

MARK HARDIN...

is a close friend of the Press Secretary to the President of the United States. Or was, until he was shot in his office at the White House by an unknown assailant, less than a month after taking office. Someone in Washington was asking for trouble, and the Penetrator would see that he got it!

A dying mobster has mentioned the well-known VIP club, the *Societe Internationale d'Elite*, in his last words. Hardin follows a hunch that the club may be linked to the Mafia, and that both may have something to do with his friend's death. Using a cover name, he visits the club. On leaving, he is ambushed. The hit fails; four men are dead. Hardin is now completely determined to find*the link between the Mafia and the exclusive social club.

But before he does, he is stabbed and almost captured by the police. A beautiful girl is murdered, and a terrible plot uncovered. Alone, the Penetrator will have to use his arsenal of destruction quickly and efficiently—before it is too late.

THE PENETRATOR

by
Lionel Derrick

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THE PENETRATOR: CAPITOL HELL

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DEDICATED TO: The Memory of John Murray, Lord Dimmore, last Royal Governor of Virginia—A man of honor and integrity, who appreciated the need of these virtues in all politicians . . .
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The Pemefeator Series

THE TARGET IS H
BLOOD ON THE STRIP
CAPITOL HELL

PROLOGUE

Soft pink bands of light gave way to the hard brilliance of sunrise. Twelve thousand feet up, Mark Hardin eased back the control column of the twin-engine Beechcraft and set the autopilot. He regretted that this was not the Lear jet he had so long been expecting. But delays in its delivery from the factory, plus the problem of finding a reliable, qualified copilot, made realization of that hope something for the future. He sighed deeply and poured himself a steaming cup of coffee from the half-gallon thermos wedged beside the pilot's seat. A partial cloud cover still obscured the sleeping December landscape below, giving Mark a welcome sense of isolation and freedom. As his plane bore him into the rising sun, his mind was filled with uneasy thoughts. Mixed emotions, and disturbing memories of scattered, unrelated incidents coursed through his brain; they formed the reason for his present trip toward the unknown threat that he felt building up on the East Coast.

Uppermost in his mind was the Fraulein and that tragicomedy he had recently experienced in Vegas. Girls and goons and guns. Maybe these modern kids had it right: MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR. For Mark Har-

din the wars seemed to come too close and too often.

First there had been a battle with crooked gamblers when he was playing football for UCLA; that one had earned him a back injury that still plagued him from time to time. Then there was his war with the shadowy world of organized crime while he was working as a claims investigator for an insurance company; again he took a beating or two, threats, and outright attempts at bribery.

Next there was a *real* war. Vietnam. It was there that his proficiency with languages and weapons had earned him the dubious honor of leading one penetration mission after another into the heartland of the enemy. His orders on those penetration missions were always the same and always simple. Get the information, bring out prisoners to interrogate, or snuff the top men right on the spot. Mark Hardin became so adept at this new trade that he came to the attention of the top brass. "Get me Hardin!" became the watchword whenever a difficult penetration problem faced any commander, from powerful area commanders to the lowliest captain commanding a company of grunts. There were medals for this type of work and Mark earned his share, including a Silver Star. Then he undertook a more difficult type of job.

With Mark's willing consent, between tours in 'Nam, higher headquarters arranged for Mark to be assigned to the intelligence school. Then they had him attached to Force Commander, Saigon, in CIC—the army's answer to other services' James Bond types. From field intelligence work to the dirty, back-alley life of counterintelligence was a difficult

transition, but Mark Hardin made the change with ease.

It wasn't long before Mark got into something big. He learned about a huge black market deal through which many of the supplies intended for and needed by the front-line soldiers were being siphoned off to enrich corrupt South Vietnamese officials and high-ranking officers in our own services. Mark exposed this vicious racket through the Associated Press and showed to the world how it was resulting in the deaths of many young Americans on the altar of Mammon.

He paid for it too. On orders from several of the higher-ranking members of the black market ring, a gang of American toughs jumped Mark one night and dragged him into a warehouse, where they savagely beat him and left him for dead.

He survived the beating, and his hatred for those who victimize the innocent for profit was hardened by it. The vengeance of those whom he had accused followed him through the hospital and into civilian life. Only when he faded out of sight and went to live at the fantastic home of Professor Willard Haskins—the Stronghold—in the Calico Mountains of Southern California's desert, did he elude his enemies.

There he found a girl—Donna Morgan—love, and renewed strength. Found them, only to lose the girl he loved and part of his strength in a fiery crash on the mountain road to Big Bear Lake. Donna Morgan died at the hands of Mafia gunmen who were acting on orders.

Mark found the men behind those orders and in a

fiery death of his own making, decimated the ranks of the Scarelli Family in Los Angeles, resulting in the breakup of the ring behind the richest, most plentiful supply of heroin ever introduced into this country.

Mark felt sickened by the excess of blood and death he had called down to insure that Don Pietro Scarelli, "His Lordship"—that mysterious man of power behind Scarelli—and the others in the heroin racket met their just fate. Afterwards, his thoughts turned to a dream of a quiet, peaceful life in some obscure place. But before Mark could settle down he had an obligation to a young friend and former student of Donna Morgan's.

That one meeting with young, attractive Sally Wilson led to another. Then the tentacles of evil engulfed her as well. This time it wasn't the Mafia and all its powerful allies. A greedy, vicious woman with dreams of control of all the entertainers in the world had spread her web and caught up the young actress hopeful, smashing her to bloody ruin. Mark was determined to right yet another wrong.

That led him to Las Vegas, to the Pink Pussy and to a bloody trail of justice for those who believe themselves above the laws of their fellow men. It was a brief fight, compared to the months it had taken to expose Scarelli and his high-up cohorts, but it left Vegas rocking and rolling to a new beat. "The Penetrator Rock" was the little guy's justice, a hard place to smash the faceless, nameless forces of evil.

"Look, I'm not Don Quixote, chasing windmills," Mark had told Professor Haskins, following the

crushing of Scarelli's empire. "No knight in shining armor, defending fair maidens. I have a normal man's appetites: I like my booze; I lust for a woman; I get hungry, cold, scared. What's done is done. Why not let it rest there?"

But something—call it God, call it fate or the Muses—saw to it that *it couldn't rest there*. The cry of the little man—the one who could not afford to buy justice in a corrupt court or pay off a Syndicate shylock or face the ruin of his business, his reputation, family and friends through the greedy involvement of the criminally tainted—kept following Mark Hardin wherever he went. It was following him now as he flew eastward through the cold crystal air of winter toward he knew not what...

Late that night, on the thraway in from the airport, Mark was driving a rented car he had obtained for his side trip into Philadelphia. Ahead of him, at an on-ramp, a long, black limo was pulling onto the thruway. There was a sudden flash, followed by a rolling ground shock and the distinctive sharp crack of high explosives. The car was lifted from the ground, slammed down and pieces scattered around it. The driver was hurled from behind the wheel as gas ignited with a whoosh.

In the split second that it took to convert the Cadillac into burning scrap metal, Mark accelerated, cutting across lanes and stopping a safe distance from the burning car. He ran to the crumpled body of the driver. Through the glare of the flames, he could see that it was too late for the other occu-

pants of the car. Kneeling, he examined the injured survivor.

At first, Mark believed the man was also dead. Blood gushed from a deep wound on the inside of the man's left thigh. Mark attached a tourniquet, watching as the spurting arterial flow lessened to a trickle. Working quickly, he tightened the belt to cut off any recurrence of the bright red river. The man's clothes were shredded and tufts of the seat stuffing protruded from gory lacerations in his back. His breathing was so shallow as to be nearly nonexistent and Mark again gave him up for dead. Just as Mark began to stand up, preparing to leave, the man groaned.

Mark took off his coat, and using it to protect the man's back, Mark gently rolled the victim over. He wiped blood from the injured man's face and was surprised to find he recognized Mm. It was Salvatore Bentini, a well-known Mafioso and a member of *La Commissione*, that all-powerful brotherhood-within-the-Brotherhood, that controls the activities of the various Families of the Mafia. Bentini moaned again and tried to speak.

"Sallie, what is it?" Mark asked urgently. He bent closer. "Who did it, boss?" he inquired, slipping into a pattern of speech familiar to the injured Mafioso.

"See," Mark thought he heard. "Got . . . gotta get to sea," Bentini gasped. "They . . . get , . . sea..." Then he coughed up a gout of bright blood, choking on it, and died.

To the state patrol and coroner, the words were meaningless. They would have been completely meaningless to Mark Hardin, too, taken alone. Yet

there was a nagging something . . . Something overheard in Denver, a line or two from a letter at the Pink Pussy? Or was it something about "His Lordship"? It was a fleeting thought, not fully formed, but nevertheless tied into Ms trip eastward, somehow connected with his unease about the East Coast. The feeling vanished under the barrage of questions from the state patrol.

But Mark Hardin resolved he would stay in Philadelphia, nosing around until he secured some answers . . .

Chapter 15 HEADLINE HUNTER

This was it! Sure as hell, the biggest one the assassin had ever been on. And for once everything was going exactly as promised. From the very first, when they had called him in and told him what the job was to be, he knew it had to go off without a hitch. So far it had. He had felt the first exhilaration of success when the key had fit without effort. On the first try it had slid into the slot in the elevator control panel, giving him access to the penthouse floor. There wasn't even an indicator light in the lobby or the elevator to designate a stop above the button that indicated the roof, so no one knew he was up here. And the second key had yielded instant admission to the penthouse flat. He quickly set his over-large briefcase down and opened it.

From inside he removed the stock and barrel/receiver group of a 300 Weatherby magnum. His long, deft fingers assembled it and laid it aside. Next he withdrew the 10X Redfield scope and carefully mounted it on the rifle. Then came the three-foot-long, evilly glinting silencer tube. He affixed it to the muzzle of the magnum and reached for the bipod mount, slipping it over the muzzle end of the silencer and tightening the thumbscrew on the retaining band. He folded out the legs and propped the rifle up on a coffee table.

Now he gave attention to the windows, facing northwest, toward his target. If everything else went as smoothly as it has so far, what a sweet oper-

ation this would be. He carefully checked his field of fire from the center of three windows whose blinds had been left partially open—just as he had been told to expect them. Yes! There it was, the window opposite him on the second floor where his target would come into view very soon now. Moving quickly and silently, he slid the coffee table into position and checked his sight picture. Perfection. He turned his attention to the briefcase again, removing a box of custom hand-loaded ammunition.

For this particular job he had selected a medium-weight, 140-grain steel-jacketed bullet. Not quite an armor-piercing round, but behind the heavy-magnum load, still quite adequate to smash through bulletproof glass and do its job on the other side. He carefully selected three rounds and, after opening the bolt, inserted them into the magazine. The well-oiled bolt rode home, chambering the first deadly missile. Once again, he turned his attention to the image in the sight reticule. His target was just shy of 300 meters, a clear and easy shot for the formidable weapon he held—almost in a caress—against his cheek. There was a slight downward angle from his vantage point, but that presented no problem at all. He adjusted the focus and watched details leap into view.

Neat stacks of paper stood on the large, hardwood desk, the center blotter clear of any work. Dark wooden wall panels and glowing brass ornaments reflected the outdoorsy nature of the office's occupant. His target, however, was not in the office. Even this had been taken into consideration, and he used the time to make a minute study of the target field. Only three-quarters of the door could be seen from this angle, depriving him of a facial view of anyone who might enter.

The assassin shifted his sight picture to study

other angles ... There! Against the bookshelves to the left of the desk. That would be the best spot. He glanced at his watch. He was unhurried, confident that no one would be coming to the penthouse. The men who had given him this assignment had also assured him that there would be no bookings of the rooftop lounge and restaurant, one floor beneath him. He had all the time he needed. Yet, there was a certain anxiety as he awaited the appearance of his victim. He was keyed up for the hit, and couldn't help wanting it to run with clockwork precision. Now he found himself with too much time to think.

His reflections caused Mm to start suddenly as a blur of movement entered the edge of the scope's field. He swung the muzzle, centering the moving figure in the scope.

His finger relaxed on the trigger. It was only a secretary, bringing several pages of typescript, which she lay in the precise center of the desk blotter. Without any hesitation, she walked to the door and left the room. His concentration returned to the task at hand. If nothing else, it indicated that Ms target was about to return to his office. The assassin ran calm fingers through Ms long, wMte-blond hair and returned to his view of the door.

Again Ms mind wandered as his eye kept watch. Hell of a thing, he thought. Those guys that had Mred him were Mafia through and through. But you'd never figure the Syndicate for a job like this. Jeez! They had troubles enough without a deal like this to add to them. Yet, sure enough, those guys had come and made their proposition and he had agreed, for a fee that was in six healthy figures. It was the biggest, the most important hit—for the highest price—he had ever made. The highest price he had ever heard of anyone getting. Yet, sure enough,

those guys had ponied it up, without argument. So all he could figure was that it was the Syndicate, right? But why this particular dude? What made him so damn important to *them*? Well, Syndicate or no, he reminded himself, he had a job to do and he would do it right. The door opened and a man's trousers filled the scope.

It's him! Fred Walters, the target. It had to be, he thought almost prayerfully. He carefully tracked his target to the desk, watched him seat himself, bringing his face into view. The assassin exhaled sharply as he made positive identification of the man he had been sent to kill. Then he remembered that the window through which he was sighting was still closed. Easing his weapon to the tabletop, he moved over swiftly and opened it enough to make his shot. Returning to his weapon, he lifted it, made sure of his sight picture, and gently took up slack on the trigger.

Even with the huge silencer, there was some noise as the big weapon bucked against his shoulder. He held it on target, working the bolt and chambering another round. His finger ticked off the second shot as Fred Walters was slammed sideways over the edge of his desk, a shower of blood and gray matter spraying from his shattered skull. The second slug, following closely on the first, bore through the thick bulletproof glass, carrying slivers of it along as it slammed into Walters' right hip, ripping and tearing its way into his bowels and exploding his intestines with the force of its shock. A third shot was not needed.

Quickly the assassin stood up and began to disassemble his weapon. He placed the parts back in the briefcase and polished his brass. He crossed to the window, wiped off all prints, and lowered it to its original position. Whistling tunelessly and silently to

was no doubt that the assassin had used that particular building, one of very few tall enough to give a clear field of fire into the second-floor office of the press secretary.

The Metropolitan police and the FBI were in an uproar and promised results in quick order. Reactions were varied throughout the nation and the world, and the president wanted to make it perfectly clear that the vast resources of the federal government would not rest until the unknown slayer was apprehended and brought to justice...

Mark Hardin put down the pages of the *Philadelphia Enquirer*. Anger—an emotion David Red Eagle was trying to condition out of him—suffused his face. Fred Walters had been an old and dear friend. First, as a knowledgeable and enthusiastic sports reporter, covering UCLA football games for the *L.A. Times*. Later as a political reporter for the Associated Press and lastly as bureau chief of the AP office in Saigon. Mark and the slain man had downed many a cold brew together during the steaming, streaming monsoon season in Southeast Asia, and their mutual interest in sports had cemented a close bond of friendship.

Because of the meticulous attention to detail and integrity displayed by Fred Walters as a sports reporter, and his equal dedication to truth while bossing the coverage of this dirty little war in Vietnam, it had been to the Associated Press bureau chief that Mark—a younger and more naive Mark Hardin—had first brought his discoveries of the corruption in high army circles. Fred Walters had helped him in his investigation and made careful notes of all that was revealed. He also saw to it that the scandal received the worldwide scrutiny it deserved, thus preventing any possible coverup by the WPPA—the

himself, he made sure that everything was exactly as he had found it. He checked its appearance against a photograph of the room as it had looked before. Then he crossed the room and left by the door through which he had entered.

On the way down in the elevator, he thought of how little a problem the intervening structure of the Treasury Building had been. Now that the roofing job was over, there had been no prying eyes or ears to take notice of the crack of the bullets. A light scudding snow—not unusual for mid-December in Washington, D.C.—accompanied by a damp, chill wind, insured that there had been no one at a window to observe his activities. It had gone very well.

With careful nonchalance, he strolled across the lobby of the Washington Hotel, swinging his briefcase lightly. He was inconspicuous among several other similar-looking men. In the hotel parking garage, he paid for two hours and retrieved his car. A small smile played across his rugged features as he toolled out into the midday traffic to the nation's capital. It had been one hell of a good hit...

PRESS SECRETARY SLAIN IN WHITE HOUSE OFFICE!

Headlines screamed it and TV news commentators spoke with controlled excitement, describing the details of the shocking assassination. Fred Walters, newly appointed Press Secretary to the President of the United States, had been shot down at his desk by an unknown assassin. The assassin had fired from a window somewhere in the Washington Hotel, located on the edge of the White House grounds on Fifteenth Street. The shattering of the bulletproof window glass had deflected the bullets, and it was impossible to determine exactly from which window the shots had been fired. But there

fabled "West Point Protective Association" that looked out for their brother officers, no matter what.

Now the man was dead, slammed down by an assassin's bullets, less than a month after taking office as press secretary to the president. The job had been a well-deserved reward for a man of courage and integrity, and he should have come to a far better end than he had received.

Mark Hardin was no longer without direction. He no longer felt he was moved across the board by vague feelings of something wrong. The compass point had stopped spinning. It was pointed south by southeast, toward Washington, D.C. Someone down there was asking for it ... and they were going to get it.

The Penetrator was on his way . . .

Chapter 2 s GENTLEMEN'S CLUB

Mark did not find Dan Griggs' office in the Justice Department buildings, but rather in a dusty corner of an upper floor of the Department of Labor at Fourteenth and Constitution Avenue. Listed as the *Industrial Relations Research Section*, it occupied five offices in a back portion of the building. Dan was in, and he welcomed Mark Hardin warmly.

"So, you have finally seen the light and decided to join us, Hardin?"

Mark shook his head negatively. "I told your friend Kelly Patterson that I didn't want a license to kill and I'll tell you the same now. I'm strictly a loner, not a government spook type."

Dan's disappointment was clearly evident on his face. "I'm truly sorry to hear that, Hardin. You're a natural, you know. Why, that Las Vegas thing was carried off like a Jeb Stuart cavalry raid. A little too messily, perhaps, but with a badge, a guy can be a little more careful of how he cleans up the loose ends. He can take his time. The point is that you are doing things, hitting the racketeers and mobsters in places we could never touch before. And you're making it count.

"Naturally, your methods are somewhat unorthodox," he went on, "and we would have to make sure you adhered a little closer to the law, but ..." He left his question unspoken this second time.

"The answer is still no, Dan."

"Then what brings you here? Don't tell me you are merely sight-seeing?"

"Not exactly." Mark formed his questions carefully, not sure how Dan Griggs would take an interest in recent events by the Penetrator. "What do your people know about Fred Walters? What connections did he have outside his office?"

"Don't tell me you think there was something wrong with *him*!"

"Hell no," Mark growled. "Fred was ... ah, an old friend. I've known him since he handled the sports line for the *Times*. You have enough background on me to know it was Fred to whom I went with that deal in Saigon. I want to know what leads you have on his killer."

"You're going after him?"

"Could be. Also, what do you know about an outfit that calls themselves the *Societe Internationale d'Eliter*?"

"SIE? What's your interest in them?"

"Say that again?"

"SIE—•" Dan pronounced it *see*. "Everyone calls them by their initials. They are very big right now. The biggest in fact. SIE is the *gentlemen's* gentlemen's club. Everybody who's anybody wants to join their happy little group. They have a big estate for their club over on the eastern shore. Not far from the farm the Russians bought for a party pad. Believe me, they are *very* big. They even sponsored a chess tournament that featured Bobby Fisher and now they're trying to set up a swim meet—they have an outdoor and indoor olympic-size pools—and invite Mark Spitz. No restrictions on membership, class or race. They have junior civil service types and foreign embassy personnel in their membership. Surely you don't think... Hell, that's too ridiculous."

"Right," Mark said dryly. "I don't think they had

a thing to do with Fred's death. And all you have told me I could and did get from the gossip columns of several papers. But, tell me, Dan, did you know that SIE was as well known to the hoods? So well known in fact that SIE was named in the dying statement of a member of *La Commissioned* Just last week, as a matter of fact."

"The hell it was!"

"Yeah. In Philly. I'm sure your outfit got a report on Salvatore Bentini and four other members of *La Commissione* buying it in a car bomb deal. Now, someone burns Fred Walters. The president's press secretary, for Christ's sake! Tell me ... I may be fishing here, but I want to know everything that might help. Was Fred a member of SIE?"

"What's that got to do with the Mafia?" Dan countered.

"Nothing, maybe, but was he a member?"

"No. In fact, he was invited to join, but he turned them down. Said his duties prevented his participation."

"Everybody is trying to get in this club but Fred opts out. Well, that shoots down my theory."

"Just for the hell of it, what was that?"

Mark explained to Dan that he had received various clues, hints from this or that faction of the grubby world of racketeering and crime, that referred to SIE. He recounted the letter he had read in the Fraulein's office and the dying words of Salvatore Bentini. He had, he told the shrewd investigator, begun to think that maybe the Mafia was trying to get a handle on this *Societe Internationale d'Elite*. He had been thinking that maybe the assassination of Fred Walters was an attempt to show enough power to scare SIE into knuckling under, letting the mob take over their action. But if Walters wasn't a member, that was out. Dead end.

"Still and all, Dan," Mark said, "I think there has to be some connection between the Mafia and this SIE and if so, we might even find out something about Fred Walters."

"I can't believe that But I have a guest card for SIE myself. If you want a closer look to eliminate your suspicions once and for all, why not go over for dinner tonight?"

"I'd like nothing better. Never know what we might find."

That night, dressed in evening clothes, Mark and Dan Griggs arrived at SIE's palatial mansion that served as headquarters for the club. They had driven over from D.C. in Dan's special Lincoln. Crossing the bridge into Maryland, they drove thirty-five miles east and south, passing the farm that the Russian Embassy had purchased for a party place. Dan pointed it out to his guest, making a wry face as he commented on it.

"The people over here are pretty conservative, rock hard in their beliefs and fiercely patriotic. You should have heard the uproar they created when it was found out that that old farm had been purchased outright by the Russians. They sure raised some hell over it. The guy who owned it and the real estate agent who sold it still can't place in a popularity contest."

"Nice to know there are a few people left who believe America is for Americans," Mark replied acidly.

They arrived at the club, and as agreed, Mark used a cover name and identity. He was introduced and signed the guest book as Bart Lowe. Liveried attendants and a dignified butler dressed in the costume of the antebellum days of the Old South escorted them into the main lounge.

Although his research to date had been extensive,

Mark Hardin was not prepared for the opulence that spread before him in the SIE Club lounge. Subdued, indirect lighting sent subtle highlights dancing from the chrome cases of a line of slot machines arrayed along one wall beside the huge, old wooden bar. The bar itself was a sight to behold. It looked like it had come right out of the Old West of Wild Bill Hickock—which indeed it had. The crystal mirrors behind the darkly stained bar top refracted slivers of light and each panel of mirror sported above its center an oil painting of a nude woman. A brass rail and brass nailheads, glittered along the entire expanse of bar, and brightly polished cuspidors sat like gold lovingcups at the feet of those standing before this extravaganza.

Mark ran strong fingers through his modishly long black hair and whistled softly. As if sensing his thoughts, Dan took Mark's elbow and steered him toward the bar.

"I told you this was a very big club just now." The justice department man spoke softly. "No lack of money here. You like?"

"All the more reason for our Family friends to try to grab the plum. How about some introductions?"

Bart Lowe was duly introduced to the bartender and several civil service types at the bar. Drinks were ordered, Mark taking his inevitable Tillamore Dew Irish whiskey. With glass in hand, Mark began to relax and check out his surroundings.

Everyone was soft spoken and well dressed, no rowdy country club drunks among these government types. The women were glittering with jewelry, their hair done in the latest manner, and evening attire ranged from a cocktail pants suit to provocatively plunging evening gowns that exposed a lot of cleavage. Mark spotted a sheer see-through. Its wearer was carrying it off well, and when Mark's eyes caught

hers for a moment, she gave him a brief smile that matched his own. The smile told the story: this tall, broad-shouldered, darkly handsome man appreciated what he was seeing, and she appreciated his silent, distant admiration. He took a long pull on his drink.

"The casino is back there, through that mural panel."

"Hunh? ... What?"

"That's Lisa Cantares," Dan informed Mark, laughter in his voice. "She is a secretary at the Mexican Embassy. Her husband is a member of the club. Nice to look at, isn't it?"

"Like Colonel Sanders says...^{ss} Mark replied.

They finished their drinks, and Dan conducted a tour of the facilities, ending in the casino. Mark's attention went immediately to a man seated to one side, chatting with several people at a green felt-covered card table. The black and white halftone that accompanied his newspaper column didn't do him justice. Although not physically commanding, Brooks LePage had a striking appearance. His full shock of nearly white-blond hair was like a halo about Ms head, and he possessed the most piercing gray eyes that Mark had ever seen. His evenly tanned features gave Mm a relaxed outdoorsy look.

"That's Brooks LePage, the Washington columnist. He also does the public relations for SIE. TMs is the only private club catering to government employees and diplomats that actually seeks publicity. Let's go over."

After the introductions, Brooks LePage ordered a round of drinks. Seated with Mm was General Phillip Nichols, dubbed "Phil the Flag Waver" by the liberal press. In private, his staff called Mm Hardass Nichols. His soft, tenor voice, with just a Mnt of Midwestern twang, belied the image of a radical right-wing extremist he had acquired from several liberal

editorialists. He drank gin and tonic. Drank in measured sips, as if doing it by the numbers. He reminded Mark more of a George Marshal general rather than a George Patton.

Talk turned to business and government, so Mark excused himself and drifted off, looking over the action, and stopping at last at a small bar in one corner partially screened off like a Seraglio. As his eyes roamed the room he toyed idly with the "genuine Havana" cigar given him by LePage, wondering if just one smoke would damage the conditioning of his body, undoing the efforts of *Sho-tu-ca*, the Cheyenne medicine/magic regimen prescribed for him by David Red Eagle. He had nearly weakened enough to give in when a soft voice interrupted him:

"Go ahead. You never really break the habit anyway, just take on a new habit of *not* smoking in its place. You deserve it anyway."

Mark turned to see who his temptress was—there was no doubt that it was a woman, had to be. She smelled like a woman and the voice, soft and throaty and teasing, made his body tingle with suppressed desire. How long had it been since he had slept with a woman? Too long. He gave the luscious redhead a smile, exposing his white even teeth. Mischief danced in her brown eyes.

"I'm ... ah, Bart Lowe. And you just saved me from smoking a cigar I didn't want to smoke," Mark said extending the green leaf-wrapped tube to her with solemn grace. "Have a cigar."

"Boy or a girl?" the bold young woman inquired.

"Neither, it's a genuine Havana." They laughed together.

"Nice to know you're not married, Bart Lowe. I'm Anitra Carson and I'm looking for a man."

Mark's mouth dropped open. "I'd heard you D.C.

women were bold, but that sounds like a proposition."

"With all the secretaries and clerks, we outnumber the eligible men by five to one. If we don't seek for ourselves no one will speak for us."

"You play with words nicely," Mark complimented.

"I'd better. I'm with DOD ... and if we don't make things come out sounding pretty, those nasty budget freaks over on the Hill just might cut our fat endowment and then where would we all be?"

Mark assumed her reference to "the Hill" meant the Congress. He was beginning to find out that Washingtonese was a language unto itself.

The longer Mark and Anitra talked, the more he liked this girl. Her striking way of talking flippantly about serious matters enlivened her already attractive appearance. She had dark red hair and a trim figure, and her dress was cut just low enough to reveal the upper rim of large, firm breasts. Her tasteful dress was even more provocative to Mark than the Mexican beauty's see-through had been.

"What do you do that brings you to Sodom-on-the-Potomic?" She deftly brought the conversation around to Mark.

"I'm a management consultant." Mark began his prepared cover story. "That's a fancy name for lobbyist. I'm representing a group of small electronics hardware manufacturers out west who have formed an unofficial conglomerate to bag Department of Defense contracts directly instead of fighting each other for subcontracts."

Anitra smiled. "Well then, maybe I can help you. My boss—Harvey Bristoll—is the chief honcho of the contracts branch at DOD. I'll see you get in to see him soon. But ... you'll have to bribe me pretty big."

"Bribe? How about lunch tomorrow afternoon?"

"That's a start. Meet me at Bassin's. It's at Fourteenth and Pennsylvania Avenue. First sidewalk cafe in the District. Say twelveish?"

