

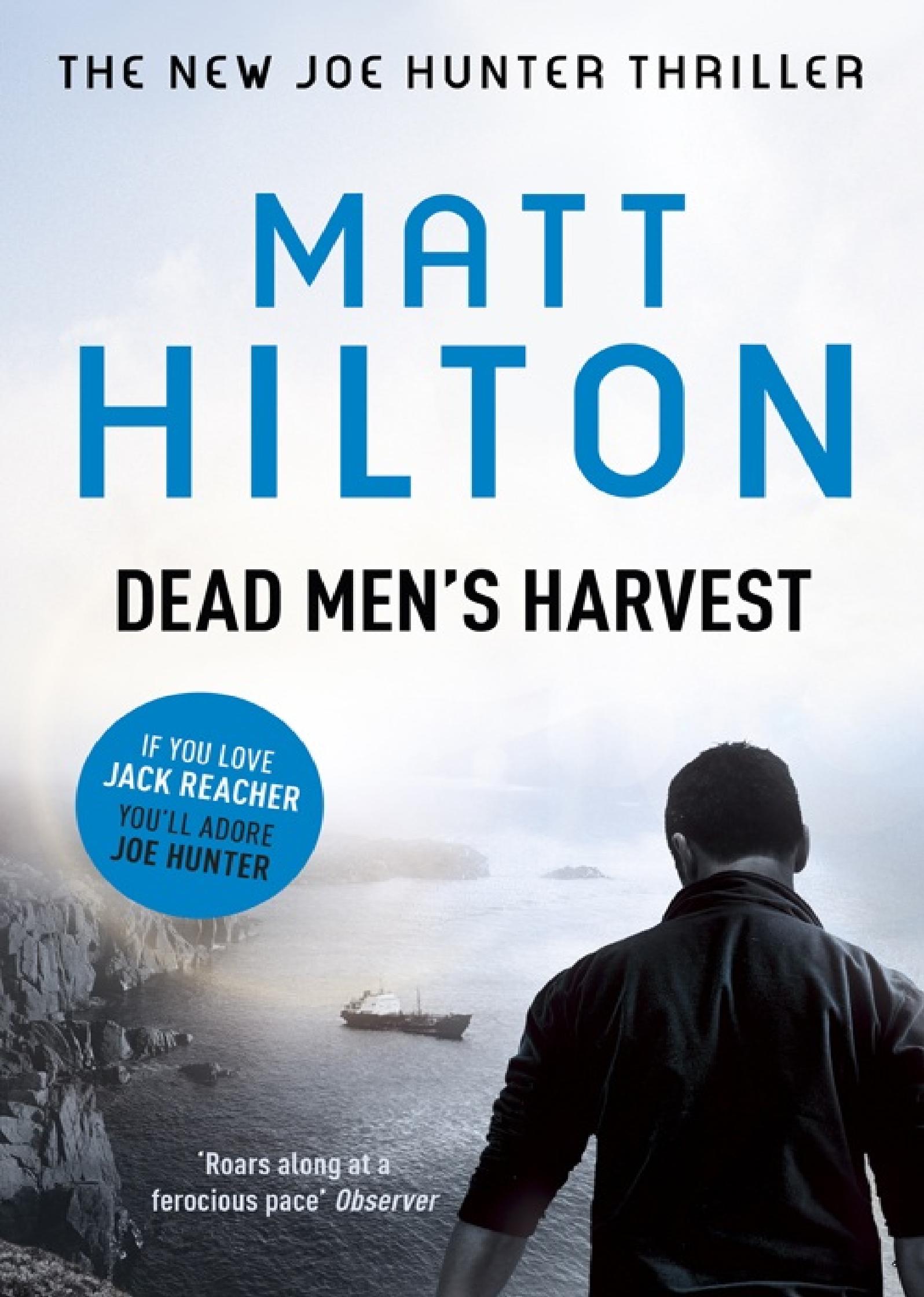
THE NEW JOE HUNTER THRILLER

MATT HILTON

DEAD MEN'S HARVEST

IF YOU LOVE
JACK REACHER
YOU'LL ADORE
JOE HUNTER

'Roars along at a
ferocious pace' *Observer*



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Dead Men's Harvest

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Also by Matt Hilton

Dead Men's Dust
Judgement and Wrath
Slash and Burn
Cut and Run
Blood and Ashes

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This one is for Alison Bonomi

‘There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter.’

