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GLOBAL ANGER
by Kent Politsch

Prologue - Chapter 4

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PROLOGUE

Yeoncheon, Korea

June 1953

Pak Myung lifted the door covering a hole for human excrement. He pointed at the prisoner slouched in odorous waste. His three-year-old grandson pulled down his pants and urinated on the despondent soldier.

The old man spoke harshly at the near-death enemy then slammed the door when the boy finished. His tone changed as he guided the child by the shoulder away from the pungent shed to a hut that was their home, just the old man and the boy now.

Pak Myung prepared rice for their dinner. He heated a can of rations taken from the soldier. It was less than a week since three North Koreans stumbled on Pak Myung's hut, three reckless renegades separated from their unit.

The farmer was a determined home defender, although he had no idea who to trust. Fleeing South Koreans gave him a Russian semi-automatic rifle and Chinese grenades captured in combat. In exchange he gave them fresh food, blankets, and a shed to sleep in.

They told him they were no longer safe. The enemy was adding more fighters in a last-attempt surge. But they said they would soon return to free him and the rest of Korea from the threat of Communism.

On the fateful day that Pak Myung regretted deeply, he took his rifle and grenades and told his daughter-in-law and grandson he would return before dark. They were not to wander beyond the hut.

Pak Myung knew his daughter-in-law was very afraid. Two months earlier, North Korean soldiers killed her husband – Pak Myung's son and the father of his grandson.

Like his father, Pak Hsong became an inexperienced mercenary taking money from South Korean soldiers who asked him to shoot at the enemy so they could flee.

The young family was poor. Pak Hsong did what he needed to do in order to feed his wife and child during a war that kept him from working. It was an unwise thing that cost him his life and the happiness of his wife and child.

Pak Myung was now more than a grandfather; he was again head of a household. It had been many years since he had a young boy to care for. Further, it was awkward having his daughter-in-law as a dependent, but it was what he accepted nevertheless.

He pulled raingear over his head and braved the elements. It was too early for monsoons, but rain had been falling heavily just the same.

The boy and his mother sat quietly for the first hour Pak Myung was gone. They cautiously began to move about when the hut door pushed open in a thunderous and startling burst.

In the doorway stood two threatening figures in dripping gear. Their dirty, gaunt faces made them look monstrous.

They entered. Behind them was a third soldier who backed in looking to see if anyone heard the loud crash of the door.

The soldiers pointed their guns at the woman. She pulled her child close. She hunched over the boy to protect him. He strained to see the soldiers' frightening appearance.

The first two men began to walk around the hut while the third closed the door, behaving nervously. One soldier strode proudly, the other more cautiously. The boy wiggled again to look at the strange sight, but his mother tucked his head beneath her breasts, attempting to enclose him with her body.

The soldiers spoke to each other, but the boy could not understand what they were saying. The proud soldier and the soldier who was now Pak Myung's prisoner jerked the boy's mother hard. The third grabbed the boy, pulling them apart. The prisoner soldier reached for his mother's shirt and tore it open. She screamed.

The proud soldier kicked the heels of her feet, forcing her to the ground with a sudden thud. The boy yelled, but the man holding him put his hand over the boy's face, hurting him meanly. The proud soldier grabbed his mother's hair, and the prisoner soldier pulled her clothing from her body. She twisted in pain, crying, but unable to scream further.

They stretched her naked body across Pak Myung's table. The prisoner dropped his pants to his knees and lay on top of the boy's mother. He kept pushing his body against her and making animal sounds.

He groaned loudly and the other soldiers laughed. The proud soldier heaved him aside pointing at the boy. The third soldier quickly grabbed his mother. He held her down while the proud soldier dropped his pants to his knees. He covered the boy's mother with his hunching body like the soldier before him.

The proud soldier spoke angrily as he continued to press against her. He tried to slap her face, but the third soldier pushed his arm away. The boy's mother lay limp on the table while the two soldiers held her and circled around her.

Then the third soldier lay on top of the helpless woman causing her more pain. The proud soldier pushed his rifle against her neck to hold her down. He rubbed himself with his free hand. She struggled to cough, but the third soldier kept pressing his body against her.

The prisoner soldier spoke sternly to the others. He squeezed the boy harder as he became angrier. The boy

saw his mother stop struggling, her eyes now gazed upon him blankly. The boy called her name.

At that moment the hut door crashed open again. Loud noises and sudden bursts of fire came from the silhouette in the doorway. The third soldier's head exploded. Blood sprayed the boy's face.

The proud soldier yelled and then stopped as his body collapsed. He fell in a clump against a stool the grandfather made. The prisoner soldier picked up the boy and held him in the direction of the door.

The shadowy figure stepped into the hut. It was the boy's grandfather pointing a gun at the soldier and boy. Pak Myung dropped the barrel. Another explosion, even louder, filled the enclosing room. The boy tumbled from the soldier's grip. He hit the floor hard as the soldier crumpled behind him yelling in pain.

The boy twisted quickly to see if the soldier was going to hurt him more, but the man lay squirming on the floor, his hands grasping his knee. It oozed blood from between his fingers.

The boy scrambled to hide behind his grandfather as they both surveyed the hut. They looked at the boy's mother lying lifeless on the table. Pak Myung moved to the moaning soldier and struck him hard in the face with the butt of his rifle. The soldier stopped writhing and fell quiet.

Pak Myung walked around to the other two soldiers and poked the gun into their bodies. They did not move.

The boy, holding his mother's face in his small hands, watched his grandfather put down the rifle. Still very confused, he told his grandfather to hold the gun. He was afraid of the soldiers. Pak Myung told the boy that two soldiers were dead like his mother, and the other soldier would not be able to hurt him.

The boy gripped his mother's face and looked at her open eyes. He asked his grandfather if she could hear him. He said her face was empty.

Pak Myung covered her naked body with a blanket. He told the boy to sit on the stool and watch over his mother.

He tied the hands of his prisoner with twine. He then pulled the dead soldiers from the hut.

The old man struggled with the bodies, dragging them one at a time across the floor, through the threshold, and toward the riverbank. He laid the first body on the bank and went after the second. When he got the second body to the swiftly moving river, swelled by rain, he rolled it into the water. The river pulled at the soldier's legs first, then grabbed his trunk and began to carry the corpse downriver.

Pak Myung rolled the second soldier's body into the river. He watched the river repeat its task floating the second corpse after the first. He stood for a moment still in a daze. A setting sunbeam colored western clouds amber in an otherwise charcoal grey sky. He thought of the young boy in his hut, a grandson he barely knew. How would he deal with the violence and death?

