

Prologue

Free men of every generation must combat renewed efforts of organized force and greed to destroy liberty. Every generation must wage war for freedom against new forces that seek through new devices to enslave mankind.

—Robert Marion “Fighting Bob” LaFollette, Sr.,

Platform of the Conference for Progressive Political Action (1924)

One Year Ago

Hickiwan District
Tohono O'odham Nation
Arizona
July 24

There are no shadows in the valley of death.

The sun blazes with such ferocity that anything resembling shade evaporates, like every last drop of water in this godforsaken desert. With the exception of the sweat that started soaking through the navy blue windbreakers of the FBI agents the moment they stepped out of the green-and-white Border Patrol Explorer, of course. It wasn't even seven in the morning yet and already it had to be over a hundred degrees. Wavering ribbons of heat rose from the brick red sands, making the creosotes and chollas and ocotillos appear to burn with invisible flames. A diamondback's rattle buzzed from somewhere behind a snarled mass of flowering prickly pears.

Crazy to think that this desolate and essentially uninhabitable corridor was one of the most hotly contested regions on the planet.

Special Agent James Mason paused in the sparse shade of a saguaro cactus, lifted his ball cap, and wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm. His close-cropped blond hair was

already soaked. He reseated his hat, tugged down the brim to shield his eyes, and scrutinized the cloudless sky over the rocky crest uphill for the first sign of what was in store for them in the canyon on the other side. Supervisory Agent Javier Velasquez, the Border Patrol agent who'd driven them out here from Ajo Station, stood silhouetted against the rising sun. One of his best trackers was waiting for them at the site of the discovery he'd called in just over two hours ago.

By the time Mason reached the top, Velasquez was already picking his way down the eastern slope through a maze of cacti and paloverdes toward a dry wash lined with ironwoods and hackberry trees on this side and a stratified red escarpment on the other. They were roughly twenty miles north of the Arizona-Mexico border, twenty-five in every direction from anything that could pass for civilization, and deep in the Ajo Mountains.

Mason caught a glimpse of a dark hunched shape in the streambed as he glanced through the branches of an ironwood, the emerald leaves of which shimmered like a viper's scales. He raised his hand to block out the sun and again scanned the cloudless sky.

"Where are all the carrion birds?"

Special Agent Spencer Kane clapped him on the shoulder as he passed.

"You figure out in a hurry that any exertion costs you hydration, and once you start losing fluids, there's just about no way of getting them back." He was tall and had the kind of physique that made it impossible to determine his age. His Nordic blue eyes were framed by crow's-feet and his hair had faded from blond to silver, but he carried himself with the air of a man in his prime. "First lesson you need to learn out here. Don't waste your energy. Even the buzzards know that."

Mason followed Kane to the edge of the trees, where the branches still shook from Velasquez's passage. They'd only been partners for a few years, but they went way back. Kane

had personally recruited Mason at a time when the latter desperately needed to find his direction in life, then served as something of a long-distance mentor through the FBI Academy in Quantico and Mason's first posting in the Twin Cities. He'd been instrumental not only in bringing Mason back home to the Denver Field Office, but in securing his assignment to this high-profile strike force, which would be a nice feather in his protégé's professional cap.

"Remember that human-trafficking ring we shut down a while back?" Mason asked.

"Bastards knew they were about to get caught, so they killed those poor girls and buried them out in the corn rows."

"We spent three months tracking them and still might never have found the farm where they were holed up if it hadn't been for all the crows in the fields."

"You think we're wasting our time here?"

"I sure as hell hope so."

They pressed through the thorny branches and hopped down from the bank onto the coarse gravel and silt. Mason didn't notice there had been a gentle breeze until it was gone. The air was heavy and oppressive. A horrible stench hit him squarely in the face. He covered his mouth and nose, but the damage was already done. The smell of decomposition was already lodged in his sinuses.

Velasquez stood with his back to them, conferring with his subordinate, who glanced up at them with an expression of apprehension, if not outright suspicion. He had Hispanic dark skin and eyes and wore the standard forest green paramilitary uniform all USBP enforcers wore in the field, with a Heckler & Koch P2000 .40-caliber semiautomatic on one hip and a telescoping steel baton on the other. He acknowledged them with a nod.

The dirt crunched underfoot as they approached. Mason stopped short when he saw the reason they'd been summoned all the way out here and whistled appreciatively.

