**Chapter 2: Milan, May 1977**

The black S-Class Mercedes cut through the streets of Milan like a blade, the polished chrome reflecting the golden afternoon sunlight. Franz Speke sat in the front passenger seat, his ice-blue eyes sharp beneath the sheen of his blonde hair. His face was carved from cold stone, rigid, emotionless, a man who had never known mercy. In the back seat, two men lounged with predatory ease, their features hidden behind dark sunglasses, their movements sharp and efficient. The driver, equally silent, focused on navigating the narrow, bustling streets.

The sun poured through the windows, casting slanted shadows across the leather interior. The smell of gun oil lingered faintly. The car was silent but for the low growl of the engine and the click of magazines being checked. Each man drew his sidearm with clinical precision, pulling back the slide, inspecting the clips, and disengaging the safeties. Rituals of survival. Rituals of death.

Speke reached into his small black backpack, pulling out a stack of photographs. Black and white. Surveillance-grade. Each face is captured in a single moment. He passed them back without a word.

John Thorn. Maria Thorn. The targets.

The two men studied the images in silence, memorising the contours of the faces they would soon destroy. The hum of the walkie-talkie broke the stillness, crackling like static in the electric air. A voice, clipped and calm: "Targets located."

No questions. No hesitation. The mission was in motion. They were hunters, and their prey was within reach.

Speke's gaze darted to the narrow streets, his mind mapping the escape routes, calculating where shadows would fall as the sun shifted. In this world, every detail mattered. The tilt of a shadow, the glint of metal on a rooftop, the flash of an eye that lingered too long.

He saw them first. Always.

The Piazza del Duomo basked beneath a golden May sun, its marble expanse glowing against the towering majesty of Milan Cathedral. Tourists and locals mingled, laughter and idle chatter rippling through the air like the songs of summer songbirds. The café terraces were alive with conversation, the clink of glasses, and the perfume of strong coffee mingling with the faint aroma of street vendors' pastries. It was a moment of perfection, a place where nothing bad could happen.

Paul Thorn sat at a marble-topped table, the heavy aroma of his Toscano cigar coiling around him. His Dupont lighter, a silver glint on the table, caught the light like a sliver of history. The gift from his parents still bore the soft marks of years gone by. He was comfortable in solitude, although his eyes were restless beneath his calm façade. Scanning the crowds, his gaze flicked over strangers, cataloguing details with a practised eye. As the laughter from Maria and John faded into the vibrant atmosphere of the piazza, Paul turned his attention to his parents, seated across from him. He leaned back in his chair, allowing the warmth of the May sun to wash over him, cradling his espresso cup as the rich aroma filled the air.

“Mom, Dad, it’s terrific to be here with you finally,” he said, a genuine smile breaking across his face. “Feels like ages since we’ve sat together like this.”

John, his father, nodded, his eyes sparkling with a mix of pride and happiness. “Too long, son. I swear, time moves differently when you’re stationed away. How are things over there? The Dhofar is a long way from our little slice of paradise here.”

“It has its challenges,” Paul replied, his tone shifting slightly as his thoughts drifted to the rugged landscapes and relentless heat of Oman. “But the landscapes are breathtaking at times, and the camaraderie among the men makes it bearable. We’ve seen… a lot, though. Things that come home with you.”

Maria’s expression softened, and she reached across the table to place her hand on Paul’s. Her touch was warm and grounding. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, sweetheart. Just being here with us is enough.”

Paul appreciated her understanding, but he felt a persistent urge to share, to bridge the gap between the worlds he inhabited. “It’s just that sometimes I feel like the experiences are so far removed from what we have here. It’s good to be with you, but part of me is still there, you know?”

“Of course,” John replied, his voice measured and steady. “You’re doing important work, Paul. Your service matters, and I know it’s not easy. But remember, we’re proud of you; always.” There was a fierce, unwavering conviction in his father’s words, and it enveloped Paul like a protective mantle.

“Thanks, Dad,” Paul said, his heart swelling with gratitude. “I guess it’s just harder to explain sometimes. I had this one experience...” He paused, weighing the gravity of the memory. “There was this young local girl who would come by the camp to sell water. One day, she asked us why we were here. I wanted to tell her the truth, but it felt like any explanation would somehow diminish her innocence. I just told her we were helping.”

John leaned forward, the intensity of a military mind reflected in his gaze. “You did the right thing, son. There’s no need to burden her with the weight of war when all she knows is a simple life.”

Paul nodded, appreciating his father's point of view. “I just keep wondering if I’m doing enough. Am I helping? Or is it all just a complicated mess?”

