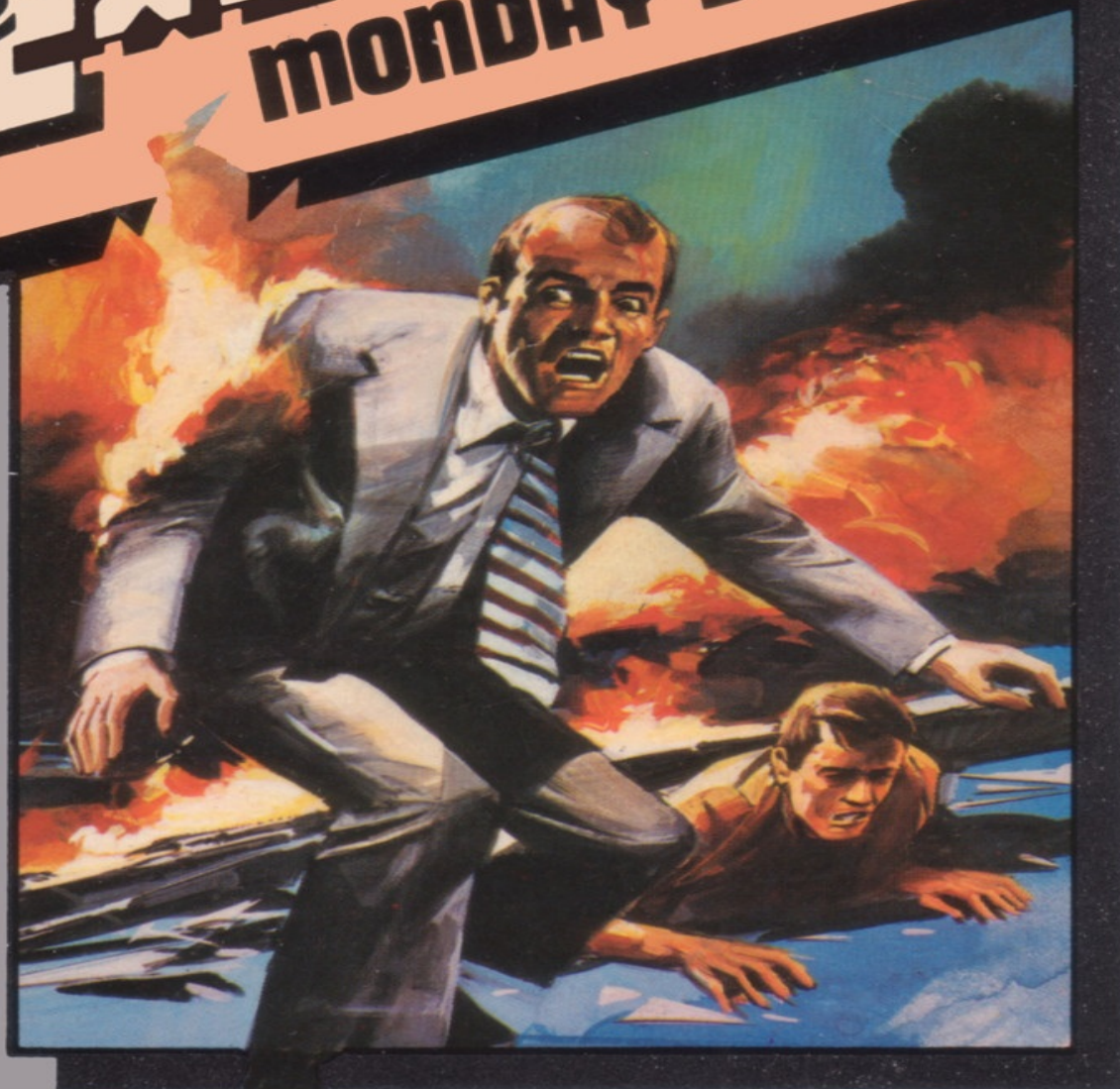




Mack Bolan is
The EXECUTIONER
MONDAY'S MOB



Mack Bolan mounts his biggest battle yet, the beginning of the grand finale against the Mafia!

DON PENDLETON

Bloody Monday

The Executioner was going out with a bang, not a sigh ...

“The job isn't finished. The wiseguys are just lying low, waiting for the heat to subside. I know who they are and where they are. They'll be popping up again, stronger than ever. I can't give them that.”

“You can give them your last chance for a real life, though, can't you?” Brognola replied bitterly
“What can you do with one lousy week?”

“I can give it a proper mop-up.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere. A quick blitz in each major region of the country. I count six of those. Give me some air support and I'll do it in six days.”

Six days, sure. Mind-boggling. If the guy could survive them, Mack Bolan would thereafter abruptly cease to exist, in any legal sense, and the Phoenix Project would arise from the ashes of that lost identity.

The final days . . . a second long mile through Hell . . . and already the sun had arisen on Monday . . . bloody Monday.

Also by Don Pendleton

THE EXECUTIONER: MIAMI MASSACRE
THE EXECUTIONER: ASSAULT ON SOHO
THE EXECUTIONER: CHICAGO WIPEOUT
THE EXECUTIONER: VEGAS VENDETTA
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THE EXECUTIONER: CALIFORNIA HIT
THE EXECUTIONER: BOSTON BLITZ
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THE EXECUTIONER: DIXIE CONVOY
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THE EXECUTIONER: COMMAND STRIKE
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Don Pendleton

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MONDAY'S MOB**

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For all the nice folk of the heartland — or spell that hearthland — with
due apologies for whatever liberties have been taken herein with your blessed countenance.

dp

~~`And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile,
Go with him twain.'~~

— Sermon on the Mount

`Like one that on a lonesome road doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on, and turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightened fiend doth close behind him tread.'