Pak Myung walked back to his hut where silence engulfed the boy in a space still haunted by screams and deafening gunfire. For the boy's sake, Pak Myung created a new mission. He would avenge his anger while instructing his grandchild to be fearless and focused. It would begin with the slow and disgraceful death of the remaining soldier.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

St. Ann's Medical Center

Baltimore, MD

A Monday in March; the present

Nurse Jean O'Donnell wrote down her patient's blood pressure and pulse rate. She closed the folder and looked at Rodney Armstrong sitting on the edge of the examining table. Armstrong was a regular visitor to Dr. Stuckey, who she knew would not be happy with his patient's lack of progress. "Be prepared for a scolding," she told Armstrong.

The Baltimore cop smiled an eff-you grin. Clearly he was in no mood for her condescending attitude. She understood the look and turned to exit the patient's room in the doctor's building at St. Ann's Medical Center.

Before O'Donnell could reach the door handle, Dr. Isaac Stuckey entered. He carried a magazine article he wanted Armstrong to read. He suspected his patient, lifelong friend, and one of Baltimore's finest, Police Lieutenant Rodney Armstrong, would not have complied with his orders. The doctor insisted the cop pay closer attention to diet and rest.

Stuckey acknowledged Nurse O'Donnell.

"Jean..."

"Doctor. Here is the lieutenant's folder." She departed without further comment.

Dr. Stuckey took it and opened with a hopeful glance at the numbers Nurse O'Donnell just entered.

"God damn it, Rodney! You've got to get off the street. You've got to take this condition seriously."

"I need more energy. That's all I came to get from you, Isaac, not another lecture."

Stuckey had helped Armstrong once. The doctor opened up the cop's chest for a quadruple bypass surgery, which gave Lieutenant Armstrong a new lease on life. There would be only one other reason to open him again Stuckey told him. That would be to implant a new heart.

True, Armstrong abused his body through neglect, but he was one of the best at curing the ills that plagued Baltimore. He ingested every bit of responsibility for the rampant crime that overtook the city.

Baltimore was a typical blue-collar town that went through a metamorphosis, converting from steel maker and shipyard to a service-sector player, a key high-tech corridor linked to the nation's capital. Military bases, federal intelligence operations, and the IRS surrounded it.

Like many U.S. cities fighting neglect, Baltimore experienced a renaissance. People grew tired of the rust and ridicule. They gave their harbor a facelift and campaigned for a new image among travelers, conventioners, and sports fans.

But the city could not shed its crime. Armstrong dealt with sex offenses, juvenile crimes, burglaries, and murders. It was a pace that was killing him. When Dr. Stuckey made him transition to white-collar crimes, Armstrong went into a funk.

He felt it was his duty to protect his city against the thugs, the bad seeds. Baltimore was his city, where he was born, where he went to school. It was where he played basketball in the parks and recreation centers. It was where he was recruited for college, a ticket to a better ride than his parents experienced, and their parents before them.

Despite the break that his sports skills granted him, it was not easy. Married twice and divorced twice, Armstrong saw his share of personal drama. Still, he was regarded as a generally good and certainly a responsible man.

Following his open-heart surgery, Dr. Stuckey's demand for a lighter workload in the white-collar beat was the low point in Armstrong's career. He isolated himself and pouted like a child. It was very uncharacteristic. To him there was not enough action in white-collar, just sniffing politicians and MBAs who thought they were smarter than cops.

Armstrong's self pity lasted several weeks until a case came along that mixed embezzlement, a few dirty tricks, and a murder-suicide mystery. It piqued his interest. He began to recover passion for his work. But the excitement was temporary. Fortunately, being a cop was not his only love. Armstrong was a coach. He coached basketball and Baltimore's best youth players. He scouted his talent and recruited players from the Police Athletic League.

Armstrong played AAU basketball as a youngster, so he found it fitting to volunteer as an Amateur Athletic Union coach when he was a rookie cop fresh out of the academy. He finished his police schooling less than a year after his final basketball game at Salisbury University, a familiar landmark to Marylanders who spent their weekends cruising to Ocean City.

Armstrong thought his volunteer efforts provided value for Baltimore as well. The city's toughest street gangs also recruited from the ranks of youngsters involved in PAL programs. However, Armstrong outscored his opponents by taking a larger share of those at-risk youngsters from their neighborhoods and putting them in sports rather than jail.

Among his basketball protégés was Dr. Stuckey's son, Conrad. Conrad was not one of the at-risk youth. In fact, quite the contrary. He was a privileged genius. But the doctor didn't want his son feeling entitled to his wealth and extraordinary opportunities. He wanted him to know that there were others in the world with the same talents, but not the same advantages.

There was another motive as well. Dr. Stuckey wanted to show his son that success can rise from the most uninviting circumstances when people care, people like his friend Rodney Armstrong. That's why the doctor put Conrad on Armstrong's AAU team.

"I hate to be so blunt, Rodney, but the best way to keep you alive is to put a better heart in your chest. You're a time bomb about to go off. If you don't start eating right and get better sleep – and stay away from Johnny Walker – you're a dead man within a year."

"And if I do what you say, I'm dead, too. Either way I lose."

"When I call you, you'll have a few hours to get to the hospital. It may take months, but we're going to find you a new muscle, one that hasn't been through the abuse you've put this one through."

Stuckey tapped the middle of Armstrong's chest with his finger as he spoke.

A sudden and firm wrap on the door interrupted the somber point. The door swung open and Nurse O'Donnell excitedly told Dr. Stuckey he was needed in emergency surgery. An ambulance was bringing in a 14-year-old boy with a gunshot wound to the back. The boy was alive, but his vitals were weak. Paramedics treating him believed a bullet was lodged close to the boy's heart.

"We've got details to work out yet," the doctor reiterated.

Rodney Armstrong now wanted more information from Nurse O'Donnell than he did from his fleeing friend. "See ya, Doc," Armstrong said at the closing door.

He grabbed his shirt, put his arms into the sleeves, and pulled the partially buttoned garb over his head. He lassoed his head with his still-tied necktie, jerked the knot up, and shoved the shirttails into his pants. Before he could exit the room, his cell phone began to vibrate.

"Armstrong..."

On the other end was Sergeant Maggie Billingsly. Armstrong stopped to listen to a familiar complaint from another Baltimore business.

“Garibaldi’s on Albemarle Street, Rodney. It’s the same story. The restaurant has a contract with SpeedCredit. The owner admits that he needed cash and did the deal, but he says the credit firm’s collections are illegal.”

“Have we come up with anything on SpeedCredit yet, Maggie?”

“Nothing yet. So far, it all looks legit. They advanced about 20-grand to the business so the owner could pay off some old debt and make payroll.”

“Same credit card scheme?”

“Yeah, apparently SpeedCredit collects its payments by taking a healthy percentage of the business’s credit card receipts, applying some to principal and some to fees. The payments are pulled out electronically. That’s what Garibaldi’s owner said he agreed to. He said he was desperate. So, it looks legal even though he claims it isn’t.”

