”

“Hairy, as usual,” Turrin replied, smiling.

Brognola agitatedly declared, “Dammit, Bolan, I have to talk to you!”

Bolan simply smiled, shouldered his weapon and began trudging wearily to his vehicle. The other men hastened after him. Brognola said, “Bolan, dammit, will you listen to me?”

“Will those cops listen to you?” Bolan asked, inclining his head toward the advancing sirens.

“Talk to him,” Turrin advised. “What have you got to lose? Just talk to him.”

“What about?” Bolan asked. “That same portfolio?”

Brognola snapped, “Yes, that same portfolio. Look, you said you were tired of the war. I’m offering you a possible way out of it.”

Bolan threw him an interested glance. “Yeah?”

“Hey, those Miami cops are getting with it,” Turrin warned. “Better make this quick.”

Brognola said, "Look, it's all in here." He was thrusting a rather fat, oblong wallet upon Bolan. "Look it over in your leisure and call me at the contact number I have in there. That's all I ask, Bolan—just look it over."

Bolan took the wallet and thrust it inside the neck band of his nightsuit. "Okay," he said. "I'll look it over." He carefully placed the weapon inside his car and then climbed in behind the wheel. "Good seeing you again, Leo. Give my best to the wife, eh."

Turrin smiled and said, "Will do. She worries about you a lot, if that's any comfort."

Bolan nodded and cranked the engine. "Uh, get lost for the rest of the night, eh."

Turrin replied, "That means that you're rolling."

"That's what it means. So stay clear."

"Thanks. I'll do that."

Brognola irritably said, "Look, don't go getting yourself killed *now*. Break it off, dammit, and go someplace safe and read that portfolio."

"I can't break it off now," Bolan replied in a flat voice. "Too much is already invested in this battle."

"Well at least—"

Bolan had stepped on the gas and left Brognola standing open-mouthed in the street. As the car disappeared around the corner, he turned to Turrin and said, "Now if that guy isn't the coldest number I've ever run into. He wasn't like that on the phone last month. Hell I—"

"He just buried a compatriot, Hal," Turrin explained. "You didn't see what was in that car up there, did you."

"No, I was just—"

"Come on." Turrin was dragging his companion back up the street, toward the bullet-riddled automobile. "I'll show you what makes The Executioner tick."

## Chapter 16

### Bolan's Battleground.

The Beach Hacienda was of old Spanish architecture, complete with bell tower and ceramic-tile roofs, covered walkways through colorful gardens, fountains and lily-pools, and poolside cabanas posing as adobe huts. Three major buildings comprised the hotel proper, set at clever angles to exclude the patios and gardens from the outside world, except for the exposure to the ocean. There, a smallish replica of a 17th century Spanish galleon served as a floating pier for those who preferred their beaching with all the comforts of iced drinks and shaded lounges. A broad expanse of well-combed sand was also provided, for those who took their surfing seriously; surfboard racks, outriggers, and other water toys were in ample evidence though in general disuse.

The hotel buildings were single-story, except at the center where the bell tower reigned above a luxurious penthouse suite. The mock-adobe structures presented

a windowless, walled appearance to the street; inside, all rooms opened via sliding glass onto the garden patios, in a setting of obvious and no-expense-spared luxury.

The Beach Hacienda, in local Mafia circles, was known as “the joint,” and the penthouse had served, until very recently, as the meeting place for the Council of Capo’s.

Now, the penthouse was virtually abandoned. A sleepy-eyed man in a waiter’s jacket sat tiredly upon a barstool in the corner of the main room. Two other men were standing on a small balcony which hung out over the enclosed gardens; these were Ciro Lavangetta and his underboss from Tucson, Salvatore Di Carlo. Lavangetta was at the extreme corner of the balcony and trying to peer around to the street-side of the building, an impossible project. He told Di Carlo, “I’m telling you, Sal, I heard gunshots and explosions. Something’s going on out there somewhere.”

As though to confirm Lavangetta’s conclusions, the wail of sirens rose up faintly in the distance. He said, “I knew it!”

“It’s a long ways off, Ciro,” Di Carlo assured him.

“Just the same, it makes me nervous. I wish the Talifero brothers would report in. I’d sure like to know ...”

After a brief silence, Di Carlo said, “You should have gone out to the boat, like the others. That’s the safest place, Ciro. You should’ve gone.”

“All of ’em didn’t go yet, Sal. And that’s why I didn’t either. Look down there and tell me who you see gossiping by the pool.”

Di Carlo craned over the railing, “Looks like Georgie the Sausage Man and Augie Mary.”

“That’s exactly right, and I’ll tell you also exactly what it is George the Weenie is try’na put in Augie’s head!”

Di Carlo soberly nodded his head. “He’s really been pitchin’, Ciro.”

Lavangetta snorted a string of obscene words, then added, “I ain’t going to stand for it. You know that. I won’t take that, Sally.”

“I wouldn’t take it either,” Di Carlo agreed.

After a brief silence, Lavavgetta fervently declared, “I wish this Bolan *would* come in here, Sal.”

“He’s going to be a dead son of a bitch if he does,” Di Carlo growled.

“Yeah, but so might somebody else, Sally, if you know what I mean.”

Di Carlo thought about that for a moment, then: “I guess I get you, Ciro.”

“Yeah, I guess you do. I wish he’d come in here before everybody makes the boat, that’s what. And I wish he’d blast a certain weenie king right in his liver sausage, that’s also what.”

The sirens were becoming louder. Di Carlo sniffed the air and said, “I smell smoke, Ciro. Maybe this Bolan is already here and is right now burning the joint down.”

Lavangetta laughed quietly. “Maybe somebody is going to think so anyways, Sally.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“This Bolan” was not at that moment burning the joint down, but he was quietly casing it from a soft drop some 200 yards down the beach. The binoculars could not give him the full details, but his mind supplied what the eyes omitted and the general lay of the place came out into a quite logical extension. He studied the bell tower and the men standing on the balcony just below, then shifted to the adjoining roofs and what he could see of the beach area and the galleon. Hardmen were everywhere. They patrolled the beach, perched upon the otherwise deserted galleon, and hovered in the shadows of the red slate roofs. It was a hardsite, no mistake about that.

Bolan’s attention returned to the men on the balcony of the penthouse. The one who was waving his arms about seemed vaguely familiar. Bolan racked his memory, sliding through the newspaper and magazine photos he had studied so often, and then he had his “make.” It was *Ciro Lavangetta*, a bit heavier in the jowls than his pictures indicated, but *Ciro* nonetheless. The man with the worried face standing beside him Bolan could not make, but he would remember him if he ever saw him again.