— Coleridge (The Ancient Mariner)

`Brognola says i've done my mile in hell. So okay, let's start the second mile.
But let's not look back.'

— Mack Bolan, from his Journal

PROLOGUE

Mack Bolan's personal war against the Mafia had erupted as a spontaneous reaction to a terrible injustice. The young sergeant from Vietnam had not even known the true pedigree of this new enemy at home when he opened the ceremonies on a Pittsfield street with five blasts from a sniper's rifle; he knew only that they were legal untouchables, that they were responsible for the destruction of his family, that there could be no point to his own life without some answer to the atrocity.

Bolan had an answer. He had already become a quiet legend in the hellgrounds of Southeast Asia where his expertise as a death-master had earned him the label, "The Executioner." He had been officially credited with nearly a hundred kills of enemy VIPs when the tragedy at home recalled him from the second combat tour. And, yes, the Executioner had an answer for the tragedy on the home front. He brought that answer from the steamy jungles of Vietnam and deposited it on the quiet street of his home town.

And then the awful truth came down. Mafia! And Mack Bolan knew, then, that he had another unwinnable war by the tail. A sympathetic homicide cop unofficially urged the young soldier to return quickly to that other war zone, where his chances for survival would be infinitely better. There was no point, now, to his remaining in Pittsfield. He had secured his "pound of flesh" and forced a balance on the scales of justice; nothing but his own certain death could possibly await him here.

But Mack Bolan had other ideas. And he had come into a new truth. He knew now that the greatest enemy the American nation could contemplate was that enemy within—that cancerous, scabrous, vile growth on the nation's innards—that power that knowing federal officials had characterized as "the second invisible government of the nations"—the Mafia, La Cosa Nostra, the Mob, the Outfit, the Organization; by whatever name, it was the new enemy and Mack Bolan could not turn his back upon it.

Instead, he brought war to it.

Quite to his own surprise, he survived the ensuing battle for Pittsfield—and it was a resounding victory for the one-man army. He knew, however, that he had won a minor skirmish, not a war. And he knew that this new enemy was virtually infinite in terms of power and resources. But they were not gods. They had weaknesses that could be exploited by a savvy soldier. Still, as he faded from the scene of that initial engagement, Bolan felt that his own days were definitely numbered—measurable perhaps as a given number of heartbeats. In his own understanding, he had embarked upon his "blood last mile," determined only to "eat their bowels as they ingest me."

As it turned out, that last mile was rather elastic. It stretched across more than thirty pitched battles and onto several continents as this remarkable warrior grew into his destiny and transcended the most hallowed concepts of duty and valor. He became far more than just a soldier—as he preferred to think of himself. Mack Bolan became a force in the world—a thundering angel, as it were—a heartening and inspiring model for individual commitment and high achievement, a spur and a goad to law enforcement agencies everywhere, a chilling wind and justification for pervading paranoia within the organized underworld. The marksman's medal was his dreaded calling card; a wispy shadow in combat black his shivery presence; flames of war and pyramiding attrition his jolting effect on the "omnipotent" enemy. More devastating than all, perhaps, was his ability to walk among them as one of the flock, to sit down with them at their councils, to drink their wine and break their bread—even to command them, and divide them, and pit faction against faction so that they may eat themselves.

It was quite a mile, yes.

He had been hounded and pursued by the law and the lawless alike—the most wanted criminal of all, in the law's blind stare; the most threatening and demoralizing enemy of all, in the Mob's fevered gaze. Yet wherever he halted and planted his feet for the stand or for the counterattack, the vaunted enemy fell writhing while the law—those soldiers of the same side—watched in awe and admiration.

Mack Bolan's war was not with the law but with those who confounded the law. And he did not make war on the badge, not even a tarnished one. The hand of friendship or the salute of respect was always there for any badge that would accept it, however grudgingly; consequently, Mack Bolan's last mile had attracted warm friendships and clandestine allies from various levels of the police community.

Early in the war, a high official within the U.S. Justice Department had approached the warrior with an offer of amnesty and honors if only he would join the official war against crime. Bolan declined the offer, feeling that he would be severely limited and perhaps totally neutralized by a government sponsorship. That high official was one Harold Brognola, later to become the No. 1 cop in the country, advisor to presidents, NSC expert on domestic subversion. Except for one aberration, Brognola had been Mack Bolan's staunchest champion and most powerful ally within the police community—unofficially, of course. There were others—many others. The closest friend and perhaps most valuable ally was a man whom Bolan had been sworn to execute during the initial struggle at Pittsfield: Leo Turrin, Mafia underboss with the "girls franchise" in western Massachusetts, blood nephew to Sergio Frenchi, the boss of the Berkshires. But Bolan had learned just in time that "Leo the Pussy" was an undercover federal agent—thus, a soldier of the same side who quickly became a total convert to the Bolan cause and an invaluable insider whose counsel and assistance did much to stretch that last impossible mile into an infinite circle.

Other friends had checked in from both sides of the spectrum, as well as from the neutral zone of uninvolved bystanders—a tribute to the basic humanity of man and a testament to Bolan's own warm humanity. This lonely warrior was not all death machine. He was a man, as well—one who could inspire fierce loyalties, undying love, towering respect. Through it all, however, he was essentially and necessarily alone. He involved others in his cause with the greatest reluctance and at a stringently minimum level; yet he leapt quickly and decisively to the aid of those in need, without thought for his own jeopardy.