“Either way, not very ethical if they’re giving the business hope and then ripping them off. Call him, Maggie. What’s his name? Let him know I’ll be there in about 20 minutes.”

“His name is Carbonari. Rudy Carbonari.”

Before Armstrong left the doctor’s building, he found Nurse O’Donnell and asked about the wounded youngster. She didn’t have a name, but knew the boy was in critical condition.

Dr. Stuckey was called to remove the bullet that had entered the boy’s back at point-blank range when he was lying on a sidewalk. O’Donnell told Armstrong that the bullet may have ricocheted off the concrete and stayed in his chest. It was lodged on the front side of the youngster’s heart. He was shot after he was beaten and lying face down.

“Tell Isaac I’ll call him later,” Armstrong told O’Donnell.

As the cop turned right out of St. Ann’s onto Caton Avenue, he looked left and spotted a young man he thought he recognized running across the street from Cardinal Gleason School.

Armstrong was headed the opposite direction. He looked in his rearview mirror and saw the figure dart between oncoming traffic and head into the hospital’s emergency entrance.

USDA Whitten Building

Washington, D.C.

Same day

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Jorge Segura’s glassed-in outer office on the second floor of the Whitten Building, often referred to as The Cage, was filling with executive staff from the Foreign Agricultural Service, known better as FAS, one of several agencies that make up the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Whitten Building is wedged between Independence Avenue and Jefferson Drive on the south side of The Mall, the sightline between the Washington Monument and the Capitol. The secretary’s office overlooks The Mall, the only cabinet member with that privilege.

Although most of the 100,000 people employed by the department live in the states, FAS places its attachés in nearly 100 offices in about 80 countries around the world.

The agency’s mission is to improve foreign access to U.S. products, increase competitiveness for U.S. agriculture in the global marketplace, and provide assistance to developing foreign countries.

The phone rang on Berta Spencer’s desk.

“Yes, Mr. Secretary.”

The throng from FAS watched Berta's eyes as she scanned the group for Ralph Woodridge, administrator of the agency. Looking at Woodridge, Berta announced that the secretary was ready for them, and that he would join them in the conference room shortly.

"Thank you, Berta." Woodridge led his subordinates through the double doors into the pristine chambers adjacent to Secretary Segura's office.

He sat first at the south end of the conference table. Woodridge was not among the secretary's favorite political allies. He was young. He had not paid many dues as a politician, but he was a long-time staffer for a powerful congressman to whom the president owed favors. That's how most at USDA assumed Ralph Woodridge got his job.

Secretary Segura always took the north end of his conference table against The Mall windows. Woodridge liked sitting opposite Segura. The others jockeyed for seats between the polar points, leaving one seat in the middle for Jack Fitzgerald, notoriously the last to arrive for such gatherings.

Fitzgerald, in his late 40s, had a reputation among his colleagues for being tardy. The Deputy Administrator of the Office of Global Analysis kept to himself, but when he spoke, it generally quieted the rest because of his direct and often poignant assessment.

In fact, Fitzgerald often irritated his colleagues because the secretary tolerated the others, but awaited Fitzgerald's opinion before offering his decisions. It made them wonder why they were brought into the discussion.

Jack Fitzgerald was born on Nov. 22, 1963. He grew up on a small farm along the east bank of the Choptank River between Preston and Easton, Maryland. Jack's parents had originally picked out the names Lloyd for a boy, after his father, and Louise for a girl. But the young parents became swept up with the rest of the nation on that

day, the day their child was born. Instead, they chose the name Jack in honor of the slain president.

Lloyd and Agnes Fitzgerald were not politically minded people, but the emotions running through Memorial Hospital in Easton affected them. And since Lloyd's parents had once told him that the family came from New England and may have been related to John Fitzgerald, former mayor of Boston and father to Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, it seemed like a natural tribute.

Of course, Jack Fitzgerald never told any of this convoluted legend to his fellow workers at USDA. Most never made the link between his name and JFK, probably because they were too young.

Fitzgerald's upbringing was ordinary. The only thing exceptional about him was his gifted athletic abilities. He was a standout in most sports. He led his small Catholic high school to a basketball championship and a rare winning record for the tiny school. He also was an avid outdoorsman -- a hunter, trapper, and the type who liked to prepare for wilderness survival.

The conversations quieted when the door separating the secretary's office and the conference room opened. Melody Juarez, the secretary's chief of staff, a 30-year-old Harvard-educated lawyer, led Secretary Segura into the room. As Segura crossed in front of the second set of windows, he reached for his chair. His body suddenly twisted at the moment everyone heard a high-pitched ping. Shards of glass imploded into the room.

The secretary grabbed at his left shoulder. His knees buckled and he fell against the chair and table. Jack Fitzgerald had just entered the room with his cell phone at his ear. He saw what was happening and yelled at the others to get down under the table.

The chaos filled with screams as bodies fell in all directions. Fitzgerald scrambled toward the secretary, pushing confused colleagues under the table as he ducked

but searched for the source of the disruption. Shouts came from outside the conference room.

“Keep your heads down!” Fitzgerald commanded as he got to the secretary.

“Something hit my shoulder, Jack!” Secretary Segura sputtered to Fitzgerald through a look of shock.

“It looks like you took a bullet, Mr. Secretary. You’ll need to stay down and try to be calm. I don’t think it’s serious.”

“Is anyone else hurt?”

“Martin is down. I need to check on him.”

Martin Johansen was a member of the Secret Service assigned to Secretary Segura. He followed the secretary, but not with the same intensity given higher profile cabinet members, such as State and Defense. However, Homeland Security had raised the alert status in recent weeks, which prompted closer watch over all members.

Melody Juarez was now crouching next to Segura, concerned and frightened.

“Are you all right, Jorge?”

“I’ll be fine, Melody. Make sure no one else is hurt while Jack checks on Martin.”

“You have to put pressure on the wound, Melody. Push on his shoulder!” Fitzgerald barked at her.

Some of the younger men were crawling out from under the table as things quieted. They instructed others to stay put.

The building’s security guards entered the room with pistols drawn. Jack Fitzgerald knelt over Martin’s still body. He yelled at the guards to get paramedics.

“There are at least two injuries, including the secretary of agriculture,” Fitzgerald shouted. “They need immediate medical attention!”

One of the security guards turned quickly and left the conference room. “Call 911!” he yelled to Berta, who stood

outside the doorway, hands over her mouth and tears welling in her eyes.

The guard pulled his two-way radio from his belt. “Send the building nurses to the secretary’s conference room pronto!”

“They’re on their way already. What’s happening, Ron?” the voice from the radio blurted.

“It looks like terrorists! The secretary is down. Alert the White House!”

“10-4.”

“The secretary wants to know how Martin is doing, Jack,” Melody Juarez uttered calmly, knowing that others were trying to manage their fear.

“He has a pulse, but it’s weak. He’s bleeding from the back of his head. He needs medical attention. He needs it now.”

