

1

What Tommy Had Done

Tommy Stojack had supplied weapons to a psychopathic female assassin called the Wolf.

That's what Tommy had done.

The Wolf had been at the center of Evan's last mission. The Wolf had attempted to kill Evan with a .357 Magnum revolver and a Savage 110 sniper rifle and an SUV with an unyielding front bumper. She had shot a father in the head in his own home and had tried and tried again to put a sniper round through the critical mass of his orphaned seventeen-year-old daughter after failing to garrote her with a zip tie. Through all of that and more, the Wolf had been armed by Tommy.

That's what Tommy had done.

The man who'd coaxed into Evan's stone-hardened heart the first faint heartbeat of trust since Jack Johns had plucked him from that desolate rest stop on the side of the highway in Evan's twelfth year.

NEMESIS

The man who'd shone a ray of friendship into Evan's shadow-eclipsed soul.

The man with whom Evan had walked the past decade and a half at some distance but together, who'd manufactured his guns and field-tested his weapons and provided crotchety remote backup on his missions.

A dead father. An orphaned seventeen-year-old. A betrayal of what Evan had thought was a shared code.

That's what Tommy had fucking done.

Since Evan had deserted the Orphan Program, he had operated as the Nowhere Man, a pro bono assassin devoted to helping the powerless and terrorized. There'd been precisely one person he'd been able to count on for the entirety of that time.

Not anymore.

At the moment it was less than helpful for these thoughts to be cycling through Evan's head with white-hot OCD compulsion. Not when he was nestled into bushes outside a heavily armed Hancock Park house nearly big enough to be called a mansion, his face darkened from a loam paint stick, superglue glazing his fingertips to obscure prints, suppressed matte-black ARES 1911 in hand.

This was not the time to be musing about Tommy. Or the weapons he'd supplied to the Wolf. Or the purpling face of Jayla Hill, the seventeen-year-old Evan had held in his arms as she'd gasped for breath. Or the slit through Jayla's trachea, the splatter of blood across her face. Or the fact that his own supposed friend had indirectly broken the Eighth Commandment: *Never kill a kid*, and directly violated the Tenth: *Never let an innocent die*.

Evan had already scaled the spiked wrought-iron gate and waited now, tucked into the shrubbery, twenty-four meters off the front of the unlit house-mansion, twenty-three if the Angeleno darkness was screwing with his internal range finder. Night blooming jasmine perfumed the air and as anyone familiar with night-blooming jasmine understood, "perfumed" wasn't too fancy a word for it.

A crunch of movement issued from the blackness of the wrap-around front porch. Evan thumbed off the ambidextrous safety, but he couldn't make out the source and couldn't risk reaching for his night-vision headset. Three hours ago, as dusk had filtered into

What Tommy Had Done

nightfall, he'd surveilled the property from atop a telephone pole one long block over. He noted the movements of each of the four hired guns—which one walked with a shuffle of the left foot, which one took smoke breaks every quarter hour, which one scratched at his dandruff, which one was close protection. For obvious reasons, Stavros's house-mansion was under extra-heavy security tonight.

Evan's brain clicked back to Tommy. Certainly Evan had other associates with shady intentions and deadly intent. But they'd never crossed his missions. People had been murdered on Evan's watch with Tommy's weapons. Was he supposed to just forget that? Was he supposed to make this the only time in his life he didn't trace a threat to its source and uproot it? If he allowed a crack in his code, he had no idea what else might leak through, widen the gap, and surge into a torrent.

The snick of a match on the porch.

Evan waited.

The flame flared and rose.

A glimpse of a downbent face, the crackle of a cigarette breathed to life.

Then just the cherry floating in total darkness five feet and eleven inches off the ground.

Evan lined the high-profile tritium Straight Eight sights ten inches below—*pfft pfft*—and the cigarette twirled away in a streak of sparks, and then came the pleasing sound of crumpling meat and laundry hitting wooden planks.

