



The Executioner #13

WASHINGTON L.O.U.

Mack Bolan's relentless war on the Mafia turns into a wild battle in the nation's capitol!

by Don Pendleton

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DEDICATION:

To the honest men,
the ethical men,
the dedicated men ...
wherever the hell they may be.

PROLOGUE

It had already earned him fame as 'the Executioner' in the war zones of Southeast Asia when Mack Bolan's spectacular brand of warfare was suddenly transplanted to the city streets of his homeland.

As a U.S. Army sergeant, Bolan's combat excellence was built of many commendable attributes. His military superiors regarded him as 'a natural soldier'. He seemed to possess an almost intuitive 'feel' for combat tactics and strategies. He was rated an expert marksman with virtually every personal weapon, in the army's arsenal. On penetration strikes into enemy-held territory, Bolan had repeatedly demonstrated a cool self-sufficiency, nerves of steel, and the ability to complete missions despite overwhelming obstacles.

In a modern army heavy on specialties, Mack Bolan practiced the oldest specialty in the book of warfare. He was a death specialist. During two tours of combat duty in Vietnam, he had 'executed' ninety-seven enemy VIP's, by confirmed count, and he had come to be regarded as a formidable weapon in the army's psychological warfare efforts.

And then Sgt. Bolan experienced a personal tragedy. He was called home on emergency leave to make burial arrangements for his father, mother, and teenage sister – all victims of violent death. When he learned that the local Mafia arm was responsible for the triple-tragedy, Mack Bolan seceded from the 'Asian wars and turned, his attention to 'the home front'.

'It looks like I have been fighting the wrong, enemy,' the sergeant wrote in his personal journal. 'Why defend a front line 8,000 miles away when the real enemy is chewing up everything you love back home? I have talked to the police about this situation and they seem to be helpless to do anything. The problem, as I see it, is that the rules of warfare are all rigged against the cops. Just knowing the enemy isn't enough. They have to prove he's the enemy, and even then sometimes he slips away from them. What is needed here is a bit of direct action, strategically planned, and to hell with the rules. Over in 'Nam, we called it a war of attrition. Seek out and destroy. Exterminate the enemy. I guess it's time a war was declared on the home front. The same kind of war we've been fighting at 'Nam. The very same kind.'

Mack Bolan, indeed, declared a personal war on the Mafia. It was not to be a limited war, not in any sense. It was to be 'war everlasting' — that is, everlasting in terms of Bolan's own lifetime.

This competent combat veteran held no illusions regarding the eventual outcome of such a war. He knew what the odds were. It was obvious that he would be fighting the impossible fight. There could be but one logical conclusion: the death of Mack Bolan.

Even so, he infiltrated, the enemy camp in his home town Pittsfield, and began his cool campaign of identification and destruction. Much to his own surprise, Bolan emerged victorious from that initial skirmish, and when he left Pittsfield *that* Mafia arm was a shambles.

The Executioner was strongly aware, however, that all trails away from Pittsfield were, in effect, his 'last mile' of life. He vowed to make it a bloody mile and to make each step along that wipeout trail as costly as possible to the enemy. He would not 'roll over and die for them'.

He then declared the entire underworld a jungle — an arena in which the only law was survival of the fittest — and his war became a series of guerrilla campaigns. Wherever he surfaced, hell broke loose; wherever he lingered, ruin and destruction descended upon the enemy. Before long, the lordly masters of organized crime throughout the nation were beginning to address themselves to 'the Bolan problem' with the gravest respect.

An 'open contract' was issued against the life of this blitzing one-man army, with the initial \$100,000 bounty on his head pyramiding into astronomical amounts as local chieftains hastily added 'arrest bonuses' in an attempt to discourage Executioner strikes in their territories.

Meanwhile law enforcement agencies at every level of government throughout the nation were viewing Mack Bolan's one-man anti-crime crusade with growing alarm, and a tight 'Bolan watch' was being federally coordinated towards the apprehension of this 'highly dangerous' fugitive. Even internationally, Bolan was a wanted man. Interpol as well as national police in several European nations had reasons for an interest in the activities of the Executioner.

