

II



MEXICO

FIVE YEARS AGO

“Pull the goddamn trigger and get your ass out here,” Munro barked through my earpiece. “We’ve got to clear out NOW!”
Tell me something I don’t know.

My eyes darted around, reacting to the three-bullet bursts and the longer, wild frenzies of gunfire that were echoing around me from all over the compound. Then some dull thuds and a searing grunt tore through my comms set, and I knew that another operative from our eight-man team had been cut down.

My body froze as opposing instincts dueled for control. I swung my gaze back to the man who was cowering next to me. His face was all sweaty, locked in anguish from the big, bloody gash in his thigh, his lips quivering, his eyes wide with fear, like he knew what was coming. My grip on the handgun tightened. I could feel my finger hovering over the trigger, tapping it indecisively, like it was red hot.

Munro was right.

We had to get out of there before it was too late. But—

More gunfire pummeled the walls around me.

“That’s not what we’re here for,” I rasped into the mike, my eyes locked on my wounded prey. “I’ve got to try and—”

“—and what,” Munro rasped, “carry him out? What, are you Su-

perman now?” A long burst ripped through my comms set, like a jackhammer to my eardrums, then his manic voice came back. “Just cap the sonofabitch, Reilly. Do it. You heard what he’s done. ‘It’ll make meth seem as boring as aspirin,’ remember? That’s the scumbag you’re worried about wasting? You happy to let him loose, is that gonna be your contribution to making this world a better place? I don’t think so. You don’t want that on your conscience, and I don’t either. We came here to do a job. We have our orders. We’re at war, and he’s the enemy. So stop with the righteous bullshit, pop the bastard, and get your ass out here. I ain’t waiting any longer.”

His words were still ricocheting inside my skull as another volley of bullets raked the back wall of the lab. I dove to the floor as wood splinters and glass shards rained down around me, and took cover behind one of the lab’s cabinets. I flicked a quick glance across at the scientist. Munro was, again, right. There was no way we could take him with us. Not given his injury. Not given the small army of coke-fueled *banditos* bearing down on us.

Dammit, it wasn’t supposed to go down this way.

It was meant to be a swift, surgical extraction. Under cover of darkness, me, Munro, and the six other combat-ready guys that rounded off our OCDEF strike team—that’s the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, a federal program that drew on the resources of eleven agencies, including my own FBI and Munro’s DEA—we were supposed to sneak into the compound, find McKinnon, and bring him out. Him and his research, that is. Straightforward enough, especially the sneaking in part. The thing is, the mission had been ordered up hastily, after McKinnon’s unexpected call. We hadn’t had much time to plan it, and the intel we were able to put together on the remote drug lab was sketchy, but I thought we still had decent odds. For one, we were well equipped—sound-suppressed submachine guns, night vision scopes, Kevlar. We had a surveillance drone hovering overhead. We also had the element of surprise. And we’d been pretty successful in raiding other labs since we’d first arrived in Mexico four months earlier.

Quick in and out, nice and clean.

Worked a treat for the *in* part of the plan.

Then McKinnon sprang his eleventh-hour surprise on us, caused Munro to go apeshit, got hit in the thigh, and screwed up the *out* part.

I could now hear frantic shouts in Spanish. The *banditos* were closing in.

I had to make a move. Any longer and I'd be captured, and I didn't have any illusions about what the outcome of that would be. They'd torture the hell out of me. Partly for info, partly for fun. Then they'd bring out the chainsaw and prop my head in my lap for a photo op. And the worst part of it is, my noble death would all be for nothing. McKinnon's work would live on. In infamy, by all indications.

Munro's voice crackled back to life, blaring deep inside my skull. "All right, screw it. It's on your head, man. I'm outta here."

And right then, my mind tripped.

It was like a primeval determination bypassed all the resistance that was innate to me and brushed aside everything that was part and parcel of who I was as a human being and just took control. I watched, out-of-body-experience-like, as my hand came up, all smooth and robotic, lined up the shot right between McKinnon's terrified eyes, and squeezed the trigger.

The scientist's head snapped back as a dark mess splattered the cabinet behind him, then he just toppled to one side, a lifeless mound of flesh and bone.

There was no need for a confirmation tap.

I knew it was final.

My gaze lingered on the fallen man for a long second, then I rasped, "I'm coming out," into my mike. I took a deep breath, popped the strikers off two incendiary grenades and lobbed them at the *pistoleros* who were hunting me down, then sprang to my feet, laying down a wall of gunfire behind me as I bolted toward the exit. I stopped at the back door of the lab, took one last look at the place, then I burst out of there as the whole place went up in flames behind me.