

No 29

CORGI



Mack Bolan is
The EXECUTIONER
COMMAND STRIKE



Mack Bolan hits at the
very heart of the New York Mafia!

DON PENDLETON

NAME THAT TUNE

Bolan went up the stairs, rapped on the door and pushed it open in the same movement, and stepped inside the apartment. Minotti was seated at the window, glaring gloomily down onto the street. "What is it?" he growled, without even looking toward the door.

Volpa and a beefy man of middle-age, obviously the other tagman, sat at a table at the far end of the room. Volpa was engrossed in the newspaper; the tagman was reading a comic book. Nobody seemed to give a damn. Bolan sighed. His Beretta whispered. The tagman's nose disappeared as shattered parts of his head flung themselves onto the wall behind him. Volpa looked up just in time to catch the next bullet squarely between the eyes. The table overturned and both bodies joined the march to nowhere.

"For God's sake!" Frank Minotti exclaimed.

"Peter sent me," Bolan declared.

"What? Who?" cried Minotti.

"It's not 'I've Got A Secret,' man," Bolan said. "It's 'Name That Tune.' We're going for one that begins with Peter."

"Peter who?" Minotti screamed. "I don't know no Peter!"

"Too bad," Bolan said coldly. "You lose ..."

Also by Don Pendleton

THE EXECUTIONER: MIAMI MASSACRE
THE EXECUTIONER: ASSAULT ON SOHO
THE EXECUTIONER: CHICAGO WIPEOUT
THE EXECUTIONER: VEGAS VENDETTA
THE EXECUTIONER: CARIBBEAN KILL
THE EXECUTIONER: CALIFORNIA HIT
THE EXECUTIONER: BOSTON BLITZ
THE EXECUTIONER: WASHINGTON I.O.U.
THE EXECUTIONER: SAN DIEGO SIEGE
THE EXECUTIONER: PANIC ON PHILLY
THE EXECUTIONER: NIGHTMARE IN NEW YORK
THE EXECUTIONER: JERSEY GUNS
THE EXECUTIONER: TEXAS STORM
THE EXECUTIONER: DETROIT DEATHWATCH
THE EXECUTIONER: NEW ORLEANS KNOCKOUT
THE EXECUTIONER: FIREBASE SEATTLE
THE EXECUTIONER: HAWAIIAN HELLGROUND
THE EXECUTIONER: ST LOUIS SHOWDOWN
THE EXECUTIONER: CANADIAN CRISIS
THE EXECUTIONER: COLORADO KILL-ZONE
THE EXECUTIONER: ACAPULCO RAMPAGE
THE EXECUTIONER: SAVAGE FIRE

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Don Pendleton

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COMMAND STRIKE**

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

For John McPherson and Larry Smith—
booksellers, by God—
and for all the good ACIDA people
we met at Myrtle Beach. Cheers!

dp

'The only inequalities that matter begin in the mind'.
- JACQUETTA HAWKES

'They can because they think they can.'
- VIRGIL

'Don't tell me I can't
I will because I must.'
- MACK BOLAN, THE EXECUTIONER

PROLOGUE

Mack Bolan's magnificent war began in the western Massachusetts city of Pittsfield. It should have ended there. It did not, despite the obvious fact that no lone man, without friends or allies, could successfully challenge that awesome combination of underworld power known variously as the Mafia, the mob, the organization, La Cosa Nostra. Unparalleled dedication and surpassing gallantry made the difference at Pittsfield, though, bringing a victory of sorts to the one-man army and sending the shock patterns of his very personal war cascading along the worldwide networks of organized crime.

Early observers of the war regarded that initial victory at Pittsfield as a fluke, an accident of the beginner's-luck variety, a lucky punch by a "wild-assed warrior" who would very quickly pay for his impertinence. Even the enemy saw it that way. Pittsfield, after all, had been a "soft territory"—a mere colonial operation of small-time racketeering with weak ties to the national organization. Headquarters' response to the losses there was casual almost to the point of indifference. Bolan's name was added to the "enemies list" and a routine contract was issued to cover the matter.

Of course, even a routine contract for someone to die at Mafia hands is usually sufficient. Add to that the threat from the law-enforcement community, which was now committed to the apprehension of this "highly dangerous fugitive," and Mack Bolan's days clearly appeared to be numbered. No one in the know—media people included—expected this "tragedy of the Vietnam era" to be seen or heard of again, except perhaps on a cold slab in some morgue.

One nationally syndicated columnist even ventured to offer advice in print to the "last American hero"—whom he compared with the windmill-fighting Don Quixote: "Go away, young man. Go to Africa, go to India—better yet, go to Tibet. Bury yourself in memories of what might have been; forget the windmills, forget honour and justice and human dignity: cease to exist, Sergeant Bolan, except as a fond memory of a dying society. Find yourself a deep cave in the mountains of Tibet and there spend the rest of your blighted days in contemplation of your magnificent gesture, your stupendous impertinence, your splendid manhood. But give us no more heroic grist for the gods."

If Bolan read that advice, he did not follow it. He went instead to the focal points of underworld power, one by one and campaign by dazzling campaign, to hit the enemy with thunderation and hellfire. The shattering, blitzkrieg assaults upon everything Mafia dismantled underworld power structures wherever it encountered them and sent the enemy reeling in shock and dismay from coast to coast and border to border.

"This magnificent warrior is playing to win!" exulted one mind blown journalist in the wake of an Executioner strike. "It is almost impossible to believe the effect of this guy!"

Other interested observers also began to rethink the "impossibility" of this "hopeless war" against the Mafia. The enemy itself retrenched behind new defences while exerting political influence to enflame official government response to the Bolan war and, at the same time, setting up a fantastic response of its own. The contract purse escalated to a cool million dollars, payable to anyone who could earn it. Special hit teams and head parties were formed and geared specifically to Bolan's

destruction while street-corner militia and ambitious freelance gunmen prowled the tracks of the now dreaded man in black.

Meanwhile, the police reaction to Mack Bolan had become mixed. Officially, Bolan was a dangerous fugitive, occupying a prime position on the most-wanted list. Law-enforcement officials throughout the land were advised to "shoot on sight—shoot to kill." Yet, a secret chair in the federal government had made direct overtures to Bolan—offering him amnesty for past "crimes" and official but secret status in the government's own war against organized crime. Bolan declined that government alignment, preferring to wage his war his way, without compromising himself on the one hand, without embarrassing his nation's official conscience on the other. And at all levels of the police establishment the personal sympathies of individual lawmen were almost wholly on the side of the indomitable man in black. The cops knew a brother when they saw one. Bolan himself thought of lawmen as soldiers of the same side. He never once fired upon nor intentionally endangered a police officer. This was another of the impossibilities, matching in effect only that other miracle which continually intrigued the sideline observers: with all the hell and thunderation unleashed by this savage warrior, his uncanny sense of direction and moment focused the attacks only on those who had earned them. No innocent bystanders fell in Bolan's charges. But it was no miracle—it was simply the way Mack Bolan worked. If he could not live without killing cops, then he simply would not live. If his war against human filth could not be waged without himself becoming filth, then why make war?

Early observers saw the Executioner war as an exercise in simple vengeance—or, at best, as a swashbuckling style of vigilante justice characterized by bloody excess and psychotic energy. The long view, however, clearly revealed that this war was indeed a true and a magnificent war, that Mack Bolan was a superbly gifted and strongly balanced human being, that he was motivated not so much by hatred for the enemy as by compassion for the victims of that enemy.

Mack Bolan was a good man.

He was not a psychopath, but a deeply concerned human being who could not stand idly by while the savages devoured the world. He was also a military realist who possessed the strength of spirit to do his duty as he saw it. In an early entry in his war journal Bolan declared, "I have seen the enemy and I know them now. I know how to fight them, how to defeat them. And I cannot turn away."

There lay, perhaps, the entire motivation behind the Executioner's war.

He could not turn away.

1

THE BREW

Marinello's old Long Island joint was an armed camp. The rock walls of the old fortress stood about five feet high, topped by high-voltage wires and further protected by an electronic alarm system. All that mattered lay within those walls. The gate was indented about fifty feet, equipped with heavy electric locks, bracketed by two small brick guard shacks—the "chute" effect, featuring sentries to either side behind bullet proof glass. Behind each of the gatehouses was a "dog run"—fenced enclosures about ten feet wide and maybe fifty feet in length, each sporting a matched pair of alert Dobermans trained to kill on command.

Bolan could only guess at other defensive sets within those walls. Marinello had been the king crazy in the demented world which he ruled from this old palace. Savages in a savage land lead savagely paranoid lives—their kings and chiefs in particular. But even that did not save them from their own kind. It had not saved Marinello, the King of Kings.

It was some kind of commentary on the American justice system that fortresses such as this were designed not to protect the lawless from the law but to protect them from one another. Any cop with a badge and a warrant would be passed through those gates without question. He would be received graciously and treated hospitably, while the clout machine waltzed the guy gently twice around the palace and back outside the walls with all the formal ceremony indigenous to palace visits. No—it was not the cops who scared people like Augie Marinello. It was people like Augie who scared people like Augie.

And now the king was dead.

In his place stood a shaky heir presumptive, one David Eritrea—never yet a boss, but now hoping to take over as the Boss of all Bosses. He had been Augie's consiglieri and a good right arm through the old man's declining years—and, through all those years, David Eritrea had nursed a forlorn dream. Now, it seemed, the dream was becoming a reality—thanks chiefly to none other than Mack Bolan, the only natural enemy these people had beside themselves.

Ironic, yeah. Bolan had given the guy his legs. Now he had to take them back. That would be no easy task. The king was dead, sure, but the empire was secure—as secure, probably, as the palace itself. More so, maybe, than under Marinello. The old man's lingering illness had produced a quietive effect on the organized underworld, a "wait and see" attitude of caution and uncertainty. Now ...Well, now, yeah—many things would be changing.

Mack Bolan's chief desire, at the moment, was to sponsor a few changes of his own. The king was dead. Bolan meant to see the entire damned empire dead. To do so, he knew that he must frustrate any thought of a smooth transition of power.

The Executioner smiled, then frowned at the same thought.

He would shake their house down. Yeah. From within.

The sun was rising and Digger Pinella knew that it had been the longest night of his life. He stretched tired muscles and smiled sourly through the laminated layers of protective glass, across the twenty feet of no-man's-land to Tommy Zip, who was smiling tiredly back at him from the other guard shack. "Another night, another fright," Tommy growled through the intercom.

Digger extinguished the night lights of the chute as he growled back. "Don't knock it, guy. Where would you be without all this?"

"In a soft bed with a warm broad," the other grumped, then stiffened attentively as a vehicle entered the chute. "Whatta we got here?"

What they had there was a flashy sports car with a foreign pedigree, fire-engine red and shrieking of luxury. The car fit the guy behind the wheel. Big guy, cool, macho—wearing a white suit that did not come from Sears or Robert Hall—flashing white teeth and wraparound shades. A class guy.

"Good morning, sir," Digger said politely.

"You bet it is," the guy replied in a strong voice that rattled the intercom. He held up a laminated card for Digger's inspection. "Roust Billy Gino and get him out here on the double."

There was no mistaking the quiet authority there.

Digger smiled and flicked a reassuring glance toward the other guard shack as he picked up the phone and passed the word inside.

"You want to go on in, sir?" he asked the distinguished visitor.

"You passing me through?" the guy asked, almost smiling.

It was a hell of a question. Would the Pope pass Jesus through to heaven? Digger laughed nervously as he punched the button that unlocked the gate. "Mr. Gino is on his way, sir," he reported. "He'll meet you on the drive."

The guy saluted casually, tossed a wink toward Tommy Zip, and eased the hot car on through the chute.

Digger closed the gate and said, "Shit," into the intercom.

"Who the hell is that?" Tommy wanted to know.

"Don't ask," Digger growled, inspecting his own reflection in the heavy glass. He hoped he looked okay, at the end of a long and nervous night.

"Really?" Tommy Zip asked tautly, guessing. "That Ace of Spades he flashed on me didn't come from no poker deck," Digger assured his partner.

"What does he want with the Head Cock? What's he doing coming out here at this time of morning? What do we—?"

"Go back to your soft bed and warm broad," Digger growled. But he was worried, too. Something was brewing. Something unhappy. A Lord High Enforcer from La *Commissione* did not pay social calls at the crack of dawn—or at any other time, for that matter.

For damn sure. Something unhappy was brewing.

Billy Gino paused at the front door to pass hurried instructions to the house boss. "Get it clean. We got some brass coming. Make sure Mr. Eritrea is wide awake. Tell him I think it's Omega."

The house boss jerked his head in nervous understanding of that news and hurried away to prepare for the event. Gino went outside and yelled, "Look sharp, there!" then went on down the steps in lively descent. The two boys on the porch shifted uncomfortably to more alert postures and one of them inquired, "What's up, sir?"

"Time, maybe," Gino growled cryptically.

The watch chief, guard dog at the wrist, met him on the walkway. "Someone just passed through the gate, Billy," he reported, frowning. "Who're we expecting?"

"We're expecting anything," the Head Cock told his yard boss. "Get these boys on the balls of their feet, huh?"

"Who is it, Billy?"

"It's a wild card. Omega, probably."

"That's the guy that ..."

Billy Gino solemnly nodded his head. "That's the guy. Let's see he goes away with a good impression, huh? We weren't looking too hot last time he saw us."

The guy was reaching for his walkie-talkie when Gino spun away and hurried along the drive to greet the important visitor. It was a simple matter of protocol. With the joint "on hard," it would not be proper to allow a high ranker the indignities of being challenged at each checkpoint along the way. Besides all that, appearances could mean a lot at a time like this. There was going to be a lot of shit flying for a long time—Billy Gino was certain of that. Augie had been sick for a long time, sure—but he'd still been the boss, for as long as he remained alive. With Augie completely out of the picture now, things would be going to hell in a basket until someone moved into the power vacuum at the top. This was no elected head of state who had passed away—with all machineries of government geared to a smooth succession to power. Nobody voted Augie Boss of all Bosses. He was the boss simply because nobody else could claim the job while he lived. He'd been the boss because he was the meanest and the smartest of them all. Now, sure, there would be a lot of shit on the fan until the next guy proved himself worthy of the job.

Billy Gino shivered with the thought and hurried on to meet the man who certainly would have some pronounced effect upon that selection process.

Omega was Billy Gino's kind of guy. Damned right. But the mere presence of the guy was enough to induce shivers, even in Billy Gino.

His kind of guy, yeah.

Maybe even the meanest and the smartest of them all.

2

LIAISON

Bolan had no illusions regarding the hazards of his position. It was a bad place at a tense time; he would rather be almost anywhere else, in almost any other situation. But the game was here—and the situation was practically unavoidable. Bolan was here simply because it was the best place to be, in the mission sense.

He had to be here.

But he did not have to enjoy it.

The security boss was no clown. Bolan knew the guy—had talked to him briefly just a day earlier, in Pittsfield, while employing the same masquerade. It could work again. Then again, maybe it wouldn't. So many intangibles went into a successful penetration.

The guy was approaching the vehicle with a cautious stride and uncommitted face. Bolan got out and leaned against the fender of the hot little car, gauging the guy's acceptance of the role camouflage while he lit a cigarette and peered at Billy Gino over the flame from the lighter.

The Head Cock did not extend a greeting hand, but rather hoisted a foot onto the front bumper and extended himself across the engine hood, supporting himself on his elbows, to stare intently at his visitor. It was a good sign.

"Ay," Billy Gino unemotionally greeted the Executioner.

Bolan showed him a tight grin. "Seems peaceful enough," he said quietly.

"Almost too peaceful," the guy said, just as quietly—adding, almost too quietly, "after all the shit at Pittsfield."

Bolan took a long pull at the cigarette and said, "Don't hold your breath, Billy."

"That's all I been doing since we got back," Gino admitted. "Guess you know about Augie, eh."

"I know," Bolan assured him. "It's why I'm here."

"I figured that." The guy's gaze dropped to his hands. "What happened up there, sir?"

Bolan flicked the cigarette away and watched it arc to the ground before he sighed and replied, "Hell happened up there, Billy."

"It was Bolan for sure, huh?"

The guy lifted his eyes to a direct confrontation with the cold gaze of his visitor. The gazes clashed for a moment; then Bolan told him, "For sure, yeah. And something else."

It was Billy Gino's turn to go for a cigarette. He lit up, exhaled noisily, stared at his hand, and said, "Uh huh. Some of us have been wondering."

Bolan took the plunge. "How tight are you with David Eritrea?"

The guy waggled his hand, still staring at his hand as though struggling to identify it.

Bolan allowed him a beat of contemplative silence before telling him, "Keep on wondering, Billy."

"Thanks," the guy muttered. He sighed in afterthought, smiled tautly, and added, "Thanks, too, for the Pittsfield nudge. All of us know what you did for us there."

"Saved your ass, maybe," Bolan said with a matching grin.

"That you did, for sure. What else did you do up there, sir?"

Bolan's grin faded. The guy was out of line. "I told you to keep on wondering, Billy. Wondering and asking is not the same."

The Head Cock's face flushed with embarrassment. "Yessir," he growled. "Sorry. It's a confusing time."

It will get worse before it gets better," Bolan said, his tone softening. "Just remember that it will get better. Can I count on you for that, amici?"

"What'd I tell you in Pittsfield?" Gino replied, still a bit red in the face.

"You told me to snap my fingers, Billy."

"It still goes, Mr. Omega. A guy needs a star to follow through troubled waters. Right? I don't know what else to—"

Bolan reached out and touched the guy's shoulder. "This time it could be a comet. Keep the eyes wide open. Right?"

The Head Cock flushed even brighter, obviously strongly affected by the open display of friendship from a man whom he believed to be a Lord High Enforcer. "I'm keeping them open, sir," he promised.

"That's all I can ask. For the moment."

The guy wouldn't give up, though. "What was Augie doing at Pittsfield, Mr. Omega? No offence. But I got to know."

Bolan's reply was immediate, delivered in a solemn, almost sad monotone.

"Running," he said quietly. "Keep the eyes open, Billy. And keep on wondering."

"Bet on it," the guy said savagely. He looked around him in some mute, helpless frustration, took another pull at his cigarette, then said, "We're hard, sir. We're ready for anything."

"I can see that," Bolan told him.

"Is that guy in our territory now?"

The Head Cock was asking Bolan about Bolan. "Bet on that, too," he advised him.

"I already did," Billy Gino replied solemnly. He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. "Mr. Eritrea knows you're here. I'll take you on to the house. Then I gotta come back out here and check my defences. This sort of thing is tough on the nerves. You gotta watch these guys like a hawk. They're all good boys but—well, you know how it goes."

Bolan gave the guy the supreme compliment. "You run a hard palace, Billy," he said, and meant it.

Sure he meant it. It was no discredit to Billy Gino that he did not know his most feared enemy even while standing toe to toe and eyeballing him. Few men now living could positively identify that wraith of death called Mack Bolan. Even in their nightmares, the living enemy saw him only as a presence—a moving shadow which turned three-dimensional only when Death beckoned. Billy Gino knew this man only as Omega—one of those impressive and equally faceless wild cards from the Commissione's hardshed. Not even the bosses knew for sure who their wild cards were at any given moment. The guys took on new names and new faces in the same routine with which ordinary men changed their clothes.

So, no, it was no discredit to the Head Cock of the palace guard that he did not recognize his enemy. And Bolan saw enough during the brief ride down to the house to be glad that he had not come in hard himself. This would be a tough one to bust.

Bust it he must, though—and the sooner the better.

Eritrea stood at the library door and impatiently awaited the arrival of his distinguished guest. What the hell was the guy doing? Checking him out? Inspecting the defences? Christ!—David could have walked from the gate in this time.

Suddenly there he was. The front door opened and the guy stepped inside—or maybe glided was a better word for what that guy did—all muscle and grace and restrained power. In a different situation, in kinder times, David Eritrea could easily

hate him. Somehow he made David feel less of a man, less in command—almost clumsy; and David Eritrea was known as a class guy himself. No matter, though. That was small stuff now. Right now the only visible heir to the Marinello throne needed that Black Ace if he really intended to grasp the reins of power from Augie's dead hands. Omega could be the one to cinch the grip. As soon as David was home clean, of course, there would be some different calls from the huddle. Guys like Omega would never again have this kind of power. He'd never liked that setup, not ever. Too damn much autonomy, too much raw authority at their fingertips. King David would change all that, and with damn little loss of motion.

For now, though .

He stepped into the hall with a smile and a ready hand. "Omega! Glad you came. I've been worried about you. God, isn't it awful what happened up there! I was worried that maybe you—well, you know, it was a lot of hell."

Omega grasped the outstretched hand and pressed it firmly, smiling solemnly for the occasion. "Close is good enough, isn't it?" he said quietly, revealing nothing whatever.

Eritrea steered the visitor into the library and saw him comfortably seated at a small table where orange juice, toast and marmalade awaited. Then he closed the doors and took a chair opposite his guest.

"I didn't wish that for Augie," Eritrea declared in a hushed voice.

"Course not—none of us did," the visitor replied.

"I didn't even know he'd gone up there. I'm totally mystified—I'm—he was getting senile, you know. Paranoid, too. Of course, who wouldn't—with all that's been going on these past months. But I believe sometimes he even mistrusted me." Eritrea sighed. "You can't watch them twenty-four hours a day, can you? I want you to understand something one hundred percent, Omega. I was trying to protect the old man. I was trying to hold the thing together, trying to make sure that he died with dignity. I was trying to protect the tradition. It's important that you understand that."

"I understand it," Omega said, still holding off, staring distastefully at the orange juice.

"Can I get you something more, uh—"

"It's okay," the wild card said quietly. "I didn't come to be entertained, David. I came to parley."

Eritrea nodded agreeably. "Okay. Fine. Let's parley."

"You know what you have to do now. But you'll have to move fast. It's started already, with Augie not even planted yet. What are you doing about funeral arrangements?"

"It's scheduled for tomorrow. What do you mean? What's started already?"

"The scramble, David, has started already. I thought you had things nailed down a bit tighter than that. It's only been a matter of hours since ..."

A cold chill chased along King David's spine. "Well, sure, uh—I thought—you told me ..."

"I told you I'd help," the visitor said softly. "I did not say that we were nailing it down for you. You know what you have to do, eh?"

The chill hit him again. Eritrea hoisted the orange juice to cover any outward show of emotion as he assured the wild card, "I'm doing it."

"You need to call a council, too. Full table." "Okay. Sure."

"You can work it in with the funeral arrangements. Delay the funeral, if necessary. Let's give them all time to get here."

