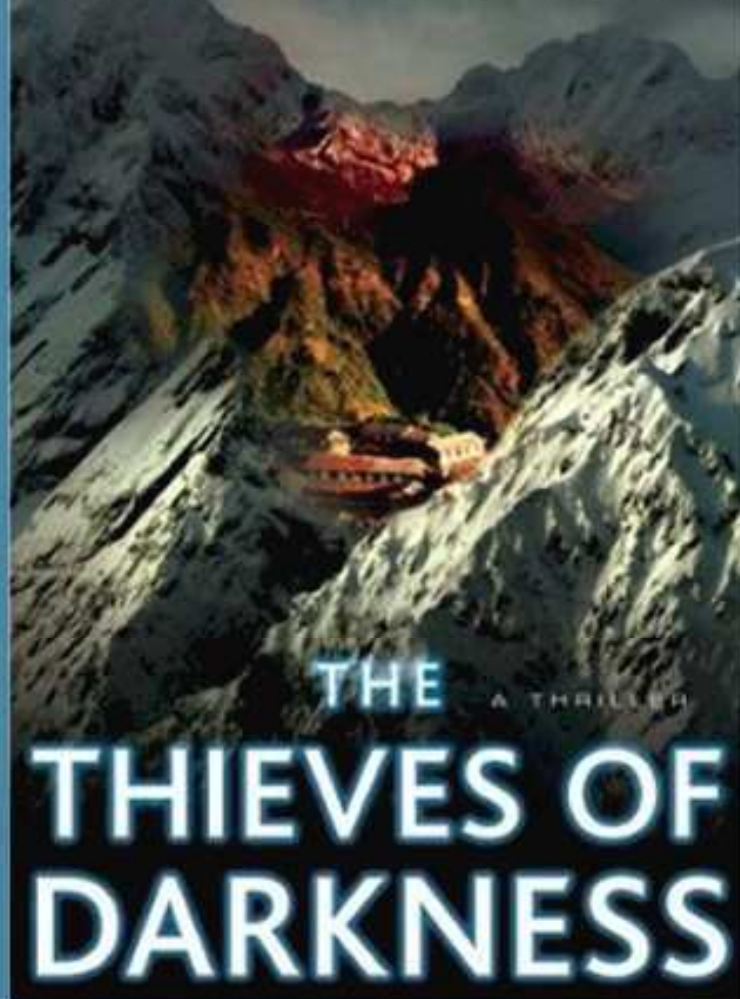


AUTHOR OF THE 13TH HOUR
RICHARD DOETSCH



CHAPTER 1

The gale-force wind whipped back Michael's hair, buffeting his clothes, rippling his cheeks. His body was prone, his arms and legs extended to control his fall. It had been five seconds since he left the safety of the plane and Michael was already at the terminal free-fall velocity of 120 miles per hour.

Michael glanced at the altimeter on his wrist, watching the numbers fall toward his deployment height of four thousand feet. Though comfortable with skydiving, he was never foolish; he didn't want to deal with that fatal free-fall injury, SDT: sudden deceleration trauma—what some people called hitting the ground.

Michael pulled the rip cord; his chute fluttered out of his para-pack and jerked him to a halt. The parafoil spread above him, capturing the air and guiding it across its airfoils, allowing Michael to control his descent and direction as if he were flying.

Every time he released his chute he said a little prayer and made sure he could easily reach the hook knife that dangled at his side. Though he packed his chute himself, he dreaded becoming entangled, having to cut away his main chute in time to deploy his reserve. He knew it was rarely the novice who was killed skydiving; more often than not, it was the overconfident expert.

He gripped the guidance handles of his parafoil and directed himself toward the far edge of the outcropping. The prison sat upon a ledge that was more akin to a Wyoming mesa than an Akbiquistan mountain. The lights of Chiron Prison were the sole sign of civilization for fifty miles. It was an imposing structure, seeming to grow out of the earth, out of hell itself. There was no barbed wire, razor wire, or fences. Its location and height served that purpose far more effectively. At three thousand feet, surrounded by desert, the prisoners would be imposing their own death if they attempted escape.

The half moon on the cloudless night painted the world blue, softening the sharp rock outcroppings, dyeing the desert so it appeared as comforting as the sea.