"It's a date." Mark's eye had been roving over the people in the casino room as they bantered and now he caught Anitra's arm. "That guy over there at the crap table—the little one playing the crap line—you know him?"

Anitra gave a toss of her auburn tresses. "Sure. That's Louis Polio. He works for Brooks LePage here at the club. Sort of a public relations type cat."

Icy fingers of suspicion crawled up Mark's spine. His theory had just received new life. Louis Polio was known to Mark—as he had been known to his associates for over twenty years—as Chicken Louie, a particularly repulsive and sadistic Mafia soldier. A hit man par excellence. And he worked for SIE! Mark made quick excuses and headed toward Dan Griggs.

As Mark hurried the government man toward the door, other eyes were making a surprising discovery as well, eyes that "knew Mark when" and burned with hatred. Willi Bauer cursed softly under his breath as he watched Mark and Dan Griggs leave the casino. Sure as hell it was that rotten bastard Hardin. He thought they had done the job right the first time in Saigon. But one court martial and eighteen months of a three-year sentence at Leavenworth later, Willi knew he still owed Mark Hardin, Sergeant Straightarrow, for a few things. He gulped down the last of his drink and rushed for a back door.

On the road away from the SIE Club, Mark unloaded. "A real *pezzo novante* outfit that."

"Ninety caliber outfit," Dan returned. "You sure picked up Mafia slang fast."

"I should. One of the foster homes I spent the better part of two years in was that of a full-fledged Mafia Don. But I have good reason for using that expression. Louis Polio works for SIE."

"So?"

"This makes my theory sound good again, Louis Polio, known as Chicken Louie, is a first order hit man. A long-time gun soldier. Part of the gossip I picked up when I penetrated Don Pietro's was that Chicken Louie had disappeared. He had pulled a job in Vegas and faded out. Not I know where he went. Believe me, Dan, that punk don't know enough about public relations to sell virtue to a priest. The only method he knows for getting cooperation is with the business end of a forty-five. Whatever it is he's really doing for SIE, it's something I want to find out about."

Mark's theory received even more support an hour later. They had stopped to eat at a famous seafood restaurant on the eastern shore, making up for the meal missed when Mark rushed them away from SIE. Now, as the big black car nosed into a tree-lined section of roadway, shots were fired from several places along the side. Lead hammered into the thick metal sides of the car and a tire blew. Dan fought it to a stop as more shots starred the bulletproof glass of windshield and right side window. Mark's hand streaked to his side, pulling out his big Colt Commander.

The sound was something like having your head in a bucket while someone beat on it with an iron pipe. Ears ringing, Mark hit the door and rolled out onto the roadway. He had already taken in the location of the ambushers and now returned fire, shooting a little to the right of the next muzzle flash. A man grunted softly. Mark fired again as another of the unseen attackers threw a shot toward him. There

was a high-pitched scream and loud thrashing in the underbrush. A man's form was silhouetted against the lighter background of the horizon and Mark sent another deadly messenger from his .45. The man didn't have time to cry out again. He spun sideways into the brush, dead before he hit the ground.

Dan Griggs was out of the car now and the lighter pops of his .38 sounded near Mark's shoulder. Then a shotgun boomed off to their left and pellets kicked up concrete dust close by, the big double-aught pellets making an odd whirring noise as they passed overhead. Mark made a quick roll to the side of the road and waited. Dan fired two shots toward the direction of the shotgun blast and was rewarded with still another. He was in motion before the shot was fired and to the gunner it looked as if he had hit right on.

"I got the bastard!" the attacker shouted joyfully. His triumph was as short lived as he was, as Mark used his voice to zero in.

Two .45 caliber slugs took the hood high in the chest, driving bits of meat, blood and part of his spine out the back to slap against a tree trunk a split-second before the shotgunner himself bounced against it. His knees buckled and he fell forward into the leaves and dirt. His feet drummed a brief tattoo, spasmodically kicking out the last seconds of his life. Then he lay where he fell, in a spreading pool of his own blood.

"Hey, they got O'Neil!" a voice shouted. "They got the gunner!" *Proop! Proop!* Dan's .38 spoke twice and the speaker broke off with a high, piercing shriek. Shock and pain carried him over into death as he crumpled to the ground, clutching his groin.

"Damn it! That was low," Dan muttered, criticizing his marksmanship.

There was a crashing though the brush and an-

- other voice called out. "Holy Christ! They shot Jimmy in the balls!" Mark's big blaster roared three times, bringing an end to the fifth member of the ambush. Before he twitched out his life, Dan and Mark heard a crashing noise, receding through the brush, followed by the faint slam of a car door and a powerful engine roaring to life. The car sped away as they cautiously checked out the five dead men.

"Any doubts now that the Mafia is mixed up in this somehow?" Mark wanted to know. "I spotted Chicken Louie and he must have seen me. How the hell he knew who I was is something we'll have to find out later, but he must have set up this ambush."

"It could easily have been meant for me. Listen, Mark," Dan went on. "My section's activities are supposed to be secret, you know, but I am not all that unknown. Couldn't the hit crew have been after me?"

"Perhaps," Mark agreed. "But all the same I think it would be best if I penetrated this little operation and got a firsthand look. I just might draw the creeps out of the woodwork. I've already put out the Bart Lowe cover as a management consultant. Could you set it up for me so I have the documents to go with that story?"

"I could, but I don't think I should. This is a job for a trained investigator. Oh, I know you are a trained man," Dan went on to forestall Mark's objections. "But you refused a badge from me just this morning. Now you want to get into the action on your own. It won't work."

"I suppose your way will? Damn it, Dan, what if I'm right, that through Chicken Louie and whoever it is behind him, SIE is being infiltrated by Mafia hoods? Then I want to know about it, right? If they know me and come after me, your team can

pick up the pieces. But, face it, sneakin' and peekin' just won't get it. With ail these government types in this club, how would you handle it? Wiretap? After Watergate? My way, at least if they come out shooting at me, we can separate the sheep from the goats and have it all over with."

"You've made your point. But Hardin, this is a serious thing."

"And Fred Walters' assassination wasn't?"

"Lay off and let me finish. Okay. I'll set you up with a cover story and credentials. But, I want you to make regular reports to me so that my rackets team is ready to move in when it breaks. Got that? No independent, go for broke operation by the Penetrator. Agreed?"

"Well, it's something. I work better alone, Dan. Let me decide when we are set to move. After all, this club seems innocent enough on the surface. I'm just curious to see what's it's like on the inside . . ."

Chapter 3: THE MASTER'S VOICE

Cursing Mark Hardin, the free-lance guns he had picked up—everyone and everything, in fact, except himself—Willi Bauer had sped away from the ambush-gone-sour and now went about his duties of shutting down the SIE Club. He still seethed with anger as he turned off lights, checked windows, doors, and glass panel partitions.

He had hired outside talent because he didn't want his present employers to know anything about his vendetta with the goodie-twoshoes Sergeant who had tipped over the cart on their lucrative black market operation in Saigon. This was going to be a private kill, one he had waited a long time to enjoy.

Eighteen months hard labor at Leavenworth had only added savor to his contemplation of the revenge he would someday wreak on Mark Hardin, if and when he found him. And this very night his prey had walked into his field of vision quite without effort and presented an inviting target. How was he to know that damned car was armor-plated and equipped with bulletproof glass? What was Hardin's operation? Why was he here? Unless, of course, he was now working for that supersecret undercover outfit that Dan Griggs was in charge of.

Killing the last light and setting the sentinal alarm system, Willi headed for his room to contemplate this possibility.

Not all of the big SIE establishment was as quiet. From many rooms—private suites for members

staying overnight—came soft murmurs of pleasure or strident cries of animal passion. Each floor held its late-night revels behind carefully soundproofed doors. Only the faintest murmurs gave any indication of occupancy.

Downstairs, however, in a large room behind the "torture chamber" room, a far different type of activity was in progress. Here were gathered the top fifteen members of SIE's organization within an organization. Dressed in floor-length white robes, their faces hooded and masked they stood before an altar-like affair. Before them stood Ralph Deveraux, president of SIE, in a scarlet outfit like their own. They stood in a pyramid formation, Brooks LePage at the apex.

Two hours had passed since the official closing hour of the club and their ritual was drawing to a close. It was a strange combination of rites, drawing on a mystic, occult, and jingoist appeal to the emotions rather than to reason. To an outside observer, it would seem, in part, to resemble the martyr ceremony of the neo-Nazi groups that had sprung up across the country in the past fifteen years. Liberal sprinklings of black magic Satanism and Ku Klux Klan mumbo-jumbo had been added.

Deveraux now turned from the altar and faced the assembled members, raising his hands above his head. He began to lead a ritual chant, the members giving the response.

Deveraux: "We have the power."

Chorus: "The power is ours."

Deveraux: "We have the power."

Chorus: "The power is good."

Deveraux: "We have the power."

Chorus: "The power is destiny."

Deveraux: "We are the power."

Chorus: "The power is all in all."

Deveraux: "We shall overcome."

Chorus: "Through the power."

Deveraux: "We shall rule."

Chorus: "With the power."

Deveraux: "We shall be mighty."

Chorus: "In the power."

Deveraux: "All hail the power."

Chorus: "All bow down." There was a rustling of soft robes as the membership prostrated themselves before Deveraux.

Deveraux: "All hail the power."

Chorus: "All know fear."

Deveraux: "All hail the power."

Chorus: "Master of all."

Deveraux: "Declare the word!" The membership stood again, thrusting their clenched right fists into the air.

Chorus and Deveraux: "We are your masters! Bow to us! Fear us! Worship us!"

Deveraux lifted a chalice of wine, drank from it and passed it on to LePage, who drank and passed it on to the next, until all had drunk. In addition to some excellent Sandeman Port, it contained a mild hallucinogen that brought on a feeling of well being and a sense of mastery. The others sat at a large, oblong table, according to rank, and the business of the meeting began.

"Gentlemen, our plans are nearing completion. Soon the most powerful nation in the world will be entirely in our control ... ours to command. I needn't tell you of the limitless power we shall enjoy through the wealth, industrial potential and military strength of the United States of America. The successful assassination of Fred Walters has achieved exactly the desired results. Those men who are next to the new vice president, those whom we wish to bring around to our use, were highly impressed. They

are ready to go on to the next step. I have no doubt that they will be equally impressed by our demonstration of personality control through drugs and hypnotic techniques. Once we have passed this point, there is nothing that can stop us."

"But," protested General Phillip Nichols, "The veep is a pretty strong-willed individual, despite what they say about his being chosen because he is not politically ambitious. Once he becomes president, how can we be sure of winning him over or of controlling him with drugs?"

"Simple. His personal physician is already in our group." There was a general nodding of heads. "Others of his advisors are far more ambitious and ... ah, greedy? ... than he. They are now leaning to our side. With his own doctor administering the treatments and reinforcing them through hypnosis, and his closest advisors urging the desired course of action, we shall control the man entirely." Deveraux looked with disdain at the dissenter.

"So then," Brooks LePage took up the conversation. "A week from now they get their demonstration. As you know, the assassination plans for the president have been laid out fully, according to his known itinerary. The model airplane has been built and test flown. The explosives are ready. All our man has to do is fly the plane into the side of Air Force One as it is landing and *poof*, no more president. There can be no mistakes."

"When can we expect a new *presidents*?" Jesus Montenegro inquired. "And how soon can we have a brushfire war in my country?"

"It is all set. In less than two weeks there will be a new president of the United States whom we control, and within one month after that the United States will intervene in a guerrilla war in Chile. That

should be as per your schedule, Senor Montenegro," Ralph Deveraux supplied smoothly.

"Absolutely! The 'Cuban Volunteers' will have landed, the government will be in chaos and the rightist rebels who now enslave our country will ask for aid from your nation. Yes, a month is just about perfect."

"Naturally, as military attache to your embassy, you will accompany your ambassador when he calls on the new president, correct, senor?"

"Most assuredly, Senor Deveraux. We shall appeal for help to your new president to protect the stability of our war-torn land ... and we shall get it, correct?"

"Let me add that the complete control of this country that is our goal will only come through enactment of our tame senator's series of bills." Brooks LePage smiled and nodded to the others.

"How will you get the congress and the people to go along with antigun legislation, and confiscation of all firearms, when they've always balked before? Particularly when the president is to be assassinated by a model airplane full of explosives?" General Nichols asked.

"Obvious. We have programmed the unfortunate individual who will guide that flying bomb. After he completes his mission he will fight with police and federal agents; it is likely that he will kill a good many of them before he is killed in turn. This also eliminates any possible leak from the assassin of Fred Walters. That gun battle will signal an intensive antigun campaign in the press. And . . . when we no longer need our puppet president, he too, can meet his end from a gun. Another wave of antigun propaganda and we can count on the hysterical mindlessness of the people to insure the confiscation bill passes when the right time comes." Deveraux ex-

plained. "It will be much easier to control a disarmed populace."

"To say nothing of the tremendous profits we shall reap by controlling our own president," appended Malcom McConkey.

"Don't forget that through that control, we control the most powerful nation in the world."

"All hail the power!" they shouted in unison.

Chapter 4: A GOOD DAY FOR A MUGGING

Mark Hardin called Anitra Carson at her office around ten the next morning to verify the time for their luncheon date. "Hi, this is Bart Lowe. Just wanted to check with you on what time for lunch?"

"Ah, my mysterious, tall, dark and handsome lobbyist! Are you already at Bassin's? It's on the corner of Fourteenth and Pennsylvania Avenue, remember. You'll like it." She didn't pause for Mark to reply, but ran on with her one-sided conversation. "Meet me there at about twelve-thirty, I have a couple of reports to finish this morning."

"That sounds good to me," Mark finally said. "I'm at the Washington Hotel. I'll pick you up and we'll sample their fare."

"Easier if I take a cab and meet you there. Don't figure on eating outside this time of year. Walk over and order a martini. I'll join you before you've finished the second sip."

She was nearly as good as her word. Anitra walked with a liquid grace, her dark red hair swirling around her face. When she spotted him, her eyes sparkled in the subdued lighting, twinkling like the cut-glass chandelier that hung in the center of the room. She crossed to his table and sat down.

"I told the girl to bring you a martini as soon as you arrived," Mark informed her, reading her expression. "It should be here any second."

"Thanks, I needed that," she replied, mischief twinkling in her eyes as she delivered the old movie

cliche with a straight face. "So, you are going to be wheeling and dealing with the DQD people, eh? I thought this would be a good place to introduce you to the District. A lot of treasury people and DOD staffers eat here."

Mark returned her smile and, bent forward, his face filled with earnest sincerity. "Look, I have to eat, sleep and breathe business all day long. Let's talk about you. You're a lot nicer package than missile systems hardware."

"Me?" Anitra beamed in pleasure. "This is a pleasant change. Most of the men you meet in this town are so busy trying to impress you with how important they are to continued world peace that they never do get around to asking a girl what she likes or does. Ask away, oh gallant lobbyist." She examined him closely over the rim of her martini glass as Mark framed his questions.

"Hmmm," he delayed. "I'm curious about finding you at SIE. I've never seen such a place before. Were you there as a member or as a guest?"

"Oh, I had an escort, for all I saw of him after we got there. He's military attache to the Chilean Embassy. He went off into a huddle with several other members and I didn't see him again until we left. Not that SIE discriminates on the basis of sex. In fact, they are the only club that doesn't discriminate for any reason. That's what makes them so popular. But I'm not much of a joiner. So, I'm not a member."

"How long have you worked in Washington?" Mark made the questions more personal.

"Oh, nearly seven years now. I started out as a very junior clerk and worked my way up to an executive secretary position by dint of ... but that's another story. By the way, everyone here calls it 'the

District.' You might as well get used to doing it too, or you'll seem too much an outsider."

"The District, then. I suppose I'm like a lot of people, I've always thought everything and everyone here was staid and conservative. Your, ah, banter, ah, and sense of humor came as a pleasant surprise to me. Hasn't levity, uhmmh, been a drawback in dealing with the serious business of government?" Mark's wide grin softened his candor.

"Oh, hell yes!" Anitra exploded. "At first, I had to watch what I said and where I said it. But this is the age of liberated women, remember? I even sign my name Ms. now and no one thinks it peculiar. Actually," she continued after they had ordered lunch, "you wouldn't recognize me on the job. I'm all business and serious dedication to the proper function of DOD. It's just that when I'm out of there, away from it all, I can't let it stay in any longer. I think I'm a clown at heart," she explained, wrinkling her nose and crossing her eyes for emphasis.

"Even when I was in school," she continued. "One time, I played Queen Euridice in *Antigone*, in a college production. All I had to do was sit on the stage and knit. God! Half of the time I was afraid I'd drop a stitch and the rest of the time I was convinced I looked like a cotton-stuffed dummy to the audience. So, I started to do little things. Like cross my legs, something a Queen would never do that gave the audience a little something new to contemplate. Or I wiggled my nose, as though I had hay fever. One time, just as I was making my exit, I stuck out my tongue at Lance Turner, who was playing King Creon. I don't know if the audience saw it, but he did and it broke him up. He had to fake a coughing fit to cover his laughter. So, be warned, I don't take myself—or anyone else for that matter—very seriously."

"Saves on ulcers," Mark replied. "As an executive secretary in the Defense Department, you must have your share of ulcer-making situations."

"Ah, that I do. I'm glad I'm on this side of the river instead of in that Land of Oz in the Pentagon. If I had to put up with the hassle over there, I'd have been a candidate for the funny farm a long time ago."

"What's the status of the soldier from Chile?"

"Nothing serious. He likes fun places and so do I, so we go out a lot together."

"I gather he is a member of SIE. Do you get out there often?"

"With him, yes. He's gone a long way for being in the District for less than a year. I guess he's on some sort of board out there, so we hit the place two or three times a week."

"But it's nothing serious between you? In that case, what about dinner with me tomorrow night?"

"Love it. And thank you, kind sir. I've been looking for a way to enjoy something besides the high-toned atmosphere of SIE for a while now, and you fill the bill nicely." She studied Mark's broad shoulders and rugged features. "Very nicely," she repeated.

"Don't be surprised if that's where we end up."

"Hey! Just who are you interested in? SIE or me?"

"Both," Mark replied sincerely.

"The membership secretary will see you now, Mr. Lowe," the major domo informed Mark Hardin.

Mark entered and took a seat in a plush leather chair in front of a wide desk in the paneled office. Polished brass and copper accessories glowed in a soft light that filtered through the rich, cream-colored drapes that covered wide windows behind the desk.

The decor was tasteful and subdued, like everything else about SIE. It spoke clearly of quality and considerable money. Mark looked up to study the man behind the desk and was hard put to mask his surprise. The other's bronze skin, wide-set almond eyes and hawklike nose marked his ancestry.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Lowe. I am Leroy White Elk, the membership secretary. I understand you wish to make inquiry regarding membership in the *Societe Internationale d'Elite*. And I also believe," he continued, giving his visitor scrutiny as close as Mark had give him, "that we are brothers of the same blood. Is that not so?"

"*He ya hah*," Mark replied to cover his own reactions. "I am of the Beautiful People."

"Cheyenne. And I, cousin, am Sioux. But now to business."

During the next half hour, Mark allowed his cover story to be "drawn out." His business with the Department of Defense and fictional details about his consulting firm, William Hansen and Associates were supplied. He was confident that Professor Haskins would be monitoring the telephone drop and would be able to cover any questions that might be asked. It was this attention to detail, which Professor Haskins insisted on and his training under David Red Eagle insured, that allowed Mark the freedom of movement he enjoyed.

Few persons knew that Mark Allen Harrow was indeed the Penetrator, although his past attacks on organized crime had given the Penetrator quite a wide press and no lack of admirers or enemies. His cover as William Hansen, Jr., had proven invaluable in cracking the drug ring operated by Don Pietro Scarelli, acquiring tips over that phone line from deep inside Charlie Cavallera's regime. Now, he

hoped, It would serve as well to enable him to learn how deep the mob's involvement in SIE was.

He permitted Leroy White Elk to "compromise" him; telling the interviewer that the small electronics hardware firms he represented were primarily oriented toward electronic surveillance equipment manufacture and sensitive components for "spy satellites." This brought lifted eyebrows and a brief, smug smile. In the end, White Elk gave him a membership application and a guest card.

"Make yourself at home, cousin. Enjoy our facilities. After my grilling," he gave a hearty, forced chuckle, "you would probably enjoy a steam bath and. massage downstairs. Just show your card and the attendant will take care of everything you need. Everything. . . her name is Miyoshi."

As soon as the door closed behind Mark, Leroy White Elk hurried to his desk. He flipped a toggle on the hidden intercom and spoke with subdued excitement. "Mr. Deveraux. Can you come to my office? I think we have a live one . . . an important one here."

Mark Hardin enjoyed the steam bath. He had missed Red Eagle's sweat lodge over the past three weeks and this was a passable substitute. It did a lot to soak out the damp cold of winter in the nation's capital. The massage was welcome too, although he refused the more intimate ministrations offered by the strikingly beautiful attendant. Her offer was graphically illustrated when she slipped from her brief smock and began the massage treatment in the buff. That the firm, satiny smooth flesh of the lithe Japanese girl had its desired effect on Mark was soon obvious, yet with visible effort, he refused her patently erotic suggestions.

Now, refreshed and glowing after his steam room session, Mark relaxed at the main bar, nursing a Tiltamore Dew and making casual conversation with

the barman. His open, friendly manner eased the reticence of the red-jacketed employee and for a while he talked freely.

"How long have you been tending bar here, John?"

"Four years, now, sir. Since the club was opened."

"I, ah, suppose a lot of important people have had a drink across your bar?"

"Yes, sir. Some. The former vice president came here twice. Although I'd rather not have people that high up as customers. All those secret service agents make me nervous."

"Why's that? You haven't done anything wrong have you?" Mark regretted that one even as he spoke. He amended his remark, "Besides, vice presidents and heads of state enjoy a drink like anyone else, don't they?"

The barman paused, giving Mark a searching, shrewd look before continuing, choosing to answer Mark's last question first. "That they do. It's not them or even the boys in the secret service as such. Just that when they're working, those agents can't drink themselves. Even if everyone else is getting shitfaced—if you'll pardon the expression, sir—they have to stay sober. Anybody hangs around a bar and don't drink, it makes me nervous."

"Not natural, eh?"

Mark tried to get more from the bartender, but his injudicious question had closed the man up like a clam. After another drink, he left. Something, he decided, was definitely wrong with SIE ... but he couldn't put a finger on it. Not just yet anyway.

It was late afternoon and nearly dark when Mark returned to the parking garage of the Washington Hotel. Traffic was as thick as ever on the streets of D.C. He disliked the narrow, dimly lit side corridor

of the hotel and shunned it in preference to the front entrance on Fifteenth Street. He was near the corner when, on an impulse, he crossed the street during a break in traffic, intent on making a few small purchases. As he neared a narrow passageway between two buildings—hardly wide enough to be termed an alley—a tall, heavily built man bumped into him, throwing Mark off balance.

Staggering to regain his equilibrium, Mark tottered into the mouth of the narrow passage. As he did, the fat man followed. It was nearly a stygian black inside but Mark was able to see two dark forms detach themselves from a building. His hand was dipping for his .45 when the fat man slammed him against a wall. The others closed in. In the feeble light, Mark saw the glint of steel in one man's hand, followed by a searing pain along his left side as the knife bit into flesh and muscle, slicing through to the ribs beneath. Only the fact he was still twisted away from the fat man saved Mark from a fatal, professionally administered stab wound.

Fatty and the other man groped for his arms and threw Mark against a brick wall with enough force to knock the breath from his anguished chest. His long and rigorous training in *aikido* and karate prevented him from losing all the precious air, and he used the few seconds it gave him to advantage.

Lashing out with the hard edge of his left shoe, he hit Fatty just below the kneecap and was rewarded with a satisfying snapping sound and a shriek of pain. Fighting under a disadvantage, Mark decided on karate as his best choice of defense. His left arm was freed as Fatty fell away. He sensed rather than saw the blade artist thrust again, and he twisted, giving with the pull on his right arm. He felt the hot numbing line drawn by a razor sharp edge as it slid across his left forearm and then the

hot-cold stuffy feeling as the tip buried itself in his flesh below his ribcage. He changed tactics.

Mark's left hand continued its motion across his body and fumbled awkwardly with his Colt Commander, drawing it from under his coat. Left-handed, he thumbed off the safety and fired at the knifer before he could recover enough to make a third attempt. The blademan had his lips drawn back, teeth bared in a grimace of lustful violence. Two hundred grains of soft lead in the flat nosed semi-conical Hensley and Gibbs slug punched a neat hole in his expensive capping job before it removed a large portion of the back of his head. Blood, fluids and gray matter sprayed against the opposite wall, while bits of bone, flesh, and hair spattered the other two attackers.

The man on Mark's right let go suddenly with a muffled curse and spun into Mark, a knife now glinting in his hand. Mark fired two fast shots in his direction as his face loomed closer in the dusk. For an instant as the face bore in on him, Mark's brain flashed that he had seen the man somewhere before.

Reacting to the racketing slam of the two shots, the second knife wielder pushed himself away from Mark, spun on his heel and started to run, clutching his side. Just then Fatty came back into the fight, grunting loudly as he tugged a .38 from under his rumpled, stained coat. Mark returned his attention to this threat from the downed assailant, switching hands and grasping the .45 in the Weaver combat stance. He carefully planted a slug in the man's throat, exactly centered in the small notch where the two sides of his rib cage joined at the top. Grossly fat as the man was, the big slug rocked him backward. He tottered on the edge of balance then fell back, to lie sprawled in his own blood and brains in the alley. Mark turned back to the fleeing man

... but he had disappeared. The only sound in the alley was Mark's harsh, pain-wracked breathing.

High-speed action under those conditions—his body slashed and punctured by a professionally wielded knife—had taken a heavy toll on Mark's superbly conditioned system. His head swam from loss of blood and he could feel the sticky wetness, as still more of his precious life fluid leaked down his side.

His first thought was to the speedy efficiency of the Metropolitan Police. Although the entire fight had consumed no more than a few seconds, he knew they would be on their way even now. He groped his way in a darkness now grown fuzzy and misty edged from blood loss, searching for a trash container in which to dispose of his pistol barrel before making his escape. He reached one and fumbled weakly with the mechanism. His fingers slipped off and a veil of darkness closed over him. He didn't recall, later, tossing the entire pistol into the trash just before he tumbled to the ground and into the oblivion of unconsciousness ...

Chapter 5; OFFICIAL QUESTIONS

At first, Mark believed that he had somehow come into the hands of the air force. As consciousness slowly, painfully returned, he looked up from the cold slush that had gathered in the narrow alley where he lay and dimly saw many dark-blue trouser legs. Mark fought hard to get back his orientation as a pair of brown trousers and clearly civilian over-shoes came into his blurry vision. A tall, broad-shouldered man knelt down beside him.

"This one's back," a bass voice rumbled over him. "Police," the voice identified. "Can you speak?"

Mark fought to make his voice function. "I" He nodded his head affirmatively. "Yes," he croaked.

"He's lost a lot of blood. We'd better get him to the hospital first, then you can ask your questions," came a voice from above and somewhere behind Mark's head.

"Look, I have an alley full of corpses and now one of them comes back to life. I want some answers for all of this before we go much further."

"He's down about two pints, Lieutenant, and that slash on his side don't look too good. If you want him around long enough to get tho"se answers, we'd better take him on in."

My God, Mark thought irrationally, *you'd think I was a car and they'd just checked my dipstick.* Strangely enough, he felt no pain, just light-headed numbness.

"All right, load him up. Take him to George Washington. I'll ride in the back with him."

Two white-coated ambulance attendants replaced the plainclothes cop in Mark Hardin's line of vision. They lifted him gently and placed him on the low gurney, rolling it to the rear of a fire department ambulance and skillfully sliding it inside. As the wheels clicked into their lock-slots, a policeman's voice called from the alley.

"We found the gun, Lieutenant. It's all covered with blood."

"Good. Bring it along. You know how to package it. Blood ought to hold some prints." He climbed into the rear of the van and an attendant followed, closing the door behind him.

Two hours later, Mark Hardin awoke from a light, unsedated sleep to find himself in a white, sterile-looking private hospital room. His eyes moved around, trying to piece together what had happened and searching for a familiar face. Beside the bed, he saw a stainless steel stand holding a plastic bag of whole blood. His eye traced a path along the surgical tubing . . . from bag to his left arm. He had no memory of the thirty-odd stitches they had put in his left side to close the wounds, nor of the blood they had pumped and were still pumping into his veins. His eyes settled on a face beside his bed and slowly focused.