Maria smiled gently, her eyes shining with understanding. “Sweetheart, helping doesn’t always mean having all the answers. Sometimes, just being there and showing kindness is more than enough. You’re doing what you can. You’re trying.”

Paul considered this, but the unease in his gut remained, a lingering anxiety that something wasn’t right. Despite that, his parents’ presence anchored him in the moment. “And speaking of trying, Dad, how’s your golf game? Still pretending to be the next Jack Nicklaus?”

John chuckled, a lightness spreading across his features. “I’ve retired that dream, thankfully! Last time I hit the course, I accidentally launched a ball straight into the water hazard. I might have given a couple of ducks a heart attack in the process.”

“Classic Dad!” Paul laughed, his tension easing for a moment. “And here I thought our family’s legacy was in military service, not water sports.”

Maria chimed in, crossing her arms with a mock-serious expression. “Just remember, dear, you can’t lose if you never play. At least, that’s what I tell myself every time I steer clear of the golf course with your father.”

Paul could picture it: his mother, impeccably composed, avoiding the chaos of the golf course while effortlessly keeping the peace at home. “Fair enough, Mom. You’ve mastered the art of avoidance; perhaps I should commend you for your strategic prowess?”

“Thank you, dear. It’s a crucial skill.” Maria leaned back, a playful glint in her eye. “But let’s not forget the time I tried to outdrive your father on the golf course. I swung the club, and instead of hitting the ball, I managed to throw myself into a lovely mud puddle.”

Paul burst into laughter at the mental image. “I can’t believe you still tried to swing after that! What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking I could impress you both! It didn’t go as planned,” Maria replied, shaking her head with a grin. “But at least I provided a memorable spectacle.”

“Never a dull moment with you, Mom,” Paul said, shaking his head in amusement. “I’m glad you still have that sense of adventure.”

“And what about you, Paul? Still the serious one, I see,” John said, a teasing tone lacing his words. “What happened to that goofy kid who used to make mud pies in the backyard?”

“Life happens, I guess,” Paul responded, a smile creeping onto his lips as nostalgia washed over him. “But honestly, I think that kid was just in training for the serious business of military life.”

“More like trouble training!” John countered. “Do you remember when you used to ‘organise’ your action figures for battle? Half the neighbourhood thought there was a war going on in the backyard.”

“True,” Paul replied, chuckling. “But those action figures were the fiercest soldiers you'd ever seen! And hey, at least I was creative with my tactics.”

John leaned back, arms crossed, and burst into hearty laughter. “You had a vivid imagination. Who knew you’d grow up to write the book on real warfare?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m writing the book just yet. Right now, I’m still trying to figure out how to make sense of it all,” Paul admitted, his humour giving way to a more serious tone. “But those memories… they remind me of home.”

“Exactly!” Maria joined in, her eyes bright with warmth. “Those moments of laughter, of love, they’re what keep your spirit strong, no matter where you are.”

Paul took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his mother’s words settle within him. “I suppose that’s why I cherish moments like this. It’s easy to forget how important it is to connect, to share laughter.”

“Just think, son, one day you’ll return and we’ll reminisce about today’s adventures in the same way,” John said, raising his glass in a mock salute. “To more family moments and fewer mud puddles!”

With that proclamation, they all lifted their glasses in a toast, the clink of glass echoing beneath the warm sun. As they shared those hearty laughs, Paul felt the shadows of his military life briefly recede, leaving him with the lightness of family, a love that was enduring and unwavering.

Still, that nagging feeling in his gut lingered. He wondered if he would ever be able to escape the weight of his experiences fully. Yet, as his parents exchanged affectionate glances, he realised that love was a powerful emotion. Amidst the convivial atmosphere of the piazza, it would carry him through whatever challenges lay ahead. And perhaps, with laughter and love, he could also breathe a little lighter, even amidst the chaos that often surrounded him; a soldier's intuition.

Maria Thorn laughed nearby, her voice light as the sun on the piazza stones. She tossed her head, dark curls bouncing, and playfully swatted John Thorn's arm. "I told you, John, if you keep speaking Italian with that accent, someone will think you're from the north."

John chuckled, leaning closer to his wife, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "And if you keep correcting me, someone might think you're the boss."

Paul smiled at their banter, warmth spreading through his chest. "We all know who's really in charge," he teased, lifting his glass in a mock salute to his mother.

Maria grinned and tapped her glass to his. "Don't you forget it, ragazzo?"

There was laughter, soft and manageable, threaded with love and history. Small gestures spoke volumes: a lingering touch on a hand, a shared glance, the unspoken comfort of those who had weathered storms together. Paul felt it, a deep connection that rooted him. This was home, not a place, but these people, this moment.