“Now that’s what I call a taxidermist’s wet dream,” Kane said. “Now ... just for the sake of argument, let’s pretend I’m not a taxidermist. How about instead I’ll be a federal agent who was unceremoniously awakened from a dream costarring the lovely Sofia Vergara and has yet to have his first cup of coffee.”

“Lead Border Patrol Agent Rafael Silva,” Velasquez said by way of introduction. “These men represent the FBI on the Bradley Strike Force. Special Agents Kane and ...”

“Mason,” he said, and shook Silva’s dirty hand. “Special Agent James Mason.”

“Wonderful,” Kane said with a clap. “Now that we’re all old friends, why don’t you tell me, Lead Agent Silva, what in the name of God does any of this have to do with me?”

Silva glanced at his boss, who gestured for him to proceed.

“I was cutting sign down off the Destruya Drag—”

“That means he was searching for tracks or any other indication that undocumented aliens had recently passed through,” explained Velasquez, interrupting.

“Right. We’d just busted up a route the smugglers had been using for a while, so we knew word would get back to the coyotes and they’d be forced to adapt on the fly. Branch off their usual path somewhere south of here. I picked up sign about three miles down the wash and followed the tracks until I caught a whiff of this stench.”

Mason scrutinized the trail leading in their direction from the south. There was a riot of footprints, one set trampled on top of another. Staggering gaits. Uneven treads. At least six distinct sets of tracks. There were disturbances in the dirt, where it looked as though one of them had fallen and struggled to rise again.

“What kind of time frame are we looking at?” he asked.

“Just over twenty-four hours. Night before last. Maybe a couple hours before sunrise.”

There were dark splotches all over the ground. The fluid had congealed into the dirt as it dried. Mason used a twig to excavate one patch and rolled it over. Blood. No doubt about it.

“And you’re basing that deduction on what? The tracks?”

“I could read this sign in my sleep. These people weren’t trying to be sneaky. They were in big trouble and they knew it.”

At the heart of the pattern of droplets was an impression in the dirt shaped like a man, had he fallen diagonally forward and landed on his shoulder and face. The upper half of the imprint was smoothed into a shallow trench. Someone or something had come along and dragged the body upstream and around the bend, obliterating its own tracks in the process.

“Figure they were mules?” Kane asked. “Maybe one of the rival cartels—”

“No.” Mason studied the clumps of dried blood. The smell. It was more than just death. There was something wrong with the smell. He covered his mouth and nose with his sleeve. “They were sick.”

“Well, that would explain all of the birds.”

Mason had to step over and around the avian carcasses, decomposing where they’d fallen, as he walked to the north. They littered the streambed for as far as he could see. Massive turkey vultures and crested caracaras and crows, which seemed tiny by comparison. Crusted blood on their beaks. Feathers disheveled and lusterless. Eyes sunken. Positively crawling with black flies.

They say the meek shall inherit the earth, but he was convinced it would be the flies.

“So, then, where are the bodies of the people who came through here?”

Mason stared to the east. He was pretty sure he could see flares leaping from the sun, which seemed to be getting closer as it ascended. They'd be lucky if the mercury didn't top 115.

If the corpses were still out here, he had a hunch that after a full day in this heat they wouldn't be incredibly hard to find.

2

Six sets of footprints turned to five, then five to four.

It was easy to tell where the bodies had fallen. They'd left contorted impressions in the dirt, droplets of congealed blood, and the drag marks that highlighted their posthumous northern migration. That, and the concentration of dead carrion birds clustered around the imprints.

"We should be wearing biohazard suits," Velasquez said for the hundredth time. "These birds are probably breeding disease and we're breathing the germs right now!"

"Then we're already dead," Kane said. He didn't appear worried in the slightest.

Mason wished he shared his partner's confidence. He had a new bride waiting for him back home in Colorado, who'd undoubtedly prefer it if he didn't return with some nasty pathogen. Or in a box.

He counted forty-three dead birds over roughly a two-mile stretch. Apart from the flies, nothing had attempted to scavenge them.

Four sets of tracks became three. Two of those remaining collapsed next to each other. Silva said the lone remaining walker had pulled on their arms in an effort to get them to stand again, before kicking sand everywhere in frustration and continuing onward to the north.