"You're back with us, Mr. Lowe . . . or is it Hansen? I'm Lieutenant Lester Hyatt, Metropolitan Police. The man from the alley. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Mark nodded his head, finding words too much of a problem. Through hooded eyes, that revealed nothing of what was running through his mind, he studied the policeman as he went on.

"Listen carefully. I have something I am required to read to you. 'You have the right to remain silent. If you give up this right or make voluntary state-

ments, they can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney and he may be present during this and all other proceedings. If you do not have an attorney or can not afford one, one will be appointed for you by the court.' Do you understand what I have just read to you?"

Mark brought the words from deep inside, his voice rusty. "In other words, I am arrested. What's the charge?"

"At the present time, we are conducting a homicide investigation. Two men were killed in an alley with a pistol we believe to be yours. That's all I can tell you now. I do have some questions, if you are up to answering them." Mark nodded and the police detective went on as the door opened and a young black of medium build entered the room. He was neatly dressed in a conservative, but expensive suit that marked him as a police officer of some importance. "Now, about the name problem. We found a permit to carry a concealed weapon in Los Angeles County, California, made out to a William Hansen, Jr. Are you he?"

"My picture is on the permit, isn't it?"

"Point for your side," Hyatt replied. "Then why do you also carry identification that says you are Bart Lowe?"

Mark's lips parted in a mirthless smile. "I'm afraid I can't answer that question."

"You're not helping yourself, you know," the black man spoke for the first time. "I'm Sergeant Carver, from Captain Levin's office."

"This gentleman just got through explaining to me that anything I said, good or bad I presume, would be used against me in court. So, how can I know for sure that I should answer this question?"

"In other words," Lt. Hyatt snapped, "you want an attorney."

"I want to make a phone call. I still have the right to make a phone call, don't I?"

"You haven't been booked yet," Hyatt growled. "I said we were making an investigation. The least you can do is cooperate. When and if you are booked, you will get your call."

"Look, Lieutenant, the guy's right. He can make a call if that's what he wants." Mark's training in intelligence put him right in step with these two and he smiled inside himself as he watched them subtly slip into their roles as good guy-bad guy for the interrogation. He decided to push it a little more and see how well they did it.

"You said I could have an attorney present *now*. How can I get an attorney if I can't make a call?"

"Look, fellah, you're in enough trouble as it is. Answer my questions and it'll be a lot easier on you. And you," he turned to the other man, "You should know better than trying to instruct a superior. We'll talk about that later."

"The Lieutenant's right in a way." The Sergeant gave ground. "He does have a murder investigation to handle. Less than a year ago, a policeman was gunned down in that alley—he's still paralyzed—and now we have two dead men and one cut up. A few straight answers from you might help clear the air and we can all go home."

"Do I get to make my call?" Mark wanted to know.

The two policemen exchanged glances. "You do," Lt. Hyatt relented.

"I'll need my wallet to get the number." Hyatt produced it and handed it over with feigned bad grace. "And where am I?" Lt. Hyatt told Mark with equally bad humor.

By sheer luck, Dan Griggs was still in his office when Mark called. He identified himself as Bart Lowe and, talking quickly, informed the Justice Department man that he had been stabbed and was in Room 2301 at George Washington University Hospital. He urged Dan to get there as quickly as possible and gave him no more details. Just as he was hanging up, the voice on the phone squawked again and Mark replied, "Yes, the police *are* here."

Dan Griggs mouthed a one word reply before hanging up. "Shit!"

"Now, Mr. Lowe—you seem to prefer that name—we can get on to some solid information," Lt. Hyatt began.

"Let me, Les," Sergeant Carver interrupted. "At first," he explained, "when the units responded to a shooting report, they thought it was a holdup or a mugging. Two men shot with a very big gun and one stabbed. But they found no gun."

"We found it later," Lt. Hyatt contributed, taking over. "I still thought it could be a mugging..

"Which it was," Mark replied.

"Until we found nothing missing in your pockets or the other two men's. Since then, I thought of the possibility of a gang slaying."

"Which It might have been," Mark supplied.

"Not after we identified one of the dead men," Lt. Hyatt said, answering Mark despite himself. "He was a security officer for the *Societe Internationale d'Elite*."

"I'll be damned," Mark shot out. "Curiouser and curiouser."

"Just respond to the questions," Hyatt ordered.

"That's when I got into it," Sergeant Carver took up. "I'm from Criminal Identification and Intelligence. SIE is a pretty big club right now ..

"I keep hearing that."

"Maybe you can tell us how one of their men wound up getting shot with your gun?" Carver went on, ignoring Mark's harassing interruption.

"Would it help any if I told you I didn't know he worked for SIE?" Mark slid around reference to his .45. From experience he knew that they had not had time to run a ballistics check yet, nor had they run a make on him or the gun. "And, Lieutenant, when someone starts carving on you, you usually don't take time to ask him for I.D."

"You did shoot them, then?" A notebook appeared in the policeman's hands.

"Can you prove it? Prove it right this minute?"

"No .. ." Reluctantly. "But we will." There was a click of heels in the hall, followed by a brisk knock. Dan Griggs entered the room.

"What have you done now?" he asked, ignoring the two officers.

"I hit the jackpot, Dan. It all ties up now. But I'll fill you in later." He made the introductions. "Lieutenant Les Hyatt, Sergeant Carver, this is Dan Griggs, Justice Department."

"Oh, hell!" Hyatt exclaimed. "Not another one of those." He turned to Mark. "Why didn't you just tell us you were working for the government?"

"I wasn't sure where I stood," Mark began. "And ..." he studied Dan's stern face, taking note of the slight, imperceptible nod, "I wasn't sure I still was, until I checked in."

"Lieutenant," Dan Griggs added, "let's step out in the hall. I think I can explain this to your satisfaction."

They walked outside the door, propping it open slightly so the Lieutenant could keep an eye on his suspect. Les Hyatt began to outline to Dan what they had so far.

After they left the room, Tom Carver came closer

to Mark's bed, looking at him from several angles, cocking his head and moving to get a different play of light. A slight half-smile turned up the corners of his mouth. He moved again, bending over to peer directly into Mark's eyes.

"Find something interesting?" When there was no answer. "This a new form of third degree?"

"No, man," Tom Carver spoke slowly, his voice low and neutral, except for the slightest hint of amusement. "I was just trying to place your face. You aren't exactly the hide in a crowd type, you know. I'm wondering if I can fit your face to a name." He paused. "Maybe one on a wanted poster?"

"Good luck." A sudden raising of voices rumbled from out in the hall and both policeman and suspect turned their attention to the apparent argument that was going on.

"Look, I don't care if he is one of your supersecret spook types, Griggs. The man gets booked. Have someone from the U.S. Commissioner's office come to the Grand Jury hearing and explain the whole thing. That's the way it's always done and that's the way we'll do it now."

"All I'm asking," Dan retorted, "is that you withdraw your men, let me put one of ours on the door. Also, no booking. I'll guarantee an appearance and I'll vouch for the fact he is working for me. That ought to be enough."

"Not when you include the concealed weapon. Look, let's assume I go along, declare him a private citizen and let him keep his cover. He's still in violation of twenty-two dash three-two-oh-four. 'No person,' it says, 'shall within the District of Columbia carry either openly or concealed on or about his person.' "

"I'm aware of that. But there are exceptions. In three-two-oh-five."

"That deals with the armed forces and, 'officers or employees of the United States duly authorized to carry.' You can't have it both ways. If he's identified as an agent, you say it compromises a case. If he's Joe Citizen, even if he shot to defend his life, he's still in violation."

"What about the section on licenses? Where it says, 'any person having a bona fide residence or place of business within the United States and a license to carry a pistol . . . issued by the lawful authorities of any State . . .' How about that?"

"Well, yes," Les Hyatt said slowly. "That could apply. But, your guy didn't even give us the courtesy of checking into gun control section and requesting a license. We still have to have a hearing on that."

"Don't be a nit-picker, Lieutenant. Check his hotel. He checked in only yesterday. He hasn't had time to come down. Give us a break on this one. We are supposed- to cooperate with you in matters that occur in your jurisdiction so what about a little feedback? Cooperate with me on this."

There was a long silence while the police Lieutenant considered the matter. He shook his head as if to clear his thinking. "I still have to report to my superiors. Two men were killed, right? A lot will depend on what they say. But for now, let's go back inside."

Mark Hardin and Tom Carver looked up as the others entered the room. Les Hyatt looked decidedly uncomfortable and Dan Griggs still wore a grim expression. "Mr. Lowe. If you will simply state that you shot the two men in the alley in the line of duty, you will no longer be held in connection with a double homicide. And you will not be under arrest. Mr. Griggs here has, for the moment at least, explained that to me fully. However, as a private citizen," his voice was heavy with irony, "the first thing

you had better do when you leave this hospital is to come down to the gun control office and apply for a license. In fifteen years with the Metropolitan Police I have never heard of one being issued—there are only about a dozen licenses for the entire District—but in your case they, ah, might make an exception. That's Room twenty-fifty-eight, Three Hundred Indian Avenue, North West. There will still have to be a hearing on this, but Mr. Griggs is going to arrange for your release on O.R. until the grand jury meets on it.

"He has requested that I ask no more questions, so this is probably the last time I'll see you before the hearing."

"I'm stricken," Mark quipped. Les Hyatt's dark face flushed and his black eyes burned with anger. Dan Griggs shot an irritated glance at Mark, silently commanding him to silence. Beside the bed, Tom Carver made a muffled sound in his throat, and his eyes twinkled with mirth.

There were no parting pleasantries, but Sergeant Carver held back a second, turning at the door and speaking to Mark with a knowing look on his face. "It's been fun. I'll have to have you over to my place some time, Mr. Lowe, We can look at my arrowhead collection."

"Son of a bitch!" Dan Griggs exploded when they were alone. "You really stuck it in and broke it off this time. Carver's got a make on you and you can bet your sweet ass he's going to wait for the right moment before bringing it up."

"What could he have? He's just off fishing somewhere." As Dan attempted to argue the point, Mark went on quickly, "Most he could have is a vague image from a photograph. Something from L.A., maybe."

"I told you he was a sharp one. If he paid any at-

tention at all to the NLEG Intelligence network photo that was sent out from L.A, on you, you can bet he memorized it."

"But that was five months ago! How many of those grainy teletype photos get transmitted in any given day? Three hundred? Five? I don't buy it, Dan."

"Hardin, I've been looking into Tom Carver's background for some while now, and with good reason. I'm thinking of offering him a place on my team. He's damn sharp. Only twenty-six and a Sergeant, promoted and transferred to CII all in one deal. If he has a line on you, he has it all the way. Count on it. That arrowhead thing. That didn't come into the picture until Vegas, right?" Mark nodded a suddenly sobered agreement. "Yet he threw it out to see what reaction he'd get. For all we know, this Penetrator thing might have caught his personal interest. I've known several cops who papered their dens with old wanted posters. He wouldn't be the first to make a hobby out of his work."

"So?" Mark countered defensively. "He hasn't shouted out Ms big secret, has he?"

"He'll wait until he makes absolutely sure, and not a second longer. WMch brings up another thing. You no sooner hit town than you start stacking up bodies. I thought this was going to be a soft penetration?"

"I *did* get cut, remember? If you want it all nice and neat and quiet, take it up with the Mafioso types who are gunning for me."

Dan Griggs paced the room in silence for a few seconds, crossed to the edge of Mark's bed and poured himself a glass of ice water. Varied emotions played across his face before he began to speak, his

voice rising as he emphasized the importance of what he was saying.

"Now you listen to me. I bought this deal on the terms we laid out last night. There were to be no free-wheeling shootouts or moves without consulting me. It looks like you brought the creeps out of the woodwork all right. But we still don't have a home for them or names of those who are giving the orders. I can't have it. As far as I am concerned, my office is out of this entirely. Unless you accept a badge from me, there will be no more protection, no coverups. What you do will be strictly on your own. If I hadn't seen you in action in L.A., I'd have you locked up myself.

"What am I saying?" he reversed himself. "Because I did see you in action, I should have you locked up so far away they'd have to pump you sunlight and air. But, I'll go along to the extent I'm already in this. I have with me the credentials you wanted for Bart Lowe. I showed them to Lt. Hyatt, in fact. That and a phone number for verification of your cover. And I brought along some clothes. But, beyond that, I and my section are out of this unless you do it my way."

Dan was breathing heavily and his brows were knit in scowling disapproval. "You're going to be here overnight, they want to give you another transfusion and check out those wounds before discharging you. Think about what I said. Don't go off half cocked."

"No good, Dan. I don't want a badge and rules and court appearances—all of that. I do what I have to, the way it has to be done. I appreciate what you have done for me so far . . . But if I am going to be on my own in this, it's going to be all the way on my own. I'll leave the 'details for you to clean up, but if

we part the ways here, I'll seek my own counsel on what I do, how and when."

Dan Griggs shook his head in resignation. Slowly a grin born of grudging admiration spread over his face. "Good luck, then, sucker."

"Good luck, copper."

It was well past midnight when Mark was awakened by the nurse removing the tube from his arm. A third pint of blood had trickled into his system and he felt nearly his old self again. There was a stinging itch in the region of his knife wounds and it kept him from drifting off again.

He had given long and careful thought to all that Dan Griggs had said and, much as he regretted it, he had to admit that the man made sense. Mark had remained, however, convinced that his own way was the only way to get positive results. There was more here than showed on the surface. Something deep and evil that he would have to sniff around the edges of until he discovered its nature. When he did, the cautious, pussyfooting around that was necessary to insure not stepping on political, diplomatic or jurisdictional toes would never get the job done before those responsible had been able to hole up and hide their trail. It would take, Mark knew, the Penetrator's special touch to dig out this particular sack of pus and expose it to the healing light of day.

And that, he decided, could not be done from a hospital bed. Throwing back the covers, he sat up. The world reeled around him and he nearly fell back. Sucking deeply on a breath of air, he held it until the room steadied and he sat upright without support from his hands. He slipped the hospital gown from his shoulders and examined his wounds. Cleaned, stitched, and lightly bandaged, they looked

neither impressive nor dangerous. Gathering encouragement from this, he stuck his feet over the edge of the bed and stood up. A little dizziness hit him again, but it was quickly gone. He drew off the gown and folded it, placing it on the pillow and throwing back the covers.

With little hesitation in his step, he crossed to the closet and located his clothes. The coat was out; it was slashed and blood-soaked, as was his shirt. He cursed himself for his own forgetfulness and went to a package sitting on a side table. Dan Griggs had brought it along when he arrived.

It contained underwear, a sport shirt and warm jacket. Mark dressed quickly, then walked quietly to the door. He opened it and looked out. The corridor was empty, and he eased out into it with no notice. At the first intersection, he found he had gone the wrong way, so he retraced his steps to the elevators. Two nurses were looking at a chart and discussing it at the nurses' station, while the floor nurse sat, half-doing, at her desk. He walked to the elevator bank and pressed the down button. Then he turned and stepped back into the hallway from which he had come. When the car arrived at his floor and the doors opened, he strode briskly to it and stepped inside.

"Good night, Doctor," came a voice after him. Mark smiled. It had been easy, so far. Perhaps too easy. Dan Griggs must have made allowances for just this eventuality. Although Mark was concerned about how much the black cop, Tom Carver, knew, it was Dan who was convinced that his knowledge would be used to Mark's detriment at the proper time. He had not, as promised, put a man on Mark's door and his bundle of clothes had made just such an escape possible.

A cold wind struck Mark as he left George Wash-

ington University Hospital and he hailed a cab, telling the driver to let him off at Twelfth and H Streets. There he took another cab and rode to within a block of the Washington Hotel. He made up his mind that if Carver was after his scalp and if he and Lieutenant Hyatt wanted to make something of his unorthodox departure from the hospital, it could become a cause celebre for the two policemen. Therefore, Mark determined to hole up somewhere else, preferably outside the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Police.

He quickly packed his things. Dan had his .45 which left him feeling naked on the right side, so he carefully checked Ava and placed the compact dart pistol in the clip holster where the Colt Commander usually rode. He checked out of the hotel, retrieved his car and turned right onto Fourteenth Street, headed south toward Arlington, Virginia, across the river...

Chapter 6: "I KNOW WHO YOU ARE"

Later in the day, after a long, healing sleep in the motel room Mark had located on the Jefferson Davis Highway, he called Anitra at her office. They verified their date for that night, set a time and Mark set down the phone again. As matters stood, he had too little to go on and no specific point at which to aim. He would have to go on playing it by ear until they tried again. Hell of a way to fight a battle, but it was all that offered itself so far.

When he had crossed over into Virginia the night before, Mark had sought an acceptable hideout. He wanted something clean and comfortable, yet not one of the larger, well-known tourist stops or hotels. He had located this place near the freeway interchange, oh U.S. 1, across from National Airport. His room and parking were below street level on the Jeff Davis Highway side, with quick, easy access to a back street or the highway out front. It suited his purposes entirely.-

After a shower and shave, he examined and redressed his wounds. Nothing had torn loose during the night and he was well satisfied. There was some pain and considerable stiffness on Ms left side, but he could compensate for that.

He set about getting another rental car. He had registered in the motel as William Hansen, Jr., in the hope that outside the District no one would be looking too closely for him. Once he had changed

cars, he could move about a lot more safely. As soon as he had turned in the Ford and rented a different car, Mark drove back into Washington, D.C. and spent the remainder of the afternoon in the public library, researching articles on Mafia activities and on SIE. His small list of names and facts gave him a better starting point. He returned to his motel, showered and dressed the wounds a second time, then made ready for his date.

"Well, hello there," came a sultry voice from the short, trimly built blonde who stood in the doorway of Anitra Carson's apartment. She licked her lips and invited Mark in. "You must be Bart. Anitra said you'd be here about now. She had to work late and said you should have a drink and wait. She has a status report or such to do for her boss. What do you drink?"

"Do you have Irish whiskey?"

"Scotch do?"

"Fine." Mark watched the girl fix the drinks while she watched him intently over the bar top. Carrying both glasses over, she handed him his.

She sat down beside him. "I'm Lynn-Ann Simpson, Anitra's roommate. I must say you are an improvement over the short, dark Latin lover type that ... oops! Slip of the lip." It was obvious that she had fortified herself with a couple before Mark's arrival. "Ummmh," she continued, sipping her drink, "you sure look like someone I know. You ever been in show business before?"

"No."

"First time in the District?"

"Yes."

"You have something to do with DOD contracts, Anitra was telling me. Right?"

"Something like that. At least I am trying to *get* Defense contracts."

"Bullshit!" the girl said suddenly. "You . . . let me guess," she said, teasing. "You have something to do with crime, with criminals. You . . . you," her smile twisted into a smirk. "I know who you are. You are . . . the . . . Penetrator." She sat back, pleased with herself.

Surprise robbed Mark Hardin of an adequate defense. "What are you talking about? What's a penetrator?"

"That guy in L.A. Right? Shoot 'em dead and all that. That was you sure as I am alive. I saw it all on TV . . . The wanted poster thing, the other stuff. Way to go, guy. Bust up the Sicilian brotherhood, right? Bang! Pow! Boom!"

She had been drinking a lot more than Mark had first thought. He tried to stall off the inevitable, distract this girl from her line of questioning. "That sounds great, all right, but you have me mixed up with the 'Late, Late Show.' I haven't gone around banging, powing and booming lately."

Lynn-Ann sobered slightly, looking Mark straight in the eye. "Any time you're ready for a banging, you've come to the right place," then she returned to her theme. "But it won't do you any good, Mr. Penetrator, Mark Hardin."

"I saw it all on TV and again in what my boyfriend had on you. Captain Levin, Criminal Identification, Metro. Police, that's who. He had the whole lot of stuff when you were doing your thing in Los Angeles, then came that deal in Vegas. That was you too, right? Oh, wowie! I thought he'd crap his drawers. Said a thing like that was bad for all law enforcement. One time in his office I even saw the pictures, clearer than on TV. Benny Levin says

you are the cat, and Benny Levin is never wrong about things like this. So, you're it, elected by unanimous vote of Benny Supercop Levin and li'l ole me, Lynn-Ann Simpson, horny broad."

Mark felt the situation deteriorating rapidly. He fought for something to say. "Look, Lynn-Ann ... even if I admitted to being ... doing the things you say. Well, the truth is ..."

"The truth is, I caught you. So, tell me all about it. I'm dying to know all the gory details."

Mark shrugged. Lynn-Ann emptied her own glass, pantomimed Mark to do the same and then went for refills. With the fresh one in his hand, he began. "The truth is, it was not me. It was really someone else, I don't know who. He, this guy, didn't want to do it in the first place ... not at least the whole thing like he did. It ... it was over a girl."

With a silent apology to Donna Morgan's memory, Mark rendered an edited and revised version of the affair in Los Angeles, trying to spin a believable "other guy" image for Lynn-Ann to fasten upon. When he finished, he sat back, looking at the firm bust and neat waistline of the blonde.

"Okay. So this 'other guy' did all that to Scarelli because of a chick. What about Vegas? Huh? You have an answer for that one?"

"No. Because I wasn't there, I don't know anything about that."

"In a pig's a .. . but I'll go along. It's our secret, right, Mr. Penetrator?"

"Fine. Our secret. Because, even if you don't care what happens to me, think of Anitra. And yourself. If anyone ever took seriously what you said, no matter that I'm not the guy, he'd come after me and he might come after you, too. By now the Mafia must

have put out a contract on him, right? You know about contracts?"

"Oh, yeah. My boyfriend's told me all about those guys and their contracts. You got a point there. I sure don't want to get hi . . . hit. Anitra either. Even if she does cop all the good ones." Her mood clouded again, thoughts sending different expressions flitting across her face. "Well, we know what we know, right? So, then, what really brings you here? Why are you in the District?"

"For the reason I told you. To get Defense Department contracts for a group of companies my firm represents."

"Not bloody likely." She belted down the last of her drink. "You after the spaghetti boys again?"

"Lynn-Ann, get off that. I was officially cleared of any involvement in that L.A. thing and they never got a lead to the guy in Vegas. That's where it officially lies and that's where I want it to stay. Got me?"

Her mood changed again, screwing her face up into a look of hunger. "Qooh, I wish I could." She jiggled to the bar to make another for herself.

As she worked, she again gave him a curious, searching look. Wriggling her way back, she put even more of her solidly packed body to work, transmitting her message. It was a hot and willing message, but Mark chose to ignore the signals. She took a long pull on the fresh drink and went back at it. "Well, if we can't talk about *that*, what can we talk about?"

It had worked before and Mark sincerely hoped it would work this time. "What about you? What's the Lynn-Ann Simpson Story?"

"Ummmh. Nice man. But what's there to know? You see me, know I'm short, blonde and hungry.

That I'm Anitra's roommate but not her Mother Superior. You know I have a big-wheel cop boyfriend and I like Scotch. So what else?"

"Where do you work? Are you another government type?"

"Hardly! Would you believe it if I said I worked at a travel agency? It's true, swear it, A town like this, all those government types shaggin' off all around the world, it's darn good money. That's where I met Captain Levin. Benny was going to a convention of police officers and he came to us to book his trip. One afternoon together in the same room and I had to get him in the sack. He came around after he returned and I nearly dragged his pants down right there. It took a long time, though. He's married and, believe it or not, *he* knows it. It took some while, but we became lovers. So, that's my big romance. He's not tall and handsome, really. Sort of short, middle-aged and pot-bellied. But what the hell. There's something about him that says pure man, all man. I dig it a lot. Say," she changed the subject, tugging on her dress. "I haven't changed clothes since coming home from work. Let me slip into something else."

While she was out of the room, Mark took advantage of the time to prowling around, looking at everything he could find. Since learning the identity of one of the men who had attacked him, Anitra Carson—or anyone else with even the vaguest connection to SIE—held considerable interest for him. Poking into the bookcase and prying into an address book, Mark gave the place a quick going over. He finished his brief search and was seated on the chaise once more when Lynn-Ann came into the room.

What she wore was something else indeed. If the hem had reached to the floor, it might be described

as a loose fitting kimono, but it was cut to mini-skirt length, and when she sat on the chaise again and parted her legs, it was impossible not to notice she wore nothing underneath. "You know, I've never before made a pass at any of Anitra's men. But you, Mr. Penetrator, turn me on. A long way on. What do I have to do to get the balling started?"

"Ih, let's get back to the life story of Lynn-Ann, shall we?" Mark felt ridiculous even as he said it, but Lynn-Ann appeared not to notice. She was willing to do anything that would keep this man near her. She gave him what she believed to be a sultry, hot look and revealed even white teeth. The pink tip of her tongue flicked out and ran over them in an imitation of passion. "Are you a native of the District?"

"Oh, Lord no. I'm from Kansas City, by way of Vegas, by way of New York. I'm the original child with the stagestruck mother. Dancing lessons—don't my legs still show all that work?—singing and all that. I was going to be a star, or else. Dear Mother never made it herself, the closest she ever got was reading movie magazines. I suppose it was a big disappointment to her that I didn't either. But I didn't want it."

"Sounds like a hard way to grow up," Mark provided, hoping to lead her away from talk of the Penetrator and sex.

"You know it . . . And I got it all. Even the producer with a thing about little girls. He deflowered me at the tender age of twelve. All the time I was lying there on his couch, on my back with my heels in the air, I could almost visualize my mother standing behind him applauding and shouting, 'If you like the way she screws, wait'll you see her *act!*' God! It was awful. I ran away from home—we were living in

Burbank, California by then—when I was fifteen. I was pretty well developed for my age and all I knew was singing and dancing, so I took a job in Vegas, lied about my age. Nine years, two divorces and five jobs and here I am."

"Tough breaks all along, eh?"

"Hell no. I *like* it here. The District's where the action is and like I said, there's a lot of money in this travel thing. I'm bringing home more bread now than I ever did. Even when I was turning tricks at The Pussy."

Mark's mind was dulled, not as fully perceptive as usual. He was lulled by the effects of the two drinks she had poured, and fatigued by the stress of the knifing. Her words, so meaningful to him if only he had taken note, slipped past him unnoticed. His eyes began to droop.

Suddenly he was jerked awake by a new sensation. Lynn-Ann had slid across the lounge and was snuggled close to him. One nail-nibbled finger slid down his chest and across his hard, flat belly to his belt. Her hand fumbled with the buckle and opened it, even as he became aware of what was happening.

"Oh, poor man. He needs a little pick-me-up. There now," she crooned as she tugged at his zipper. "Lynn-Ann will make him all well again." His big left hand clamped over hers as she started to peel open his trousers.

"Some other time, huh?" Mark said softly.

"Poor baby, you're so mixed up you don't even know what it is you want. Look..."

But Mark didn't have to look. He could already feel the swelling in his loins, his thunderous need for a woman, long-denied. It wasn't that Lynn-Ann Simpson wasn't desirable, she was. But something about the willing young woman turned Mark off ...

way off. She giggled at his consternation and, taking his hesitation for assent, headed for her target again. Then the doorbell rang.

Saved, Mark thought to himself, *by the bell*. „

Chapter 7: AFTER THE BALL WAS OVER

The bell rang a second time, followed by the rattle of a key in the lock. Lynn-Ann dashed to her room, leaving Mark to fend for himself. He had just put himself back together and was turning from the bar as the door opened and Anitra Carson, burdened by packages, entered the room.

"You made it, I see," she began. "And are well taken care of." Her pleasure was obvious and her features were devoid of any double meaning. Setting down her parcels, she walked behind the bar. "The martinis are in the freezer, and do I ever need one." She produced a large, scooped champagne glass and a frost-covered pitcher, pouring deftly and taking a sip before continuing.

"Ringin' the bell is oUr signal. There have been so many break-ins and muggings, things like that, it lets whoever's here know that the person at the door belongs here. Lynn-Ann's boyfriend suggested it."

"Good idea," Mark was finally able to get in a few words.

"I have to change. Just be a minute. Have you decided on dinner?"

"You said you didn't particularly want to go to SIE, so what suits you?"

"How about Don Quixote's here in Silver Spring? I'm wild about real Spanish food."

"Done then. But I would like a little dancing and I do have a guest card for SIE, so . . ."

"Oooh! You're coming up in the world fast." Her laugh was rich and musical. "I'll change and we can go. You meet my roommate?"

"Uh, yes. Sort of."