Bolan wondered what would happen if he were to lob a round of HE into that bell tower. If he could work in about a hundred meters closer, he could do it ... but then he might lose his angle in the intervening rooftop. As he debated the question, the two men left the balcony and went inside.

Bolan was a bit elated around the core of cold deadness which had settled into him upon finding *Margarita’s* mutilated body. He had located a *Capo*; undoubtedly others were on hand also. It was a hardsite, and that usually meant *VIPs* present. He fell to studying the terrain between his soft drop and the hotel. If he could find a rise down there somewhere, maybe he could get that angle he needed, and maybe that angle would give him the passport he needed for entry into the hardsite. One way or another, he meant to get in there.

*Salvadore Di Carlo* was greatly disturbed and excitedly whispering “Dammit, *Ciro*, I’m telling you—cold crying Christ, it ain’t worth it. You can’t just take it on yourself to—”

“Stop telling me what I can’t do!” *Lavangetta* replied furiously. “The old weenie’s got one foot in the grave already anyway, he’s got hardening of the dollar signs in his arteries, and I’m not taking no more shit from that weenie!”

“Just th’ same, *Ciro*, you know better than me that—”

“That’s right, I know better than you, *Sally*. Listen, he’s done everything to me all day except shiv me. And if you could only see, I probably have shivs sticking out all over me just the same. If I’d been screwed by that old cock knocker every time he thought about it, I’d have a hole like *Madame Bazonga*.”

“Well, it’s your funeral I guess, *Ciro*.”

“What do you mean, *my* funeral? It’s *our* funeral, *Sally*, if we let *Georgie* make weenies out of our territory. Isn’t it? *Our* territory, *Sally*.”

“Yeah I figured you’d be getting around to that, *Ciro*.”

“You better be damn glad I am. It’s just you and me now, *Sally*, don’t forget that. You and me. And listen, I don’t want no fucking around on this job. I’m hoping, *Sal*, that you’re understanding what I am telling you.”

“Sure, I understand you, *Ciro*,” *Di Carlo* replied in a defeated voice. “But I guess you better tell me exactly what you’ve got in mind.”

“What I got in mind, Sally, is bleedin’ the weenie with a Bolan bite.”

“Shit, you say the funniest things at the funniest times, *Ciro*,” Di Carlo complained soberly.

Hannon was positive that he was going to retire after this case. He had used up an entire year of police energy in this one orgiastic day of unbridled mayhem; anything after this would be anti-climactic anyway. He took a final look at the charred corpses in the rubble-heap, said tiredly, “Okay, get them out of here,” and moved aside to give the coroner’s boys the grisly remains.

A uniformed patrolman followed Hannon back to the street and, in a conversational tone, asked, “What’d he use on those guys, captain—a flame thrower?”

“I would not be at all surprised,” Hannon replied in a quiet voice. He paused and stared toward the death car. “There’s a story lurking here,” he mused half-aloud. “And it could be a very romantic story. But I’m not quite ready to buy it.”

“Sir?”

“Never mind. Any make on the girl yet?”

“No sir. Except that she’s Cuban, and she’s wearing—”

“Hell I know all that!”

“We don’t have an identification, captain.”

“All right. You stay right here with the car and you don’t let anyone touch it, I mean not the chief himself, until the lab boys release it. Then you get it down to the police garage and you seal it up tight. You tell the lab people that I want something to definitely relate those charred corpses to this vehicle. I want physical evidence.”

“Yes sir.”

Hannon sighed and went to his car, picked up the mike, and contacted Dade Force dispatch. “How many mobile units are tied up in that soiree out at the raceway?” he asked.

“Twelve, sir,” came the reply.

“All right, release six of those and send ’em over here. We’ll assign definite stations while they’re en route. What’ll it take, about an hour?”

“Half that if we blue-light them, Captain.”

“All right, blue-light them. Next I want a Dade alert call. I want every man on the job, and it’ll take a doctor’s statement to alibi any absence. You get them in and assembled and I’ll have instructions by the time I get in. Have they gotten anything from Tommy Janno yet?”

“No sir, but he’s conscious and they’re still trying. He’s in the room right next to Lt. Wilson, by the way.”

“Okay, I’m coming in. Get those calls going.”

Hannon racked his mike and set the car in motion. This massacre had gone far enough. It was going to be stopped... or by god *Hannon* was going to call the President.

Bolan had completed his recon and the picture was entirely readable to his mind. No one, it appeared, was going to bed. The patio gardens were filled with seemingly relaxed and congenial men, sitting around tables, talking, laughing, drinking—living it up. Except for the hardmen who were placed strategically about the perimeters, the Hacienda reeked with party atmosphere. Only a couple of

details belied this. First and most graphic, no women were present. This was a large item. Secondly, the waiters did not move like waiters. They were clumsy, and frequently dropped things, and seemed to forever be scrambling their orders, producing an almost comic opera effect with much good-natured kidding and heckling from those being served.

All this fitted neatly into Bolan's developing strategy. As long as the *Mafiosi* had been intermingled with the "straight" public, his angle of attack had to be geared to pinpointed singling-out and man-to-man confrontations. But with them clutched up in an exclusive gathering, Bolan could go for the big strike, using massive-kill techniques—he did not need to walk amongst them.

Bolan did, however, need a "hard drop"—a site with reasonable cover from which to conduct the assault. He had worked his way to the water's edge and just north of the hotel. The illumination from the Hacienda's outside lights was creating a twilight effect all along the ocean-front in that immediate area, except right at the waterline where the sloping beach provided a thin band of dense shadows. The tide was running low, giving Bolan several yards of hardpacked sand in utter darkness. Hardmen were thick in that particular perimeter, stationed close enough to converse with one another. With the covering purr of constantly breaking waves behind him, Bolan was moving slowly and carefully along that shadow-area and toward the galleon. The pier, he had decided, would make an ideal hard drop. The problem was that the enemy had evidently reached that same decision, and was then in possession. He passed within a few feet of a hardman who was trying vainly to light a cigarette in the stiff ocean breeze. Another man stationed several yards farther on had evidently found this amusing and was calling over heckling instructions.

"Hey, go tell Augie we need a smoking tent out here."

"Go to hell."

