

CHAPTER ONE

Jordan Sandor had no reason to expect this quiet autumn morning to erupt with the familiar sounds of his violent past.

It was nearly ten. The air felt crisp and cool, the calm sky bright and clear and blue. The two-lane blacktop in upstate New York was deserted, except for Dan Peters' old station wagon where Sandor slouched in the passenger seat, a casual observer of the passing countryside. He and Peters had been riding in silence when a pickup truck came into view then turned across their path.

"That's practically a traffic jam around here."

Sandor nodded. "Doesn't seem to be much doing."

"Nope, not this time of year. Summer you get the tourists, hiking, camping, and all that. Winter, they come up to ski." Peters eased the wagon along a wide curve. "Fall, some people drive up on the weekends to see the leaves turn color. Other than that you get nothing."

They passed a makeshift billboard that boasted authentic home cooking at some nearby restaurant. The poster looked so old Sandor wondered whether the restaurant even existed anymore. "You don't miss the city at all?"

Peters thought it over, surveying the barren road. "Sometimes. The places, you know. Not the people. The food, mostly. When I get a taste for good Chinese or Thai, and especially Japanese, that's when I really miss New York. No Sushi Yasuda up here."

Sandor smiled at the road ahead. "Still need your sushi fix."

"Old habits die hard."

"You were the one convinced me to try it, remember? Raw fish! Man, how many years ago was that?"

Peters didn't answer.

"Well," Jordan said after another mile or so, "I give you high marks. Looks like you've done a good job of making the transition to the quiet life."

"Quiet everywhere, except up here," Peters said, pointing to his head. Embarrassed by the confession, he fell silent again.

"You're entitled to some peace," Jordan told him.

"What I saw over there . . ." Dan paused, "it never gets peaceful for me. Sometimes I

manage to ignore the noise, that's all."

The two men had fought together in the Gulf War, the first one, when they drove the Iraqis out of Kuwait, leaving behind a mess that needed to be cleaned up a dozen years later. Before that, Peters saw duty in Vietnam. He had been a career soldier and, although he was nearly fifteen years older than Sandor, Jordan outranked him when they served in the Persian Gulf.

"Well," Sandor said, "maybe peace and quiet are overrated."

"Yeah, tranquility is a bitch," Peters said, then uttered a short laugh. "So what about you? How do you like your new gig? What are you supposed to be, a reporter or something?"

"I'm a journalist, if you don't mind."

"Oh yeah, a journalist, beautiful. You talk about transition, man. I suppose you don't miss the good fight, eh?"

Sandor faced forward again. He had an uneven nose, earned in too many close order scuffles, and a jaw line etched in a strong, firm line. His complexion was tanned and a bit weathered for a man not yet forty. His hair was brown and cut just long enough to allow him to run his fingers through the waves, front to back, which he habitually did when he took time to consider a question or reflect on something that troubled him. He was doing that now, his dark, intense eyes visualizing something beyond his actual line of sight. "I gave up the good fight the day they left my men for dead in Bahrain."

"Yeah," Peters said as shook his head. "Bastards."

After his tour in the Middle East, Dan returned home to finish his military career stateside, take his pension and disappear. Jordan remained abroad, working on special assignments until an undercover team he was assigned to in Manama was betrayed. It had been more than a year since that incident in Bahrain. The day after they pulled him out and left the others behind to die, Sandor submitted his resignation from government service.

"Not everyone comes home."

Jordan nodded.

"Strange, how things never work out the way you figure."

Jordan let that go too. "So what about this Ryan guy we're going to see?"

"What about him?"

"What does he think of the quiet life, now that he's back?"

“You’re the journalist, you ask him.”

“I will,” Sandor said.

Peters rolled down his window, letting a cold breeze whip through the car.

“If this guy was really a mercenary,” Jordan said, “he’s got some explaining to do before I’ll believe a thing he tells me.”

Peters turned to his old friend and showed him a crooked grin. “Good old Jordan, Mr. Black and White. The mercenary business is immoral because you play for money. But if you put the same guy in a uniform, underpay him and send him out to shoot someone, that makes it okay.”

Sandor shook his head.

“You sure know how to wave the flag, buddy.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Jordan said. “Flag’s not the problem.”

Morning sunlight sparkled on the trees, an October spectacle of colors lining the road as they continued on Route 32 towards Jimmy Ryan’s house.

“Close your window, will you Dan?”

Peters chuckled as he put it up half way. He was a burly man with wide shoulders and thick arms. “Blood a little thin these days, Sandor? Winter’s coming, you know. Time to bulk up.” He patted his ample stomach, evidence that he no longer bothered with the physique he maintained while he was in military service.

Sandor, who was still trim and fit, eyed his friend’s gut. “If it’s all the same to you, I’ll pass on the donuts and put on my jacket instead.” He grabbed his sport coat from the back seat, pulled in on and rubbed his hands together.

“So how well do you really know him?”

“Jimmy? I told you, I only met him last month, when he first got back from Europe.”

“I thought you said he was in North Africa.”

“He was. Spent some time in France before he came back to the States.”

“Uh huh. And how’d he find his way to you?”

“I met him in a bar.”

“Picking up guys in bars, Danny?”

“Very cute.”

“You still a Budweiser man?”

“Loyal to the end. You still going steady with Jack Daniels?”

“Ever faithful.”

Danny laughed.

“You think he was looking for you, or was it just a coincidence?”

“Looking for me? I don’t think so. We were watching a ballgame, talking bullshit, found out we were both in the Army, started gabbing about it. Save the third degree for him, will you? We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Just curious. Occupational hazard.”