Anitra disappeared into the second bedroom and Lynn-Ann came from hers, dressed now in evening clothes. She made a face at Mark and wiggled suggestively, then crossed to the bar and built another drink. "Where are you two headed tonight?"

"Don Quixote's and then out to SIE."

"Tired as you are," her bold gaze directly into Mark's eyes left no doubt that her earlier mood had not changed, "you should go straight to bed."

"Thanks," Mark replied. "But, u h . . ."

"No thanks? Oh, well, you can't blame a girl for trying. If you are at the club, I'll probably see you."

"You'll be there?" This idea had not occurred to Mark before.

"Sure. My captain is taking me. I'll save a dance for you."

"As if they still had dance cards. It's a deal, though."

"Believe me, Mr. Penetrator, I'll rape you standing up, given half a chance."

Anitra entered then, ready for an evening out. Their conversation ended. As the door closed behind them, Anitra took Mark's arm possessively, snuggling close. He thumbed the down button and almost at once the elevator door opened. During the descent, Anitra spoke for the first time since leaving the apartment, a new record for her.

"Lynn-Ann's a sweet girl. But, I'm worried, Bart, about her drinking. It seems to get heavier and heavier all the time. As if she had some really big problem she can't talk about. And she's awfully vulnerable. Thin-skinned, you know?"

"She told me something about her mother push-

ing for a show biz career she wanted no part of. I hear that's no place for the faint at heart. But as to a big problem, isn't dating a married man who's also a high-ranking cop trouble enough?"

"You're right, I suppose. I really like her. She's so warm and affectionate."

"Horny, you mean," Mark supplied.

"You too?" Anitra giggled. "She makes a pass at every guy I bring up there. Nothing serious and she'd never follow through. It's just part of her life-style. Like saying, 'Look at me. I'm beautiful and desirable and men throw themselves at my feet.' Pathetic in a way, I guess," she went on, facing for perhaps the first time Lynn-Ann's real problem.

"Forget it. Let's enjoy the evening." They were in the lobby now, headed toward the glass doors of her apartment house. Moisture was condensing on the side panels and freezing at the bottom edge. "It's going to be pretty cold out there tonight," Mark observed.

"Maybe we should have stayed here and I could have cooked you a steak."

"Next time, that's a promise."

At the restaurant Mark ordered, *paella* for two and they relaxed over large glasses of Maderia, served with oysters on the half-shell—dipped in a fiery Spanish sauce—as their first course. Conversation was random and relaxed while Mark waited for an opening. When it came, he deftly steered the conversation around to SIE.

"It sure seemed to me that there was a lot more room at the club than they were using."

"Well," Anitra began, giving a verbal tour, "there's the golf course—eighteen holes, would you believe?—two swimming pools, steam room, sauna, whirlpool and massage parlor. Private dinning'rooms and residence suites, too, for the members to use.

There are a number of members from distant places who use the place as home, office *and* club. That reminds me, did you know that there are several levels of membership in SIE?"

"No. Sort of a fraternal order, like the Masons?"

"Well, sort of. There's the general membership. Just about everybody from anywhere can be a member of that. That's what the main dining room is for, the casino, the dinner-dances and all the rest. Then there is a second level. To use your fraternal order idea, let's call them second-degree initiates. They serve on boards for the club, outside too, like civic improvement and other things, plan activities and all that. They're much more select in who can join that. And, according to Jesus, there is a third, higher level. He got a little tiddly one night and confided to me. I think he was trying to impress me that he was more than a mere military attache from a banana republic. It's supposed to be a very select group. Made up of intellectuals, statesmen, financiers from all over the world. Malcom McConkey—you know, the 'Wall Street Wizard'—is supposed to be a member, to hear Jesus tell it. A real elite society."

Their food arrived and talk dwindled out as they devoted the full attention deserved by the excellent meal. Mark paid their check and they headed for the eastern shore and SIE. It proved to be a pleasant drive. Earlier clouds had blown away and a full moon softened the stark wintry countryside with a silvery glow. Stars dusted the curving vault of the sky in bright profusion. Mark tuned in soft music and Anitra slid across the seat to sit close to his side.

There was a change in the atmosphere at the SIE Club. Mark had presented his card and signed the register as required, then they were seated at a small table near the dance floor. No sooner had they or-

dered drinks than the manager was at Mark's elbow, bowing and speaking softly.

"Mr. Deveraux's compliments, sir. Will you and the young lady join him at his table?" His head inclined toward a large table, situated on a raised dias, centered along one side wall. Lights set in the ceiling illuminated the table so that all could see the "Lord of the Manor" entertaining. Ralph Deveraux was seated at the center of the oval expanse and nodded imperiously, smiling his invitation as Mark and Anitra glanced his way. It was what Mark was seeking and he readily agreed.

Introductions were made around the table and Mark was seated next to his host, Anitra on his left. Deveraux ran a thick, pink tongue around liverish lips, his eyes bulging from hypertension—the chronic complaint of gourmands through the ages—giving, along with his grossly obese body, mute testimony to his major vice. He reminded Mark of a frog.

"Leroy here," Deveraux's pudgy hand moved in a vague gesture down the table toward his membership secretary, "tells me you are connected with some electronics firms, Mr. Lowe."

"Yes, sir. Actually, I only represent several of them for my company, William Hansen and Associates."

"Just the same," Mark's host went on, "in my book that makes you a very important person. I think it's marvelous the things you are doing with microminiaturization. Using minute quantities of energy to do prodigious tasks. Wonderful for the ecology, don't you think?"

Mark wasn't sure where this was supposed to lead, but sensing an invitation to compromise his employer and clients, he stepped into the trap. "Actually that field is a spinoff from aerospace research. I'm not familiar with it at all. The companies I rep-

resent are after Defense contracts. I don't think you will find the ecology types singing the praises of any company that deals with DOD." His comments brought a chuckle from those at the table and a lessening of tension on the part of Brooks LePage.

Talk wound around Mark's cover job and he again let it slip that the companies he represented dealt in electronic surveillance equipment. He was urged to make full use of the club facilities while he was in town. Deveraux ordered another round of drinks and extolled the virtues of the dinner ordered for his party.

"It's a shame you have eaten,, Mr. Lowe. I have ordered a truly epicurean repast. Escargot . . . pouched trout. . . duckling *l'orange* . . . suckling pig . . ." He breathed each item of the menu with the reverence of a priest saying the litany.

On the bandstand, the orchestra struck up their first number, giving Mark an excuse to leave Deveraux's table for their own. He thanked the SIE president for his kindness and promised to use the facilities more often. On the dance floor, he held Anitra close as they blended into the rhythm of the music.

"Nice as this place is," Anitra spoke softly into his ear, "that guy always gives me the creeps. I feel slimy around him."

"Yeah," Mark agreed. "I'd like to wash my hands, too."

As the pattern of their dance brought them to one side of the room, Anitra nudged Mark. "There's Captain Levin. Lynn-Ann must be around somewhere. Probably at the bar."

"Right." Mark turned the girl so he could get a better look at this D.C. policeman whose name had come up more than once since his arrival. What he saw didn't impress him. Short, swarthy, and slightly

balding, the Captain displayed a small pot-belly encased in moderately priced evening clothes. Yet there was something about him, an aura, that caused Mark to agree with Lynn-Ann, here was a guy who was all-male. Tough, self-confident and a bad one to have for an enemy.

Behind them, at Deveraux's table, Brooks LePage slid into the chair vacated by Mark. He brushed back his pale blond locks. "Was that wise at all?" he demanded of his superior.

"Certainly, my good man. I ... how do they put it in these security things? ... I have a need to know."

"For all we know this guy might be an agent. He came here the first time with Dan Griggs, right?"

"All the more reason, Brooks. If he is genuine, his connections to the manufacturers of electronic spying equipment could make him very useful to us. And if he is an agent, the sooner we find out, the better."

"Look, after those people set the demonstration for tonight and the whole thing is going into high speed, now is no time to be playing footsie with a federal cop."

"Don't condemn out of hand, my friend. Let me handle this aspect of it. You concentrate on seeing that we have the vice president's people in our pocket."

Mark Hardin was also the topic of conversation in a darkened booth at the bar. Lynn-Ann Simpson, now well advanced into an alcoholic haze, sat with Louis Polio and two other men. Her slurred speech was the only indication of her condition as she bent urgently across the table, patting Chicken Louie's paw with her own warm, moist hand. "I tell you, Louis, there are strange happenings around here. The District is due for resti ... retribution. Blood is gonna flow in the streets."

"Whadda ya talkin' about, blood in the streets?"

"I mean it. The Penetrator is in D.C. Believe it." She studied his blank look with unsteady focus. "You don't know about the Penetrator?"

"What's he, some kind of sex-nut?" Chicken Louie's mind seldom rose above the gutter.

"Hey, I mean it! This guy is bad news. Anyone with . . . bad vibes, he wipes them out. Shoulda saw what he did out on the Coast. Look, we all work for the same boss, right? Well, while this Hardin guy is in town we better cool it, Louie. I mean he's hell on anything even smells off-color."

"Ah, you're boozy again," Chicken Louie dismissed her words. Yet, his mind was working fast. If what she said was right and *he* was the one to bring it to the higher-ups, it might be the opening he had been looking for to get a leg up in this outfit.

"I'm not kiddin'," Lynn-Ann said in defense, trying one last time to convince the gunsle of her inside knowledge. "Hardin, the Penetrator. Don't forget that name, huh?"

Anitra opened the door to her apartment and stepped inside with Mark following. "Lynn-Ann won't be back for several hours, probably not before dawn." She turned abruptly, causing Mark to crash into her, his arms encircling her to keep them both from falling. "You're a lot of man, Bart Lowe," Anitra said in a husky voice. "All this girl needs."

Their kiss was cordial at first, building in intensity as Mark felt himself being aroused. The passionate attentions of Lynn-Ann Simpson, earlier that evening, had teased him beyond his usual ability to avoid encounters that might compromise his operations. Now his body thrust vibrantly to life, pressing urgently against the eager, willing form in his arms. Anitra's lips parted and her tongue darted

inquisitively into Ms mouth. She moaned and pressed even tighter against Mm. The kiss ended. Both of them were gasping for breath.

Standing on tiptoe, her arms extended, Anitra ran her fingers through Mark's hair, her body undulating hungrily against his. "God, you're big," she commented as she pulled his lips to hers again. Mark felt the pliant strength of her agile secretary's fingers as they worked their way down' his neck. Her short, but well-shaped oval nails sent a tingling along his spine as she worked even lower. Then her hands were fumbling at his waist an instant before deftly opening Ms belt and seeking out the swelling firmness. All of the lost days, the demals, the brutality and bloodshed, the punishing routine of his physical conditioning came crashing in on him and Mark had no doubt how this evening was going to end.

Bending at the knees slightly, Mark picked the young woman up in his arms, crushing her to his chest. He winced at the strain it caused on his recent wounds, but threw caution aside as they crossed the darkened room toward a doorway- beyond.

"Not there," Anitra panted close to his ear. "That's Lynn-Ann's. The other door."

Mark Hardin came fully awake, his mind and body functional in the same instant. He sat up, recalling his surroundings. Reaching out, he lit a small bedside lamp. The bedclothes were scattered on the floor around them and Anitra Carson lay on her back in a deep sleep, a small, satisfied smile on her lips. Mark climbed from the bed and bent to kiss her before dressing. He was not callous enough to leave without a word, so he awakened her with a touch. Her eyes were glassy and it took a few seconds for her to gather herself.

"I'mmmh. That's the best bribe a girl ever got. Staying for breakfast?"

"Can't. Have a lot of things to do."

"Speaking of business, I'll see you get in to see my boss any time you want."

"Fine. But . . . you know I didn't . . . we didn't do this for business."

"Yeah. Pleasure." Her warm, throaty chuckle filled the room. "Strictly for pleasure."

"I'll call you tomor . . ." They both grinned foolishly. "Later today. I have to go now."

"Wait," Anitra called him back. "You never did tell me about those bandages. What happened?"

"Later on that, too. If I stay here, I'll never get any sleep. Call you." He reached the door before she spoke again.

"Call me. You're a good man, Charlie Brown."

"You're not so bad in the woman department, Lucy."

Anitra stuck her tongue out at his retreating back.

Chapter 8: FOUR DAYS AND COUNTING

Ralph Deveraux's office resembled the situation room in a general's headquarters more than the office of the president of Washington's most popular social club. On one wall hung a huge map of Chile. Another wall was covered with charts depicting war materials and supplies manufactured by the many companies in which he and others of the upper echelon of SIE held controlling interest. A column on each chart represented what quantities of each item were to be ordered by Chile to fight for their "independence" against foreign aggressors. Equipment was to be ordered through the U.S. Government.

Present in the room on that morning following the successful demonstration of their drug techniques, were Brooks LePage, Lt. Colonel Clevon Harris, Jesus Montenegro and Senator Jirgens, their "tame" senator. Deveraux was presiding over their meeting.

"Gentlemen, as you know, the success of our demonstration last night was astounding. We have the complete cooperation of the men around the vice president. They urge that we do not delay a day longer than necessary. After due consideration, we are speeding up the entire program. Four days from now the president of the United States will be assassinated. Already the first dose of drugs is being administered to the vice president and his hypnotic conditioning has begun. Within a week, the country will be ours."

"Hail the power!" the others cried.

"Now, to business. From the quantities and amounts involved, you can all see we stand to profit considerably from this convenient little war in Chile. A war, gentlemen, I feel I can assure you all just might escalate to include most of Latin America—thus bringingus even greater profits."

"Many of these nations, Senor, are poor and cannot afford the expensive hardware your companies sell."

"A small matter, Jesus," Brooks LePage assured him. "They can always appeal to our government for a subsidy."

"Of course," Deveraux expanded on the theme. "The American taxpayer is far from poor. As yet they are nowhere near the maximum that can be obtained from their pockets. You can be sure that there will be little opposition when our new president asks Congress to vote additional taxes so they can increase aid to Latin American countries in order to 'keep Democracy safe in the Western Hemisphere.' So long as there is a pay raise worked in it for them, our politicians will never hesitate to approve higher taxes for the people."

"You are a cynic," Clevon Harris said softly.

"I am a realist, Colonel. Look at the millions that were supposed to be used to help your people. Did one single black man in a single ghetto benefit from it? No, they created new bureaus and staffed them with thousands of workers—all on high salaries, naturally—and turned a perfectly straight face to the taxpayers and said, 'See what we are doing for the plight of the black man.' Horse manure!"

Angry fires blazed in the black officer's eyes. "I left the ghetto when I was ten years old, Mr. Deveraux. I was lucky; my father was a doctor. And the U.S. Air Force Academy is hardly a training ground for black revolutionaries. I have, though, had my share

of discrimination, slurs and put-downs. I have seen others that were really hurting. Black babies that have starved or been bitten to death by rats. Hell, that's why I'm with you on this thing. I don't ever want something like that to happen to me ... ever. You can sit there in your protective robe of white supremacy and call it realism, man, but it makes me want to puke. I get so goddamned mad I want to go out and smash every smug face on every whitey motherfucker I can find. Deveraux, you don't give a fuck about the black man and you know it. And v. ." he faltered, "I'm ashamed to say that I no longer give a fuck about any black man but this one. Me! So, let's get on with the talk about profits and save the soapbox oratory for the suckers, huh?"

As Cleveon Harris had wanted to Ms speech, Ralph Deveraux's protruding, froggy eyes had grown hard and as distantly cold as a glacial landscape. "Are you quite through, Colonel? Any time you find our methods or anything said in tMs organization not to your liking, you may take your racist Black Panther bullsMt and get the hell out! Is that perfectly clear?"

Tension crackled through the room. Deveraux rarely used profanity and his words had a telling effect on each of them. Every man was on the edge of his seat. At first, Harris had reacted to Deveraux's stinging words as if he had been slapped. Now he sat, angry eyes locked on those of the SIE leader, unmoving. Slowly a broad smile split his dark features. "I figure I'll stay, man. You're all right for a honkey bastard."

Strained almost to the breaking point, the tension shattered as Brooks LePage spoke through a widening grin, "I'm glad you decided that. The reason I like you so much, Cleveon, is that you are such a mean son of a bitch."

Hams- slipped into jive talk, a habit he frequently engaged in when embarrassed or confused. "Dig it, man. Here we are, planning a shooting war in Chile and rappin' about doin' a number on the president, like it was an everyday thing, then we start hasslin' each other. Heavy, man, real heavy. I'll apologize ... if you will." He extended a big hand toward Ralph Deveraux.

With only the slightest of hesitations, Deveraux acted in kind, his blunt-fingered hand was swallowed in the black man's larger one. "Done. Now let us continue." Before he could, however, there was a buzzing of the intercom and Ms secretary informed Mm that Mr. Polio of Brooks LePage's staff was outside with urgent information. It could not be delayed. Deveraux looked to Ms chief enforcer and received a puzzled nod of approval. "Send him in."

Louis Polio entered, bold as brass and not at all intimidated by the men before him. The displays had been covered by the butcher paper overleaves in which they had been brought and now faces turned to the ex-Mafia gunman as he stopped opposite Deveraux, the table between them.

"Mr. Deveraux. That broad we have worMn' for us, Lynn-Ann Simpson. Last night she got potted again and started unloading some sort of tMng on me. I couldn't get It all from her, she played it cute, ya know?"

"Get on with it," Deveraux interrupted.

"The broad's onto something. Kept hinting at some sort of avenger type. Calls him the Penetrator or some such. Says he's right here, now, and anyone with ... ah, how'd she say it? ... bad vibes had better look out. Said Ms name was Hard-on or something like that. Sounded silly to me at first, but I thought you oughtta know.

"Think it could be another of those Justice De-

partment deals like last year?" he volunteered. "*Operation Hardguy*? A code name, maybe?"

All the chill that had edged Ralph Deveraux's voice in his encounter with Clevon Harris was back. "You are retained by Mr. LePage to keep dissenters in line, Mr. Polio, not to make decisions or to think," he informed the triggerman in a superior tone. "We appreciate the information. We will take it under consideration at the proper time and advise you if we need your services."

"You wanna know what I think," Chicken Louie blundered on. "Ya oughtta snatch the broad and find out What it is she knows. Get me?"

"Only too well. We'll let you know."

The dismissal was total and complete. Chicken Louie left the room quickly, smarting at the rebuff when he had expected praise for his loyalty. *Screw them*, he thought angrily as he stomped through the corridors, *things were sure different with the Families*. They had manners.

Behind him, Deveraux addressed the others in a haughty manner. "His hoodlum manners and hoodlum mentality disgust me. Once we are in power, he and all his kind must go."

Their business was concluded in half an hour's time. They departed with Deveraux's reminder that the timetable was greatly accelerated. Each man was to attend to his immediate tasks in regard to the master plan. Clevon Harris was last to reach the door and as he did, Ralph Deveraux spoke. "Oh, Colonel Harris, would you stay a moment?"

Brooks LePage secured the door; all three took seats around Deveraux's desk. "About What Polio said," Ralph Deveraux began. "The situation had already come to our attention and it is time something is done. We have this Simpson woman. Oh, yes, she was on our payroll. She was supposed to

gather what information she could that would be of aid to us. Also to keep an eye on that boyfriend of hers, Captain Levin. However, she has turned fractious. She won't divulge whatever it is she has on this 'mysterious avenger' she was babbling about last night. She demands a rather large cash settlement. As she puts it, she, 'wants something big for this.' Considering her attitude and your, ah, peculiar preferences, we have decided to allow you to interrogate her. You do have the time, don't you?"

To Harris' nod, he continued. "Fine. Take your time. We want it all."

Clevon Harris was surprised and flattered by this offer, made so soon after his emotional outburst during the conference. Anticipation changed his face into a jungle mask as he thought of how he would handle this interrogation and the special pleasures he would enjoy during and afterward. Pleasures that were as familiar to him as they were twisted. He had, from earliest childhood, gained his sexual kicks from the sight of others' agony and bloodshed. His maleness swelled with expectation as he thought of the release that the sight of red blood against a blonde's fair skin would bring to him. Sliding again into the ghetto jive lingo, he smirked to Deveraux and LePage, "She want something big, man, she gonna get it from this dude."

Chapter 9 s LITTLE GIRL LOST

This would make the third try today. With each previous contact, he had heard several names and addresses that were written on the list he had made in the D.C. library, but had come no closer to the top man than this. Every low-echelon operator he had questioned had referred him to Didgets Calomare and his numbers operation. Time was running short, and if Mark didn't score here things would really get rough.

He eased the nose of his rental car into a parking place on First Street, half a block from the shabby building near the corner of First and I that housed Didgets Calomare's numbers office. The idea of a "black Mafia" was new to Mark. He knew that some criminal elements of the black community were organizing, but that the clannish, fiercely possessive old-line Sicilians would begin to use black men as street soldiers and bag men was something else again. Yet, it was a fact beyond dispute.

"You won't have any trouble finding Didgets," one frightened gunsel had told Mark as he stared down the black tunnel of a .45 Commander. "He's the only white face down there."

The Penetrator slid out of the car and nudged his Colt back into place. He had replaced the one held as "evidence" that morning from the blue canvas flight bag of special equipment, stored in his Beechcraft Baron at National Airport. In light of how fast things were breaking, he needed its comforting

presence. The bag and all of its contents were now riding in the trunk of the plain-looking gray Chevrolet he had rented. Stepping over the soiled curb, he started down the littered sidewalk.

He was conscious of the fact he was making waves, roughing up button men and small operators and leaving them alive to talk about it. With this most recent turn of events he had little to choose from, and bringing them out in the open seemed the best of several bad options. For the time being, he would settle for a name. The name of the Man, Mr. Big in the D.C. area. According to the newspaper reports he had read, the numbers operation now controlled by Didgets Calomare had been knocked over twice by vice officers of the Metropolitan Police. A check of city records indicated that the same man, Gregory Francello, still owned it and a casual area assessment had yielded useful information. Many men, young, black and hard-looking, streamed in and out of the place all day long. Also he had obtained the name and address of the property management firm charged with renting space in the building. From them, Mark learned that the rooms he had been told were used by Calomare for his numbers setup were supposed to be unavailable due to remodeling. It all fit a pattern and the pattern was spelled *Cosa Nostra*.

Mark skipped up the worn, stone steps to the entranceway. Peeling, faded red paint gave the old brownstone a scabrous appearance and grime-coated windows did little to improve the image. Inside the hall it was as cold as outdoors, unheated and dimly lit. There wasn't an office directory, only a line of mailboxes. None gave any indication of the location Mark sought and he passed them quickly, climbing stairs to the third floor.

A lean, muscular black man lounged in a raggedy

overstuffed chair near the door. At first glance, the man appeared to be a casual loafer, but the cloth straining bulge at his left armpit gave Mark no doubt as to his purpose. Ava hissed softly and the young man was in the paroxysms of collapse before he could cry out a warning or brace the unexpected visitor. As deep sleep closed over him from the dosage of M-99 and pentothol, Mark Hardin reached for the doorknob.

"Hey, boy," a voice rasp from inside. "You know better'n to open the door during a count. Wha ...?" his voice choked off as the Penetrator entered the room. Two button men on either side of the desk streaked for their rods, but not fast enough as the muzzle of Ava dropped first one then the other, putting them to sleep.

Mark's voice was low and hard. "I want the Man. Who is he, where is he? And I want the girl."

Didgets Calomare had served many faithful years with the organization. He had seen just about every means of torture and death but he had never seen a heater that hissed like a snake. And he had never before been confronted by the likes of this big, dark-featured son of a bitch that held that gun. These thoughts, the money piled on his desk, and the fact his three boys had been taken out so swiftly and silently, rattled Didgets. He thought of going for his own rod and rejected the idea just as quickly.

"Come on, come on," the big man demanded while Calomare struggled to make a decision. "I want the girl."

That decided Didgets. "What girl?" He would fight for time. "Listen, if you want today's - take, you're cuttin' into something too big to handle. You'll never have a chance."

"Screw the take, Didgets. *I want the girl.*"

Christ! He knows my name, Calomare thought,

the first edges of panic touching him. "I don't know nothin' about any girl. What broad? I tell you, brother, you made a big mistake in coming here."

A big, hard hand that he never saw move swept across the desk and connected with Didget's face, knocking him from his padded swivel chair.

In two quick strides, the Penetrator was beside the fallen numbers man, bolstering his dart pistol. From a kit strapped to his leg, he took a hypodermic needle and a slender vial. Loading the barrel of the syringe, he skillfully injected the Mafioso. At first, Calomare fought against the drug, but his writhing slowed and his features relaxed. When he began to mumble, Mark questioned him. He had what he wanted in three fast queries, but he went back over it several times to be sure. Then he took a different vital marked with a red skull and bones from his kit and loaded the syringe a second time . . . No need to leave more loose ends dangling than necessary. No one but his fellow criminals would miss Didgets Calomare and his absence would make the world a little cleaner.

Out on the street again, the action Mark had sought suddenly caught up to him. It seemed to happen in slow motion. There was a puff of cement dust a foot in front of him and a gap in the sidewalk appeared as if by magic. It was followed almost at the same time by the scream of a ricochet and the dull glint of metal, climbing upward across the walk, followed by another whine from a secondary ricochet as the bullet struck a building front. Then came the sharp crack of a high-powered rifle as Mark dived into a trash-littered basement entrance.

Below street level, in relative safety, Mark hooked back the front of his sports jacket and felt the comforting weight of the Colt Commander in his hand. There was a momentary lull following the first two

shots. A woman had screamed. Two small children wailed on counterpoint scales from overhead and down the block. Mark hazarded a look over the sidewalk lip. Immediately another shot sang through the chill afternoon air. But the angle was too steep. The slug slapped into the stone wall behind him and fell, spent, into the piled trash, a flattened lump of harmless metal. The exchange had been enough, however, for Mark to locate the hidden sniper. He moved to a different place along the outer wall and made ready to pop up again.

The urgency to get his target and be away before the police arrived overcame the sniper's caution, and as Mark's head popped above sidewalk level again, he stood up full-length, exposing himself as he jerked his weapon toward the movement. It was all Mark needed.

Grasping his pistol in both hands, Mark snapped off three rounds; the first two on top of each other and the third a heartbeat later. Cheap glass, from the brittle old window, exploded inward, slashing at the sniper even as the first two slugs smacked into his chest. The third bullet took him in the belly, to the right and just above his navel. The shock of their impact jerked the rifle from his hands and it took out the remaining glass as it fell to the street. Impact of the rifle on concrete shattered the stock noisily and then there was silence. The wailing chorus took up again, augmented by other voices and the yapping of a small dog in the window above Mark's head.

The Penetrator waited a few seconds to be sure the sniper didn't have company, then hurried up the basement steps, holstering his .45. He walked quickly to his car and stepped in. Pulling smoothly out into the street, he drove away, confident—considering the neighborhood—that when the police ar-

rived no one would have seen anything or heard anything. There had been one more try on him and one more failure. He was sure now that he was onto something big and at last he had a name and an address out in Chewy Chase.

Everything had begun to fall into place earlier that day when he had called Anitra at her office. Some of the bits and pieces had taken on their proper meaning, Mark believed, as she described in an excited, frightened voice what had happened that morning.

"Bart, I'm worried about Lynn-Ann. She's disappeared."

"Probably went to work, or gone off on a toot."

"No, she had the day off. And it was what she said, what happened ..."

A premonition came over Mark. Had she told Anitra about the Penetrator? "What did she say?"

"She came home this morning," Anitra launched into it in a rush. "While I was getting ready for work. She was pretty drunk and I didn't pay close enough attention, I realize now. It was all confused. She was going on about there being a lot of trouble coming for the District. It was about something named the Penetrator and someone called Hardin. She said they'd learn to listen when she talked and not make fun of her. That now they'd have to pay to find out what she knew about this Penetrator."

"Then she said that if those high and mighty idiots got on the wrong side of the Penetrator, they'd wish they were never born. That this Hardin was in town right now and he'd show them. Oh, it was wild, Bart. She was almost raving. She said that if they didn't pay for what she knew, she'd laugh while they got their asses kicked."

Mark kept his voice low and even. "Just booze

talk, Anitra. Lynn-Ann was probably enjoying the great American pastime of taking it out on that anonymous 'them' who were out to get her."

Fear was edging out the worry in Anitra's voice when she answered him. "It's more than that, Bart, I know it is. I ... I started to worry after I got here. I called home three times. No answer. So, I'm going to take an early lunch and go back to the apartment."