Quite a mile, yes.

But now it appeared to have found its natural end.

Unable to withstand the repeated onslaughts of Bolan's raging brand of warfare and falling apart under its own attrition at the top, the once invincible Organization was now scattered into fearful bands of huddled paranoiacs, distrustful of one another yet loath to walk alone the twisted roads of their own hell-grounds.

Bolan had been carefully reading all the signs and he knew what was happening in Mafiadom. Others, also, were keeping abreast of the situation. Harold Brognola had journeyed to Nashville where he held a secret parley with Bolan following an operation there, and where he not only confirmed "the imminent dissolution of organized crime in America" but also brought to Bolan an offer that most men would find impossible to refuse.

The President had created a sensitive new security section, to deal with terrorists and other paramilitary threats to the national security. The man who headed that section would be virtually autonomous, reporting directly to the President himself. The only man for that job was Mack Bolan—that was a consensus decision from Washington.

"It's the same war," Brognola had told his friend the blitz artist, "the same kind of enemy. You haven't been fighting people, you know. You've been fighting a condition."

Yes, Bolan had known that. And he had been strongly aware of the ugly mood of terrorism

sweeping across the western world, already beginning to spill onto the American continent. The need for an effective counterforce was real—and urgent.

Bolan felt that he understood the terrorist mentality, that he could be effective in dealing with it. He had directly experienced the savage effect of terrorist activity on civilian populaces in Southeast Asia—and he agreed with Brognola that western society was in grave peril unless decisive action was immediately taken to discourage the spread of barbarism.

But he was not entirely convinced that the Mafia menace had been sufficiently weakened—that his vow to "shake their house down" had been fulfilled.

The offer from Washington was like a hand from heaven, sure. It included total amnesty and forgiveness, a whole new identity, honors and official status, the full resources of the mightiest nation on earth in close support—a reprieve and a restart, a new life, a new challenge, a new hope.

Above all else, though—an end to that damnable last mile.

The President of the United States had, yeah, made Mack Bolan an offer which could not be refused.

But it was also one which he could not possibly accept; not yet.

At a second meeting with Brognola—in Louisville, twenty-four hours later—Bolan set forth the conditions of his acceptance. And though Brognola huffed and puffed throughout the discussion, he knew from the beginning that no argument was possible. The guy had that look in his eyes, a suggestion of ice just below the surface, and the head fed knew that the big guy simply had to travel that extra mile.

"He's in, sir," Brognola would report to the President, several hours following the meeting in Louisville. "But not for another week. It's a question of ethics, I guess. The second mile syndrome."

"The what?"

"A final walk through hell. I guess he's taking a roll call. Wants to make sure nobody's missing. Then he'll be in. I have his word on that. He will be in."

"Or dead," the President replied with a quiet sigh. A moment later he pinned his top internal security advisor with a steely gaze while softly commanding, "He's to have full support on this final walk, whatever that means. I don't want to know the details. I just want you to produce the man in this office, alive and well, one week from right now."

Brognola dropped his eyes with embarrassment as he responded to that. "There are, uh, extra-leg overtones to, uh—"

"I said I don't want to know the details, Hal."

It was just as well. There was very little Brognola could offer, anyway, in the nature of full support. Bolan would not tolerate any direct intervention. His only request had been for a C-130 transport—air logistics support.

As for those details—nobody would have believed them, anyway. Even Brognola, knowing the guy as he did, had found the whole thing just a bit mind-boggling.

The Executioner was going out with a bang, not a sigh. That second mile would be as elastic as the first—though greatly compressed in time.

Six days.

The guy had asked for six lousy days. "I'll need another week, Hal."

"For what?"

"The job isn't finished. The wise guys are just lying low, waiting for the heat to subside. I know who they are and where they are. They'll be popping up again, stronger than ever. I can't give them that."

"You can give them your last chance for a real life, though, can't you?" Brognola replied bitterly. "What can you do with one lousy week?"

"I can give it a proper mop-up."

~~"Where?"~~

"Everywhere. A quick blitz in each major region of the country. I count six of those. Give me some air support and I'll do it in six days."

Six days, sure. Mind-boggling. The final days of the Executioner. If the guy could survive them, Mack Bolan would thereafter abruptly cease to exist, in any legal sense, and the Phoenix Project would arise from the ashes of that lost identity.

Six days, the final days—a second long mile through Hell . . . and already the sun had arisen on Monday, bloody Monday.

CHAPTER 1

THE MARK

The crosshairs of the sniperscope were centered on the hood ornament of a gleaming Cadillac El Dorado. A dozen or so other luxury cars surrounded the El Dorado, including several more Cadillacs in varied styles, a Mercedes, a couple of Continentals.

Pulled up in front and probably awaiting a load was an empty semitrailer transporter.

A large metal building in the near background was the recycling center for the largest stolen car operation west of New York. This one happened to be nestled in the gentle hills of northwest Kentucky, just outside Louisville.

The tall man in black with the cool eye at the scope had watched as six "refurbished" vehicles rolled from the building to the loading yard during the past hour alone. It did not require a math whiz to compute the value of that one-hour production at somewhere around a hundred thousand dollars. Judging from the size of the building in which the refurbishing was taking place, the twenty-four-hour operation could easily produce six cars per hour right around the clock.

There had not been time to fully scout the operation but the pre-intelligence suggested a typical major recycle. Freelancers would bring in the stolen product—probably most of it from the surrounding states of Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee, Ohio, West Virginia—for something like ten cents on the dollar, market value, maybe a bit more for highly favored models. Night deliveries, probably. The standard plant time for each vehicle would average no more than a few hours for cleaning, touchup paint, a general cosmetic renewal, new serial numbers and counterfeit paperwork.