Ernest Hemingway

Conchar is an ancient Gaelic term for those who admire the king of all hunters: the wolf.

To some, the wolf is a magnificent beast, the pinnacle of predatory evolution. To others, the wolf is a thing of nightmare.

Castle of the wolf: it was a good name for an Army Confinement Facility. Imprisoned within its walls were men and women who were ultimate predators and also, often, things of nightmare.

Criminals housed at Fort Conchar generally fell into four categories: prisoners of war, enemy combatants, persons whose freedom was deemed a risk to national security and, lastly, military personnel found guilty of a serious crime.

Occasionally it housed criminals who did not meet any of these criteria, but that was an extreme circumstance. Only once had it opened its arms to a man who checked all four boxes and then some. Designated Top Secret, his name was withheld even from those who guarded him night and day. Known only by a number – Prisoner 1854 – he was a cipher in more ways than one.

Mostly he refused to speak to his jailers. Some even thought him incapable of speech. But his mystery went much deeper than that.

He was a living dead man. According to official records he had died, not once, but twice. And yet he still breathed.

If all went to plan, the dead man would, like Lazarus, rise again. And people would know him. And they would scream his name in fear.

Chapter 1

A breeze stirred and the susurrations of foliage were like the whispering of lost souls. Frogs croaked. Water lapped. All sounds indigenous to the Everglades pine lands. Jared 'Rink' Rington ignored the natural rhythms of the Florida night, listening instead for the soft footfalls of the men hunting him.

There were at least four of them: men with guns.

From the cover of a stream bed, Rink spied back to where he'd left his car. The Porsche was a mess. Bullet holes pocked it from front to back and had taken out the front windshield. He'd wrecked the sump when he'd crashed over the median and into the coontie trees. A wide swath of oil was glistening in the moonlight, as though the Boxster had been mortally wounded and crawled into the bushes to die. Rink cursed under his breath, more for the death of his wheels than for his own predicament, but it wasn't the first time he'd had to consign a car to the grave.

Neither was it the first time he'd been hunted by armed men.

It kinda came with the territory.

The stream was shallow, almost stagnant. He used its steep bank as cover as he headed left. Above him someone stepped on a twig and it was like the crack of a gunshot. The insects grew still. There was a hush on the forest now. Rink crouched low, pressing himself against baked mud.

A few yards further on, another twig creaked beneath a boot.

Rink wormed himself out of the stream bed. A man moved along the embankment above him, periodically glancing down towards the water, but more often towards the road.

Through the bushes Rink saw another man was moving along the blacktop. This one held a Glock machine pistol, the elongated barrel telling him that it was fitted with a sound suppressor.

Frog-giggers want to do me in silence, he thought. Well, all right. Two of us can play at that game.

From his boot he pulled a military-issue Ka-bar knife, a black epoxy-coated blade that didn't reflect the light.

His options were few. He had to take out the men hunting him or die. Put that way he'd no qualms about sticking the man in front of him.

His rush was silent. His free hand went over the man's mouth even as he jammed the Ka-bar down between the juncture of his throat and clavicle. The blade was long enough to pierce the left aorta of the man's heart, killing him instantly. Rink dragged the corpse down to the ground.

The man on the road was unaware that his companion was gone.

From the dead man's fingers, Rink plucked free the Heckler and Koch Combat .45 and shoved it into the waistband of his jeans. There was no suppressor on this gun, so the knife would remain his weapon of choice for now, because the man with the Glock had to be done as silently as the first. Two other assassins were out there – possibly

more – and he wanted to even the odds in his favour before exchanging rounds.

Rink was tall and muscular, built like a pro-wrestler. The man at his feet wasn't. But by exchanging jackets and with the man's baseball cap jammed over his black hair, he'd fool the other hunter for a second or so. Everything weighed and bagged, that would be all he'd need.

In the corpse's clothing, Rink moved through the bushes. For effect he pulled out the .45 so the disguise was complete. He held it in a two-handed grip, or that would be how it looked in silhouette.

The man to his right gestured; soldier-speak that Rink recognised. These men weren't your run-of-the-mill killers; they too must have had military training. Rink hand-talked, urging the man in the direction of a stand of trees. As he moved off, Rink angled towards him. Ten paces were all that separated them. The moon was bright on the road, but its light helped make the shadows beneath the trees denser. If Rink moved closer he could forget the charade.