"Relax, it may be nothing. But, I'll call you there in half an hour."

"She isn't here," Anitra answered the phone. "I thought all the way over here that she might be sleeping it off, but she's gone."

"No chance that she went off somewhere to sober up or drink some more?"

"No. There's been a fight. The coffee table is smashed, a chair turned over and one lamp is broken on the floor. Oh, Bart, she's been kidnapped. And ... " Emotion broke her and she sobbed violently before she could continue. "And I don't know why . . or what to do. You have to help. Please."

"Sure. But what can I do?"

"You know Dan Griggs. For all I know, you could be one of his undercover men. Isn't kidnapping a federal offense? Can't you go after whoever did this?"

Mark kept tight control over himself. "I don't work for Dan. He's a friend, nothing more. Have you notified the police? If you haven't, do it. And ... I'll ask around. See Dan or someone over at Justice about it. But I don't think the FBI or any federal agency can come in until some time has passed. Call the police and take it easy. I'll look into it, see what I can do."

Mark's looking into it had so far taken him through the rabbit warrens of organized crime in the District of Columbia from one petty hood to an-

other and at last to Didgets Calomare. Calomare had yielded the name of Don Mario Genova and his fancy address. Now he felt the Penetrator had all he needed to strike.

Midwinter darkness came early to the Maryland countryside, providing a mask for Mark Hardin's movements as he carefully scouted the exclusive neighborhood in which Don Mario Genova lived. Vacuformed, plastic, magnetic signs—prepared in Professor Haskins' shop long ago—converted his nondescript Chevrolet into a Western Union messenger car, a liquor store delivery wagon or an insurance salesman's car, easily disguising it from the perimeter guards around the Don's expensive house.

Careful approaches from three different directions satisfied Mark's mind as to the location of all of the outside men. Now, slumped down in an apparently empty car—half a block from Geneva's drive—he waited for the guards to change and the lights to go out in the front of the house. He had a long wait.

As the minutes ticked into hours, Mark ran over all he had to date. There had been that letter from SIE to the Fraulein seeking to book entertainers. "Compliant talent," the letter had phrased it. Then Salvatore Bentini's blasted car and his dying words. Fred Walters had died at the hands of an assassin, and Lynn-Ann Simpson was now missing. There had been the three attempts on his life. Everything smacked of the Mafia. Everything but the sloppy manner in which it was being handled. Too many loose strings. So far the whole picture didn't add up. He needed an answer, and Mark felt the answer was going to come from Don Mario Genova.

The guard changed at midnight and the lights went out not long after. Mark gave the new men an hour and a half to get settled and bored before mak-

ing Ms move. Dressed in black, Ms face darkened by burned cork, Mark glided silently from his car into the shadows. Moving from hedge to hedge, through pools of lesser darkness, he closed on the house.

Using special cartridges for Ava—designed to give a longer sleep of two or three hours—Mark took out the outside guards. The gas pistol softly hissed a pathway to Genova's residence. It was swift, silent and easy. The inside guards, however, would be another matter. They had access to the kitchen, to coffee, as well as opportunity to move around, talk together, and keep alert. Getting past them called for a different tactic.

Mark crouched beside a kitchen window, listening to muffled voices from inside. Numbing cold seeped into Ms body as he strained to make sense out of the distorted sound. Then the coffee klatch broke up, leaving the crew chief alone in the Mtchen. Mark went into action.

Pounding softly but urgently on the kitchen door, he adopted the gutter-tough, slightly whiney voice of a street soldier. "Hey, f•Christ's sake open up, Gino. It's colder'n a well digger's ass out here. Let's have a pot of coffee for the boys. They's freezin' where they stand." He went on pounding as he talked, hoping to mask his voice enough to keep from tipping off the crew boss.

"All right, already!" Gino griped from the other side of the door while he worked the locks and swung the panel back. "Waddaya, bunch a pansies ya can't take a little cold?" Mark let Mm finish the sentence before sending him to sleepy-time with a gentle hiss from Ava. He caught the writhing man and lowered him quietly to the floor, stepping in and around him and closing the door. As he moved, he kept up a one-sided conversation going for the benefit of any nearby ears.

"Hey, I mean it's cold out there. Thanks for the joe. We sure need it. We gonna get any relief soon?" By then he was as far as the hall door and easing it open. Through the crack he saw another man near the front door. Easing through the narrow opening, Mark slid along one wall until he was within range. Ava claimed another sleeper and the unseen invader was streaking upstairs in search of Don Mario's bedroom.

Don Mario Genova, supreme head of the Family's operations in the District of Columbia and a member of *La Commissione*, was half-roused from sleep by the spasmodic twitching of his wife, who was beside him in the bed. But he was jolted rudely awake by the painful presence of a metal object on his left ear. His eyes snapped open and he made a momentary grab toward the .38 on his nightstand before he was fully aware that the object on him was the muzzle of a pistol.

"Nice and easy," a voice spoke out of the dark. "You ever see what a twenty-two mag hollow point will do to a guy's head?"

"You're a dead man," the Don replied, slowly taking control of himself and—he thought—the situation. "You couldn't have picked a dumber place, loft man. I don't know how you got past all the boys downstairs. You must be pretty good. But you're a stupid burglar, man. You picked the wrong house . . . a Family house, *capishT*"

He got nothing but a whispery chuckle, cold and somehow unafraid.

"I mean, man, you are trying to boost Our Thing. *La Cosa Nostra*, understand, stupid?"

"Stow it, Genova. I came here to get some answers. Your boys are all asleep, just like your wife. Yell all you want, they won't wake up for a couple

of hours. Time enough to wring you out . . . easy or the hard way, your choice."

The Penetrator snapped on the bedside light and withdrew the twin barrels of his .22 mag Hi-Standard derringer from the Don's ear, letting him see the tiny weapon that had held him at bay. Moving down, he took a seat on the bed, facing Mario Genova. In his left hand was his gas-powered dart gun. "This Is what put them to sleep. I can kill with it, too, if you give me reason enough. So, talk."

"You the fuzz? A Fed?" A different thought crossed his mind. "Someone put a contract on me?"

"Wrong all around." For further answer, Mark laid Ava in his lap and removed from a narrow pocket of the tight-fitting thermal jacket a two-and-a-half-Inch hand-shaped blue flint arrowhead and handed it to the Mafioso. He got a blank look in return. He began. "The girl. What did you snatch her for?"

"What girl?" There was a look of genuine surprise on the Mafia leader's face. "I don't know who the hell you mean."

"I want the girl and I want to know what you're doing inside the SIE operation."

"Those bastards! You workin' for them?"

"Could be, Give it to me."

"Fuck you."

"Then it has to be the hard way." Reaching across to the zipper pocket in the Inside right leg of his insulated thermal trousers, Mark drew out the hypo kit. "Let's have your arm," he commanded.

Eying the needle with growing worry, Don Mario Genova refused cooperation. "You'll play hell sticking me with both hands full. Any noise and . . . §§"

"The guards are out cold and," he raised the flat-sided, squeeze-action derringer until Don Mario was

looking down the twin snake eyes, "I don't give a damn if I kill you or not. The arm."

"Take it, tough man."

Mark laid the syringe carefully on Don Mario's bed, then pocketed the derringer. His left hand came up with Ava and fired a dart into the fleshy part of the surprised Mafioso's arm. Before Don Genova was beyond understanding, Mark spoke. "Who said I have to play by the rules?"

He used the fifteen minutes the man would be out to search a desk he found in the adjoining room, the Don's study. It yielded nothing of help to him and, keeping an eye toward the bedroom, was back when Don Mario Genova began to move feebly. Carefully measuring the dosage, Mark gave him a shot.

"Now, let's start all over again. What about the girl?"

"No girl . . ." Don Mario spoke distantly. "No other girl. I love my wife."

Mark cursed and started again. You had to be very careful how you asked questions of someone full of babble juice. "Who snatched Lynn-Ann Simpson? What . . ." *Careful*, he reminded himself, *only one question at a time*.

"No snatch jobs. Federal District makes . . . federal cops. No girl. Sim . . . Simpson."

Recalling the hostility in his victim when he mentioned SIE, Mark switched his line of questioning, asking the Mafia big shot about the social club. The answers he received brought a chill and a feeling of disgust.

The Mafia, he learned, was not interested in getting a handle on SIE at all, but in eliminating it entirely. They weren't sure what it was that SIE was in the process of doing, but the organization's ambitions were known to threaten the very existence of

la Cosa Nostra. The only men who knew for sure were dead. Blown up in a car. So, the boys had decided that SIE had to go. As a member of *La Commissioner* Don Mario informed Mark, he was convinced that another member—whom he did not name, but Mark knew to be Benfini—had the goods on SIE and was hit by them while discussing methods of destroying that organization. Louis Polio was no longer in the employ of any Family, in fact, he was viewed with extreme prejudice. In other words, a contract was out somewhere on the pint-sized button man.

Mark returned the questioning to Lynn-Ann and was eventually satisfied that the Don and his men had nothing to do with her kidnapping. He administered a dosage that would keep Don Mario asleep until daylight, then he quietly left the house.

As he drove from the neighborhood, Mark was faced with the greatest dilemma he had ever encountered. He was now convinced of the error of his original theory and satisfied that the Mafia had nothing to do with Fred Walters' assassination. Or with Lynn-Ann Simpson's kidnapping. Everything now pointed to the *Societe Internationale d'Elite* and if he pursued a course of action to bring an end to their criminal activities, he must, at the same time, do a favor for the Mafia. He was none too happy about the prospect of doing the Syndicate's job for them, nevertheless, he was determined to do something about SIE.

Mark was fighting against time—kidnap victims weren't noted for their longevity—and he was sure that time would tell . . .

Chapter 10 s LITTLE GIRL FOUND

Lynn-Ann's mutilated body was found the next morning. Her nude body was discovered floating face-down in the Tidal Basin, near the rear of the Jefferson Memorial. The press got a lot of mileage out of the fact she had been repeatedly sexually assaulted. Headlines screamed that a brutal sex-slayer was on the loose in the District. Front pages were crowded with recollections of the Boston Strangler, the Chicago nurses and similar mass murders. Television commentators editorially speculated upon the ability of the Metropolitan Police to handle such a bizarre situation. Car pools were hastily formed and women vowed to lock their doors and windows.

In light of what had occurred, Mark called Anitra at home, rather than her office. He got her on the first try. Tears had left their imprint in her voice, but she urged Mark to come over at once. He agreed and left Ms motel.

On the 1-495 bypass around Washington, D.C., headed toward Anitra's apartment In Silver Spring, Mark had time for thought. With the murder of yet a second Innocent, he was determined to get to the heart of whatever SIE was up to that, to them, justified torture and murder. His session with the Mafia chieftain the previous night still bothered him, and he tried to fit the pieces to spell out what was at stake.

Bentini, Walters, and Simpson: it sounded more like a team of attorneys. Violent death in each in-

stance, two assassinations. Assassination! Fred had been press secretary to the president. Could they be after bigger game? That was too unreal to consider.

Whatever their goal, Mark felt a growing urgency. The manner in which they had disposed of Lynn-Ann's body indicated that they were indifferent to its discovery. Mark could not help but think that this indifference came from confidence on the part of the SIE people that it was too late for anything to have an adverse effect on their plan. Denied the excellent intelligence data provided by Professor Haskins and Red Eagle, Mark was forced to continue to play it by ear. Making up for time lost when he had gone off on a false trail would be difficult. Despite the emotional shock she had experienced from Lynn-Ann's death, he would have to pump Anita for everything she knew about SIE.

Far from being prostrate with grief when he arrived, Anita Carson was consumed with insatiable desire. She closed the door behind Mark and threw herself against him, her hands exploring his body with a frantic urgency. He tried to push clear and she gave an agonized moan, clasping him to her.

"Oh, hold me, Bart. Hold me close. I . . . I've never been afraid of death before but . . . now . . . I just can't handle it." Her lush red hair fell loose, revealing her frightened eyes. "Oh, please don't talk now. Later we can talk, later. I have to do something to keep death away."

Sex had been the farthest thing from Mark's mind when he had knocked on the apartment door. He tried to push the frightened girl from him, but she clung even tighter and covered his mouth with her own before he could speak. Her hands worked in earnest now, groping, stroking until Mark's body betrayed him and he felt a hot rush of desire. The

flames of his sudden need were rapidly fanned to a height matching her own, and all protest was stilled.

Reality and reason returned slowly as they lay beside each other on the shambles of her bed. Anitra turned a calculating eye toward Mark. "After . . . after they found her, I went through Lynn-Ann's things. I found her diary."

"And?"

"She had written something in it yesterday morning. Before they took her. At first, I thought it might have been this Hardin person, reading what she had there, then I went through it again. She called Mm the Penetrator. Said he had been here in the apartment. She wrote down how handsome and big he was and how much she wanted to take him to bed. But," she paused archly, "she also said it was a no-no. That he was . . . my . . . my new boyfriend. Remind you of anyone you know?"

Mark kept a straight face. "No. Should it?"

' A hard edge came into Anitra's voice. "Listen, Bart Lowe. I don't know who you are or what you do or even why you came to the District. I don't care. But you seem to have meant-something—cryptic—to Lynn-Arm. She's been murdered. Butchered, really. I . . . I had to identify the body, and I was sick for half an hour after. Oh, God, how can people do things like that to other people? She's lying there, mutilated and dead, *because she knew something about you!* .Whatever it was, whenever it happened, someone wanted to find out what she knew and she died for it.

"You have to have some feelings about this," she changed tack. "Some human feelings about . . . everything. You've come here twice, made love, talked of gentle things with me. We've become lovers and we need each other. You can't refuse to help me

now. I don't care how you have to go about it, but you must do something about what has happened."

His mind in a turmoil, Mark got up from the bed and began to dress. What Anitra had said had hit home. It was true. He mentally berated himself for the weakness that had allowed—even for a few hours—his physical needs and demands to overcome his sense of proportion, to distract him from his purpose and involve himself in the lives of these two young women. Yet he had yielded, and conscience demanded he do something about it.

But because he was compelled to protect Anitra and other innocents from any possible harm, he was at a loss. He could never reveal to this lovely, passionate girl who the Penetrator was and what he did. He could find no easy way to let her off gracefully and leave her thinking he was not involved and unable or unwilling to do anything about it. He decided at last to feign anger. Every word, he saw as he spoke, was like a slap on her face.

"Just because I slept with you a couple of times, you think you can lead me around by my dong. Forget it, baby.

"I'd like to do something about Lynn-Ann, about all the Lynn-Anns who have ever met a horrible death at the hands of people like that. But where does a guy begin? I don't even know how to go about it. I'm sorry, Anitra, but if you had visions of pumping up my male ego with your pneumatic body and sending me riding out in my white hat and black mask to bring vengeance to evildoers, you picked the wrong guy. Try Les Hyatt or Captain Levin. Levin knew her better. He has a good reason for seeking out her killers."

He finished dressing and stood over the shocked girl, his face twisted. "I never asked for what happened to me. It just grew. All I want is a job, a new

name and a chance to live down a past I'm not all that proud of. Good-bye, Anitra. I'm sorry, but good-bye."

"Good-bye!" Anitra screamed, hurling an empty ashtray at the closing door. "You sorry son of a bitch!"

Chapter 11s SOFT PROBE

At eleven o'clock that night, Mark's mental alarm awakened him. He showered and towed himself into full alertness. Through his mind ran not thoughts of the complexity of this situation with SIE, but rather the steps of *Sho-tu-ca* regimen to heighten Ms awareness, sharpen all Ms senses, and aid him to pass, almost invisibly, through the ranks of Ms enemies. His visit to the "SIE Club tonight was to be a soft probe, to gather information and, if possible, a prisoner to interrogate. Without intelligence data, it would be impossible to plan an attack. For this type of work, silence was needed.

Mark dressed in the same dark, insulated clothing used on his visit to Don Mario Geneva's the previous evening. He slipped into blackened deck shoes. Since this was to be a quiet operation, he chose to take only the dart pistol, with his Hi-Standard derringer as a backup. The hypo kit was securely zipped into its leg pocket, and the snug clasp of leather straps held Ms stilettolike knife ready in his right sleeve. As an afterthought, he slipped his Buck clasp-knife into a coat pocket, doused the lights and left the motel.

A light, scudding snow fell, dancing in his headlights as he maneuvered through sparse traffic toward the eastern shore. Snow continued to fall as the Penetrator took Maryland 404 and headed toward the club. But warmed by the Gulf Stream current, the snow melted as it met the ground.

Darkness was complete under the lowering sky of wooly snow clouds, and the air was bitingly cold.

Mark Hardin felt a heady exhilaration as he neared his objective. He was doing what he knew he did best and he was confident of success. Like the proverbial retired fire horse, he had been stamping in his stall at the first whiff of smoke. Now he could see the blaze and was anxious to get to the fire.

If SIE was indeed out to set up a master criminal network that would rival the long tentacles of the Mafia, their sheer megalomania—which they must possess to ever envision such a scheme—might provide a weakness in their defenses. Such audacity rarely allowed itself the sobering thought that they might have left something uncovered, open to attack. He would soon know.

On Friday and Saturday nights, things rarely shut down at SIE before two in the morning, so Mark had ample time to check out the surrounding territory. He scouted every road, drive and country lane near SIE's mansion, paying particular attention to one dirt track that ran parallel to the golf course near the fourteenth hole. Following a second circuit of the place, it was there that he chose to stop, pulling his car off into a cleared spot under overhanging trees. He completed his night attack gear by pulling a dark knit hoodlike cap over his head, covering his face. Then he set out on foot to check out the golf course and a few outlying buildings.

Frost-stiffened grass on the fairway crunched under his soft tread. It, and the low moan of the wind, made the only sounds. To Mark, who was an infrequent if not indifferent player, it was just another golf course. However, his sportsman's eye soon began to notice that the links had been cleverly laid out, taking advantage of terrain, natural vegetation and the vicious crosswinds to create some unusual haz-

ards. It could provide considerable challenge, even to Jack Nicklaus or Lee Trevino. He might, he decided, even like to play this course himself, sometime. Now, there were other things. His eye picked out the darker form of a squat, cement-block building situated in a cluster of trees.

Mark moved to it in gliding, soundless steps. There was no indication of occupancy and a few seconds with his picks opened the padlock. It was a caretaker's shed, filled with mowing equipment and spare marker poles. Shelves held weed killer, old balls—retrieved from the many hazards—and elongated metal cylinders for replacing cups. He sat in an old lawn chair, avoiding for a few minutes the icy wind outside. His knife wounds had troubled him less as time went by, but they still hampered the full freedom of movement to which he was accustomed. He had removed the stitches the previous day. Now he used this brief respite to ease the nagging itch of healing flesh. He could sure use Red Eagle's healing creams about now. Mark hoped he could wind up this affair soon so he could return to The Stronghold and the welcome comfort of the old Indian's ministrations.

Moving with silent haste, Mark checked out as much of the outside area as he could, before returning to his car. Coffee from his thermos and a sandwich restored his earlier vigor and sense of well-being. A check of his watch indicated only a short time remained before he could enter the main building. Shrugging down in the seat, he decided on a catnap.

At three-fifteen Mark awakened, fully refreshed. He made final preparations for invading SIE's headquarters. Into an outer pouch of his jacket, Mark placed a coil of fine wire, a small pair of insulated

nonferrous sidecutters and a roll of burgler alarm tape. He added a glass cutter and masking tape, then faded into the blackness of the night.

Entering the old antebellum mansion proved easier than Mark had thought at first. In the mottled shadows of a huge magnolia, he slipped over the low wall that separated the golf course from the patio of poolside tables. He remembered that the wide French doors ahead of him opened into the main dining room and it was there he headed. At one upper corner of the double glass doors, he located the alarm-system wires.

Working swiftly but carefully, he cut the glass near those wires and, hinging it with masking tape, tapped it out gently. Then he scraped the insulation from one wire at a time, repeating the manipulation on the opposite side of the doors. Attaching leads from the hair-fine two-stranded wire, he unreeled it backward to the "sending" side of the alarm system, attaching those ends last. The magnetic catch at the dividing point of the doors was now successfully bypassed. He repeated his actions, with slight variations, for the pressure-sensitive sentinel alarm on the door catch. Sliding the rigid, extrastrong blade of his Buck knife between the facings, he slipped the latch and opened the doors. Entering silently, he closed the door behind him.

He began his search in the office wing. Here he found yet another alarm system; photoelectric cells set near floor level, just high enough to avoid being triggered by a stray mouse or other small intruder. Mark produced a small mirror with an adjustable stand, setting it at the proper height. Working from the far side of the light beam, careful of the angle, he arranged it to reflect illumination into the sensitive light cell, closer to it than where he intended to cross. On the opposite side, he placed a small, pow-

erful pen-light at an angle to the mirror, creating a circuit of its own. Now he was ready to enter the corridor.

Moving undetected down the hall, he fanned each of the offices. Desk drawers, file cabinets, a safe left carelessly open: none of them provided anything of use. Returning, he removed the mirror and flashlight, placing them again in a pocket of his trousers. Locating the basement stairs, he elected to check out the lower floor first.

He passed through the steam rooms and massage parlor to the handball and tennis courts beyond. A tight grin creased his grim features when he paused to read an announcement on the bulletin board. Billy Jean King would be in training at the club in February for the Australian matches. Gallery tickets would be available for members and their immediate families only. Big doings for an outfit that appeared to be trying to take over the Mafia's action. His search also revealed a small, closetlike room that on closer examination proved to be an elevator. Entering, Mark pressed a recessed button and found himself on the way to a subbasement.

Recessed flood lights, protected by metal grillwork, revealed to Mark a far different sort of entertainment than that provided for the members on upper levels. He quickly identified a medieval rack along one wall, a brazier for coals and accompanying brands, thumbscrews and an iron boot. There was a pillory and a stained whipping post. On the nearby wall hung a cat-o'-nine-tails and several other whips. Neck rings attached to Jong, heavy chains bolted into the wall hung to one side, and there was a wide variety of restraints, ancient and modern. Revulsion swept over the Penetrator as his inspection revealed that the bloodstains were not painted on, and that

there had been recent practical application of these instruments.

Mark Hardin crossed the cobbled floor to the rack. Cold anger ran through him as he tested the oiled smoothness of its operation. A flash of white drew his attention to the undercarriage. A cloth object was wedged into the support beams of the diabolical device. He retrieved it. Blood and grease smeared the bright prints on the white background, but Mark easily identified it as fabric of the blouse Anitra told him Lynn-Ann had been wearing the last time she had seen the unfortunate girl alive.

Having acquired this grisly piece of evidence, Mark used the elevator to ride to the second floor. Here were bedrooms and suites reserved for use by members. Mark checked carefully to determine if the rooms were unoccupied before entering. Some were done in bizarre decor, with mirrors on the ceilings, water beds, or four-posters that rotated on elevated turntables. Others were simple and utilitarian in nature. He decided to check one final room before moving on in his quest for information.

Entering this last room, Mark discovered the weirdest of all the sleeping quarters. The room was illuminated by soft light from a bedside lamp. On the floor was a stark-white, deep-pile carpet, but everything else was black. Thick black drapes hung across the windows, the walls and ceiling were painted a deep jet color, black picture frames and stark black-and-white prints the only relief. The air was heavy with the sweet-tangy odor of marijuana smoke. No longer burning, the odor emanated from the bowl of a large *houkah*. The water pipe itself, done in black embossed silver, stood beside a huge circular bed. Black satin sheets covered the bed. Sprawled across the bed was the unconscious, nude form of a large Negro.

Mark moved on silent feet until he stood over the recumbent man. He recognized Lt. Colonel Clevon Harris. From the rhythm of the air force officer's breathing, Mark judged him to be out cold from drugs, booze, sex, or some combination of the three. He searched the room, Harris' clothes and briefcase, but as before, he found not the least clue. He returned to the man on the bed. Looking down at him, he decided against tampering with a possible drug imbalance by using his dart gun. Removing a roll of strong surgical tape from his jacket, he placed a wide swatch across Harris' mouth, next he bound his victim around the legs and ankles, then he rolled him over and taped his wrists together behind his back. He had his prisoner to interrogate. Now, to get him out.

Mark rolled his helpless prisoner into one of the black satin sheets and hoisted him to his left shoulder, like a sack of meal. His breath whistled between his teeth as the load placed a strain on his partially knit wounds. He made the hallway without incident and went down the stairs to the main floor. He was breathing hard and the effort of carrying his unconscious package was starting to tell, even before he reached the outside.

Carefully, Mark worked to remove as much evidence of his illegal entry as he could, biting his lower lip to prevent an involuntary grunt of pain each time he lowered his bundle to the floor then retrieved it after removing his burglary devices. He was buttoned up too tightly to be sure, but he could almost swear that his exertions had reopened one of his wounds and he was leaking blood down his left side. He tried to think it was sweat generated by his energetic activity inside the heat-retaining clothing.

Cold air partially revived Mark as he stood at the

French doors, disconnecting his bypass rigs. As he shouldered his heavy burden once more, he regretted parking his car so far from his present location. He crossed the patio and eased Harris down on the other side of the low wall. The pain in his side and the unknown trickles urged Mark to take a breather before heading across the cold expanse of the golf course to his car. He gulped down deep draughts of air, seeking to regulate the rhythms of his body and master its vital forces.

Pulse rate and breathing were back to normal when Mark turned back to the wall. He swung one leg up, ready to vault the low barrier and retrieve his black satin bundle. Suddenly, the bright beam of a large flashlight lanced out of the night, pinning him at its end.

"You there, hold it!" a voice commanded. It was the night watchman.

Mark completed his move, unable to stop his momentum in midair and spun to face the man who had apprehended him. It was then that he heard the soft scrabble of claws as the dog launched itself at his throat...

Chapter 12 s SCRATCH ONE

It was a good guard dog. Not a sound betrayed its presence before it leaped for its victim's throat. Mark had little choice. His hand went to the butt of Ava, and he swung the muzzle in line with the charging animal. The dart pistol hissed softly and the dog seemed to come apart in midair. Jerking and snapping, its coordination destroyed by the powerful drugs, the dog tumbled to the top of the wall, thudding across it lifelessly. The heavier dosage, designed for a man, would no doubt be fatal to the lighter weight animal, but Mark had no time to contemplate this.

Slipping the catch to chamber the second round, he sent the dose winging on its way to the watchman, before the other man was able to draw his sidearm. The flashlight clattered to the patio tile and the guard made a choking sound as he dropped, his body wracked by convulsions. Mark went to him and administered a sleepy-time shot that would keep the watchman out for a long time.

He was in a hell of a spot and Mark realized it fully. He could not afford to leave the man and his dog where they lay. Their premature discovery would raise an alarm before he had realized his purpose. Somehow he would have to remove them.

His memory came to his rescue as he recalled the groundsman's shed near the fourteenth hole. He tumbled the unconscious watchman over the wall, to he beside his dog, while he dragged Harris to the

shed. He returned for the guard and stowed him away as well. By the time he came back for the dead dog, he was reaching the end of his endurance. He stumbled drunkenly as he half-dragged, half-carried his last burden to his destination.

Exhausted, panting, the room spinning around him, Mark Hardin closed the door to the shed and sank into the lawn chair, letting Clevon Harris lie on the cold dirt floor. In a few minutes, calling on his last reserves, the Penetrator was ready to go on. He injected Harris with a drug to revive him, pushing and shoving him into an upright position. He waited for the shot to take effect. He was thankful for the respite it offered.

Mark resisted the temptation to take a dose of Red Eagle's joy juice—available in his car only a hundred yards away. Mindful of the debilitating effect the organic superstimulant would have on his system the next day, he was determined not to seek the brief renewal of strength it promised for now. Harris began to stir and Mark knelt beside him.

The windowless shed provided an ideal spot for this interrogation. Mark had snapped on the bright overhead light and now he maneuvered his black prisoner so that it glared mercilessly into his eyes. He watched intently as Harris looked around, trying to identify his surroundings and orient himself. Mark pushed his face close to the other man's, speaking low and intently.

"Listen, Harris, I want some answers about SIE. What it's up to, who is involved? And I want some answers about Lynn-Ann Simpson. Who was responsible for kidnapping her and for the way she died? You're elected to give me those answers. Now, I'm going to take this tape off your mouth and the first thing I want to hear is, 'Yes, Sir,' and the next thing I hear is going to be a rundown on just what

the hell is going on around here. Is that clear?" Mark exercised no gentleness in jerking off the adhesive.