“Jack, the secretary is losing blood and starting to fade on me!” Juarez pleaded.

“Keep the pressure. Somebody help Melody! Get a hand on the wound and put pressure to stop the bleeding – back of his left shoulder!”

The three men standing over the secretary and Juarez knelt and did as told.

Fitzgerald looked up to see a team of paramedics hurry into the room. He began describing the situation to the paramedic who came to his aid.

Another ran to Melody and Secretary Segura. Two nurses followed the paramedics. One went to Secretary Segura, the other to Agent Johansen.

As the medical teams took over, Jack Fitzgerald moved toward the pierced windows. Outside, police cars were filling Jefferson Drive.

More than a dozen fully armed military police were securing The Mall. People – mostly tourists and federal workers – were lying on the ground as instructed by nervous soldiers.

The activity made Fitzgerald think of Baghdad and the streets outside the Green Zone when rockets suddenly disrupted activities inside the allegedly protected area. Thoughts of Baghdad took him back further to his first sniper mission inside Iraq in July 1990, nine days before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Basra Market

Basra, al-Basra Province, Iraq
July 24, 1990

“Fitzgerald, wake up. It's time to move.”

Navy Lieutenant Jonathan Corrigan gave his young ensign a half-hour of rest in the small merchant boat anchored in the Shatt Al-Arab River. Lieutenant Corrigan was passing Ensign Jack Fitzgerald to a team of Iraqi farmers who sold produce as street vendors in Basra City. The Naval officers were disguised in native clothing, bearded, and trained to speak enough Maghrebi Arabic to avoid instant suspicions.

Corrigan waited for sunset before docking near the market.

“There they are. Give them the light signal,” Corrigan told Fitzgerald.

Three men grabbed a rope from the young ensign. One spoke to the officers in broken English while the others secured the boat.

“I am Faisal. I am interpreter for Jack Fitzgerald.”

“I'm Jack. Can you take the bag?”

Fitzgerald handed Faisal a padded bag and climbed the two stone steps. He turned to his lieutenant.

“I have 2103 hours, sir. Same time tomorrow?”

“Good luck, ensign. Shoot straight.”

The other Iraqi farmers threw the docking lines back into the small boat, and Lieutenant Corrigan guided the

craft south less than a kilometer. His destination was a French tanker in queue for oil.

Faisal and the others led Ensign Fitzgerald to a 1970s vintage Datsun pickup truck. Faisal drove and the two farmers jumped in the cargo section. The American assumed he was to ride shotgun.

“We are driving west 90 kilometers. The Kuwaiti officer you must kill is meeting with a man from Baghdad.”

“Do we know who is coming from Baghdad?” the young ensign asked.

“We are not certain, but we hear that it is Barzan Ibrahim Hasan al-Tikriti. He is Saddam Hussein’s half brother. He is Ambassador to United Nations in Geneva. He is very rich and we think he brings money for Kuwaiti general in exchange for military information. Barzan will take the information directly to Hussein tomorrow after your ambassador meets with our crazy leader.”

“Is he really crazy?”

“He must be. He does not want us to grow food for our people. He destroys our farms.”

Jack Fitzgerald studied the dark buildings that passed along the roadway. He was quite nervous.

After traveling for nearly two hours, Faisal turned off his headlights and slowed as he approached an abandoned structure. It appeared to be a two-story house backlit by a starry sky. The men in the back of the pickup used flashlights to guide Faisal as he crept closer to the house.

“You have a torch? You will need it to see the steps,” Faisal told Fitzgerald. “There is a table and chair in the room up there.” He pointed to an open window on the second floor. “Barzan is to meet the officer in the morning near the old well. It is approximately 400 meters from here. We will signal you when we drive this direction. You will know that they have arrived.”

“Did our intelligence officer know the Kuwaiti general was meeting Hussein’s brother?”

“I do not think he knew. We just learned today.”

Fitzgerald had studied Hussein and his family. He knew that Barzan al-Tikriti was once Saddam’s intelligence chief. *Should I kill him as well?*

One of the first things the Defense Intelligence Agency instructs a new recruit is to follow mission instructions closely. *Don’t think, do.* That implanted thought was enough to answer his question.

Jack Fitzgerald lit his flashlight in the empty house. He climbed the rustic stairs and found the table and chair. He looked over the setup. The window in the room across the narrow hallway would illuminate the upstairs with morning light. He didn’t have to worry about the flash from his rifle showing his location easily because of a darkened background. Still, he decided to set his rifle with the barrel protruding outside, using the sill as an additional brace.

After preparing his weapon, Jack set his alarm on his watch. He sat upright in his chair, faced in the direction of his target, and dozed.

The buzzer on his wrist awoke him at 0530. Morning light filled the empty structure, but sounds that he expected were absent. It was eerily quiet.

He felt awkwardly exposed to emptiness. The still air was hot and dry. No noises of birds welcoming the day or roosters crowing. No movement. No nothing.

He walked around to start his circulation again. He did pushups on the floor and stretched his back in several directions to make sure he was awake and prepared for his assignment.

He saw the first movement at 0700. He took his position on the floor and looked through his scope. A large car circled the short brick structure that Jack assumed was the top of the ancient well that Faisal described to him. The driver parked at an angle facing the well. He could see

the man's bearded face and headgear. He considered it an easy shot.

To the left, Jack caught a glimpse of movement. He pulled his eye away from the scope and saw Faisal's pickup approaching the house.

Jack suddenly realized how flat and barren the land was. As a farm boy, he was not surprised that his sniper location was abandoned many years earlier. *Why would anyone want to live here?*

Another vehicle arrived. Like the sedan, it pulled up within a few feet of the bricks. The driver stepped out. Jack could see that it was his target, the Kuwaiti general.

Two doors opened on the sedan, the driver, an imposing figure, and another man approached his target. The driver carried an attaché case.

Jack watched his target through his scope lens. He carried an envelope. Jack knew instantly that he needed to kill the general to prevent the exchange, to scare away the sedan driver and his passenger.

He squeezed the trigger and felt the recoil push against his braced shoulder. He quickly bolted a second round and searched again with his scope.

The general was down. The two men ducked and scrambled for the safety of the sedan.

Jack centered the scope hairs on the driver, who looked in the direction of the house. Jack knew they still wanted the envelope that lay next to the fallen general. The car was not moving.

He fired again, aiming slightly behind the driver; a scare shot shattered the window behind the driver's head. The shot did what Jack wanted. The car sped away.

Jack suddenly felt nervous. He searched the area again with his scope. Another man walked up to the slain body. Jack could see it was one of the farmers that rode in the back of Faisal's pickup. He carried a sword. He swung

it at the general. The farmer picked up the head and held it for Jack to see through the scope.

The farmer retrieved the envelope and took both to the well. He leaned over the ancient hole and dropped the head first and then the envelope. He walked to the general's car and drove away.