Bolan had been hearing rumors about this particular "plant" for months and had stumbled onto some fresh input while in Tennessee. Wholesalers Car Refinishers, Inc. was fronted by one Benjamin Davis, a "legitimate" businessman of Louisville. Real owner: Carmine Tuscanotte's Underwriters' Salvage Services, Inc.—an Illinois firm that came under the larger umbrella of North American Investment Services Corporation, which was owned jointly by Tuscanotte and Chicago hood James "Jimmy the Jump" Altorise. Included under that umbrella were a score or more of closely related enterprises such as used car dealerships in more than a dozen states, finance companies, collection agencies, auto wholesalers and transporters, a couple of auction yards.

It was a sweet setup, yeah, and the illicit profits astronomical. The up-front losers were, of course, the nation's insurance companies. Perhaps many people would shed no tears over that. But insurance companies never lose. The ultimate loser was the American motoring public—for whom the insurance premiums kept soaring higher and higher.

Bolan knew that organized auto theft was milking billions each year from the U.S. economy—and that was concern enough, right there, of course—but his interest of the moment was not with auto theft but with the personalities bankrolling this particular operation. Both Tuscanotte and Altorise had "gone cool" recently, abandoning their usual haunts and submerging from both public and underworld view. The Chicago outfit had been in turmoil for a long time, hardly recovering from Bolan's strike there before being torn by internal strife as inevitably the younger turks began jockeying for the reins of power.

So the enemy had engaged itself in Illinois. Bolan had kept interested tabs on the developments in that area. His recent paralyzing strike on the national headquarters in New York had produced strong

secondary effects in the Midwest—perhaps inspiring the rash of gangland hits in and around Chicago as uneasy Mafiosi moved to protect their flanks.

There was no doubt whatever that Chicago remained the nerve center for organized crime in the nation's midsection. But the scene there was too chaotic.

Bolan's personal feeling was that the real powers remaining behind the Chicago Mob had dispersed themselves to the hinterlands—lying low and cooling it while the street bosses fought it out for control of the petty territories.

This was precisely why Mack Bolan was seated on a hillside in Kentucky, contemplating the probability effect of a quick blow to a multimillion dollar car-theft ring.

He sighed with real regret as he chambered a hefty round into the impressive Weatherby .460 and took a final scan through the scope. The sun was about ten minutes into the sky, behind him. Several hundred feet below and about a quarter-mile away, the overhead door of the building was opening to disgorge another gleamingly "refinished" Cadillac. He found the hood ornament with the crosshairs, then made a calculated adjustment to an imaginary mark beneath that hood as he squeezed into the pull.

The big round tore through polished metal and found vital involvement somewhere there under. The car lurched, wheezed, and died directly beneath the overhead door, black smoke immediately puffing out through the grillwork. He gave her a couple more in unhurried search as the driver broke clear and ran for cover deeper inside the building. The third round from the big Weatherby evidently found the desired mark as a small explosion sprung the engine hood and sent flames licking over it.

People were scampering about down there, now, in confusion and panic. One guy had grabbed a fire extinguisher and was trying to get some CO₂ under the hood of the stricken car. Bolan shook his head and sent that silly guy 500 splattering grains from the Weatherby. The big slug tore through the CO₂ cylinder and ripped it from the guy's grasp, inspiring saner thoughts and a quick retreat to the interior.

Flames were beginning to lick the underside of the abandoned car when someone inside the building decided to lower the overhead door. Unfortunately the burning vehicle was in the way; the door had hardly settled onto the roof of the car when her gas tank exploded. The door tumbled from its tracks as the exploding vehicle leapt several yards deeper into the interior of the building, blowing much of her fire into the gasoline-paint-solvent-whatever-laden enclosure.

An immediate chain reaction of explosions marked the effect there as Bolan grinned solemnly and went on with the destruction of the massed vehicles outside.

Round after searing round came down off that hillside in a coolly methodical pattern that soon had every third car in flames, with ensuing firestorms reaching out to envelop the whole yard of expensive automobiles.

The barrel of the Weatherby was too hot to touch when Bolan put her down for an assessment of the strike.

It was enough.

Much more than had been hoped for, actually.

There would be no illicit product yield from this recycling plant today. Indeed, there was no more recycling plant. The whole joint was a roaring inferno, flames leaping spectacularly high through jagged holes in the metal roof, walls bowed and gaping from the intolerable pressures inside. Stunned men in work clothing were crouching in frozen groups at safe distances to watch helplessly as the doomed building devoured itself.

Bolan also watched for a moment, then he retrieved his weapon, turned his back on all that, and strolled to the top of the hill.

A Ford station wagon was parked in the grass there, beside a utility pole. A young woman was

perched atop the roof of the wagon, her shapely legs crossed Indian fashion at the ankles, eyes glistening.

"What're you doing up there?" inquired the tall man.

"The view is better," she explained. "Like a ringside seat to the burning of Rome. How'd you do that?"

Bolan ignored the unnecessary question as he stowed the Weatherby. "Did he take it?" he asked the lady.

"Yes, sir, he took it." She detached a small tape recorder from the utility pole and handed the device to Bolan. "He called a number in the 812 area."

"Did the number record?"

"Sure did."

Bolan grunted with satisfaction, rewound the tape, and punched the playback. The guy took it, yeah.

"Put him on! Quick!"

"Who's this?"

"It's Ben Davis, dammit! Put him on!"