With eyes that smarted and burned from his chemical awakening, Clevon Harris strained to focus on the face before him. It was a figure all in black, except for flashes of white skin around the angry mouth and flint-hard black eyes. Mark's head was still covered, and it provided not a single clue to his identity. Harris tried to make sense of it all with a mind benumbed by drugs and his bedroom gymnastics with the talented stewardess from SAS. His usual defense mechanism took over as he tried to play it ghetto tough.

"Hey, man, you some kind of honkey fuzz? You gotta lay my rights on me, you ask me any questions, dig? Like you depriving me of my civil rights."

Mark's hand flashed downward, releasing the slim-bladed knife from its wrist holster. It snapped into place, the razor-sharp blade glinting an ugly blue white in the light. "I'll deprive you of your balls if you don't answer my questions."

Harris' eyes seemed glued to the shimmering steel, held there by his sick fascination for the agony, blood, and death it could bring with its icy touch. He swallowed harshly and licked his lips. "Now," he began, returning to his normal, cultured tones, "I don't know who you are or what this is all about. But I'll tell you, dude, you got the wrong man. I am a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force. Any harm comes to me and you'll have the cops, the Feds and OSI crawling all over your ass."

The stiletto point pricked a drop of blood from Harris's right cheek. "You forgot the 'Yes, Sir,' *boy*. From the top. What's the real action behind SIE and does Deveraux run it? Where do you fit in?

What's the overall game plan you're working on now?"

Wrapped up in his bonds, naked and shivering from the cold in the shed, Clevon Harris was hard put to try to assume a stoic mask of courage. "Harris, Clevon Jefferson, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, serial number; zero-two-two-nine-five-zero-three-four," he recited in a rush.

"Cut the crap, Harris," Mark snapped at him. "You're not a prisoner of war, this isn't a prison camp and I'm not an enemy interrogator. It isn't TV, either, and nothing is going to come out all right in the end, unless you cooperate. One more time. .."

But it did no good. In the end, Mark had to use drugs to extract the information. Time was against him, and he was working hard to get it all. Harris unloaded the lot.

He began with the real, hard-core elitist group behind the SIE Club operation and went on to reveal the grandiose plans they had set in motion, explaining the reason behind Fred Walters' assassination and the results they had achieved. Mark was rocked hard by the implications and the short time limit against which he had to work. Assassinating the president, taking over the country and systematically milking it dry through a continuous series of brushfire wars, was a scheme even beyond the avaricious ambitions of the gentlemen of the Sicilian Brotherhood. The fact that SIE flirted with the ever-increasing chance of a nuclear holocaust with every new conflict seemed not to trouble these would-be rulers of all they surveyed. Harris indicated that they had not even considered the possibility.

Mark got names, plenty of them. Deveraux and LePage; Malcom McConkey, the stock operator; Anitra's ex-boyfriend, Jesus Montenegro; General

Nichols; Harold Williams, a disgraced, ex-Marine Corps colonel; Leroy White Elk; James E. B. Powell, self-styled "Exalted Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan"—many others were named as well.

The more that Harris talked, the more Mark was seized by a sinking, sickening feeling that it was too late to prevent their monstrous plan from coming to fruition. If he was to prevent their takeover, he had less than three days to do it. Only sixty-five hours stood between him and a sky-splitting explosion that would claim the life of the president of the United States! A conspiracy of these unbelievable proportions had to come from sick minds—perhaps brilliant, shrewd, fantastic minds, but deeply sick. Their plan could plunge mankind into a barbarity unknown since the worst days of the Dark Ages.

Next, he asked about Lynn-Ann Simpson. He felt a gagging rush of bile to his mouth as Harris chortled drunkenly and described her interrogation. She had been beaten and branded, and through it all, she had been repeatedly raped by him and the two goons who worked the chamber of horrors beneath the SIE Club. Mark fought down his nausea and frustrated rage and listened as Harris explained that he needed suffering and blood to arouse him and that he had enjoyed their inhuman treatment of the girl.

Regardless of the harm done her, Mark reminded himself, Lynn-Ann Simpson had worked for the evil genius behind SIE. She was a hidden, unexpected betrayer who had demanded a bigger share and had paid for her greed. Lynn-Ann's long ago reference to the Pink Pussy flashed into Mark's mind as Harris recounted how the girl had come to work for SIE from Las Vegas, not from New York as she had claimed. Had it only registered before, Mark thought, he might not have gone off on a tangent. He might have looked closer at SIE itself and she

might still be alive. But there was the eternal problem of omelets and eggs, and the Penetrator had more important things to occupy his mind now than the death of an enemy.

One of those things was Clevon Harris. The black Air Force colonel was living the last minutes of his life, although he didn't realize it yet. Harris was going to figure in any plan Mark devised to attack SIE. His gross, animal barbarity would not justify his continued life, so he would provide fuel for a fire to consume the evil he represented. Mark Hardin gave him a strong shot to keep him asleep a long while. Then he dragged Harris out of the shed. As the bitter winter wind struck him, he was able to shake off some of the unclean feeling that Harris' revelations had produced. He locked the door behind him, leaving the night watchman and his dead dog inside.

As Mark drove away from the SIE building with Clevon Harris's unconscious body stuffed into the trunk, the seriousness of the situation continued to gnaw on his mind. Working from hiding, living somewhat outside the law, Mark realized he had no one upon whom he could rely. Yet, it was certain that the information given him by Harris must be shared, must be acted upon in the dangerously short time left. The life of the president, the freedom of his country . . . perhaps even the peace of the world, hinged on how he handled this situation. There had to be someone else, someone who would believe him and carry on some of the groundwork while he went straight to the heart of the matter.

But who?

Dan Griggs and his organization would wade through miles of red tape, delaying to make sure,

until it was too late and one fine morning, less than four days removed, the nation would awaken to find itself in bondage, its people the unwitting slaves of a greed-bloated cabal bent on sucking the last drop of productivity, money, and power from them until, vampirelike, they moved on to loot yet another country.

Anitra was out, not only because he refused to involve women in his activities when danger was so surely a possibility, but from the way she handled her roommate's disappearance and murder. And there was the way they had parted. Red Eagle? Professor Haskins? By the time they got here, far too many precious hours would have slipped away. Then he remembered the sympathetic look on the face of that black cop. What was his name? Carter ... no, Carver. His eager young face had reflected more than the necessary amount of sympathetic interest needed to conduct the interrogation at the hospital. And there was that parting remark. Mark decided to contact him.

He found a phone booth and began to make inquiries. On the third call, he located Carver's phone number. A sleepy voice answered. "Sergeant Carver? Tom Carver of the Metropolitan Police?"

"Look, man," came the voice from the other end. "If this is an obscene phone call, wait a few hours, I'll listen when I wake up."

"Carver, this is Bart Lowe ... the guy in the hospital."

"The one who took a flyer? Gotcha. What makes this so important you don't come down and see us during working hours?"

"You better believe it *is* important. Can we meet somewhere? Right now?"

"Hey, nothing can be *thai* important. Come in to the office later, we can discuss it."

"It has to be now," Mark insisted.

"Then let me have it over the phone."

"No way. Not this. It . . . it's about your arrowhead collection."

Mark could almost sense the black policeman doing a mental double take. His terse reply crackled across the wire. "That way, huh? On my way." He named a place to meet and hung up before Mark could.

On his way to their meet, Mark determined to bust the whole thing wide open in a way that would leave SIE no doubt who it was that was after them. He wanted to stir up things, get the head men off balance and keep them that way, so that they would make some mistakes. Big mistakes that would lead to smashing them. The time had come, he reasoned, to let them know that the Penetrator was mixing into their act.

Once back in the capital, Mark stopped along the banks of the Potomac. He took Harris from his trunk and carried him to the river bank. There he removed the tape, wadding it all up except for one piece. Then he opened his Buck knife and gave Harris a swift stroke across the throat, cutting it from ear to ear. Before tossing the dead man into the icy waters, he used the tape to attach a blue-flint Cheyenne arrowhead to the center of Harris' chest. That, he thought with satisfaction, should get things moving in a hurry.

Seated over soul-restoring cups of hot coffee in an all night, diner, Sergeant Tom Carver listened attentively as Mark unrolled the tale he gained from Harris. He further backed it up by playing back—through a private earplug—a tape of the entire interrogation. When it was over, Carver shook his head.

It was just too much to handle at one time. He asked a few questions and Mark admitted he had used drugs to interrogate Harris. Where was Harris now? Mark admitted he had cut his throat.

Now the headshakes changed from resignation to regret. Mark had no real evidence—evidence that would be admissible in a court of law. What he did have, he got illegally, through breaking and entering, kidnapping and drugs. On top of which, he now admitted killing his informant. Carver told him that as a police officer, he should place him under arrest for murder at that very moment. All Mark had going for him was the tape, which had convinced him that a very real threat existed . . . and that, because of how it was obtained, was mighty thin.

"I'm not surprised to find out you're this Penetrator dude," he told Mark. "I pretty well had it figured that way when I saw you. Then you cut out of the hospital and I was sure. I've sort of made a hobby out of you. Checked on everything coming in and sort of made a scrapbook. I admire what you've done to the scum bags we can't even touch, and what you seem to stand for, but this time you've really gone out on a limb. Murder is still murder in the District. I'll even stand still for you cutting out again; I have seen nothing and know nothing if you clear out right now. But staying around to go after those SIE cats on your own is out. This whole thing is a job for the proper authorities, handling it in a proper maimer."

"Damn it, man! Didn't you listen to that tape at all? We have," he consulted his watch, "less than fifty-nine hours and the president of the United States gets hit. There are men with diplomatic immunity involved, high-ranking military. The Secret Service, the FBI, even your own department would move too slowly, too cautiously. Too much red tape.

By the time they get verification, the job will be done. We don't know where it will happen, just how and the day. If they miss, they can still reach him later and the shit hits the fan."

Mark made his last appeal. "If I can outline a plan to you, a means by which we can bring this off in the time left, will you consider it?"

"I'm listening."

"I need you to start the routine slowly. You'll be listened to. Get the Feds working, but carefully. Remember, we have some of the names, but not all. We have no idea how deeply into the government SIE has infiltrated. One whisper of this and they go early, or pack up and leave with no trace that you can take to court."

"Sounds good, so far. Keep going."

Mark went on to describe the plan he had been forming since first hearing Harris' tale, adding to it, embellishing on the rough edges as he spoke. Between them, they devised a cover to get a source inside the SIE operation. Tom, working through his office and the union, would arrange to take the place of the regular bartender. Mark would meanwhile continue hard hits at the organization, in order to keep them off balance and perhaps interrupt their schedule enough to prevent the assassination on the next Monday, the day before Christmas. All of it had to be planned, coordinated and carried off with the utmost secrecy.

Tom Carver protested that he had to have some story to give to his superior, Captain Levin, that would allow for him to make the infiltration of the SIE staff. Likewise, he felt the captain should be briefed on the situation in order to lend assistance in convincing the Feds to move swiftly. Reluctantly, Mark agreed, urging all possible speed and no com-

promise of his activities. They set up a reporting schedule and Mark left, reminding Carver that according to Harris, they had but two and a half days . . .

Chapter 13; JUDAS PIG

Midmorning editions of the papers carried Mark's message to SIE in banner headlines. The *Washington Post* broke out a type size not used since the assassination of a president:

PENETRATOR STRIKES IN DISTRICT

In an excited style of journalism not usually associated with newspapers in the District, the story was splashed over the front pages. At six-thirty that morning, the body of Clevon Harris had been discovered, washed up against the pilings of the railroad bridge near Fourteenth Street. Police subsequently identified him as an officer in the air force. The stories went into lurid detail. A spokesman for the Metropolitan Police promised quick action, stating that, "This Penetrator fellow has sort of a Robin Hood image in some parts of the country, but this is the nation's capital and to us, a murderer is a murderer. If our investigation develops information that leads to the arrest of the man whom the press calls the Penetrator, rest assured he will receive the same treatment under the law as any other person accused of a crime." When asked, the spokesman informed the press that Captain Levin of Criminal Identification and Intelligence was not available to answer questions.

Two papers made much of the unusual wording of the statement, calling attention to the fact that the

police phrased it the way they did because no one had the first idea who the Penetrator was. Much space was also given to previous activities of the Penetrator, pointing out that never before had anyone outside the ranks of the underworld been a victim of his vengeance.

One writer, more dedicated to research than the others, commented on the first use of an arrowhead as the Penetrator's trademark. His article, titled *Blood on the Strip**, went into detail regarding the Vegas strike, pointing out that miniature arrows and later the arrowheads were found near criminals who had become targets for the Penetrator's wrath. All in all, it was a most satisfactory manner of conveying the message that the Penetrator wanted delivered to the elitist cabal behind SIE.

At SIE headquarters, meetings were held all morning. The night watchman had revived about sunrise, at nearly the same time that Harris' body was discovered. He had yelled and hammered for two hours, until a die-hard foursome who had braved the morning chill for a fast eighteen holes heard him and effected his release.

Gathered in the conference room, in addition to Ralph Deveraux and Brooks LePage, were members of the fifteen elite hierarchy, including Harold Williams—who rarely showed his face in public—Leroy White Elk, General Phillip Nichols and Malcom McConkey. Several of them were on the edge of panic. Present were Chicken Louie Polio and Willi Bauer. They listened for the fourth time as the watchman told his story.

It was a confused tale about a prowler dressed all in black, his face covered by a ski mask or suchlike device and a black-wrapped bundle. Much of his

* Number two in the Penetrator Series.

story was disjointed, confused by his grief. The bond between a handler and his guard dog is as close as that between father and child, and the man was broken up over the death of his companion. He spoke wonderingly of a pistol that hissed. A silencer? No, not a silencer. He had been shot with it, too, and no bullet holes. Just one hell of a headache and a little red spot on his chest.

Earlier, before Harris was discovered missing and the leaders arrived, the saddened, unfortunate watchman had insisted on helping the other security personnel search the grounds and buildings. Now he reported on the professional job of circumventing the alarm systems done by their unknown intruder. He commented on how few traces remained of where he had been and how he had gained access to the building. Even the lock on the shed where he had been held captive was intact when rescue arrived. In the shed, he told the others, they had found a small dartlike object, a little over two-and-a-half-inches long. It looked like a scaled-down model of the "capture darts" used to tranquilize animals. At last he was dismissed.

On the oval table lay several copies of the newspapers and Harold Williams picked one up to reread part of it. He slammed it down in anger.

"So who is this Penetrator bastard?" He glared from one to another. No one answered, so the forcibly retired Marine Corps colonel commenced to answer his own question. "He's a man, just like anyone else. Flesh and blood. Shoot him and he'll bleed. All of us here around a table, dragged out of our beds in the middle of the night," his exaggeration went unnoticed, "to stand around like a lot of scared kids. You'd think this guy was Superman or something."

"Maybe he is." Chicken Louie was ignored by the

others. "Yeah. With maybe Captain Marvel thrown in." Now Deveraux glowered at him.

Harold Williams turned on Brooks LePage. "LePage, you have men employed for the purpose of handling things like this. Get them off their asses and doing something!" His own approaching panic was showing through the bluff of anger.

"Colonel, the fact remains that what the newspapers say is right. We do not have the first idea who to look for or where to look any more than the police. All we know is that for some reason—and I suspect the manner in which we handled the Simpson woman has something to do with it—he has singled us out for attack. How much he knows, where he learned it, we don't know. Until we have something definite on him, there is little my men can do."

Ralph Deveraux eased his way in with timely news. "Gentlemen, for those with a need to know—Brooks, Mr. Bauer, Mr. Polio—we have another meeting scheduled in my office," he consulted his watch. "Right now we have a highly reliable and confidential source who is supposed to shed some light on this matter. If you others will excuse us ..." In their absence, the meeting broke up.

". . . So this is how it is. This Penetrator *gonif*, who calls himself Bart Lowe, pumped your boy Harris full of drugs and got the whole *schtick*" The short, energetic, pot-bellied form of Captain Benjamin Levin paced back and forth in front of Deveraux's desk. He stopped in mid-stride turning angrily toward the gross figure behind the desk. "God-damn it! I don't like this. I never have. I should have never gone along with it, no matter what it did to me, my career, my ... family."

"But you did," Brooks LePage reminded him. "We

have you by the balls, Levin, and you'll continue to do as we say."

"This morning, at my house, my Sergeant Carver brings this ... thing to me." Levin's face was filled with wild disbelief. "Jesus Christ! The president of the United States. It's *meshugehl* Crazy like that fucking Hitler!"

"Captain Levin," Ralph Deveraux's voice dripped venom as he said each word. "The last time someone called me crazy, I nearly killed him. Your position right now is not an enviable one. As Mr. LePage so colorfully put it, you are our creature now. The first time you accepted our money ... before that even, when you yielded to pressure when we threatened your family, you had no other choice. Now get on with what you have to tell us and leave the moralizing to your rabbi."

A rush of hot, angry blood nearly blackened the swarthy face of the soiled policeman. "You filthy *schmuckl* You arrogant *goyim* pig! You . . ." As suddenly as it came, his anger left him, slumping his shoulders in resignation and bowing his head in defeat. Bitterness and self-loathing were printed on his features. Quickly, without further hesitation or resistance, he related the plan that Tom Carver had outlined to him, giving all of the details he possessed. Then, head down, he turned to leave.

"Captain Levin," Deveraux said in commanding tones that stopped the other man in his tracks. "We think it advisable that you remain at the Club. Enjoy the facilities for the next several days. In light of what you have told us and the state of our plans, I think that I must insist that you stay with us. Mr. Bauer here will accompany you and assist you in making the necessary arrangements for your absence from the District. Please do not attempt to leave

the grounds or to do anything quixotic like trying to give a warning over the phone.

"That will be all."

After Willi Bauer left the room with Captain Levin who was virtually under house arrest, the others turned to laying counterplans designed to trap the Penetrator and give him a warm reception. ..

Chapter 14: 4 HANDICAP

Unaware that he had been compromised, Mark visited the SIE Club in the afternoon. In order to prepare for a direct assault, he wanted to strengthen his recollections of the interior structure and location of possible cachets of information. Also, it would be the first inside meet with Tom Carver. He had no sooner signed in than Ralph Dev-
eraux waddled across the reception lobby to greet him, hand extended and welcoming smile pasted on his froggy features.

"Ah, *Mister* Lowe. How very nice to see you. Come," he drew Mark away toward the open patio doors. "I have news for you. Very good news. I have received word from friends," he went on following a dramatic pause, "associates on the West Coast. They have very highly recommended you to me. It seems you are considered a very valuable man in your firm."

This was not news to Mark. That morning he had checked in with Professor Haskins. He learned that two discreet inquiries had been made by phone to the blind drop set up in the William Hansen, Jr., townhouse apartment. When "Mr. Hansen" returned the calls, he gave glowing praise to Bart Lowe.

"Gives one a feeling of schizophrenia, responding to that recorder, my boy," the retired geology professor had told him laughingly. "I enjoyed the role of William Hansen and I gave it my best. Hope it is helping. By the way , . . just what is it you are on to?"

"Later. I'll be returning to the Stronghold in

three or four days . . . or there will be nothing worth returning to."

"How's that?" But Mark did not take the time to go into the astounding plot he had discovered. Telephones can be tapped and he had no wish to test whether their conversation was being bugged.

"Yes, we are very pleased," Deveraux was saying. "In fact, we wish to extend an invitation to you to meet with the membership board at your earliest convenience. They meet next on Thursday, after Christmas. Would that suit your schedule?"

Mark paused to give it the appearance of careful thought. Yes, I'm sure I could make it then."

"Fine. Say about eight in the evening?"

"I'll be here."

Strolling across the patio, toward the low wall where only the night before Mark had killed a dog and downed the night watchman, they stopped beside the pool. Several courageous souls were braving the winter chill to splash in the heated water, mist rising from it in curling tendrils.

"Isn't this sunlight refreshing?"

"It certainly is, Mr. Deveraux."

"Call me Ralph. First sun in a week. Why, we had several foursomes out almost before sunrise this morning." He studied Mark Hardin closely, looking for any show of reaction. "Be a wonderful time for a game. Do you golf, Mr. Lowe?"

"I think I'm the original duffer. I celebrate for a month any time I can break a hundred."

"If you have nothing to do, why not take in a few holes? Play the whole course. I promise you it is very challenging. Some of the best in the world have gone over par."

"Thank you, I have the time, but . . . I don't have my clubs along. I never visualized any place on the

East Coast where you could play in winter." The lie slid smoothly from his mouth.

"Don't let that bother you. I can tell a modest man when I see one. I insist. I'll lend you my own set of clubs. Best thing in the world for you. Take advantage of this sun, you know."

Left without a graceful way of refusing, the Penetrator relented. Armed with Deveraux's personal clubs, alone in a golf cart, he set out on the course

Anxious to make points with his boss, to regain lost ground, Chicken Louie had volunteered to lead a head party to take care of this Penetrator. When plans had been made that morning, no one believed the man would simply walk in the front door and present himself for execution. A hurried conference had determined that they could not do the job in the public rooms of the club. It would have to look like something else. And it should be away from the curious eyes of any of the guests. After determining from Mark's application that he was a golfer, Louis Polio himself had come up with the idea of an ambush on the golf course. He selected four of the toughest-looking security guards and made sure they were armed. Then they hurried away across the golf links in two electric carts.

They had selected positions around the thirteenth green. Symbolic, Chicken Louie had thought. All the guys were hunkered down now, waiting. It was left up to Deveraux to lure the rat onto the course and Polio now believed he had this Hard-on character. The Japanese-made walkie-talkie in his cart squawked to inform him that Mark had left the first tee, and they waited tensely for him to arrive. It would be a cinch, a cakewalk.

Chicken Louie heard the whine of an electric mo-

tor and glanced over his shoulder toward the twelfth green. One man alone; it had to be him. Yeah, he had that bright orange golf bag of Mr. Dev-
eraux's. This was their guy. Something was wrong, though. He had played through to here far too fast, unless he was some kind of pro. But the way he piddled around with the ball, he was no tournament player. Did he suspect something? Too late to change things if he did. Louie couldn't expose himself to signal the other boys, but he tensed and waited until the guy had sunk a close putt and driven off in the cart. Any time now, he'd be on the fairway approach to this green and dead meat for their guns.

Mark was angry with himself and the situation. He was conscious of precious time slipping past, and he felt helpless to do anything about it. If he didn't at least go through the motions of playing golf he might give himself away. Even so, he had hurried through the first twelve holes, hacking and slicing at the ball in far worse style than his usual game. His pent-up anger burst out, however when he reached the thirteenth tee. Addressing the ball with full concentration, he made his backswing and unloaded. The ball flew straight and true down the partial dogleg fairway to land scant inches from the cup, on the uphill side. It skidded a little from the back spin he had knocked into it and overcame the resistance of the brittle grass, creeping until it nudged the flag and plopped into the cup. Hole in one! Mark's mouth fell open in surprise. The first damn hole in one he had ever shot and no one to verify it. Bringing the bag, he climbed into the cart and headed down toward his trophy ball.

Goddamn! A hole in one at a time like this, Chicken Louie thought to himself. It's a shame to

ruin his game right now, but it looks like the excitement's gonna kill him. He brought his own gun to bear, as Mark Hardin came closer. Any second now this hardass type would be in range. He hoped the other guys would hold their fire until they had a sure thing. But they couldn't and they didn't.

First one and then another of the hidden gunmen opened up with their .38s while Mark was still some seventy yards down the fairway, rising with the ground toward the green. One shot fell far short, kicking up dirt and grass. The other spanged off the front of the cart. In the next instant, four guns were banging away. Only Chicken Louie held back, determined not to foul up this time.

Before the sound of the first two shots had reached him, the Penetrator was aware that he was under fire from an ambush. He jerked the tiller over and poured full power to the cart, driving not away from the ambush as would be expected, but directly toward the source of the first two shots.

Startled by the direct attack, the security men fired wildly, joined by the others on the opposite side of the fairway. For its size, the electric cart closed rapidly under full throttle. One of the men rose at the last moment, just before the golf cart would have crashed into him. At point-blank range, he tried to get off a shot.

Mark's Hi-Standard derringer cracked a single sharp report as he careened past the confused gunman. He didn't spare time to watch as the magnum hollowpoint struck the man in his breastbone, mushrooming as it bored in, cutting away a large portion of his aorta. His adrenaline-charged body bled to death before he realized he had been shot.

Turning his back on the other hood, who had temporarily abandoned the fight, Mark threw the

tiller hard in the opposite direction, cutting out of the brush before the cart rode up high enough to make the drive wheels ineffective. His eyes scouted the hazard across the fairway, searching for the location of the others.

They betrayed their hiding spot by sending three shots whistling past Mark's head, uncomfortably close. He changed course again, moving in on them at a jolting, whining pace. Unable to readjust their aim rapidly enough to bring effective fire onto the charging vehicle, their nerve broke. They ran into the open, making for the rise behind the thirteenth hole that masked a sharp cutoff. Mark exchanged Ms derringer for the .45 and hurtled after them.

They churned up the slope in a panic as the pink, candy-striped, fringe-topped juggernaut bore down on them. Mark was standing now, riding the swaying cart like a wagon box and shooting one-handed. It wasn't the most accurate firing position, but he managed to plant two big slugs into one gunman, knocking Mm against the other and toppling both to the ground.

As the still-living ambusher tried to extricate himself from the corpse sprawled across his body, Mark closed with them and began to circle like a one-man war party around a wagon defense. Considering the ambush in which Mark had suddenly found himself, Ms sense of fair play had long gone by the board, and before the gunman was free Mark stopped long enough to take careful aim and remove the right side of the gunsels head with a single well-placed slug that caught the trapped man in Ms left ear.

Adrenaline shock brought on by the rapid-fire action left Mark shaken and panting. He looked about him at the carnage of the brief fight. Even as he regained control of his body, Ms mind was working on the meaning behind tMs ambush. His thoughts were

interrupted by the high-pitched whine of another golf cart, headed his way at great speed from the twelfth green. Other golfers, coming to find out what the shooting was about? He turned to warn them off, but a shower of pellets splattered against the rear of his cart. Several others ripped through his jacket and one left a stinging, blood-filled gouge in his upraised arm. They were followed by the mellow boom of a sawed-off shotgun.

Mark threw a hurried shot and gave power to his metal steed once again, heading in the direction the two dead gunmen had taken before. He gave it all he could, anxious to outrun the range of the scatter-gun. As he topped the rise, he discovered—too late—the sheer drop of some five feet. The engine screamed as the wheels lost traction, and Mark felt a sinking sensation as the cart hurtled through the air. It slammed down, blowing one rear tire and skewing off as a result of the unequally distributed force on the drive. Bouncing and jouncing like a dune buggy, he headed toward some distant trees. Behind him, his glance told him, the other cart had skirted disaster—from prior knowledge—and was running parallel to him on the other side of the ridge. For the time being, he was safe from further attack. He made it within fifty yards of the trees before the golf cart gave out. With a rending, grinding sound, the drive chain parted, bringing the cart to a lurching stop. Mark piled out and headed for the trees.

Suddenly the pursuing cart rounded the edge of the cut, followed at once by a second electric wagon—the other ambusher was back in the game. Mark had more than thirty yards to go and he put on a burst of speed. His football training in broken field-running paid off as he cut random zigzags to throw off their aim. Turf flew up in a line to his left, where a straight-line course would have taken him,

and he heard the staccato chatter of a Thompson gun. They were giving it everything they had now.

Stopping when they least expected it, Mark crouched low into the Weaver combat stance—arms thrust out like a rifle stock—and squeezed off three carefully spaced rounds from the Commander. He heard an agonized cry and the submachine gunner threw up his arms, thrashing and falling forward across the front of his cart. The cart, still under power, wavered across the course. It had been one hell of a job of shooting, and he hoped he wouldn't have to repeat it.

Using the respite this gained him, Mark continued to the trees. He dodged among them as Chicken Louie came into range for his sawed-off. Pellets slapped into the trees and moaned by overhead as Mark crouched low. He waited until Louis Polio was out of his cart and moving into the brush. Slowly, hoping to avoid notice, Mark raised his pistol. Despite the coolness of the day, he was drenched with sweat. Exertion blurred his vision for a moment and he blinked tiredness from his eyes. Drawing a breath and releasing some of it softly, he took up the slack. Louie moved and Mark readjusted his sight picture.

