

# TWO

*Georgetown—Washington, D.C.—United States of America*

Anna rose up from where she had fallen, her arm tight with pain in a line of new bruises, all along the points where she had collided with the heavy planters. She felt woozy and her hearing was flattened and woolly from the concussion of the grenade blast. She could smell smoke and dirt and the cloying scent of crushed flowers.

The agent made it up to her knees and blinked; her optics were blurred like a poorly tuned video image, the delicate subsystems of the augmented eyes cycling through a reset mode. Her vision hazed from black and white to color, and she saw her pistol lying among a drift of broken window glass. Anna loped forward, and stooped to gather up her weapon, eyes darting around.

As her fingers tightened around the butt of the Mustang automatic, she felt a sharp jerk at her back that dragged her off balance. Kelso saw the hood of the stalled town car coming up to meet her and she brought up her hand just in time to block the new impact. Slipping down over the crumpled fender, cursing, she saw her assailant.

It was one of the figures from the car, dressed head to foot in black combat fatigues with a zip hood that closed like a mask over his face. The man was easily twice her

body mass, and protruding from the ends of his jacket sleeves were hands of dull machined metal. Her hearing was coming back by degrees, and she heard his combat boots crunching on the glass as the attacker balled a knot of her expensive Emile jacket between those steel fingers and hauled her off her feet. She struggled, but her arms felt like lead.

Blank eyes, shark-black and wet, measured her; this bastard was playing games, tossing her about like a rag doll—but now that was going to end, now he was going to kill her. The other hand came up and clamped around her bare neck and squeezed like a vise. Anna tried to scream, but the sound died in her throat, trapped there. A cascade of warning icons rained down across the inside of her eyes, fed from the implanted biomonitor tracking her vitals. She heard her bloodstream thundering in her ears.

The Mustang was heavy and dead in her grip. It was a block of iron, dragging her down. It took all her effort to lift it, her exertion ending in stifled gasps.

He saw the movement, and tried to deflect her, knock the gun away. Anna jerked the trigger by reflex and the pistol roared. The first discharge missed, but the muzzle flash flared bright across the killer's eye line and he snarled; for a moment his grip slackened and Kelso pushed away, turning. When she fired again, the round hit him at point-blank range through the base of his jaw. Her assailant dropped like a felled tree, trailing a stream of blood from the back of his head.

Anna went down with him, landing hard for the third time. She pushed away and came up in a crouch, turning away from the mess she'd made of him. A crawling, itchy

gale of static was gnawing at the base of her skull—she'd lost the mastoid comm from the blast. Putting the dead man out of her thoughts, she moved off, low and quick behind collapsed tables and fallen chairs, wincing with pain at each step.

There was thick smoke everywhere; all of Q Street was wreathed in it, the drifting haze of gray mist put out by the distraction grenades churning with the dark black pall from the burning limo. The rebreather implant in her chest stiffened; she'd use it if she needed to. A strident chorus of peeling car alarms was crying up and down the street, warning lights flashing. She glimpsed Connor lying at the curb, his torso a red ruin of bullet impacts. The agent's eyes were lifeless, staring into nothing.

Anna kept moving. The crackle of automatic rounds sounded nearby, and she heard someone call out. The words were lost to her, but she knew Matt Ryan's voice when she heard it. She could make out the vague shape of the SUV—he had to be there, with Skyler. The Secret Service's first priority was always to their principal, and Ryan would be doing everything he could to get the woman out of danger.

A figure moved in the smoke, and she called to it, stifling a cough. "Matt?"

The gunshot that answered her struck Anna in the gut and she cried out. Burning, white-hot agony seared her belly and she recoiled, stumbling against a low wall. Her legs turned to water and she slipped down, a blossom of stark crimson blooming across the white silk blouse beneath her jacket. The round had gone straight through the Kevlar undershirt and buried itself in the meat of her. The agony

was like nothing she had ever felt before. Her hands tightened into fists; her pistol was gone, spinning away out of reach. She felt a tightness in her chest as her biomonitor's active response system released protein threads into her bloodstream, racing to the source of the injury.

The SUV's engine rumbled, and the taillights glowed white as the gears shifted; they were going to get away, get Skyler to safety. Kelso felt panic rising in her thoughts. She was going to be left behind.

The haze was thinning, and for one random moment, a breath of clear air passed before her. She saw Byrnes and Ryan with Skyler between them—the senator was slack, semiconscious—trying to maneuver the woman into the back of the SUV and keep a watch for the assailants at the same time. Dansky was staggering after them, pressing a bloody kerchief to a nasty wound on his face.

Anna tried to get up, but the pain flared in her torso like another bullet hit, and it forced her back down. She was gasping for breath when she saw the figure again.