They intermittently lost the sole set of tracks, thanks to the drag marks from the others. No effort had been made to brush them away. It was a contradiction that the bodies had been used to erase the prints of those dragging them, and yet the trail they had left in the process might as well have been illuminated with running lights. It was almost as though—

Mason glanced over at Silva. He'd stopped off to the left and crouched over the drag marks. He fingered the edge. The expression on his face betrayed his recognition a heartbeat before his hand found the butt of his pistol. He'd come to the very same conclusion.

The birds and the trail hadn't been deliberately left behind. Whoever had made them simply hadn't had the opportunity to erase them yet.

Mason drew his Glock 23 FG&R and sighted down the streambed ahead, where it bent back to the east around the sandstone outcropping. The ironwoods lining the bend were so dense, he could barely see the ridge behind them.

It was the perfect place for an ambush.

“What's going on?” Velasquez said.

“Shh!”

Kane's eyes locked onto Mason's. He had a two-handed grip on his own sidearm, which he directed down at the sand between his feet.

A high-pitched buzzing sound erupted from the valley ahead of them.

“ATV,” Silva whispered.

Kane took off at a sprint as the whine of another engine joined the first. Then another still.

“Call for tactical support!” Mason shouted back over his shoulder. “I want ground teams converging on our location! And get a bird in the air! Now!”

He took off after Kane, who rounded the bend without bothering to clear it. He heard Velasquez barking orders into his transceiver behind him as he went low around the stone embankment.

The buzzing sound grew more distant by the second.

The ravine wound to the east before opening into a straightaway. Kane was a good ten strides ahead of Mason, but he was closing the gap fast. He could hardly hear the motors over his heavy tread and even heavier breathing. His body was already overheating.

By the time they found the ATV tracks, the sound was a memory. He doubled over to catch his breath and watched the sweat dripping from his face onto the sand. Kane paced with his hands on his hips, sucking wind, until the others caught up.

“We have vehicles en route from both directions on Highway Eighty-six,” Velasquez said. “Maybe five minutes out.”

“It’s already too late.” Kane snatched the two-way out of the Border Patrol agent’s hand. “They’re long gone.”

Mason could barely see the single set of footprints they’d been following beneath all of the new prints, which had been made by large men wearing heavy-duty work boots. There were so many that he hesitated to even wager a guess as to how many men had arrived on what appeared to have been four-wheel all-terrain vehicles.

The faint thumping sound of chopper blades materialized from the west and he saw the dark shape of an ICE—Immigration and Customs Enforcement—Black Hawk streak across the sky.

“They found the last one over there.” Silva pointed to a small swatch of shade behind a boulder. “No sign of a struggle.”

“Any indication of what they might have been smuggling?”

“All I can tell you is that if they were moving anything, it couldn’t have been in any kind of quantity. Their footprints are too shallow and the distance between them is too long. They couldn’t have been carrying anything much heavier than the clothes on their backs.”

“Then what the hell happened here?”

“They couldn’t have gotten four ATVs onto anything smaller than a tractor trailer!” Kane shouted into the two-way. “I want roadblocks set up on Eighty-six east of Why and west of Tucson! Search every semi and horse trailer and get me another goddamn Black Hawk!”

He thrust the transceiver into Velasquez’s chest, turned, and bellowed at the top of his lungs. A startled flock of doves took flight from a thicket of paloverdes as his voice echoed away into oblivion.

“Come on,” he said. “We’ve got a long walk ahead of us.”

3

The Douglas P. Bradley OCDETF Strike Force was named in honor of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement special agent in charge who, along with his wife and teenage son, had been killed in a home invasion six months ago. The Sinaloa Cartel hadn’t publicly taken credit for the murders, but chopping the bodies into dozens of pieces and keeping the decapitated heads fit their modus operandi. The strike force itself was an offshoot of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, and, as such, fell under the auspices of the United States Attorney’s Office and the special agents in charge of the Phoenix branches of the various federal law-enforcement agencies involved. It brought together the assets and strengths of a veritable

alphabet soup of acronyms like the DEA, ATF, FBI, ICE, and IRS, along with the local police and correctional departments. A veteran DEA agent and administrator, Rand Marchment, coordinated the strike force's activities from Washington, D.C., and answered directly to the secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which meant they had pretty much free rein to do whatever they needed to do under the all-encompassing umbrella of the Patriot Act.

The strike force met in a small windowless room at Ajo Station, twenty-seven miles north of the Lukeville port of entry and situated at the western edge of the Tohono O'odham Reservation. The station itself was responsible for patrolling and policing seven thousand square miles of desert and sixty-four of the most violent and inaccessible miles of the international border.