"Hey, my brother Angelo was in the navy. He says you gotta climb up inside your ass to light up, but then you got another hazard."

A chuckle, and, "Come over here and lend me your ass then."

Bolan slipped on past and made the overhang of the galleon. The mock-up was built to look as though the ship had been run aground, bow end to, and rode perpendicular to the beach. At high tide, very little of the floating pier was resting on dry sand and much of it was actually afloat. Now, with the tide running out, the situation was reversed; only the stern section was actually afloat. Three heavy cables angled down from the stern, holding the galleon firmly in position. Bolan slung his weapon parallel across his shoulders and moved quietly into the water. He was in to his chest and fighting the turbulent pull of the surf when he reached the nearest cable. Then he clenched a commando knife between his teeth and began the hand-over-hand climb to the galleon's deck, some fifteen feet above.

Hannon charged into the bull room and growlingly announced, "Okay, we got it. It's the Beach Hacienda, North Beach—let's roll! Pick up on the Dade Net for your assignments!" He wheeled about and led the squad of riot specialists through the tunnel and into the parking lot. A uniformed officer in a white helmet ran along beside him for a short distance.

"Standard riot roll, captain?" he inquired.

"We'll play it by the seat of our pants," Hannon puffed.

The officer nodded and peeled off toward his own vehicle. Hannon dropped into his car and muttered beneath his breath, "It's a blood roll, sergeant." Then he was screeching away, leading the blue-light procession to the massacre.

Lavangetta intercepted George the Butcher as the latter was making his way along the covered walkway toward his room. He said, "Listen, Georgie, I think it's about time we had an understanding."

Aggravante tried to push past him. "I've understood you for a long time, *Ciro*," he replied.

"I don't think you have, Georgie, and I think that's been the cause of all our trouble."

"You've never been any trouble to *me*, *Capino*," the old man replied nastily.

"That's all over with now," Lavangetta assured him, and quietly slashed George the Butcher's throat from ear to hairy ear.

The Boss of Arizona stepped quickly clear and dropped the knife into a lily pond, then began hoarsely shouting, "Get 'im! Get that guy! Get—"

His voice was quickly drowned out in the roaring of a heavy revolver in the courtyard just beyond, as Salvatore Di Carlo unloaded his gun into the roof. Nervous fingers all about the enclosure quickly joined in and a hail of slugs began chewing up the roof area directly above Aggravante's room.

Lavangetta had run into the courtyard, gun in hand, and joined the firing party. Augie Marinello charged out, flanked by two smooth-faced men in impeccable Palm Beach suits. "What is it?" he cried. "What's going on?"

"That Bolan!" Lavangetta spat. "He just shivved Georgie Aggravante!"

Di Carlo ran over to corroborate the story. "He swung up on the roof," he excitedly reported. "I think maybe I hit 'im!"

One of the Talifero twins snapped a vaguely disbelieving glance at his partner and said, "Let's check."

The other brother waved his arm in a signal to the quickly approaching hardmen and led them in a running sweep through the main building and toward the street. The remaining brother touched Lavangetta's elbow and said, "Come on, *Ciro*, let's look at that roof."

Bolan had quietly dispatched three of the galleon's sentries and was working his way toward the fourth when the pandemonium erupted in the courtyard, some twenty yards distant. The hardmen of the beach area congregated in a loose knot, then began spilling slowly toward the disturbance. Some one yelled, "*Bolan's on the roof!*"

From the darkness just ahead of Bolan, a galleon hardman softly called over, "You guys back there stay put. Me 'm Happy are gonna go see."

The only one remaining "back there" was Bolan. In a softly slurred voice, he replied, "Sure, sure."

Two men ran down the gangway and up the beach toward the hotel. Bolan quickly reconned his position, assuring himself that he was alone on the galleon, and immediately swung his 16/79 into firing position. The M-79 rounds had been carefully mixed in the ammo belt, with HE, buckshot, and tear gas, in that order then repeating.

A tight clutch continued to hold forth on the beach directly below Bolan's position. He decided that he should take them first. He checked the clip on the M-

16, positioned the switch for automatic fire, and swept 30 rounds of tumbling projectiles into the group at 700 rounds per minute. They went down like pins in a bowling alley, and then the heavy weapon was swinging over and up and Bolan's hand was moving onto the pistol grip of the M-79.

## Chapter 17

### Holideath Inn.

The bell tower exploded and rained debris into the courtyard, the heavy bell itself crashing down onto the balcony of the penthouse. Augie Marinello froze and cried, "My god, what..."

A calm voice from the roof called down, "He's firing from the pier. How the hell did he get—" The speech ended abruptly with another detonation and a sweeping spray of ballbearing-size buckshot, and the Talifero swung himself recklessly over the edge of the roof and into the courtyard, landing jarringly on his feet.

"*On the roof, eh?*" he yelled at Salvadore Di Carlo.

Another projectile impacted several yards to the side of Marinello and released a cloud of smoke. Someone coughed and exclaimed, "Tear gas!"

The courtyard was in a state of unrestrained panic now as another round of high-explosive sailed in, this time directly on target into a crowd of scrambling men. Instantly-mangled bodies were hurled in all directions and a cry of consternation swept the Spanish gardens. Talifero was swearing loudly and trying to lead a pack of hardmen through the confusion as round after round of grenade, buckshot, and tear gas continued to pelt the bawling mob. Men were leaping into swimming pools and lily ponds, crowding into cabanas, and racing for covered walkways as the panic reached peak level and the assault continued without letup.

The Talifero squad reached the edge of the gardens, almost in the shadow of the galleon, and tried to take cover behind a foot-high wall. With the first volley from their pistols, the chatter of a light machine-gun answered back, interspersed with the *whoomps* from the galleon, and four *Taliferi* learned the hard way that a foot of wall was not wall enough. The man in the now-dishevelled Palm Beach suit commanded, "Back, back, this is no good!"

Bolan had been preoccupied with the galleon sentries and had therefore not known of the rush of men to the street when the oddball shooting broke out at the hotel. He had been, in fact, puzzled by that outbreak though thankful for it and more than willing to twist it to his own advantage. He was even more puzzled, then, when at the height of his strike men began moving up over the roof areas from the street-side of the building, and he was strongly curious as to why they were firing at something *down in the street* rather than into Bolan's position.

There was no time to ponder the question, though—he was being challenged from the wall just below. A rain of bullets punched into the bulkhead just behind him. He moved his triggerfinger onto the M-16 and gave them a quick burst. Three



or four of his challengers toppled over backwards and the rest immediately began to fall back.