Thus, it must have, seemed that every hand was raised against him. Bolan had not, however, expected to be decorated for his actions in this new application of warfare. He had known from the beginning that his campaign would be officially regarded as both immoral and illegal; he was prepared to accept the condemnation of his society. He even accepted philosophically the knowledge that many police agencies were observing an unofficial 'shoot on sight - shoot to kill' policy in their attempts to apprehend him.

From Bolan's viewpoint, though, the police were not his enemy. He studiously avoided any confrontation with police authority and he had never been known to exchange gunfire or hostilities of any nature with the law enforcement establishment.

Actually, many police officers were secretly sympathetic to Bolan's war, and it is felt that frequently individual policemen 'turned their backs' and consciously avoided confrontations with the blitzing warrior. It is known that Bolan's closest friend and contact within the establishment was an undercover agent who was also high in the crime syndicates hierarchy. Another Bolan intelligence contact was a highly placed official in the U.S. Justice Department. Neither of these contacts was on an official

basis, however, and rumors that Bolan was being financed and otherwise supported by various governmental agencies are patently false.

Bolan financed his own war, via raids on the enemy's money caches. From the beginning, he seemed to delight in hitting them where it hurts' — in their money pipelines, their 'clout routes' (bribe networks for political influence), and in their juicy semi-legitimate business covers. He had learned early in the wars that the enemy's seeming omnipotence was derived mainly from the power of the great wealth - from their 'bought' politicians, law-officials legal-eagles and unscrupulous businessmen.

The actual source of their power, though, was quickly seen as 'the common everyday moral weakness of mass America. The Mafia's billions come from the dimes and dollars harvested daily through organized gambling, prostitution, loan-sharking, bootlegging, narcotics and other mass-interest sources of illegal revenue.

But Bolan was no moralist and, his war was not directed against the common weaknesses of mankind. His war was with the Mafia itself, which he saw as a ravenous leech at the throat of his nation, a monster bloated fantastically by an insatiable appetite for wealth and power, a nightmarish criminal cartel with tentacles wriggling out in all directions in a determination to encompass the world.

His first brush with the mob's political ambitions came in New York where he learned that *La Cosa Nostra* (translated literally, Our Thing, or this thing of ours) was giving birth to an even more formidable *Cosa di tutti Così*, the Thing of all Things, a movement described by worried government officials as 'the nation's invisible second government'.

The new Thing was spreading like a cancerous growth into the financial and political institutions of the country indeed, of the entire world — and it was at Chicago that Bolan saw that the festering poisons of politics lent the most natural, environment for the growth and perpetuation of the monster. It was in Chicago that he gained personal insights into the power structure of a society in which the businessman is a politician, the politician is a criminal and, the criminal is a businessman.

This 'unholy trinity' came into sharp focus at Las Vegas, where untold millions of 'Skim' dollars moved steadily from the green-felt gold mines to the graft lined halls of government and finance everywhere. It was an unending stream — and Bolan himself flowed along one such underground river to the sunny Caribbean playgrounds, into a personal experience with the syndicate's international intentions.

It was during the Caribe strike that Bolan formed a sketchy understanding of that brooding conglomerate

which he termed 'the Fourth Power' — an international apolitical force which was bent on wor

domination — and it was this understanding which launched him into an invasion of the most western U.S. trade routes.

In San Francisco Bolan found the confrontation with Fourth Power plans which solidified in his mind the full implications of the unholy alliance — a combine whose only allegiance was to the buck whose only politics was power; Whose only morality was built of corruption, greed and rapacity.

The Executioner's call on Boston was for purely personal business, but even this emergency mission developed into another head-on collision with the syndicate's master plan, for unlimited power — and this was the collision which sent Bolan ricocheting into Washington for a sweep of the national clove routes.

Bolan found the smell of Mafia hanging heavy in the Washington atmosphere. A series of ominous events had been taking place in and around the national capital, but they were not political events in the usual sense.