But paranoia, he'd learned, keeps you alive. Even now, an edge of unease lingered in his gut. A sensation that something, someone, was out of place. Then he saw him.

A tall figure, Aryan features, sharp and cold. Blond hair slicked back, blue eyes like shards of ice. The stranger paused near the cathedral's shadow, his gaze sweeping the square with a soldier’s precision. Paul felt a jolt, the primal sense of being observed by a predator. Their eyes met for the briefest second. Thorn blinked, and the man was gone, swallowed by the crowd.

The glass in Paul's hand trembled slightly as he lifted it to his lips. He frowned, brushing off the chill that crawled down his spine.

Moments later, the world shattered.

The explosion tore through the air with a violence that obliterated sound. A shockwave of fire and debris rippled across the terrace, smashing glass, splintering wood, and tearing flesh from bone. The scream of destruction merged with the panic of the crowd as bodies crumpled like paper beneath the force. Paul was thrown from his chair, slammed against the stone pavement, his vision a haze of dust and red mist. The deafening roar subsided, replaced by a symphony of agony, cries, whimpers, and the frantic shuffle of fleeing feet.

Paul struggled to rise through the haze, his ears ringing and his limbs trembling. His eyes fell on the devastation, tables overturned, bodies broken. His gaze snapped to the terrace where his parents had been.

There was nothing but ruin. Flesh torn beyond recognition. The scent of burning hair and blood. Paul staggered, his breath hitching.

Standing in the distance, beneath the shadow of the cathedral, was the Aryan figure. Watching. Unmoving. A silent ghost amid chaos, and then, he vanished.

The assassin, Speke, had struck. Paul Thorn's life was broken beyond repair.

As sirens echoed through the city and the smell of burning lingered in the spring air, a darker shadow took root in Paul’s mind. Not just grief, but the gnawing seed of suspicion. Questions without answers. Faces without names.

The knowledge that this was no act of random terror.

It was a message.

Speke walked through the ruins of the blast with the precision of a surgeon. His eyes scanned every angle, his mind cataloguing details, always calculating. The chaos did not touch him. Screams echoed like distant thunder. Bodies lay broken, but Speke’s gaze was focused and cold. Detached.

To Speke, the dead were not people. They were variables. Obstacles are removed from an equation. Collateral. Necessary. The mission demanded efficiency, and emotion was inefficiency. Regret was a weakness, one that his godfather, General Karl Wolff, had taught him to cut out like a tumour.

He thought of Wolff's voice, calm, instructive, a teacher of survival. "Kill clean. Kill cold. Regret is the chain that drags you to ruin."

Speke lived by that code. It was a matter of pure and brutal survival, and so, as he stepped over the shattered remnants of a marble table, his face showed nothing. The blood, the limbs, the ruin; none of it touched him.

He thought only of angles. Of exits. Of shadows.

Behind him, his crew emerged from the haze. Silent. Professional. Like him. Shadows who would be gone before anyone knew they had ever been here. Speke’s gaze caught a glimpse of a child's doll, charred and torn, lying beneath a splintered chair. He stared at it for a moment. Not in reflection, but in assessment. Another fragment of the narrative they were leaving behind.

And then he turned away.

They moved as one, slipping into the side street, their pace unhurried but precise. Sirens screamed in the distance, growing louder, closer. Police cars streaked past, their blue lights casting flickering reflections across the alley’s damp walls. The sound echoed, rebounding off stone and glass, a storm of fury rushing past the stillness of their escape.

Speke slid into the back seat. The car's engine was already idling, a heartbeat of quiet menace. The driver’s hands were steady on the wheel, eyes sharp, reading every shift in the chaos.

"Go," Speke said, his voice low, devoid of urgency.

The Mercedes rolled forward with ghost-like precision, slipping into the river of sirens and shouts. They wove through the traffic, ducking beneath the radar of authority. Speke watched through the window as the piazza receded into the distance, the chaos diminishing behind them like an echo.

His mind was already moving forward. Calculating. Adjusting. If questioned, the story was simple. They were ghosts, shadows that melted into the fabric of the city. To police, to authority, to those who asked questions, they would be gone before their faces could be remembered.

Speke thought of the Thorn family’s last moments. He wondered if John Thorn had understood why he had died. If he had known the war he had been fighting, even in peace. Did he recognise the message left behind?

But Speke felt nothing. No curiosity, no triumph. Only the stillness of a job completed.

The car curved through the labyrinthine backstreets, moving with practised ease. The city swallowed them whole, the way it always did. Milan was a maze, and Speke knew every corner, every shadow where a man could vanish.