The sprawling complex was a hotbed of activity twenty-four hours a day. Explorers rocketed in and out of the enormous lot behind the main building, depositing full loads of undocumented aliens rescued from the heat and confiscated drugs to be entered into the evidence storage warehouses. It was a turnstile operation. Illegals were booked, fingerprinted, caged in holding cells, and then transported by bus to the detention center in Eloy, where they were loaded onto another bus and dropped back off on the other side of the border to try their luck again.

The shouting and banging from the other side of the wall were ceaseless, and yet somehow they always sounded exactly the same, as though both the agents and the immigrants had learned their roles by rote and were merely performing their parts. Those inside the room, however, were dealing with something they'd never seen before.

A rectangular table dominated the small room. As they had been the last to arrive, Kane took a seat at the foot, while Mason leaned against the back wall, by the door. They'd only just received the formal findings from the crime-scene response team—CSRT—and Mason had

barely had time to organize them into something reminiscent of an actual briefing on the drive over, with his laptop bouncing on his thighs.

The ICE representative was a small, dark agent named Ray Mondragon, although everyone called him “Razor” because of the long, thin scar that bisected his right brow and cheek. He was seated on the right side of the table in his customary forest green cargo pants and T-shirt with his agency’s shield on the breast. He’d split his childhood between living on the O’odham Reservation and in a Tucson barrio, which meant that not only did he know this area better than anyone, he had the kind of relationship with the police departments, both on and off the reservation, to seal it off at a moment’s notice. He served as liaison with the Border Patrol, which brought to the table a veritable army of agents, air and land vehicles, and a SWAT team with specialized desert-combat training, known as BORTAC.

Agent Travis Becker of the ATF sat across from Mondragon, his heels on the table and his omnipresent cap pulled so low on his forehead that none of them had ever seen his eyes. His team had its finger on the pulse of the smuggling arteries through the vast desert and a network of informants both stateside and in Mexico.

DEA Special Agent James Templeton, who’d been hand-selected for this operation after a successful run in Miami through the cocaine-crazed eighties, assumed a position at the head of the table. As the senior officer, he served as de facto leader and dealt directly with Marchment back in Washington. He struck an imposing presence and reminded most people of the guy from the Allstate commercials, especially when he spoke. He looked pointedly at Kane, who nodded for him to proceed, and got right down to business.

“This should go without saying, but since Marchment has both the DHS and the U.S. Attorney’s Office crawling up his ass, he insisted that I stress the importance of the fact that none

of the information discussed in here leaves this room.” Templeton looked from one agent to the next, soliciting the requisite nod or grunt. “I trust you’ve all familiarized yourselves with case file number oscar alpha sierra zero seven two four dash zero five, provided this morning at approximately eleven hundred hours, so I propose we don’t waste any time and go straight into the briefing Kane and Mason have prepared. I understand the CSRT has *finally* released its findings?”

Kane nodded.

Everyone opened their laptops or brought their tablets to life in order to view the briefing Mason had sent to each of them maybe fifteen minutes ago. Mason reached past Becker to attach his laptop to the projector and focused the image on the creased screen affixed to the wall. Once Kane reached the head of the table and Templeton had taken a seat, he killed the overhead lights.

Kane leaned forward and braced both hands on the edge of the table. Tiny dead vultures spotted his chest, while his massive shadow reared up behind him on the screen.

“Our worst fears have just been realized. We have to act immediately and decisively before this thing gets out.”

4

“All they’ll say is that it’s ‘genetically similar’ to HPAI H1N1—highly pathogenic avian influenza A,” Mason said. “They won’t commit to anything beyond that until the results of the PCR testing come back. They’re doing their best to buy us some time before they call in the CDC and the veil of silence falls.”

“How contagious are we talking?” Becker asked.

“Extremely. Especially by airborne and droplet transmission. Coughing, spitting, the transfer of bodily fluids by making contact with an exposed surface and then rubbing your eyes or nose. The level of contagion is largely dependent upon physical proximity. In theory, the virus can’t survive for very long outside of a living host, though. H1N1 remains viable on environmental surfaces for anywhere from two to eight hours, a fraction of that time in this heat, but we’re not taking any chances. Kane and I got lucky. From here on out, everyone is expected to carry gloves and a respirator mask in the field.”