Obscure but important officials in key governmental positions had been victims of mortal 'accidents' — more than a half-dozen in the past few months. Others had quietly disappeared from the scene 'missing' without a trace. A few had simply resigned abruptly - taken 'normal' departures.

Occurring over a period of several months, the events seemed unrelated and without unitary significance except in the minds of a few worried observers of the Washington scene — and even these few hesitated to use the word 'conspiracy' to explain the rapidly changing picture of official Washington.

There was no hesitation on Bolan's part, however; No other man outside the mob's top ruling circle had been so close to the reality of *La Cosa Nostra* and the newly developed concept of *Cosa di tutti Cosa*. The Executioner has inside information pointing definitely to a mob conspiracy in the hub of the nation's government -- and The Thing of all Things has never seemed more probable as an existing force in American life.

Bolan had hoped from the beginning to keep his war a simple one. His avowed intention had been 'hit and keep hitting until I shake their house down around them?' The complications had set in early however, the audacious warrior had been aware of a steady broadening of the battle fronts.

In Washington he is destined to discover that the focus of his entire life has become pinpointed at the nerve centre of America.

'It's my country,' he wrote in his Journal on the eve of his sweep into Washington. It's not perfect, but

it's the best I've ever seen ... and I've seen a few. I left a lot of buddies behind in 'Nam, guys who will never see home again. So, yeah, this one is going to be sheer hell. But I owe it. I owe it to the guys who won't be coming home. I can't let the mob swagger away with this nation's government in their hip pockets.

`A lot of blood has been spilled in the defense of this country. Even if the country itself is not sacred, that spilt blood sure as hell is. So what choice do I have, except to spill some more. So this one is for the beloved dead. Let's call it the Washington IOU. And let the mob pay the tab ... with their blood.'

The Executioner's battle plans were set, and the strike on Washington was underway.

CHAPTER ONE

THE GAME

The woman jumped out of her vehicle before it was fully parked and ran smack into the waiting arms of Horse Lucchese and Tommy the Sandman Roberts, two of the meanest hit men in Washington. Without even a hello or by-your-leave the enforcers grabbed the flustered beauty and roughly hustled her into the shadows at the side of the apartment building.

Bolan left his car at the curb out front and flitted along in quiet pursuit, making full use of the natural cover of darkness and closing just enough to maintain visual contact.

Obviously something had gone sour and the Executioner wanted to know precisely what that something was.

He'd been on Claudia Vitale's tail for nearly a week, dogging her around Washington on an eighteen-hour day surveillance - and she had been a very busy little bagwoman for the Capitol mob.

Bolan did not ordinarily devote so much time and attention to a payoff courier — he either hit them or forgot them, but this one was something else. Dropping bags around venal Washington was just a moonlighting sideline for Mrs. Vitale. At the stroke of eight every morning she turned back into the sedate and capable Chief Administrative Aide to the venerable old patriarch of Capitol Hill, Congressman Harmon Keel.

And, yeah, this made Claudia Vitale a very item special item in Mack Bolan's book of warfare.

She didn't actually tote payroll bags around Clout, Ville, of course. What she carried were tidy little envelopes which could be inconspicuously passed at bureaucratic gatherings and social-supper happenings.

Bolan's chief interest had lain in the recipients of those envelopes.

Not that the courier herself was unworthy of a man's interest. She was the kind who was never inconspicuous, whatever the crowd. Belled hips, alluringly sloped in the upper approaches and firmly rounded at the bases. Long legs, exquisitely tapered from full thighs, all of it together. A hipped little waist exploding upwards towards softly voluptuous womanhood and delicately molded shoulder

Swan neck, smooth as velvet and gracefully supporting a head of classic Roman beauty.

On those evening rounds, she looked more like a Washington VIP-league call girl; Bolan had to wonder if she'd once doubled in that capacity, also.

She'd been an easy mark to watch.. Bolan could spot her walk from a block away. He knew all the little gestures as she conversed or dined or sipped at a cocktail. She was, highly animated, a very much alive and interesting woman. He had been close, enough often enough to know the flash and sparkle of those dark eyes, and he could tell by the tilt of her head if she was bored, interested, sad or mad.