He rolled from cover, tucking up against one of the porch columns, a fluted Ionic monstrosity befitting the home of a shipping magnate with deep syndicate connections and delusions of Old Country grandeur. A slight lean gave Evan a decent vantage of the bowed balcony rails directly above.

On the last mission, Evan had saved Jayla Hill despite Tommy's best hardware and the Wolf's best efforts. Every time he finished a mission, he asked the person he'd just helped to find someone else in dire straits and to pass on the number to his encrypted phone: 1-855-2-NOWHERE.

That helped his clients transform from victim to rescuer.

In less than two weeks, Jayla had identified his next Nowhere

NEMESIS

Man mission. On a follow-up visit to her otolaryngologist at Cedars, she'd come across a distraught woman, Neva Alonso, surrounded by police officers in the lobby of the pediatric ward. Neva had been hysterical, barely able to render a report.

Jayla had waited, followed the woman home, earned her trust, and passed on the secret phone number.

So here he was.

Fully operational, in the red-hot center of a mission, and yet his mind remained stubbornly fixated on Tommy. These past weeks, Evan had forgone comms with his former friend and ally, performing his own weapon checks, oiling his Strider knife, cleaning his pistols, running bore brushes down his shotgun barrels. Though he field-tested his magazines regularly, it was time for a fresh batch, but he'd put off heading to Tommy's armorer den in Las Vegas to pick them up.

He'd been avoiding Tommy's face, knowing the unspoken conflict between them would ignite when they next squared off. Evan had countless skills for countless varieties of conflict and clashes, but with—what was it? intimacy?—in the mix, he was unsure.

Or afraid?

Afraid of what?

Of how he might *feel*?

How ridiculous was that?

From above came a creak of decking and then the *scritch-scratch* of the dandruffed guard. A shadow moved into view, the guard resting his hands on the railing, and Evan leaned out farther from the preposterous Greek column and fired upward.

Against the faint backlighting of the stars, he saw a spray leap toward heaven. A grunt, a topple, and then the guard piledrived into the hydrangeas by Evan's feet.

At some stage of the last mission, Tommy had known that his hardware was putting Evan's clients at risk, that his specialized weapons had even been used in multiple attempts to kill Evan.

And he hadn't spoken up.

That was a declaration of war by omission, wasn't it?

Evan was inside the house-mansion now, having used a diamond pick to make the spool pins of the front-door lock dance into

What Tommy Had Done

alignment. Instead of a foyer, there was a gallery lined with resin sculptures of Greek gods, Poseidon featured most prominently as befitted the owner's profession and ego.

Evan had just drifted inside; he hadn't checked corners.

He did so now, a full two seconds too late.

This level of distraction was untenable. It put the current mission in jeopardy of failing.

Dark of face, firm of grip, he drifted through the gallery, the gods flanking his progress from either side.

Stavros would be awake and waiting.

Tonight was his big night.

Two guards remained, one tall and slender, the other tall and as wide as a deep freezer.

Evan heard footfall in the adjoining hall, the padding of boots. Radio silence of the first two guards must have drawn notice. The steps were inconsistent, one crisp, one shushing across the Thasos marble in a slight limp. The slender guard, then.

If Tommy had in fact declared war by omission, that had to be answered, didn't it? Evan had to confront him no matter what emotional complications that might produce.

In the middle of the gallery, he struck a flawless isosceles stance, raised his ARES, and waited for the lanky guard to limp into his sights. A few more steps and he surged into view, his head framed beautifully by Hades' two-pronged staff. Evan took a micro-moment to appreciate the Jungian synchronicity of dispatching a man by shooting him through the bident of the god of the underworld. Then he exhaled smoothly and pressed the trigger—*pfft*.

Moving swiftly now, Evan swept past the guard as he was still falling, dumping another two rounds into his chest—*pfft pfft*—for good measure.