Like the one she had killed, he was broad and thickset—a linebacker profile, black-clad and lethal. He lacked the obvious cyberlimbs of the dead man, but he moved through the smoke without pause; he had to be tracking his targets with a thermographic implant. In the assailant's hand was a large frame automatic, the length of it doubled by a cylindrical silencer.

Dansky caught sight of the armed man and cried out; the gun replied with a metallic cough and the executive went down. Anna's heart hammered in her chest as she saw what would come next. She shouted Ryan's name,

the pain rising with it, and he turned toward the sound, pushing himself in front of Skyler to shield her from attack.

The next shots took Byrne in the throat and the face, ending him before he hit the asphalt. Ryan returned fire, his rounds going wide.

Anna's legs felt numb and unresponsive. She lurched forward, but the limbs were dead meat. The coppery stink of her own blood filled her nostrils and she gagged. She wanted to look away. She wanted to, but she couldn't.

The assailant went in for the kill and Ryan threw himself at the figure. There was a scuffle, and the agent tore open the zip hood. Kelso got a look at the face underneath—all fury and exertion, sallow and Nordic, with a shock of ice-blond hair. He clubbed Matt Ryan across the skull with the butt of the pistol, knocking him down. Then, with care, the killer took aim and ended him with a single shot.

Anna felt her friend die, the awful inevitability of it. She felt the horrific sense of the moment pass through her like an electric shock as Ryan crumpled into a nerveless heap and was still.

Everything about him, everything he was, the good, honest man who had done so much to help her...all of it gone in less than a second. Tears streamed down her dirty, bloodstained cheeks as she struggled to hold on to consciousness, her pain overwhelming everything. *It all seemed impossible, unreal...*

The killer halted for a long second, and she recognized the body language of someone conducting a sub-voc conversation. Then, very deliberately, he turned to examine Senator Skyler, where the woman lay half in and half out

of the SUV. She tried to hold up her hands to ward him off. In the distance, sirens were approaching.

Anna waited for the next shot, but it never came. Even with all the madness unfolding around her, confusion rose in her thoughts as the assailant walked away, leaving Skyler very much alive. Instead, he crossed to where Dansky was lying on the edge of the restaurant patio, and shot the man again.

Then he turned to look toward her, and once more Anna got a good look at the sharp angles of the man's face.

It was the last thing she saw, as the thundering in her ears grew loud and dragged her down toward blackness.

*The Grey Range—Queensland—Australia*

Saxon never felt the impact.

A split second before the veetol collided with the hillside, jets of shock foam flooded the cargo bay with gouts of yellowy matter, reeking of chemical stink. The fluid sprayed across him, the frothing mass instantly hardening as it made contact with the air. He gagged and coughed as some of the foam made it into his mouth, his nostrils. It enveloped his body, smothering him.

The aircraft crashed down and ripped itself to bits as it drew a long black gouge of scorched earth across the tree line, the wings and rotors shearing away in puffs of high-octane flame. Somebody was screaming.

The cockpit was crushed and the fuselage torn open. Inside, Saxon was slammed around his makeshift cushion, and for long seconds he teetered on the brink of losing consciousness. He grunted with the exertion of keeping himself awake, and with a final, tortured screech of stressed

metal, the wreck of the flyer tumbled to a halt, inverted, half buried in a drift of loose earth packed around the nose cone.

A wave of punishing heat pressed in on Saxon through the cowl of the solidified shock foam and he felt it running like molten wax under his hands. He dragged his left arm up through the mass and his fingers found the handle of the heavy jungle knife, lying in its holster atop his shoulder pad. The soldier lurched forward, cutting through the clogged restraint straps still holding him in his seat, then down through the thick foam-matter.

He used his right arm, his cyberarm, to peel back the curdled material. A gust of hot, putrid air washed over him. The cloying, sickly-sweet stench of burned flesh and the tang of spent aviation fuel made him cough and spit out a thick gobbet of bloody phlegm.

Fire beat at him; the cargo bay was open to the night on one side where an entire quadrant of the fuselage had peeled back off the *veetol's* skeletal airframe. The rest of the space was filled with black smoke and sheets of orange flame. Seats where men and women had been strapped in were now little more than charred, indefinable things. The smoke was thickening by the moment, and he wheezed, cursing, calling out their names as he sliced through the straps still holding him upside down. The knife cut the last and he dropped, falling badly. A shard of agony shot up from his right hip and he howled.

The flames were all around him now, and Saxon felt the hairs of his rough beard crisping with the heat. He stumbled forward, reaching for spars of broken steel, searching for a foothold to get him up and out of the wreckage. The metal was red-hot and he hissed in pain as it burned his palms

through his combat gloves. The smoke churned around him, clogging his lungs. It was leaching the life from him, dragging on him. His chest felt like it was full of razors.

