

## Prologue

### Davos, Switzerland

#### The Unlucky Number 13

The heavy boots made a loud click as they snapped into the long skis. Marco Larron checked with a critical eye to see if they were properly engaged. When he found nothing wrong with the grip in the shoes, he released them from the skis again. Having completed this necessary first test, he was now ready to ski. So then he put on his light blue helmet and orange-tinted ski goggles. He hadn't been to a ski resort in almost ten years. In the past, he had been a regular guest on the numerous slopes in the Dolomites, where he had mastered the black runs reserved exclusively for experienced and talented skiers. But times had changed. More and more, professional circumstances had forced Larron to put his free time on the back burner. He now knew the term *vacation* only from hearsay. This was due admittedly to his role on the commission of Scylla, of a mafia organization.

However, when Gino Caruso had organized the participation of Scylla's commissioners in the World Economic Summit in Davos, Larron had seen and seized his opportunity. After all, Davos was not only famous for the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum, but for the ski slopes which were something to behold and especially the steep slopes on the Rinerhorn. So he had decided to arrive two days early and use these forty-eight hours to practice before attempting the steep slopes of the Rinerhorn.

Larron finished his coffee and glanced at the door of the café, which was filled with the buzz of dozens of guests. Standing just inside the door was a giant. Marcelo Runieri was already a true

giant in normal circumstances. He had broad, muscular shoulders and upper arms of the same circumference as Larron's thighs. In full, all-black ski gear, however, his physical dimensions seemed downright monstrous. A native of Sicily, he was Caruso's closest confidant. It had come as no surprise to Larron that he had appointed him to the commission about a year ago. Three years ago, Caruso had entrusted Runieri with the management of Il Campo, the legendary retreat that Caruso had built near the city of Ravenna. In recent years, the epicenter of Scylla's power had shifted more and more from Bologna to Il Campo. The more powerful Caruso became, the more important Il Campo became. From there, Caruso handled the operational business of the commission. The members of his small private army were also trained there which included the famous Spartacus team. Runieri led this training, and out of his strict manner had come some of the best contract killers in the West. Each was given his own call sign. Runieri had always gone by the name of Crixus. Indeed, he always gave the appearance of being able to single-handedly slaughter an entire battlefield, much like his historical namesake the famous rebel gladiator. Runieri beckoned Larron over. Larron immediately tucked his skis, including poles, under his arm and crossed the café.

"Ready to go?" asked Runieri. He had never been a man of many words.

"I can't wait," Larron returned. Somewhere in the pit of his stomach, he felt a pleasant tingle of excitement. Yesterday, he had already tried out some of the more undemanding slopes, trying to rediscover his skill and drive after all these years. He was pleased to discover that skiing was apparently similar to riding a bike. You don't unlearn it.

“Are you really sure you want to ski the Thirteen?” asked Runieri with a furrowed brow.

“Of course,” Larron said, waving it off. “I’ve skied many other dangerous routes.

”The skepticism didn’t leave Runieri’s eyes, but he didn’t disagree either. Thirteen was a new black run on the Rinerhorn, opened just a few months ago at the start of the current season. On this day, it was actually closed and skiing was prohibited, but Larron through a generous sum of money he had given to the right person had made sure that an exception was made for him. Now Runieri had spontaneously asked Larron if he could accompany him. Larron had had no objection. Even if he suspected that Runieri’s motive was not so much enthusiasm for the sport, but much more concern that one of the commission members might seriously injure himself while skiing. However he had no problem with that thought. In a fit of vanity, Larron even felt flattered by this concern. It only underscored how important he was to the organization. The two men left the café and made their way through the tourists on foot. The weather was just perfect with light sub-zero temperatures, bright blue skies and glistening sunshine. The summit of the Rinerhorn towered above them. A silent, mighty sentinel of the valley below. They walked to the lift stations, where, however, they did not join the long line of waiting people, but instead booted through the snow to an abandoned station. This lift ran exclusively to the start of the Thirteen. When one of the employees in a yellow high-visibility vest noticed them, he came over to them.

“I’m sorry,” he said apologetically. “But Thirteen is closed today.”

“That’s all right,” Larron replied. “I have a permit.”

His counterpart looked at him questioningly. "Permission?"

"Call Maurice Strasser," Larron urged him. "He'll confirm it for you." The man pulled out a cell phone and moved away from them so Larron couldn't hear what he was saying. When he returned to them about a minute later, he still appeared uncomprehending, but removed the red chain that had blocked the entrance to the lift station.

"All right," he said. "But the cafes and restaurants at the starting point are closed today." Larron nodded.

"It's okay."

"Ski carefully," the man said.