Right now, at the tired end of this evening, Bolan's reading on Claudia Vitale was that she was 'scared out of her skull'.

And with damned good reason. The Horse, and the Sandman were not particularly known for polite conversation and social graces.

They had maneuvered the woman to the rear entrance of the building. Bolan knew where they were headed. He doubled back, went in through the front door — delayed only momentarily by the efficient security locks — and proceeded directly to the top floor. He emerged from the elevator just in time to see the others disappearing inside the Vitale apartment.

Something about the look on the woman's face as the Sandman shoved her through that doorway struck a sympathetic chord in Bolan's mind. He decided to go in for a direct reading ... but not without a quick recon of the battle zone.

The Executioner quietly backtracked his own route to the ground level, then went to the rear exit and let himself outside. He stood on the small porch for a moment, casually lit a cigarette while his eyes probed the dimly-lit parking area.

He scored immediately, finding the thing he'd expected to find.

The outside man.

He was seated tensely at the wheel of a Pontiac LeMans, a beefy man with a nervous cigar. The parking lights were on and the engine was running, the vehicle parked rear-end to the building and ready for a fast departure.

Hell, it was a set up for a hit.

Bolan went on down the steps and walked directly to the Pontiac. The guy's eyes were following his progress with a curious and indecisive stare.

Bolan stepped right up and tapped on the window. It rolled down immediately and the stereo sounds of a tape deck drifted through the opening.

The Executioner's ominously-tipped Beretta Belle drifted in, attaching herself to a point directly between a pair of suddenly-flaring eyes. She coughed once,

quietly and almost apologetically, and death whispered in between those eyes and shuttered them forever.

Bolan opened the door and eased the messy remains on to the floorboards, then he turned off the ignition and the lights, rolled up the window, locked and closed the door, and went back to where the action was.

The apartment door yielded to the first delicate probe. Bolan swept on inside.

All the lights were on. The woman's handbag was lying on the floor just inside the door. It was nice, simply decorated but reeking of affluence — sliding glass doors at the end of the living room, small balcony outside, Washington Monument visible in the background.

A large TV-stereo combo served also as a bar, but there was no action there.

An open doorway led to the bedroom, also brightly lighted. The shimmering cocktail gown the woman had been wearing was now lying in a wad just inside the door; other, more intimate articles, were strung along in an erratic path to the bathroom. That door was partially closed. The unmistakable sounds of a bathtub being filled with water were the only sounds in the place.

They had not, Bolan knew, rushed up here for a quick community bath.

He hit the door with a commanding foot, sending it banging into the party, the Belle close behind and at the ready.

Horse Lucchese caught the full force of that moving door and he went over head first into the tub with

a startled cry.

The Beretta's whispering death overtook him there, two of her grim little messengers plowing into the rear of the gunman's skull at cerebellum level to liberate

bubbling blood and jellied matter into the swiftly discolouring water.

The other guy had his hands full of Claudia Vitale. She was very nude and putting up one hell of a grim fight for her life. The Sandman was scratched and bleeding about the face; both of them were so preoccupied with their own troubles that they were not immediately aware of the new presence in the Vitale bathroom.

Roberts was the first to know, via the unsettling thing in the bathtub. He froze for a split-second, then he gave the woman a panicky shove towards the far wall and came around in a fast pivot, clawing at his leather.

The silent Beretta tracked right along with him, and Tommy the Sandman kept right on going round collecting Parabellum hi-shockers in the head and throat as he spun on to the john, then slid into a deflated heap, wedged between the porcelain fixture and the wall, dead eyes open and reflecting the bewilderment of that final instant of life.

Bolan stepped inside and turned off the bath water.

The woman was slumped against the far wall, one arm raised and steadying herself against the corner, the other pressed flat to the wall beside her as though she were trying to hold it upright. Horrified eyes rebounded from the mess in her bathroom and she moaned, 'Oh God...'

Bolan growled, 'Get out of here.'

'They fed me p-pills,' she gasped, ... sleeping pills.