“Are we still working under the assumption that the humans infected the birds and not vice versa?” Templeton asked.

“Internal body temperature, postmortem lividity, and the level of insect activity place the time of death for the birds between sixteen and twenty-four hours prior to our arrival. The Border Patrol officer who made the initial discovery is convinced that occurred after the victims passed through, which fits with the rest of the physical evidence.”

He clicked quickly through the technical data in the CSRT’s report.

“Our working theory is that seven people entered the valley, and over a stretch spanning roughly three miles, six died and the seventh was collected, along with the remains of the decedents, by a team we speculate numbered between four and six. They were subsequently transported to the north by ATV and to a rendezvous point east of mile marker twenty-nine on Highway Eighty-six. The vehicles were driven onto what we believe to be a semitrailer, based on the lone set of tracks we were able to glean from the shoulder. While it was moving. Whatever their ultimate goal, these men were well trained, and had we not stumbled upon the scene when we did, we undoubtedly never would have known they’d been there.”

“Do we have any idea where the victims originated?” Razor asked.

“At this point, it matters more where they are now than where they started,” Kane said.

“Right now, kids, we’re wasting time we don’t have. Somewhere out there, an unidentified group has gained access to potentially inexhaustible reservoirs of a virus similar to the bird flu, which is, by all appearances, one hundred percent and seemingly immediately fatal to birds and at least eighty-five percent fatal to humans. This isn’t someone’s science fair project we’re dealing with here. There’s no doubt in my mind that the end goal is weaponization of the virus.”

“What do we have to go on?” Templeton asked. “If they didn’t have time to cover their tracks, then they had to have left some kind of evidence we can use.”

“Which brings me to the forensics report,” Mason said, and hit the clicker. A graph that looked like an EKG strip with dozens of large, irregular spikes appeared. “Forensics collected samples of the dirt and gravel found in the tread of the footprints, the ATV tracks, and those of the semi where it briefly rode up onto the shoulder, then ran them through a gas chromatograph–mass spectrometer. What you see here are the trace compounds transferred from the bottoms of the shoes and the tires, which presumably contacted the same floor at some common location. And that’s exactly what the results bear out. As you would expect, there’s the standard array of hydrocarbons associated with fossil fuels and motor oils you’d find on any garage floor. Now here’s where things get interesting. ...”

He clicked the remote again to change the slide. This one demonstrated three more spiked lines set against axes labeled “Abundance” on the left and “Time” across the bottom.

“All three samples demonstrated spikes in acetoin, 3-methyl-1-butanol, heptanol, and hexanol, which are metabolites found in spoiled meat. In addition, the GC–MS detected the

presence of VOCs—volatile organic compounds—specifically, esters, aldehydes, ketones, carboxylic acids, and sulfur compounds. Again, these compounds are prevalent in spoiled meat.”

“So we’re looking for some sort of slaughterhouse or meat-processing plant,” Templeton said.

“Not necessarily.”

“I’ve seen something like this before,” Becker said from beneath his cap. “When we were following a lead on an arms racket. VOCs in concentrations that high could also mean we’re looking for someplace with a lot of blood on the floor. When we found where these guys were storing their weapons, the Zetas had already been there. Body parts had been stacked in pyramids in the middle of the room.”

“That’s right,” Kane said. “Mason said *meat*, not *beef*.”

The room fell silent.

“Surely whatever trace evidence sticks to the tread of a tire wears off after a while,” Razor said. “There has to be a finite amount, right? And if the trace transfers to whatever it contacts, then at some point all of the trace leaves the tire and is replaced by different kinds of trace it picks up from whatever it drives over.”

“Leave it to ICE to state the obvious,” Becker said.

“*¡No seas, güey!* Isn’t there a moonshine ring in Kentucky you should be busting up?”

Templeton stifled a chuckle.

“I see where he’s going with this,” Mason said. “For there to have been trace on the wheels of the semi, it couldn’t have been driven very far.”

“And considering we have Eighty-six locked down and we cleared all of the semis passing through the roadblocks ...” Templeton said.

“They couldn’t have had more than a fifteen-minute head start before we had a bird in the air.”

“No way they made it to Tucson.”

“They never left the reservation,” Becker said.

“Razor . . . You know this place,” Templeton said. “What’s out there within a fifteen-mile radius, accessible by road, and large enough to hide a semitruck?”