He had gone through an entire belt of M-79 ammo, and there was but one belt left. He would have to make a tactical decision very shortly; for the moment, there were those characters on the roof inviting his attention. He kept raking the courtyard with sporadic bursts from the M-16 and dragged over his final belt of M-79 heavy stuff, then slipped a round of HE into the red-hot breech of the grenade launcher, sighted carefully toward the roof, and let fly.

Hannon's riot force had roared up into a startled eyeball confrontation for which neither side was really quite prepared. The guys had come tearing out of the hotel with blood in their eyes and obviously looking for something to shoot at, and it had been just their damn tough luck to have found the Dade Force instead of whatever it was they'd been looking for.

Hannon later admitted that perhaps it could all have been resolved peacefully except that in that first tense moment when the two startled forces were eyeing each other over their hardware, something exploded in the bell tower directly overhead and large chunks of adobe rained down upon both forces. A young trooper several feet to the side of Hannon overreacted with a spontaneous buckshot blast from his riot gun at pointblank range into the astounded men from the hotel. Someone fired back, perhaps also reflexively, and one of Hannon's uniformed men fell.

From there it was a spontaneous shootout, with both sides diving for cover and not awaiting directions from anyone. Added to this was the unsettling sounds of open warfare and general pandemonium from beyond the walls, and it is doubtful that any of the men outside the hotel, Captain Hannon included, had any large idea of just what was happening or why.

The Hacienda men did have presence of mind enough to bolt clear of the light spilling from the hotel entrance. By the time the Dade Force had reached protective cover behind their vehicles, the others had melted into the shadows of the windowless building; two uniformed officers and five members of the other force lay wounded in the no-man's-land between.

Hannon got to his bullhorn and bawled, "Throw out your weapons and come forward with hands raised." The instructions were all but drowned out in the booming explosions and rattle of small-arms fire beyond the walls. He threw down the PA and told his sergeant, "Hell, this is impossible. Pass the word to hold fire and await further instructions. Fire only if fired upon."

"What the hell is going on in there, Cap'n?" the sergeant asked.

"How the hell should I know! You wanta go in and ask?"

The sergeant's reply was lost in another booming explosion beyond the walls. He shook his head and slipped away to pass on the captain's instructions.

Moments later men began to appear on the roof, snaking furtively up the sloped tiles and slipping over the peak to the courtyard site. Hannon shouted through his PA: "You men on the roof! Halt or be fired upon!"

Scattered shots came back in replay. Hannon grabbed a plainclothes officer and ordered, "Get those spotlights going, back along the building there. There must be an emergency ladder to the roof. Seal it off. Get some men along that wall down there. Shoot anything that moves across that roof!"

At that precise instant, the area of Hannon's concern was subjected to a shattering explosion. Two bodies and a sizeable section of the roof were ejected and hurled off somewhere into the darkness.

Hannon knew, then, what was "going on" in there. The question now uppermost in his mind was what, precisely, could he do about it. The beam of a powerful searchlight arced across the darkness then and illuminated a large section of the roof. Hannon found himself looking at the handsome face of a blond man in a once-impeccable Palm Beach suit. There was a large bloodstain on his shoulder and the expression on his face sent a shiver down the almost unshiverable spine of a 35-year police veteran. He was there for one brief instant, sliding awkwardly over the peak to the other side, and then he was gone and Captain Hannon was wondering. Bolan? No—Bolan's rugged face could never be reduced to such pretty angles—this guy was something else, but *what* else?

Hannon leaned into the open doorway of his cruiser, snared his mike, and told the Dade dispatcher, "I want some mobile units behind this place, Ed. I don't care how you get 'em there, but get 'em there damn quick!"

"Yessir."

"And Ed... this is a blood roll. Let's shoot to kill."

Ciro Lavangetta was in a mental state closely approaching shock. He had somehow managed to get off the roof alive, scrambling down seconds after the bell tower exploded but not quite soon enough to avoid being laced across the forehead by an angry double-ought ball from Bolan's second round. He had seen the Talifero boy take his circus-stunt leap to safety, and had heard the sarcastic comment he'd hurled at Di Carlo. Somehow he had also made it across the insane courtyard while being alternately buffeted by exploding munitions, choked by teargas, and trampled by panicky *Mafiosi*. He stepped quietly into his room, switched on the lamp, turned on the television, and made himself a drink, then sat tensely on a hard chair and stared unseeingly at the television screen, the drink clenched in his hand and forgotten. The welt across his forehead was red with congealed blood, several fingers of which trailed down to his eyebrows.

None of this bothered Ciro Lavangetta now. He was a dead man already and none realized this truth with such subjective conviction as Ciro himself. What the hell, he'd tried. It was a beautiful idea, nobody could ever take that away from Ciro no matter how it had turned out. It'd been a beautiful idea. But that Bolan. That goddamn Bolan couldn't even be trusted to not cross him up at a time like that. If he'd hit 20 seconds earlier, or even twenty minutes later, everything would have turned out all right for Ciro. But no. The goddamn bastard had to do it right when he shouldn't have.

Arizona Ciro, the master of the perfect timetable, had been crossed up by a lousy trick of time. Nobody was fooled by it now, especially nobody named Talifero. Ciro was as good as dead.

The hell was still going on outside, but that couldn't bother Ciro now. Hell no. Nothing could bother him now. Not even the certain knowledge that he had unwittingly played right into Bolan's timetable. Ciro had messed it up good, he'd got everybody off balance—god how he'd messed it up, and now Bolan was out there and he had 'em all by the balls, and god he was squeezin' like hell, wasn't he. Well it didn't matter now. Ciro was already a dead man.

He was sitting there in that frame of consciousness, staring at the television, an untouched drink in his fist, when Talifero came in. The brother looked like hell, *Ciro* thought. He'd never seen him look that way, hell no, not ever.

*Ciro* said, "Hi there Pat or Mike, I never could tell which one."

"Hi there, *Ciro*," the brother replied.

"Looks like you hurt your shoulder. That's hell out there, huh."

"Yes, it's quite a bit of hell, *Ciro*. You know what I have to do, huh."

"Yes I guess I do, Pat or Mike."

"It's Mike. You deserve to know that much, also. How do you want it, *Ciro*?"

"I want it dignified, Mike, like I always lived my life. I want it right between th' eyes, sittin' here watching television, a good drink in my hand. Dignified, Mike."