The man halted. Something stirred in the foliage ahead. He dropped into a shooter's crouch, his Glock sweeping the area. Then a bird, disturbed from its roost, broke through the trees in a clatter of plumage on leaves. The man sighed, turned to grin sheepishly at his compadre.

Rink grinned back at him and he saw the man's face elongate in recognition. Charade over, he whipped his Ka-bar out from alongside the .45 and overhanded it at the man. Like a sliver of night, the blade swished through the air and plunged through tissue and cartilage.

The man staggered at the impact, one hand going to the hilt jutting from beneath his jaw, the other bringing round the Glock and tugging on the trigger. Rink dropped below the line of fire, the bullets searing the air around him, making tatters of the bushes and coontie trees. It was a subdued drum roll of silenced rounds, but no less deadly than if the gun had roared the sound of thunder. The man was mortally wounded, though not yet dead, but the Glock was empty and no threat. Gun in hand, Rink moved towards him.

Weakened by the shock of steel through his throat, drowning in his own blood, he couldn't halt Rink's charge. He was knocked off his feet and went down under the bigger man. Then Rink had a hand on the hilt of the Ka-bar. A sudden jerk sideways opened one half of the man's neck and that was that.

Dragging the corpse off the road, Rink concealed it amongst a stand of palmetto.

Two down, two to go.

Rink was beginning to fancy his chances.

Armed now with two reliable guns and his Ka-bar, he decided it was time to show these frog-giggin' sons of bitches who they were dealing with.

'My turn, boys,' he whispered.

A faint click.

'No, Rington,' said a voice from behind him. 'Now it's *my* turn.'

Rink swung round, his knife coming up in reflex, but it was too late.

Something was rammed against his chest and he became a juddering, spittle-frothing wreck as fifty thousand volts were blasted through his entire being.

Chapter 2

The headstone was the only feature that held any colour. Everything else was the grey of a Maine winter, with sleet falling like shards of smoked glass across the monochrome background. Even the trees that ringed the small cemetery were dull, lifeless things, their bare branches smudged by the shifting sky. The sleet was building on the ground, not the pure white of virgin snow, but slushy, invasive muck that filled my boots with a creeping chill that bit bone deep.

I hunkered over the grave and wiped the accumulation of icy slush off the headstone. The granite marker stood four feet tall, pinkish-grey, with a spray of flowers carved down one side and painted in vivid splashes of red and green. The name had been inlaid with gold leaf, as had the date of her premature death: almost a year ago.

I'm not a religious man, not in the accepted sense, but I still mumbled a prayer for her. Religion, or more correctly the effects of others twisting it, had been a factor of my professional life. I'd seen people murder one another for having a different faith, I'd seen people tortured and mutilated. I couldn't believe that if there was a God, then such a benevolent, loving figure would allow such outrages in His name – whatever that might turn out to be. For fourteen years I'd fought men whose minds had been poisoned by fanatical teachings; they all swore that they were doing His bidding. Made me wonder who was guiding me when I put the bastards down. I hoped that Kate Piers was in more caring hands than those of the god of war that must have propelled me.

I rose to my feet and folded my hands across my middle, looking down at the grave. The sleet stung my face, but it was small penance for failing to save the woman I'd fallen in love with.

'Are you ready, Joe?'

Lost in the past, I'd momentarily forgotten that Kate's sister was standing beside me. I looked at her, and her eyes shone with tears. Her sister had died protecting her life, and Imogen had never got over it. She felt guilty that it was her little sister lying cold in the grave and not her. But, more than that, I knew her tears were because she feared the man she loved was thinking the same.

I took one of her gloved hands in mine, pulled her in close so that I shielded her under my arm and placed a kiss on her cheek. 'Ready,' I told her. 'Come on. Let's get out of this cold.'

Imogen leaned down and placed a single rose against the headstone, then together we walked across the cemetery towards the gates. The cemetery wasn't large, just a half-acre ringed by a stone wall, and now almost overgrown by trees. The Piers family plot held five generations, including the body of my old army friend, Jake. This was where Imogen would come when her time on earth was over. Made me wonder where I'd end up. Nowhere as sanctified as this, I supposed; more likely an unmarked hole in the ground. Perhaps that would be fitting, because I'd sent plenty of others to such an

ignominious resting place.