Michael landed softly on the far edge of the mesa, a quarter mile from the prison. He immediately pulled in and balled up his chute, removing the chute's container harness and tucking it under a tree. He unclipped the black sack off the front of his chest, knelt on the ground, and opened it.

He removed two 9mm Sig Sauer—oiled and holstered—and affixed them to his body. Michael hated guns; he had never used them until Simon taught him how and even then it was always with great reluctance. He had become proficient only through necessity, and he much preferred his knife. But coming into a prison alone, against a group of armed guards, he had no choice.

He pulled out two small backpacks: BASE jump chutes. Different from the chute he'd just worn, these were designed with a small primer release chute that would be deployed by hand from a low altitude.

He extracted three blocks of C-4. He tucked a timer remote in two of them and stuffed the other block in his pocket. He opened the side pouch and removed a small electrical box, a frequency jammer that would render not only portable radios but all cell phones useless.

Michael had stolen art, he had stolen diamonds, he had stolen keys and golden boxes, but he had never done something like this. Tonight he was stealing his friend back from a death sentence.

Michael worked his way around the perimeter of the prison. There were no guards on patrol, no guards on the battlements, just two teams poised in the north and east three-story towers who were probably more interested in the World Cup soccer match being played on their small TVs.

He looked at the hundred-yard stretch of barren land in front of the prison, his line of sight following the rocky terrain toward the cliff's edge. He confirmed the lack of obstacles and the moon shadow provided by the

penitentiary to his rear. If they could survive the ten-second run without being shot, they just might make it.

Michael pulled out a small block of C-4 and buried it at the south base of the prison, the red LED barely glowing through the dirt.

Michael fell back behind the prison and walked a half mile to the power station, the loud whine of its generators echoing off the prison and surrounding terrain. Utility lines and electrical power were still foreign words in this remote section of the country. Chiron's desolate location forced them to generate their own power, using gas-driven generators. The electricity was used to power the prison's minimal lighting, radios, satellite phones, and guard-tower searchlights, which were turned on only in the event of an escape attempt. But first and foremost, the generated electricity ensured the comfort of the warden.

The fuel depot contained two five-thousand-gallon tanks that were filled once every two months by a trucker who was paid triple wages to drive up the narrow mountain pass. He was always paid in advance, since the money in his pocket kept him focused as he drove past the hulking charred remains of his predecessors' fuel trucks that littered the valley below.

Michael carefully affixed a small block of C-4 to the first fuel tank and triple-checked the remote. He crept over to the generator and found the main electrical panel. He picked the lock almost as quickly as if he were using a key. He found the main breaker, and without hesitation, flipped it off. The lights of the prison immediately blinked out. Michael closed the panel, affixed the lock, and fell back into the shadows.

It was five minutes before the flashlights of the guards could be seen, bouncing with their approach. Michael watched as two guards came into view, their cigarettes glowing in the night. He couldn't hear them over the whine of the still-running generators, but watched as they unlocked the panel, flipped the switch, and restored the power.

Michael waited until they were back in the prison, reopened the panel, and, once again, flipped off the lights. This time, the two guards walked fast, the

anger about being interrupted once again evident in their stride. Michael quickly worked his way around, directly across from the prison door they exited, and waited as they reset the system once again. Michael watched their return. The lead guard removed the key ring from his waist, opened the door, and disappeared inside, the door slamming shut behind him.

Michael went back to the generator, shut off the power again, and hid within the shadows.

It took them ten minutes to arrive this time, their curses easily audible above the generator's roar. They were so lost in their exasperation they never saw Michael two feet away in the dark.

The bullets passed through and erased the anger from the guards' minds; both were dead before they hit the ground.

Michael quickly holstered his pistol, bent, and stripped them of their guns, keys, and radios. He took the lead guard's jacket and hat, put them on, and headed for the prison.

MICHAEL SLIPPED THE key in the side door of the prison. A sudden chill ran through him; he hated prisons more than anything in life. To him it was like having one foot in hell. He had spent three years at Sing Sing a few years back and still had nightmares.