"Oh, sure. We've covered that. Everybody has been notified. They're all coming."

"Good work. Okay. You need to lock it up before some of the old bosses have time to think about it. Guys like--well, never mind, you already know who they are. Tradition, David, is what they want."

The son of a bitch! Right between the eyes with it Eritrea coughed delicately. "You said—"

"What I said in Pittsfield still goes. You'll get your support from my people—but after you've locked it up with the others. You need a majority, David. Give us something to enforce. Then we'll do our job. There's a possible hitch, though. I can't cover it. You'll have to."

Eritrea felt his dream squirming away from him. In a hollow voice he asked, "What's the hitch?"

"One of my kind," the son of a bitch told him. "One guy I really can't be sure about. He could toss it. You'll have to get to him, and quick."

Eritrea knew it, goddammit! He never got spinal chills for nothing! "Which guy?" he asked quietly.

"The one that got away," the goddamned rockjawed bastard announced in that infuriatingly placid tone.

David shook his head. "I don't understand." "Augie was not alone in the Pittsfield stand, David."

"Oh. Well." Eritrea sipped more orange juice. He could feel his soul sweating. How much did this cool bastard know? Really know! "I thought, uh I heard—the word came down that Mack Bolan was the one got to Augie. What are you saying?"

"The same," Omega coldly assured him. "But that's only one of your problems. There's a guy in Manhattan, David, who knows why Augie was at Pittsfield."

Sweating, sure. Sweating blood! He sighed. "I see."

"I can't approach the guy. I'm not even sure who he really is. They call him Peter." Omega was looking at his watch, lips pursed, eyes slitted. "He knows, David. You'd better find him. And quick."

Eritrea groaned aloud, allowing some of the tightly reined emotion to leak out, then tried to cover it with a growling comment. "He's an Ace, huh?"

"Odds-on favourite, yeah. Maybe you should let Leo the Pussy look into it. He has good instincts for such things." The guy's eyes warmed momentarily as he added, "They worked fine for him at Pittsfield, didn't they?"

Eritrea nodded agreement with that, not really giving a particular damn at the moment about Leo "the Pussy" Turrin and his survival instincts.

Omega was suggesting, "Let Leo work it for you. He already knows, David. If you're worrying about his loyalty . . . hell, man, it was Augie trying to set him up for the fall at Pittsfield, and he knows that, too."

"You're right," Eritrea agreed. He smiled suddenly. "You're always right, aren't you?"

"As long as I'm alive," the other said, grinning thinly. He looked at his watch again. "I'm on a tight timetable, David." He got to his feet. "Tell you what. Contact me through Leo; let's work it that way. Keep him advised of all developments, and I'll work the liaison through him from here on. It's better that way, eh?"

"Better, sure, right," Eritrea agreed as he left the table and accompanied the visitor to the door.

"I'm keeping a low profile through all this. You understand."

"Low profile, right, that's a good idea. Don't worry—I'll keep you plugged in via Leo the Pussy."

They were in the hall, heading toward the entrance foyer. Omega again consulted his watch. He turned on a bright smile and said, "Good luck, David."

But then, before any response to that was possible, it began to appear that King David's luck was all running the wrong way. A white-hot light flashed through the doorway of the library they had just vacated, the floor beneath their feet shook and heaved, and the cataclysmic roar of high explosives battered the air around their ears. The wall at David's left spilled open and a white cloud puffed through at about the same moment that Omega grabbed him and threw him to the floor.

"What th' hell!" Eritrea squawked.

Omega was on top of him, protecting him from the shower of debris from the library, and other rumblings were moving across the grounds out front.

"I guess it's that other problem you have, David," Omega told him, unflappable as ever, cool and possessed while all the world tumbled down. "I'd say you've got Mack Bolan right up your ass—right now."

The would-be king of crime shivered under the knowledge that it was true. He should have known it already. It was an occupational hazard for Mafia bosses—the very one which had given David Eritrea legs enough to reach for the crown.

"Get that guy, Omega!" he groaned. "God's sake, get him! Then you can write your own ticket with me! I'll give you the fucking world!"

Omega was already on his feet and sprinting through the wreckage toward the door, gun in hand and looking magnificent.

And the vision of that made King David feel tremendously powerful—not at all clumsy or less the ruler. With a guy like that at his side—why God!—David Eritrea could have it all!

There was a comfort.

God yes, there was a magnificent comfort.

3

FROM THE PIT

A bit of sleight of hand, sure, with all the magic being provided by the war wagon's auto-fire system, but it had come uncomfortably close to the man behind it all, just the same. Each of the four big birds carried in the rocket pod had been programmed for individual targets on a sequence-time logic, with the first directed at the big east window on the ground floor of the mansion. It was pure luck that Bolan himself wound up in that room with the budding capo and still more luck that he was able to make the grandstand play over the guy's cringing body.

It had been designed as more than a stunt to cover his Omega identity, however. It was a seriously considered attack which had been designed to shake the swaggers out of these guys and to serve notice that there would be no free ride to glory over Marinello's ashes. It was also a carefully calculated cover fire, in case Bolan needed a hard withdrawal from that joint—a circumstance which had not arisen, but which had to be covered in the planning of the mission.

There was nothing wild-ass about this warrior. Bolan consistently picked missions up and put them down with the greatest of care and planning—and it was a tribute to his tactical genius that he had remained alive for so long under such incredible odds against survival.

Actually, that mission into the Marinello palace had served several important purposes. "The one that got away" at Pittsfield was of as much concern to Bolan as it could possibly be to Eritrea. "Peter," whoever he was, could mean big trouble for Bolan's closest friend and ally, little Leo Turrin, who had been living the double life as undercover cop and Mafia big shot for quite a bit longer than Bolan's war had been in progress. The Pittsfield thing had gone okay, with Leo actually stronger in the mob than ever before—but "Peter" could possibly undo it all. Bolan had to plug that hole, with any means available, and the tip to Eritrea represented but one avenue of attack into the problem.

Bolan had also wanted personal contact with Billy Gino. He'd accomplished that, and hopefully he'd started something building in Gino's mind which would help the Executioner somewhere downstream in this command strike.

Otherwise, it had been an almost routine visit for Mack Bolan. He'd picked up a few vibes, sown a few seeds, and shaken their house a bit. Which was good enough for starters.

He received visible evidence that it had been good enough the moment he hit the doorway in his withdrawal. A smoking section of porch railing was lying on the lawn beside a blackened body. Flames were leaping from the shattered east side of the house and a couple of men were scampering around over there trying to figure out what to do about it. The yard guard was in full reaction, with electrified flunkies running everywhere in grimly silent response to the attack—taking up defensive positions, probably, on some prearranged perimeter surrounding the manse. A crew wagon in the parking area was aflame beside the gutted remains of another which had obviously taken a direct hit.

A man with a guard dog at his wrist stood stolidly in the drive at the front of the house—just standing there, waiting for what might come from behind the barrage. Bolan had to respect him. He stepped around him and climbed into the Ferrari. "Watch it, guy," he growled in a friendly tone.

The man was worried. He asked, "What is it, sir?"

"Watch me go find out," Bolan suggested, and sent the Ferrari screaming toward the front gate.

It was real chaos down there. Bolan had sent the other two birds to this sector—one straight along the chute and into the west gatehouse, the other into a section of wall which bore the main power transformers for the electronic security system. The chute was littered with debris, impassable. Someone was moaning pitifully from somewhere in the wreckage of the guard shack, while others frantically tried to dig him out with bare hands.

Bolan pulled onto the lawn and nosed along the wall toward the breeched section, seeking exit. He found Billy Gino there, arm-waving a reaction team into position to cover the break and also directing damage-control efforts.

"Watch it, Mr. Omega!" the Head Cock shouted as Bolan drove up. "We got live wires here! Already fried a couple of boys!"

"Clear me a path, Billy!" Bolan commanded. "Pardon me, sir, you shouldn't go out there now!"

He was running alongside the car as Bolan continued manoeuvring through the litter. Bolan just gave him a look and kept on moving.

"I'm the Head Cock, dammit, sir, and I say you should take cover and let my boys secure the situation! We got a full-scale assault here! I already sent a crew out! We think we know where to look! So please! Take cover!"

Bolan growled, "Cover yourself, Billy!" and bulldozed on out of there. He cleared the wall and hit the roadway at full whine, taking off with a fishtailing squeal of rubber and putting that place quickly behind him.

But it was no time for self-congratulations. This thing could go sour yet. Billy said he'd sent a crew out. Yeah. "Where to look" was a small knoll overlooking the estate from the western approach, the only really viable position from which the attack could have been launched. And, sure, that was the place. He had to get up there damn quick and cover that front. The war wagon was too valuable a piece of hardware to trade in for a mere Mafia hard-site.

Bolan had his own damn palace to guard. Sure as hell he was not turning it over to one of Billy Gino's crews!

The war wagon was indeed a valuable piece of hardware. Conceived by Bolan himself, but actually put together by a team of moonlighting aerospace engineers who dubbed the resulting marvel a "terran module," the new war wagon had served the Executioner well since its first use during the New Orleans campaign. The basic structure was a 26-foot GMC motor home with a 455-cubic-inch Toronado engine and tandem rear wheels with airbag suspension. She served multiple functions, as home for the warrior, field headquarters, mobile command post, armoury, electronics surveillance post, and battle cruiser. Mafia bucks from the war chest had built her, sure, but the only mortgage on this item of space-age technology was written in blood—and the repossession notice would have to be written the same way.

Bolan arrived on the scene just a couple of beats behind the head party. There were nine of them, standard crew with standard arms—couple of choppers, couple of shotguns, the rest with sidearms only. They'd pulled their vehicle into some trees about fifty yards below the battle cruiser and were cautiously debarking when the Ferrari pulled up behind them. Bolan recognized the crew chief as a guy he'd glimpsed at the hotel in Pittsfield, one Eddie Rainbow, and Eddie was looking as though he'd found his own pot of gold. Literally, he had. A cool million bucks was awaiting the possessor of Mack Bolan's head.

Someone whispered, "Relax! It's Omega!"

At Omega's right knee, nestled between seat and console, a 9-millimeter Ingram machine pistol awaited directions to the front. Basically a one-hand weapon with folding wire stock, the impressive little chattergun was scarcely larger than the AutoMag. The clip held 32 Parabellum flesh-shredders, with feed via the pistol grip. She'd been conceived as a "room broom" for use by sniper-plagued urban police forces and could deliver at the rate of 1,200 rounds per minute. In the interests of ammo conservation and improved fire control, Bolan had modified this one to a 700-rpm delivery. At this very moment, he was wondering if that had been a desirable modification. Desirable or not, it was the only arm he had; he'd just have to make it do.

Eddie Rainbow was walking toward the Ferrari.

The others were beginning to separate into fire teams, one to either side of the crew wagon.

It was going to have to be now, while they were still bunched up—or it was going to be never!

The crew chief was hung somewhere between a smile and a frown. He was reading Omega's presence here as an interference, perhaps even as a "ace out" of the bounty money. No matter. The Ingram came up blazing, catching the chief with a burst full in the throat at close range, flinging that shocked, unhappy face into a grotesque mask as the head led the way to oblivion.

The Ingram tracked on, laying a blazing wreath of death around the four gunners of the first fire team, sweeping them into a crumpled heap beside their vehicle.

The other team was more advantageously placed, beyond the crew wagon, but one of them also spun away with a shriek and both hands at his head. The others instinctively flung themselves to the ground behind the vehicle—and one of the immediate survivors was evidently gripped by the idea that some monstrous error had been committed.

"Mr. Omega!" he yelped. "We're with Billy Gino! Hold your fire!"

But Mr. Omega had committed no error whatever, and he did not hold his fire. He had already quit the Ferrari to seek a better fire track. Now the Ingram was firing for effect, searching for a hot spot and finding it instantly. The result came first as a whoof of flame, then as a bellowing roar, as the gas tank of the crew wagon responded to that certain stimulus and lifted all four wheels in a flaming jump to ruin.

The Ingram's clip was empty. Bolan picked up an abandoned shotgun and made it ready as he circled the funeral pyre. Bodies were aflame back there, one of them flopping crazily in a final, futile gasp at survival. Bolan gave it a round at close range from the shotgun, then pumped in another load and did it again to another, and again and again, purely for mercy's sake and nothing else. And when he was sure that mercy's work was done, he retrieved the Ingram, returned to the Ferrari, and took the hot sportster to her berth in the enclosed trailer behind the war wagon.

Moments later, the man and his gunship were moving cross-country in a circling return to the main road.

He was clear, yeah—for the moment—and all was okay. But Mother Death had found Bolan's fix once again. He had wallowed with her for a bare few seconds in the slime pits of humanity and fed her the blood of others for temporary satisfaction.

It had not been all that easy back there. One missing number, one small miscalculation, one tiny error in timing or in performance—and some surviving headhunters would at that moment be hacking a valuable head from its dead body for triumphal delivery to the council of kings.

Bolan shivered. No, it had not been all that easy. For damn sure, it would never be any easier. And now, once again, he had to take on the Big Apple. He had to hit the city of cities—old New York herself.

There would be slime pits enough for everyone there. And old Mother Death would be watching, watching, watching ...

4

THE ENGINEER

"This will have to be quick," Turrin's voice announced from the safe phone in Manhattan. "This is a busy job you engineered for me, buddy. Haven't had a minute to breathe since I got here."

"What do they have you doing, Leo?" Bolan asked.

"So far, nothing but protocol. I'm handling the carnal requirements for the visiting families. The funeral, you know. They're coming from everywhere to pay final respects."

Bolan chuckled. "You're looking after their security?"

Turrin chuckled back. "Yeah. Bed and board, too—the whole smear. Greasing a few official palms, also, to make sure there'll be no legal embarrassments during the visit. It's a big job. I got five guys working on it."

Bolan said, "I'll need that list, Leo."

"Sure. You'll have it."

"How's Angie?"

"Angie's fine, Sarge. Kids are fine. Why the small talk?"

"No small talk to it, friend. You have them safed?"

"Safe as I can call it, yeah. What's happening?"

"You didn't hear about the Long Island hit?" Bolan asked him.

"No. When was that? Something was coming down as I was leaving the office. Very hush-hush. Nobody volunteered to cut me in and I didn't ask. So. What?"

Bolan said, "I paid my respects to David. Nothing big, just a light probe. But it's moving now, Leo. So watch yourself. You get any tumble yet on Peter?"

"Not a snicker. Of course, he probably wouldn't walk up and introduce himself. You okay, Sarge?"

"I'm fine, yeah. What's your reading on the Manhattan climate?"

"Hot and getting hotter. The whole town is tense, buddy. If I were in your shoes, I'd be a long way from here right now. And I wouldn't even look back."

Bolan said, "Don't say it twice, Leo—I could take you up on it."

"You sound ... kind of ragged. Sure you're okay?"

"Ah, hell, Leo, I just zapped a bunch of boys who thought I was God."

"Don't let down now, guy," Turrin said softly. "Be glad you're not the zappee."

"I'm not letting down," Bolan assured his friend. "Other way around; I'm afraid. I've got to blitz New York, Leo."

"Don't. It's too tense. DiAnglia and Pelotti have both got every gun at their disposal on the prowl, just waiting for something to go down."

"Just them?" Bolan wondered. "What are the other bosses up to?"

"Gustini has airport security. Fortuna is providing mobile shields for the visitors. The manpower, that is. They're all under my administrative control. If that sounds like a fancy phrase, forget it. We Commissione boys talk that way." Turrin snickered. "You'd think we were stockbrokers or something. I don't think I'm going to like this job, Sarge."

"How does Hal like it?"

Hal was Harold Brognola, Turrin's federal boss, the nation's number two cop.

"Hell, he loves it," Turrin said. "Considers it the coup of the decade. Sarge—I got to go. Be sure and make the next scheduled contact. I'll have some real feed for you

by then. But listen. Don't go a'blitzing in New York. Wear your soft shoes and smile a lot. I'm serious—it is very tense here."

"That's the whole idea, Leo. I've got to loosen it up a bit. By the way—Omega suggested to Eritrea that you would be the logical pick to uncover Peter. I think Eritrea bought it."

"Okay. Thanks. I'll get ready for that."

"Also, you're to be the point of contact between Omega and Eritrea. So here's the first contact. One of Billy Gino's crews bit Bolan's dust in the aftermath of the Long Island hit. It was Eddie Rainbow and company. Omega got there too late to help them. He's now sniffing along the backtrack and believes he has made Bolan heading toward the city. End of contact."

Turrin whistled and commented, "It gets deviouiser and deviouiser. Okay. Are we clear?" "Clear," Bolan told him. "Hang tight, Leo." He broke the connection, lit a cigarette, and returned to his vehicle.

Yeah, Leo, it gets more devious all the time. It was that kind of world, that kind of enemy, therefore that kind of war. Some kind of monster, Mack Bolan was. How many men had he killed this week? Not enough, right.

So it was time to kill some more.

5

THE MECHANICS

The cleanup details had all done their jobs, things were under control, and Billy Gino was breathing easily again when the chauffeured Cadillac eased onto the grounds and nosed in beside him. The man in the back seat was Barney Matilda, perhaps the last of his kind now that Marinello was dead. Barney and Augie went back a long way together—back to the Maranzano era. And there'd been a time when those two were the terrors of lower Manhattan. But Barney Matilda had never become a boss. He'd hitched his wagon to Augie Marinello's star, quite content to ride along with the Man as a sort of phantom left hand, personal troubleshooter, and confidante to the court. Largely retired for the past few years, Barney was respected far and wide as a sort of senior citizen type of torpedo, rich in street wisdom and highly expert in the machinations of gangland intrigue. There wouldn't be another like him in this world; Billy Gino was sure of that.

"How is David?" was the old man's greeting to the Head Cock.

"None the worse," Gino growled. Then he saw that Barney was not alone. A pretty young woman, about twenty-five, shared the seat with him. This was highly unusual. Billy could not recall another time when he had seen Barney with a woman.

"This is Miss Curtis," Matilda explained, without explaining anything.

Billy Gino nodded an acknowledgment of the one-sided introduction and showed the pretty lady a stiff smile as he held the door for the old man.

The lady stayed.

The Head Cock and the Head Mechanic strolled across the battlefield.

"I was halfway into town when I got your call," Barney half-apologized. "Who hit you?"

"David says it was Mack Bolan."

"He says that, huh?" Shrewd old eyes were taking the measure of that hit, triangulating targets, examining small objects tossed up by the fury of battle. "And what do you say?"

"I say it looks a lot like Pittsfield yesterday. We got met at the airport by the same thing, Barney. It was a rocket attack. Not like you might get from a bazooka, either. Hard stuff, with a lot of whizz, a lot of fire and smoke trailing out behind it." He pointed westward. "Came from that little hill up there. I sent a crew out. We found them up there, nine good boys, torn apart."

Barney was gazing toward the knoll, a hand shading his eyes. "You saying he just stood up there and tossed down on you? He didn't try coming in? You never saw the guy?"

Billy Gino shook his head. "We didn't see anything, Barney."

"Strange," the old man mused.

"Why strange?"

"What'd he really accomplish, Billy? I mean, assuming it was Bolan, why the bother for so little? So he burned up a couple of cars. So he started a little fire in the house. So he shot a couple of holes in your wall. And that's all? Does that sound like a Bolan hit to you?"

Billy Gino shifted his weight uncomfortably as he thought about that. He respected this old man. Barney was still the best cleanup man in the business, and he'd cleaned up behind a lot of Bolan hits. Still ... Billy told him, "It was just like at the

airport, Barney. Hit and run. We never saw the guy. But he was there, bet your ass. And I think he was here this morning, too."

"If he was, then he's changed his M.O.," Barney declared flatly.

Billy Gino shrugged. "Then he's changed it."

"Why?"

"Hell. I don't know why, Barney."

"Maybe you better start wondering why, then."

"You're the second guy to tell me that today," Billy said quietly. "What the hell is going down here, Barney?"

"Who told you to wonder about that?"

"Not about that, especially. He just said I should start wondering. You probably know the guy. Omega."

"Who?"

"That's what he's calling himself right now. Headshed. You know."

Barney was giving the Head Cock a strange look. "You had an Ace out here this morning?"

"Yeah. He was here when the hit came, down. Tore out after the guy just behind Eddie Rainbow's crew."

"That the same crew you found in bits and pieces?"

"The same," Billy Gino growled. "We couldn't get a scent of Omega. But I'm not worried about that guy. He knows what he's doing."

Old Barney sniffed and turned his steps toward his car. "Remember last time I was here, Billy?" he asked the Head Cock. "I asked how long it'd been since you'd seen Augie. Remember what you told me?"

Billy Gino flexed his hands as he replied, "Barney, I honestly don't know the last time I saw Augie. I had the feeling that he was around but . . ."

"But you wouldn't swear on that?"

"No, sir, I wouldn't."

"Was this Ace asking you about that."

"Not that I remember," Billy replied, thinking about it.

"Does the guy seem pretty cozy with David?"

"Seems to be, yeah. Well, come to think, I don't know. Why're you asking me this, Barney?"

"Something stinks," the old man said quietly. "I'm just wondering about the wind direction. Forget it, Billy. An old man's wandering mind, that's all."

But Billy Gino was not buying that. Barney Matilda had never been known for a wandering mind. Quite the opposite. He said, "If there's something I ought to know, Barney . . ."

The oldster sighed as he opened his car door and prepared to take his leave. "Tell David I concur. It was Bolan. He should cover his ass. Call it a sizing hit. The guy will be back. Tell David I said that."

"Okay, I'll tell him. Barney. If there's something I ought to know ..."

"Do you know why they put goats with sheep, Billy?"

"Guess I never thought about it," Gino replied.

"Think about it, then. And think about this with it. There comes a time when the goats get separated from the sheep. Hold your ass, Billy, and think about that."

The limousine slipped away, leaving Billy Gino with his thoughts.

And he liked not a damn one.

6

A TIME FOR TIGERS

They were known unofficially as "the Incorruptibles"—which was no mean tag for a unit within the most corruptible police force in the nation. The forty-six-year-old Captain of Detectives who headed the elite OrgCrime unit, William J. Rafferty, was also a charter member of the metro tactical intelligence council on organized crime and was now the official NYPD liaison for the various crime commissions at the state and federal levels. It was a job with more pressure than status, more headaches than arrests—a "politically sensitive" position which made the department's other hot potatoes seem more like coleslaw. Few men on that force of more than thirty thousand envied Bill Rafferty or coveted his job. There were times when Rafferty himself would candidly wonder aloud if he were the biggest patsy in town, a "token tiger" for the Knapp Commission's searching probe into police corruption. But Hal Brognola knew better. The nation's number two cop had been instrumental in manoeuvring Rafferty into position as New York's number one cop for organized crime. Brognola knew that Bill Rafferty would never allow himself to become anyone's paper tiger.