Larron and Runieri entered the lift station and sat side by side on the frontmost gondola. After they clicked into their skis, the slope employee started the lift and the gondola began moving. During the ride, Larron felt his excitement steadily growing. When he had mastered a few easier runs yesterday, he had realized how much he had actually missed this sport. On the slopes, his head was wonderfully empty. Nothing seemed to exist in the world but the snow beneath his skis, the icy wind blowing downhill, and the steep slope in front of him. A form of freedom he hadn't felt in years. It was the most beautiful form of freedom of all. On the way, neither of them spoke a word. Larron noticed his knees knocking rapidly against each other from excitement. He was like a dog wagging its tail. Runieri, on the other hand, sat silent and motionless on the bench. Now and then Larron had the feeling he was being watched, but whenever he turned his head to the side, Runieri stared expressionlessly up at the snowy peak.

After a seeming eternity, the gondola had reached its destination. He felt hard snow in perfect condition under him again, stood up, let the gondola push him forward some more, and

found secure footing. The view from up here was incredible. Nearly a thousand yards away rose the white, jagged peaks of the adjacent mountain range, and in between lay a deep valley with a few villages that were barely the size of a pinhead from up here. Above the panorama, the brilliant whiteness transitioned smoothly into the bright blue of the sky. The sun's rays were reflected back by the masses of snow, and Larron estimated that he would have been nearly blind without his tinted glasses. Above them on a hill were a few restaurants, cafes and stores, as well as two smaller hotels. But, except for the hotels, all the lights of the buildings were out. It was true what the clerk had told them earlier. If the Thirteen was closed, the restaurants up here were not open either.

In the launch area of the runway, they were all alone. The silence was almost eerie. Apart from the rattle of the gondolas and the whistling wind, no sound reached Larron's ears.

"So," he suddenly heard Runieri's voice behind him. Larron turned around, "Ready?"

"Ready," Larron replied with anticipation. Runieri obligingly extended his arm and gestured toward the runway.

"After you."

Larron bent his knees slightly and took a deep breath, drawing the cold, icy air deep into his lungs. Then he moved forward and began to pick up speed with perfect technique. After a few seconds, he bent forward, knees slightly bent. The slope steepened a bit and Larron noticeably picked up speed. Ahead of him, he saw the track drop off behind a steep hilltop. It's about to start, he thought excitedly. He looked around. Crixus' black figure was driving behind him, slightly off to the right. Larron turned his gaze forward again, picked up speed slightly once more, and

jumped over the crest. As he took off and found himself somewhat high in the air, his eyes fell on the slope below him. His breath caught in his throat. *My God, it's steep!* The skis touched down again. It almost felt like he was hurtling down a vertical wall. He couldn't possibly gauge how fast he was going. The slope took him straight for a while, after half a minute it took a sharp left turn, past a small grove whose trees seemed to defy gravity, sticking straight up in the air despite the incline. The blood in Larron's ears rushed. He was moving so fast that he barely had air to breathe through his airstream, and yet he noticed that he was becoming more confident with each passing second. His footing became firmer, and as the slope flattened out a bit, he made a couple of elegantly intersecting turns. He let out a whooping cry of joy. Freedom. For a brief moment, he cast another glance over his shoulder. He thought he was going pretty fast, but Runieri kept up the pace with no problem. He was riding close behind him, almost too close.

"Hey!" shouted Larron. "Keep your distance!"

The wind swallowed his words. He drove, no, flew over the next crest and followed a breakneck right turn, at the apex of which the descent became even steeper. He passed another group of trees. Behind it, directly on the left edge of the descent, there seemed to be a low wall in the middle of the mountain. Just off the slope, the rock wall had sharp edges. The wall was so wide that Larron could not see the bottom of a steep slope that lay beyond. Only a rather pathetic looking safety net protected the riders from falling to their deaths after a possible fall.

The track now oriented itself consistently along the edge of the escarpment, following each curve. Just as Larron had brought the uncertainty welling up inside him under control and guessed

that they were about halfway down the track, a black, gigantic shadow appeared to his right immediately beside him. Runieri was barely keeping his distance. They were riding stick to stick. Larron gave an indignant shout when he saw this giant grinning. What happened next, Larron experienced as if in slow motion. Runieri's left arm lifted. He angled it in front of his massive body. Then the arm and the pole shot to the side and he gave Larron a powerful blow as if with a sword. He began to stumble. He brought the front ends of his skis together to brake sharply. In the process, he spun on the slope and had turned toward the rocky precipice. A second thrust with the tip of the pole hit him right between the shoulder blades.

Larron lost his balance and fell forward into the abyss. As he fell, he just saw this giant called Crixus make a full stop. Fine snow swirled through the air like white dust, and the man watched him go. Larron fell and fell and fell. He had let go of his sticks out of reflex. There was a strange clarity in his mind. He was going to die in a few seconds. Three heartbeats remained to him, perhaps. At least it would be quick. A fall from this height meant on impact he would die instantly. Perhaps it was because of this certainty that he did not panic.

But he did not die quickly. The next moment he crashed into a protruding boulder. His hip exploded in pain. The fall was braked, and he got his skis caught in a crevice. He felt his ankles break, his ligaments and tendons tearing like overstretched rubber. The pain overwhelmed him, robbing him of his senses. Everything went black. Marco Larron no longer felt anything when a few seconds later, he crashed into a massive rock that smashed half his face. He had found his last freedom.