Saxon gripped the fire-scorched spars and dragged himself up the side of the fuselage, ignoring the singing pain from the places where jagged swords of hull metal slashed his torso and his meat arm. Then he was out, falling into the dusty brown loam churned by the crash. He grasped for his canteen, and through some miracle it was still clipped to his gear belt. Saxon thumbed off the cap and swallowed a chug of water, only to cough it back up a second later. Panting, he staggered a few steps from the wreckage.

The tree-lined hill extended away, becoming steeper, falling to a fast-flowing creek bed a few hundred meters below. A black arrow of smoke was rising swiftly into the night air. There was little wind, so the line was like a marker pointing directly to the crash site.

He stopped, fighting down the twitches of an adrenaline rush and took stock, running the system check. Red lights joined the green, and there were more of them than he wanted to see.

He couldn't stay here. The drone that had shot them down would be vectoring back to scope the crash site, and if he was here when that happened . . .

Kano's face rose in his thoughts and Saxon swore explosively. He glared back at the burning *veetol*. *Am I the only one who survived?*

"Anyone hear me?" he called, his voice husky and broken. "Strike Six, sound off!"

At first he heard only the sullen crackle of the hungry

flames, but then a voice called out—wounded, but nearby. He turned toward it.

Pieces of hull were scattered over a copse of thin, broken trees, small fires burning in patches of spilled fuel. Saxon blinked his optic implants to their ultraviolet frequency setting and something made itself clear against the white-on-blue cast of the shifted image.

A hand flailed from underneath a wing panel, and he moved to it, crouching to put his shoulder under the long edge. Bracing against a boulder, Saxon forced it away and heard a moan of pain.

Sam Duarte looked up at him from the dirt, his tawny face a mess of scratches. The young mercenary's legs were blackened and twisted at unnatural angles; he'd likely been thrown clear of the veetol when it plowed through the trees, but the luck that saved him from being immolated had left him broken.

"*Jefe*..." he gasped. "You're bleeding."

"Later," Saxon said, and bent down to gather Duarte up, hauling him to his feet. The other man grunted with a deep hurt as he put weight on his right leg, and Saxon frowned. "Can you walk?"

"Not on my own," came the reply. "*Madre de dios*, where the hell did that drone come from?" Duarte looked around, blinking. "Where... Where's Kano and the others?"

Saxon could smell the burned meat stench on himself and he couldn't say the words; his silence was enough, though, and Duarte shook his head and crossed himself. "We have to move," said Saxon. "You got a weapon?"

The other man shook his head again, so Saxon drew the black-anodized shape of a heavy Diamondback .357

revolver from a holster on his belt, and pressed it into Duarte's hands. "That vulture, he'll be coming back," he said, checking the loads.

Saxon nodded, casting around, scanning the drift of wreckage. He'd lost his FR-27 in the crash, but the veetol had been carrying cases loaded with extra weapons for Operation Rainbird. He spotted one off to the side and made for it.

*Rainbird*. The mission had been blown before they even reached the target zone. Saxon's mind raced as he ran through the possibilities. Had they been compromised from the start? It was unlikely. Belltower's mercenary forces were the best paid in the world, and there was an unwritten rule that once you wore the bull badge, you were part of a brotherhood. The company did not tolerate traitors in the ranks. Belltower policed itself, often with lethal intensity.

He reached the case and tried the locks, but they were stuck fast. The knife came out again, and he worked the tip into the broken mechanism.

"The intel..." Duarte said out loud, his thoughts mirroring those of his squad leader. "The mission intel had to be bogus..."

"No," Saxon insisted.

"No?" Duarte echoed him, his tone changing, becoming more strident. "We had a clear highway, *jefe*! You saw the data. No drones for twenty miles."

The lock snapped and Saxon cracked the case. "Must've been a mistake..."

"Belltower intel never makes mistakes!" Duarte snapped, coughing. "That's what they always tell us!"

He tried to lurch forward on his one good leg. “Whatever happened, we’re screwed now . . .”

Saxon shot him an angry glare. “You secure that crap right now, *Corporal*,” he said, putting hard emphasis on the young man’s rank. “Just shut your mouth and do what I bloody well tell you to, and I promise I’ll get you back to whatever barrio rattrap you call home.”

Duarte sobered, and then gave a pained chuckle. “Hell, no. I joined up to get out of my barrio rattrap. I’ll settle for just getting away from *here*.”

“Yeah, I hear you.” Saxon dragged a bandolier of shells from the case and pulled a heavy, large-gauge shoulder arm from the foam pads inside. The G-87 was a grenade launcher capable of throwing out a half-dozen 40 mm high-explosive shells in a matter of seconds; the Americans called it “the Linebacker.” He cracked open the magazine and began thumbing the soda-can-size rounds into the feed. He was almost done when he heard the low whine of ducted rotors overhead.

