

CHAPTER 40

Friday, December 13

The midnight black GTO tore up Route 2, heading eastbound toward Boston. Inside, Decker leaned forward to peer through the rain-spattered windshield. He kept an eye open for more cops as he swerved between cars.

“We’ve got to get off the highway,” he said. “Where the hell is that exit? I can’t see a damned thing in this rain.”

“Well, if you hadn’t—”

“Don’t say it.” Decker glanced over at Lulu.

“Okay, okay.” Then she added, “Why’s everyone slowing down?”

He looked back at the road. It was true. All the cars before them were flashing their brakes.

“Accident?” Lulu offered up without much conviction.

“Or a road block,” said Decker. “Wait, there’s an exit sign, see? Exit 22. Route 68, Gardener.”

They slid by another car, an Audi A6 in the fast lane, and Decker noticed the driver waving at him—a young man with a wide, toothy grin and a ponytail. He pointed at a radar detector mounted on his dashboard. Then, he waved his right hand up and down, motioning for them to slow down.

“We’re in trouble,” said Decker. “Looks like more cops.”

Lulu leaned forward, shielding her eyes. “Really? I don’t see any cops. Where?”

“Must be off the road someplace. The guy in the Audi just told me.” Decker jammed on the brakes and the GTO dropped from seventy-five to just over sixty. The Pontiac slid in beside a Mayflower moving truck. “Where the hell is that exit?” he repeated, just as an explosion erupted behind them.

Decker felt the car leave the ground, as if it had been literally picked up and thrown down the highway

The windows shattered, sending pieces of window glass everywhere. There was a burst of white light. For a second, Decker was stunned. His ears simply stopped working. Then, they started to ring.

He glanced at his side mirror. What was left of the Mayflower moving truck burst into flames, pitched into the air, and began to somersault end over end in their wake. *Objects appear closer*, was all Decker could think of as he braced for the truck to roll over and crush them.

Decker stepped on the gas. The burning hulk of the moving truck kept somersaulting toward them. He held his breath as it flew directly over the Pontiac, flattening a half-dozen cars before plunging off the side of the road and down into the trees.

“Holy shit,” Lulu said. “What the fuck?”

Rain and wind swept into the cab through the shattered windows. Decker swerved to the right, almost hitting the rear of the car right in front of them. The GTO began vibrating violently as they ran over the rumble strips.

“It’s a plane,” Lulu added. “I can see it behind us.”

Decker glanced out his side window. “Where?”

“There,” Lulu said, pointing.

He glanced back again. “That’s no plane,” he replied. “It’s a drone.”

“A drone? You’ve got to be kidding. We’re not in Afghanistan. What would a—”

“It’s a drone,” he repeated. “Believe me. An Avenger, I think. Probably out of Hanscom Air Force Base. No, wait, that can’t be. More like an old MQ-1 Predator. An Avenger would be flying much higher. Plus, it’s setting off radar detectors. The new ones don’t use that old tech. Brace yourself. That was only the first.”

“The first what?”

“They usually come with two Hellfire missiles.”

“Fabulous.”

Decker laughed as he stepped on the gas. The GTO leapt up the highway, swerving now between cars.

“There’s the exit,” said Lulu.

“I see it. Keep an eye out for a white plume of smoke.”

“Smoke? What smoke?”

“That will mark the second missile. I have an idea.”

“What? What idea?”

“Just look for the smoke, Lulu. And tell me as soon as you see it. How high would you say that it’s flying?”

“I don’t know—five thousand feet. Maybe more.”

“Be precise, for crying out loud.”

“Fine. Eight thousand feet.”

“Okay. Figure she’s moving at seventy knots, and the missiles run maybe Mach 1.2, 1.3 . . . something like that.”

“You mean 950 MPH! How the hell—”

“Just keep your eye on the bogie.” Decker pressed his foot to the floor.

They swerved past a couple of cars and then charged off the main road toward the exit. The Pontiac skidded and squealed on a thin patch of snow as it banked down the ramp. When they reached the road below—ironically called Timpany Boulevard, Decker noticed—he swung around and pulled off to the side.

“What the hell are you doing?” cried Lulu. “We’re sitting ducks here. Get under the overpass.”

“Just look for the smoke.” Decker pulled up the parking brake and put his foot on the gas. The rear tires squealed but the GTO stayed in place. His chest was completely soaked from the rain.

“There it is. I see it. White smoke.”

Decker counted off in his head. *Three, two, one.* He flipped down the brake lever and the car leapt down the road like a shot.

They had just entered the shadow of the underpass when there was a frightful explosion above them. Route 2 came apart, raining huge chunks of masonry down onto the boulevard. One barely missed them as they broke into the light. Two cars sailed off the highway and came crashing down but a few feet away, exploding into bright orange flames on each side of them. Decker kept driving. He swung round the roundabout, under the overpass once again, and then back onto Timpany. Moments later, they had climbed up the entrance ramp back onto the highway.

“Holy fucking shit,” Lulu said. “I can’t fucking believe it. How did you do that?”

“It ain’t over yet, potty mouth.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said Predators had only two missiles.”

“They do.”

“Then, what’s the problem? What? Guns? Bombs? What?”