Going to drown me. Make it look . . . accident. Already taking effect I guess.'

One knee buckled and she almost went down.

Bolan snatched a large bath towel from a wall rack and draped it over her shoulders as he grabbed her and pulled her out of there. 'How many pills did you take?' he asked her.

'Too many,' she replied weakly.

She had her eyes on the bed but Bolan pulled her on into the kitchen and bent her over the sink. 'Stick a finger down your throat,' he gruffly commanded. 'There hasn't been time for that stuff to get in your system.'

'You're wrong,' she protested. 'I can feel it.'

'What you're feeling is Tommy the Sandman and Horse Lucchese,' Bolan told her. 'Now whose finger is it going to be, yours or mine?'

She swiveled her head about and those dark eyes probed his briefly before she asked, 'Do I know you?' The towel fell to the floor.

Bolan stared at her for a moment, taking in all there was to take. There was quite a bit, then he retrieved the towel and knotted it about her waist as he told her, 'You're going to. I'm Mack Bolan.'

The eyes receded somewhat and a curtain seemed to fall into place there. In a very tired voice she said, 'That's all it takes to make my night.' Then she turned back to the sink and muttered, 'Tor who it's worth, thanks for my life. Now go away; leave my misery private.'

He instructed her anyhow, 'If the finger doesn't work, try some salt water. But get it up, empty the stomach completely. Then make some strong coffee and fill your belly with it. Wet the towel and slap yourself in the face with it if you're feeling drowsy. And stay on your feet.'

'Okay, okay,' she whispered.

Bolan returned to the slaughterhouse.

Blood was spattered across the walls, and pools of it were oozing across the floor tiles. He threw some towels down, then he took two sheets from the linen closet and ripped away the laundry marks. He wrapped

the corpses in tight shrouds and stuffed in heavy towels to absorb the leakage.

He heard Claudia Vitale retching in the kitchen as he carried Tommy the Sandman through the apartment.

The time was two o'clock. The quiet Georgetown neighborhood was wrapped up for the night, so there seemed little danger of being discovered with his grisly burden.

On the second trip he found the woman standing quietly in the kitchen doorway, the towel draped around her, sarong fashion, patting her face with an ice cube,

'What are you doing with them?' she asked in a solemn tone.

'Taking them home,' he growled.

Horse Lucchese was draped over his shoulder. Bolan gave the woman a reassuring wink and went out about his business. He took the elevator down and exited through the rear, depositing Horse in the Pontiac with the other two. He dropped his calling card, a marksman's medal, into the pile-up of lifeless flesh and drove the cargo to an address just a few blocks away. He parked the Pontiac in a no-parking zone at the front of a renovated brownstone and dropped the keys into the mail box. Then he returned on foot to the scene of the hit and moved his own car to the parking slot in which the Pontiac had been standing.

Claudia Vitale's door was safety-locked, bolted from the inside. He went on to the roof, locating an easy access to the balcony outside her apartment.

The lock on the glass doors yielded easily to the pressure of his blade. He found the woman in the bedroom. She was wearing a frilly dressing gown and she was seated cross-legged in the middle of the bed, sharing it with a half-packed suitcase.

She had one of those toy-like .25 caliber autoloaders in her hand. She was making a point of showing it to him.

Quietly he told her, 'Go for the throat if you intend to make any score with that thing.'

Her eyes were luminous and regretful, her head tilted into a sad attitude. 'I don't know just how to talk to you, Mr. Bolan,' she said solemnly.

'I don't want your head, Mrs. Vitale.' He stood quite still and snapped a glance towards the suitcase. 'Good idea. Finish your packing. If they've decided to hit you, a momentary setback won't change anything. Every breath you draw now is a stolen one.'

She gave a tremulous sigh and replied, 'I know. Maybe you shouldn't have butted in. It would all be over now.'

Bolan shrugged. 'That's one way of looking at it.' `Why did you? Butt in, I mean. What are you looking for in Washington?'

`I'm looking for the man.'

She sighed again. 'What man?'

He batted the question away with a flick of the eyes. `Why were the boys hitting you?'