At the moment the big cop sounded less the tiger than at any time in Brognola's memory, the voice coming tired and strained through the safe phone.

"They've whittled me down to thirty men, Hal. How the hell do I cover this with thirty men?"

"Maybe you're trying to cover too much," Brognola mused. "Maybe you should be thinking about concentrating the coverage."

"Where do I concentrate?" Rafferty strained back. "The problem here, Hal, is that I serve too damned many masters. One of them is demanding tight intelligence on all the movements. Another wants head counts, affiliations, and all the social jazz. Another guy is screaming about protocol and protection, believe it or not, for this national gathering of thugs. Still another suggests that we declare a seventy-two hour moratorium—take a vacation or something, I guess, and not come back until the excitement's over. Next someone will be wanting my unit as honour guard for the funeral, chrissakes!"

"Maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea, at that," Brognola quietly commented.

"Don't you start on me, now!"

"Gotta keep your sense of humour, friend," the fed said. "Especially when we get to the bottom line."

"We're not there yet?"

"Huh-uh. Guess who else is coming to the festivities?"

"I already guessed," Rafferty growled dismally. "I've just been awaiting confirmation. Do you have it?"

"Sort of," Brognola said. "You really wouldn't expect the guy to stay away from this one?"

"I would. I'd stay far away!"

"No, you wouldn't. You're a tiger, just like him. No power on earth would keep you out of it."

"Maybe not," Rafferty admitted.

"Did you get the UCN from Pittsfield?"

"I got it, yeah. That puts the guy just a couple hours away. Still ... well, maybe it's wishful thinking on my part. I've got enough to think about without ..."

"Better start believing it, Bill. The guy is going for a grand slam. The thing at Pittsfield yesterday was only the preliminary. Rely on that. It's hard intelligence. He'll be going for the wrap-up in your town. I have it on—"

"Hold it," Rafferty grunted. "Steve just handed me a bulletin from Nassau County—it's..."

"What?"

"Well, goddammit, okay, this could be the confirmation. There was a hit on Marinello's Long Island estate this morning."

"Who got it?"

"Nobody of any consequence, apparently. It was a—oh—hold on—more's coming; they're feeding me from the printer. Okay. Okay, Hal. I'm buying. Sounds like your blitzing buddy, all right. Listen to me. That guy is not my territory. I don't want any of him."

"Ever hear tell of a golden goose?" Brognola asked quietly.

"If I see the man, I'll burn the man down." Rafferty coldly promised.

Brognola sniffed and replied, "He wouldn't have it any other way. The legend is at least ninety-nine percent accurate, Bill. Hell, we offered him a license, way back. I wouldn't admit that to just anybody, so don't quote me. He—"

"It's true, then. So what do you want from me, friend? What kind of a goddamned—"

Brognola stepped in to smoothly head off a threatened tirade concerning police ethics. "Don't get nasty. I said we offered. The guy turned it down flat. It's his war and he's the commander-in-chief. Won't have it any other way. I'm going to lay it on your line, Captain. We would like to be able to call his shots. Since we can't, then we do the next best thing. We try to run cleanup behind him. Sometimes we can't do that, even. But I could tell you some stories, friend cop, that would—aw, to hell with it. But if you'll put your ass where your ethics are, the man could make your job a hell of a lot sweeter. Maybe you could even have a dreamless sleep for a couple of nights running."

"So what are you saying?" Rafferty asked suspiciously.

Brognola replied with a sigh, "I've already said it all. Forget that I did. That's not really why I called anyway. Just wanted you to know that all of my people in your area have been ordered to give you every cooperation in this present emergency. They're there, friend—use them where you can. Also I have a couple of inside operatives. They'll be feeding you, and you can believe what they'll be telling you. They have the combination for your clean phone, also your home number. One of them will identify himself as Sticker. Got that?"

"Sticker, yeah. Who's the other guy?"

"The other guy is not a guy. You'll know her as Flasher."

Rafferty grunted, his only response to that. "Don't sell her short. Flasher is one of my best operatives."

"Who's she sleeping with?" the New York cop growled.

"King Kong, if that's where the action is. Put her down for it, if you're bent that way. But that's your problem, not hers."

Rafferty almost apologized. "Today I don't even like myself, Uncle. Thanks for the, uh, support. So. What do you want me to do about Bolan? Give him the keys to the city? I couldn't if I wanted to. He's not my territory. The boys over at SWAT get full title. So you'd better warn the guy that—"

"Hold it," Brognola protested. "I didn't say I was in contact with him."

"Maybe you'd better try. The bulletin from Long Island got here a bit late. That hit went down at about dawn. I'd already been looking at a couple others, right here in my own front yard. Someone hit one of Pelotti's numbers banks on Lexington Avenue. That was at eight o'clock. At eight-ten, a midtown powder factory went the hard way. And right now my squawk box is talking about something going down in lower Harlem. Tell the guy, Hal. He can't get away with it here."

"He did once already," Brognola reminded his friend.

"Sheer luck. If there's some way you can do it, you'd best call him out. And I mean right now. The entire force is on the line at this very moment. Has been, since we heard of Augie's death. All leaves are cancelled and overtime restrictions lifted. And all that was before we knew that Bolan was in town. Now . . . call your man off, Hal."

"Goddammit, I've told you, he's not my man!" Brognola fumed. "There's no way to call him off!"

"Then he's a dead man," Rafferty said, and broke the connection.

Brognola stared at the humming instrument for a moment, then slowly hung it up.

He lit a cigar, blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling, and told it, "He's been a dead man ever since I've known him, tiger."

Then he punched the intercom and ordered a plane for New York. The chief fed for organized crime was not about to sit this one out in Washington.

It was going to be a day for tigers, yeah. No way was this one going to be left out.

7

MOVERS

Bolan knew that three hits in less than an hour was pushing things a bit—but then that was the whole idea. The lightning strikes were designed to accomplish three specific and inter-related goals: to terrorize and panic the enemy; to induce confusion and indecision in the ranks; to provoke emotional and hasty counteractions by the leadership. Then things would begin to move in this old town.

And, yes, the Executioner's M.O. was a bit different for this campaign. He had pitted enemy against enemy before, on many occasions; indeed, this was a favoured Bolan tactic: to trick the enemy into engaging itself. However, he was using a somewhat different twist in this command strike. It was a gut punch he was going for, not a headshot—temporary paralysis of the entire body rather than a couple of jabs to the chin. If Bolan had learned anything from this long and bitter war with the mob, it was that his enemy was infinite and probably eternal. There could be no final, full victory.

Victory for Bolan had and would always be limited to a series of successful events, through which he might be able to stop or divert a particular movement, contain a certain sphere of action, or interrupt some domino chain of criminal cause and effect. It had been a long time since Mack Bolan had deceived himself about his ability to win this war. He knew, and had known almost from the beginning, that it was just another `Nam--a war of delay and containment, a war of attrition, a war of hopelessness and frustration. But he had gone on fighting this one the same way he'd fought the other one—with determination, dedication, total commitment of the self without regard for personal comfort or ambition. And to hell with all the moralizations, the equivocations, the rationalizations. His war was "wrong," sure—immoral, illegal, and brutal. But so was the enemy, a thousandfold. They were cannibals, and all of civilized society was simmering in their pots. Not even a missionary—not a sane one—would try teaching the Ten Commandments from inside the cannibal's pot. He'd get a gun, by God, if he could, and he'd blow their savage heads off—then content himself with teaching the Lord's Prayer to their kids before it was too late to civilize them.

Bolan was certainly no missionary. He would leave that end of the job to others. Bolan was a soldier. He had a gun, by God, and knew how to use it to maximum effect. And he was, yeah, blowing their savage heads off, hoping to create a bit of safe turf for the missionaries.

Even that, he knew, was a lot of wishful thinking. All he was really doing was simply opposing the cannibals—shaking a stick at them and trying to divert them from their meal until the cavalry could arrive. The problem, dammit, was that there wasn't any cavalry. There wasn't anybody to really nail these guys, to put them out of business, or even to discourage the expansion into more and bigger pots.

These cannibals had already learned the litany and they were using it against those they chose to eat. Where's your search warrant? Where's your evidence? Call my lawyer and send for the bailbondsman. Change of venue. Plea bargaining. Courts of appeal. Friendly judges, bought and paid for. "Made" legislators and Congressmen, "smart" cops and "wise-guy" prosecutors. Amici di l'amicu, or friend of the friends—from the ward heeler clear to the White House itself.

It was enough to shiver a guy, yeah—especially one who knew the true brutal ferocity of these savages. And Mack Bolan had never learned to live with his shivers.

They moved him, commanded him, sent him out and over the top to do battle with those enemies of the people—those gentle people, the good people who shrank from violence, yet who had not common sense enough to realize that there was no such thing as a gentle savage. You could not give them your own litany, your own protections, your own saving graces—because they would only laugh at them, spit on them, then use them against you.

Bolan had no litany, no protections, no saving graces. He gave the mob exactly what they feared and respected the most—he gave them another savage, meaner than themselves, deadlier than their own hired goons, more merciless than their own code of conduct.

But he knew he could not win. At best, he could hope to remain alive and continue the opposition until the people themselves awoke and began to seriously deal with the problem—and he could hope, merely hope, that the savages could thus be contained until the time when Mack Bolan's "illegal and immoral" war would no longer be necessary. And then, thank God, yes, he would happily lie down and die.

But, sure, this campaign in New York was necessarily different from the others. He could not possibly kill them all. Even if he could, and did, that would not mean the winning of the war, but merely another successful event. For every boss he popped, another ten hopefuls were waiting to fill the vacancy—perhaps another hundred. As for the soldiers, the ordinaries, those guys were like grains of sand on a beach. Any boss anywhere in the country could snap his fingers and "make" a thousand men—and there would be another ten thousand disappointed ones waiting for the next snap. They bred on the big-city streets like maggots on rotten meat—and that was a job for the missionaries, sure. But for now it was an infinite enemy, yeah—and "the Thing" itself was no doubt eternal—or, at least, for as long as society continued to brutalize its underside and to turn away from the tough moral question of how to deal with career criminals.

Bolan had found the answer to his shivers' and he could not turn away.

So, okay, a gut punch this time. Hard enough and deep enough to temporarily paralyze the whole body. And then perhaps the whole body could be manipulated a bit, reconstituted with mismatched pieces, weakened, set up for another fall the moment it found its feet again.

Command strategy. The three early hits in Manhattan had been different. Nothing had been left behind to tie those events to Mack Bolan. He'd used the red Ferrari, penetrated as Omega, made the hits in approved Mafia fashion, and left plenty of witnesses to tell the tale.

Gut punching, sure.

At Lexington Avenue, he'd executed one Salvatore Bona, a Pelotti lieutenant whose "tight" with David Eritrea was in doubt. In the barber shop on 43rd, a Marinello underboss with the same affliction received death with his customary eight o'clock shave. On the edge of Harlem, another loose Eritrea fit had been dispatched from the field of contest. Bolan was moving things, he hoped—forcing a crisis where no clear crisis yet existed except in fearful ambitious minds.

But he found the real mover near a shabby apartment above a nondescript delicatessen on Eighth Avenue. Nobody lived there; seldom did anybody go there. It was a cool spot—an offbeat meeting place for certain rankers in the Manhattan territories of the late Augie Marinello.

Bolan, as Omega, left the Ferrari beside a trash bin in the alleyway and entered through the back door. The Beretta was shoulder-slung beneath the white coat, silencer attached, spare clips on the belt. It was his only arm, but quite enough for this

sort of warfare. Special loads of 9mm Parabellum skullbusters gave the Beretta equal ranking with a .357 Magnum at twenty yards, not a hell of a lot less at greater ranges, and the personally engineered silencer interfered very little with ballistics capabilities at short ranges.

Entrance to the apartment was via a short hallway at the rear of the deli. A youngish guy was seated on the steps, smoking a black cigarette and small-talking with an older man in a white apron. The small talker scrambled to his feet at Bolan's approach and snapped something in Italian to the man in the apron. The old man spun about and went into the store without a glance at Bolan.

"What's he doing back here?" Bolan growled to the sentry.

The guy was nervous, unsure. "He uh—do I know you, sir?"

"You'd better not," Bolan-Omega told him. He displayed the plasticized ace of spades as he inquired, "Who's here?"

The guy did a quick take on the card, becoming more nervous. "Mr. Minotti's here, sir, and Mr. Volpa." Both were Marinello lieutenants with Manhattan territories. Volpa was big in the financial district— shylocking the brokers, scams, counterfeit securities. Minotti was best known for bankrolling drug buys from Mexico as well as for financing other types of big hits, be it bank jobs, gem fencing, or wholesale recycling of stolen goods. Both were relatively minor in the family hierarchy, but they did command territories. At such a time no wise guy with rank was too small to dream of bigger things for himself. And Bolan knew that these guys were dreamers.

"Who else?" he coldly asked the sentry.

The younger man was getting downright scared. A bit green, perhaps—or maybe too much time spent in the relatively soft territories around midtown Manhattan. His voice cracked just a bit as he replied, "Mr. Scuba just sent word that he'll be a little late. Tony brought the message. That's why he was back here. Mr. Scuba is—well, something is going down, I hear." His eyes twitched. He tried something very daring—asking a direct question of a Black Ace: "Have you heard?"

Bolan gave him about twenty seconds of icy silence in which to repent; then he told him, "It's going down all over. It's going down here. Right now. What's your name?"

"I'm Johnny Ricco; I'm with Mr. Minotti."

"You were," Bolan said unemotionally. "Goodbye, Johnny Ricco. You won't want to be around here."

In mob language, there was nothing veiled in that statement. Johnny Ricco knew precisely what the Black Ace was saying.

"I get you, sir—thank you, sir," he calmly replied, and got out of there.

Bolan immediately went up the stairs, rapped on the door, pushed it open in the same movement, and stepped inside the apartment.

Minotti was seated at the window, glaring gloomily down onto the street—can of Schlitz in one hand, well-chewed cigar in the other.

"What is it?" he growled, without looking toward the door.

Volpa and a beefy man of middle age, obviously the other tagman, sat at a table at the far wall. Volpa was engrossed in *The Wall Street Journal*. The tagman was reading a comic book.

Nobody seemed to give a damn.

Bolan sighed. The Beretta whispered. The tagman's nose disappeared as shattered parts of his head flung themselves onto the wall behind him.

Volpa looked up just in time to catch the next whistler squarely between startled eyes. The table overturned as a dream vanished and both bodies joined the march to nowhere.

A suddenly electrified Frank Minotti leapt to his feet, arms stiffly extended and hands dangling—crying out, shrilly, "For God's sake!"

"Peter sent me," Bolan quietly declared.

"What!? Who!?"

"It's not I've Got a Secret, man. It's Name That Tune. We're going for one that begins with Peter."

"Peter who?" Minotti screamed. "I don't know no Peter!"

"Too bad," Bolan said coldly. "You lose."

The Beretta whispered again, before Minotti could even wonder about what he'd lost.

Bolan stepped outside and closed the door, softly descended the stairs, and ran smack into Johnny Ricco.

"Cops in the alley!" Johnny gasped. "You driving a red car?"

"I was," Bolan-Omega replied. "Remember that I owe you one, Johnny. Beat it on out the front; don't stop and don't look back. Try Florida. And be glad you weren't here today."

"Florida, right," Johnny Ricco said, eyes jerking. But Bolan knew better. The guy would head for the first hole, climb in, button up, and pray that nobody found him. But they would. They would find him. And Johnny would be spilling his guts before they got him out the door. Which was precisely what Bolan desired.

He watched Johnny dash through the store; then Bolan went to the rear to verify the report. Uniforms were scurrying everywhere back there. So okay—they had a make on the Ferrari. He tipped a mental hat to the samesiders and went out behind Johnny Ricco. The little guy in the apron was nervously busying himself behind the counter.

Bolan growled at him as he passed, "Cops in the alley, Tony. If they come in, send them upstairs."

The old man nodded and chirped, "Upstairs, sure. Have a good day."

"No way," Bolan said, and meant it. A long black Cadillac had just pulled up to the curb out front. A big man in a chauffeur's uniform leapt out and ran around to open the rear door for an immaculately attired man with white hair.

Bolan had that make instantly.

He had another one, also. Police sirens, screaming along Eighth Avenue and also approaching from a couple of cross streets.

Bolan did not even have to think about it.

He stepped onto the sidewalk and gave the chauffeur a glimpse of the Beretta Belle. "Give me your heat," he commanded softly.

The guy froze for an instant, then solemnly handed over a Colt .45. Bolan pocketed the surrendered weapon and told the chauffeur, "Come on—we're travelling together."

He watched the chauffeur get into the car, then slid in beside him.

"What is this?" queried the angry senior citizen in the back seat.

"I'm just hitching a ride, Barney," the Executioner told Augie Marinello's oldest and closest friend. He snapped a glance at the pretty girl seated beside the old man as he informed her, "It's okay, ma'am. Nothing for you to be worried about."

But there was plenty for Mack Bolan to worry about.

He knew that young lady—knew her quite well, in fact. The hairstyle was a bit different, the costume more sedate, but it was that same sweet, girl-next-door face and those same baby-doll eyes.

The young lady accompanying Barney Matilda was none other than Sally Palmer, lady fed, late with the Ranger Girls of Vegas and other exotic Mafia ports of call.

Bolan had not seen this one since Vegas—but he'd lately chanced upon another Ranger Girl who'd been working the same angles as this one apparently was. He'd seen what was left of Georgette Chableu one dismal night on hell's back porch in Detroit—and, yeah, Bolan had plenty to worry about now.

The limousine lurched away from the curb, then moved smoothly into the Manhattan traffic.

"Where to?" asked the chauffeur-bodyguard.

"To hell," Bolan muttered, "unless you're very careful."

His cold gaze clashed with Sally's worried baby-dolls in the rear-view mirror—and he knew that she had him made, too.

Sure, yeah, there was a mover for old New York town. And the hackles were at full combat shiver.

8

PROMISES

Bolan was seated sideways in the front seat of the limousine, hands folded atop the backrest as he sampled the mental atmosphere within that vehicle. In a word, tense.

Softly, he said, "Surprised to find you in the neighbourhood, Barney."

"How do you know my name?" Matilda asked, the tone a shade peevish.

Bolan showed him a thin smile. "Come on—everybody knows Barney Matilda."

"Are you the guy was out on Long Island this morning?"

Bolan kept on smiling. "I was a lot of places this morning. What was your business at the cool spot?"

"What cool spot?" It was developing into a fencing match. Those alert old eyes were tearing Bolan apart and rebuilding him. "They call you Omega, huh?"

Bolan shrugged. "Call me what you like. Alpha or Omega—it's all the same. Right?"

Matilda glanced at the girl. He told Bolan, "I'm going to light a cigar."

"Fine by me," Bolan said. "As long as you don't do it with a six-shooter."

"Why would I do that?"

The smile stayed. "It's tense times, Barney." He waited while the oldster cautiously hauled out a stogie and lit up. Then he told him, smile gone, "I wish I hadn't seen you back there at Tony's."

"Why not? Tony sells good cheese and better wine."

"It wasn't cheese and wine today."

"What was it then?"

"Wrong place, wrong time, wrong people."

The old man chuckled. "Like 45th and Lex, huh? And maybe like the barber shop on 43rd? How many more wrong places were there?"

Bolan wagged a hand. "Easy come, easy go. You know."

Matilda chuckled some more, played with the cigar, shot another look at the girl. "This is Miss Curtis," he said amiably. "Miss Curtis, this is Alpha and Omega, I guess. That means the beginning and the end—and he's letting us take our choice."

Bolan did not give the lady a direct acknowledgement of the introduction. He asked the old man, "And who is Miss Curtis?"

"She's a friend of mine," Matilda shot back, with a bit of fire igniting. "One of the few I got left. So don't try to tie me into any of the dumb action around here. I'm an old man and I'm all through with wrong places, wrong people, and all that. I leave that kind of stuff to you young squirts. I feed birds. I water my garden when I feel like it. I talk to my pretty friend here. Tomorrow I'm gonna go bury Augie; then I think I just might go to Florida and get me a condominium on the beach. I'll feed the damn pelicans. That okay with you?"

Bolan solemnly nodded his okay to that. "Sounds like a good move," he said.

"Sure it is. This whole country has gone to hell in a basket, anyway. For myself, I see nothing, say nothing, do nothing. Is that okay with you, too?"

Bolan said, "You seem to hear a lot. About wrong places, wrong people."

Matilda flicked a cigar ash onto a console which had been built between the seats—an area occupied by jumpseats in standard limousines. Among other features, the console housed a mobile telephone and a citizen's band radio. "I keep in touch," he said. "Retired isn't dead. I guess."

"Could be, Barney. I say this with all respect: the cut is coming. Make sure where you're coming down—Florida and pelicans notwithstanding."

The shrewd eyes were measuring again, dissecting. "Those other boys ... wrong side of the cut, eh?"

"Dumb side," Bolan replied.

"Let's talk plain out," the old man suggested.

Bolan looked at the lady. She demurely dropped her gaze and almost imperceptibly moved closer to the old man.

"She's okay," Matilda said. "Plain talk. What are David's chances?"

"It's wrapped," Bolan replied quietly. "Especially since you're cutting down all the opposition, eh?"

"Let's just say that the territory is now unified."

"That don't say nothing. The other territories have to ratify it."

"Like I said, it's wrapped. Tonight it gets ratified by the full council."

"That quick, eh? He must've been working it a long time."

"Long enough." Bolan spread his hands in a gesture as he pounded the point.

"Barney, what else? The old ways are dead. It's a different time and it's different people. You and Augie are the last of a kind. Who's going to take over? Punks like Minotti? Scuba? Volpa?"

Matilda heaved a deep, tired sigh. "Lot of people thought Augie was a punk when he took over. But he was ten times the man David will ever be. I don't get it. I don't get it, at all, when guys of your calibre line up behind a kid like that."

Bolan had no desire to win the argument. He was, in fact, deliberately throwing it. Barney Matilda might be semi-retired, sure, but the old guy was admired and respected throughout the mob. And Bolan was greatly satisfied to discover that Barney was not in Eritrea's pocket. And, yeah, Bolan was throwing the argument. "David can be handled, Barney," he said pointedly.