“I see. New occupation, new hazards. I think I liked you better in the desert.”

Peters slowed down as they approached an intersection and swung into a left turn that led them onto another two lane road. It was a narrower stretch than Route 32, but just as quiet—until a sharp *crack* rang out through the clear morning air.

“What the hell was that?” Even as Dan asked the question, they heard a second explosion ring out, the sound unmistakable.

“Gunshots,” Sandor replied flatly.

“There’s no hunting this close to 32,” Dan said.

“That didn’t come from any hunting rifle. Those are low velocity rounds.”

As they rounded the next curve they saw, just ahead and off to their left, two cars stopped on the grass shoulder. One was a police car, the other a sedan parked in front of the cruiser. Beside the driver’s door of the sedan an officer had fallen to the ground in a leaden heap.

Dan instinctively jammed on his brakes, tires screeching as the station wagon shuddered to a halt fifty yards from the two cars.

Jordan hollered a warning as a small, dark man jumped from the passenger side of the sedan and leveled an automatic pistol at them. “Move it!” he shouted. “Go!”

Dan was pulling at the column gearshift, about to throw the wagon in reverse when the first shot smashed through the windshield, covering them in a spray of fractured glass. The second round tore into Dan’s right side, piercing him with the awful, numbing sensation of jagged ice slicing through his flesh, then giving way almost at once to a searing shock of pain. Peters lurched backward from the impact then slumped forward onto the steering wheel. His foot slipped from the brake and the station wagon rolled slowly ahead towards the approaching gunman.

As Jordan dove below the level of the dashboard a third shot exploded through what remained of the windshield, showering them again with broken shards of safety glass. He struggled to pull his friend out of the line of fire, keeping himself as low as he could manage, even as another round whistled above him and went crashing through the side window. The car was still moving forward, now no more than thirty yards from their assailant.

Another shot sounded.

“Sonuva—”

Crack!

Sandor managed to yank Dan down, pulling him off the steering column onto the seat. Kicking his friend’s feet out of the way he slammed down on the accelerator, the car surging forward with a surprising burst of power. He grabbed the wheel and tried to hold a steady course but careened wildly to the right. Jordan knew that if he ran them off the road they would be finished, so he tugged slightly to the left, judging his position with the help of a quick look above the dash. Making several reflexive adjustments, swerving left and then right, Sandor was nearly even with the two parked cars when he veered sharply left again, causing the gunman to jump backward, out of the car’s path as the wagon sped past. The shooter quickly regained his balance and fired again, the bullet crashing through the rear window, sending more glass cascading across the back seat.

Jordan heard yelling in some foreign language as he reached up to tilt the rear view mirror for a look behind.

The driver of the sedan had gotten out of the car and was waving his arms. It appeared he was ordering his companion back inside. He was tall and blond, as dissimilar in appearance from the short, swarthy gunman as he could have been.

Jordan remained low, peering just above the dash now, keeping the pedal pinned to the floor, doing the best he could to put some distance between his car and theirs and wondering how he was going to survive a high speed chase, driving from the passenger seat with Dan Peters’ bleeding body on top of him.

Several more shots popped behind them as he headed down the long, straight stretch of road. When it seemed the firing had finally stopped he checked the mirror again, surprised to see that the two men were not turning around to pursue him. Instead, they had hurried back into their car and were speeding off in the other direction, towards the main highway.

He watched as they disappeared around the curve from where he and Dan had first spotted them. Sandor knew they might spin a turn and come back after him, but he brought Dan's wagon to an abrupt stop and threw the gearshift into park. If they were returning, he would have no chance to outrun them unless he got behind the wheel.

"Dan, can you hear me?" He tried to raise him.

"My side," Peters muttered. "I'm hit bad."

"I know," Jordan told him, relieved to have him say anything at all. "Can you move?"

Dan nodded slightly and Jordan checked behind them again, making sure the sedan did not suddenly roar back into view, then helped Peters slide to the middle of the seat and scrambled over him to get behind the wheel. He turned to have another look back, but there was no sign of them. Not yet.

Sandor turned back to his friend and, seeing the growing stain of blood running onto the seat amidst the broken glass, pulled off his jacket, folded it up and placed it under Peters' head.

"Here," he said, grabbing Dan's parka from the back seat of the car and shaking it free of glass fragments, "hold this against your side. Hold it tight."

Jordan shifted the car into reverse, completed a high speed turn, then sped back to the police cruiser. The sudden stop drew a groan from his friend. There was still no sign of an ambush. Jordan watched and listened intently but heard nothing except the hum of the station wagon's engine through the empty frame where the windshield had been. The quiet was eerie now, unsettling after the explosion of gunfire, the shattering of glass and the wailing of tires that had resounded along this desolate strip of roadway. Sandor, now aware of the pounding in his chest, took a deep breath to steady himself before stepping quickly from the wagon. He ran around the front and knelt beside the wounded officer.

"Can you hear me?"

He gave no response, but Jordan checked for a pulse along his carotid artery. He was still alive.

Sandor removed the pistol from the trooper's holster, which he found was still snapped shut. All the while he kept returning his anxious gaze ahead, searching for what might appear without warning from around the turn. He pulled at the slide of the officer's automatic and drew a round into the breech, then climbed into the police cruiser, picked up the radio mike and spoke into the open channel.

“We have an emergency. Officer down, just off Route 32. Repeat, officer down, emergency.”

He released the button on the side of the microphone, waiting only an instant before a voice crackled over the speaker, and Jordan knew that for now, at least, it would be all right.