"He ain't here, Mr. Davis. You sound—maybe you better let me have it. This's Harry." Frantically then, "Harry, we're getting hit!" ..

Pause; then, "Whattaya mean you—who what?" ..

"I don't know! Somebody's shooting us up! The whole place is going up!"

"Is it feds or locals? Because if—"

"It's not a raid, Harry! It's not a damn raid! It's a hit!" ..

Very quickly, then, "Awright, listen, cool it. Just cool it. Call that deputy and get his ass out there on the double! Save all the stuff you can but get rid of all the paper. Understand me? Burn everything that—"

"I told you, it's already burning! All of it, everything!"

A sudden, inspired thought, then, from 812, "How much dirty product you got sitting around there, Ben?" ..

"What? I got—what?"

"You get in there before the firemen come, dammit! Throw acid on everything that's still dirty! You know what I mean!"

Very tiredly, "I know what you mean, Harry. Okay, I'll try. But listen, dammit, we're under fire. Those bastards are gunning us down! Must be a hundred of 'em up in the hills over our head! I want some damn—"

That was the end of the conversation from the Kentucky side. The connection popped and sizzled briefly, then died away completely. The guy at 812 shouted a couple of times into the open line, then hung up muttering.

The girl atop the station wagon beamed brightly at the tall man as she declared, "So that's how you did it. A hundred of you, huh?"

Bolan was rewinding the tape.

"Looks like we're going to Indiana," she observed spritely.

He helped her to the ground. "If that's where 812 is, yeah—that's where we're going."

"It's in central Indiana," the lady informed him. "I mean, the prefix he called. Actually, 812 covers most of the state south of Indianapolis. But that's a Columbus number. Indiana, not Ohio."

Bolan showed her a small smile and said, "Right off the top of your head, huh?"

"Sure. That's what this head is for— isn't it?"

He could think of another use or two for that lovely head. He placed a quick kiss on it and told

her, "It's for staying on top of your shoulders, Number One. Remember that. Get in the car."

~~"We're going to Columbus—right?"~~

"That's where we're going," he assured the lady.

For damned sure, yeah.

The guy at 812 had to be one Harry "the Apeman" Venturi, chief gunbearer to Carmine Tuscanotte.

And Mack Bolan had not come to the Midwest to make war on automobiles.

He'd come to hang the mark of the beast on Carmine Tuscanotte.

CHAPTER 2

APRIL ROSE

The lady had come with the deal. She'd been selected to baby sit Bolan's warwagon—the twenty-six-foot GMC motorhome that, beneath that RV exterior, housed a most formidable capability for making war—and she was the one who'd loaded the cruiser aboard the C-130 at an air base in New Mexico for transportation to Louisville.

Bolan had been forced to leave his big cruiser behind when he responded to the urgent summons from Tennessee, but he definitely needed it for the planned six-day romp that would ring down the curtain fully and finally, one way or another, on his war with the Mafia.

As for the lady—she was something else. Something extravagantly else. The name was, believe it or not, April Rose. She looked like anything but. A tall girl and very strikingly put together with flaring hips and exploding bosom—dark, silky hair and luminous eyes—she would have been well received onstage at Moulin Rouge. Brognola had described her as a "project technician"—which could mean most anything, in Brognola's world. According to the data sheet, she held a degree in electronics and had done considerable graduate work in solid-state physics.

"The lady has it all together," Brognola assured Bolan. "She can be a lot of comfort and you're a damn fool if you don't utilize her talents to the fullest."

"Just what are her talents?" Bolan had warily inquired.

"She can run that bloodmobile for you, guarantee that. The lady could write the book on that Buc Rogers communications gear you have in there. That's mainly why she was selected. I was afraid to turn just anybody loose with that stuff. But she's a lot more than a babysitter for computers. Believe it."

"What exactly does she do, Hal?" Bolan persisted.

"Electronic spying," the head fed muttered, and apparently intended to leave it there.

Bolan grinned and allowed the matter to rest, knowing Brognola's sensitivity to the subject. And he trusted the guy's judgment when it came to personnel. He'd built the most impressive domestic security force ever to emerge from the Washington bureaucracy—and the most effective.

Yeah—Bolan trusted Hal Brognola's judgment.

Until he actually put eyes on the lady. By that time, Brognola was back in Washington and April Rose was comfortably ensconced in the warwagon's command chair.

"You don't like what you see," was the lady's first words to Mack Bolan.

This was not entirely true. Even in a baggy military jumpsuit, the lady was a knockout. "I love what I see," he corrected her. "I just don't like where I'm seeing it."

"Would I look more in place flat on my back between satin sheets?" she inquired saucily.

He gave her the level stare as he replied, "Maybe. Look, I—"

"No need to apologize," she said, smiling. "I'm resigned to the reaction. Anyway, I never lay flat on my back."

Bolan could believe that.

But she had not given him much time to think about it.

"I took advantage of the flight time to check out your gear. Where'd you get this stuff? I'd like to meet the person who designed it."

Bolan noted that she did not say the man who designed it.

~~"It's straight from outer space. Many of these designs have never been released to public use.~~

Most of this stuff is classified. Where'd you get it?"

Bolan said, "Look, I think you—"

"Those optic systems—how did they combine laser principles with infrared illuminators?

And this navigation system—you have terrain following together with—"

Bolan growled, "Hey, hey."

She smiled nervously and said, "Okay, so I'm showing off. I always do that when I'm scared. You make me nervous when you look at me like that. Stop scowling, will you? Actually, no, I'm—well, yes I am. I'm scared to death. Mr. Brognola told me who you really are, of course. That was necessary. Oh don't worry, you're Striker—that's it, that's all, no questions asked—but really . . . yes I am scared to death."