Something snapped beneath Mark's feet. Chicken Louie twisted rapidly, bringing up the deadly twelve-gauge muzzle as he swung toward the sound. Mark fired then—once, twice. The slugs slapped into Louis Polio's chest before he completed his turn. Shards of broken ribs ripped into his lung and the slugs tore through it to shatter his heart. Chicken Louie's shotgun thudded to the ground harmlessly, followed by his lifeless body.

Mark Hardin fell forward with a heavy sigh, releasing the tension. He gasped in deep breaths to

regulate Ms system before getting up' to clear the mess left by the battle . . .

The Penetrator enjoyed the look of shocked disbelief on Ralph Deveraux's face when he returned to the club in Louis Polio's golf cart, bringing the director of SIE his personal clubs.

"You know, you have a hell of a course out there. Roughest one I've ever played," Mark said with heavy double meaning. "Oh, by the way, I got a hole in one on the tMrteenth. Makes me mad. It's my first one and there wasn't anyone around to see me."

Deveraux struggled for control, at last stammering out, "That . . . well, ah, I suppose that leaves you out of the fifty dollar hole-in-one pot, Mr. Lowe. That's a . . . ah, too bad. Least I can do is buy you a drink as a consolation prize."

He shepherded Mark to the bar, where Tom Carver was on duty. Mark ordered his usual and Deveraux had a double brandy. His hand trembled as he picked it up and sweat was shiny on his pale forehead. "Carver, the new man the union sent over, is an excellent mixologist, don't you agree, Mr. Lowe?"

"Oh, yes. Best I've seen in a long time." Behind the bland mask of Bart Lowe, the Penetrator glared hot hatred at Ralph Deveraux; Mark silently defied him to call attention to the holes in his jacket made by double-oh pellets.

Chapter 15 s TIME RUNS OUT

"You're going to have to pull out of there," Mark told Tom Carver when they met later Saturday afternoon at Carver's home to compare notes. "That fire fight on the golf course wasn't an accident. They were out there waiting to ambush me."

Tom Carver nodded reluctantly. "Damn, just when I was getting things going smoothly. I sent a lot of drinks down on the dumb waiter to the second basement level; from seein' what the big shots drank upstairs I was pretty close to figuring out just who went down there. Given another day, we could have had a list to round up the whole bunch of them."

"I'm not criticizing, just stating a fact," Mark said. "They apparently have infiltrated your office. You or Captain Levin must have said something to or around someone that tipped them off. If my cover is blown, yours is too."

"We're running out of time, as well. Tomorrow is Sunday and the next day sometime, in the middle of the afternoon when the president flies to Florida to deliver his Christmas Eve message, blooie, there goes the old ball game. That gives us a day and a half, give or take a few hours. I'm going in tonight and take that subbasement apart until I come up with the answers."

"That's heavy, man. If they do the simple thing and call the local law, you're had. Breaking and entering, all that. Before you . . ."

The phone rang, interrupting what he was saying.

It was a brief, one-sided conversation. As Tom Carver listened, his normally dark brown complexion drained and was replaced by a sickly pallor. His white-rimmed lips tightened in anger. He slammed down the receiver and his throat worked to form words. He exploded, "Motherfuckers!" Regaining control after his outburst, he explained to Mark.

"That was a guy named Williams, Harold Williams. He said he was the Elect Master of SIE—whatever that means. He told me they grabbed Joanie. Took her on the bridle path a little while ago. Said they were going to hold her until late next Tuesday. As a guarantee of our good behavior: yours and mine. He said they wouldn't harm her, so long as we did nothing to interfere with their plan. He said that after Tuesday it would be too late to change things."

"All the more reason to hit them tonight."

"That's my wife, Hardin!"

It was the first time the black police sergeant had used his real name, dropping the pretense of the Bart Lowe cover. Mark took note of the anxious strain the man must feel to have made such a slip. He considered carefully before pushing his point.

Most of all, Mark was aware of the close bond between Tom Carver and his family, his fierce pride in his wife. "Hey," he had told Mark earlier when he arrived. "My wife's out riding again. We have the place to ourselves." He grinned boyishly, "Can you dig it? *My wife*. The first black woman to enter national competitions at horse shows and come out in the top three. She got her first horse when she was a kid, called him Chief, and she's been in the horsey set ever since. Even my two kids go for horses." He waved a hand at the fireplace mantel, sparkling with trophies. "Second Place, Second, First, First, Best in Class," he read. "Man, that's accomplishing some-

thing big without need of a club or a fire bomb. Joanie Carver, horsewoman," his eyes glowed with a shared pride. "My wife."

Now she was a kidnap victim, hostage to guarantee the successful completion of Ralph Beveraux's diabolical plot to seize the reins of government and lead the country to the bone pickers, changing the American dream of freedom and plenty into a nightmare of want and slavery.

One of the sheep was in the jaws of the wolves again and the Penetrator felt helpless, powerless to guarantee she could be brought out without harm. He spoke slowly, his words carefully selected to convey his meaning and win the point. "As I said. Now is the time. If I hit them hard, with everything I have, they'll be too busy holding me off to do anything to your wife. When I get inside, I don't intend to give them time to think of anything except how to stay alive. Once I'm in, I can get her out. That's the easy part. But I have to do it now.

"We can't delay long enough for them to reinforce their headquarters. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to get inside. You didn't stop being a policeman just because it's your wife. You've seen the statistics. You know as well as I do exactly what they all say; the longer someone is in the hands of the kidnappers, the less chance the victim has of being released alive. Tonight I go in and take her out."

Tom Carver's shoulders slumped in resignation. "You're right. I'll call Captain Levin and fill him in." He matched action to words, dialing the number before Mark could say more. On the other end of the line, Mrs. Levin informed him that the Captain was out, that he had a meeting with Maryland CII heads at the SIE Club. Carver set down the instrument with a sick look. "Levin . . . *Captain Levin* was our

leak. He's out there now. We don't stand a chance, man. They don't just know some of it, they know it all. They'll be waiting, expecting us to hit them, with Levin to fill them in on the way you operate." He shook his head, as if to throw off drops of water. "No matter. We have to do it tonight like you said."

"Not *we*, me. I have to go in alone. If something does turn sour, if I'm taken, you can't be in a position that would compromise your standing as a law officer. You would then be the only other person who could get the whole story to Dan Griggs or someone who could do something about it. With Levin right in the middle of this, you can be sure nothing was passed on to the Secret Service. We're on our own."

They reached a reluctant, uneasy agreement on that point and went on to set up the hit. Carver checked SIE by phone and learned that they were closed to "decorate for the Christmas party." Evidently Brooks LePage and his crew of enforcers were forting up, getting ready to stand off an assault. Mark arranged a check-in schedule to be used following the hit. He departed, leaving a frustrated, grim Tom Carver behind.

At his parked Beechcraft, Mark removed several items he felt he needed for the stunning *blitzkreig* attack he knew would be necessary to paralyze the enemy long enough to effect Joanie Carver's release. Into the trunk of the Chevy went a collapsible, fiber glass rocket launcher. It was designed to fire a devastating four-inch round a maximum of five times before being thrown away. Even military hardware was being designed with planned obsolescence. Next came his M-79 grenade launcher, purchased from Sal Mitzuzaki, an illegal arms dealer in Los Angeles who had been helpful on several occasions in the past. Next came high explosive rounds for the four-inch

tube and the stubby little 40mm antipersonnel rounds for the grenade launcher. Four quarter-pound blocks of C-4 plastique followed them into the trunk. Looking over his other equipment, Mark added his handy WP grenades before locking up the plane.

Ralph Deveraux and his elitist cabal were about to learn what *elite* meant. The Penetrator was out for blood ...

Chapter 16; FLANK ATTACK

Coming in over the golf course where he had battled that afternoon, Mark discovered that his evaluation had been correct. The reserves had indeed been called up. He had figured that this back approach—with lots of room to maneuver while gaining the main building—was the most vulnerable to attack.

Someone was ahead of him, though. Pairs of guards roamed the entire area. Ava spoke her soft sibilance and one such team tumbled into death. For this operation, the knockout rounds had been replaced with deadly curarine, a fast-acting derivative of the South American nerve poison. Silently, he ghosted on, his shadow a misshapen thing in the occasional flashes of moonlight as the cloud cover drew aside. On his back was a satchel, filled with rounds for both long-range weapons and the grenade launcher hung from a thin nylon cord around his neck. He carried the rocket tube in his right hand and Ava in his left. He looked like a bizarre space soldier. Taking advantage of the switchback design of the course, he moved toward the fringe of trees that separated the outward links from the back nine.

The Penetrator's first move in this encounter had come some minutes before, when he had climbed a pole not far from the entrance drive to SIE's mansion and severed the telephone and power lines. Then he had raced to his parking place off the fourteenth green and broke out his equipment. The element of surprise had been weakened, if not lost en-

tirely, by tWs maneuver, but he had weighed that aspect against the confusion and demoralizing effect that loss of light and communications would have on noncombat-hardened troops. He slid off into darkness, making his way swiftly toward the SIE mansion. Then he had encountered the first two guards and taken them out.

Each foot of ground he gained without discovery increased the slim edge in his favor. With the exception of Joanie Carver, everyone inside that building tonight could be considered an enemy and Mark Hardin grimly determined to make this as costly and devastating an attack as he could. Only three hundred yards left to go. He paused to slip a round into the rocket launcher.

"Cramer, is that you?" a voice called from ahead. Mark froze into the darkness at Ms side. "Cramer? Who the hell's out there?" Nervousness was evident in the voice and the longer an answer was delayed, the more unhinged the man would become. The Penetrator waited, sensing the other man's agitation, the tension building. Then the sentry broke cover, walking toward where he had heard the slight metallic sound. He drew closer, looming huge in the darkness. Then he was on the ground, clawing at his throat as the powerful poison cut off his breath, vision, eyesight and heartbeat in an instant. It was a terrifying way for a thinking being to die. But nearly as rapidly as the curarine affected the nervous system, it went to work on the other brain cells and its victim didn't have to live with the knowledge of Ms certain death for long.

The Penetrator closed ground rapidly, finding two more guards and snuffing out their lives as quickly and quietly as turning off a lamp. Then, from behind him, he heard a cry of alarm. *Cramer* must have come back and found his dead partner. He knelt,

throwing the fiber glass tube up on his shoulder and taking quick aim at the French doors at the rear of the mansion. He squeezed the heavy trigger mechanism, spinning the magneto and sending an electric pulse to the propellant charge of the rocket.

- *Whoosh!* Riding a bright blossom of flame, the missile was on its way to the target. Mark Hardin was in motion before it had traveled half the distance, advancing to a preselected spot and loading another round. Glass tinkled faintly as the slender rocket smashed through the thin partition. A bright flash followed and the crack of high explosives. The old building shuddered as if it had been struck by an earthquake and dust boiled off the brick walls.

Up with the launcher tube again and a second round was streaking toward the window of a second-floor bedroom. A cluster of gunmen charged him from the pool cabana and Mark took time to send them a present from the already loaded M-79 before moving to his third point of attack. The grenade went off with its characteristic popping-snapping sound, but it was drowned in the bull roar of the second package of HE detonating inside the building. Following on its heels was an ominous groaning, crumbling noise as inside walls collapsed and plaster dust billowed from shattered windows, while years of accumulated dirt smoked into the air from the shingled roof. The men between the Penetrator and his objective had gone down as if felled by a great wind, and one of them was still shrieking out his life. It was an eerie sound in the silence following the second rocket.

The Penetrator sent three carefully spaced 40mm death pills onto the golf course behind him. Screams and moans informed him of his accuracy and he

turned back toward the brick plantation house. His back was, for the moment, safe from attack and he had seen signs of another counterattack forming. He fired into the front of the golf pro shop, breaking up a second rush before it could form and drew fire from second-floor windows of the main building. Two grenade launcher rounds silenced this opposition and left him half a dozen for his withdrawal. Fitting the third rocket into the tube, he sighted on the office wing, the stench of scorched fiber glass strong in his nostrils.

"Christ! What's happening to us?" Brooks LePage's mind yammered in terror as he was slammed off one wall, to dive into another before he was knocked across the crap table when the third rocket detonated. This guy was supposed to be a law-and-order nut, not half the friggin army. "Jesusjesusjesus!" his terrified thoughts raced. "We're all done for if we don't stop this guy. What can we do? How?"

LePage had been sent upstairs, following the second rocket blast, to get a damage report and learn how his men were progressing toward containing The Penetrator's *blitzkrieg*. Loss of their electrical power had taken out the intercom system as well and there was no one else to handle this dangerous task.

Things, he discovered when he reached the upper levels, were going from bad to worse. Then, on his way through the main floor to find more men and rally them for a counterattack, he was caught in the third blast. Painfully he crawled from the crap table, deafened and bleeding from one ear. Other cuts, unseen, were bleeding as well; he staggered from impaired balance.

In the lounge, barricaded behind the bar, he found

six men, told them to hold it there and went in search of others. The lounge was untouched so far, and Brooks LePage decided to use it as a staging area to launch another try at Hardin. He dug out several more dazed and uncertain men, sending them to the lounge, as he climbed once again to the second floor.

Mark moved to the low wall surrounding the patio as the third blast went off. There was no return fire and he made ready to advance to the office wing, where he would gain entrance to the building. He discarded the clumsy launcher tube and rose to vault the wall. Behind him a heavy truck engine roared to life. Looking over Ms shoulder, he was momentarily blinded by bright headlights. Some of the outside crew had fired up a dump truck and it bucked and snorted through the gears, gaining momentum as it rushed down upon him. He took a fourth round from the knapsack and hurriedly pulled off the arming ring. Inserting it into the tube, he checked the ignition system and brought up the rocket launcher. Less than fifty yards separated them as Mark's sights found the center of the grill and squeezed off Ms shot ... Long tongues of flame whipped in the wind from the muzzles of pistols extended over the high steel dump bed and from the passenger's side window, bullets smacking into the brick wall close beside him and screaming off the top.

Truck and rocket met in an ear-shattering blast that raised the front wheels off the ground and hurled the hood, end over end, high into the night sky. Yellow orange flames engulfed the entire truck as a secondary explosion ripped open the gas tank. The added push of the gas tank explosion completed the work of throwing the dump bed from its bunk. Two men tumbled from it, shrieking in agony, living torches

that clawed at themselves as they ran blindly across the first tee and fell at last, charred cinders.

The Penetrator dropped the launcher tube and vaulted the wall, flames still hot on his back as he ran through a large hole in the side of the office wing. He had gained the inside! Looking around the rubble-strewn office, he noticed a wall safe he had overlooked on his previous, quieter visit. He would tackle it later, if there was time. He went to the inside door and grabbed the handle. With a parting moan of rending metal, the remaining hinge gave way and the heavy oak panel fell inward, toward Mark. He jumped back out of the way and checked the corridor carefully before venturing out. The hall was free of any human opposition. Mark crossed it and entered Brooks LePage's office. Save for the furniture, it was empty. He retraced his steps and started into the hall. Bullets gouged into the doorframe and the thunderous echoes of gunfire blatted down the hall.

Giving the correct interpretation to the crash of the falling door, Brooks LePage had led his regrouped forces toward the office wing. "There he is!" he shouted as Mark came into view, emerging from LePage's own office, "Get the bastard!" A volley of shots rang out, causing their target to pop back inside the room. Several men charged down the hall toward the first sign of retreat they had witnessed since the battle began. As one of them dashed into the doorway, his pistol extended, there was a heavy bark from a .45 and the gunman fell backward against the doorjamb opposite and slid lifelessly to the floor.

One of the two men who had accompanied him made a dash across the open area, intent on gaining a protected field of fire. More shots came from inside

the office and the runner's legs were cut out from under him. The remaining man pulled back. For a moment it was stalemate. LePage urged the men to press their advantage. They regrouped and pushed into the hall, rushing the door.

In the few seconds that passed before he heard the rush of oncoming men, the Penetrator had again crossed to the door. He stood with his back to the wall, facing inward. He removed a small, blue green canister from his bag and pulled the pin. He counted off three seconds and tossed the white phosphorus grenade out into the face of his attackers. Ticking off the remaining time, he sprang into the hall just after the grenade detonated. Men were down, crying out in pain and clawing at the ravaging chemical that bit into their vitals. He snapped three shots down hall for insurance and dashed across to the other side. Continuing, he made the hole in the wall and completed his withdrawal to the edge of the patio.

He made ready for the countercharge that was sure to come, loading the last round into the rocket launcher and preparing the M-79. A minute passed; two; five. Nothing stirred inside or around the building. Slowly the flames were dying out in the shattered truck. Mark tensed himself but continued to endure the silent waiting.

As the last flames were flickering out, bringing swift darkness to the ruined grounds of SIE, a small object was tossed from the building, barely making it over the wall. It was too small to be an explosive charge and Mark's curiosity forced him to crawl toward it. As he neared it, curiosity changed to horror as the dimming light revealed what it was.

It was a black finger, blood still oozing from the severed end. Winking in the ruddy light of the flames, around the digit, was a diamond ring and matching

wedding band. Joanie Carver's left-hand ring finger! Tied to the finger was a note. With hands that shook with rage and suppressed revulsion, Mark unrolled the note and read:

There is nothing you can do to stop our plans. We have already won! Withdraw at once or pay the consequences. For each minute you remain, we will throw out another piece of the nigger wench. We will deal with you later. Hail the Power!

Thoughts of the subbasement torture chamber and of what had happened to Lynn-Ann Simpson flashed through Mark's mind. There was not the least doubt that the madmen behind SIE were fully capable and willing to carry out their monstrous threat. He had no choice but to withdraw. Silently gathering up his equipment, keeping low to the ground, Mark pulled out. He made short rushes, covering himself carefully, until he reached the spot where he had entered the grounds and hurried to his car. He left the area with the Chevrolet wide open, his mind spinning to come up with a means of ending this before their time ran out...

Behind the retreating Mark Hardin, Brooks LePage and his remaining men worked to clean up the mess. They disposed of bodies and gathered up spent brass. LePage was conscious that the battle must have been heard for miles and that now the police had to be on their way. He hurried the others and worked among them, going over and over their version of what had occurred, inventing as they went along.

LePage had not been wrong in his surmise. They

had just finished sending down the last two corpses when the local sheriff arrived with two cars of deputies and the local volunteer fire department. There had been reports of explosions and fires. He walked across the grounds with LePage, asking prying questions and taking everything in with shrewd, calculating eyes.

Brooks LePage pointed to the burned out truck. It had, he insisted, been carelessly backed into an above ground storage tank of LPG. The whole works had exploded and gone up in flames. Other explosions and flames spread through the mansion, following the rupturing gas lines. It was all as simple as that. A common enough winter accident, although not usually on so grand a scale. LePage was worried that the county mounties would not accept his suave explanations, that this country cop would pry deeper and somehow tumble onto their plans, causing more trouble and possibly unrecoverable delay.

"We had reports of gunshots, too, Mr. LePage. What about that?"

"We keep a supply of fireworks for the holidays. Well, somehow the fire spread to a small outbuilding nearby and ignited the whole works. A regular five minute Fourth of July." LePage chuckled to the doubting lawman.

They argued earnestly for some time, going over the grounds and damaged portions of the building. There were more falsely hearty words, and a large sum of cash changed hands, from LePage to the sheriff, before lawmen and firemen drove out the gate. Even then, there was a promise that right after the holiday, the fire marshal would be out to investigate.

It had been a close squeak, and they all felt re-

lieved. They considered the money well spent to prevent any last minute difficulties. Considering the worst to be over, they never realized that the worst was about to come ...

Chapter 17 P IS FOR PENETRATOR

December twenty-third was several hours old when a green and white van rolled up the long drive to SIE's beleaguered mansion. Stepping from the cab, the driver adjusted the tool pouch at his hip and started up the steps. He was met halfway by two guards. They exchanged a few words and the guards led him to another man at the front door.

"There's still trouble on your line," the workman explained. "We've traced it to the building."

"A guy was already here."

"That was before we found out there was more trouble. Have you received any incoming calls in the last hour?"

"No," the other man admitted.

"Listen, buddy, I spent the last half hour freezin' my nuts off on a pole out there tryin' to call in here. When I say you have trouble, you have trouble."

The repairman was reluctantly admitted, and a guard was assigned to stay with him. He asked for the location of the terminal box and received a blank stare. Describing it, he was led toward the stairs and down to the basement. There, he opened a box and quickly went through each circuit. As he disconnected several leads, he informed the guard that it was going to take a lot of time.

Bored with something outside his field of knowledge and exhausted after a sleepless night filled with mind-numbing exertion from the unbelievable attack and all that followed, the guard slumped

against the far wall. Soon he drew up a chair and slouched down in it, his head nodding.

Following his withdrawal from the aborted assault on SIE, Mark Hardin had telephoned Tom Carver. They arranged to meet on the eastern shore. Straight and hard, that was the only way the Penetrator believed he could tell Carver what had happened and not lose the man's aid. He gave it all to him, including the handkerchief containing Joanie Carver's finger. He took it better than Mark had expected, yet his face was pale and he shook with anger.

"The thing is, we now have something to move on," Mark had urged him. "Take ... that ... to the local law. They're holding your wife. As far as we know now, she is alive. You have proof, no matter how grisly it is, and they will have to act. I'm going back, quietly this time. Once I get inside, I need about thirty minutes, then the police can hit the place with all they have.

"We just have to keep believing that they have done nothing more to her, that she's still alive. Once the shooting starts and they know the game is up, we can't guarantee they'll not harm her. So, I *need* that half hour. Make sure they don't move until I signal from inside. Red smoke. Be sure they wait for that."

Turning from his task, the repairman nudged his sleeping watchdog. "Ready to go, buddy." The guard snapped awake. "Trouble seems to be coming from there," the repairman said, pointing toward the steam room. "You comin'?"

They walked to the door and entered, the repairman first. Inside, he turned back toward the guard, a smile on his face. "You need a good- night's sleep."

His hand flashed in a blurring arc, connecting with the base of the guard's neck. His other hand was in motion also, striking the unsuspecting man below the sternum, plunging upward and rupturing the diaphragm, killing the gunman with silent efficiency. He dragged the corpse to a steam cabinet and folded him inside, closing the door.

Abandoning the repairman's tool kit, the Penetrator took the concealed elevator to the second floor. He quickly fanned all the rooms. It soon became obvious that none of the top men were there. He was positive that none of them had left the building, so there remained only the subbasement torture chamber or the offices. He headed for the stair.

In the office wing, only two doors remained on their hinges. Behind the first one he opened, a man was seated at a large desk. The brass plaque identified the office as that of *W. Bauer, Security*, but the name was meaningless to the Penetrator. The face, however, was another matter. Willi Bauer looked up as the Penetrator entered then pushed the door shut and leaned back against the panel.

"Hardin!" Willi Bauer made the name sound like overflow from a septic tank. "We don't have enough trouble, but Sergeant Good-guy has to get in the act." He was stalling, trying to figure the angles as he watched the big Colt Commander in Mark Hardin's fist.

Mark remembered that face. First twisted in hate and murderous lust, wielding a knife in a slush-clogged alley in Washington, D.C., and before that in a dimly lit, smelly warehouse in Saigon. A raging face, coming in and out of view, a man swinging a club over and over, a bloated balloon far above the pair of jungle boots that were stomping him into senselessness. He had been puzzled when Harris had said that

SIE had not tried to ambush him, but now he knew the answer to that one. It had been a private thing for Willi Bauer, trying to finish what he had begun in Vietnam. But then ... he put his thoughts into words. "You weren't big enough to get the job done in Saigon and you screwed it up again."

Willi Bauer eyed the .45 and thought of his .357 S&W only inches away in the drawer. He tried to stall for an opening. "You working for Griggs? You're the type for it."

Mark dug into his coat pocket and tossed an arrowhead onto the desk. Willi's eyes went to the wicked-looking blue flint object lying before him and the color drained from his face. They had found enough of them after that crazy man had hit the place and ... Harris had one taped to his chest when he was found. *The Penetrator!* Bauer's quavering voice betrayed the sick fear that gnawed at his guts. "You mean you're *him*?"

There was no mirth behind the wintry smile Mark Hardin gave him for reply. "Joan Carver. I came to get her out. Where do they have her?"

Willi spread his hands in a helpless, defensive gesture. "Listen, I can't go against..."

"I owe you something for the beating you and your friends gave me in 'Nam. Tell me or you'll get it now. Oh, I won't kill you," he went on when he saw the increased fear in Bauer. "Just gibble you up a little. A forty-five slug through each kneecap. Think about it. Every time you try to move, for the rest of your life, you'll scream with pain and remember me."

"Jesus," Willi said softly. Fear made him reckless, his hand twitched toward the desk drawer where his rod waited, telegraphing his intentions to the Penetrator. He fought for control over the hand and swallowed with difficulty. "All right, Hardin, I'll play ball. They ... they have her downstairs. In that tor-

ture chamber. Or maybe still in the room behind that. They have somethin* going. I don't know what it is, but it's big. The biggest thing I've ever been in. Makes that deal in 'Nam penny ante, even with all the millions that were bein' made." His hand moved toward the gun again, a casual gesture. "Place is all fortified up down there. You can't get in. If ... if you ... give me a break ... no rough stuff_____maybe I can get..."

"Ralph Deveraux, this is the police," a voice from outside crackled over a bullhorn, interrupting Willi's false offer. "We have a warrant for your arrest, charging kidnapping. Do not harm the woman. Send her out and come out with your hands up."

Damn them! They didn't wait for the smoke. Why couldn't they do it right for once! Mark thought as the voice continued. His attention was distracted just long enough. Willi went for his gun. Then Mark was in the air, his feet lashing out, slamming into the front edge of the desk, ramming it backward. The move caught Willi's hand inside the drawer, driving him, his swivel chair and the desk against the back wall. Bauer's scream of agony was lost in the rush as the Penetrator followed his momentum, landing, catlike, on the desk top and sending another kick at Bauer's head. The force of the blow knocked Willi from his chair, freeing him from his trap. His gun hand was jerked from the drawer, ripping skin from the back and sending the .357 magnum flying across the room. He recovered quickly enough, coming to his feet and facing Mark, the fight still in him.

The Penetrator jumped down and moved in on his opponent. A desperate man was more dangerous than a trained, cool-thinking fighter. You could never tell what they might do. The .45 was holstered, forgotten. If there was a shot from inside,

tipping his hand, Mark feared that something would be done to Joanie Carver before he could reach her. He needed every advantage he could hold until he had freed the woman. He began a lowline attack, concentrating on Willi's legs.

Bauer managed to pivot out of the way, sending stiffened knuckles toward Mark's kidney in a counterblow. He missed his target, but it sent pain signals jangling through Mark's body all the same. Willi's hand flashed to a pocket, coming out with a switchblade. He pressed the button.

Mark recovered smoothly and moved into a new attack routine. As he turned, he saw the flash of steel in Willi's hand. He let momentum carry his body on into the karate set he had intended to use. As he did, he arched his right wrist, freeing the slim blade secured to his arm. It dropped, hilt first, into his hand and he allowed it to slide on down, catching the point between thumb and forefinger. His arm continued downward, the knife released at the precise point for maximum force. It turned one and a half times in the air, a graceful, glittering ribbon of steel, then sunk hilt-deep into the soft flesh of Willi Bauer's belly. Willi's mouth twisted into a grimace of agony as he sucked in air, stifling a cry of pain. His eyes glazed in shock but he continued the upswing of his own knife, intent on completing the powerful stroke that would slash Mark's stomach from side to side. Well-executed though it was, the attack never connected.

Pivoting left, around Willi's extended knife, Mark executed a classical disengagement, moving in and beside his attacker and—hands and arms flashing—finished him off with three blows to throat, jaw and temple. The Penetrator looked down at Willi Bauer's corpse. Hardin wasn't even breathing hard.

"Deveraux! This is your last chance. Send out the

woman and surrender. You will be given every protection of the law .. ."

Mark Hardin became aware of the police outside, rushing things, making his work more difficult. He crossed to the door and checked the hall carefully. He sprinted to the basement stairs and took them three at a time. Clutching Willi's .357 in his hand, he dashed for the concealed elevator to the subbasement. As he passed the closed door to the massage parlor, suddenly Captain Benjamin Levin was in the corridor ahead of him, a pistol in his hand. Mark started to swing up his own weapon.

"Hardin! Look out!" the bought policeman shouted.

Instinctively, Mark hit the floor, rolling and turning as a shotgun exploded behind him. Pellets from the first charge slapped into the wall above his head, some of them hit Levin. The traitorous cop grunted with pain, raising his pistol and bringing it to bear on the man who had shot him. A second blast erupted from the shotgun, catching Captain Levin full in the stomach, driving him backward and spilling him on the floor.