“Incoming!” shouted Duarte, and the soldier stumbled toward a twist of wreckage.

Saxon looked up and shifted the optics to low-light, instantly painting the whole sky in shades of dark green and glittering white. He caught movement as something ungainly and fast wheeled and turned above them. The wings of the drone changed aspect and folded close to the spindly fuselage as it dove at them. Saxon glimpsed a ball festooned with glassy lenses tucked underneath the nose of the robot aircraft as it turned to single him out.

He broke into a run and vaulted away over fallen tree trunks just as the clattering hammer of heavy-caliber

bullets ripped into the place where he had been standing. Saxon rolled, hearing the deep report of the Diamondback as Duarte fired after the drone. The aircraft’s engine note throbbled and changed as it went up into a stall turn and came about.

“The trees,” Saxon shouted, working a dial on the grenade launcher. “Get to the trees. We stay in the open, we’ll be cut to shreds!”

Duarte didn’t reply; he just ran, as best he could, half-staggering, half-falling. Saxon looked up, finding the drone as it came hunting once more. He pulled the G-87 to his shoulder, almost aiming straight up, and squeezed the trigger. With a hollow grunt, the weapon discharged a shell in an upward arc. The dial set the grenade fuse for a half second, but even as the drone passed over him, Saxon knew he had misjudged the shot. The shell exploded and the robot flyer bucked from the near hit, but maintained its dive.

His blood ran cold as the aircraft put on a burst of speed and fell toward Duarte, like a cheetah zeroing in on a wounded gazelle. “Sam!”

The soldier twisted and raised the revolver, the bright stab of discharge from the muzzle flaring in the low-light optics. The heavy cannon, slung in a conformal pod along the length of the drone’s ventral fuselage, opened up with a sound like a jackhammer—and Sam Duarte was torn apart in a puff of white.

“*Bastard!*” Saxon rose from cover, screaming his fury at the machine as it looped and turned inbound once more, preparing to finish the job at hand. He broke out and ran as fast as he could toward the steeper slope where the

trees were denser, the grenade launcher bouncing against his chest, his every breath a ragged, gasping effort. The cannon started up again as he reached the perimeter of the tree line, and Saxon turned as he ran, mashing the trigger. The remaining three rounds in the magazine chugged into the air one after another, exploding barely a heartbeat apart at a height just above the canopy. The drone's delicate sensors were blinded by the flashes and the scattering of shrapnel, and it lost its target. The flyer drifted off course and clipped a tall tree; in seconds it was spinning and coming apart, shredding into a new firestorm of burning metal.

The detonation sent Saxon sprawling and he lost his footing. The soldier slipped over the lip of the hill and tumbled headfirst down the steep, crumbling face, bouncing hard. Unable to arrest his descent, he fell pinwheeling over the edge and into the muddy waters of the creek below.

*Washington Hospital Center—Washington, D.C.—United States of America*

Sensation returned to her by degrees, assembling itself piece by piece, line by line. She had the sense of being in a bed, the cotton sheets pressing against her legs, the prickly feel of the mattress cloth beneath. Her lips were cold and dry, a steady breath of oxygen flowing from a plastic mask resting on her face. Anna felt worn and old, broken and twisted. Her body seemed dislocated from her; she expected pain. Why wasn't there any pain?

With difficulty, she turned her head on the pillow beneath it and felt warmth on her face. Licking her lips,

she tried to speak, but all that emerged was a hollow gasp. It was dark all around her, a strange dimensionless void that she couldn't grasp.

Then footsteps, people nearby. A voice. "Anna? Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Okay, just lie still. You're in the hospital. Try not to move."

The oxygen mask was pulled away and she licked her lips. "Why...is it dark?"

"Okay, nurse, thank you." Someone else coughed and she heard the familiar shuffle of expensive Italian loafers, a door closing. "Hey, Anna. It's me, Ron. I'm here with Hank Bradley from Division. Just take it easy."

"Ron?" Agent-in-Charge Ronald Temple was Kelso's supervisor, a decent guy with a long career in the Secret Service. She hadn't expected to hear him. "What's wrong?"

"Agent Kelso..." The next voice was Bradley's. Anna didn't know the man as well as Temple, just by hearsay and reputation as something of a hard ass; he was a senior agent working liaison with the Secret Service and the Department of Justice. His presence underlined the gravity of what had happened. "I'm afraid we had to take your eyes."

"What?" Her hand automatically reached upward. Pads of gauze covered her face, and in a sickening moment of understanding, she realized that the orbits of her skull were empty. Something hard and plastic protruded through the bandages from one of the sockets.

"We can't talk like this. Wait a second." Bradley came closer and Anna heard the whisper of a cable uncoiling.