"Oh, I get it," the old fellow growled. "You want someone you can handle. Hey, stop the car and get the hell out! I don't want your dirty breath polluting my air around here!"

A senior citizen could talk that way to an Ace, sure—especially when that senior citizen also happened to be a living legend in his own right. Bolan chuckled and told him, "I wish you were twenty years younger, Barney. Then there wouldn't be so much trouble finding the cut."

"Get outta my car!"

"I'll have to borrow it," Bolan countered regretfully. He told the driver, "Find a good spot near a cab stand. You and Barney leave. The car stays." To Matilda he said, "The lady stays, too. I'll leave them both in the garage under corporate office. You know how to find that, eh?"

The old man had abruptly calmed himself. He growled, "She can't help you any. Leave it be."

Bolan smiled sympathetically. "You know the routine, Barney. Don't worry. She'll be okay."

"Don't you misplace a hair on that pretty head. You hear?"

"Stop worrying. If she's clean, she's clean. If she's not, you're not. Then all your worries are over. Right?"

"You're right about one thing," the old man snapped. "I should be twenty years younger. And even without it—you better be clean, wise guy!"

They were idling at the curb, some ten to twelve blocks removed from the "cool spot" on Eighth Avenue. Bolan ejected the loads from the .45 and returned the

weapon. The wheel-man got out and held the door for Matilda. The girl leaned across the seat to kiss the old man's cheek. She whispered something which Bolan did not catch, but it seemed to reassure Barney somewhat. He kissed her hand, murmured a loving phrase in Italian, and haughtily disembarked.

Bolan told the girl, "Up here. You're driving."

A moment later, the Executioner and the Ranger Girl were blending swiftly into the traffic in the commandeered vehicle.

She took a deep breath and said, "Well!"

"Not very," Bolan replied with a taut smile. "Just how clean are you, pretty lady?"

"I'm as dirty as they get," she assured him with a flash of innocent eyes. "And so is he. You've got yourself a bull by the horns this time, Mack Bolan."

"So old Barney is playing the game," Bolan mused.

"Say, old Barney invented the game," she said. "And you weren't selling him a thing. Don't you know what that old man is?"

"I guess you're going to tell me, huh?"

Her eyes were flashing delightedly as she told him. "He's the meanest man in town. The dirtiest dude around. That old man is the original horror story. Forget Frankenstein and Dracula. Don't you know who he is?"

Something moved deep within Bolan's chest—a familiar iciness—and, yeah, maybe he did know. But who would have thought it? "I've been looking for a man called Peter," he muttered.

"Call him what you like, but you'll never like what you've called up. He's the granddaddy of it all, the master architect, king of the killers. The only question to be settled is who was the biggest boss of all—Augie or Barney. What do you think kept Marinello in the driver's seat all these years? Love and kisses? Mack—Barney Matilda has always been the power behind the throne."

Yeah. Sure. A man called Peter. The rock of the church of La Cosa Nostra. Architect of the fascist secret police, mentor and chief executive officer of the Commissione's own gestapo—Ace of Aces! It played. Hell, how it played! Old Barney, living legend of the good old days, Marinello's sidekick from the beginning of time!

"I didn't sell him a thing," Bolan said, echoing Sally's earlier comment.

"Not hardly. He had you coming in, big man, Alpha or Omega. He's the one that sends the Aces."

Bolan chuckled, thinking about that. But then a new awareness diluted the humour of the moment. He told the girl, "Then I've just settled your case, Sally. The guy already has your contract written. He'd never let you survive a debriefing by Mack Bolan."

She vigorously nodded her agreement with that idea. "Don't let it throw you, though. I was about ready to bail out, anyway. Besides, I'm sure that contract was executed right along with the employment agreement. Men like Barney Matilda carry the touch of death. Touch them and you're dead. I'm afraid I've touched him in a lot of places."

"What were you doing for Barney, Sally?"

"Intelligence," she said, with a roll of eyes. "Isn't that a kick in a soft spot? The Mafia is now an equal opportunity employer. I've been with Barney since shortly after I last saw you." She winked an innocent eye. "I've been his secret weapon."

"Yeah, you're quite a weapon," Bolan agreed, meaning it.

"Well . . . I'm loaded and cocked. Fire me when ready."

If there was a double entendre there, it was lost on the worried man. "You'll have to fade quietly away," he told Sally. "The town has about reached the flash point. Anything could happen now." Sure. Any thing. "There will be no more brokering. It's a full go now. It's best that you find a hole and tuck it in until things settle."

It seemed that she had heard not a word he'd said. "I need to file a report. First things first, you know. I have a quiet place not far from here, safe phone and all. Then I'll be glad to let you debrief me."

"Who knows about Barney, other than you?" he asked.

"It's just you 'n' me, pal. Nobody told me to go out and find the boss monster. It just worked out that way. I've been keeping my ugly suspicions to myself, hoping to come up with some documenting evidence. If I'd told Washington what I suspected about old Barney, they'd have jerked me out long ago."

"So you've been sitting on it?"

"Very quietly, you bet," she said, flashing a huge smile. "I heard you worked with Toby and Smiley in Hawaii. Smashing. How'd they stack up against the hula girls?"

Two more of the Ranger Girls. If this one was half the woman ... "Smashing," he told her, grinning. "Didn't you hear me, Sally? I said no—"

"I heard about Georgette, too," she said grimly, cutting him off and leading him away from the mild reprimand, her mood altering in that twinkling. "So don't try to ease me out of this, Mr. Blitz. I have a stake, too. I have a right."

Bolan sighed, knowing that it was true. "The only right we have, Sally," he argued, though, "is the right to die."

"Well at least you said we," she replied, reverting to that dear-girl mode which customarily melted masculine hearts and revived the age of gallantry. For some masculine hearts. Of course, there were still those savages who would play marbles with those baby-doll eyes, shove a busted bottle up that delightful bottom, and carve obscenities into the divine body of that dear girl.

"And sometimes," he muttered, "the duty to kill."

She gave him a quick look, then returned her attention to the driving chores. "What are you going to do about Barney?" she asked quietly. "What does it do, now that the monster man has you made? What does that do to your cover?"

"Nothing," Bolan growled. "It wasn't a cover. Just a casual wrap for coming and going, here and there. Aces wild, that's all. I'll meet Barney Matilda on his own turf, under his own rules."

The girl shivered and punched him delicately with an elbow. He had not realized that his voice had become so icy. He touched her arm and she placed a dainty hand over his. She murmured, "You're the Ace of Hearts, that's what you are. I'm sorry about Detroit, Mack. But you can't erase it."

She was speaking of Georgette, who'd ended her last fifty days on earth as the most hideous "turkey" ever encountered by Mack Bolan anywhere. Bolan was speaking of Georgette also, as he replied, "Never again, Sally. That's the way I erase it. Never again, and I promise you that."

"I'm going to stop this car and kiss you," she said solemnly.

And she did.

And, sure, Mack Bolan knew that any thing could happen, now, in this tense old town. Except what happened to Georgette in Detroit. It would not happen here, to this dear girl.

And Bolan promised that to the devil himself.

9

DEBRIEFED

Sally Palmer's "quiet place" was a twelfth-floor studio apartment in an east side highrise. One room, and not a very big one, but with all the comforts, very compact. Bolan sat at a tiny dining table with instant coffee, trying unsuccessfully not to watch as she casually stripped off her clothing and slipped into a robe. She'd already used the safe phone to file her report to Washington. Now she was briefing a friend and unofficial ally, as she began selecting clothing more appropriate for the hours ahead.

"I've been with Barney since shortly after Vegas. Some day maybe I'll tell you how we got together. Or maybe I won't, at that." She laughed at some secret joke. "I figured a man that age wouldn't give me much trouble in the bedroom. Well, I've got news for Mr. Kinsey. Age has nothing to do with sex. And, of course, it started as simply a sexual thing. But then I began feeding him little morsels of intelligence from here and there. He was impressed, and my job gradually began to broaden."

Bolan asked, "When did you begin to tumble to who the guy really is?"

She frowned. "Right off, I think. At least, I knew he was more than what everyone thought—his own associates included, by the way. I think I really knew it was something large when I saw the telephone. He has a scrambler machine in his bedroom, concealed in the bedside chest. That thing has twelve lines coming into it. It's a regular little compact switchboard, with call-forwarders built into it and everything. He gets daily reports from all around the country. We have this little charade we play. He pretends that he's handling lay-off purses for various bookies around the country, just as a sort of hobby, just to keep his hand in. I pretend to believe that."

"You've been living at his place on Long Island?"

She wrinkled her nose as she replied, "Off and on, mostly off. He sends me here and there—sometimes as a courier, more often as a sexual loan-out for intelligence purposes."

"Where were you headed today?"

"He didn't say. He was being very enigmatic today. You think I should wear slacks? I think I'll wear slacks. I wonder where those red—oh! Sure! He did say something about a new man at corporate office. I believe he was going to introduce us."

"Turrin," Bolan said quietly.

"That's the one. How'd you know?"

"It figures," Bolan told her. "He's been trying to nail Turrin to the barn door."

"The Pittsfield boss."

"Right. What do you know about it?"

She shrugged daintily and held a blouse to the light. "Nothing much, I'm afraid. Except that the Pittsfield territory has been disenfranchised and Turrin is now serving on the Commissione's executive staff."

"You know anything about Turrin?"

She shook her head. "I've never been to Pittsfield. Someone pointed him out to me, once, at a party here in New York. But we've never met. Is he important right now?"

"Very," Bolan said. It would be very unlikely that Sally Palmer would know anything about Leo's undercover federal status, and vice versa. It was too hairy a game. The fewer people who knew these things, the better.

"Well, I wish I could give you something. If we'd followed through on the usual routine, I guess I'd be having dinner with Turrin within the next few days. One thing would lead to another. This time next week I could tell you plenty about Mr. Turrin from Pittsfield. But now ..."

Bolan grinned faintly and told her, "Win some, lose some."

Suddenly the girl looked very stricken. "I just remembered. You're from Pittsfield, aren't you? That's where you—that's—I'm sorry I can't help. I guess Turrin is a very personal matter with you, isn't he?"

"The personal matters are all behind me," Bolan said. "Forget it. Turrin will keep. The target right now is David Eritrea. What do you know about the boy wonder?"

"Barney dislikes him, I know that. He doesn't like the way Eritrea is moving in to take over the Marinello territory. Even before that, Barney didn't like him. I think there was a jealousy of some kind at work there. We were out there this morning, by the way. Right behind you, I guess. You really laid into them, didn't you? Something puzzles me about that. We were on the way in to town when Barney got the call on the mobile phone. He seemed very pleased about it all at first—I mean, really gloating over Eritrea's misfortune. But then, after a walking inspection, he became very grumpy. And troubled. He didn't say two words all the way to town. Then he had to stop and use a pay phone to call someone. Whoever and whatever, he wouldn't trust it to the mobile phone. A few minutes later he got a call on the mobile. I couldn't catch the report, but it upset him even more. He told Charlie, the chauffeur, that Moe Dantim got hit on Lexington Avenue. I guess you know all about that. Aren't you going to debrief me?"

Bolan blinked at the sudden question. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

"Not my mind, dear heart. My dirty body."

"Your body isn't dirty," he told her.

"Inside it is," she said. "It's soiled with Mafia dirt. My God, I need a debriefing."

With gentle gruffness, Bolan suggested, "Let's concentrate on the mind for now. The numbers are all falling, Sally. I have to pick some up and run with them."

She draped the clothing across her arm and said brightly, "Then I guess I'll take a shower. If you're in all that much lather, come in and continue the mental work while I purge the body."

"Take your shower," he growled. "The rest can wait."

"Can't even get you to scrub my back, huh?" she asked pertly. "You'll be sorry. Wait and see."

"One thing usually leads to another, doesn't it," he said, smiling. The smile turned to a scowl as he playfully added, "Get outta here before I forget my calling!"

"You guys are worse than jocks," she groused, feigning anger. "What's a girl to do when all the men are at training camp?"

"She behaves herself," Bolan suggested. "And waits until time, place, and circumstance combine to provide the proper atmosphere for a proper debriefing."

"I'll hold you to that!" she cried delightedly, and skipped into the bathroom.

Bolan would not mind being held to that. He watched until she disappeared behind the door; then he sighed with masculine regret and went to the telephone. It was time for a contact. He sent the call to the clean number and lit a cigarette while the combination ran its course. A moment later, the subject of recent conversation came aboard with a guarded, "Yeah, hullo."

"It's getting very hairy," Bolan told him. "Thanks for telling me. Here's an equal truth. The sun rose this morning."

"In the east, yeah." Bolan chuckled soberly. "Here's the top of the order, Leo. Barney Matilda is Peter."

A moment of silence, then: "That's curious, isn't it?"

"Worse than that. He still has an interest in the Pittsfield kid. A soft one, at the moment, if that's any comfort. He was on his way to see you when I diverted him a bit. He may still go for it, so get your face ready."

"How sure are you about all this?" Turrin wondered.

"Just say I got it from a solid source. I'm convinced, and it plays pretty well when you put it all together. For now, let's call the man Peter and keep all the instincts active."

"Okay, yeah. Where does he fit, though?"

"Right where I said. Top of the order. My source is positive that the guy is the Ace of Aces. I think we better play it that way."

Turrin sighed loudly. "If that's true, he sure kept it close. I don't know a wise guy anywhere who has even suggested such a thing. Old Barney has been more or less out of things for as long as I've been in the mob. But, okay, let's say it's true. What do you think his intentions are, present situation?"

"I think he means to stop Eritrea, if he can find a chink to cling to. And I'm giving him all the chinks I can find."

"Poor David," Turrin commented, chuckling. "From the vibes I've been getting, though, he's got some pretty solid support. I guess he's been working this thing a long time."

"Long time, yeah," Bolan agreed.

"He's been selling a program, way I get it. Not himself. Of course, he goes with the program. So what will Barney do? Nothing overt, I'd guess."

"Right. Overt is not the name of his game. I think I caught him with his hand near the cookie jar a while ago, though. He was going to a meeting with some Marinello dissidents."

"Oh. That was you? How'd you get onto that?"

"I had one of the guys wired."

"Well, good work. It's the talk of the twenty-seventh floor—probably in the penthouse too. I guess that was you at the other hits, too."

"I've kept busy," Bolan admitted gloomily.

"I need a reading on those hits, Leo."

"Sure. That's easy... The reading is that Eritrea is sending Aces around town, moving quickly to tidy up the town for the big council tonight. And there's a general feeling that the Commissione is sponsoring his show. There's a lot of nervousness. Switchboard here has been lit up constantly for the past hour. How do you like the reading?"

"It's all I could ask for," Bolan replied. "But there's a twist to the twist, and I think you ought to be aware of it. Barney and I came eyeball to eyeball, jaw to jaw. He knows who Omega really is. And, of course, the Commissione—certainly not the hard arm—is not sponsoring David's show. I'm hoping now that Barney will be combining two and two to make five. I'd like for him to think that Eritrea is cozy with Mack Bolan—for whatever reasons he wants to give it."

"You mean, Eritrea knows who his pal Omega really is."

"Something like that, yeah. Keep in mind, Leo, who Barney really is. Remember Pittsfield and remember Hal Brognola's hairy problem. Someone high in the mob is wearing government ears. Those ears may as well belong to David Eritrea."

The little guy's voice was strained as he replied, "You're still angling toward that, eh? Let's face reality, Sarge. Going in, your chances were about one in ten. If Barney is Peter--and if he is also the secret boss of the hard arm—and if he was the mastermind of the Pittsfield fiasco—then your chances have plummeted to about one in a thousand. I don't see—"

"I don't play odds, Leo," Bolan said quietly.

"Sure, sure, I know—you make your own. But I'm right back where I was when they snatched Angelina. If Barney knows ..."

"Obviously he does not," Bolan said. "Otherwise you'd have already been hit. Look at it, Leo. With all his covert power, Barney still has to depend on others to keep him in the know. I don't believe he ever got fully on board with the situation at Pittsfield. He knows there was a snatch from a government safe house, okay. He knows the outside facts of the Pittsfield operation. He probably engineered them. But he does not know the inside truths. Nobody walked away from that Pittsfield operation, Leo. No word came out. You weren't the only guy in Pittsfield when it went down. And you weren't the only one to walk away smelling clean. I'm figuring Barney Matilda right now for a very troubled and half-blind Ace of Aces. He's finger-groping in the dark. Okay. Let's give his fingers something to examine."

"Okay," Turrin said with a heavy sigh. "It's your game, guy. I can't even run much interference for it. Here's something for you, though. Hal is on his way up from Wonderland. He'll be at the U.N. Plaza at noon sharp, and you know the combination. Says he'd appreciate a debriefing at this stage of things."

"I'll try to make it," Bolan said. "I need the parley more than he does."

"Okay. Hey. Be careful."

Bolan grinned at the telephone. "Hey. What's careful got to do with it?"

The contact terminated with a chuckle from both sides. But Bolan was not feeling particularly chuckly. It was all coming together, yeah. In bits and pieces, but coming nevertheless. And things were going to be getting brutal right quick.

He went to the bathroom to hurry the lady along. The door stood slightly ajar. Water was running in the shower stall. Her robe hung from a wall peg. But there was no lady in that bathroom. Her clothing was gone and the lady was gone. There was no window, no other door, and the vent shaft would barely admit Bolan's hand. Nobody—nobody—had come through that apartment past Bolan.

Impossible, sure, but there was coldness in his chest and cotton in his throat as Mack Bolan accepted the unhappy fact that he was alone in that twelfth-floor apartment.

The debriefing was over. All that remained here for Mack Bolan were the invisible gates of hell itself.

10

SECRETS

It took Bolan only about thirty seconds to find the secret. A concealed latch at the top of the built-in medicine chest swung open a section of the bathroom wall. He stepped into an identical but mirror-image bathroom in a duplicate apartment.

Damned cute, yeah. And entirely worthy of a Ranger Girl. Those ladies missed few tricks. Sally's "quiet place" evidently served also as an escape port, through which she travelled between her two worlds. And this one was the true quiet place. Bolan found wigs of every colour and style, an incredible selection of clothing, and various other tools of a double-agent's trade.

He found also, pinned to the apartment door, a small comfort. It was a hastily scrawled note reading simply, "I told you you'd be sorry!"

He grinned at that, relieved to learn that she had engineered her own disappearance. But it was a relative relief. He'd wanted to tuck her away some place safe. She'd vetoed that arrangement, with a minimum of fuss and bother, electing to return to the hellgrounds and her own calling.

So, okay. Bolan could understand that. He could respect it. But he did not have to enjoy it.

He put the place in order and got out of there. Some things a guy simply had to accept. Bolan accepted Sally Palmer's right to self-determination.

He descended to the garage and shook down Barney's limousine. That vehicle would be red hot the moment it hit the street again. He intended to abandon it a few blocks away. First he wanted a closer look at it.

Beneath the rear seat he found some coins, a theatre ticket stub, a petrified slice of french fried potato, and a soiled handkerchief.

A wicked little palm gun, a snubnose .32, loaded and awaiting use, was nestled between some bottles in the console bar. Bolan left it there, jotted down the number of the mobile phone, and got out to check the trunk.

And he was glad he did that.

That trunk compartment was crammed with electronics gear. Several of the pieces were portable black boxes—about the size of a cigar box but much heavier—but most of the gear was built into the vehicle and wired in place.

Intrigued, Bolan returned to the between-seats console for another look at that citizen's band radio. The whole front lifted away from the thing, revealing another, much more sophisticated control panel.

Yeah.

And the CB antenna was no CB antenna. The inner guts of the thing extended through the trunk lid to a larger housing on the inside surface, containing multiple loading coils.

That limousine was a rolling command centre, damn near as good as Bolan's own in the war wagon.

And Bolan knew now what those portable boxes were. They were the top of the art in electronic surveillance, miniature transceivers which—used in conjunction with micro pickups—would record, store, and transmit on command in a few seconds an entire twenty-four hours' accumulation of eavesdropping. Did old Barney have the whole town wired? Probably, yeah.

He had complete and trusting access to everywhere and everybody. The "living legend" could stroll innocently through the homes and offices of bosses and

buttonmen alike, strewing his little microbugs like rose petals while the "chauffeur" planted the black boxes somewhere outside—and bingo, a wire was attached.

So this was how the Aces always managed to know so much about everything and everybody. It was said that an Ace could glance at the lowliest street soldier and reel off a complete make on the guy—how he liked his eggs cooked—even his preferences in sex and the configurations thereof—if he suffered from gas or haemorrhoids or chronic constipation.

Someone should have guessed long ago. Apparently, no one had. Any guy with rank would bleat like hell, with murder in his eye, if he knew that his own mob had wires on him. Not even a buttonman would hold still for that sort of thing. They were all paranoid as hell about police surveillance. What would they do if confronted with

...

Bolan grinned at the mere thought.

And maybe, yeah—just maybe—there was an angle here. Maybe old Barney had one secret too many.

A grimly elated Executioner probed deeper into the secrets of that console. And, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Mack Bolan was not about to abandon this vehicle!

He moved it to a remote corner of the underground garage and locked it up. Then he went out and hailed a cab. It was time to meet Brognola at the U.N. Plaza. He needed that parley with the chief fed—but even more urgently now, he needed to pass the word about Sally. The girl was in grave jeopardy, self-determination or no. She could end up like Georgette. And Bolan still felt the responsibility, even though she'd so cleverly relieved him of that.

At least now—thanks entirely to Sally—Bolan had another weapon at his disposal. And, the way things were shaping, he'd be needing every damn weapon he could pull together.

And so, he reflected darkly, would the Ace of Aces.

11

CONFIDENCES

As was his custom, Bolan was on the scene and scouting thirty minutes ahead of the scheduled meet. Even though Brognola was now a friend of long standing, one whose loyalty and commitment to the cause had been ably demonstrated time and again, a guy in Mack Bolan's shoes did not casually venture into any prearranged meeting.

He satisfied himself that the track was clear, then settled into the wait. At precisely twelve o'clock a cab arrived and Hal Brognola stepped out. Had there been a last-minute hitch, the chief fed would have moved directly inside, the meet would "abort," and Bolan would go on his way. But the pressure man from Wonderland moved along the walk a few feet, then paused to light a cigar. Bolan stepped into view and lit a cigarette. The two then walked toward each other, meeting halfway. They solemnly shook hands. Brognola said, "I never know you. You could have walked right past and I wouldn't have known. How do you do it?"

They were moving along the walk toward the corner. Bolan gruffly told his old friend, "Recognition is in the mind, Hal, not in the eyes. I start standing out for instant recognition, I'm a dead man."