He said, "Shut it off. Right now."

She shut it off, dropping those great eyes with a resigned swoop toward the floor between them.

He said, "I've been trying to tell you that you're welcome aboard. The fault is entirely yours if you don't work out. So forget about the male-female thing and just remember that we're making war, not love. I'm the boss—and that has nothing to do with male-female, either. You do what I say when I say it and we'll get along fine. We may even remain alive. Understood?"

"Okay," she replied soberly. "But do we have to scowl all the time?"

He said, "Wear your own face the way you like it and leave me to mine. Anyway, we won't be seeing that much of each other. You'll be staying with the plane until it's time to airlift this rig again."

"That's a mistake."

"What?"

,"It's a mistake. Mr. Brognola warned me that you would—look, if it's not the sex then what is it? I'm a trained operative. I can be a real help to you."

"Trained how?" he inquired, seriously interested.

"Electronic intelligence. I can—"

"Field intelligence? Or are you an incubator baby?"

Color rushed to that lovely face. "I had field problems at the academy. But this is the first practical—"

He asked, "Can you climb a pole?"

She tucked that firm little chin into a pert nod of the head. "Like a monkey."

"Know how to tap into telephone carriers?" "That's kindergarten stuff."

He sniffed. "It's going to be dangerous as hell."

"I know that."

The Bolan decision was characteristically quick, as much from the gut as from the head. "Okay. We'll try it. But get out of that jumpsuit and into something feminine. Don't downplay that fabulous body. A good soldier uses every tool available."

She was already stripping it off. "What exactly does that mean, Striker?"

He turned his head, more for his own peace of mind than as a concession to modesty. He growled at her, perhaps to cover the effect this lady was having on him. "If you're a good soldier, you'll figure it out for yourself. Just don't ask me to be your conscience. The object is to get the job done and come out alive. That's the whole object."

The technically nude young lady was moving toward the rear of the motorhome. "In which order?"

He growled, "What?"

"You said get the job done and come out alive. If there's a conflict between those two, which

comes first?"

~~She was slithering into a silky, formfitting chemise. And it was quite a form to be fitted.~~ Bolan told her, "That's nice."

She said, "Please note that I brought it with me. Also—you haven't answered my question. Which comes first?"

He very soberly addressed her question. "There's no formula for that decision, April. It comes from the gut, not the head. If your gut is reliable then you'll never have to ponder the question. If it's not, then you're in the wrong line of work."

"Trying to scare me off?" she inquired quietly.

"Maybe," he admitted.

She stepped into delicate little shoes and said, "Okay, I'm fittingly frightened as well as fittingly dressed. And I'm still in. Aren't I?"

She was. But deeply enough only to allow the lady to feel useful and worthy. Bolan had no intention of testing April Rose's combat guts.

None whatever. He'd seen too many fail the test. And some of those, yeah, had been every bit as pretty and talented as April Rose .. before the test.

CHAPTER 3

ON TRACK

The Ford was in tow behind the warwagon and the track had been due north from Louisville on interstate Route 65. The C-130 aircraft had been ordered on to Indianapolis, there to await further flight instructions.

Bolan wore faded blue denims, a sweatshirt, ankle-high moccasins. April Rose was seated at his right hand. She'd doodled theoretical problems in solid state mechanics on a scratch pad through much of the hour-long drive from Louisville. The conversation had been sparse and light, all of it initiated by the girl.

As they peeled away from the interstate at Columbus, she said to him, "You're not much of a talker, are you?"

He replied, "Not much, no." He flicked a glance at her scratch pad as he added, "I guess I've been doodling, too."

"In your head?"

"Yeah—if that's what you call it."

She sighed. "Sometimes it helps to talk. When we get time, let's—would you look at that! Did you see that signboard?"

"City marker?" he grunted.

"Yes, but did you see what they called it? The Athens of the Prairie. Is this a prairie?"

He replied with a grin. "Well, it is pretty flat."

"Have you ever been to Athens?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"Neither have I. But this looks nothing like the pictures I've seen."

He suggested, "Maybe it has something to do with the frame of mind."

"It certainly can't be the architecture," she said wrinkling her nose. "This is pure Midwestern Gothic."

Bolan chuckled and pushed the command console toward her. It was sort of nice, for a change, to have a companion. "Punch it up on the navigator," he suggested. "She knows all, tells all."

"What's the program?"

Bolan gave the lady the program as they crossed the White River and entered the downtown area. It was not a bad little town, after all, prairie or not. Many signs of recent construction—a new downtown mall rising in the shadow of an ancient cupola and spire courthouse—a modern new post office building with trick glass walls nestled alongside crumbling warehouses of an earlier era—all, somehow, very appealing and inviting.

"There are signs of progress," he told the girl.

"I bet I can tell you why, too," she replied as she scanned the monitor display. "Lots of money here. Columbus is the home of the diesel engine. The man who developed it lived here. Cummins Engine seems to be the lifeblood of the area. Many other plants, too. It's not Athens, Striker. It's little Detroit."

"What's the crime pattern?" he asked absently.

"Saturday night stuff," she replied, sniffing. "Nothing I can see here to intrigue a man like Tuscanotte."

"Drugs?"

"A little action there. Grass, mostly, sez here. Usual small town pattern. The local cops are pretty tough on it. It says Indiana has a paraphernalia law. A two-ounce bust would probably make the local headlines. All in all, looks pretty clean."

"Gambling?" Bolan inquired, his mind only partially into it.