Back in the piazza, the chaos would rage for hours. Questions would echo. Who? Why? But the truth had already disappeared, leaving behind only ruin.

Speke rested his head against the seat, his gaze fixed on nothing. Another job. Another life shattered. But that wasn’t his concern. Only the next mission. Only the next shadow. He knew he had to call the Colonel to relay the success of the endeavour; however, he could wait until he was back at the warehouse.

He closed his eyes briefly. Not in regret. Not in reflection.

Just waiting. For the next call. For the following message.

And the game would begin again.

**Ospedale Militare di Baggio, Milan – May 1977**

The Ospedale Militare di Baggio loomed like a forgotten monument, its high iron gates casting elongated shadows across the cracked pavement. Sunlight struggled and ultimately failed to penetrate the thick shroud of grey clouds overhead, bathing the landscape in a chilling, colourless light. The hospital’s outer walls were etched with the scars of time, peeling plaster revealing patches of raw concrete beneath, a stark reminder of its heritage, a relic from a war that never truly lay to rest. Its façade was devoid of warmth and grace; it exuded only a chilling sense of purpose, every corner whispering secrets, a fortress masked in the drab trappings of NATO collaboration.

Military vehicles littered the forecourt, their olive-green exteriors scratched and weathered by the relentless rigours of duty. Canvas-topped jeeps huddled beside black American staff cars, their engines purring softly like restless beasts waiting for a call to action. The air was thick with tension as soldiers, Italian Carabinieri clad in dark uniforms, stood as sentinels at the gate, flanked by American MPs whose hard, chiselled features betrayed no hint of emotion. The occasional glances between them suggested a silent acknowledgement, a seemingly instinctive understanding forged in the crucible of shared allegiance. Their weapons hung low, yet the readiness in their tense postures mirrored an unspoken threat, fingers brushing against triggers with unsettling familiarity.

Inside the hospital, the corridors pulsated with a chaotic symphony of sound. This was no familiar, calming rhythm of a medical centre; it was raw and jarring. The cacophony of boots clattering against the tile, interspersed with the urgent barks of orders, clashed violently with the frantic whoosh of stretcher wheels racing toward resuscitation. Medics darted through the hallways, uniforms drenched in sweat and blood, a grim testament to the urgency that enveloped them. The acrid stench of antiseptic mingled with the more visceral scent of charred flesh, creating a heady cocktail that threatened to overwhelm the senses.

Fluorescent lights flickered overhead, their erratic hum creating a strobe-like effect that played tricks on the eye. Shadows crept where they ought not to, giving the illusion of movement in the air, while deep, unsettling pockets of darkness lurked in every corner of the corridor. As the American medics, young, hard-eyed men clad in combat fatigues, worked with relentless precision, their expressions hardened into masks stripped of emotion. They patched shrapnel wounds and set splints with brutal efficiency, their focus unyielding amid the surrounding chaos. Beside them, the Italian medics, dressed in pristine white, struggled heroically to maintain their ground, their faces flushed with the exertion and desperation of fighters outmatched.

A US Army Medical Corps officer strode through the turmoil, his clipboard clutched like a weapon and a sidearm prominently displayed at his hip. He barked orders into a radio, his voice slicing through the chaos like a knife, demanding attention. The door to an operating theatre slammed shut with a resounding finality, muffling the shouts of a patient whose screams echoed in a jarring blend of English and Italian. Amidst this frenetic energy, a fresh arrival appeared, wrapped in a black NATO blanket, a tag fluttering from a broken toe, moving like a spectre through the mechanical horror unfolding around them.

It was a scene painted with distress and disarray. Life was triaged into stark categories, save, stabilize, and discard. Somewhere amidst the throng, a man named Paul Thorn lay submerged in the wreckage of a war that wasn’t his own, waiting for the unfolding nightmare to reveal itself.

The hospital compound trembled beneath the weight of urgency; outside, a black Alfa Romeo glided to a stop at the rear gate, its tinted windows cloaked in secrets darker than those woven within the hospital walls. The driver, stone-faced and moustached, barely acknowledged the Carabinieri checkpoint, a flicker of tension sparking in his brow. He eased the car into a reserved bay, cloaked in the crumbling shadow of an annexe.

Two men exited the vehicle in silence, their presence taut with unspoken purpose. They were SISMI agents, unmistakable in their confident demeanour. One moved toward the cramped gatehouse while the other surveyed the perimeter with the casual assurance of a predator. Their movements were deliberate, as if choreographed to savour the intricate dance of power within a fragile ballet.