"Who're you kidding? You're a dead man anyway."

"Says who?"

"Says Big Bill Rafferty, chief of the Incorruptibles. Says you'll never leave town alive."

"That's the organized crime unit?"

"Yeah. I tried to put in a word for you. Rafferty wants no part of you. His big headache is the funeral and all the possible implications of the power vacuum."

"There's no vacuum," Bolan reported quietly. "Just the reverse."

"Meaning what?"

"It's never been in doubt, Hal. Eritrea had the thing locked up long before Augie died. That's why the old man pulled his Houdini routine and tried to hole up in Pittsfield. I think he became convinced that Eritrea meant to help him die a bit quicker. If I hadn't happened into it, it's possible that Augie could have broken the movement. It seems that most of the Commissione executive staff was remaining loyally behind him. That was the only edge he had, but it could have been enough if I hadn't interfered. Well, I did interfere—and I broke the back of the resistance before I realized what was going down. Eritrea now has a free ticket. And he's a real Turk. If that guy can get his program inaugurated, look out. He has a lot more brain than muscle, but the brain is where the real power is at. I don't have to tell you that. He can buy all the muscle he needs, once he's on the throne."

"So your real target here is Eritrea."

"He's the one."

Brognola coughed delicately and observed, "Then I'm surprised you haven't already burned him down."

"I'm going for something better than that"

"You want to tell me about it?"

"You want to hear about it?"

"No. But I guess I better."

Bolan chuckled solemnly. "You still have that problem in Washington. Right?"

"Don't remind me."

"I promised you a patsy."

"That's right, you did. But I can't hold you to that."

"I'm holding myself to it," Bolan said. "Leo is in a great spot now. You'd like to keep him there, wouldn't you?"

"Sure I would."

"What's your deadline?"

"I have to respond to the Senate subpoena by the close of business tomorrow. I've thought seriously of resigning instead."

Bolan gave his companion a sharp look. "What would that save?"

"It would save Leo—and maybe the lives of his wife and children."

"You're sure that leak is plugged, Hal?"

"It's plugged," the troubled fed replied sourly. "Plugging leaks is one thing. Frustrating the normal processes of government is quite another. If I produce Leo, he's damned. If I don't, there'll be a governmental crisis for sure. My only option is to resign and take all the heat onto myself."

"You really don't want to do that."

"Course not."

"Okay," Bolan said. "So we'll keep playing the original tune. I'll give you a stand-in for Leo. Do you want him dead or alive?"

"I have that choice, eh?"

"I think so, if my numbers come down in proper sequence. I'm going to give you Eritrea, Hal."

The fed didn't even break stride, but he almost lost his cigar. "You're the damndest guy. How do you intend to do that?"

"If you want him live, he'll volunteer for the job. Otherwise, I'll just hand over his carcass and you can write your own scenario. I'd rather deliver him live. It would give me a certain satisfaction. Also, it would cinch the main thrust of my operation here at command."

"You've lost me somewhere, pal," Brognola admitted. "I don't understand a damn thing you're telling me."

Bolan sighed as he launched into the explanation. "I intend to deliver Eritrea on his knees. He'll be begging for the job. In exchange for your protection."

"Protection from you?"

Bolan shook his head. "From his own kind. I've been setting the guy up all day, Hal. When I'm done with him, he'll be a sure candidate for the turkey makers. They'll draw and quarter the guy and roast him on a spit. Unless ..."

"Unless," Brognola responded heavily, "he can find himself a sponsor."

"Right. You can offer him care and feeding. And all he has to do, in exchange for that, is admit to the world that he's been on the government payroll all the time he's been with the mob. And the guy is really pretty clean, Hal. Cleaner than Leo, if you want to get technical. The embarrassment to the government would be minimal."

They walked on in silence for a full minute before Brognola heaved a deep sigh and told the most wanted man in America: "If you can pull it off, okay. But we have only a little more than twenty-four hours."

"If I do it at all, I'll do it in twelve," Bolan assured him.

"You're incredible. I never have been able to believe you, man. I keep seeing it, but I still keep wondering if it's all some crazy illusion. I'm getting your drift now. You aren't just after Eritrea. You're really staging the grand slam, aren't you? You still believe that you can erase them all. What is it you're setting up? Besides Eritrea?"

They'd travelled halfway around the block. Bolan looked at his watch. "Let's start back," he suggested. "Time's running short, so let's cover as much as we can as quick as we can. You're right. I have an ambitious program in mind. But you're wrong, too. I do not still believe that I can erase them all. And I'm not even trying that, not here, not now. The whole mob is here and they're all nervous as hell. Their biggest enemy is themselves. They all know that. I want to reinforce the idea, promote it. I want to break up the grand alliance, Hal. I want to see them separated into isolated regional groups, the way it used to be—competitive, distrustful of other groups—I want to break up this goddamned command structure, or at least weaken it, defang it."

"Congratulations," Brognola sniffed. "You and about ten thousand feds want the same thing."

"I don't have your limitations, your burdens," Bolan said quietly. "I may be able to pull it off. Eritrea is the key to that. He's been selling these guys a unification program which—if it worked, and it certainly could—would put the whole western world in one big pot for them to eat at their leisure. So my first goal is to destroy Eritrea's credibility so devastatingly that his program falls with him. But now I've lucked onto another tool. I've found the Ace of Aces, Hal—and I've discovered that he has wires on everybody. There's cause enough right there to spark a total revolt. But here's the beauty."

"Wait a minute. Who is this guy?"

"Hang on to your cigar. The guy is Barney Matilda."

"What makes you think so?"

"You can't buy it?"

"Not right off the top of your head, no. See, I've had an operative on that guy for quite a while. It's inconceivable to me that—"

"Hal. I was with Sally earlier today."

The fed gave him a hard stare. "So?"

"So she gets all the credit. She's known for quite a while. She knew you'd pull her if there was the slightest suspicion that it was true. So she's been sitting on it, waiting for the goods."

"Don't fault her, Hal. She's done a hell of a job?"

"Sure she's done a hell of a job," Brognola fumed. "And you're right, I'd have jerked her damn quick. We picked Barney because of all his ins. Figured it would be a perfect contact point for a flasher. And that's all her job was in the beginning. To flash movements, associations, that sort of thing. I wanted to pull her the moment the old guy made a double agent out of her. She talked me out of it. Against my better judgment. So. It's true? Old Barney is the kingfish?"

Bolan nodded. "I think I verified it. I told you about the wires. They're controlled—at least partially—from his limousine. You've seen the war wagon. Barney's Cadillac is a mini war wagon, strictly wired for sound collection. You've heard the wild tales about these Aces and their incredible makes on all the boys. Know all, see all, hear all. Well, that's how. The hard arm has wires everywhere, I'm guessing. I'll bet there's a limousine in every family."

"I see what you meant by 'beauty.' I wonder how long he's been getting away with it."

"That's not what I meant, though," Bolan said. "The beauty of the whole thing is that Barney Matilda is leading the dissidents against Eritrea. He's the guy who sponsored Augie's runaway to Pittsfield, and he's the guy who was sending Aces around the country to pick up old tabs and to rally the boys to Augie's cause. Hal—Barney Matilda is Peter."

"Jesus Christ!"

Bolan grinned. "No, Augie was Jesus Christ.

Barney is Peter—and Peter, you may recall from a Sunday School lesson, is the rock upon which the church is built. Now here's some more beauty. Eritrea hates the aces with all his heart and soul. If he gets in, the first thing to topple will be Barney's secret gestapo empire. Don't think crafty old Barney doesn't know that—and don't think for a minute that he intends to sit by and let it happen. This is a do-or-die battle for him. With all his power, though, he does have certain limitations--imposed by the very nature of his operation. Augie was his power base. As long as Augie occupied the throne, Barney could call his shots wherever he damn well pleased. As Sally put it, which one of the two was really the boss? I read it as a double kingdom, one of which was invisible. Neither could exist without the other. Barney no longer has that other kingdom as support. Most of the other bosses hate the Aces as much as David does—and that's especially true of the new generation of rankers. So you see what I've got here to play with."

"I'm not sure I do see," Brognola growled. "It's very involved and confused. Give it time to soak in. Meanwhile, what about Sally?"

"Well, now, there's a worry," Bolan said, sighing.

"Couldn't you get her out?"

"Oh, I got her out. But your gal Sal is a mighty determined operative. She gave me the slip. I'm sure she's too smart to try another whirl with Barney. But she's up to something cosy, bet on it. She's on the town, Hal."

"Well, dammit," said the chief fed.

They were back to their starting point.

"I'll keep an eye out for her, Hal. You keep an eye on Leo. I think he's still in deep trouble. I'm going to give him Barney's limousine. He'll know how to use it to the best possible advantage."

"He knows about Barney?"

"He knows, yeah. Leo can be a hell of a tiger. I've watched him operate. Think I'll let him operate on Barney. I'll concentrate on Eritrea. We'll get them in the pincers and see what comes crawling out of the shell. I feel good about this one, Hal. I really do."

The fed threw down his cigar and shoved both hands deep into his pockets. "For what it's worth, so do I. I didn't mean what I said a while ago. I believe you, guy. I believe in you. And I can't say that about many. You go ahead. Do it to them. And I'd defend you in God's court. I mean that."

They shook hands and Bolan said, "Thanks. I respect you. It's good to have your confidence. I'll give it my damndest."

"When didn't you?" said the fed.

Bolan winked and walked away.

He did more than respect Hal Brognola. He loved the man like a brother. In that big, broad brotherhood of men, the chief fed was a real man. There would be no reproach for Sally Palmer, not from that real man. She was a brother, too, albeit a real woman. And there would be no cop-outs in courts or Senate chambers, no senseless sacrifices in the name of many-tongued gods with their faces pointing in all directions at once, spouting the one litany.

Yes, it was very good to have the confidence of such a man. And it was comforting just to know that such a man could survive in the fantasy structures of Wonderland-on-the-Potomac.

12

MESSAGES

A telephone message awaited Bolan on the war wagon's recorder. It was Leo Turrin's voice. It was brief. It was urgent.

"I think I have some heat. I'm laying it on the floater since I may not have another chance at a telephone for a while. Your friend Peter came stomping in with a couple of high locals in tow. They had at me for about thirty minutes. Wanted a full rundown on yesterday, complete with all the trimmings. I played it straight, from the point of view of my new sponsor. From one pro to another, I've never been interrogated so thoroughly. I think hell is breaking loose. They have now called a two o'clock meeting of all ranking locals. My sponsor was not invited, or even informed. I have been ordered to stand by for further testimony. Sounds very hot. I'll be travelling east on the 27th. Stay loose."

Time of receipt was 12:25. It was now nearly one o'clock. Broken down in plain language, the message meant that Barney Matilda and two New York bosses had interrogated Turrin regarding the events at Pittsfield. He had "told all"—as the events unfolded in David Eritrea's understanding. As a result, the New York families were assembling in council, sans Eritrea, for further discussion. Given present circumstances, this could mean but one thing Barney felt ready to make his case against Eritrea. And the table was to be held in the East Room on the twenty-seventh floor—the Commissione's executive quarters.

Bolan immediately picked up the mobile phone and called the Marinello estate. A guy named deFlorio, the house boss, kept Bolan cooling for more than a minute before Eritrea came on. And it was a certainty that two instruments lifted simultaneously into that connection. Billy Gino was probably on the line also.

Eritrea angrily inquired, "What the hell is going on?"

"That's what I meant to ask you," Bolan replied coldly. "You've got the whole damn town in an uproar. I had you figured for more class, David."

"Wait a minute there!" he fumed. "What are you saying? I didn't tell you to go in there and cut everybody down! Who the hell do you think I am?—Frank Anastasia?! Of all the goddamned—it looks like I ordered that shit, Omega, and I don't like it a damned bit!"

"One of us is off our rocker," Bolan calmly told him.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" Eritrea yelled. "Are you saying you did not—?"

"Are you saying I did?" Bolan countered icily.

The guy's balloon was rapidly deflating.

"Well, I thought—I just assumed—if you didn't, dammit, then who did?"

"Look, I didn't call to play twenty questions," Bolan told him. "I want you to know that you're blowing it. Maybe it's too late already. They're all meeting at two o'clock to talk about it."

"Who is meeting?" Eritrea asked, plainly aghast.

"The whole damn New York company, that's who. I think you should be there."

"Damn right I'll be there. Two o'clock? At the penthouse?"

"East Room, twenty-seventh floor. And David . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Find out who's behind it. You'll find Peter."

"Wait a minute, wait! I want you there, too."

It's time to get it all out of the woodwork. I want your whole damn crew to be present and accounted for."

"I'll be there. Is that you, Billy, on the extension?"

Gino's solemn tones confirmed the fact. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"Not if I can help it," Bolan told the Head Cock. "You'd better come in strength. Pick me up outside. I'll ride in with you; it'll look better."

"You mean. outside the corporate office building. South ramp?"

"South ramp, fine. See you there. David?"

"Yeah," the would-be boss glumly responded. "Maybe it's best this way. We'll get it all on the table. We'll nail it down."

"Sure, sure."

"And maybe I'll give you Peter's head."

"In a paper sack!" he snarled, and hung up. That was an order, a royal decree, from a guy who did not yet wear the crown.

Bolan went to the wardrobe closet and made a selection for the next act.

Stay loose, Leo? Not hardly.

13

NUMBERS GAME

The numbers were falling, yeah, but a bit out of sync for Bolan's game. The various pieces of the grand slam were all rushing together out of control—like an implosion of volatile substances. Unless Bolan could get securely into the act to stage-manage some of the movements, critical mass would be attained prematurely and the resultant explosion could destroy the game beyond repair.

It was crazy to go in there with Eritrea, sure. Too wild, too many variables which could not possibly be controlled from within—a soft penetration of La Commissione was entirely outside the realms of sound tactical logic.

But he had to try it.

He gave it every possible chance, wearing the skin-tight combat blacks beneath another suit, which was more appropriate to the role. The Beretta rode shoulder harness beneath his left arm—two spare clips on the harness, two in the hip pockets of the suit. He wore a leg harness on each calf, assuring further comfort. And he carried a briefcase crammed with other support.

The convoy from Long Island hit the corner outside the corporate office at eight minutes past two o'clock, which was pretty good considering the distance they had travelled. And, yeah, they'd come in full strength. Four big limos, all crammed with tense-eyed paranoids ready for anything. David's car was second in the line-up, Billy Gino leading the procession, two other crews bringing up the rear.

Bolan-Omega showed himself as the lead vehicle swung across the sidewalk and lined into the ramp for the underground garage. A front door sprang open and Bolan popped inside, with the car still in motion. Billy Gino scrunched closer to the wheelman, making room, as he grunted his greeting: "Didn't know for sure it was you, sir. We're a bit late."

"The timing is fine," Bolan assured him. "We want to catch them with their hands on the table, anyway. Right?"

"If, uh, I'm not sure I know what—"

"Standard routine, Billy," the "Ace" instructed. "Just do it the way you always do it. I'll let you know when that changes."

A radio speaker in the dashboard crackled with Eritrea's tense voice. "Where are your people, dammit?"

Bolan accepted the mike from Billy Gino to reply, "All around you, David. Relax. This is your show."

There was no response to that. The procession was moving swiftly along the ramp, descending into the earth beneath the high-rise office building. Most of this building, Bolan knew, was legit. Only the top floors were occupied by the corporation. The twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh floors housed the nerve centre of international Mafia operations. The twenty-eighth floor was called the penthouse and was reserved for special occasions, such as full summit meetings and strategy sessions, as well as other high-level affairs, some of which involved representatives from the straight community. The fact that the table on Eritrea was being conducted on the twenty-seventh floor served a double function of mob protocol. First of all, the location of the meet downgraded its relative importance to that of a local problem which did not merit the dignity of the penthouse table. Thus, visiting dignitaries from outside the city would not be affronted by their exclusion from the process. Secondly, those local bosses who were in attendance would feel less

uncomfortable, less the schemers, in the lower-level setting. Bolan understood the Mafia mind.

But he had never been up there in that nerve centre. He did feel a certain familiarity with both the physical plant and the human atmosphere, thanks to Leo Turrin's fine sense of detail. And his instincts were at full combat shiver when that convoy from Long Island came to its screeching halt in the Mafia's bowels.

He was outside the vehicle and coolly surveying the situation down there before the car was fully halted. Billy Gino slid out behind him, a small walkie-talkie in hand, and trotted on independently. People were also coming out of the other vehicles and moving swiftly in typical coverage of the territory. Bolan strolled back to the second limo and leaned into the open doorway for eye contact with Eritrea. "It's okay," he growled.

But the man from Long Island preferred to hear it from another. He had the mike to the car radio in hand and was speaking into it. "How's it look, Billy?"

"They're all here," was the instant reply. "I've made Mr. Pelotti's wheels—Mr. DiAnglia's, Mr. Gustini's, Mr. Fortuna's. They look clean."

"How many boys?"

"Just the wheelmen. They're gathered down here outside the office. It's soft. It's okay."

Only then did the hopeful Boss of Bosses come out from behind the armour plate and bullet-proof glass. He swept past Bolan-Omega without so much as a nod or a glance, the crew of tagmen quickly forming around him and the whole group moving as one man toward the elevators.

Bolan brought up the rear, moving leisurely, briefcase in hand, eyes and ears alert to every nuance of this almost melodramatic operation. He knew that it was not melodrama. These men lived within the jungle of savage minds, and they moved accordingly whenever they were outside their own little private sphere of that jungle. It was a hell of a way to live, sure—but it was the only way they had; they had built it for themselves, and now they were trapped in their own structure.

Two elevator cars had been called and held by tense hardmen. Others had run along corridors and ramps to secure the territory. Bolan estimated a total of thirty to thirty-five guns here—quite a lot of strength, yeah, for this visit to the headshed.

Eritrea stepped into an elevator car and spoke from behind a protective wall of flesh, addressing a Gino crewman on station outside. "Tell Billy to leave someone here with those wheelmen. I want no messages going upstairs." His eye finally caught Bolan's. "Well? Come on."

"Go ahead," Bolan called in. "I'll go up with Billy. You don't want me opening doors for you, anyway. You open your own doors from now on in this joint. Right?"

"I've been opening them for a long time," Eritrea bit back. "You and I have something to settle, Omega. Be damn sure you're around when that time comes."

"Does that mean you no longer want my support?" Bolan asked coldly.

"It means I'll damn well have it!" the man growled. The door closed.

Bolan turned icy eyes onto one of the hard-men left behind. "Remember that," he commanded.

The hardman's eyes jumped. "Yes, sir," he said, and went into a fit of coughing.

Billy Gino, closing quickly, had overheard. "Remember what?" he inquired of his friend, the Ace.

"The time has come to stop wondering, Billy," Bolan told him. "The guy is flipping out. Just because he turned on Augie, he figures everyone will do the same to him."

A muscle popped in the Head Cock's jaw. "Who says he turned on Augie?"

"The whole damn company is saying so, man. Didn't you hear me? I said it's time to stop wondering!"

Billy did not know what to do. He pounded the cougher on the back and growled to him "Get Julio and Freddie and get all the wheelers together. I want these cars wheeled around and headed toward daylight."

The hardman nodded through his strangles and gasped, "Mr. Eritrea wants us to keep the other wheelers busy, too."

"Do that," Gino said. "Go on." He glanced at Bolan and stepped past him into the next elevator car. "Let's talk about this on the way up," he suggested.

Bolan moved in beside him and lowered his voice to tell him, "Send the rest of your boys to the penthouse. We don't want too much showing on the twenty-seventh. This thing could still go either way."

Billy Gino was still baffled by the unsettling changes of direction in his curious world, but he accepted that suggestion and passed the word outside to the balance of his hard force. The Head Cock and the Black Ace travelled unaccompanied to the twenty-seventh floor—and, during that ride, they came to an understanding.

"I don't like to put you in this position, Billy," said the Ace. "But I guess I have to snap my fingers now."

The meaning was clear to Billy Gino. It was a call to service, a command imperative to which the Head Cock had already pledged himself. In a world where deceit and double-dealing were the catchwords, confused men often gladly cast their loyalties along lines of personality and admiration, rather than trying to unravel murky logic and conflicting chains of command.

"I heard the snap," Billy Gino declared in a level voice. "You say it, I'll do it. But I have to tell you honestly that I still don't know what the hell is going down here."

Nor did Bolan—not in any precise sense. He was strictly playing it by ear and hoping for the best. At the moment, Billy Gino simply happened to represent the handiest and the most likely tune to try. He held the car with the door closed at the twenty-seventh floor and told his latest convert, "I'll go on to the penthouse. You get off here and give it a feel. The meeting is in the East Room. When you've had your feel, gather up those four boys and bring them on upstairs. I want—"

"Two of those boys are his personally. I don't think they'll come."

Bolan shrugged. "It was for their sake I said it. Leave or stay makes no matter now. They have the goods on him, Billy. The old man treated him like a son, gave him everything, trusted him, loved him. And what did he get back? He's getting planted tomorrow, Billy—that's what he got back. Augie would've never been up there in Pittsfield except for that treacherous son of a bitch! I'm sorry if this bothers you. But the cut has been made. I've got to come down on the right side of that cut. Them that wants to stay, let them stay."

A light was dawning behind those troubled eyes. "Barney was saying something about sheeps and goats. I've been wondering. A long time. I don't know when was the last time I saw Augie in the flesh. I just don't know. But it must have been—oh, hell—weeks ago. Uh, what's the difference between a sheep and a goat, Omega? I mean."

"One leads and the others follow, Billy. You never heard of a Judas goat? They put him in with the sheep when it's time for the slaughter. He gets them to moving toward the slaughter pens. At the last minute, they cut the Judas out of the crowd. He leaves. The others stay."

"Oh I Yeah. I get you. Hey, I'll get that feel and I'll come up as quick as I can."

"Do that," Bolan said solemnly. He opened the door.

Billy Gino stepped out and Leo Turrin stepped in. The two men stared at each other across the open doorway. Leo grinned soberly and said, "Hi, Billy."

Billy Gino said, "Hello, Mr. Turrin." His gaze flicked to Bolan-Omega.

Bolan gave him a reassuring nod and wink. The elevator door closed and the car moved smoothly upward.

Leo leaned against the back wall with a deep sigh. "I see it," he said, "but hell, I don't believe it."

"I got your message," Bolan told him.

"I still don't believe it. This is insane. You can't run a masquerade in their own damn headshed!"

Bolan laughed softly. "The numbers are falling pretty good so far."

"You can't play a numbers game either, dammit! The whole damn New York mob is under this roof."