"The same. Small time. Football pool cards and the like. Indianapolis distributors, though. Nothing very exciting. Same for prostitution. Very disorganized, local girls, massage parlor quality. really can't see a thing here for Tuscanotte."

"That's why he's here," Bolan told her. "Low profile, huh?"

"You've got it. No profile whatever, actually. The guy dug a ditch and buried himself in it."

"In a prairie Athens," she added.

"It's still in the shadow of Chicago," Bolan pointed out. "It's a marvelous age, April. Ninety minutes or so by fast plane and he's right back in the homegrounds."

He pulled the big rig into a public parking lot. "Or ten seconds by telephone. The phone will be easier to find. Go find it, Tinkerbell."

She smiled tolerantly. "What'd you call me?"

"Be a nice fairy and go find the telephone. Just be sure that no one knows what you're after."

She said, "You'd better drag that station wagon out of the street or the Prairie Athens police will show you what they're after."

He watched her halfway to the telephone company building, then sighed and pulled the Ford on into the parking lot, blocking off several meters in the process. A meter maid walked by, eyeing the tandem vehicles with casual interest. He stepped outside and fed coins into the meters, grinned at the lady, and went back inside. Then he smoked a cigarette and studied the area map display on the console while April Rose did her stuff in the Bell offices.

The city seemed adequately served by a network of highways in addition to the interstate route. Nice location, really. Louisville an hour south, Cincinnati an hour east, Indianapolis and that great interstate hub less than an hour north. There was a small airport and an auxiliary naval air station nearby.

The general layout of the town itself, though, seemed rather chaotic, with state roads and a U.S. highway traversing the inner city in virtually every direction. The business district was very compact encompassing just a few square blocks, with outlying shopping centers grouped northeasterly, and industrial development to the south—except for Cummins—which appeared to dominate the city proper. The river rather effectively curtailed western expansion except for a tourist-related buildup at the accesses to the interstate highway.

West of the interstate route was entirely rural, with some rather dramatic terrain variations. No prairie that way. About fifteen miles to the west lay the village of Nashville and a large state park, in an area called "the little Smokies." Interesting names on the map that way: Gnaw Bone, Stone Head, Bean Blossom, Stoney Lonesome. It sounded like frontier country.

Bolan was playing a little mind game with himself when April Rose returned from her mission. He had adjusted the area display to the region west of Columbus, focusing on the route to Gnaw Bone.

The girl moved in beside him and said, "Okay, Striker, I found the phone."

He immediately fired the engine and eased out of the parking lot, heading back along the reverse course. "I heard your words," he told her, "but your face is saying something different."

"Well I nearly blew it. Have you heard of ACF?"

He shook his head. "What is that,--a company?"

"No, it's a new Bell System service. It means Automatic Call Forwarding. Anyone can have it for a few bucks a month. If you subscribe to that service, you can program automatic call forwarding from your own telephone. I mean, you program it yourself. You don't tell anyone but your own telephone. It does the rest, via computerized switching circuits at the phone company. Any incoming calls will be automatically diverted to any telephone in the country that you may choose. The calling party would never have to know that the call had been diverted. If it's a local diversion, the monthly service fee takes care of it. If long distance, the call is metered to your base phone and charged like any toll call."

"What are you telling me, April?"

"I'm telling you that the Columbus number is a dummy, a robot number. I don't believe we'll find your friend Tuscanotte in Columbus."

"Me either," Bolan said quietly.

"The dummy is in a crummy little two by four office above a downtown store front. The subscriber is listed—what'd you say?"

"I said, me either."

She had just become aware of their position in the traffic flow. They were crossing the river again, headed back toward the interstate route.

"What are you doing?" she asked, very quietly.

"Listening to your report," he assured her. "Keep on."

"But you're already—I haven't told you— you already knew!"

He shook his head. "Educated guess only. I do need your report, Tinkerbell."

"Dammit I wish you wouldn't call me that!" she flared.

He said, very softly, "Okay. No disrespect intended—believe it. I'm very impressed with what you're saying. Can I hear the rest of it?"

She snatched a cigarette from the console and lit it. Not until they'd reached the Holiday Inn, at the I-65 ramp, did she speak. "Go straight ahead," she instructed. "Stay on state route 46."

Instead, he pulled into the motel and drove to the back lot where he unhitched the Ford and parked it.

The girl was giving him a speculative gaze as he returned to the car and again headed out on 46 west.

"Had me scared for a minute, there, boss," she said quietly.

He very soberly told her, "Perish the thought. There's nothing indirect about me, April. You'll always know precisely what I want from you."

"Fair enough," she replied, matching his sobriety.

They passed under the interstate route and picked up speed.

The girl said, "I'm sorry. Where was I?"

He told her, "You were in a crummy little office with a dummy telephone."

"Right. It's listed as R.B. Smith Company. That's all, no amplifying remarks. The bills are paid by postal money order, under the same name. I got the rest by blind luck. The girl in the telephone office knows the man who owns the building where R.B. Smith is located. Thank God for small towns. She said that the R.B. Smith Company is quite a mystery. The office was rented several months ago, the lease paid for six months in advance, the telephone installed—and since then no one has seen a hair of R.B. Smith. Then I happened to notice the little billing code and saw that R.B. Smith was paying for ACF services. And here's the part that hurts. I'd never heard of ACF. Had you?"

Bolan said, "It's a quick world, April."

"You bet it is. Well, then—look—I had to lean on my badge."

"Small towns work in both directions," he quietly told her.

"I know that. But I had to get into that computer and find the program. They were very helpful."