The Penetrator had completed his turn and the magnum barked harshly, spitting a slug into the shotgunner's body, knocking him back through the doorway. But James E. B. Powell, Klansman member of the elitist cabal, was already dying from two of Levin's bullets in his chest. The Penetrator was on his feet and running down the hall before Powell had thrashed his way into death. He knelt beside the dying policeman.

"Hardin ... I ... I remembered I was ... a cop. My country, after all. Bunch of *yensen* fascists. In the safe at my house . . . full account. Names . . . dates... all there ... I..."

Mark Hardin looked into Levin's dead eyes. His

voice sounded rusty, broken. "You paid your dues, old man. Welcome back." Then Mark was in the elevator, heading down toward the evil waiting below.

He came out of the elevator shooting, bending low, Ms eyes searching out targets and firing until the Smith magnum fired its last round. Switching to the .45 he continued to send a hail of death through the room. Jesus Montenegro fell first, his dead body falling away from the hot branding iron he had held when he was Mt. General Phillip Nichols, who was bending over the rack mechanism, adjusting it, produced a 7.62 Walther and got off three shots before taking a Mt in his hip, throwing him to the floor, out of the fight.

Malcom McConkey was trying to shut a movable section of wall, behind which was revealed the altar and paraphernalia of the cabal. The tiny .25 automatic in Ms hand yipped like a toy terrier; Ms shots were wild and unaimed. Beyond him, the Penetrator caught sight of a slim black woman, struggling in the hands of pudgy Ralph Deveraux. Then he shot McConkey between the eyes. The Wizard of Wall Street fell backward, drawing the Mdden door closed with Mm. There was a momentary silence, broken only by stifled groans from General Nichols and the distant sound of gunfire as the police launched their attack on the building. Mark stood up and started for the movable wall section.

Suddenly Brooks LePage was behind him, Mdden until now by the bulk of an iron maiden. He got off a shot ... and missed. Mark spun toward him and steadied. He needed someone alive to give him information. His slug plowed along LePage's right side, spinning him and knocking him to his knees. Mark ran to Ms side, jerking him upright by the hair. "That door. How do you get through there? Is there another exit? Who is in there?"

Brooks LePage had had his mind assaulted with staggering defeat since early the previous night. Now, with the burning pain along his ribs, his reason let go. "The Power! We are the Power! All praise the Power!" he babbled. Slapping him on the side of the head with the slide of the Colt Commander did no good, LePage had fled reality. Mark dug out his hypo kit and gave LePage a shot. Then he went to where Phillip Nichols was struggling to stanch the flow of blood.

"You'll live, Nichols. You saw what I gave him. If you don't want the same, answer my questions. How do you get into that other room?"

"Plate to the side, on the right," the wounded general replied. "Push it. About halfway up."

"Anyone else in there?"

"I . . . no, not that I know of."

Mark ran to the wall, he searched for a second or two and found the plate. Tugging on the door, he swung it open cautiously. There were no shots from the other side. Taking care to avoid exposure to hidden fire, the Penetrator entered, eyes darting left and right. Except for the body of Malcom McConkey, the room was empty. He was too late. Mark returned to the other room, determined to learn as much as he could. Sounds of a sustained fire fight came dimly into the room, telling him that the SIE personnel were making a desperate stand against the police and federal officers.

Brooks LePage was lying back, relaxed by the drug. Mark questioned him quickly, learning that there was a second elevator in the other room, leading to the garage building adjacent to the mansion. Deveraux had an escape plan, one he had planned long ago, just in case. He began to rave, so Mark turned back to Nichols.

With little urging, Nichols told Mark all he knew

about the escape route.. Deveraux planned to fly 01 if necessary. Harold Williams kept a plane at nearby airport for that purpose. Before Mark could get more information, Nichols slipped into unconsciousness. Mark headed for the elevator to the garage.

Sounds of firing no longer came from upstairs; the police would be swarming over the place any moment. At the elevator, Mark discovered that it was in use. The door opened and Tom Carver burst into the room, gun in hand. "Where is she?"

"Gone," Mark told him simply. "Deveraux and Williams got away, taking her as a hostage. They are on their way to an airstrip. Let's go."

Upstairs, they commandeered a squadcar, using Captain Levin's name. Once on the way, Tom Carver took the radio, asking for and receiving the location of the nearest landing strip. He hadn't acknowledged the report before Mark had the car halted around-and was dashing toward their objective. Only a few minutes had passed since McConkey's death throes had closed off the other room. Maybe they had time to catch them on the ground

Chapter 181 SEARCH AND DESTROY

Chunks of frozen gravel rattled against the undercarriage of the police car- as the Penetrator wheeled it into the dirt road leading to the small airstrip ahead. To cover the possibility that they might be too late, Tom Carver had radioed for a police aircraft to meet them there. It was only minutes away. As they slowed to a stop beside the operations building, Tom pointed out the rear profile of a Cessna 183 growing small in the distance as it fought for altitude.

. "Yeah? Colonel Williams? Keeps Ms plane here all the time. In fact, you just missed him. He took off with two passengers just a minute ago." The traffic manager's words only verified what they already feared. As soon as the police craft landed, Mark and Tom replaced the two officers inside and took off, Mark piloting it in hot pursuit.

Tom Carver turned anxiously toward Mark, the strain of his tightly controlled fury turning his face into a skull-like visage. "How are we gonna find them up here? The sky's a big place, you know."

How *would* they find their quarry? The momentum of Ms all-out'attack' to stop iSeveraux and to free the hostage had carried them this far, into the air with only a general idea of their bearing, northeast toward New York with a destination of Kennedy Airport. What could be done to make sure? Too bad, Mark thought, they didn't have long-range radar. Wait a minute! Why not use ra-

dar? "GONAD!" he yelled, to be heard over the roar of the single engine under full throttle.

"Con-what?"

"Continental Air Defense Command," came his reply. "Get on that radio and have someone on the ground contact the army. They have to have a GONAD center around somewhere. Fort Balvour? No matter. They can plot Williams and relay to us."

Hope flared through Tom Carver. It took some time but soon they were given a new frequency and Tom relayed the information on Williams' flight plan and probable course to a bored-sounding second lieutenant at the operations center near the Aberdeen Proving Ground. He included the estimated time of take-off. Static-filled silence held for several minutes. Then the voice came back, tinged now with growing excitement.

"Thunderhead to police three-zero-niner. We have your plot." Tom's hand shook as he took the mike to respond. "Target was originally listed as FPO—friendly by point of origin," the lieutenant translated, "we have now resumed tracking. Target is at Angels seven, air speed one-five-eight, four-zero miles off coast and holding steady. Target has deviated from indicated flight path, now flying course of one-eight-niner degrees, true. I say again, target is no longer flying north, new course in one hundred eighty-nine degrees true north. Coming back your way. Good hunting."

"Keep us advised, Thunderhead . . . and thanks. Police three-zero-niner, out."

Mark nosed the plane gently into a broad circle and they continued to wait for sight of their adversary. Twenty minutes passed and the radio crackled to life again. "Police three-zero-niner, we have you orbiting seven-five miles southeast of our position, ap-

proximately two miles off Cape May. Is that affirmative?"

Accustomed to the standard police ten-code, Tom replied, "Ten-four ... uh, that's a roger," he corrected.

"Good news, then. We have your target crossing your position three-zero miles due east in five minutes. Advise when you have him on visual."

"Roger, Thunderhead, police three-zero-niner, out."

' Mark broke from the orbiting pattern and headed out to sea, past the southernmost tip of New Jersey, dropping to six thousand feet and seeming to hover between the slate-gray sky and the angry gray green waves below. He adjusted Ms heading slightly, allowing for the extra distance they had to cover. Tom Carver asked why they had dropped a thousand feet in altitude and was told that the chances were If Williams and Deveraux were watching for pursuit, they would concentrate out to the sides and upward, as well as to the front, expecting a Mgher altitude for maximum cruising speed and wider search range. Since they had been orbiting along their quarry's path, they could now slip under them and possibly avoid detection. They spotted the fugitive aircraft a few minutes later and dropped lower, sliding in beMnd the Cessna. They made their contact report and the GONAD system shut down their part of the hunt with another wish for good luck. Williams continued on Ms previous heading, following a bearing that Mark estimated would take them over the Carolinas.

Suddenly, the plane dipped one wing and threw hard left rudder, skewing sideways in the air, dropping several hundred feet. Immediately they had straightened on course, the plane picked up speed.

"They may have spotted us," Mark commented grimly. "He's making a run for it."

Tom Carver checked the map, drawing an imaginary line along the probable course. It indicated they would cross the coast line somewhere in the Tidelands area, near the York or James Rivers in Virginia. He gave frowning concentration to that segment of aerial map outlining the area. "I thought I knew the country around here pretty good, but I can't figure out where he's headed. Far as I know, the only place for them to land, if they do, is at Patrick Henry Airport, halfway between Newport News and Williamsburg."

"Hard telling what they'll do if they've spotted us. Aren't there any other airports nearby?"

Tom continued his study. "There's a small field at Williamsburg. They land there and we have trouble, lots of ways to get lost, make a getaway. Also there's a cow pasture field at a marina near Jamestown."

Mark's mental discipline had long ago enabled him to see a problem as a whole. "We'll stay to the west of them, try to force them away from the big airports. As I recall, that's pretty rugged land around there, swamps, not many roads. Only way off is by toll bridge and the highway. Easier to bottle them up if they stay away from Williamsburg."

"You know this area?"

"A little. I've been to Williamsburg twice. Once when I was a kid, a history award thing in high school, and again while I was at an army school on the East Coast."

"That'll help once we get them on the ground."

"If we can get them down here."

In order for Mark's tactics to work, it was necessary that Deveraux knew he was being pursued. Moving closer, Mark began to crowd the other

plane. Williams, who was piloting the plane, reacted as expected, veering eastward. Deveraux fought open the window panel on the passenger side and, struggling against the slipstream, fired several shots at them, trying for the engine.

"Hey!" Tom Carver shouted. "This is like World War One."

"Only we can't shoot back," he was reminded. Mark eased off, drawing out of effective pistol range.

"Well, he knows we're after them. Wonder what he's going to do?"

Sergeant Carver's question was answered some twenty minutes later as Williams crossed the peninsula and began his first leg over the dirt field near Jamestown. Crowding and harassing them again, Mark tried to duplicate every move they made, hoping for a simultaneous touchdown. It was a dangerous and tricky maneuver, but he held on tenaciously until a sudden crosswind forced him to veer off and come around a second time. As he dropped into the slot, Mark saw Williams' Cessna taxi clear of the field. Three figures ran from it toward the office building.

Blue smoke billowed from the rear tires of a speeding sedan as Mark and Tom jumped from the police plane and hurried toward the office. A man writhed on the ground, clutching his crotch. As they neared the fallen man, another came from the nearby hangar, belligerently stepping between them and the fallen man, hefting a fourteen-inch spanner. Tom Carver flashed his badge.

"Police. The men in that car are fugitives wanted in D.C. You have a car?"

A change of mood came over the wrench wielder, "Got that pickup over there."

"It'll have to do. See to it that that plane won't get off the ground." They sprinted to the truck and

the location of the fleeing trio, a commotion on the windmill stair caught their attention. Propelled backward, a costumed employee went crashing down the steps. Clutching at the rail, he managed to grab it even as his momentum propelled him over the side. His grasp held long enough, however, to enable him to bring his feet under him and land without harm. "My God," the young black shouted, "that guy's got a gun!" A shot rang out from the highest window in the mill, underlining his words as he dived for cover at the mill's base. Snow spurted close to where Mark stood. Without a word, Mark and Tom Carver separated, moving in on the gunman.

Angling to his right, Mark cut across the cornfield, using the corn for concealment as he rushed the mill stairs. Moving in fits and starts, changing direction frequently to avoid presenting a good target, he had advanced nearly to the center of the field when a shot was fired from the miller's cottage, almost in a direct line with his rush. He had not considered the possibility that the fugitives had also separated, and his error nearly cost him his life. A fusillade followed the first shot. Two bullets cut through the loose material of Mark's jacket and a third struck the frozen ground so close to his foot that it stung painfully from the impact. He dived behind a corn shock, heedless of the damp snow. He concentrated his fire on the window opening in the near wall of the cottage, vaguely conscious of screams and shouts of consternation in the near distance.

Bullets thudded into the ground near his side, throwing pellets of frozen soil into his face. In his hurry to get out of the line of fire from the cottage, he had exposed himself to fire from the windmill. He hastily fired three more rounds at the miller's and jumped to his feet in one fluid motion, changing

magazines on the run. He cut across to a vee-notch in the split-rail fence that provided partial protection from both positions. The one room, brick mill-house was behind him now, making it hard for the gunman to fire from without exposing himself fully in the window. Safe momentarily, Mark concentrated on the open window in the mill. The heavy thudding of a .45 automatic sounded from inside the mill, but Mark was hearing the sound from behind. Following quickly on the heels of the more powerful weapon was the flat popping of a .38, verifying Mark's surmise that Tom Carver had circled the mill and now stood between the fugitives and the remainder of the restored area. The gunshots told Mark something else of importance; Deveraux had fired a revolver at them from the plane, a .38 or .357, so the man in the windmill must be Williams. Mark decided in an instant.

Vaulting the low wooden fence, he dashed to the base of the mill where the frightened Colonial Williamsburg employee huddled like an eighteenth century anachronism. "Police." A lie of convenience. "Is this thing into the wind enough to turn?"

"Yes, sir. A little bit."

"Good. How do you get it to turn?"

"There's a pull rope on the other side, releases the brake up in the mill."

"Okay. Hang on, well have you out in a minute." Keeping behind the base of the mill, Mark located the rope and yanked on it. With a slight creak of wooden gears against the wood shaft, the great sails turned to find their balance then, catching the wind on the quarter, began to revolve. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, the canvas-rigged wooden arms began to move the entire mechanism. Mark heard a muffled curse from inside, distorted by

the soft rumble of wooden parts and the huge millstones.

The Penetrator was becoming aware of the absence of fire from the cottage; he took advantage of it to gain the foot of the stairs. When he still did not draw fire, he was positive that Deveraux and his hostage had escaped during the action around the windmill. Accepting it, he went up the stairs two at a time. Before Mark reached the low, narrow doorway, Harold Williams was on his way down from the upper level, where he had suddenly found himself in the midst of the implacably spinning, rumbling wooden machinery. Hardin and Williams confronted each other from less than four feet away.

From years of conditioning, Harold Williams shot military style. Mark felt his left forefinger curl around the front of the trigger guard at the same second the .45 bucked in his hand. Colonel Williams' shot went wild, over Mark's head. His own was low, taking the rogue Marine Corps officer in the gut, knocking him back against the steep flight of stairs. Mark fired again, hitting Williams in the chest. Still the tough older man tried to raise his weapon for another shot. Mark squeezed again ... and nothing happened! His mental counter had skipped a shot somewhere and the receiver of the Colt was open, the slide locked rearward. No time to reload. He started for the derringer in his trouser pocket. The black hole at the business end of Williams' .45 steadied on Mark's chest . . . held . . . wavered and sank. Harold Williams' hand would no longer do what his mind commanded, life was rapidly leaking out of him. His pistol clattered to the floor and he died.

"Carver, I'm coming out. It's all over." Tom Carver met him at the foot of the steps, as he was re-

loading his .45. "Did you see Deveraux, which way he went?"

"He wasn't in there too?" the black sergeant asked in confusion.

"No. Deveraux and your wife were in the cottage."

They heard a shout of anger from behind them and a cry for help in a familiar voice. Turning, they saw an eddy of motion, angry voices and surprised tourists, then the bulk of Ralph Deveraux disappearing into the gardens adjacent to the windmill. Deveraux had not escaped the cottage earlier, as Mark had thought, but had deliberately held his fire, callously sacrificing Harold Williams in order to make good his own escape when he figured it would be unobserved.

"That's the Peyton Randolph house. Let's go," Mark commanded.

They had to push and shove their way through the milling tourists, attracted by the gunfire, before gaining clear ground and running into the gardens. Ahead of them, Ralph Deveraux had nearly reached the house and he turned back long enough to fire three shots at them. A woman screamed and a man fell to the ground. Neither of the pursuers had the time to check to see if the man had been hit, had a heart attack or merely tried to get out of the line of fire. They sprinted between the ornately trimmed shrubs and formal flower beds—bare now in winter—hurrying past the white outbuildings.

Deveraux shoved a gray-haired woman out of his way and dragged the struggling hostage into the back door of the house. The woman, knocked off balance and awkward in her crinolines and farthingale, fought to* keep from falling. Her efforts effectively blocked access to the rear door. Shoe leather slapped on the brick paving as Mark and Tom Carver arrested

their pell-mell dash. Shouts and angry voices came from inside and they heard a door slam.

"He's gone out the front!" They divided and ran for the ends of the house, Tom Carver ahead of Mark, rounding the corner and dashing down the short side. Mark had taken the long way to the east end of the building and had only rounded his corner when he heard Tom Carver's challenge.

"Police officer! Stop where you are!" A rattle of shots followed. Several people screamed and Mark put on a greater burst of speed. He came out on Nicholson Street as a small knot of people were gathering around a fallen man. He made it to the crowd in four long strides. Mark looked down to see Tom Carver, sitting up, clutching his left thigh just above the knee and rocking from side to side in pain. A murmur rose among the onlookers.

"He's got a gun."

"Look out, he'll shoot us!"

Mark raised his voice commandingly. "This man's a police officer, get some help here fast. Where'd they go?" this last to Carver.

Tom Carver nodded his head. "Across there, somewhere."

Mark looked in the direction indicated, his eyes going quickly over the knots of tourists on Market Square. Then he saw a swirl of movement among a clutch of people standing around three cannons that sat on the grass. He recognized the broad girth of Ralph Deveraux as he broke clear of the others, still going south, toward the courthouse on Duke of Gloucester Street. Mark started after him, gaining ground with each stride. But when he reached the courthouse, there was no sign of the fleeing fat man.

"Come back here, mister! What do you think you're doing?" The angry shout came from across the street, at the Powder Magazine and Mark

needed no more assurance of Deveraux's whereabouts. He bounded into the street and ran across toward the tall brick structure. Two Colonial-costumed "militiamen" were arguing over what to do about the man who had forced his way inside as Mark came up.

"Police," he told them to ease matters. "Do those gates close? Good. Shut them from outside and stay out there. That man is armed and dangerous." They obeyed without question, their eyes going to the compact Colt Commander in Mark's fist and back to his solid bulk. He dashed to the open doorway as the gates thudded closed behind him. A bullet splintered wood from the doorpost beside his head as he entered and he dived behind a counter, holding his own fire for fear of hitting Joan Carver on the narrow spiral staircase.

Memory clicked into place, identifying the physical structure for him. Built in 1715, the three-story, all-brick structure was surrounded by a thick eight-foot brick wall. The wooden spiral staircase from which Deveraux had fired ran up through the center of the building, giving access to all floors. The second floor, where the SIE man and his hostage now were, contained a collection of over 3,000 antique firearms and other weapons. There was, Mark recalled, no other way out. Unknowingly, Deveraux had trapped himself. Scuffling came from the floor above.

"Sit where I put you and don't move." The leader of SIE was ridding himself, temporarily, of his burdensome hostage. It was going to be a tough fight. Footsteps sounded through the wooden overhead. "You down there, Penetrator." His voice was mocking, on the thin edge of raving insanity. "You were a fool to come after me. I'll kill the nigger wench if you try to interfere. But it's already too late to

stop us. We're going to win, you know. In a few hours now, we shall control this nation, utterly and completely. Nothing will stop us. Nothing!" He fired three shots down the stairwell as though to punctuate his statement.

This time, Mark was able to return fire, blasting away at every slight indication of the obese madman above. He achieved as little as Deveraux, only emptying another magazine. As his fingers closed over another one, he realized with a shock that it was his last seven rounds. He had been hard at it since the assault on SIE that morning and had not had an opportunity to resupply himself. He loaded and watched for a clear target.

There was a rattle of wooden poles and a heavy thud that sounded like an axe striking solidly into wood, followed by the sound of a fist against flesh and a woman's voice in pain.

"You bitch! Try to stick me with that pike!"

Mark heard more scuffling and realized that Deveraux was moving on to the third floor, away from the readily available weapons with which Joan Carver had tried to defend herself. Mark was up and moving, too, starting up the stairs even as he thought about it. At the second floor landing, a spontoon still stuck in the wall, its leaf-shaped blade buried deep in the wall where Deveraux must have crouched, firing down to the first floor. A wry grin creased his face. That girl had pluck. She had lost a finger, but she hadn't yet lost her nerve and was fighting every bit of the time. A bullet chipped plaster from the wall near him and Mark dived for protection. Both guns barked in a heated exchange until Mark realized he had but one shot left. He held his fire, waiting.

The silence became too much for Deveraux. His pale face appeared over the edge of the spiral stair-

case, he pushed Joanie Carver in front as a shield. He mouthed profanities, coming closer to the breaking point. His eyes were wild and saliva was running from one corner of his mouth as he fired several random shots.

Suddenly, Joanie Carver ducked her head and bit his arm. Deveraux cried out and, as he released his hostage, Mark took his chance. Mark's shot narrowly missed Deveraux's head, gouging flesh from the juncture of his bull neck and thick body. He screamed like a woman and fell back.

Mark holstered his .45, drew his Hi-Standard deringer and started up the staircase. Deveraux fired twice, wildly, and the hammer clicked on a spent cartridge. Mark fired both barrels, one .22 mag round screaming off the wrought-iron bannister above and the other thwacking through Deveraux's coat, just missing his body. Deveraux stood coolly in the open, calmly reloading his pistol. Mark thumbed open the two-shot hideout gun, kicking out the spent brass, trying to reload on the run. His heart thudded in his chest as his groping fingers discovered he didn't have a single replacement round. Deveraux snapped shut the cylinder of his .38 and fired at point-blank range. Mark felt a sharp blow and a stinging along the top of his right shoulder. He swung himself over the edge of the stairs and hit, rolling, scrambling back toward the demonstration table, away from a direct line of sight from the opening above. He was now without a weapon, facing an armed, desperate madman.

Mark looked around him. Remembering Joanie Carver's brave attack with the spontoon, he thought of the weapons at hand. But to get to the rack of halberds and half-pikes would expose him to Deveraux's fire. He needed something else. Then he remembered the demonstration put on by the guide

when he had been here as a visitor. There was powder and shot on the demonstration table above his head. He quickly located a Brown Bess musket with a new-looking flint and wrestled it from the gun rack. Mark searched his memory for the loading procedure as he returned to the table.

Deveraux was not slow to realize that Mark had broken off his nearly successful attack because he was out of ammunition. Elation flowed through him and he started down the stairs, alert for a trick, but convinced he was going after an unarmed man. "You have overplayed your hand this time, Penetrator," he boasted. "We are one with the Power and cannot fail. Now I am going to kill you, slowly, and wait for our success. We will rule here and none can stop me." He neared the halfway point on the stairs and stopped to once again check.

Mark placed the musket on half-cock and raised the frizzen. Clawing the cartridge from its demonstration board, he bit off the end—the taste of black powder grains sharp and bitter on his tongue—and poured a small portion into the pan, lowering the frizzen. Footsteps creaked on the stair as Deveraux moved further down. Mark grounded the musket and poured powder down the barrel.

Deveraux reached the second floor. He looked around from side to side.

Mark pushed paper and ball into the muzzle and drove them home with the ramrod. The sound caused Deveraux to turn toward the side wall. He saw a flash of motion as Mark seated the ball and returned the rammer to its holder. A smile of triumph twisted Ralph Deveraux's lips as he moved on cat feet toward his cornered victim.

Mark eared back the hammer as he glanced up, seeing Deveraux nearly on top of him, his pistol raised for a simple, deadly shot. Mark stood, throw-

lug the antique weapon to Ms shoulder, pointing it directly at Deveraux's face. The hammer fell, there was a spark as flint Mt steel, a flash and a puff of smoke, followed by a deep-tMoated dull roar, and billow of wMte from the muzzle. The butt slammed back into Mark's shoulder.

Deveraux's mouth was open to shout his victory to the world when the .75 caliber ball took Mm between the eyes. His face was blackened from the muzzle blast, making the tMee-quarter-inch hole just a darker spot in Ms smudged features. He was flung backward by the impact, slammed into the bannister and pitched forward onto the ancient wooden floor. The back of his head was gone, flung across the room in shattered bits, and he was very dead. Mark crossed to him and dropped a blue flint arrowhead in the middle of Ms back.

Although Ms ears were ringing from the sound of the shot, Mark heard deep wrenching sobs as Joame Carver gave way to emotion. She came down the stairs, holding her face in hands. Mark crossed to her.

"My husband," she sobbed. "He ... he shot my husband."

"It's all right. Tom's not hurt bad and it's all over."

They went on down the spiral staircase and out the door. For the first time, Mark became aware of the wail of sirens and the crowd outside the front gate. He spoke to Joanie Carver again and headed her toward the gate. Then the Penetrator went around back and out another way; up and over the wall. There was no need to stay and answer questions. He had left Ms calling card and the job was done...

EPILOGUE

Deveraux was dead, the empire, he dreamed of creating lay in ruins. Many of the other top men behind the conspiracy were rounded up and arrested on various charges. Wednesday night, the day after Christmas, Mark and Anitra were seated with Tom and Joanie Carver in a Chinese restaurant on Twenty-third Street in Arlington. They had just ordered drinks when Les Hyatt and his wife joined them. Talk naturally turned to the SIE affair.

"It's lucky that they were able to return LePage to sanity long enough to find out where the assassin planned to launch that model plane," Les Hyatt told the others. "The Feds located him Monday and arrested him half an hour before launch time. They have enough to prove he's the one who shot Fred Walters, too. Got all of the people around the vice president who were involved, so that wraps it all up. Funny, but I never figured Ben Levin for the undercover type."

Mark and Tom exchanged glances, but kept their silence. Tom had turned over the book that Levin had kept, giving all the information he had obtained on SIE, the times and ways in which he had been bribed and the cash he received, neatly tucked away in stacks. His diary had enabled the authorities to bring charges against those conspirators who had survived. A special investigation was called for by the Senate. Captain Levin and Tom Carver received

full official credit for cracking the case and the Captain was to have a hero's funeral the next day.

"I lost my job, however," Tom informed Les Hyatt.

"I know," the lieutenant was embarrassed.

Tom's grin was one of pride and impish pleasure. "Yeah, seems I wouldn't answer questions about some guy the press calls the Penetrator. Refused entirely. But ... I got another offer already. I'm going to work for Dan Griggs over at Justice."

"Congratulations," Mark and Les Hyatt echoed together.

"Just who was this guy, Tom?" the lieutenant wouldn't let it rest.

"You mean that masked man on the great white horse?" teased Joanie Carver. "Why, he just rode away, shouting, 'Hi-yo Silver!'" They all laughed except for Les Hyatt, who gave a long, speculative look at Mark Hardin.

Dinner was a triumph, a celebration of being alive. As they walked out the door, Wo Fat Ling, the proprietor cursed them roundly in Chinese. Somehow, his name had not been uncovered in the investigation following the destruction of the *Societe Internationale d'Elite*. He remained a free man, but one living in fear of the next knock on the door. He hated this black policeman and that unidentified, shadow man known as the Penetrator. They had come so near. Now their plans were in ruin and many were already in prison or taking flight. Someday, he vowed, he would take his revenge against the black man. And no matter how long it took, a day of sweet revenge would come when he had the Penetrator at his mercy.

Two thousand miles west of Washington, D.C., the Beechcraft Baron nosed down into level flight at

ten thousand five hundred feet, chewing up the miles at an air speed crowding two hundred twenty-five m.p.h. Locking in the autopilot, Mark Hardin turned on the tape recorder and listened again to his interrogation of Clevon Harris. At Ms present speed, he would be back at the Stronghold that evenng and he wanted to take up a matter with Professor Haskins and David. It was something he had heard on the tape, but as yet he could give it neither meaning nor value. Harris had begun to ramble near the end of Ms interrogation and had mentioned one thing in particular that Mark had listened to over and over, intrigued. It was a reference to someone or something called "Black Gold."

Maybe, Mark thought as his plane droned on toward California, he should think seriously about a trip to Gotham in the near future. It just might be that New York City would be needing the services of the Penetrator... soon.