Bolan stopped the car just before it reached the penthouse. "That makes it easier," he told the edge-of-lifer. "I'll take my chances in a crowd any time. What about you? What's happening?"

"I should have felt your fine hand there when Eritrea came storming in," said the troubled undercover fed. "Listen—we're just a pinch away from a shooting war in there. The guy ordered everybody out but the bosses. They're having at each other right now, and the outer office is crammed with nervous guns. Barney dispatched me to the penthouse to get the hardarm alerted."

"How is he playing it, Leo?"

"The same concerned elder statesman routine. You were right about that guy. He's a hundred percent shark. I don't understand why nobody ever saw it before."

Bolan sighed. "We usually see what the other guy wants us to see, Leo. Okay. Let's have some numbers. How many guns can the penthouse field?"

"No more than ten or twelve. But they're not ordinary guns, pal. They are Aces every one." "Major or minor?"

"Maybe one or two majors, the rest minors. But even a minor Ace is something to reckon with."

"Okay." Bolan punched the button, allowing the car to proceed. "Get ready."

"For what?"

"We're taking over."

"The penthouse?" Turrin groaned.

Yeah. Right. That was exactly what they were taking over. And Mack Bolan was praying for all the good numbers to come together at that time and in that place.

The elevator door slid open and the Executioner stepped into utter chaos.

He threw his head back and raised a commanding voice above that din. "Awright, awright! Alla you boys! Pull it down and tuck it in! Siddown and shuddup! We'll have none of this shit!—we'll have none of it!"

And Leo's strained voice, close to his ear, was quietly declaring, "I still don't believe it."

14

WATCHING

Leo Turrin was not exactly your standard, ordinary street-corner commando. He never had been. Blood nephew to one of the founding fathers of the American Mafia, Leo was born with rank. He could have had it any way he wanted it. But he'd never really wanted any piece of it. He'd kept putting the old man off, and one day he found himself wearing a U.S. Army uniform, headed for Vietnam.

Leo came of age in Vietnam. Like so many young men before him, he found the true meaning of humanity while suffering the very depths of hell. And he came back from that version of hell with a new commitment, a new sense of the importance of his own humanity. He'd found a friend in Saigon—an intelligence guy with Washington connections. And even before he doffed his uniform, Leo Turrin was in Washington and taking secret training for a job which would confine him to the edges of hell for the rest of his life. When he finally did come home to a hero's welcome, he immediately succumbed to Uncle Sergio's pressure and took over one of the old man's Pittsfield territories. He also took to wife the fair Angelina, childhood sweetheart, and settled down to the double life on the edge of the knife.

He'd done some dirty things, sure, in that mirror-image world. One did not survive the competition of Mafiadom by playing the good Samaritan. One certainly did not thereby become established as a leader in that brutal world. So he'd lived the role--and, yeah, he'd done some rotten things. One of those rotten things had involved a cute kid called Cindy Bolan. The juicemen had sent her over to make a few bucks on behalf of her old man—one Sam Bolan, a steelworker who'd been unfortunate enough to develop a bad heart and get too deep into payday loans.

For Christ's sake, the kid was still a virgin!

But "pussy" was Leo's territory—and he had no choice but to play the game. He took a personal interest in the kid, making sure that she was lined into straight dates with reasonably presentable johns. Perhaps no one was more shocked and depressed than Leo when the kid turned up dead at the hand of her own father. Sam found out and flipped out. He killed Cindy. He killed Cindy's mother. He tried to kill Cindy's kid brother. And then Sam Bolan killed himself.

That was how it had all begun with this big, impressive bastard who was already being called the Executioner. Brother Mack came back, took off his uniform, and started walloping the shit out of everything Mafia. He'd Come within an inch of walloping Leo as well. It was a tribute to the depth of the man, though, that he held no grudges against Leo, once the truth was known. It was further tribute that the two had become true comrades-in-arms. And when the world became darkest for Leo Turrin, it was Mack Bolan who came blitzing to the rescue to save the day for Leo and to spring Leo's wife from almost certain death.

Yeah, things had been very grave there, those last few days in Pittsfield. Nobody had known that Augie was behind it all, rattling through the death throes of his kingdom and pulling every string at his command to stave off the inevitable. But Bolan had stumbled across some roots of the intrigue in—of all places—Atlanta. Other tentacles of the conspiracy surfaced in official Washington—and suddenly Hal Brognola and the entire Justice Department were embroiled in a tug of war with the United States Senate over—of all people—little Leo Turrin, the double-lifer from Pittsfield. Nobody yet knew who the double agent really was, but a storm of indignation had swept the scandal-wracked halls of Congress over the leaked

disclosure that a highly placed Mafioso was actually on the Justice Department payroll, with intimations that the 'U.S. Government was therefore sponsoring a certain degree of criminal activity. It was all nutty as hell, sure, but there it was just the same. An overzealous Senator with a penchant for headlines was threatening to wreck the most important and supersensitive operation ever launched against organized crime—and who was it who saved the day in Pittsfield? Right, the nation's most wanted criminal—the one and only Mack Bolan.

But the day had not really been saved; it had merely been postponed. Bolan knew that. Leo knew it. All of the principals knew it. And maybe this was where it all came to nothing, right here in La Commissione's penthouse.

Leo would be the last man in the world to blame Mack Bolan for anything he did, the last to doubt him, the last to desert him.

But every man had his limitations.

Mack Bolan was, after all, just a man.

How the hell did the guy hope to pull this off? By what stretch of mind and will, of guts and heart, did the magnificent bastard hope to pull this off?

"Just watch me," the big, grim man had told Leo once, on another battleground far away. "I can ... because I must."

Okay. So okay. Turrin is watching you, big bad Bolan. Do it, guy. Do your magnificent thing!

The hard force from Long Island was up there—just about all of them, it seemed—and they were getting some static from the penthouse staff. The elevator foyer was entirely deserted, but the big lounge area just beyond was the scene of much pushing and shoving, angry voices, and general confusion.

Bolan moved straight into the chaos, chastising and berating in a voice of clear authority which carried above the din. He slapped a few heads and manhandled a couple of bodies along the way, leaving awkward silence and embarrassed faces in his wake. The centre of disturbance was a large, curving reception desk that was set well into the interior of the huge room. There a besieged group of Red (minor) Aces were engaged in a staring contest with the crew bosses.

Bolan muscled his way into the centre of that and began throwing some icy stares of his own. A crew boss whom Bolan knew only as Julio was the first to wilt. His eyes fell and he backed off half a pace as he told the now-familiar figure, "These guys say we have to wait in the garage, sir."

"Both of you are right, so relax," Bolan said, almost gently. He impaled a Red Ace with an icy gaze as he told him, "It's okay. They stay. Make them comfortable."

The ace's voice was but a shade warmer than Bolan's, though the tone was courteous and the manner entirely impersonal. "We are told to keep the penthouse clear."

"Right, but we're changing that," Bolan informed him. He turned to Leo. "God's sake, get these guys taken care of. Make them feel like brothers."

"Right," Turrin snapped. He stood on a chair and raised his hands above his head as he announced, "Hey! What the hell! You boys know where the beer is at!"

The tension evaporated. There were no hoots or catcalls, but a quiet swell of relaxed voices as thirty armed men moved toward the refreshment centres.

Turrin chidingly told the penthouse spokesman, "Now isn't that better? Why'd you wanta, get into a shouting match with these boys?"

"Following orders, Mr. Turrin," the man replied, totally unaffected by the mild rebuke. "Mr. Orion says keep it clear, we keep it clear. You better—"

"Yeah, well I got some new orders for Orion," the undercover fed snapped. "They want all you boys downstairs. Go get 'im."

The guy's gaze shifted from Turrin to Bolan-Omega and back to Turrin again.

Bolan said, very softly, "Peter says."

The spokesman's eyes jerked just a bit at that. He lifted a finger to summon his associates and walked away, the others following as a single body, headed toward the private offices at the rear.

Turrin bit the end off a cigar and muttered, "What now?"

"Play it by ear," Bolan said quietly. He eased a hip onto the desk and lit a cigarette. "Who's Orion?"

"Beats me," Turrin admitted. "Watch boss, probably. Black Ace, for sure. You sure said the magic word. Hope it doesn't turn out to be black magic."

Bolan said, "I'm going back there and take it over. You cover the action out here; try to keep it relaxed like it is right now. Billy Gino will be coming up in a minute. Send him on back."

Turrin was clearly uncomfortable with the idea. He said, "Frankly, I didn't expect you to get this far. You're in a hell of a spot right now. I suggest you get in that elevator and get the hell out while you can. You could be walking into anything back there. And it could all fall to hell any minute out here. You said Barney had you made. What if he should spot you—or what if David or somebody lets it drop that Omega is in the building? He'd have this joint sealed in nothing flat."

"Faint heart never won the game, Leo," Bolan said quietly. "I'm game if you're game." "You really think you might do it, huh?" "I think I might, yeah."

The little fed grinned soberly as he told his compadre, "Okay. I'm watching you, man."

Bolan squeezed his friend's arm, picked up his briefcase, and went back to beard the lions in their den.

And he hoped that the universe was looking on ... with favour.

15

MIRROR IMAGE

Besides the large conference room at the rear of the penthouse, smaller doors led to three offices. The minor aces had disappeared behind the end door. Bolan tried the middle door and found it unlocked. In there was a mahogany desk, back dropped by a large plate-glass window with the RCA Building framed in the distance, connecting doors to the other offices, a closed-circuit television system—deactivated, two large bookcases crammed with leather-bound volumes, several luxurious leather chairs, a small bar, a couch, a very expensive taping system, life-sized nudes decorating panelled walls. Pay dirt. It would not be "Peter's" office, no—a guy in Barney's delicate position would never be found pulling rank in the headshed but definitely it was some exalted station which saw very little use. The place even smelled new—and the leatherized furniture didn't have a wrinkle anywhere. All the bottles on the bar had their seals intact. It was pay dirt, yeah.

Bolan grabbed a bottle of bourbon and opened the interconnecting door to the side office. The guys were on their way out via the other door. All stopped in their tracks to stare with surprise at the occupant of that central sanctum. True to Bolan's guess, the side office—though nice enough—was a ghetto in comparison. He gently waved the bottle as he extended an amiable invitation. "Come on in, boys. We need some words."

He turned his back on them and went behind the desk. They came in slowly, quietly, faces frozen—wondering but not showing it. Orion was about 35, medium build, catlike, good-looking, with none of the telltale signs of recent plastic surgery. He had not been a Black Ace for long, being scarcely distinguishable from the Reds.

"Close the door," Bolan said, when they were all inside. He removed the seal from the bourbon and told no one in particular, "Get some glasses."

It was the earlier spokesman who finally made the move. He went to the bar, filled a tray with glasses, brought them to the desk.

The silence in there was thick enough to cut, as Bolan poured doubles into each glass. He set the bottle down and held a hand, palm down, over the tray. "First let's see your marks," he quietly commanded.

Slowly, one by one, the plasticized cards slid across the desk. Five reds and a black. Orion's was the last to come. Bolan scooped them into a stack, then, one by one, scrutinized them.

Then he set the stack in front of him and said, "Relax. It's a celebration. The new deal gets a new deck. All black. You get the honours, Orion. Let's have some new marks for these gentlemen." The guy grinned. Then he laughed outright, but in a very restrained way, and playfully slapped the guy next to him on the butt as he wheeled about and went to the bookcase.

It was all smiles now, all around that desk, as Orion carried over a heavy volume and carefully placed it on the desk in front of Bolan.

"No, no," Bolan told him. "I said it's all yours."

Orion was delighted. The book was actually a box, cleverly disguised in leather binding. Inside was a small mechanical gadget, a press for embossments, and several stacks of playing cards or reasonable facsimiles thereof. He plugged the machine into an electrical outlet and took five cards from a black stack.

"Clubs—right?" he said to Bolan.

"Clubs it is. And pull a spade for yourself."

The guy could hardly believe it. Bolan's earlier guess had undoubtedly been accurate. This one had not been black for long. Sure he was delighted. He was enjoying a meteoric rise into the heady realms of raw power. An Ace of Spades was the top of the deck.

Bolan explained, "It's your club, Orion. Tomorrow all of you will get new faces, new names. Tomorrow you're going to need them."

That was both a threat and a promise, and all who heard understood it well. The smiles immediately became tempered with sudden recognition of new and perhaps awesome responsibilities--and the rest of the celebration was conducted in a solemn manner.

The gentlemen got their new cards and their congratulatory drinks without once questioning the authority which conferred it all. This was a world in which few questions were asked. Authority was self-evident, and Bolan had refined that game to a sharp hone many, many campaigns ago. He had been using their necessarily furtive and insanely secretive modes against them almost from the beginning.

And there was no questioning those final instructions from the man in the central office. Did they think that perhaps Bolan was Peter? If not, then surely Peter's personal stand-in, a Lieutenant-Ace of all the aces.

"I want you to cool it out of here right now. Talk to nobody, listen to nobody. Go out through the main lobby, hail a cab, take it to Long Island." Bolan scribbled an address, tore it off the pad, handed it to Orion. "That's the place. Whoever is there, throw them out. I mean, whoever. You're taking it over. Nobody gets in without my personal okay."

"This is Barney Matilda's place," the new ace said, staring at the scrap of paper.

"That's what it is."

"How long do we hold it?"

"You hold it until I say you don't."

The men were exchanging awed glances among themselves.

"What's old Barney up to?" Orion wondered aloud.

"He's up to his ears in shit, that's what," Bolan replied gruffly. "That's all; you better get moving."

"Uh, what do we call you, sir?"

"You call me Phoenix."

"Phoenix?"

"That's the firebird," Bolan explained. "He rose from his own ashes."

"Oh, sure, I get you. Uh, we're the only ones left around here. You going to be okay, sir? I mean—with all this going down?"

"You were the only ones," Bolan said. "Go on. You gentlemen have the hot job."

Bolan solemnly shook hands all around and escorted the new aces to the door. Then he closed and locked it, went through and locked the other offices from the inside, and returned to his briefcase.

He had to get this show on the road, and damn quick. He took a light grease gun from the briefcase and assembled it, shoving in a long clip for maximum firepower, attaching a neck cord. Next came the harness and nylon line. Crazy, maybe, sure—he'd never tested the rig but he'd used similar ones for similar occasions—but then it was a crazy world, wasn't it?

A rap came at the door. He stashed the stuff in a drawer of the desk and went to see who was calling.

It was Leo—with Billy Gino in tow. Mystification was peering from Leo's long

suffering eyes. "Orion and crew just bailed out," he said. "Where'd you send them?"

Bolan tossed a glance at Gino as he replied, "I sent them to Long Island. Come on in."

Billy Gino had evidently never seen the inside of this office. He was clearly impressed, and he was clearly looking at Bolan-Omega with a new understanding.

The tray of used whiskey glasses still occupied the desk. The Head Cock noted that, also. He was obviously counting the glasses with his eyes. "Looks like a celebration," he murmured, forgetting protocol for the moment.

"We toasted the new deal," Bolan solemnly explained. "Your turn will come, Billy. I've decided to give your boss one more turn around the paddock. Just one, that's all. You want to try the guy one more time?"

"If you say so, sure," Gino replied, openly nervous now.

"Okay. Here's what you do. Put Julio on this door. Nobody comes through. Right? Nobody. Leave his crew here. Take the rest of your boys down to the East Room. You'll seal that door. No coming and no going. Right? None! No matter what you hear, no matter what you see, that room stays sealed."

"Whatever you say, sir, you got it."

"I know that, Billy," Bolan said warmly. "Okay. What's the situation down there?"

"It's quietened down a lot. They sent out for wine and five glasses. I guess they're getting it together. David came to the door and told me to cool it. He seemed to be feeling fine. And it's still a closed door. Nobody's going in."

"What's old Barney doing?"

"Barney?" The question puzzled Billy Gino. "He's just sitting there at the door, waiting and stewing like the rest of them."

"Barney and who else?"

"You want names? It's a dozen or more. The underbosses and all the tagmen."

"I make it about twenty," Leo put in quietly.

"Yeah, maybe so," Gino admitted. "They're milling around a lot. Kind of hard to get a count."

"Let's split them up," Bolan suggested. "Send the underbosses and their boys up here, Billy. Tell them they should get comfortable; it'll be a long wait. You won't budge those other tagmen, so just leave them. Go ahead, you better get moving."

"Right." The Head Cock went to the door. "I'll put Julio and his crew right here. Nobody will come through."

Bolan went for his gear the instant that door clicked shut.

"What are you doing?" Leo asked nervously. "There's only one hand to play," Bolan told him. "You still game?"

That good face was tense, uneasy, but the voice was definitely game. "We've come this far. Why not?"

Bolan was threading nylon line through a small pulley and adjusting the rig. "Okay. We're going to put the noose on friend David for good and all. I figured the guy to land on his feet. He didn't get this far by weeping in the dark, did he?"

"You had it planned this way all along, didn't you?" Leo said, watching the preparations.

Bolan grinned tautly as he replied to that. "Even to play it by ear, Leo, you have to bring along a few instruments. Give me a fix on that East Room, huh?"

Turrin went to the window, cranked it open, leaned out. He pulled back inside with a worried frown to report, "One down, two south. It looks tricky. You want me to feed?"

"This rig doesn't need a feeder," Bolan replied. "It's a closed system. All I need is a good anchor, something to pay the line through without binding it up. Here's what I want you to do. Go straight to the twenty-sixth floor. Soon as you get there, start evacuating the east side. Get everybody out of there."

"That's easy," Turrin said. "It's practically deserted already. The time-clockers are on holiday 'til after the funeral."

"See how the ear plays?" Bolan observed, pleased with that. "That's great. I'll need an open window below the East Room."

"You'll have one," Turrin promised. "Then what?"

"Then you hot it up to the twenty-seventh and join the stew line outside the East Room. Make sure you're seen there. Get with Billy Gino and tell him there's a new word. This is the word: He's to rally 'round the new Boss of New York and protect him at all costs. All costs. Make sure he gets that word."

"He'll get it," Turrin again promised. "But what does it mean? Who is the new boss?" "David, Leo, is the new boss."

"Ah, hell, I'm lost; I thought you were hanging a death rap on the guy."

"I am. The less you know about the how, the better."

"Did you really send that band of aces out to Long Island?"

"I really did, yeah. To Barney's joint."

"God, it's getting deviouser," Turrin commented, scowling. "It's hard just trying to find a place to stand in all this. What do I—"

"Time to go, Leo. Just play it by ear and look for cues. Try to hang around the twenty-seventh near the elevators. I'll be getting back with you."

"Aw, hell, no, Sarge. Don't come back up here. Hit and run, dammit!"

"I have to come back, Leo. We still have a game to play. Now you move it"

"I don't like it," the little guy insisted. "Neither do I," Bolan admitted. "But I'm going to do it."

"Because you must!"

"Right. Because I must."

They embraced briefly; then Leo moved away. He paused at the door—said, quietly, "I'm watching you, guy"—then pulled the door gently shut.

Bolan immediately stripped to the black suit and stuffed his outer clothing into the briefcase, attached the briefcase to the harness, went to the window.

It was time, yeah, for Omega's other image to present itself at the New York table.

The time had come to crown a king.

And let the devil himself pick up the pieces.

16

BROKEN MIRROR

King David had never felt better. After all was said and done, maybe Omega had made all the right moves. David had come in here prepared to deny all responsibility for those morning hits, to fix the blame squarely where it belonged, to cut that fucking Omega to pieces and to hold him as an example of misplaced power gone awry. It would serve as the first step toward a total disbanding of those arrogant bastards. And David had been rubbing his hands in anticipation of the showdown.

But then he'd seen the fear in these guys' eyes, raw and undisguised, when David came busting into that secret table. DiAnglia actually apologized, right out, right in front of the others. Gustini tried to alibi his presence at that table, while both Fortuna and Pelotti just sat there and sweated in their own juices.

So David had not denied anything. He simply sat down and took over the meeting. They went over the New York question once again, reaffirming everything that had been agreed earlier. They talked about the funeral, about the arrangements made for the visiting bosses and their cadres, and they talked a little about David's plans for the future of the corporation. They talked about cops, about the late developments in Washington, about the Mack Bolan problem—and finally they talked about Augie.

"I didn't want anybody to know," David told them. "The old man had gone senile, along with everything else. He was hanging to life by a thread those past few months. But the mind was already gone. He would be as normal as any of you one minute, completely flipped out the next. You can see I had to keep that under wraps. No telling what it would have done to the corporation—if it got out, I mean. I was protecting Augie, sure—his image and his memory, more than anything else—but I was also protecting you gentlemen, and I was protecting this thing of ours."

"There's no question about that, David," Di-Anglia smoothly assured him. "We aren't listening to all these wild stories floating around."

"I want it in the record, just the same," David insisted. "Somebody with personal plans of his own was trying to make a mark from Augie's misfortune. As God is my witness, I swear that Augie was in his own bed in his own home when the trouble started in Pittsfield. When I got back—and I mean I damned near did not get back—Augie was gone. You all know the rest. We found his ashes at Pittsfield. Anybody wants to make something of that with me, has just got to be insane."

"Or senile, too," DiAnglia sniffed.

"Meaning who?" David immediately wanted to know.

"You just kicked him out of here," Fortuna growled. "He's the one called us together, David. You need to talk to that old man. I think maybe Augie's death has had too much effect on him. They were pretty close, you know, since the world was made."

"Barney called you guys up here?"

The response was unanimous, with a lot of uncomfortable fidgeting and downcast eyes.

"He was even hinting at something between you and Mack Bolan," DiAnglia said in a muffled voice. "I think you hit it, David. Senile."

"Or worse," King David commented in a frosted voice. "Was Barney in town yesterday? Anyone see him around?"

There was no immediate response to that. After a moment, Fortuna said, "Maybe that's fishing a bit too deep, David. The old man is just ... he's just ..."

"Overdue for a full retirement," DiAnglia suggested.

"What do you do with these old guys?" Pelotti wondered.

"Our turn will come," Fortuna said, laughing, maybe trying to lighten things up a bit.

"They say the good die young," Gustini observed, joining the light movement.

"That means our turn will come, damn sure, all of us."

But he was wrong. None of those bosses assembled there—except maybe for King David, boss aspirant—would ever have to worry about creeping old age.

Something dark and terrible swooped from the sky, at that very moment, to land on the ledge just outside that twenty-seventh floor window.

All became equally aware at the same jarring instant—all, perhaps, as stunned as David by that incredible apparition in black which was glaring silently at them through the big window. It was the death look, coming from behind a wicked little machine gun, balanced gracefully on the side of that tall building, giving them a couple of ticks to see what had come for them.