Don't worry. I covered it with a good story. And I got what we need. Or I guess you need it. Do you ?

~~"I'm working straight from the gut. Sure I need it."~~

"Okay." She made a teasing face. "But first I want to know how your gut sent you in this direction."

He shrugged. "I really couldn't tell you that. I was looking at the sector display. My gut lurched west. Then you came back with your eyes rolling westward."

"Aw. They were not."

He chuckled. "They sure weren't saying Columbus."

She said, "You're scary—know that? Okay, slow down. I believe we turn left at this next—yes, that's the road. Go south."

Bolan turned the warwagon south. Soon thereafter they were rolling past a rather immodest stone structure set high on a hill overlooking the surrounding countryside. A graveled drive peeled away from the blacktop road at a very small angle, then climbed the hill in a series of switchbacks.

Said the lady, "I'll bet that's the place. How does the old gut feel about it?"

He asked, "Is this as far as the head can move us?"

She replied, "I'm afraid so. We're certainly in the general area. But I'd have to get out and read some line codes to—"

"Never mind." Bolan halted the vehicle and backed along the road. "We'll just drive up and ask them."

"Are you serious?"

He was. He angled onto the gravel drive and climbed the hill to the house. Almost to the house. The hilltop was larger and flatter than it had appeared from the roadway. Several smaller buildings could now be seen clustered about the main structure. The whole thing was densely wooded but there were no walls or fences in evidence. Only a chain, supported by waist-high metal gateposts, blocked vehicular entrance to the compound. "No Trespassing" signs were posted and a small turnaround had been provided.

Bolan pulled into the turnaround as he asked the lady, "What name is R.B. Smith using here?"

"Roger G. Tucker. That's pretty close to—uh oh!"

A guy wearing a bright orange hunting vest and toting a double-barreled shotgun had suddenly appeared at the chain barrier. Bolan donned dark glasses, growled, "Stay put," to the girl, and made a quick exit.

He called an amiable greeting to the guy at the chain and strolled over for a parley.

"Who'd you want?" the sentry inquired, not at all amiable.

"I'm looking for Gene Harney," Bolan lied. "Wrong place," the guy growled.

"Do you know Gene? He lives somewhere in this—"

"Never heard of him. You're trespassing. Get lost."

Bolan said, "Hey—I asked a civil question."

"You got a civil answer, bub." The shotgun came up. "Beat it."

Bolan quietly retreated to the motorhome. He told the girl, "Bingo," and put that place behind them.

"Tucker is Tuscanotte?" she asked nervously.

"I couldn't swear to it," Bolan replied. "But I was just jawing with Skids Mangone. And he's a long way from home."

"Who is Mangone ?"

"Used to break legs in Chicago for Joliet Jake Vecci."

"Well who is Vecci ?"

"Vecci is no more," Bolan explained. "But he was the Lord of the Loop for many years--in

Chicago, you know. And he was an uncle by marriage to Carmine Tuscanotte."

"I'd call that pretty conclusive," she said. "So would I," Bolan agreed.

The lady's eyes were fairly dancing. "So what do we do now?"

Bolan had no need to ask himself that question.

Indeed, there was no question.

He knew precisely what had to be done.

CHAPTER 4

WISE GUY

Harry Venturi had come by his "Apeman" tag honestly. He had the torso, arms and shoulders of a six-footer but from the hips down the guy was strictly five-foot material. In the trade-off between the two halves, the whole man emerged as a rather curiously constructed five-and-a-half footer who appeared to be all torso and arms. There was no deformation but only a quite noticeable mismatch between the two halves.

He had not been kidded about that since early in his youth. And nobody breathed Apeman within his earshot—though, of course, he knew how the Mob had tagged him. It was okay with Venturi, so long as nobody said it to his face.

He and Skids Mangone had come the long way together, moving progressively through a succession of connections from the juvenile street gangs to within the very shadow of the underworld throne of power. They'd made the whole trip on simple savagery. Neither had ever worked a legitimate job. Mangone was technically illiterate but had found his rightful place in an environment where brutality bred respect. Venturi had a bit more cunning and could read with understanding the editorial page of the Chicago Tribune; also, he seemed to have a natural ability to pick winners and to alter connections at advantageous moments. And, yes, the two had come the long way together. But . . . to where? To this joint in the sticks? Was this success?

Things would never again be the same in Chicago. He knew that. This was a sort of exile—a self-imposed exile, on the part of his current boss. And Venturi felt that it was no answer to the problems at home. Problems had a way of following a guy. They'd followed Carmine all the way to Kentucky, hadn't they? And maybe that was just a beginning.

He was staring at the telephone and wondering why no further word had come from Ben David when Mangone—officially the yard boss at this encampment--came through the kitchen door and went straight to the coffee pot.

"What was it?" Venturi grunted.

"The same," replied his old sidekick.

"Another camper, eh?"

"Yeah. Had a smart mouth, too. Wise bastard. We ought to start shooting these smart-asses. Belt 'em around some, anyway. Then they'd think twice about tramping around on other people's turf."

"What'd he look like?"

"Huh?"

"The camper."

Mangone carried his coffee to the table and sat down as he replied, "Like all the rest. 'Cept his RV was a bit snazzier. I shoulda shot the son of a bitch and kept that RV. Think I'll get me one of those, Harry. You ever been inside one of those? Hell, they got everything in there. They got—"

"How many boys you got out?"

"Huh?"

"Who's on watch?"

"Buck Jones and Hopalong Cassidy."

Venturi was feeling very edgy. "Them two. I thought you told me you was going to split those boys up."

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