USDA Whitten Building

"Jack, what do you see?" asked Ralph Woodridge trying to regain control of the chaotic situation in the secretary's conference room.

Homeland Security officers joined the growing number of concerned employees. One officer carried a video camera that was already recording. They moved from person to person to check for collateral wounds and to get a quick review of what happened.

"Ralph, the shots couldn't have come from The Mall. The angle is too low," Jack reported to his boss.

"Excuse me, sir, are you in charge here?" one of the Homeland Security officers asked Fitzgerald.

"No, he is." Jack pointed at Woodridge.

Turning and looking at Woodridge, but staying with Fitzgerald despite Jack's deference to the agency administrator, the officer continued his questions.

"Were you in the room when the assault occurred?"

"I had just entered when the shots pierced the windows and the two men went down. Yes, I saw and heard it all."

"Sir, can you describe what you heard from outside?"

"Nothing from outside, but the way the windows imploded, I assumed it was semi-automatic weapon fire of two or three rounds; a high-powered sniper rifle."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"The shots had to have come from on top of the Museum of American History."

CHAPTER 2

Out of Africa Nightclub

Abuja, Nigeria

Three months earlier - a late Friday evening

A kinlana Zaira studied the beautiful Jacqueline Lefebvre. She was high and freely swaying to the American blues that filled the nightclub. He could tell she was relaxed and euphoric.

They watched the nightclub's spinning lights and listened to the local DJ introduce another late-night set in his distinctive and affected English.

The Nigerian club had thinned in the early morning hours. The hangers on were in a similar state of catatonic pleasure.

Zaira had provided the hashish. He brought it to Abuja where he met earlier with Pak Yong-sung, a wealthy Korean now living in the United States.

Pak and Jacqueline were traveling companions. They had been to Paris, Jacqueline's previous home, and Casablanca, where Pak met officials from Morocco to make new cartel arrangements for Zaira.

The native of Niger sipped a local brew and gloated when he noticed club patrons gawking at Jacqueline and coveting his fortunate proximity to the stunning white lady in her clinging attire.

Jacqueline, 41, began her career as an interior designer at the Louvre Museum. She designed rooms for visitors to see the world's largest art collection. After a few years, though, even the Louvre became mundane. She needed more hands-on work with individuals. She needed more customer feedback, more satisfaction from the elegance she created. Los Angeles was a perfect spot to feed her ego, and Pak Yong-sung was the perfect patron saint.

Pak had retired for the evening and returned to their hotel a few blocks from the nightclub. He had given Zaira

cash to entertain Jacqueline and eventually to put her in a taxi when she had her fill of wine, blues, and hashish, which wafted illegally throughout the nightclub to the joy of others.

Akinlana Zaira was a foot soldier in Pak Yong-sung's newly organized drug cartel. He was one of three individuals whom Pak had selected to transport locally produced marijuana, cocaine, and black-market pharmaceuticals.

Each drug mule created proprietary routes in North Africa. They delivered to ports where the goods were shipped to Europe and the United States. Zaira and the others needed safeguards from local authorities, which Pak arranged.

Zaira enjoyed freedom to traverse the desert highways because Pak worked with various government authorities providing cash, Asian whores, and American entertainers as payment. The whores and entertainers were enticed to participate, to provide the foreign leaders personal services in exchange for an endless supply of drugs.

While his drug mule sat ogling his lady companion, Pak used his quiet moment at the hotel to place a call to Washington, D.C.

"Do you think his plan can work?"

"It's plausible, but the coordination will require extraordinary care. The American farmer can be gullible, but the marketing gurus who move the commodities are far more suspicious."

"Thank you. I will keep you informed about his progress. He will be in Nigeria soon to complete his local trial."

At the nightclub Zaira could tell that Jacqueline had finally had enough of the fun and the buzz. She was ready to sleep. He was not.

"Will you get me a cab now, Akinlana? You have me so high I need Pak's bed before I collapse in a heap."

“Of course. Let me pay our waiter. I will walk you outside for a taxi.”

Zaira stood and found the waiter. He chatted with him and passed him a handful of cash.

“Come, Miss Jacqueline. I will escort you outside. Our young waiter will assist you.”

He held out his hand. Her knees were rubbery under her own weight. She leaned against Zaira for support. He knew her mind functioned, but her body seemed unwilling. The aroma from her expensive perfume sent a bolt of desire through his loins. He steadied her walk with an arm around her shoulder, his hand contrasting starkly against her pale white skin.

“You smell more beautiful than a rose, Miss Jacqueline.”

“Are we almost there? I’m feeling so light-headed,” she slurred. “I’ve never known hash to make me feel this way before. It’s more than a high. Is this some of the marijuana that Pak is growing here, Akinlana?”

“Yes. The African soil makes it very potent.”

Outside, the waiter stood in anticipation of the human exchange. Zaira handed Jacqueline to the young man and slipped away. She was now nearly comatose, leaning against the waiter, fully aware of her surroundings, but unable to do anything proactively, not even speak. She wondered where Akinlana had gone and why he departed without saying anything more.

The young waiter fidgeted to hold her still so she wouldn’t fall. He looked around anxiously. Seeing no one he put his hand on her breast.

Jacqueline felt the assault but could not move away from the groping hand. She had thoughts of escape but to no avail.

Meeting no resistance the waiter reached inside the low-cut evening dress and cupped her right breast in his hand excited by the liberties he was experiencing. He

groaned with pleasure kneading her soft skin with his calloused hands nearly letting Jacqueline slip from his hold.

Fear shot through her body. She remained helpless. The young man smiled when he saw the anguish in her eyes knowing the drug locked her body cruelly.

Car lights panned across the buildings on the other side of the street. The vehicle turned and pulled in front of the excited waiter with his dangling victim. The passenger door opened. He eased her into the seat, letting his hand swipe across her breasts one last time. He closed the door and the vehicle sped off.

The Mall

Washington, D.C.

March, present time - Monday evening

A hooded jogger looked for quiet space to rest as he neared the Capitol. He slowed. When he found a suitable area, he leaned against a tree trunk and pulled his cell phone from his Nike warm ups. He punched in the numbers and waited.

“Hello.”

“Have you been watching the news?”

“Yes. Where were you?”

“In his conference room. Did you have anything to do with the shooting?”

“No, of course not. What can you tell me?”

“Not much.”

“Is he dead?”

“No. I don’t think his Secret Service agent is going to survive, though.”

“I want to hear more when you have details. Did they catch the shooter?”

“Not yet.”

“Can you learn more?”

“Yes, sir. It may take me a day or two, but I’m already working on it.”

Ritz-Carlton Hotel
Grand Cayman
Tuesday

The stretch Phantom Rolls Royce returned from the Owen Roberts International Airport for the third time. The door captain’s white glove gripped the rear handle. He opened the door briskly but carefully. Heinrich Althaus’s alligator shoes appeared first followed by the distinguished and perfectly coiffed body of a man in his early 60s.