"That's the way it is then, *Ciro*. Remember me to the boys on the other side, huh?"

"I'll sure do that, Mike."

Then the bullet punched in between his eyes, his head snapped back and rolled to his chest, the drink fell to the floor, and the King of Arizona sagged into the chair and a "dignified" death.

Though deposed by death, *Ciro Lavaretta* had died a true *Capo*.

*Bolan* got off his final M-79 round and slammed a fresh clip into the M-16. Perhaps, he was thinking, he had not accomplished all of his objectives, but as far as *Bolan* was concerned the offensive was over. The problem facing him now was a tactical withdrawal, and the chances for success in that direction were seeming more remote by the moment. He had carried the strike overlong. Now the enemy was overcoming that initial confusion and panic, they were regrouping, and it appeared that the counterattack was underway. They were flanking him from both sides and a murderous fire was spraying in on him from various locations in the center. Then he caught a glimpse of movement down at the wall again, followed closely by the staccato of a Thompson, and the big .45 slugs began chewing up the woodwork all about him. Another Thompson opened up from the right flank. *Bolan* scooted back and threw a fast burst toward the wall, rolled quickly to his left, tossed another burst, and rolled again.

Two men tried to charge the gangway. *Bolan* heard rather than saw them, and rolled quickly back to his earlier position, chopped them down, then again spun across to his left. As he was pondering a likely escape route and gazing longingly down the beach, another threat bore in on his consciousness. A blue flashing light was coming along down there, running along the low tide mark, then another and another. He could not see to his other flank, but *Bolan* knew without looking that blue lights were to that side of him also. Meanwhile, a very hot war was commanding his attention right where he lay. Much more lead in this old scow, he was thinking, and she'd never float again.

Just as he was seriously considering a standing plunge down the gangway, another sound registered in his consciousness—a most dramatic sound for *Bolan*. Above the endless and constantly growing rattle of gunfire, above the methodical chopping of the Thompsons, above the thudding and screaming of projectiles all about him—a faint, almost ghostly voice drifted in on the wind from the sea. Obviously electronically amplified and further distorted by the wind and surf and

the uproar of warfare, it was still warmly familiar, a voice of friendship, and it was insistently calling *El Matador*.

Bolan's sagging spirits experienced a rapid recharge. He abandoned the heavy weapon and snaked along the deck toward the stern, intent on getting over the side and into the water. The police cars were less than a hundred yards away now, and Bolan did not find it inconsistent with this observation that the fire from the beach also halted abruptly.

Deciding that it was now or never, Bolan raised to a crouch and raced along the deck to the fantail. And then, in a startling moment of awareness, Bolan understood the full significance of that ceasefire from the beach, at the same moment realizing that Mack Bolan was not the only man who might decide to climb a mooring cable. Crouched on the gun'le was a handsome man with blond hair in a dripping Palm Beach suit and in his hand was a long-barreled pistol. His attention had apparently been momentarily diverted by the rapidly approaching blue lights, and the two men became aware of the other's immediate presence at the same instant.

Bolan's recovery was a shade faster. One hand chopped at the gun as the other seized a fistfull of cloth and he lunged into a backward roll, bringing the man down with him, chest on feet and flipping in a sprawling somersault. Then both were springing to their feet and Talifero was lunging forward with a small stiletto poised for the strike. Bolan tried to move inside the blow but he slipped on the deck-moisture and took the stiletto low in the shoulder. Whirling with the man's arm locked across his chest, Bolan sent him catapulting in a backwards, off-balance plunge along the gun'le. He balanced there for a doubtful split-second; then, his eyes boring into Bolan's, he toppled on over and took the long plunge into shallow water.

The stiletto remained in Bolan's shoulder. He withdrew it and quickly crammed in a compress. It was a puncture wound, and not bleeding too severely. He tested the damage by pushing against the gun'le with both hands and immediately ruled out a hand-over-hand descent via the cable. He stepped quickly to the overhanging fantail and stared down at the water for a moment, timing the insweeping swells.

The faint voice from the sea continued to summon *El Matador*. He wondered how far away lay that voice and how far a man could swim with a hole in the shoulder... but then, there was no other exit available. He watched the ocean gird itself and lift in a cresting swell, then he vaulted over and plummeted down, and he was once again swimming for an unknown destination... this time with only a phantom voice to guide him.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Living Large.**

Bolan's left arm was useless, the pain in the shoulder becoming excruciating with the gentlest movement. He side-stroked and tried to guide himself by the

illusory, wind-lofted calling from somewhere out there in the blackness. A stiff wind had begun to blow steadily and the water was turbulent, the troughs deep and the swells immense. The view behind his course was sporadic, though he had travelled no more than fifty yards or so. Lifting with the swells, he caught wet-eyed and spray-brown glimpses of blue lights and swirling action all about the beach in front of the Hacienda, an occasional rattle of gunplay and the booming of riot guns adding to the surrealistic atmosphere of the night. The nicest part was that Bolan was out of it; what was left, the cops were welcome to.

He was tiring rapidly and fighting for breath. His good arm and both legs were beginning to lose feeling, the compress at his shoulder was sticky and irritating, and he wondered about the stories regarding blood and sharks. He had flopped onto his back and was trying to relax and get his wind in a dragging float, allowing the waters to carry him where they would, when he sensed the throb of a powerful marine engine and the shape of something riding a high swell. The voice was no longer calling to him and he had to wonder about that, also. If there were bluelights on the beach, were there not also, as before, floating counterparts in the sea?

The sounds from the beach had either ceased or he had outdistanced them. This was now, for The Executioner, an item of entirely insignificant information. He was floating in the womblike hold of the sea, and he was feeling entirely comfortable, totally relaxed—and goodbye, world, Mack Bolan was getting off now.

He had never thought that he would die so placidly, so comfortably—it should come with searing pain and with hyperelevated senses straining into the release of death—not this way, not so easy, so downright lulling, like an old man in a rocking chair and nodding off into the final sleep. It should be like *la soldada* and the... Bolan's lagging consciousness was jolted by that memory, and suddenly the comfort was gone, the quiet acceptance of death wrenched away in a painful floundering and a fighting to clear impacted lungs. He was under, and suffocating, and totally disoriented and trying to cry out against the unbreathable atmosphere of heavy water—and suddenly he was churning atop a high swell, liquids were being hastily expelled from irritated membranes, and he was shocked by the sound of his own voice crying out against the entombment of the sea.