All of them had come unstuck and were trying to find frozen feet when death began that chattering speech. It was like a nightmare—from eerie silence to the clap of doom in one swift movement. The window shattered as flame wreathed the stuttering muzzle of that little gun and death swept in. One whole side of the table went with the first blazing sweep—Gustini and Fortuna, picked up and carried backwards in a wave of exploding flesh and crashing into the wall like so much discarded garbage. Pelotti was lunging toward the window in a suicidal reaction and DiAnglia had flopped over backwards in his chair when David's side of the table joined the death march. David sat there frozen, aghast, and watched Pelotti get ripped right down the middle and sprout open like an overstuffed dummy under a sharp blade. David saw lungs and bones and all as the guy stood there and died, and he saw little DiAnglia swimming frantically on his back in Pelotti's juices when he suddenly sprouted punctures, also, and curled into a little ball, very still and obviously very dead.

It was as if there were two Davids—one just sitting there and waiting his turn, frozen in his chair, watching all the things reel through his collapsing mind just like he'd always heard—the other standing off to one side, looking at what had happened to the New York table, wondering why and how.

"Congratulations," said the cold voice from the ledge. "It's all yours now."

Was that a familiar voice? Did the guy look—"You!" David gasped.

A hell of a commotion had erupted beyond the door, a lot of pounding and yelling. David's attention was diverted to that point for just a split second—and in that split second, the apparition at the window disappeared.

David still could not move.

He sat there, frozen to his chair, as the boys outside kicked down the door and a wall of flesh poured into that room. Someone groaned, "God sake, Mr. Eritrea! My God!"

And David mumbled, "It was Omega. It was. I saw him. Only it was Bolan. He came in through the window. Only he—"

Someone screamed, "They're all dead! All the bosses are dead!"

People were scampering all around, yelling and moaning, cursing, and a couple were even crying.

David's fogged vision cleared, and he saw Billy Gino standing at the window, a little machine gun held daintily by two fingers. "This is what did it," Billy growled. "It's still hot."

"Came in the window," David insisted, still mumbling.

"Get him out of here!" someone urgently suggested. It sounded like Leo Turrin. "For God's sake, get him out before those guys upstairs find out!"

The detached side of David Eritrea calmly watched as Billy Gino stashed the little gun beneath his coat and turned a troubled face from the shattered window.

"It could have happened that way," Billy said, the voice sounding as though it came from far away.

Someone else snarled, "Yeah, bullshit too. Get 'im out of here, I said."

David's next lucid moment was in the garage. Vehicle tires were screeching along the ramp, David was inside one of those vehicles, and grim-faced men were huddled around him.

"My God, they're all dead," David groaned. "He killed all the bosses!"

"Shut up, sir," said Billy Gino. "Just dammit shut up!"

And King David knew, in that instant, that he'd been had. By a master strategist, one who'd undoubtedly had him in his pocket for quite some time.

The only question remaining for David was who. Was the master Omega?--or was it Bolan? Which one was real?

Not that it really mattered. Not now. Except that when David got laid, he always liked to know who was sharing his bed.

No matter, no--no matter now. All five families of New York City were now without leaders. Some damn bloody times lay ahead. Eritrea had no belly left for any of that. Even if he could prove in a court of law that he'd had no hand in the killings--and maybe he couldn't even do that--he would never be able to satisfy all these savage survivors on that score.

This town was going to go crazy--blood crazy. Everybody would be blaming everybody else for the worst disaster ever to hit this thing of theirs.

No. David had no belly for any of it.

And, yes, he knew for a certainty that he had been severely had. By whomever.

17

ROYAL FLUSH

The lobby area of the twenty-seventh floor was ominously still, and Leo Turrin was the only one around when Bolan-Omega put in his appearance there.

Turrin quickly updated him on the developments as they descended to the garage level. Everyone, it seemed, was in a state of shock. Eritrea had been carried out, babbling, by Billy Gino and company. Barney was in the death room selling his suspicions to a covey of mad-as-hell underbosses. No matter which way the glass broke, Barney was saying that Eritrea had never pulled a trigger for himself, anyway—and that it was sure strange as hell that David Eritrea was the only one to walk out of there alive and unscratched.

Immediately after the hit, Leo had gone to the penthouse and dispatched Julio and crew to the twenty-seventh "to safe the withdrawal."

Aside from the New York underbosses, Barney, and a dozen or so grieving tagmen, Commissione headquarters was now deserted. All of the executives had suddenly found urgent business elsewhere. The families of the slain bosses were scattered all around New York on special duties to safe the out-of-town visitors who'd come for Augie's funeral.

"Are all the VIPs in town now?" Bolan inquired.

"Just about," Turrin replied. He produced a small notebook from his breast pocket. "Here's the list. They're playing it cagey. No mobbing up. A couple of the guys keep apartments here, year around. The others are sprinkled into classy hotels from Central Park to Times Square."

Bolan declined the notebook. "Put it away, Leo. I can't go for those guys here."

Turrin shivered and replied, "I've seen enough blood to last a lifetime, frankly. I guess you've done enough here."

"Not nearly enough," Bolan said quietly. "But I can't go shooting up the hotels. I'll finish up the quiet game, then fade silently over the horizon. I haven't tied anything to the Executioner here, Leo, and I'd like to keep it that way. Let these guys keep the hate among themselves for a while. By the time I get through here ..."

"I was hoping you were already through," Turrin said.

"Mostly I am," Bolan told him. "Most of what's left is your game."

They left the elevator and walked quickly to Leo's car. Not until they were wheeling up the ramp did Leo ask, "What game is that?"

Bolan told him then about Barney Matilda's vehicle and the juicy secrets thereof.

The little guy scowled through the recital, then laughed when Bolan was finished with the account. "You're giving me that? God, I can hardly wait. I know just how to play it."

"That's the key word, Leo," Bolan told him. "There are fresh tapes in the console. I took a quick listen to a couple. I think you'll find that friend Barney had the VIP hotels all wired and waiting for the funeral parties."

Turrin was still chuckling. He said, "I'm going to take that damn car to every hotel in town. And I'll give each VIP a ride around the block. Yeah. I know how to play it."

"Drop me at 45th and Park," Bolan said. "You're saying goodbye, aren't you?" the little fed decided.

"Could be," Bolan said, sighing. "I have business on Long Island. Then . . . well, we'll see."

"How'd you leave that penthouse, Sarge? Clean?"

Bolan patted the briefcase. "It's all in here, yeah. Nobody will ever know for sure, Leo."

"That's interesting as hell. I guess you know what you've started here. The mob will never be the same. It's explosive enough right now. Wait 'til I play Barney's tapes around town. The whole lid is liable to come off."

Bolan winked at him and said, "I'm counting on it."

They had reached the drop point. Leo nosed the car into a yellow zone as he told his passenger, "It'll be curtains for Barney once the word is out. Maybe I can parlay myself into the vacuum there. What do you have in mind for Eritrea?"

"Federal protection," Bolan said simply.

Turrin chuckled at that. "I never got much pleasure out of another guy's misfortune," he said. "But I think I could enjoy this one. I just hope Billy Gino doesn't put a bullet in the guy's head before they get to Long Island."

"Billy was that torn up?"

"He was plumb sick."

"Did you give him my message?"

"He got it, yeah. Don't count too much on that guy, though. I know him from way back. He can be mean as a snake."

"Thanks, I'll watch it," Bolan said glumly. He always hated to say goodbye to Leo. "Give my regards to Angelina."

"I'll do it," Leo said, suddenly very solemn. "Sarge. How do I say thanks?"

"You give 'em hell, guy, that's how."

Bolan handed over the keys to Barney Matilda's limousine.

"And give 'em some entertainment," he added, grinning.

"Sheeit," Turrin said. "Get outta here. Go drink a bucket of blood or something."

Bolan got out and walked away. He did not look back. He hated to see a grown man cry.

18

AFTERMATH

Bolan made telephone contact with Hal Brognola and updated him on the events of the afternoon.

"You play rough games, mister," the chief fed commented dryly. "You won't see any false tears from me over the likes of them—those four, collectively, were responsible for more agonies than the ordinary mind can conceive—but . . . well, you know how it is, pal. There'll be a lot of editorializing and breast-beating over this. The usual outcries from civil libertarians, probably another crisis in Washington, etcetera etcetera."

Bolan said, "Yeah. It's okay with me, Hal. I'll wear the blood. And I wouldn't trade jobs with you for all the bloodstains in Manhattan."

"Don't worry, I'm not offering. So you think my boy Eritrea is about ready to crack."

"I think so, yeah. One more push should do it. The guy could be real sweetmeats for you, so don't make it easy for him. He could tell a lot of things."

"My feelings exactly," the fed assured Bolan.

"I hadn't planned any free pasture for that one. You think Sticker will be secure now?"

"Don't worry about that guy," Bolan said. "He'll have our friend Peter digging holes before sundown. I'm betting we've seen the end of the national gestapo. La Commissione will become an ambassadorial service, trying to mend a lot of broken fences. Sticker will find good use for his talents there, I'm sure. I'm more worried about the other one at the moment. Have you heard from her?"

"Not a whisper. I was hoping you had."

"I have a feeling where I'll find her," Bolan said. "Don't worry about it. The way everything has been going to hell for the boys today, I doubt that she'll draw a second look from any of them."

"I think my brain's gone numb," Brognola told him. "It's just starting to sink in. You've knocked off the entire New York command—in a single blow! God's sake, I think I'm growing buffalo hide. What you did today is equivalent to dropping an H-bomb on the White House. And I don't feel a thing. Not glad, not sad, not anything."

"It will come later," Bolan said quietly. "Let me know when you get it sorted out."

"No sorting is needed," Brognola assured the blitz artist. "I'll still go to God's court with you."

"Not for a while, let's hope," Bolan said lightly. "For now, how about Long Island?"

"It's a date. When and where?"

"You'd better make it a force. "Show of strength, if nothing else—but you may really need a force. Peter threw a battalion against me at Pittsfield. It's still around somewhere. The old guy could decide to go down in glory."

"Wait a minute, what is this battalion?"

"Sort of like a militia, Hal—a citizen's army. Only these citizens are actually freelance mercenaries. Actual numbers could go as high as several hundred guns. And they're not greenhorns. Ex-GI's, some of them. Ex-cops. Some of those not exactly "ex." It takes a while to activate them—and I sort of doubt that Peter has that kind of time."

"Unless," Brognola suggested, "they're already on the line."

"That would be quite a problem in logistics," Bolan said, thinking about it. "A problem with quarters, with feeding, keeping them covered. I don't know where the hell he'd put them around here. Do you?"

"Frankly, no. But I don't even like the sound of it. I'll bring a hefty force. When and where?"

"Federal marshals, please—no local cops. And put them in uniform so I can identify the players. Let's say one mile west of Augie's joint, six o'clock sharp."

"I can make that. Okay. What's the scenario?"

"I haven't written it yet," Bolan told him. "Give me a radio channel. I'll get back with you as soon after six as the situation allows."

"What range?"

"Suit yourself, Hal. I can cover it."

"Okay. Let's say 132.6 megs."

Bolan jotted the frequency in his book.

"You're covered."

"How about signals?"

Bolan chuckled. "If you want to be formal, okay. You are Royal Flush."

Brognola chuckled, also. "Very fitting. Who are you, pal?"

"You can call me Drano," Bolan told him. Brognola guffawed. "I like it. It fits. I always knew where you'd end up, pal."

"That's where I started, pal," Bolan said, and broke the contact.

Sure. It fit. It was all fitting beautifully. Right around David Eritrea's royal neck.

19

THE HARD

It was nearing five o'clock on the afternoon of the command strike when the war wagon cruised on past the turnoff to the Marinello estate, continuing toward a small seaside community on the north shore, where Barney Matilda had maintained residence for the past quarter century.

Following an impulse, Bolan picked up the mobile phone and sent a call to that troubled palace of the dead king. It was Billy Gino's voice at the other end when that connection opened, though not everyone would have recognized it.

"Cheer up, Billy," Bolan told him. "The world hasn't ended; it's just shaking a bit." "You couldn't prove it by me, sir."

The Head Cock was very surly.

"How's your boss?"

"Begging your pardon, sir, but he is not my boss. Mr. Marinello is my boss, living or not, and I'm just sorry I ever forgot that. Sir, this is disgraceful, it's just disgraceful. I don't understand—none of it—nothing—and it's made me sick at my stomach."

Sick or not, it was a long speech for Billy Gino.

Bolan's tone became very cold and stiff. "Did Leo Turrin give you my message?"

"Yes, sir. He gave it."

"Then why aren't you acting like you received it?"

"I tried—I been sitting by this damned phone for nearly two hours, waiting, wondering."

"I told you to stop wondering."

"Yessir. But then I got a bunch more to wonder about."

"Why don't you ask David, then?" Bolan snapped.

"He says nothing, does nothing. Sits and stares at the window. I guess I better tell you this. Manny Girolta called a little while ago. He wants to bring a delegation out. To talk, he says."

Girolta was an underboss under the late Carlo Pelotti. Bolan asked, "And what did you tell Manny?"

"I told him it should wait. I told him David is in shock. But if he calls again ..."

"You'll tell him the same!" Bolan snarled. "Snap out of it, dammit, and listen to me! I had you figured for a guy with a future! What the hell kind of boy-scout bullshit are you pulling on me! You told me to snap my fingers, dammit! I relied on you! It's a man's world, soldier! I thought I picked a man for a man's job! You turn sobsister on me now and I'll have your balls inside your belly before midnight! Are you listening to me, Billy Gino?"

Billy Gino was listening. The voice was alert, crisp, as he leapt to reply. "Yes, sir. I'm listening."

"You get that goddamned place on hard—double hard! Manny or anybody else calls you with a mouth dripping shit, you tell them where to spit. You stand to the colours, guy, with your nose up no man's ass! Are you still wondering, Billy?!"

"No, sir. I guess I just forgot where the sheep's were headed. I got confused. I'm sorry."

Bolan's tone softened. "Well—it's a confusing time, Billy. I'll be coming out there soon. Just you hold the fort 'til I arrive. Hey. I'm sorry I yelled."

"I had it coming, sir. It's okay. I just wish I knew what was coming off."

"What is an ace, Billy?"

"Sir?"

"You heard it. What is it?"

"An ace is an agent of the corporation, sir. He loves no man, covets no territory, sleeps with no family. An ace loves This Thing of Ours, covets the bonds of brotherhood, and sleeps only when the families prosper."

The guy had the litany down pretty good. Bolan quietly told him, "Let that be your guide."

Billy Gino was overcome. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He understood the implication.

"Tomorrow you call Leo Turrin," Bolan-Omega instructed the man with a future. "In case he forgot in all the excitement, you remind him what I said. That is, of course, if you're all done with wondering."

"I'll call him, sir. You can count on that." And Bolan understood the implication of that.

"It's already counted," Bolan told the brand-new ace, and hung up.

The palace was on hard. And Brognola's patsy was on ice. David would keep until six o'clock. And, yeah, Mack Bolan was thankful for the shiver that prompted that call.

The old joint on the sound had seen a lot of seasons go by, but it still looked fresh and clean, still had its dignity. It had class and style, which was more than could be said for many of the newer ones. This one stood alone on a low hill, with several acres under fence and a neatly tended private pier.

Bolan pulled the war wagon to the water's edge and parked her broadside on public land, the bow pointing toward Barney Matilda's private pier. Then he activated the visual scans and took his readings from the console monitor amidships.

A couple of guys were on the pier. Two more were in a vehicle parked just inside the open gate leading to the house. A pair of unoccupied vehicles were parked parallel outside a small garage. Nothing else showed in the scans. Nothing on the grounds, nothing at the windows, no other signs of life anywhere.

It was a nice day, clear and bright. Many boats were out; quite a few shore side fishermen, also, were dotted along the sound. A large ferry moved sluggishly against the horizon.

But there was no life evident at Peter's place.

Bolan deactivated the scan and secured the cruiser, then circled back to the road on foot. The result was a two-hundred-yard walk. He broke the gate at a brisk pace, catching two brand-new Black Aces who were stationed inside the vehicle there completely off guard. They came out of the car with a bound and a bounce, showing how alert they were.

"Relax," Bolan commanded. "Who's here?" "We had a shoving match," one guy said, grinning.

"Duplication of assignments, maybe," said the other, more soberly. "Vega and his band were here when we arrived. They were sent at about ten o'clock."

"And?" Bolan asked expectantly.

"We relieved them," the new Black Ace replied.

"You said throw everybody out," the other elaborated. "We threw everybody out."

"There you go," Bolan said approvingly. "Look sharp."

He went on to the house, tried the front door, stepped inside. Orion met him in the forward hall.

"Did they tell you?" he immediately inquired.

Bolan nodded. "Who sent them?"

Orion shrugged. "It was a standard send, machine cut, central office verification. It was timed 9:58 this morning."

"You did right," Bolan assured the new Ace of Spades. "Anything else unusual?"

"I would say so, yes, sir. One of Vega's men turned up missing. We searched the joint from attic to basement. No dice. The guy simply wasn't around. Vega was fit to be tied. He even went out and looked along the pier. I put a couple of men out there, just in case, to keep their eyes open."

"They think he maybe simply walked away?"

Orion shrugged. "Looks that way to me. Vega wouldn't buy it. Maybe I wouldn't buy it, either, if he was mine."

"That all you have to report?"

"Yes, sir. That's all."

"Did you hear about the hit at corporate office?"

The guy's eyes jerked. "When was that?"

"Just after you gentlemen took off," Bolan explained. "David Eritrea was locked up with the New York company in the East Room. Suddenly there's gunfire. They break down the door and find Eritrea in there with a smoking gun and four dead bosses."

"My God, that's terrible!" Orion said, voice hushed.

"You bet it is," Bolan agreed. "And we have this full council slated for tonight. You can see the job we have facing us."

That baffled face could not see, but the voice did not let on. "Yes, sir. It's getting really hairy, isn't it?"

"In doubles," Bolan assured him. "Where'd you get the vehicle? I sent you in a taxi."

"Vega left it. They came out in two. I figured it was okay. You didn't say—"

"It's okay, sure. I just didn't want you drawing any attention leaving corporate office."

Naturally I wondered about your wheels out there."

Orion asked, "Is the set okay? I mean—that's how Vega—it looked okay. I have a man out back, walking the fence. Those two in the car. Two out on the pier."

"It's a good set," Bolan reassured the guy. "I'll take over in here, though. I need to shake down the joint. Who belongs to the other vehicles?"

"Sir? Oh, the two by the garage. They were here when we arrived."

"When did you arrive?"

"About an hour ago. The cabbie got lost twice. I didn't think we'd ever—"

"An hour ago! That Ford still has a warm engine! Maybe Vega came in three. Did you think of that? Did you wonder if maybe his missing man is really planted somewhere around—just keeping an eye on you?"

Orion was very uncomfortable. "I guess I didn't get around to that yet, sir. I'm sorry. I didn't know about ... all that in town."

"Listen, I want you to get out there and reset. Pull those boys off that pier and get a hard line around this place. Get them off their ass and out of that car."

Orion was already moving. "I understand now, sir. We'll harden it, damn quick."

Bolan went behind him and locked the door. So. He had a hard line outside.

All he had to do now was find the hard line inside. And that was going to take some damn fine imagination!

20

ACES FULL

Undercover lady Sally Palmer had told Bolan that Barney Matilda had stopped at a public pay phone while enroute to Manhattan earlier that day. That would put the time somewhere between nine and ten o'clock.

Ace Orion reported that Ace Vega and band had been dispatched to Barney's place at 9:58, on a "duplication of assignments." Ergo, it would seem that at about ten o'clock that morning, while highly agitated following a "walking inspection" of the Marinello estate, Barney had sent a band of aces to protect his place here on the shore.

That was understandable. What was not immediately understandable was the mechanism for the send. Orion had called it a "standard send, machine cut." Bolan knew a lot about these people, sure, but he did not know it all.

How did old Barney control a secret force on a national scale—for God knew how many years!—a force of skilled professional killers—and still maintain his own anonymity above those ranks? The bosses didn't know the "control"—obviously the aces themselves didn't know—nobody knew!

So how the hell did the guy run his show?

"Programs," sure. Machine cut, standard send. Sally spoke of a full switchboard in the master bedroom, and Bolan himself had seen the equipment in that limousine—though just a layer or two below the surface. What other secrets would that vehicle reveal, under a thorough examination?

Machines, sure. The guy ran his invisible kingdom by remote control.

Bolan went directly to the bedroom and tore into that bedside chest. It was quite a bit more than a switchboard, Sally. The Executioner knew a thing or two about closed systems, communications razzle-dazzle, electronics intrigue. It was more than a scrambler, too. It was a program box, dammit, switching and relaying, garbling and ungarbling, sending and receiving and recording and storing conversations and instructions between a dozen exact copies of itself in as many central drops in every region of the country—and perhaps even one or two outside the country, if those circuits could ever be traced through their maze.

But there had to be more than this! This lousy box beside the bed! This was a lousy instrument! In order to function, it needed a brain!—computer banks, data processors, records storage—hell, it needed a room twice the size of this one, crammed with gear!

He lifted the dummy shell away from that instrument and located the central feed, an armour-clad coaxial cable which disappeared into the wall. He tore off a section of wall panelling to determine the angle of departure.

The angle was straight down.

Bolan took a fix on that wall position and went to the basement—a musty, low-overhead affair loaded with ancient bric-a-brac, bulging cartons of junk, several pieces of broken furniture. Furnace and hot-water heater, rusted laundry tubs. That was it. Here, emplaced on the forward wall behind light wooden boxing, the coax ran from ceiling to floor.

Bolan kicked at the boxing for a closer look.

It went through the floor, dammit, and straight into the ground. Or did it? He did not like the feel of that floor. It gave just a bit, here and there.

Bolan threaded the silencer aboard the Beretta and put a round into that floor. The bullet dug in, displacing an inch or so of powdery mortar. Mortar, yeah, not cement!

It was a false floor, mortar over wood.

He began a methodical search for the secret to the place and found it in the rusted laundry tub. The spigot lifted up. Machinery whirled. A section of rear wall opened revealing a lighted stairwell.

Bolan went below, opened another small door, and stepped into fantasyland. All the gear required, and more. Enough, maybe, to launch a missile to the moon.

And there was more.

A dead ace, head-shot from behind and lying face-down in a thickened pool of blood.

An abused and woeful lady fed, blouse ripped and soiled, trickle of blood coming from the corner of that lovely mouth. And, sure, crafty old Peter, rock of the church that greed built, leering at him over the sights of a hand cannon with a six-inch silencer.