He shook off the feeling and refocused, opened the door, and stepped into the square, dungeonlike room. A raw smell hung in the air. There were only two pieces of furniture: a table and a chair that sat directly across from each other. The floor was slightly sloped toward the middle, where a lone drain sat, from which dark stains radiated outward toward the furniture. Michael looked more closely at the two pieces. They were both rough-hewn, made of thick heavy wood, and were marred by a pungent dark residue. Michael took two stumbling steps back as he realized they were stained with death. The heavy table bore the scars of countless beheadings, and the electric chair ... Michael could see the scorch marks on its arms and back.

Michael quickly exited the horrific room and stepped into a hall that he supposed could loosely be called death row. In Michael's mind, death row was a term that encompassed this entire prison. This corridor, though, was designed for those who were next in line. From the little that Michael had seen of Chiron, he thought it might be the least cruel exit.

Michael's quickly gathered intel told of the prison's lack of funds, which manifested itself in the absence of roaming guards. He knew that the prison's operation was two small steps above chaos and the guards' attention to duty would be compromised by bitterness and anger, as their treatment was only slightly better than that of their captives. The idea of a breakout would be met with laughter, and therefore, Michael knew, the last thing they would consider was someone breaking in.

Michael quietly walked down the hall, his ears attuned to sounds and movement. His heart raced as the adrenaline pumped through his veins, but where he usually took pleasure in breaching security, now he found himself filled with trepidation and fear, for he had no idea of Simon's condition. If he was hurt, Michael would have to carry him out; it wouldn't be like some artifact that he could abandon, some piece of art he could drop on the ground to steal back another day.

Michael worked his way down the hall and looked through the small slotted window set in the middle of a heavy, solid wood door. The cell was small, shadow-filled, the smell of human waste acrid in the air. And it was empty. Michael continued down the hall; there were ten such doors, and the first six cells were vacant. He came to the seventh and peered through the small, barred opening. A figure sat on the floor, back to the wall. Michael could barely make out the silhouette.

"Simon?" Michael whispered.

The figure's head jerked up in surprise, cautiously turning. Not a word was said as the shadowed figure rose and approached the door.

As Michael looked through the small opening, he realized this wasn't Simon. The person was shorter, the shoulders less broad. Michael lifted his small

penlight, flicked it on, and shone it into the cell. As the dirty hair was cleared from the face, Michael could finally see the eyes staring back. They looked at him with a mix of emotion: fear and anger, shame and rage. Their emerald-green color was muted by circumstance.

Michael's heart plummeted, his mind spun into confusion by the unexpected sight of the woman before him, the woman who sat on death row, the woman he had held in his arms less than two weeks ago.

Michael was left speechless as he stared into KC's eyes.

SIXTY-THREE HOURS EARLIER, KC had stared into the dark recess of a two-by-two-foot wall safe. She stood in the middle of a top-floor office in Amsterdam, the midnight world dark around her. The room was lavishly appointed: Hancock & Moore chairs and tables, antique Persian rugs, priceless Expressionist artwork, the latest electronics.

On her head she wore a small headband, its central pinlight illuminating the open wall safe before her. In her hand she clutched a yellowed letter encased in clear plastic. It was impossibly old, its black handwritten lettering having bled into the paper's creases. Written in Turkish, it was indecipherable to her but for intertwined symbols of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that appeared in the uppermost corner.

She handed the letter to Simon, who quickly ran it over a portable scanner that was attached to his cell phone, sending the image back to his office in Italy.

KC carefully closed the safe door, careful not to trip the alarm system that she had so expertly overridden fifteen minutes earlier. She rehung the picture over the safe door and straightened out the bric-a-brac and curios that sat on the shelf below.

She had turned to leave when her eyes fell on the painting hanging on the wall nearest the desk. It was called *The Suffering*, by Goetia, a masterpiece painted in 1762, at the height of the artist's career, just after the death of his wife. KC knew it well, probably better than any painting on earth. She had

researched its trail of ownership, the artist's biography and mental state, the type of paint used, the canvas it was created upon. She had become an expert in all things Goetia, as *The Suffering* was the first thing she had ever stolen and sold on the black market.

Her mind spun and she stared at Simon.

"What?" Simon said, seeing her concern.

"I stole that painting ten years ago," KC said as her eyes darted around the room. "We've got to get out of here, now."

Simon pulled out a preaddressed and stamped envelope as he ran out of the office. He stuffed the plastic-encased letter inside, raced to the lobby, and shoved it down the mail chute.

KC was already at his side. "Do you think this was a setup?"