He wore an opened-collar white shirt and pleated khaki pants. A salmon-colored cashmere sweater covered his shoulders. The sleeves were tied in a single knot in the center of his chest. Sunglasses sat on top of his wavy silver hair. Each hair held its place despite the sea breeze’s attempts to ruffle it.

Women half his age stopped to watch Althaus – tall, tan, and confident. He handed the door captain a U.S. \$100 bill.

“Please have my bag delivered to my suite, the clothes pressed, and hung in the closet.”

“Yes, sir. It’s good to see you again, sir. I hope you’ll enjoy your stay.”

The door captain, a London transplant, would assert again that the gentleman’s German accent was Bavarian, not Dutch as the bell captain claimed.

Althaus gave the attractive woman at the front desk his platinum American Express card without saying a word. She was dressed in very traditional hotel work attire – blazer, white blouse, Eileen Fisher scarf, and Ralph Lauren khaki skirt.

“Your suite is ready, Mr. Althaus,” she told him after glancing at his card, excited to finally meet the guest face to face. “I also have a message for you, sir.”

She reached under the counter and pulled out an envelope with a wax seal and the initials “PYS” stamped in the center. Althaus flashed a smile, thanked her, and handed her \$50.

She reached for the money without looking at it, still transfixed by his smile. Playfully, he hung onto the bill until she realized what was happening. Embarrassed, she dropped her eyes and thanked him quietly. Her hand retreated slowly with the money.

“You’re welcome, dear. What is your name?”

“Allison.”

“American, I presume.”

“Actually, I’m Canadian – Windsor, Ontario.”

“That’s almost like being an American.” Althaus chuckled, pleased with his own humor.

He studied her as she completed work on the computer. Her complexion was clear and radiant. She had model beauty except for a slightly crooked nose. A hockey injury at 15. A 16-year-old boy decked her with an angry elbow after her slap shot whizzed past his shoulder, past the goalie, and into the net. The legend in Windsor is that Allison McCrae scored during the day and the boy scored at night becoming her first lover.

“Dear Allison, do you think you’ll be able to remember my room number if I call for anything? If the bell captain will permit,” he said, turning to acknowledge the captain standing over his right shoulder, “I’d like for you to deliver said items to me yourself.”

They both looked at the trapped bell captain. He offered a reluctant smile and nod.

“Good, then I hope to see you later, Allison from Windsor, Ontario.”

On the balcony of the top floor penthouse overlooking the swimming pools, courtyard, and a full panoramic view of the North Sound, Pak Yong-sung stood forlornly. He sipped from a glass of Perrier water. He asked his confidential assistant, Dhon Du-Ho, to check with the front desk. He reminded Dhon that the others should have arrived by now.

“Please make sure they know that I am expecting to start our discussion promptly,” Pak told Dhon.

“Yes, Pak. I will have them here by seven.”

Dhon, nearing 50, had served Pak for more than 20 years. When they met, Pak had amassed a fortune as a commodities trader in Seoul. He was in search of a new confidential assistant after firing his previous aide for leaking business information to a competitor. A mutual acquaintance introduced Dhon to Pak, who hired the new assistant on the spot.

Dhon was smart, deferential, and dignified. He called the hotel’s front desk.

“Ritz-Carlton front desk. This is Allison McCrae. How may I help you?”

She told Dhon that the two gentlemen had arrived just like he said they would, Robert Barnsworth first and then Heinrich Althaus. They had been handed the sealed envelopes.

“Thank you, Miss Allison. Did Mr. Althaus make a date with you?”

The question caught the young woman by surprise, so she hesitated at first.

“He asked that I personally bring any requested items to his room, Mr. Dhon. Was that an improper request? He did not ask that we go out on a date.”

“No, Miss Allison. Mr. Althaus is an adult, but you must use your womanly instincts well. His charm and manners are self indulgent, if you can understand my warning.”

“I think I do, Mr. Dhon. I appreciate your concern.”

Being the thorough and cautious assistant, Dhon had learned McCrae’s life story well in advance of Althaus’s introduction to the young beauty. He felt comfortable that another Althaus conquest would not compromise their purpose for being on Grand Cayman.

A Canadian, educated at the University of Michigan, she had completed a senior-year internship with an Ohio Congresswomen as part of her political studies. Her Canadian citizenship made it too difficult for her to find a full-time job on Capitol Hill, so a placement firm introduced her to personnel at the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Washington, D.C. A different kind of career was launched in hotel management.

At seven sharp, a knock broke the silence in Pak’s penthouse suite. Dhon opened the door to two distinguished gentlemen waiting to enter. Dhon bowed his head in deference, pulling the door open as he glided gracefully backwards. In strode Althaus and Barnsworth.

“Greetings, gentlemen.”

Pak’s voice came from the background. They could see his silhouette against the window that glowed from the setting sun. They entered and Dhon closed the door behind them. They sat at a table in the open area of Pak’s suite.

Heinrich Althaus and Robert Barnsworth were Pak Yong-sung’s closest associates and board members of his small but powerful holding company, Global Anchor, registered in Grand Cayman.

“I presume your travels were uneventful,” Pak said as he sat.

“Uneventful and always a pleasure to visit the Caymans when Chicago’s in the 40s,” said Robert Barnsworth.

Barnsworth, 60, was still a small-town farm boy at heart, although the international company he presided over controlled millions of acres of working farmland worldwide.

But few knew, because his land holdings were so skillfully diversified that it masked his wealth and influence.

On the scientific front, Barnsworth also managed seed operations and livestock labs across the globe. They enabled him to reconstitute the world's food supplies within five years if natural or man-made tragedy wiped out all traditional food resources. Of course, that assured his wealth regardless of the severity of any worldwide catastrophic event.

Barnsworth was a poster child for the agrarian myth and Midwestern work ethic. However, he also was perceived as somewhat naïve.

"I think Robert is afraid of flying, Pak," Althaus chimed in. "He sends his associates to more comfortable places than Chicago in the winter, while he stays on top of the Hancock Building. He'd rather look at a frigid Lake Michigan and a flat tundra than visit more exotic locations."

"I enjoy my city, Henry. True. I travel where I'm needed. In fact, I'm headed to South America next week. But generally, there's no need to jet around the world. I can talk to anyone face to face whenever I want to with technology."

Heinrich Althaus was known as a kingmaker. Every leader among the world's most powerful nations knew him. They used his counsel when elections were eminent, or when they needed to shuffle cabinet leaders, advisors, and staffs. He was often called on when civil unrest threatened national unity.

Born in Munich, Germany, Althaus had become a citizen of the United States, although he had no patriotic loyalties anywhere. His ambivalence strengthened his credibility wherever his advice was sought.