"Keep those hands where I see them," the old man commanded. "Use them and lose them."

"Congratulations, Peter," Bolan said as he advanced deeper into the place. "From the Talifero twins to all of this in one easy jump, eh?"

"I got news for you, wise guy," Matilda snarled. "I taught the Talifero kids which end of a gun is which. Since we're on it, something else I think I'd like you to know. Pat and Mike's real name was Matilda. So how do you like the wrong end of a gun, looking at a man you robbed straight from his loins!"

The Talifero brothers? Barney's own kids? Why not?

Bolan said, "I've never robbed any man, Barney. I give back what is given. You know that. But I never took pleasure from another man's grief, no matter what he gave. I'm sorry about your boys. But I'd do it again."

"I pulled the plug on Pat no more'n two weeks ago. He's been a vegetable all this time. Less than that, even. I kicked the fuckin' plug outta the wall."

What was wrong? Why all the conversation? Bolan said, "I guess that was best."

"There was no plug to pull for poor Mike.

They brought his head back in a separate box."

The parley was okay with Bolan. The longer it lasted, the better the chances. He told the angry old man, "Mike had it coming. He turned on Augie in Jersey. And that's the only reason Augie left his legs in Jersey."

Sally Palmer made a strangling sound as she cried, "Mack, he's stalling you. He sent for help."

"It's okay," Bolan told her, looking at Barney. "All the help in the world won't help him now."

The living legend chuckled, deep in his throat. "That's almost funny."

"You haven't even heard the punch line," Bolan told him. "I knew you wanted your limousine back, Barney. Very valuable vehicle. So I delivered it. With all the covers off."

It jarred. Those eyes crackled pure hatred. "What is that s'posed to mean?"

"I delivered it to the headshed, Barney, to the guy in charge of VIP entertainment. He's driving the visiting bosses around Manhattan right now. In your limo, right. Entertaining them with your taping system. I knew you wouldn't mind."

"You rotten bastard!" Matilda growled.

"If I were you, I'd steer clear of Manhattan after this. Come to think of it, I'd steer clear of just about everywhere. I couldn't even recommend that condominium in Florida now. No way. Those boys are going to be upset enough to follow you clear to hell. You know? I never met a wise guy that loved an ace. I wonder why."

Those eyes were jerking now, yeah. "I don't know what you mean."

"Aw, sure you do. Any ace could tell you, even the reds. They don't get those face jobs because of the cops, Barney. And they don't get them just so they can spy better. They change their faces because they want to keep on breathing. I can always tell an ace who's earned a pile of hate. All I have to do is count the face jobs. Isn't that right, Barney—I'm sorry—it's Peter, isn't it? Ace of all the aces, the real Boss of all Bosses. I can see why you'd rather rule by remote control. Your rotten old face wouldn't have room for all those scars, would it? You ever hear of Dorian Gray, Barney? He was a guy who never changed in appearance, but his portrait kept getting uglier and uglier. You've got to be the ugliest—"

"Mack, you're playing his game!" the girl screamed. "There's a secret way in here! He's waiting for help!"

"She's right," the old man said. "Don't think I wouldn't love to gut-shoot you, wise guy. But I have better use for your blood. I'm taking you and Punk David to the table tonight."

"No, you're not," Bolan told him coldly. "I never play another man's game. You should know that by now. No help is coming. You haven't a friend left in the world. You've used them all up, man. And now I've taken over your gestapo. All of your aces are calling me Peter—not Omega, not any more. I've taken over your remotes, I've taken over your offices, I've taken over your cadre, and now I've taken over the nerve centre of your empire. I'm not playing your game, Mr. Matilda."

The sneer was still there, but it had lost something. "You've taken over! That's rich, I love it. Whose hand has got the gun, smart-ass?"

"A very old hand, Barney. That's quite awe ight you're supporting there, isn't it? That long silencer isn't helping the balance any, is it? I get seasick just watching that old hand with the gun. I don't believe you could hit the goddam wall, Barney."

"You're ready to try me, huh?"

"A minute ago, no. Now, yeah. But I'd rather not. I don't have to do you, Barney. Ten thousand angry savages, just waiting for the chance, could do it so much better. And I guess they hold the title. No. I don't want to try you, old man. I'm giving you the chance to walk away. Say yes or no. Say it right now."

Barney said it with his eyes.

And Bolan was ready. He went to the left, against the pull, launching himself in a whirling dive as the trained hand flew to hardware. Barney's piece whistled first, but Bolan's whistled better. Barney's round hit the wall, directly behind where Bolan had been. Bolan's round hit headbone, splattering in between raging eyes and reaming a path through vicious and horror-uglier old brain cells, spilling muck and hatred and greed and power gone crazy all over the nerve centre of the empire.

"Thank God!" Sally gasped. "Another second of that and I'd have started screaming!" "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. But you're insane! His hand was steady as a rock!"

"The eyes weren't," Bolan told her. He dropped a marksman's medal into the gore. "The eyes were full of aces. In my game, the joker is wild."

"In your game, pal, the game is wild," said the lady fed.

He picked her up and carried her out of there.

The wild was just beginning.

21

COMMAND DESTRICT

The hard line outside was intact and functioning. Bolan accompanied the lady to her bedroom upstairs, where she could effect repairs to her minor hurts and replace damaged wardrobe.

"Who was Barney expecting?" he asked her.

"I don't know. He called someone from the data centre just before you came along. I knew that place had to exist. I'm sorry for the powder I took on you but I just had to find it. Mack—don't feel bad. That man was pure poison. That was his own man down there with the head shot off."

"I was expecting something like that," Bolan told her. "I don't feel bad. I feel glad."

"If you were expecting it," she said, giving him a baffled look, "why didn't you come in shooting?"

"I didn't mean Barney. He was a surprise. I meant the ace. One of the house force had already been reported missing. They tore the place apart looking for him. I'm still having trouble with the pieces. Give me a sort, will you."

"I came straight out here after I left you. I saw that the house was under guard—which was very unusual. But I didn't know it until I was already in the drive, so I decided to just bluster in. Barney was always very careful about his image as a retired citizen with little to hide. It caught me cold and I guess I wasn't thinking too well, either. I'd figured to have the place to myself. I was furious. I went right up to the guy and asked him what the hell was he doing here. He said there'd been some trouble and he'd been asked to watch the house until Mr. Matilda returned. He was very courteous and he didn't challenge my right to be here. That was fine. Except that he obviously intended to stay inside with me. Well, I came on up here and waited my chance. It took me an hour of stealth and pounding pulses to get down to that basement, another ten minutes or so to find the trick door. I guess I got found about the same time. This guy came down right behind me," She smiled ruefully. "You know I never carry a gun. But I'd picked up a piece of pipe from the trick laundry tub. I still had it when I heard the door machinery whirring again." Her eyes were dancing. "I was scared to death but I laid for the guy and I caught him with a beauty. It knocked him silly. Barney came in on me about twenty minutes later. I don't know how he got in. Just suddenly there he was. He hit me with a haymaker that knocked me twenty feet, I'm sure; then he went over and shot that poor guy while he lay there unconscious. A couple of thousand years later, you came along. Those are all the pieces I have, pal."

Bolan said, "Two cars are in the drive next to the garage. The Ford is yours?"

"Sort of loosely, both are mine. The Pontiac goes with the territory. It was here when we left this morning. The Ford I drove out from town this afternoon."

Bolan sighed. "Okay. I just didn't want any more surprises. Let's get back to that phone call from the message centre. You have no idea who Barney spoke to?"

"None whatever. It was very cryptic. He said, uh, 'It's now. Send it' Those were the exact words—then he said something like, uh, 'Pick up Barney Matilda and the beer.'"

"And the beer?"

"That's the way I heard it."

Bolan stalked to the window and peered through the curtains for a moment. From there he said, "You said Barney simply appeared down there."

"Yeah, there's another trick entrance. I looked up and there he was."

"Pick up Barney Matilda and the beer." "Hey, I'm not trying to sell it. Just telling it like it was."

"Pick up Barney Matilda at the pier!"

"Hey! That makes more sense!"

"You bet it does. Are you ready to quit this place?"

"I'm ready, Teddy. Are you ready to try springing us?"

He grinned, took her hand, and told her, "Hell, I own the joint."

Bolan called in his hard line and sent them home. "It's gone to hell, gentlemen," he told them. "You know what's been happening in town all day. Well, we lost it. I suggest you burn your marks and show this town your backs for a while. I hear Brazil is very friendly."

A very stunned and befuddled band of aces climbed in their vehicle and quickly faded away.

Bolan went back inside and told the lady, "It's clear. You better go while it is."

"Aren't you coming?" she asked worriedly.

"Not yet. Don't worry, the intelligence bank is all yours. I won't touch a thing. Come back tomorrow, and don't come alone. When you turnkey the thing to your boss, look for a trick door and a tunnel to the shore. It comes out under the pier, I'd guess."

She glumly nodded her agreement with that. "I guess. Well. So it's goodbye already."

"Already, yeah. But at least it's a happy note. Right?"

"Right," she murmured. "Say, uh, what do you have going later tonight? After, uh, the wild game is over. I, uh, I'm still a bit fuzzy on some of the plays."

"I usually don't hang around the hellgrounds when it's over, Sally," he told her.

"You don't hang around anywhere for long, do you?"

He said, "Someone once told me that travel is healthy. I try to watch my health."

"Oh, sure. I believe in that. Especially in your case. But, uh, how do you know when it's really over? I mean, if you don't get a debriefing ... by an expert ..."

Bolan grinned. "Are you an expert?"

"Certain phases of the game, sure." Those baby-doll eyes glinted with mischief. "I could even check your health."

"Left hand or right?"

"Huh?"

"Which side of the mirror do I enter through?"

She laughed daintily and told him, "All my doors are open to you, Mack, honey."

He said, "No promises, but I'll try."

She tossed her head—said, "What's a promise?"—and went out of there.

He watched her drive away; then he went down the steps and across the lawn, toward the pier. The silencer came off the Belle and a fresh clip went into her.

A ferryboat, maybe the one he'd noted earlier as only a smudge on the horizon, was running westward about two hundred yards offshore. And, sure, that could provide some answers to several problems in logistics. She was heavily loaded—vehicles on the lower deck, personnel above.

As Bolan reached the pier, a dinghy pulled away from the ferry, heading in, straight for Barney Matilda's pier. He walked to the end and waited for visual confirmation. He got the confirmation at fifty yards—three guys in faded military fatigues, armed, expectant. He gave them another twenty yards, then raised the Beretta and squeezed off three quick pops.

The reports rolled across the water as three bodies toppled beneath the waves. The dinghy wallowed momentarily, then arced back to seaward, running under its own head. The Beretta Belle spoke thrice again, holes sprouted, then gaped, along the waterline of the runaway boat, and it immediately began to founder.

The ferry staggered just a bit, slowing briefly and turning shoreward, but then quickly resumed the earlier course and speed.

Bolan walked back to land, returned to the war wagon, and reached for his radio.

The time was ten minutes past the hour of six, the evening of the command strike on New York.

And the destruction of an empire had reached the final countdown.

22

COUNTING

"Royal Flush, this is Drano. Do you copy?" "Go ahead, Drano. You're five-five to Royal Flush."

"Peter sent his battalion. Do you have helicopter support?"

"Affirmative. What is your situation?"

"Drano is five minutes east of contact and rolling. The battalion is waterborne—repeat, waterborne. Suggest you send your birds aloft to identify and confirm target. She's a double-decker ferry, white with red markings on superstructure. I make about twenty vehicles and roughly two hundred personnel. Go ahead."

"Roger, gotcha—very good, Drano. Where do you think they'll land?"

"She's not an amphibian. Look for a ferry slip."

"Roger. Stand by one. Okay. Good work: There's a ferry landing ten minutes northeast of contact point."

"That must be the one, then. Suggest you merely identify and track at present time. I'd take them as they come ashore, but it's your game. Just keep them off my back."

"You know we will. Stay in touch."

"Wilco, I'll keep you posted."

"Just a minute, Drano. Is Peter with the battalion?"

"That's the ironic part. The battalion was his dying wish. Peter is no more."

"Where is the body buried?"

"Same place it's been buried all these years. Flasher has the full story and full confirmation in spades. Her pot fairly runneth over in spades. She is well and is now returning to the revolving door. I hope."

"Ten-four. Royal Flush is standing by." "Drano will close in two minutes."

"Two minutes and counting, roger."

"What's your situation there, Billy?"

"God, it's getting tense out here, sir. Where are you?"

"I'm on my way. What's going down?"

"Manny Girolta and about five carloads, that's what's going down. They're standing at the gate and demanding a parley. I don't know how much longer I can hold them there."

"How many boys you have on the line, Billy?"

"I hate to tell you, but we've had some desertions. I got twenty-two boys left, that's counting inside and out and counting myself."

"Put David on."

"David has become an old man right in front of my eyes, sir. I swear his hair is turning white. He won't talk. I can put the phone on speaker, though, and he can hear you. Maybe you can say something to snap him out of it."

"Put it on, then."

"Right, sir, it's on."

"Listen to me, David. It's time to forget what has been and what might have been. It's time to deal with what is now. You'll never be the boss of New York. So what? It's not such a hot job, anyway. What you're going to be, though, is very dead unless you snap out of it and look at your options. Listen, friend, I don't want your head. I could have had it, many times, any time. Manny Girolta and all the New York boys would love to have it. They're at the gate right now, waiting for it. Somebody else wants it,

too. Peter has sent a whole damn field battalion to collect it. They'll be showing up very shortly. Here's what you've got to believe. I can get you out of there. I want to get you out. Say the word and I'll do it. David? Say the word, guy."

"He says nothing, Mr. Omega."

"That's because he's what they all say he is. He's a damn patsy, a fruitfly. Where the hell does a guy like this get off, wanting to be the boss of all New York?"

"Fuck you, Omega! Or whoever!"

"That's better. You can't fuck me if you don't touch me, David."

"What's your deal?"

"The deal is I'll get you out if you want out."

"Yes, dammit, yes! I want out!"

"Okay. Just sit tight. Don't budge. Sit there and look out your window. You'll know when to make your move. Billy!"

"I'm here, sir. What do I do?"

"You're a good man, Billy Gino. You remember what we talked about. You make that phone call tomorrow. Right?"

"Right, sir. But I meant—"

"I know what you meant. Here's what you do, Billy. You call all your boys in. You take them out the back and over the wall. Don't stop and don't look back."

"Mr. Omega, I—"

"Shut up! David and I have our deal. This is yours. Over the back fence and far away. Now! Move it!"

"Do it, dammit, Billy! He knows what he's doing!"

"Okay, David. Thanks, Mr. Omega. God keep, sir."

"You too, Billy. You too."

The roof panel unlocked and the launcher lifted into place. FIRE CONTROL GO flashed from the console, and the optics screen glowed redly with superimposed range marks. Bolan refined the focus and punched a button. TARGET ACQUISITION LOCK flashed on. He banged his knee. The bird whooshed away, flashing instantly into the gun sights and rustling along that electronic barrel in the view screen, trailing smoke and flame in a sizzling run to ruin.

.., three, two, one—impact! The target disintegrated in a puff of red, as seen by the electronics. As seen by the unaided human eye, a big Cadillac crew wagon exploded in a froth of fire, which instantly became towering flames and raining debris—fleshy particles as well as metallic ones flinging themselves into the spirit of total entropy as nine men and their vehicle suddenly ceased to be.

And already a new target was being acquired, a fist against a knee sent the firing plunger down, and missile two leapt off in search of certain game.

Three away ... four away . . . amid screaming panic, rustling whispers hurtling through the evening skies, thunder and lightning and hellfire itself, exploding metal, bodyless heads rolling and limbless torsos skidding, licking flames, destruction, death—another successful event.

The launcher descended through the roof for reloads and the big, grim man in black reached for his microphone.

"This is Drano. I guess you see it."

"I guess I do, pal. Is that my cue?"

"He's ready for you, yeah. Go get 'im."

Off to the northeast, a new and only incidentally related series of fireworks brightened the evening sky, and non-heavenly thunder rippled along.

"This is Royal Flush. I guess you see it." "I guess I do. Let that be Peter's epitaph."

"So be it. We're on the move. Contact point in thirty seconds."

Bolan went aft to the armoury and broke out the reloads, rearmed, recycled, then returned to the con.

He reset the optics, zeroing in on the front door of the old palace, adjusted the resolution, zoomed in.

Some thirty to forty seconds later, a short caravan of unmarked vehicles rolled into the crosshairs and came to a halt. Hal Brognola stepped down from the lead vehicle. The palace door opened and David Eritrea moved into view. He poised there rather hesitantly for a moment; then Brognola moved forward with hand outstretched.

Bolan grinned as the two shook hands and moved together toward the vehicle. Another successful event, sure.

The official caravan moved out of view.

Bolan watched the departure with the naked eye, waiting until the final vehicle had cleared the flaming wreckage at the gates to the palace; then he bent to his work once again.

He set up four automatic acquisitions, drummed his fingers upon the firing leg while the program registered; then he banged his knee one last time for old New York.

The four birds flew in a ten-second separation sequence, each with its own appointed track through space and time, each with its own role in the destruction of the final vestiges of an empire which never should have been.

The old building puffed, tottered, shredded, then blew into streaming turrets of flame and debris.

"Goodbye, Augie," said the Executioner. "You were a hell of a louse."

EPILOGUE

The mortal remains of August Marinello were laid to final rest in the borough of Queens, New York, one stormy morning in early spring. The casket had not been opened for viewing during the service at the chapel, since there was so little left of Augie Marinello to be viewed—as one official put it: "Some blackened bones and cooked meat."

Surprisingly few mourners were present. Most of those in attendance seemed to represent either the police or the press.

"What is this?" one baffled journalist was overheard to remark. "We were led to expect the equivalent of a state funeral. Where are all his pals?"

Few of those at the chapel bothered to join the procession to the cemetery. It was, after all, a miserable day—and an entirely dismal event.

Among those few who did journey to Queens and stand in the rain were a big cop from central precinct, William Rafferty, chief of the organized crime detail, and his guest from Washington, Harold Brognola.

"That's really some great support I got from you," Rafferty muttered through the driving rain.

"We didn't know ourselves until this morning," Brognola told him. "They simply slipped away in the night."

"A mass exodus," Rafferty argued quietly, "is not exactly the same thing as slipping away into the night. I should have been told. I got this face problem, see. I mean, intel is my business, isn't it? Several departments would have been overjoyed to know that suddenly this is a very small and ordinary funeral. We could've saved many thousands of manpower dollars, we could've—"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," Brognola huffed, but meant it. "I wasn't exactly squatting on my ass and watching a teleprinter all night, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Rafferty muttered. He wiped the rain from his face. "Our DOA's started coming in during the afternoon. You said a grand slam. You were right. We were just watching the wrong slam. Working the keys on the out-of-towners. The guy wasn't interested in them, was he?"

"What guy?" Brognola inquired, deadpanning it.

"You know what guy. The one who gave us Fortuna and Gustini, Pelotti and DiAnglia, and assorted lesser lights. We got a regular Mafia wing going down at the morgue."

Brognola sniffed and said, "You run a clean town, Bill."

"Cleanest I've seen in memory," the big cop said, smiling in the rain.

Brognola was smiling, also, despite the grave occasion. "Well, I'm going to be as busy as a cat covering up its doodles for the next few weeks, just trying to sort and file the intelligence coup of the century. I'll cut you in on your area of that. But God, it will take days just to get it out of there and safed away. And I'll tell you a truth, Mr. Ethics. I'm going to be dreaming sweet dreams for one hell of a long time."

"Don't rub it in. Can I buy you lunch?"

"Sorry, I have an afternoon date in Washington," the fed said, and the smile grew. "Have to introduce a distinguished guest of the government to a certain Senate subcommittee."

"You guys get all the fun," Rafferty growled, but it was obvious to Harold Brognola that he meant not a word of it.

"We have our compensations," Brognola assured him, meaning it for damn sure. He started to add to that but checked himself, his attention drawn to the street just beyond the cemetery wall. A familiar shape took form there, wreathed in the rainy mists of the stormy morning—surprising him by its presence there but also somehow belonging there.

The fed would bet his badge that the familiar mass was a GMC motor home containing more tricks and secrets than old Barney Matilda had ever dreamt of.

And he was right.

A pretty young woman in a white slicker descended from the big cruiser and strode purposefully through the gate and toward the funeral party.

The cruiser flashed its lights twice and pulled slowly away.

Brognola watched it fade into the gloom, then returned his attention to the approach of a young lady who had every right to feel elated, victorious, superb.

If she had those feelings, she was hiding them very well.

Brognola had not seen a gloomier young lady since Hawaii. "You can't win 'em all, kid," he gently told her.

"Nuts," she said. "He's just another wild man! Let him go off and get himself killed!"

"Oh he will, he will," Brognola murmured.

"Who're we talking about?" Rafferty inquired.

"Nobody you'd want to know," Brognola sniffed. "Bill—this is Sally Palmer. Congratulate her. Yesterday she buried a stake in a vampire's heart."

"I just held it in place," the girl said quietly. "Someone else drove it in."

"I guess I know who we're talking about," Rafferty said. His eyes sought the gloom where a lonely mass had disappeared. "What kind of guy is he?"

"Right now," Brognola said, sighing, "I'd say the kind who bleeds like you and me, who once had dreams like you and me—the kind who gets tired, and scared, and sometimes wonders what the hell it's all about. He's just a guy, like you and me."

"You're a very egotistical man, Mr. Brognola," said the lady fed.

Brognola chuckled, then straightened his face into the proper mien for such a solemn occasion.

The coffin was being lowered into the ground.

A moment later, the nation's top cop stepped to the hole in the ground, picked up a handful of mud, and let it fall into the grave.

It was the end of an era.

Long live the king; the king was dead.

And he left no heirs—apparent, presumptive, or otherwise.

The Marinello-Matilda empire was dead.



*The King is dead,
long live the King!*

Augie Marinello, Boss of All the Bosses, had paid his final debt to the Executioner, and the heir apparent, David Eritrea, was all set to make the biggest bid of all time. If he could unite the Five Families of New York under one banner – his banner – he reckoned to control *La Commissione*

and forge a whole new network of international underworld crime. The big irony was, Bolan was the man who'd got him started – now he had to stop him. All

Bolan had to do was infiltrate the *commissione*, set the New York gangs at each others' throats, and watch them shoot it out. And do it with a million dollar bounty on his head and every cop in the city after him...

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