Toro's voice also, very close now, was rattling off sharp commands in excited Spanish, and Bolan wondered if he was still reliving a memory. Then a dark bulk crested above him, a volley of excited voices restored his sense of reality, and immediately others were beside him in the water. Some one was forcing a lifering down over his arm and he was being tugged and dragged and then lifted; his heels bumped solid matter, and Toro's anxious face was looming above him, and Bolan knew that he was in good hands once again.

He was lying on the soft cushions in the cabin of a boat, the constant vibrations of a strong propulsion system jarring into him, and someone was sawing off his arm at the shoulder. He opened his eyes and looked into Toro's, and the Spanish Bull smiled and said, "Sorry, amigo, it is difficult to remain the gentle doctor in so turbulent a sea."

He was swabbing out Bolan's shoulder wound with raw alcohol. Another man hovered nearby, holding a tin cup. Toro relieved the man of the cup and held it to Bolan's lips. "Drink this, my friend," he commanded. "It is a transfusion of spirit."

Bolan lifted his head and accepted the transfusion. It was undiluted rum, and it momentarily took his breath. He coughed and pushed himself upright. Toro said, "See what I have told you? Already you are sitting up and looking for another fight."

Bolan smiled weakly and watched the Cuban apply a bandage to the shoulder, then he replied, "I guess I'm all fought out for awhile, Toro."

"And Margarita, amigo?"

Bolan's eyes fell. His voice sounded unnatural in his ears as he heard himself saying, "She followed me, Toro. I should have spotted her, but I didn't."

Toro nodded his head to the other man, then told Bolan, "It is as we suspected. She is the cat, *senor*. You cannot feel that—"

"Was, Toro."

"*Senor?*"

Bolan lifted pained eyes to his friend. "Margarita is dead, Toro."

The Cuban stared at him for a long, silent moment, then he patted Bolan's good shoulder and wearily got to his feet, said something in Spanish to the men grouped around them, and lurched across the pitching cabin. The men began talking quietly amongst themselves and slowly drifted back topside.

Bolan moved his feet carefully to the deck and tested his equilibrium. "You know how I felt about Margarita," he called over to his friend.

"Yes, *amigo*, I know," Toro replied.

Bolan found a crushed pack of brown-leafed cigarettes and lit one. The boat was idling along, maintaining just enough headway for maximum stability, and that was not saying much. The craft was an old, much-patched, and several times renewed PT boat of World War Two vintage. Torpedo tubes and deck guns had long since given way to more practical space utilization for its successive postwar roles as private yacht, commercial pleasure craft, and deep-sea fishing sportsboat. The powerful Packard propulsion plant remained virtually intact and smoothly functioning. Now the boat was primarily a troop-carrier, small commando strike-force variety. Bolan was looking it over with casual interest when Toro returned and tiredly sat beside him. He explained to Bolan that the 15 men now aboard constituted a hastily recruited volunteer crew, and that they had come forth for the express purpose of offering tactical support to Bolan's war.

"We have learned the identity of this big boat, the floating home of your enemies," he further explained. "We have thought perhaps that *El Matador* would highly desire this information and—" He swept his arm in a half-compass of the little vessel. "—and the facilities of our navy."

Bolan smiled, genuinely affected by the offer of military aid. "Thanks, Toro. You risked your navy to pull me out of a tight spot, and that's plenty enough. Besides, I guess the Miami War is over. If you'll just put me ashore somewhere..."

Toro's face clouded. He pointed through the cabin porthole to faintly winking lights in the distance. "She lays there, *senor*, this boat. Soon she will be forced to seek refuge in a safe harbor. The sea, *Matador*, is angry. A tropical storm approaches from the south. We are no more than... perhaps ten minutes removed from your enemy's position. You will reconsider?"

Bolan was staring glumly at the distant lights. In a gruff tone, he replied, "The price has already gone too high, *amigo*. It has become a lousy war."

“*Por que?* Margarita?”

Bolan nodded. “That’s *por que*, Toro.”

Toro sighed and reached into his breast pocket, withdrawing a folded paper. “Did you know that our Margarita was a poetess?” he asked quietly.

Still gruff, Bolan replied, “It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“She left this for me, *Matador*.” He shrugged his shoulders and gently added, “As an explanation, perhaps. Can you read *Espanol?*”

Bolan shook his head and took a heavy drag on the Cuban-style cigarette. “And I don’t believe I want to hear it, Toro. I don’t believe in grief, and I really can’t afford it.”

Toro protested, “This is not for grief, *Matador*. It is for courage, and for remembering a shining light in the darkness. You will allow me to read it for you?”

Bolan sighed, nodded, and closed his eyes.

“It will not sound the same, maybe, in English, but this is how it would translate:

The world dies ’twixt every heartbeat,  
and is born again  
in each new perception of the mind.  
For each of us,  
the order of life is to *perceive* and *perish* and *perceive* again,  
and who can say which is which—  
for every human experience builds a new world  
in its own image—  
and death itself is but an unusual perception.  
Live large that you may experience large  
and thus, hopefully, die large.”

Toro’s voice broke as he added, “That is it, *amigo*.”

Bolan sat silent for a long moment. Then he opened his eyes and crushed out the cigarette. “Margarita wrote that?” he quietly inquired.

“She did. Tell me, *Matador*, did the little soldier die large?”

“Yes, Toro,” Bolan assured him, “she died very, very large.”

“She was *muuy* angry with me, *senor*. Because I would not offer you assistance with your war.”

Bolan sighed. “Well, Toro, you’ve got those snakes to worry about.”

“There are snakes, *senor*, everywhere.” He looked out at the distant lights. “Shall we live large, *Matador*, for a little while—together?”

The Executioner smiled. “What sort of weaponry do we have, *amigo?*”

“We have the *magnifico* Honeywell, also personal weapons.”

Bolan got to his feet and tested his sea legs. “Does this thing always buck like this?” he asked.

“*Si*, she is a *Yanqui* buckaroo.”

“You’ll have to get the Honeywell mounted.”

“This is done. The Honeywell is deck-mounted, *Matador*.”

Bolan said, “Show me.”

Toro led the way just above and behind the cabin to what had originally served as a mount for a fifty-calibre machine gun. A small wooden platform had been added, and the Honeywell was bolted to this. Bolan nodded and ducked back into the cabin to escape the stinging spray which was now constantly flaying the main deck. He said, "Okay, I'm manning. I'll need another two men to crew me. How do you have the belts configured?"