Imogen's house was perched on a rocky bluff overlooking Little Kennebec Bay, a short drive from Machiasport. The cemetery was situated on the Piers land, but even the five-minute walk was unpleasant in this weather. We clambered into the warmth of my Audi A6. I'd had the foresight to leave the engine running and the car was snug. I felt the blood rushing to my cheeks. Imogen struggled out of her gloves while I headed the car up the incline towards the house. In this half-light Imogen's home looked like something out of a Poe story, its pitched roof and steepled corners rearing against the slate sky. We didn't speak in the car, nothing beyond complaints about the weather anyway, and the transition from vehicle to house was done in a hurry.

There was a fire burning in the hearth and I stoked it, piling on logs, while Imogen prepared hot, dark coffee for me, cocoa laced with something stronger for her. I never did get to drink the coffee. In the next few seconds we were in each other's arms as we navigated the stairs to her bedroom. Survivors' guilt syndrome is a powerful thing, but I couldn't blame that for the surge of passion that rose up in the two of us. She just looked so damn ravishing, her cheeks pink with a flush of warmth, her hair slightly in disarray from having pulled off her hat. She looked fragile and vulnerable and in need of reassurance. I hoped that actions were more profound than words. All I did was put down my coffee, take her cocoa from her hand and place it next to mine. Then I pulled her into a kiss, one that I meant dearly. That was all it took for us to wrestle our way through the house, undressing each other as we went.

Imogen's original bedroom had been violated when she'd been attacked by a misogynistic killer named Luke Rickard. Rickard had wanted to kill me and had targeted me through Imogen. She steered me past that room and into the one she had now commandeered. It was a big house for a single person, and the master bedroom only accentuated that. The bed would be best described as super king-sized, but we made use of every square inch.

Afterwards we lay side by side, our bodies glistening with perspiration, Imogen's hair in even more disarray. She lay with one hand on my stomach, tracing lazy circles with her fingertips, enjoying for the moment the companionable silence. Perhaps there was more than that to the silence; there were things yet unspoken, but now was not the time or place. Beyond the windows night had fallen, and the sleet had turned to snow. It was like a shroud that blocked out the rest of the world. We were cocooned in our own little bubble and I wished that things could stay that way forever. But I knew they couldn't.

Some sixth sense in me had been anticipating the thrum of an engine and the squeak of tyres on the new snow. I sat up and looked through the window. The vantage didn't allow a view down to the parking area outside. Naked, I stood, and then stooped for my abandoned clothes. First thing first, I lifted my SIG Sauer P226 and racked the slide. After that I dragged on my jeans and then padded back to the window.

'Who is it?'

Without turning, I said, 'Don't know yet. You'd best get dressed.'

We weren't expecting visitors. On a night like this, with the blizzard driving in off the Atlantic, only someone very determined would be out and about. In my world that meant law enforcement officers or enemies. Experience told me neither would be good news.

A vehicle crept into view. It was a dark-coloured SUV, the windows tinted so I couldn't make out who was inside, or how many. The snow didn't help because it was swirling on the breeze, dancing a dervish jig between me and the vehicle. I watched until it pulled up alongside my Audi. No one got out. Maybe they were running the tags on my car.

I quickly pulled on my T-shirt and a hooded sweatshirt. I shrugged into my leather jacket, still damp from earlier, even as I stepped into my boots. The clothes went on almost as frenetically as they had so recently come off. Behind me, Imogen had pulled on a robe and cinched it round the waist. She joined me as I took another peek out the window.

'Joe,' she said in a whisper. 'Who could they be?'

'I don't know, but I don't like it. I want you to stay up here until I find out. OK?'

This was Imogen's home. She shouldn't have to live in fear within its walls, but she did. Once already it had been invaded by a killer, and a cop had died on the threshold, trying to help her. Luke Rickard wasn't the one she feared now. I'd killed that piece of shit. But there were others who might still want to harm her. I met Kate after Imogen had gone missing, running for her life to avoid the wrath of a Texan mobster and his sadistic enforcers, the Bolan twins. I had found Imogen and then took the war back to its source, but that was when Kate had died. Imogen didn't have to worry about Robert Huffman or the twins: I'd killed them too. But the mob was far-ranging and had a long memory and she waited for the day they'd seek retribution. She didn't argue with my request for her to stay hidden.

I went down the stairs and threw on the spotlights I'd fitted round the eaves. The light would momentarily blind those in the SUV. While they were blinking, I stepped out of the front door, the SIG hidden alongside my thigh. Enemies would do one of two things: reverse the car out of there, or come out with their guns blazing. I readied myself for either eventuality. Instead, the passenger door opened and a single figure emerged. He held his hands over his head, showing me that they were empty.