She countered with: 'Do you know who I am? I mean ...'

He assured her, 'I know. I've been living with you for five days.'

A tense silence took control of the atmosphere between them. Presently Bolan suggested, 'You're pointing the gun at the wrong guy.'

Her gaze fell away from his. She dropped the little weapon to the bed and lowered her face into her hands. `I guess it doesn't matter,' she said in a weary, muffled voice. 'Why'd you save me?'

He replied, 'I don't know. Why were they hitting you?'

All the fight had apparently drained from her. She gave the lovely head a dismal shake, still holding it in her hands, and told him, 'Gang war, maybe. Who knows?'

He said, 'Huh-uh, try again. Why were Carlo Spinella's boys putting you away?'

She hesitated, then dropped the hands and tilted her head to meet his gaze as she replied, 'Let's just say I was getting tired of the game.'

`Okay.'

'The game of crud. Capitol Crud.'

'That's the one,' Bolan said. A smile flickered briefly across that cold face. 'Aside from Congressman Keel, who gives you your orders?'

Dully, she replied, 'Leave Harmon Keel out of it. That poor old man hasn't given an order to anybody in years. He seldom knows what day it is. We prop him up, send him out and pray he finds his way back home again.'

Bolan already knew that. He continued the probing.

'Who is Lupo?'

The woman did not respond.

He tried again. 'That's Italian for wolf. It's a code name, isn't it? Who is Lupo?'

Very quietly she told him to go to hell.

He ignored that and told her, 'I guess you heard that Al 88 is dead.'

'Al who?'

'You know who. They buried him in Boston a few days ago, as Albert Greene.' Bolan produced a small notebook and riffled the pages. 'His personal file was lousy with the names Lupo, Keel, and Vitale.'

She said, 'So?'

'So ... Al is dead. Vitale was meant to be dead. That leaves only Lupo and Keel. Which one has the most reason to want the other one dead, Mrs. Vitale?'

She asked him, 'Do you have a cigarette?'

He lit a Pall Mall and gave it to her. She took a nervous pull at it, then blew smoke at him with a long drawn sigh. 'It's certainly not Keel,' she declared, sighing in resignation. 'I told you. He's almost eight years old. Hasn't had a new thought of his own for at least the past five.'

'And you've been the real power behind the man,' Bolan suggested.

She shook her head. 'I've just been the control link. Until a few months ago, Mr. Castiglione ... you know Mr. Castiglione?'

Bolan said, 'I executed him.'

'That's right,' she replied with a rueful wrinkling of the pert nose, 'you did do that. Well, until the Castiglione was running the Keel machine, through yours truly. The Washington end, at least. I got the job after ... after....'

'After your husband was gunned down,' Bolan suggested.

'Yes.' Her voice had become hardly more than a whisper. 'Well ... then ... Lupo stepped into the picture, replacing Castiglione.'

Bolan commented, 'Big Guss Riappi is supposed to be heir to that throne.'

She tossed her head and took another tense pull at the cigarette. 'Not the political territory. Those strings are being pulled straight from the national head shed.'

'Via Lupo,' Bolan said.

'Yes, via Lupo.'

'So who is Lupo?'

'Look. I'm not in the organization. I just do what they tell me. They own me body and soul.'

'Who is Lupo?'

'I'm trying to tell you, I don't know.'

He said, 'I think you do.'

'You go to hell, then. I'm telling you I've never seen the man. This is real cloak and dagger stuff. I've heard his voice, muffled and disguised I'm sure, on the phone. That's all. I wouldn't know him if he climbed in my bed.'

Bolan asked her, 'Do you want to stay alive?' She said, 'Of course I want to stay alive.' 'How would you go about doing that?' he asked quietly.

'I ... don't know. What would you suggest?'

'Play my game for awhile. Maybe we can figure something out, something lasting.'

'Your game?'

He showed her a thin smile. 'Anti-crud.'