Six rounds burned. The ARES held eight in the mag and one in the chamber. Evan had Stavros and the deep-freezer guard left. Stavros would be easy given his state, but the big man's muscle mass would eat up rounds. While the 1911 had decent stopping power, Evan couldn't let his luck ride on three bullets.

His Original S.W.A.T.s skimmed silently across the marble. Hustling up the next hall, he extracted a full backup mag from

NEMESIS

the concealed pocket at his right hip, lifted it adjacent to the still-loaded partial mag, and ejected the partial into his waiting palm.

It snagged on the lip of the well.

A slight hitch on the drop, which from feel and habit he guessed was caused by a tiny burr lifted from the top right corner of the magazine tube between the catch notch and the opening.

A half-second delay.

A half-second was the difference between this side of the dirt and the other. One of Jack's Unofficial Rules stood Voltaire on his head: *Good is the enemy of the great.*

Feet blurring, breath low and steady, Evan stripped the mag free and instinctively added the repair to a mental task list: *Replenish mags from Tommy.*

The thought escaped him before awareness could catch up but when it did, it came like a gut punch.

His weaponry was a part of him, and that meant Tommy was a part of him, too. And now he'd have to lop that part off and trust someone else to supply and service his weapons. For Evan, trust was not easy.

Three-fourths of a second had passed now. He was unsettled but could not spare a moment to reset himself.

Head down, swapping the clean mag, shoving it north.

His momentum carried him around the turn toward the back hall of the house, and his gaze rose from the union of his fists around the Micarta checkered grips and aluminum receiver, noting only now, too late, the massive form before him aiming a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun directly at his forehead.

Evan froze, pistol still aimed ineptly, unforgivably, somewhere at the junction of the ceiling and the wall at his ten o'clock.

Evan said, "Oops."

The big bores of the twelve-gauge gaped at Evan. The deep freezer grinned, gave a quick jerk of the barrel. "Why don't you step into Stavros's office? He's waiting for you."

Stavros looked like hell.

Baggy jaundiced skin, a prodigious gut that bulged outward to sit heavily across his thighs, ankles swollen to bell-bottom propor-

What Tommy Had Done

tion. He sat stuffed into a distressed leather armchair, wearing it like a carapace. He was shirtless, his hairy torso mottled with blots and bruises, too-small athletic shorts showing the marbled wreckage of his legs. Dry flaky skin, bright yellow sclera, white paste gumming at the corners of his mouth.

The office smelled of stool, sweat, and urine. Photographs in dark wooden frames wallpapering the room showed Stavros in younger days and slighter form beside various leaders and celebrities, the one constant his openmouthed “this guy” finger-point at his companions. Medical supplies were scattered everywhere—snapped-off latex gloves, bedpans, vials and orange pill bottles scattered across the leather desk blotter at his side. Syringes overflowed a red sharps container. IV in his arm, oxygen feeding his nostrils, rattling breath finding resonance in the bulging prow of his chest.

Across from Stavros, Evan sat in a much smaller chair. The guard loomed at his back, from time to time tapping the nape of his neck with the shotgun muzzle, no doubt concerned he’d be forgotten. He was standing so close Evan could make out the tip of his size-sixteen boot.

Stavros’s voice came as a great-cat purr. “Who are you?”

Evan shrugged.

The guard prodded the back of Evan’s head with the shotgun.

Evan said, “No one.”

“And yet you know me.”

Again Evan did not answer. Again he was prompted by steel.

“Yes,” he said.

Stavros’s amused rumble of a laugh deteriorated into a coughing fit. “You come here in judgment.” A wave of his monstrous hand to Evan’s 1911, which the guard had placed on the desk at Stavros’s side. “With your little gun.”

“It’s not *that* little,” Evan said.

“I am to assume you know about tonight’s proceedings?”