Mason scrolled through his saved images until he found the detailed satellite imaging of the reservation. It took several seconds to triangulate the location where they’d found the tracks, then the point to the north where the ravine intersected the highway. He centered on it and scaled the zoom to a rectangle roughly thirty miles wide. Aside from Highway 86, there were no paved roads and it was nearly impossible to distinguish the dry creek beds from the few winding north-south gravel roads. The east-west Border Patrol-enforced drags were easy to pick out to either side of the Ajo Mountains. Had any vehicles crossed them, they would have set off one of the Oscars—the radio beacons that alerted dispatch when their motion sensors were triggered.

They had to have gone north into the mountains along one of the narrow roads that adhered to the rugged topography.

Mason tapped the map on the screen with his finger at a point where the valley narrowed and the mountains on the eastern side appeared to have been artificially straightened.

“What’s this here?”

All eyes turned to Razor.

“There’s a quarry up there, but it’s been closed since before I was born. And even then it was in such bad shape that it would have fallen apart if you looked at it hard enough.”

“Can you get a drone with infrared and thermal-imaging capabilities over that area?”

“Way ahead of you.”

Kane hit the lights and Mason stepped aside to make room for Templeton.

“Get that drone airborne, Ray. The rest of you ... full night tactical gear. Rebreather masks. I want you on-com and ready to roll in ten minutes.” He looked around the table. “What are you waiting for? We can’t let that virus get off the reservation.”

5

The night was as dark as any Mason could remember. The moon, if there was one, must have been hiding behind the storm clouds boiling from the western horizon. The wind whipped sand sideways across the valley. It sounded like sleet pattering against his windbreaker and the side of the decrepit wooden structure, the majority of which had already fallen down the hillside. Broken gray planks stood from the sand like bleached bones. Cacti grew on and around them. What little remained of the framework of the chutes led down the hillside to a thicket of ironwoods and a stream maybe a foot and a half wide.

He could barely hear the others whispering through the comlink in his ear over the sound of his own breathing through the respirator, which covered his mouth and nose. Even though he knew where they were, their black fatigues and the fortuitous sandstorm made them impossible to see.

Thermal imaging from the predator drone confirmed the presence of eight distinct sources of heat in the warehouse on the opposite side of the mill from him, just shy of where the red rock had been mined into steppes ascending the mountain. There had been a flurry of activity inside.

They all knew what that meant. The men inside were in the process of enacting their hurried exit strategy.

It was now or never.

The BORTAC SWAT team had been trained for precisely this scenario and served as the tip of the spear. They had four men positioned at each of the two doors—one on the north and the other on the south, which was situated beside the narrow gravel road that wended downhill from beneath the cranelike conveyor chute. Mason covered the northern team from the rear, while Kane guarded the south. Once the SWAT team penetrated the structure, he and Mason would advance and assume containment position in the doorways. Becker and a sniper were positioned on the ridgeline above the structure, from which they had unobstructed views of both exits through the scopes of their rifles. Razor was currently streaking across the desert in their direction on an MH-60L Direct Action Penetrator Black Hawk piloted by the Border Patrol's best air interdiction agent. Templeton was in a mobile command station parked approximately eight miles to the south, where he and his team coordinated the operation, utilizing satellite and drone imagery.

They were on Templeton's mark. When he gave the signal, they were going in hard and fast.

This was why Mason had chosen to become a field officer.

This moment right here.

He heard the *thupp-thupp-thupp* of the chopper blades, streaking toward them from the west. The chatter in his ear ceased, only to be replaced by the hollow rushing sound of his pulse. The order would be given any second now.

Any second.

Mason adjusted his grip on the .223-caliber M4 carbine, set to fire three-round bursts, and readied himself to press the button that would activate the laser sight.

Time stood still.

His mechanical respirations slowed.

And then Templeton's voice was in his ear and the world erupted into frantic life.

The red laser streaked from his assault rifle and struck the door a heartbeat before the SWAT guys emerged from the shadows, a battering ram readied between the two in the lead. They swung it and struck the door. The cracking sound of the wood splitting echoed across the valley, in stereo, as the same thing happened on the other side of the building. They shouted and charged—

A blinding light.

A wall of superheated air struck Mason, lifted him from the ground, and tossed him onto his back. The deafening roar of the twin explosions rolled through the valley like thunder. Flames burst from the demolished doorway. Burning men and debris rained down on the shrubs and gravel and struck the wooden ruins all around him. Flaming silhouettes streaked across his peripheral vision, hurled outward over the nothingness to plummet down upon the treetops below.