Simon stared at her. "Absolutely not, I—"

But before he could finish, the elevator pinged open, its interior lights off. Three guards burst out, while two men remained in the shadows of the dark cab, silently watching as Simon and KC surrendered. And though KC couldn't see their faces, she knew exactly who the shorter man was. It wasn't just his silhouette that confirmed it, it was the change in the air, a feeling of dread she hadn't known since she was a teenager.

BARABAS AZEM AUGURAL, the warden of Chiron, sat in his apartment on the uppermost floor of the prison. It was a twenty-five-hundred-square-foot space whose décor stood in sharp contrast not only to the prison but to the desert kingdom as a whole.

The walls were paneled, covered in art and mirrors; the furnishings were elegant and refined—deep suede couches, wingback chairs upholstered in silk. The view out the large windows was of the desert world, its moonlit sand and rocks rolling to the horizon. The room was cool, in sheer defiance of the weather, but the humidity was already seeping in. Barabas cursed the

generator. If it was broken it would take weeks to fix, and he refused to tolerate anything short of his accustomed comfort.

It had been ten minutes since Jamer and Hank had gone to reset the power plant for the third time this evening. He knew he should have done it himself. There was not a soul in this prison above the desert who possessed an ounce of intelligence, himself excluded, of course.

He had risen through the ranks of the Akbiquestan army, achieving the rank of colonel through hard work, bribery, and the elimination of the one general who disapproved of his inhumane tendencies. Barabas had retired with a full pension and a full bank account courtesy of his innovative, capitalistic acumen and his ability to blackmail and strong-arm the people and country he had sworn to protect. He had accepted the job as warden for Chiron, as it provided the perfect haven from which to run his varied enterprises, including "disappearing" people—some of whom didn't come through the judicial system—into the bowels of their cells and eventually their unmarked graves.

Barabas shone his flashlight about his apartment, found his radio, and thumbed the talk button. "Jamer!" he shouted. "If you don't get the power back on in the next thirty seconds, don't bother coming back."

He waited for a reply but nothing came.

"Jamer?" Barabas didn't have a slow build to anger; he was already fuming. Anyone who didn't snap to, anyone who crossed him always paid the price. And Jamer would be paying the highest. But then he recalled the fear in which his men held him. They knew his lack of hesitation in putting a bullet through the head of an underling and tossing his body into the valley. They knew his wartime reputation for slaughtering the innocent for a bottle of vodka. Jamer was his second in command, and if he wasn't answering, he wasn't capable of answering.

Barabas went to his closet and quickly dressed in his fatigues, cursing the two guards the entire time. He grabbed his pistol, radio, and flashlight and headed out the door.

THE GUARDS HAD been lulled into passivity. The triple loss of power had clouded their minds to suspicion, all thinking that the weather had finally taken its toll on the generator's overused circuits. Most of them actually welcomed the dark—no one would be the wiser to their nodding off in the 105-degree heat.

They collectively smiled as they heard Barabas's anger on their radios. Though none of them voiced their opinion, for fear of reprisal, they all internally rejoiced that maybe for once the warden would have to endure the desert heat that they suffered under.

The prisoners were all sleeping, unaware of the situation, as the cells and hallways all lacked lighting and electricity to begin with, the natural light of the sun and moon being the sole source of illumination to the prison blocks as it had been for a century and a half.

It would suit them all just fine, guards and prisoners alike, if the power didn't come back for days. It wasn't as if they needed it. It wasn't as if anyone was going anywhere.

MICHAEL SLIPPED THE guard's key into the lock, ripped open the cell door, and locked eyes with KC. She stared back at him, her face a mask, devoid of emotion. She was dressed in torn black coveralls that weren't standard prison attire; they fit too perfectly. Her face and hands were smudged with dirt and filth. Michael's mind melted to confusion as he looked upon the woman who had left him ten days ago with no contact since. The silence of confusion quickly slipped to anger. KC was too smart, too capable to be here by accident. Michael realized that the month they had spent together was a lie, her deception exceeding all bounds.

Suddenly the guard's radio clipped to Michael's belt emitted a burst of static, and words in an incomprehensible language.

KC looked at Michael and finally broke the moment. "He said, 'There's been a breach,' something about 'no one gets out alive, shoot on sight.'"