The Strider knife in Evan’s front left pocket pressed into the top of his thigh. The deep freezer had been overconfident in his girth, shotgun, and frisking abilities. “I do.”

“And you find it”—Stavros’s tongue poked out, tasting the air—“distasteful.”

NEMESIS

“‘Distasteful’ is too meek a word for what I think.”

“Hardly worth making a fuss,” Stavros said. “Nice room upstairs, well cared for, won’t know a thing. I’m not a savage.”

“No?”

“You hold that I am not within my rights?” A wheezing breath. “My name, it is derived from *stauros*, the Christian cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified.”

Evan said, “Impressive.”

Stavros crossed himself Orthodox-style, right to left, thumb joined with the first two fingers, the others close to the palm. “That means I am worthy of making sacrifices.”

“Ah,” Evan said. “An allegorical justification.”

The retort brought another tap of the double-barreled shotgun from behind. Evan let it tilt his head more than necessary so he could steal a backward glance. The tang-mounted safety was still engaged.

Stavros flared sausage fingers. “I am also immensely significant in my own right.”

Evan said, “Huh.”

Stavros tried to lean forward but his gut would not allow it and he settled back, winded. “Do you have any idea how powerful I am?”

“Yes, I do,” Evan said. “You’re the third-most-powerful person in this room.”

He waited for the shove of the muzzle into the back of his head.

There it was, right on cue.

He seized the barrels with his right hand, jerking the shotgun aside as he rolled off the chair, left hand already grabbing for the Strider, hooking the shark fin atop the blade on the corner of his pocket to snap the knife open.

The guard stumbled forward, his substantial weight tugging him into a fall, and Evan cleared the chair away with a kick and stabbed him three times up the right side through the rib cage—*tap tap tap*—hitting a trifecta of key organs.

The guard hit the floorboards hard, leading with his chin, which knocked him out cold, a stroke of compassion since it would have

What Tommy Had Done

taken his brain at least a few excruciating minutes to figure out what had happened.

Evan stood facing Stavros. "Now you're the second."

Stavros gasped and tilted forward, trying for the 1911 on the desk.

Evan watched him.

Stavros's catcher's-mitt hand knocked the pistol farther away and he tumbled from the chair onto the beautifully woven kilim. His face mashed into the earth-toned wool, the fulcrum of his enormous distended belly tilting him forward onto his chest. He made muffled noises into the carpet.

He lay there, suffocating, his chest unable to expand beneath his own crushing weight.

Evan reclaimed his ARES. Crouched near Stavros's head. He'd managed to tilt his face slightly so one straining eye peered pleadingly at Evan.

He wheezed into the carpet.

That yellow eye stared at Evan.

Evan stared back at it.

It blinked and blinked, tears clinging to the lashes.

A subconjunctival hemorrhage leaked through the sclera, red bleeding through yellow.

Stavros was trying to speak but his lips remained mashed to the floor. He made a sputtering noise and then was still.

Evan rose from his crouch.

He walked out of the study and through the quiet hallways to the base of the cherrywood stairs.

The doorbell rang—the Westminster Chime melody. Classy.

Evan walked back through the gallery of tacky statuary and opened the door.

A nervous man in blue scrubs stood on the porch. Late-middle-aged, round glasses, old-fashioned doctor's bag. At his side stood a burly nurse a decade younger with a septum pierce and buzz-cut hair died in orange and purple swirls. Behind them a mobile medical Sprinter van idled.

To the side of the porch, barely visible in the darkness, the leg

NEMESIS

of the fallen guard poked up barely into view among the hydrangeas. This amused Evan darkly.

"Listen," the sweaty little doctor said, "get the others. We have a lot of unloading to do and we still have to prep and sterilize the theater."

Evan shot him in the face—*pfft*—swung his arm a foot and a half to the right, and shot the nurse through his gaping mouth—*pfft*—and chest for good measure—*pfft*.

Leaving the door ajar, he withdrew once again to the stairs.