Black smoke billowed out through the side of the building and his eyes filled with tears.

Mason struggled to his feet and swung his rifle from left to right, cutting his way through the smoke with the red laser. Flames lapped at his feet from burning wood and body parts. He tried to make sense of the situation. The doors had been rigged. The SWAT guys were dead. Given how hard he'd been thrown backward by the explosion, there was no way of knowing whether or not Kane had survived on his side. He couldn't see Becker or the sniper uphill through the

smoke, which swirled at the behest of the Black Hawk overhead. Something about the sound of its blades was wrong, like a heart missing every fourth beat. He caught just a glimpse of it as it banked steeply off to the west.

Templeton was shouting in his ear, but he couldn't make out the words. The explosion had thrown off his equilibrium, and a hollow sound resonated somewhere inside his head.

His instincts and training kicked in and he advanced toward the burning doorway, moving low and fast. Even with the respirator mask, he still tasted smoke. His eyes burned so badly, he could hardly keep them open.

Smoke swirled and eddied past him and through the gaps in the burning roof. The floor was bare earth covered with a lifetime of accumulated gravel and grit. The wall to his left had been boarded over where the conveyors that brought the stones from the structure next door had once passed. Rusted equipment lorded over the room.

Mason nearly tripped over the first body, which lay facedown on the dirt, arms folded under it. The telltale triangular butt of a Steyr AUG assault rifle protruded from beneath it. Utility boots. Tall. Broad shoulders. Thick legs. Male. There were two holes in the back of his black neoprene balaclava—.22 by the size of them. Two shots to the base of the cranium, execution-style.

He didn't have to roll the dead man over to know that he wasn't one of theirs.

Mason's laser sight diffused into the smoke, which alternately concealed and revealed sections of the room around him. The flow of air through the burning building made everything seem to come to life with movement.

Static in his earpiece. The crackle of encroaching flames.

There was another body partially hidden behind the heap of scraps from the ruined conveyor. Same black balaclava, matching entry wounds through the back of it. Twin Steyr AUG.

He crouched and, without taking his eyes from his sight line, slid his left hand beneath the neckline of the man's mask. No pulse, obviously, but it hadn't been long at all since he'd had one.

What in the name of God was going on here?

Mason stood and pressed on. He glimpsed another body off to his right, behind what looked like a rusted mine cart. And then the smoke swallowed it again.

Three men positioned exactly where he would have posted them were he preparing to defend the northern entry into the structure. Not only had these men known they were coming, someone had seized the opportunity to tidy up his own mess.

Movement ahead of him, toward the rear of the structure.

He ducked behind the nearest cover. A plastic sheet flagged on the other side of the broken conveyor leading up through the roof. The flames reflected from it even as they started to consume it.

A shadow passed behind the plastic.

Mason crouched back down. Blew out his breath slowly. Killed the laser sight. Rolled to his left and lunged to his feet, rifle seated against his shoulder. Heart pounding in his ears, making the edges of his vision throb. He saw the shadow through the smoke, aligned his barrel with it. The sheet rippled as it melted upward toward the ceiling. It was thick and opaque, like the kind painters used as drop cloths.

He paused and watched the shadow for any indication that his presence had been detected. The figure appeared to be reaching up for something, lowering it, and then reaching back up for something else.

The sheet brushed against Mason's shoulders as he ducked under the flames and dripping plastic.

The man's posture stiffened. He reached for a silenced pistol on the shelf in front of him.

"Don't do it," Mason said.

The man made the grab and whirled to face him.

Mason saw the man's eyes widen through the holes in his mask before the first bullet in the burst destroyed his respirator. The second took a bite out of the right side of his forehead, and the third struck the wall beside his ear. Given how fast it had happened, it looked as though his head had simply vanished.

His pistol clattered to the ground beside the large steel briefcase he'd been hurriedly stuffing with computer components. The entire wall behind him held an enormous shelving unit overflowing with servers and hard drives and monitors—all of them now spattered with his blood.

Mason turned around. On the far side of where the impromptu entrance had already melted clear up to the ceiling was a bank of portable generators. The existing decrepit wooden wall to his right, between the slats of which he could see the reflections of flames on plastic, was already smoldering.