Her eyes fell again and she said, 'Okay.' She handed him the cigarette and dropped on to her back, hands clasped behind her head. Delectably tapered legs dangled over the side of the bed and the dressing gown slid open, revealing, in a more provocative pose, the natural attractions exposed earlier.

She made no move towards recovery. Bolan leaned over her and closed the gown. 'That's not part of the game,' he said gruffly.

'What did you see?' she asked soberly.

'I saw a hell of a lot of woman,' he assured her. 'But that --'

'You saw a whore,' she quietly corrected him.

So okay, maybe his earlier thoughts about the call-girl angle were pretty close on target.

He tried to tell her that he was not interested in a listing of sins. 'That's not—'

`Shut up and let me tell you this. I'm a mob whore. I disguise myself as a legitimate and respected member of the government community, and I seduce reputable and upstanding male members of the same community. I lead them into a set-up where the most vigorous and athletic styles of love-making are strongly encouraged and where hidden motion picture cameras record everything that takes place. Do you understand me?'

Sure, Bolan understood. He could have written the scenario himself, after about the third day of observation of this very interesting subject.

He told her, 'So what's new?'

She smiled, genuinely, warmly. 'Thanks,' she said. `I wanted you to know. And. ...'

`And what?'

`Well . . . you had to know. If uh, if you were to understand why the goon squad jumped me tonight. He said, 'Go on.'

`Lupo has his own enforcers, but he uses the muscle of the local mobsters for the more routine business. My end of it is considered part of the routine. Lupo picks my victims and sic's me on them. But then I deliver the evidence to Carlo Spinella. I assume that he takes it from there, applying the pressure to the victim plus whatever muscle may be required. That way, Lupo is never directly involved. As for me...

Bolan said, 'You're just one of the victims too, eh?'

She nodded, trying for a smile and failing.

'That's the way it usually comes out. I contact my pigeon after he has had time to squirm awhile, and he gets hysterical all over the place, insisting that he do whatever has to be done to protect me from being scandalized. It's just another pressure point, but sometimes it's the only thing that will turn the trick. Some of these victims would actually take their lumps rather than submit to blackmail. I guess it eases their conscience to think that they're protecting a woman's honor. Anyway. ...'

`So why did Spinella's boys jump you?'

`I'm getting to that. All this rotten business started when Lupo appeared on the scene. Before that m

job had been purely an administrative routine, contact work, payoffs, lobbying deals, that sort of thing. But Lupo hit this town like a plague. The acceleration has been really intense. They're going for all it, the whole thing, not just bits and pieces. The really tough nuts — you know, the critical men they couldn't buy, trick, or intimidate — well, those were put on my list.'

'How many?' Bolan wanted to know.

'All total, I don't know. So far I've destroyed eight of them, with my own special talent. And it became very scary. I mean, look, this always has been a dirty town. The deals, the payoffs, that has been just business as usual for as long as anyone can remember. It's the American system, it simply lends itself to corrupt manipulation. I didn't have too much trouble with my conscience as long as I was just playing the usual Washington games. But this . . . well this isn't just politics now. It's actual subversion, it's a coup. The mob is taking it over, all of it, they're taking over the government.'

Bolan could have written that scenario, also. Somehow, though, hearing it from this beautiful young woman's lips, the truth hit closer to home and sent an apprehensive shiver along his spine.

'And you couldn't live with that,' he muttered.

'No, I couldn't. I had another love-nest assignment for tonight. And I just couldn't go through with it.' 'Who was the pigeon?'

She gave him a name that quivered his eyelids.

Bolan said, 'The White House guy?'

She nodded. 'One of the bright young men of the administration, a presidential favourite . We've been setting him up for about two weeks. Tonight was the assignation. I didn't go.'

Bolan whistled softly through his teeth. 'When you said 'all of it', you really meant all of it, didn't you?'

She gave that classic Roman head a saucy tilt and replied, 'Where do you think it would all end? mean, once inside the White House, how much farther would they have to go?'

Vertically, not much farther. Horizontally, though.

...

His eyes brooding, Bolan asked her, 'Are you the only woman involved in the sex routine?'