At the base, he drew in a deep breath. He reloaded the 1911 with a fresh magazine and then gingerly unscrewed the still-warm suppressor and secured it in a thigh cargo pocket. With one fluid motion, he swept aside his shirt with the baseplate of the ARES magazine, seating the pistol into the appendix carry holster and securing the shirt's magnetic buttons *click, click, click* as he had thousands of repetitions before.

He ascended to the second floor.

Walked quietly along the corridor.

The third door on the left was locked. From the *outside*.

He hesitated, unsure what he might find within.

Steady breath in, steady breath out.

He unbolted the door and swung it open.

The room was jarringly bright and nicely decorated. A queen bed with a princess canopy and a yellow-and-blue quilt. A cheery circular rag rug. Dolls of all shapes and sizes, a rocking horse, and a plastic kitchen with play pots and pans.

A girl sat in the middle of the rug, playing with Lincoln Logs.

Querida Alonso, eight years old, universal blood type negative, healthy two-pound liver just big enough to harvest.

Neva's daughter.

"Querida?"

She looked alarmed.

"Oh," Evan said. "My face. That's just makeup. Like baseball players wear."

Querida nodded. Smooth skin, big brown eyes, her hair taken up high in a ponytail spout. She was wearing a yellow dress two sizes too big for her.

What Tommy Had Done

"May I come in?"

She nodded again.

Evan took a few slow steps forward. The girl did not flinch.

He nodded at the Lincoln Logs. He kept his voice soft, so soft.

"What are you building?"

"My house," she said.

Evan took another step toward her and lowered himself onto his knees, making himself smaller. "Are you okay?"

The girl shrugged. "I miss Mamá. They said I had to come here. Like for camp. They said this is what she wanted. But I don't understand why she didn't just say so herself."

"I don't think this is what she wanted," Evan said. "I think it was a misunderstanding."

The girl added some green split logs to the roof.

"Did anyone hurt you?"

She shook her head. "But they won't let me leave. Or call Mamá."

She had matching dimples in her cheeks and her lashes were long and curled. He pictured the man lying downstairs on the worn carpet, a man who'd been ready to absorb this child, to slice her open, part her out, and discard what was left so as to leave no evidence.

Evan's distraction had nearly left her to that fate.

His focus, judgment, and gear had been compromised by his rift with Tommy.

If he'd wound up with his gray matter spattered on Stavros's office wall, that was one thing. But what his failure would have cost Querida and Neva was unacceptable.

Observing the girl's delicate wrists, the way she chewed her bottom lip with focus as she lowered another plastic log into place, he replayed the closeness of the miss. On his knees before her, he felt penitent. This child deserved perfection from him.

That was it, then.

He'd deliver this child to her mother. He'd ask Neva to find someone else to pass his number on to, someone else in need of the kind of help that only he could provide.

And then?

He'd deal with it.

NEMESIS

He'd deal with Tommy.

"Your *mamá* sent me to get you," Evan said. "Would you like to leave?"

A vehement nod.

"I'm gonna ask you one favor, okay? I want you to keep your eyes closed until we are out on the street."

"How'm I supposed to know where to go?"

"I could hold your hand. Or I could carry you."

She scrunched up her face, thinking. Then she shot her arms up, straight at the elbows.

Something twisted inside Evan's chest, drawing pain.

He scooped her up.

She closed her eyes and nuzzled into his side, legs clamped above his hip, arms around his shoulders, forehead at his neck. He kept his forearm beneath her bottom. Her breath came feather-soft against his oft-broken collarbone.

He moved smoothly down the stairs.

Eased around the fallen guard in the hall of statues.

The front door remained open as he'd left it.

Holding Querida tight, he knuckled the keypad button mounted by the sidelight window. Out in the darkness, the wrought-iron gate started to rattle open.

He stepped over the body of the doctor, toed the nurse's arm out of the way, and carried the girl to safety.