"Your shoulder, *amigo*. Will this not—?"

"It's all right," Bolan assured him. "What's in the belts?"

"High-explosive only. For war at sea—"

"Okay that's fine, but have some flares ready just in case. And make up a belt of double-ought." He grinned. "We might want to do some deck-raking."

Toro grinned back. "And we shall largely live."

Bolan turned away quickly, so that Toro could not see the surge of emotion across his face, muttering beneath his breath, "And a little soldada shall lead them."

The MERRY DREW was underway and moving sluggishly in the general direction of Biscayne Bay. The PT crossed her a hundred yards astern and heeled into an upwind run. Soldados with light machine guns were lashed to the deck, some were poking up from the cabin, others took positions around the hatch to the troop compartment. Toro was in the conn, just above the cabin. Bolan, standing grimly spraddle-legged at the Honeywell in a constant wash of spray, shouted up to him, "What's our speed?"

The Cuban's voice, lashed back by the wind, announced, "Revolutions at 40 knots, *Matador*."

Bolan yelled, "Let's run by once and confirm that identification."

"Si! We identify on the upwind run!"

Bolan tied himself to the gun mount and tried to estimate the correction he would need in view of the shuddering, heaving platform, the relative speeds of the two vessels, and the howling gale-force winds. They were quickly closing on the larger vessel and beginning to run alongside.

The cruise boat was brightly lighted from stem to stern. Bolan could make out people standing in the protected overhang of the boat deck, and an interested crowd was gathering at a brightly lighted window which he presumed to be the main lounge. The MERRY DREW was not quite a passenger liner but she was, at worst, a junior edition of one. She seemed a stable mass beside the plunging PT boat, her bow cutting smoothly through the wild waters in an undisturbed transit. The bridge was high and sleek, and the pilot house was dimly illumined behind a row of square windows reaching from one side of the vessel to the other.

Her passengers were inspecting the PT with considerable interest. One of them waved, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted, "Ship ahoy!" Others around him were laughing and pointing at the PT as it plunged and bucked through the cresting waters, obviously amused by the wild ride being experienced by those upon her.

A man in a white uniform stepped to the wing of the bridge, a megaphone in his hand, and called over as they passed abeam. "Do not attempt a transfer of passengers. Suggest you follow us into the harbor."



Toro lifted his own bullhorn and replied, "What we transfer, capitán, can be accomplished at sea!" The PT lunged forward in a sudden acceleration and quickly slid ahead of the MERRY DREW, heading off into a wide arc and coming about for the downwind run.

Toro swivelled about to grin at Bolan and shouted, "We go! *Vamos!*"

The running lights were extinguished and the little craft leapt into a full power run, barely fifty yards abeam the other vessel. With the wind now at his back, Bolan settled into the harness and angled the latest thing in gatlings to several points off his starboard bow. He made motions with his hands to forewarn his crewmen as to the proposed swing of the gun as they swept past the target... and then they were back and speeding along the target area and Bolan was cranking the firing handle... and the war at sea was enjoined. He raked the vessel from stem to stern with a walking line of brilliant explosions along the main deck level, while the machine-gunners opened up in a steady drumfire, and pandemonium arrived aboard the MERRY DREW. Men were running and shouting even above the shrieking wind and continuous explosions, in a quick exodus from that side of the ship. Then it was behind them and Bolan's crew was feeding in another belt of large living, the PT was swinging wide in a rapid encircling maneuver, and Toro was laughing lustily into the wind.

The next downwind run was to the MERRY DREW's port side and there were no hands on deck. Lights were being extinguished throughout and there were no catcalls or hooting cries of good humor to greet Bolan's raiders. Automatic weapons spat at them from the bow, the boat deck, the bridge, and handguns were being unloaded from every point. Standing tall against the withering fire, Bolan cranked the Honeywell into a stunning assault upon the bridge, maintaining his fire into that limited area for the full run. As they swept into the turn, two of the PT's *soldados* were being hastily helped into the troop compartment for treatment of wounds and Bolan was urging his crew into a rapid re-load.

"Bring her in to a hundred meters on the upwind!" he shouted to Toro.

The Cuban nodded and the PT whirled back for a stern-to-bow sweep. Again the Honeywell transmitted a walking line of thunderstorms, this time along the boat deck and into the lounge, then into a concentration of men at the bow. A halfhearted crackling of return fire was noted but not actually experienced aboard the PT, and they were swinging once again into the jouncing return circle for another downwinder.

Bolan's wound was bleeding again and his left arm virtually useless. The MERRY DREW was afire in numerous places, most notably upon the bridge deck and wheelhouse, the crackling flames revealing men in frantic motion all about. She was pursuing an erratic course and obviously foundering.

Toro called back, "I think you have knocked out the pilot house, *Matador!* She wallows in the troughs!" He cut back on the power, maintaining just enough forward motion to assure control, and pointed off into the darkness. "Sound the trumpets, señor, the cavalry approaches!"

Bolan swiveled about to gaze into the direction of new interest. From out of the darkness, perhaps five hundred yards behind, two sets of vari-colored lights were moving rapidly toward them.

“Police boats?” Bolan yelled.

Toro shook his head, “Not this far out, *amigo*. We have played the games with these ones many times also. These are your Coast Guard!” The PT was beginning to pick up speed again, and they were roaring along across the heavily troughing waters.

Bolan looked back to the MERRY DREW. She was brightly lighted now by leaping flames which seemed to extend from bow to stern. A group of men were crowding about a boat davit, frantically trying to lower a lifeboat. Bolan found the scene holding less and less interest for him. He raised his gaze to the skies, now flashingly illuminated by both the flames from the MERRY DREW and an almost continual display of heavenly fireworks.

“The storm has found us, *Matador!*” Toro shouted.

Bolan nodded, warmly patted the shoulders of his crewman, unhooked himself from the gun, and joined Toro at the conn. Toro was grinning into the pelting spray and pointing behind them. One of the cutters had apparently dropped off to assist the MERRY DREW. The other was still behind the PT. Bolan asked, “So what happens now, *amigo?*”

Men were moving about excitedly down below, in the cabin, and the Honeywell crew were calmly dismantling the weapon. Toro said, “We play hide and seek with the radar, *Matador*. Maybe we will lose them in the storm, maybe they will run us out of fuel.” He shrugged. “Do not worry, we will elude them, at least until we have gained the appearance of peaceful fishermen.”