Decker barely missed a silver Mercedes before sliding between a propane tanker truck and a beat-up beige camper. “No,” Decker said. He gritted his teeth. They were going over a hundred now but it still seemed too slow. “Don’t you see? If they’re willing to shoot Hellfire missiles at us, they’re not being very particular. The Predator drone. It doesn’t just fire missiles. It *is* a missile.”

As they passed the town of Gardner to their left, Decker noticed another sign up ahead. Exit 23, Pearson Boulevard. Every other driver seemed to have the same idea, no doubt fleeing the mayhem, for the exit ramp was crowded with vehicles.

“It’s coming around,” Lulu said through clenched teeth. “I can see it. Hurry, please, John. Fucking move!”

Decker swung in behind a green Buick Skylark and a powder blue Volkswagen beetle. Without even hesitating, Decker punched the Pontiac against the Skylark’s rear bumper and began to push both of the vehicles out of the way. Horns honked. Tires squealed. Moments later, the GTO was turning up Pearson and heading, once again, for the underpass. But, this time, Decker kept going. He spun round the roundabout, fishtailing badly, and flew under the bridge.

“What are you doing?” screamed Lulu. “Why aren’t you taking cover again?”

“Because,” Decker said, “this time we’re not dealing with some laser-guided missile. It worked

before because if they can't see you, they can't point the laser at you. But the Predator's guided by cameras and infrared, heat-seeking sensors."

He kept looping the roundabout, slipping in and out from under Route 2. The more cars quit the highway and descended the off-ramp, the more congested the circle became. The Skylark and Volkswagen, the camper and propane truck: they crowded around them until there seemed to be nowhere to go, until the maelstrom began to stutter and slow.

"Give me the .45," Lulu said.

"What?"

"Keep the shotgun. I can't carry it anyway. But give me the M and P." Without waiting for an answer, she reached over and took the pistol out of his jacket. "And no matter what happens, when the time comes, just keep going up Pearson."

Decker watched in horror as Lulu opened her door. One second she was sitting there with the door open, the next she was standing on the edge of the frame, the road rushing beneath her, one hand on the door and the other on the roof of the car. The rain seemed to have stopped.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouted but it was already too late.

Lulu leapt from the Pontiac. She did a full somersault in the air and landed somewhere out of sight on the hitch of the tanker truck. Decker felt his heart seize up in his chest. For a moment, she vanished from sight. Then, as the truck pulled forward beside him, he caught a glimpse of her in the passenger-side mirror. The image was so small, it was almost as if he were watching some YouTube video on a smartphone.

Lulu swung up out of sight once again, only to reappear on the passenger-side running board. Moments later, she was sitting right beside the man driving the truck, the gun aimed at his face.

There was a honk and Decker swung his head back to the road. He had almost run into the camper beside him. It peeled off down the boulevard, followed by a whole stream of cars, including the Volkswagen. But the propane truck kept by his side. They continued to circle the roundabout, flitting under the overpass and then reappearing once again into the sunlight, such as it was. Decker tried to spot the Predator in the sky but it was nowhere to be seen. Besides, the wind was rushing in with such chilling ferocity, watering his eyes, that it made it virtually impossible to see anything clearly.

He turned back to look at the tanker truck but it had vanished. No, there it was. He could see it in the mirror behind him. The driver was standing outside the open driver-side door. Lulu had somehow managed to slip into the driver's seat. She was barely visible behind the dashboard, given her stature. The truck honked and the driver leapt from the cab into a large pile of gray snow at the foot of the pylons supporting the highway. He rolled out of sight.

The tanker truck honked once again as they swept around the circle. Lulu was waving at him, urging him forward. Decker stepped on the gas. And, just as he slipped under the overpass and into the shadows again, the truck spun to the side. It teetered and started to tip. Decker's heart skipped as he watched the silver tanker whiplash and roll onto its side, pulling the cab over beside it.

As it fell, the driver door opened and Lulu jumped up out of the opening. For a second or two, she balanced precariously on the frame of the door—like a surfer, her arms out—as the cab and the silver tanker threw sparks up behind her. She leapt into the air, flipping midstream, and fired back at the tanker as she sailed into the same bank of snow where the driver had fallen.

There was a terrible blast as the propane exploded. The Pontiac was carried up by the shockwave and, with it, four other vehicles. Out of nowhere the Predator fell from the sky, drawn like a moth to the flames.

There was a second explosion as the drone hit the deck. The highway collapsed as the Pontiac finally touched down on the boulevard. The steering wheel was ripped from his hands and Decker lost control of the vehicle. It bounced once and sailed onto the side of the road, finally coming to rest in an ice-covered drainage ditch.

Decker reached down and unfastened his seatbelt. As he turned, he saw a huge mushroom cloud of black smoke rising up from the highway. Flames still engulfed what was left of the overpass when a shadow emerged from the cloud.

A figure. Tiny. More phantom than human.

It was Lulu. She walked from the smoking debris with a calmness that belied the chaos behind her.

Decker got out of the Pontiac. He ran toward her as fast as he could. As he approached her, she lifted her hand and gave him the tiniest wave. Then, without warning, she collapsed onto the street.