'Move away from the car.' I allowed the SIG to be seen, so he knew I wasn't taking no for an answer.

He nodded and took two exaggerated steps to the side. I left him standing there in the snow, his hands reaching for the heavens, while I angled for a look into the SUV. There was a driver, but no one I could see in the back. 'You as well, pal. Out of the car and show me your hands.'

These weren't men lost on the road and seeking directions, neither were they enemies. Their approach told me that quite eloquently. They showed they meant no harm by lifting their hands, without raising a fuss about their treatment. I waved the driver round the front of the car, ushering them both together. It was easier to keep an eye on them like that.

Both were alike the way men of military bearing are: strong and lithe, with short haircuts and hard eyes. They were dressed similarly in thick windcheaters, dark jeans and rubber-soled boots. Bulges under their left armpits told me they were packing, both of them right-hand draws. The only thing that differentiated them was that one was missing a chunk of eyebrow, and the other, slightly heavier, had ten years on his friend.

'You're not cops,' I said. 'So I'm guessing you're with the government.'

The older man was the designated driver, which made me conclude that the first man to get out the car was the one who'd come to speak. I wasn't wrong.

'We should get out of the storm.' He nodded towards the house. 'Better if we talk inside, Mr Hunter.'

He used my name as a tool, couching his words so that they were more than a suggestion. He wanted me to know who was really in charge. It didn't work that way with me. 'My girlfriend is inside.' I left things at that. Let them think what they wanted.

'She knows all about you?' The man was wily, and he left the hint about my past unsaid.

'She knows that I'm not the type to let strangers inside without checking them out first. So . . . who are you, and what brings you here?'

The men lowered their hands. The younger of the two reached towards his armpit. Left hand, so I didn't flinch. He pulled out a leather wallet and flicked it open. He showed me an FBI ID badge. I smiled cynically at him. 'I've got one just like that. I bought it off eBay for five bucks. Who supplied yours, Charles W. Brigham? The CIA, I bet.'

Brigham chuckled. His mouth twisted, and the skin on his face puckered all the way up to his damaged eyebrow. Once he'd been very lucky that a knife blade hadn't taken off his entire face. 'As you know, CIA agents aren't in the habit of carrying badges. It's too much of a giveaway. But that's my real name. You have the ability to check it out.'

I did, but I wasn't going to bother. There was no reason for Brigham to lie. 'And who are you?' I directed at the older man. 'Your name will do, forget the Mickey Mouse badge.'

'Ray Hartlaub.'

'Brigham and Hartlaub? It sounds like an accountancy firm to me.' I smiled to show I was only fooling, but also that they held no fear for me.

'That would be Hartlaub and Brigham,' the older agent said. 'Seeing as I'm in charge.'

I'd thought as much. The one in charge never gets out of the car first. Not when there's an armed man waiting for him. 'So why are you here?'

'We were asked to come fetch you.'

I shook my head, more an act of derision than to dislodge the snow off my hair. There was only one person who could be behind this round-up. My old CIA contact from when I was hunting terrorists. 'Walter Hayes Conrad. What has that old goat got up his sleeve this time?'

'Nothing,' Hartlaub said. 'In fact, you can forget about SDC Conrad upsetting your life ever again.'

'So old Walt's finally retired then?'

'No, Hunter, Walter Conrad is dead. He was murdered a few hours ago.'

Chapter 3

Three days earlier . . .

It was undignified to run like this, but sensible under the circumstances.

Prisoner 1854 could feel the effects of eighteen months' confinement deep in his muscles and ligaments and it wasn't a sensation he liked. In his cell he'd exercised regularly, performing numerous repetitions of press-ups and crunches, interspersed with endless callisthenics. His body and mind remained strong, but running in the open, his lungs laboured under the uncommon strain of sucking in air through a constricted throat. It was one thing having the physique of an athlete when his cardiovascular system was severely impeded. But he pushed back the pain and kept running. Freedom was a far more exhilarating prospect to concentrate on.