Michael heard the silent prison explode into chaos on the floors above. His focus quickly returning, he tucked his emotions away along with the question of KC's foreign language abilities, and quietly asked, "Where's Simon?"

"Michael?" the voice called from the neighboring cell.

Michael keyed the cell door to the left and tore it open. Simon stood there, at his full six-one, wearing a dark shirt and pants, both of which were shredded, barely clinging to his taut body. He looked more like a soldier than a priest. His rugged face was bruised and bloodied, his jet-black hair matted with sweat, the gray flecks and streaks more pronounced. His calloused knuckles bore the welts of someone who had recently used his hands for something beyond prayer.

Simon said nothing as he looked back at Michael; he knew what he was thinking. He and KC were in this together. Michael wasn't sure who had put whom in danger but now was not the time to sort things out. Michael tossed him one of the guards' pistols. Simon pulled back the slide, ejected the clip, verified everything was working, and readied the gun.

"Let's go."

As the three ran down the corridor, Michael was already thinking how the entire jailbreak had just skidded out of control. Unless he thought quickly, no one would survive.

MICHAEL, SIMON, AND KC slipped through the rear door and into the night. Michael again heard the foreign voice over the guard's radio. He opened his black bag, pulled the frequency jammer, and affixed its magnetized back against the standpipe adjacent to the door. He flipped the switch, watching as the small red lights began to glow and flicker. He checked the guard's radio; white-noise static cried out. The small black box had jammed all radio communication.

Michael reached back into his bag and pulled out the two BASE chutes, handing one to KC. "Do you know how to use one of these things?" Michael asked.

"What do you think?" KC said with no sense of humor.

"Just a yes or no answer," Michael exploded.

"Yes," she snapped.

"Strap it on, then."

"Where are we going?" she asked as she affixed the pack to her back.

Michael pointed to the cliff's edge one hundred yards away, across the wide-open range in front of the prison.

Michael tossed the second chute to Simon. "You know how to—"

Simon held up his hand as he quickly strapped himself into the harness.

Both KC and Simon realized at that moment that Michael's black bag, his bag of tricks, was empty.

"What about you?" KC said as she tucked her long blonde hair inside her shirt.

"Don't worry about me. I'll meet you down there."

"No way." Simon glared at Michael. "Take mine. I'll find another way down."

"I said don't worry about me. I'll get down." Michael pointed at the stretch of land they needed to cross. "On my signal, you both run like hell and dive out as far as you can off that cliff. It's three thousand feet and sheer. Throw your pilot chute after a three count and ride it out into the desert."

"We can't run fifty miles of desert," KC whispered through gritted teeth.

Michael glared at KC. "I thought you liked extreme sports."

Simon and KC looked at the barren wasteland before them, pulled out the small pilot chutes from their BASE packs, and gripped them tightly.

Michael held out his arm, motioning them to wait. He glanced at his watch, watching the seconds tick down, pulled the small remote from his pocket, its high frequency operating above the jammed radio frequencies, and thumbed the switch.

The explosion echoed off the far side of the prison, its roar climbing up into the night. Simon and KC took off in an all-out sprint for the cliff.

Without a word, Michael raced in the opposite direction.

BARABAS STARED AT the open and empty cells of the two Europeans. He knew he should have forgone the ritual morning execution and just shot the man and woman in the head upon their arrival.

He tried his radio but found it a static mess. Not only were the lights out, and all the electricity, but so were all of the handheld radios. Everything electronic was fried. Which was why he was thankful for his good old-fashioned gun. No electronics, simple reliable mechanics. He pulled back the slide, chambered a bullet, and headed through the execution room.

A sudden explosion reverberated through the halls, startling Barabas and notching up his anger tenfold. Without thought he raced past his electric chair and chopping block and headed for the door.

Barabas had been paid fifty thousand dollars to ensure the deaths of the man and woman. He had taken delivery from someone who acted as their judge and jury, a man who paid him a thirty-thousand-dollar bonus above his going rate for such things to ensure Barabas's expeditiousness, discretion, and silence. Barabas had a reputation for efficiency and ruthlessness; he was afraid of nothing and never failed in his dealings. But the judge-and-jury man had raised something in Barabas that he had never felt before: fear. He had heard the saying that everyone is afraid of something. Well, Barabas had found what scared him. If he didn't ensure the death of his two escaped

prisoners, there was no doubt that the judge-and-jury man would return to ensure his.