The smoke washed over him from behind as he approached the lone exit, an uneven doorway that had been sealed with a double layer of plastic sheeting. He pushed one side to the left and the other to the right and stepped into a room mercifully free of smoke. To his left were

steel drums with pumps on the top and long nozzles, like industrial-size weed sprayers. The floor was sealed concrete. There was a drain set into the middle. He could see through the plastic covering the back wall of the structure where it abutted the hillside. To his right was another plastic-sheet wall formed around what looked like the framework of a greenhouse that ran nearly the length of the building.

He paused at the second double-flap doorway and watched for movement inside.

A loud crashing sound to his right. The front half of the old structure came down. Flames leaped up over his head and raced across the roof.

Mason fired a triple burst through the drop cloth, lowered his shoulder, and dove through. The moment he hit the ground, he rolled until he got his feet under him and then stood facing into the greenhouse. No return fire. Which was a stroke of luck, considering he was so distracted by everything around him that he would have made an easy target.

He tried to breathe. Couldn't. All he could do was look from one side of the room to the other. Stalls had been erected on either side of a central aisle. Nailed to the wall above each were handwritten signs with seemingly random assortments of numbers and letters. Bodies had been hung beneath them by chains connected to the overhead framework. Long chains with hooks that looped through the upper ribs at the junction of the thorax and the neck, and beneath the lower ribs above the waist. Through both shoulder girdles. The corpses were entirely naked and in various stages of decomposition. Their chins hung to their chests and their lips had curled back from their bared teeth. The woman closest to him had little hearts painted on her toenails. There had to be at least a dozen of them hanging on either side. All dark-haired and dark-skinned. And positively crawling with flies.

A man appeared in the aisle about twenty feet ahead of him, as though he'd simply materialized from the first plumes of smoke that drifted between them.

"Hands behind your head!" Mason shouted.

The man cocked his head first one way and then the other in a manner reminiscent of a predatory bird. He wore a full respirator mask over his face and a wide-brimmed Panama hat. The hint of a tie and a black suit coat were visible above the top of a gray butcher's apron smeared with bloody handprints. His black leather shoes shined with the advancing flames.

"Down on your knees! Hands behind your head!"

The man tipped up his chin as though to better appraise Mason. His irises were a startling shade of blue outside of nature's traditional palette. He had no brows and the skin around his eyes and on his forehead was pink and welted. Or maybe that was just the reflection on his face shield of the flames eating through the plastic walls.

Mason sighted the dot from his laser right between the man's eyes.

As a kid, he could have parted the fur on a deer's back at three hundred yards; Quantico had refined his innate ability and trained him to hit the ticks. There was no way he was missing from this distance.

The man with the blue eyes wagged his index finger at Mason and then pointed at the stall to his right. Kane stepped out from behind the wall, the slender barrel of a Steyr pressed into the soft spot behind his jaw and under his ear. Mason could barely see the crown of his captor's head over Kane's left shoulder. Kane shrugged, as though to let him know that things might not be going as planned but that he still had everything under control.

Mason kept his laser pinned to the man's forehead, below the brim of his hat.

More smoke drifted between them, momentarily concealing him. When he appeared again, there was a cell phone in his hand.

His eyes narrowed. At first it looked like he was wincing, but then it hit Mason. He was smiling beneath his mask.

“Shoot him,” Kane said through the comlink in Mason’s ear.

“You do and we’re all dead!” a deep voice shouted from behind his partner.

Mason could easily neutralize the man in the mask at this range, but even he might not be fast enough to get off another shot before the second man put a bullet through Kane’s head. If he took care of the more immediate threat to his partner, the man with the blue eyes would still be standing out in the open, with nowhere to hide.

“Shoot him, Mason.”

“This whole place is wired!”

“Take the shot, damn it!”

Mason swung his rifle toward the man trying to use Kane as a human shield. Pulled the trigger. Watched the top of the man’s head vanish as he looked over his partner’s shoulder.

Kane stumbled forward and the Steyr fell away from his head.

Mason’s laser sight sliced through the smoke like a scythe. He was already firing before it reached the man with the blue eyes, who stumbled backward when the first bullet took him high in the shoulder. A ribbon of blood unspooled behind him. He pressed his thumb to the screen of his cell phone.

Mason saw his eyes.

His ultramarine eyes.

The reflection of a ball of fire blossomed inside them.

Then the world became light.

And pain.