'I'm sure I'm not,' she told him. 'But I drew the big ones because it's so easy for me to move in the various Washington circles. I'm known, you see, because of my position with Harmon Keel. I get invited to all the wing-dings. A lot of men who would never risk an association with an honest-to-God prostitute are just so much ripe meat for a discreet affair with a gal like me.' She sat upright and daintily shrugged her shoulders. 'You know, men really are quite vulnerable to a routine like mine. I mean, even the greatest men. The Achilles tendon isn't in the heel, you know. It's in the....'

Bolan said, 'Yeah,' wryly, and moved over to stand beside the window.

'It sounds pretty far out, though,' he said musingly, deliberately looking out the window instead of at the girl. 'I'm talking about the move against you, now. You sound like a pretty valuable member of the team. I can't see them rubbing you out, not for simply standing up a date.'

'Well ... I guess I did a little more than that,' she replied in a small voice. 'I guess I tipped my pigeons to the set-up, then I guess I sent him a file on my other eight victims.'

Bolan said, 'Damn!'

She was gazing at him with a demure smile. 'Dumb, you mean.'

He met her gaze and replied, guess that's what I meant.'

She said, 'Carlo's goons intercepted the files. You know the rest.'

He growled, 'Yeah.'

'Well . where do we go from here?'

'Far away,' he grunted. 'You'd better get dressed. And finish your packing, but not too much.'

She slid off the bed and stood there swaying for a moment while capturing her equilibrium, then she

began moving briskly about the bedroom, rounding up clothing and tossing it into the bag. The completed, she slipped out of the gown and hastily pulled on silken under things while Bolan turned studious attention once more to the window.

The parking lot lay directly below.

His feigned interest in the scene down there took on a genuine tone as the woman asked him, 'Should I wear something casual?'

'Suit yourself,' he replied. 'Just so it's fast. I believe we have new company.'

She joined him for a quick peek through the drapes, brushing feminine warmth disturbingly into his awareness, then she made a strangled little sound and dodged back away from the window.

Five guys were spilling out of a large car down there. Two were carrying choppers and another was toting a sawed-off shotgun.

He quietly asked the woman, 'Did you send for those dudes?'

'God no!' she snapped, outraged by the suggestion.

He believed her, and that presented another huge question.

There could not have been that quick a reaction to the cargo Bolan had left in front of Carlo Spinella's place. Besides, that crew down there now were no local comedians. They were very obvious professionals, cold professionals who played the Bolan game with an excellence which the Executioner had learned to respect.

They would not be coming for Claudia Vitale, surely, with all that firepower in open display.

On the other hand . . . if Claudia had not tipped them during his absence from the apartment, then they should not be aware that Mack Bolan was even on the premises.

So what the hell had they come for?

Bolan elected to defer the answer to that question to a better time and place. He scooped up the

woman's suitcase and steered her out of there just as she stood, in panties and bra, and they made strategic withdrawal to the roof.

With a bit of luck and some critical timing, they could be away and gone while the new hit team was fanning through the building.

But the game was set now, of that much Bolan was certain. The first card had been dealt, and the Executioner was into the pot with everything of life he possessed.

He had the dismal feeling, also, that maybe the entire country was in that pot.

The girl had told him, 'They're going for all of it, the whole thing.'

Sure. Cosa di tutti Così, alive and well in Washington. What the hell could a man alone hope to accomplish in the face of all that?

It would have to be a highly personal campaign, with each target painstakingly selected. He'd have to hit them in the gut and keep hitting them there until a guard dropped somewhere and he could close in for the killing punch.

So okay, the game was defined.

Find Lupo. Dispose of him.

Hope to God that someone else in this besieged city would find the sense and the guts to join in the defense.

First, of course, he had to get himself out of that building. And he had to get the girl out. Against five professional hit men armed with automatic weapons.

So okay, one task at a time.

He pulled Claudia Vitale into a rough embrace and told her, 'Get this the first time through because there's no time for repeats and no room for missed signals. This is precisely what you have to do, and both our lives depend on it. First, you drag something out of that bag and put it on. Then, now listen closely, then you....'

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