He knew where he was – his confinement had come with some home comforts, including *unofficial* access to computers – but Google Earth was only part-way reliable. It was out of date, and it didn't include accurate topographical features. A two-dimensional satellite image couldn't prepare him for the undulating ground, the closeness of the trees or the rocks that bruised his feet and threatened to turn an ankle every other step. But he ignored these factors as readily as he did the pain in his limbs and the burning in his chest. Speed was his best bet at present. Speed equalled distance, and distance meant a larger area for his pursuers to cover. Once he had them strung out in a broader circle the gaps between them and the opportunity to slip past them grew in his favour.

The MPs had dogs, but the dogs could only move as quickly as their handlers. He was more concerned with the helicopters buzzing in the sky behind him. They would come equipped with FLIR technology, seeking his heat signature. If they got a hit on his body heat they could direct men to surround and contain him. In his favour was the fact that they hadn't expected him to cover so much ground in such a short space of time. For now, he must keep his lead, get to some place where there were other people who would confound the heat-seeking technology. The only problem with that scenario was that his hunters would expect him to do just that. They'd have all the approaches to the nearest towns covered. But he wasn't over concerned with that either. Men were fallible; if he didn't want them to see him they wouldn't. And if he chose to show himself, then they'd end up dead.

A gap in the woods lay somewhere ahead. Light was minimal, just a fingernail sliver of moon to offer guidance, but he knew the gap was there. He'd plotted the distance and the time it would take him to reach the glade. He had no watch or any other time-keeping device on him, but he was in tune with the rhythm of his pace and was confident that his first destination was close at hand.

He scrambled down a slope, grabbing at sparse brush to slow him down, his feet churning through loose earth, ankle-deep. He sloshed along a stream in an effort to confuse the dogs, made it about four hundred yards then clambered up out of the

stream and on to a wide clay embankment. The clay had once been as viscous as treacle but had dried stone-hard many millennia before. The going was easier there, but he was exposed to the air and would be visible to the chopper pilots even without the aid of technology. He sprinted back into darkness on the far side of the clay bed, heading a few rows deep into the woods. He pushed through the thickets, thorns grabbing at his stolen uniform and at the flesh of his hands. But he let none of the discomfort slow him down. Unerringly he headed up and over the next rise and down into the glade he sought. There he allowed himself a few seconds. He fisted his knuckles into his sides, sucking in air as best he could as he scanned the glade for his marker.

Beyond the far trees rose the unmistakable geometrical shapes of civilisation. There wasn't much, just a peaked barn and a silo, but he'd singled out these structures when formulating his getaway plan. He didn't approach them, but turned west and ran another two hundred yards to where a wire fence cut across the glade. It was to dissuade cattle from straying, not to halt a fleeing convict, and he hurdled the fence with little effort. He then used the fence as a guide, following it back into the woods on this side of the glade. From nearby came the unmistakable yapping of excited dogs.

Damn those dogs! His pursuers had got closer than he liked. But it didn't matter. As long as everything was in place as he'd planned.

The fence ended at a sturdy tree, the wires hammered into the trunk. Bark had begun to grow around the wires, nature sealing the wounds, making of the tree a symbiotic creature of plant and metal. It was a minor detail, but he often noted the mundane and found the minutiae fascinating. He was always spellbound by what lay under the skin of the outer world. Yet he had no time to study this marvel; the dogs were getting close. Worse, he heard the pitch of one of the helicopters change and knew that it was extending the search in this direction.

At the back of the tree he found what he'd been searching for. A tarpaulin was draped over a shapeless form and twigs of brush had been piled over them both. He pulled at the corner of the tarp, smelled the tang of petroleum, and was filled with fierce joy.

He dragged the tarpaulin clear, uncovering an off-road motorcycle. He didn't know the make, and didn't care. It was enough that the bike was where he'd requested, as was the satchel containing a change of clothing and other items more important to him. He stripped out of the uniform, threw it from him like the reviled thing it was, and then slipped into jeans and shirt and leather jacket. His own shoes would have to do. There was a helmet, part of his disguise, and he settled it over his fair hair, pulling down the visor.

Light stabbed through the woods to the east.

Dogs barked frantically.

The helicopter roared close by.

To hell with them all.

He delved in the satchel and pulled out a gun. It was a Glock with spare clips of ammo. He secreted the gun in his waistband and stuffed his jacket pockets with magazines of bullets. That weapon was secondary to him.

Lastly he fished out the thing he desired most.

It flashed dully under the meagre moonlight, yet he still thrilled at the way the

moonbeam caressed the blade as though it was liquid. In that second all his aches and pains, his minor abrasions, were forgotten.

He was back.

There would be no stopping him this time.