Kilby emerged from the back seat, his tall frame cutting a sharp silhouette against the backdrop of the overcast sky. An air of calm enveloped him, though his lips pressed tightly together, revealing nothing of the tempest churning within. Late spring drizzle clung to his overcoat like a heavy shroud, but his eyes gleamed with intensity, absorbing the details surrounding him with ravenous curiosity. Shoulders squared and gait purposeful, he chose not to glance at the Italian guards; they were familiar and needed no recognition. They understood one another through the dense fog of unspoken camaraderie. No salute was offered, no words exchanged, only the weight of shared secrets hung thickly in the air.

As he stepped into the eye of this chaotic storm, Kilby quickly found his bearings. The triage wing of the Ospedale Militare di Baggio was a tempest of blood and disorder, a theatre of the grotesque. Stretchers lay strewn about like discarded fragments of hope, their contents writhing or limp in the throes of agony. Shouts erupted in a dissonant medley of Italian and English, each cry saturated with desperation. Medical orderlies from both nations, an uneasy coalition, engaged in an unrelenting dance of urgency and dread, managing tourniquets, stacking gauze, and preparing plasma bags.

The sharp, biting scent of antiseptic hardly masked the more visceral reek that permeated the air, a harsh reminder of the suffering and struggle unfolding within these walls. Patients screamed or lay unresponsive, their eyes hollow, shimmering with confusion, while others surrendered entirely.

Within that swirling chaos, the SISMI minder took point. He wove through the crowd with the assuredness of a seasoned tactician, exuding power in his calmness. Kilby followed, his boots clicking softly on the tiles, each step deliberate as he absorbed the myriad details painting the scene: the ranks of soldiers, the fluidity of movement, the subtle exchanges of eye contact that either ignited tension or fostered camaraderie.

A young US medic hesitated in Kilby’s path, weariness etched across his features as he stepped aside without a word. Someone had briefed them; nothing occurred here without foreknowledge, and awareness hung thickly in the air as a third presence.

Kilby’s purpose reverberated within him: assess, confirm, report. John Thorn was dead, the whisper echoing through the channels of London, a cold message devoid of warmth, relayed second-hand and slithered through layers of bureaucracy. The Commodore, waiting back in London, longed for the confirmation; he sat poised, pipe stem resting between his teeth, sharpening his ears to listen for truths concealed within a sea of half-lies. Kilby owed him answers forged from the crucible of honesty.

He passed an operating room where a surgeon’s voice rose in a smoky Florentine dialect, rife with frustration and a twinge of desperation. In the next theatre, an American orderly swore vehemently into a field phone, blood spattered across his arms like gruesome war paint, a testament to the ongoing struggle. The building roared like a wounded beast, howling and thrashing in confusion.

Yet in his gut, Kilby sensed more than mere chaos. There was the stench of something sinister, something deliberate, a dark calculation nestled within the calamity, waiting to emerge.

He turned to the SISMI agent beside him, speaking in crisp Italian, “I need the casualty manifest. Include any incident reports, military and civilian.”

The man nodded sharply, a flicker of understanding passing between them before he vanished into the teeming mass of bodies and voices. Kilby continued his relentless march through the serpentine corridors, each turn twisting reality slightly as if the very fabric of the war shifted beneath his feet. Unbeknownst to him, somewhere behind a closed door, under a false name, lay Paul Thorn, his godson, the sole survivor who held the key to unravelling the tangled web of deceit surrounding the execution of Major John Thorn, lost amidst a public spectacle of betrayal.

The narrative of the Red Brigades was merely a flimsy façade, a ruse that the Commodore had long since perceived as a transparent veil concealing a far darker truth. Kilby felt it gnawing at him; the entire operation stank of manufactured theatre, a charade steeped in perfidious betrayal. As the smoke from that theatre began to curl and twist, it became clear someone was fanning the flames, intent on obscuring the unsettling reality beneath layers of lies.

London craved this truth, hungering to extract it from the shadows, in whispers, in covert exchanges, yearning to do so without igniting further turbulence in a world already precariously teetering on the brink.

Kilby pressed deeper into the heart of the chaos. The operating theatres stretched like an abyss of unknowns, while the corridors twisted like a labyrinth designed to ensnare the truth. Every heartbeat echoed in his ears, every breath tasting of antiseptic and despair. The chaos roared around him, a tempest that promised to reveal nothing.

Time was a cruel companion, and Kilby knew it was slipping away. Within these walls, beneath the flickering lights and chaotic energy, lay more than just bodies wounded physically; unsettled souls fought to survive, intertwining threads of tragedy, lies, and secrets, all waiting for a reckoning that had just begun. Someone was trying to burn the truth.

And London wanted the truth. Quietly. Without fingerprints. At any cost.