"Gentlemen, we must talk about serious matters."

"Of course, Pak. I apologize for our banter. Did Jacqueline accompany you this trip?" Barnsworth asked.

“She did, but she is still reluctant to be seen by anyone other than Dhon and me.”

“She shouldn’t be concerned about the two of us,” Althaus offered. “We’re eager to help her recover, to feel comfortable in the social settings that make her such an asset to you, Pak.”

“Dhon, see if Jacqueline would like to greet our colleagues?”

Dhon Du-Ho went to Pak’s bedroom and tapped the door gently. The door opened and Dhon slipped inside, the door closing behind him.

“The incident has put great stress on our relationship,” Pak admitted. “My resentment seems to build each day.”

“Heinrich may know more of the detail than I do, Pak, and if you don’t care to tell us, I understand, but you must talk to each other about what happened in Abuja.”

“I agree with you, but it causes such emotion for both of us. She talks to her psychologist and that helps her heal, but nothing seems to bring her closer to me. Our relationship is very strained.”

“What can we do, Pak?” Althaus asked.

“Help me kill Zaira.”

“But I thought Jacqueline was not certain who attacked her.”

“It’s coming back to me more each day.” Her voice surprised them. She stood stoically at the bedroom doorway. The men rose in well-schooled manners to greet her.

Jacqueline Lefebvre walked slowly into the room followed by Dhon. Her stride was measured, her demeanor shy. She was not the same elegant lady Althaus and Barnsworth last saw before Pak and Jacqueline left for their business trip in December.

“I’m sorry I have been hiding from my friends. I am ashamed of what happened to me.”

“You don’t need to be ashamed.”

"I hear that, Robert, but it never should have happened. I was foolish for indulging and making myself vulnerable."

"He drugged you!" Pak pleaded.

"Drugged her with what, Pak?" Althaus asked.

"With GHB," Dhon explained. "Ecstasy. It's what Americans call the date-rape drug."

"And that is what happened to me. He raped me. He taunted me, hid his face from me, and raped me. My muscles would not move. He was mean, vicious, crazy, and angry."

The men stood quietly while Jacqueline sobbed. Barnsworth and Althaus watched Pak. His eyes were cast downward. He was embarrassed that he allowed his lady friend to be victimized.

"Was it Zaira who did this to you, Jacqueline?" Althaus asked nervously.

"I did not know at first, but yes, Heinrich, it was Zaira. I know because of the sounds he made and something he said to me at the nightclub. He said I smelled like a rose. When he was raping me and hitting me, he would stop and make a point to smell the perfume on my neck."

Barnsworth listened to her painful recollection watching Pak seethe as he heard the story again.

"I am so sorry that you had to experience that, Jacqueline. I wish there was something I could say or do to make it less traumatic."

"There's nothing, Robert, although I appreciate your attempt. I'm hoping time will work on my fears like it is working to heal my physical wounds. I'm getting stronger. I'm getting braver. I stepped out to show all of you that I'm getting braver."

"You are a strong woman, Jacqueline. I've told them and now I'm telling you. I am going to kill Zaira for what he did to you."

“I need to rest again, gentlemen. The stress of reliving the moment exhausts me.”

She turned and went back into the bedroom and closed the door. The men stood momentarily before Dhon spoke.

“This is the first I’ve heard you speak of revenge, Pak.”

“I have been plotting, but I’m not satisfied that my current plan is gratifying enough.”

“You must be careful, Pak, that you don’t let emotions cloud your judgment. If you want Zaira dead, don’t dwell on it,” Althaus told him. “Zaira lives in a region where plenty of people kill for money.”

“I know, Heinrich. I will take care of him quickly. I must. He betrayed my trust and has severely affected Jacqueline’s life, and through her, my life has been changed as well. I’m suffering from enormous guilt, but I cannot let it sidetrack our mission.”

Ironically, the anger and tension Pak Yong-sung was feeling as a result of the physical crime committed against Jacqueline Lefebvre was similar to what he hoped to stir among the world’s political and government leaders through his deliberate antagonism. Althaus, Barnsworth, and Dhon knew the plan. They agreed, too, that the antagonism would provide them a platform for wealth.

Pak believed turmoil and tension in the political world were roots of progress. He often pointed to examples that he believed were evidence: Islamic unity after the creation of a Jewish state. Although today that unity had become fragile again, because greed among Arab leaders was trumping anti-Semitism.

America’s commitment to land a spacecraft on the moon followed by its subsequent technology boon was another example. It would not have happened if not for the Soviet Union’s Sputnik success in the 1950s.

Fear and global anger were the catalysts. It motivated Pak to drive more wedges, to be the antagonist so turmoil and tensions continued.

Nationalism will fade, he told his wealthy followers. Religious and cultural differences will disappear as open borders allow people to commingle. Not instantly, but over time. A passive world society will evolve, he said. It will end science and technology competition. Fortunes will fade. Humans will be content with small and uninspired life changes.

Pak was determined to prevent the death of human ingenuity and progress. His mission was to stir the ingredients that kept creative juices flowing – turmoil, tension, and anger.

He also set personal goals. He intended to be the richest man in the world supported by the next richest, Robert Barnsworth, and the man most cherished for his worldly connections, Heinrich Althaus. Wealth meant power, and power meant he could keep civilization active and progressive.

That's what made it ironic that his personal life was in turmoil. His lover and companion was victimized; their lives torn asunder. He saw first hand the power and destructive nature of hatred.

"Robert, were you able to keep up with your beta test in Nigeria? I apologize that Zaira's assault on Jacqueline set my participation back these three months, but I am ready to resume."

"Here is a summary of my report for tomorrow, Pak. Nigeria is the second leading producer of corn on the African continent. It is the most populated country in Africa, so its agricultural output has gained attention from philanthropic supporters worldwide, but especially in the States."

"I have made donations myself, so I know the effort is well supported," Pak added.

"Nigerian farmers produce about six million metric tons of corn annually. The nation consumes more than

that, so it imports from the United States, Argentina, and other exporters.”

“Are they using better farming techniques, better fertilizers to get better yields -- more grain per acre?”

“Yes, Henry. I’m impressed that you’re finally understanding my business.”

“What is your beta test supposed to reveal, Robert?” Dhon asked.

“My Nigerian subsidiary owns about 20,000 acres, all in corn. With Henry’s intervention, we’ve convinced Nigeria’s agricultural minister to let us introduce a genetically modified seed without media attention. Our labs believed it would do extremely well in the climate and soil. And they were right. But the output reported to local markets was only slightly improved. I kept 100,000 bushels hidden. I sold them into the local marketplace right before most Nigerian farmers marketed last fall’s harvest. Well-placed calls encouraged other large operations to do the same.”

“What did you learn?”

“Dhon, we learned that if farmers around the world react like Nigeria’s farmers, our project to affect world commodity markets will work.”