Barabas charged out the back door and looked around. He saw the black box with the blinking lights affixed, tore it off the wall, threw it to the ground, and crushed it under his boot. He flipped the button on his radio and smiled as it sang to life.

"There has been an escape; all guards, shoot to kill."

He looked across the yard at his jeep, his 1972 jeep, his jeep without any electronics to speak of. He hopped into the seat and breathed a sigh of relief as the jeep started right up. He turned on the headlights and jammed down the gas pedal, heading out of the parking lot toward the front of the building.

KCAND SIMON ran across the open ground in front of the prison. Simon was fast, but KC passed him right by. She ran silently, her arms and legs pistoning, a blur in the night. They were enveloped in darkness but could see the bluish outline of the cliff ahead. They held tightly to the small primer chute in their hands. Simon didn't look back at the prison towers or battlements, but he knew the bullets would be there any second. And though they might not see their running targets, a contingent of rapid-firing guards would very likely strike their mark. Simon had been under fire before but he wasn't sure if KC had ever truly experienced the fear that came with being under a barrage of bullets. She was a good thief, as good as Michael. Their capture was not her fault. They had fallen victim to something neither could have anticipated.

And even though the gunfire could start at any minute, their situation now was preferable to sitting in the prison behind them. They had a chance, a chance given to them by Michael. Simon hoped Michael wasn't sacrificing himself for their survival; he hoped he truly had a way to get off this godforsaken rock.

UTTER CONFUSION RIPPLED through the prison, with guards shouting, stumbling through the dark halls, and calling out to one another. And then, like an infection, the prisoners caught on, aware that one of their comrades

in crime had jumped ship. They began shouting, cheering, banging anything they could against their cell walls. It was as if hell had suddenly awakened, crying out, cheering on those who would defy inevitable death.

The guards didn't know which way to turn. They ran to the battlements, peering out into the night, but were blind; they raised their rifles as if they'd somehow catch sight of whoever had slipped their grasp.

SIMON AND KC heard the chaos erupt within the prison walls. Simon chanced a glance over his shoulder and saw the silhouettes and shadows of the guards scurrying about the ramparts and battlements, guns raised. He braced himself for the inevitable fusillade, turned back, and ran harder.

And the gunfire erupted. Bullets hit and skittered on the rocky ground around them. Simon could hear the high-pitched whizzing as the full metal jackets sailed past. The reports of the guns sounded like thunder as they echoed around the mountain.

Ten yards ahead Simon spied the cliff's edge. He turned to KC, saw her focus and speed up. Side by side they came to the edge and without hesitation, without slowing a bit, dove straight out, sailing into the night.

AS MICHAEL RACED for the woods, he heard the roar from the prison confines, the inmates on the verge of riot. He did not know their crimes, he did not know their hearts, but a sentence in Chiron was certain death. Michael knew his friends did not deserve to die, no matter what they had done. This was not a place for the carrying out of justice, this was a place of death, a place with no regard for guilt or innocence. He hoped that those left behind would find salvation, though it would never be here on this lifeless rock.

Michael ran along in the shadows a quarter mile to where he had hidden his parachute. He hoped his lungs would hold out long enough for him to make it there and all the way to the cliff without exploding. Michael cursed himself, cursed everything around him. He was always a careful guy, but he had opted not to bring the extra, redundant BASE jump chute. He never imagined he would be breaking out two people, let alone that the second would be KC.

He struggled to keep his mind focused, the swirl of emotions impeding his every thought, his mind vacillating between love and hate, fear and anger, deception and honesty. He had no idea why KC and Simon were here or what they had done. All he knew was that he wanted answers, all the answers, if they all got out of here.

Michael made it to the tree line and quickly found his discarded chute. He pulled his knife and cut away the main chute line from the harness. He wasted no time, strapping the harness back on his body, praying that the reserve chute was packed right.

Without a moment's thought, he charged back toward the prison.

BARABAS'S JEEP ROUNDED the corner, his headlights falling upon a man in a full-out sprint. It wasn't one of his prisoners; it wasn't the man or the woman. Barabas didn't know who it was, but it was obvious he was responsible for the escape. Barabas aimed his jeep right at the running man, leaned out the doorless side, pointed his gun, and hit the gas.