Bolan was looking at his clothing.

Toro laughed and said, “I do not think we can make you into a fisherman, *Matador*. We will run you ashore near Hollywood, my friend. You can make it safely from there, no?”

“I hate to leave you this way, Toro. Maybe we will meet again some day, and stomp snakes together.”

“This I would greatly like, *Matador.*”

Bolan went below then, and made his farewells to the rest of the *soldados*. This was a group he would never forget. He put a fresh bandage on his wound, had another quick cup of jolting rum, and returned topside to conn the ship with Toro the Spanish Bull. They had lived largely together. Now they stood quietly, shoulder to shoulder, enmeshed in the atmosphere of that largeness. Some minutes later, when the boat had reached its nearest safe distance from the shore, they still had not spoken. Then Toro clasped his friend’s hand and said, “*Adios, El Matador.*”

“*Adios, El Soldado Grande,*” Bolan murmured, and then he stepped over the side and joined the seething waters, carrying with him large memories of a very large people.

Some ten minutes later, he floundered ashore and knelt there panting in the surf and in the presence of another type of large people. Bolan had crashed a skinnydipping party of young people, and a startled girl with blond braids and an entirely unembarrassed smile exclaimed, “Oh wow! This Aquarian makes it by land, sea, and air!”

Bolan was immediately surrounded by naked, curious youths. In the background, some distance inland, stadium-type lights melted the darkness and

the crashing amplified sounds of mod music drifted across the intervening area to compete with the growing sounds of the storm coming in from the sea.

Bolan struggled to his feet and stood swayingly holding a burning arm tightly against him. Just as he was about to topple over, a nude boy with a luxurious beard stepped forward to support him and softly said, "Sure man, I'll carry your bod."

## Epilogue

John Hannon knew with a certainty that he would never have all the details of that most fantastic day in Miami police history. What he did know was perhaps enough, he philosophized. A Mafia convention in his town had been busted, the county morgue was overflowing, and the police ward at the receiving hospital had been extended to cover two full floors. The surviving and the walking wounded, while probably in no danger of long-term incarceration, had at least suffered the embarrassment of arrest and exposure, and Hannon was thinking that there would be drifting snow upon Miami's beaches before the mob returned again. He had not caught so much as a glimpse of Bolan, of course, but there were some mysteries that a career cop enjoyed taking into his retirement, and Hannon would certainly have a lot of heady things to contemplate. In a secret corner of his mind, John Hannon was entirely satisfied with the way things had gone, massacre or not.

And, at this time, the Dade force skipper had not even been apprised of the Coast Guard report on one MV MERRY DREW. According to this report, the cutter OSWEGO BAY had gone to the assistance of the cruise ship, finding her in flames and foundering in heavy seas. The ship's officers had insisted that the MERRY DREW had been set afire by lightning, which had ignited a large case of fireworks brought aboard to entertain the passengers. The officers could not or would not explain the shrapnel and bullets found imbedded throughout the vessel's superstructure, nor could they explain the combat-type wounds of some 52 of her passengers.

A closely connected report, filed by the cutter JARVIS, indicated that a party of Cuban "fishermen" in a converted PT boat had been chased down and boarded at the height of the tropical storm, then towed to safety in Biscayne Bay. The JARVIS report indicated that her officers had suspected an involvement between the burning MERRY DREW and the PT boat, and that charges might be filed against the PT's captain for a violation of international law, "failure to standby and lend assistance to a vessel in distress." It was pointed out, however, that the PT was in graver danger than the MERRY DREW, because of the approaching storm and the relative inexperience of the PT's crew.

For Mack Bolan, in the aftermath of the Miami war, there was a feeling of emptiness and frustration. In his thinking, the "sweep through the middle" at Miami had been a dismal flop. It would not be until some time later that he would fully appreciate the extent of the losses suffered by his enemy. For now, he quietly mourned the death of a brave little *soldada* while taking comfort in the memory of

the strong friendships generated during that hectic day. And he was studying an unusual and watersogged *portfolio* which had been urged upon him by a high officer of his country's government.

Various items within the portfolio had been sealed in plastic—such as a passport with Bolan's image upon it, credit cards and bank letters and an assortment of personal identifications. Not plastic-protected but still legible were excerpts from various reports on Mafia activity overseas, narcotics traffic through North Africa and France, secret bank accounts in Switzerland, and syndicated gambling in England, smuggling and so forth from various nations. Bolan grinned inwardly as the full implications of the portfolio were borne upon him. They were trying to export The Executioner.

A pretty blond girl dressed in buckskin jeans and nothing else was tenderly changing the dressing on his wound and shooting him warm, quick glances of open admiration. The storm was howling into its swansong, and others in the big tent were bemoaning its effect upon the music festival, but Bolan didn't mind at all being in the most incredible ghetto in the world—it seemed somehow to fit perfectly into the rest of the day. The girl completed her first-aid chores and lay her bare chest upon him and kissed his chin. "You're cool," she told him.

Bolan smiled, pushed her upright, and pulled a peace medal from between the heavy breasts and spun it on the chain. "You wouldn't approve of me," he told her. "I wear war charms, not peace medals."

She shrugged. "Sure, I know. Sometimes it's a thin line between war and peace. I get violent sometimes, too."

Bolan raised his eyebrows and said, "Yeah?"

"Sure. You should have caught my thing in Washington last month." She lay the breasts upon his chest again and wriggled gently against him. "There's more to life than just war and peace, though." After a moment, she moved hastily away and said, "Oh wow! I just thought of a great idea for a protest song!"

Bolan grinned and closed his eyes. The spirit of protest, he was thinking, was strong in just about everyone these days. He wished he could work that spirit out of his own bones by simply writing songs or marching in the streets. He thought again of Margarita, and of the depth of her thought *and* actions. Who was right, the Margaritas, the Aquarians, or the executioners? Bolan didn't know. He only knew what was right for him. His fingers played with the portfolio, then he quietly tucked it away. He would think about that. Perhaps The Executioner would join the international jet set. Maybe he would try a sweep through Europe.

The blond was gigglingly whispering into his ear. He patted her bare back and made room for her, and she crawled in beside him. The dirt floor of the tent was awash and her feet were muddy. A weird kid with a fright wig for hair was just across the tent, strumming a guitar and singing a mournful song about injustice in the world. Bolan relaxed and tried to forget the girl's muddy feet. From the beginning to the very end, it had been a most incredible day... as were most days in the life of The Executioner.