The headlights drew the guards' attention. They all looked out from the battlements and saw the jeep gaining quickly on the running man, and as if in automatic response, they raised their rifles and began shooting. Gunfire echoed throughout the valley, the trigger-happy guards reveling in the fact that they could take advantage of the moment and enjoy some target practice. What had once been a dull evening filled with no electricity and boredom had suddenly blossomed into excitement as they all smiled and shouted with each pull of the trigger.

Barabas himself took aim at the figure before him, fifty yards ahead. He steadied his gun hand while guiding the jeep and began rapid-firing.

FEAR TORE THROUGH Michael; he had not expected to be the bull's-eye target of all of the guards, the fifteen-strong contingent rapid-firing at him. The bullets hit the ground behind him as he raced for the cliff. The edge was up ahead, falling off into total darkness. Michael ran harder than he had ever run before, knowing that the effort and pain would prove worthless if he didn't make it.

But the bullets were erupting closer, shattering the ground around him. It would be only seconds before one of the shooters got lucky.

Without breaking stride, Michael reached into his pocket and pulled out the small remote. He thumbed back the cover, hit the red switch...

And the night was torn apart. An enormous fireball rose from behind the prison, lighting up the world around it. The fuel tanks, in concert with the C-4, rained destruction upon the generating plant. Even at a distance, Michael could feel the heat of the blast searing the air. The barrage of gunfire fell to silence as the guards instinctively dove for cover.

THIRTY YARDS BACK, Barabas was not deterred. He never even looked in the direction of the fireball. His attention was like that of a hawk on its meal, fixed without distraction upon Michael. He rapid-fired his pistol until it clicked out of bullets. There was no time to reload. He pinned the gas pedal to the floor. He was out of ammo, but that didn't deter him. Ten yards. It would only be seconds before he ran the man down, the man who had destroyed his prison, freed his captives, and ruined his life.

MICHAEL HEARD THE roar of the engine behind him, its pitch climbing as it approached with unabated acceleration. He could hear the crunching of the ground, the pinging of the pebbles as they hit the undercarriage of the jeep. Michael refused to look back; he refused to look at death. The jumping headlights grew brighter as they played off the cliff's edge only feet away...

Michael leaped out into the night. The wind once again poured over his body. Without a pilot chute, he would have to pray that the reserve was packed properly and the deployment was quick. He held tight to the rip cord as he free-fell into darkness.

BARABAS SAW THE abyss too late; his focus had been only on the runner. He slammed on the brakes with both feet, ramming the pedal into the floorboard. The jeep skidded left to right, its inertia determined to sail him out over the edge. He threw the wheel hard left, hoping to avoid the inevitable, but it was too late. His speed was too great for the brakes to

overcome; the jeep skidded sideways, finally slipping over the cliff into oblivion.

MICHAEL HEARD THE jeep behind him scrape over the edge. He craned his neck and watched as its headlights fell through the air, tumbling end over end. He turned his body and waited before pulling his chute, afraid of being pulled right into the descent of the two-thousand-pound vehicle that was still behind him, tumbling his way.

Michael turned his body, expanded it as much as he could to create the most drag, slowing his descent. It was only moments before he would be killed by either the falling jeep or an abrupt impact with the ground.

The jeep, as if in slow motion, crept alongside him. Michael briefly saw the driver's fear, saw him clutching the wheel as if it would somehow deliver him from death. And Michael yanked the rip cord.

The chute skittered out of the pack, dragged up into the night by the wind, and the canopy deployed, yanking Michael's body to an almost sudden halt. Michael watched as the lights of the jeep fell away to pinpoints and then a sudden fiery explosion glowed at the foot of the cliff, its orange tendrils reaching up for him. The deep, resonating sound echoed up seconds later.

Michael turned and guided the chute through the plume of rising smoke out into the desert on a northerly heading. He caught his breath as he began drifting. Suddenly, headlights flicked on, illuminating a section of level ground. Michael glided in, coming to an easy landing. KC and Simon were leaning up against a Land Rover.

A tall man, six-four, walked up to Michael, his blond hair a tangle in the night's summer breeze.

"You're always late," Paul Busch said as wrapped his bearlike arms around Michael, hugging him tight.