“So, they panicked when you sold more than their government estimated was in the marketplace?”

“Yes, and prices fell, which caused more farmers to bring their grain to market, which caused the prices to fall further. The downward spiral was, in fact, surprisingly unstoppable.”

“The market watchers in Nigeria may not be as sophisticated as they are in the States, South America, and elsewhere,” Althaus claimed.

“True, Henry, but I believe the panic was a natural human reaction that happens regardless of expert opinions. They’re too suspicious of market manipulators.”

“I take it, Robert, that you are confident in your larger plan.”

“I am, Pak. I have set up meetings with my farm leaders in each of our primary regions. We will go over the details carefully. When I give them the signal, we will push the first dominos and watch what happens.”

“When?”

“In about 60 days, Dhon. Corn harvest has begun. Soybeans will start soon. Production will appear equivalent to last year. Pre-harvest reports confirm that. We have the government’s inspectors paid well. They will keep the American and French diplomatic corps away from our fields when we’re harvesting. We’ll top off our underground silos as we haul the grain to our facilities. Then we’ll be set.”

“How do you expect North America’s producers to react to the reports from Brazil and Argentina?”

“Planting season has started in the southern states. Most U.S farmers had terrific growing seasons the last two years and expect another this year. Exports hit a record. They’ll work the land hard, grow more, and solidify their export markets while South America appears to have less to sell. America’s farmers are on a production binge.”

“How do we make money off your scheme?” Dhon asked.

“We’ll short the markets right before we begin our selloff. I’m predicting modest gains of about a billion dollars.”

“Where does the turmoil come from? That’s what you hope for, Pak, correct?”

“Yes, Dhon, more turmoil. Robert, can you explain to Dhon what antagonism you hope to create?”

“There are two areas where I expect conflict to escalate. Presuming the panic works to drive down grain prices, the American farmer will look to Congress to rescue their businesses. Farmers will invest heavily in this year’s crop.

If their income this fall is less than their expenses, we expect to see smaller operations go under.”

“Do you think Congress will rescue farmers again?” Althaus asked.

“Lawmakers may not have a choice. Food and fiber are national security items. Congress cannot risk withholding support from the people who feed and clothe their nation.

“So, you’re saying Congress will have to find taxpayers’ money to keep farmers in business like they did for Detroit’s automakers and the nation’s banking industry?”

“Yes, Dhon. And here is what I’m after: Money spent to rescue farmers will complicate the nation’s debt problem.”

“America’s weaknesses are certainly our target, Robert. Your design makes sense.”

“Where is Europe in your scenario?” Althaus asked. “Are you including them?”

“Indeed, Henry. Our operations in Germany, France, and Italy produce grains on a much smaller scale, but it’s enough to skim, which I’ve done. The Ukraine is my European jewel. We’ll all move together when the time is right.”

“Do you have your details prepared?”

“I have a presentation with a timetable to go over tomorrow, Pak. My first move will be soon. We’ll line up the trucks and have the farmers lead the charge. When the markets react, I’ll buy a large portion to stabilize them. When the dust settles, we’ll drop twice as much. If you can get China to participate, Henry, we will see the floor absolutely collapse.”

“I’m eager to see your full plan laid out, Robert,” Pak said. “Now, on to my more immediate interest.”

“I knew you would get there eventually, Pak,” Barnsworth said.

“What have you learned about the shooting in D.C.?”

Barnsworth told Pak the shooter was a renegade. His sources inside the Washington Beltway said the shooter was a U.S. soldier, a farmer's son who was hoping to go back to the farm when he finished serving in the army.

"Apparently, there's nothing to go back to. His old man lost everything. Banks are foreclosing. The Department of Agriculture will pay off its guarantees to the lenders, but that represents a small portion of his debts. Bootheel of Missouri," Barnsworth added.

"What are some details about the boy and his parents, Robert?"

"The old man is African-American, but the boy's mother is white. They grew up together; same grade school, same high school. Only had about 240 acres, mostly cotton and rice, a few acres of soybeans and corn to feed some livestock."

"Did they find the boy?" Pak asked.

"Not yet. He's AWOL now, too."

"I heard a Secret Service agent was shot when the secretary was hit," Althaus said.

"Yes, that's true. In fact, I learned that he died just before I got on the plane to come here."

Pak wrote a few notes on his iPad while the others waited and watched.

"Our man on the inside was frightened by the experience. He asked if we had anything to do with the shooting. I told him we did not and asked him to report what he could."

The door to Pak's bedroom opened. Jacqueline came out in shorts, sandals, and a sweatshirt.

"I want to walk along the beach. Will you join me, Pak?"

"Yes, Jacqueline. We are done meeting for tonight. I will be ready in five minutes."

She returned to the bedroom and closed the door.

Pak wrapped up their summary briefings and excused his high-powered team until their morning strategy session. Dhon escorted Heinrich and Robert to the door and returned to Pak.

“Contact Washington, Dhon. I want the young American soldier Robert spoke about found before local police capture him. We need to protect him. I think he can be useful. And soon, very soon.”

CHAPTER 3

Leadership Gym

Lansdowne, MD

Tuesday evening

Rodney Armstrong dragged himself to the gym to meet 10 teenage boys. The boys had an eclectic set of issues. Some came from dysfunctional and poor families; others were well off, but maybe just as dysfunctional.

Together, they found solace in the gym where they were all the same and had one goal in mind – to play basketball.

Armstrong was successful at converting street kids into a respectable team. He had made a name for himself among national AAU competitors and college coaches, always finding a winning combination on the streets of Baltimore.

Tonight's gathering, however, was the third practice of an all-star squad from the Police Athletic League that Armstrong chose to sponsor for AAU competition.

Armstrong felt tired, but he knew he had to keep up a brave front for the boys. Nine of the 10 were already on the floor, warming up, shooting, and playing one-on-one matches.

Along the out-of-bounds line at center court, two white men dressed in casual business attire stood watching the boys. The one who Armstrong recognized waved for the coach to join them.

David Langdon, an attorney and father of David Clark Langdon III, one of Armstrong's trio of white players, had been to all three of the all-star team's practices. He was a nuisance, but one that Armstrong was willing to tolerate, because he had money and connections.

"Coach Armstrong, I want you to meet Jim Axelrod, vice president of sales for Under Armour and a personal

friend. I asked Jim to come watch you work and to see the boys practice. Hope you don't mind?"

Armstrong extended his hand. "Of course not. You didn't bring any warm ups with you did you, Jim?"

Axelrod and Armstrong chuckled, but Langdon jumped in, "No, he didn't this time, Rodney, but we're working on it. We need uniforms, warm ups, and shoes."

"Coach, I'm here to see what you've got. If I can help and David will let me play with his foursome this spring, we may be able to do something."

"Watch these young men play, Jim," Langdon said. "Under Armour will be glad they were first to put uniforms on them. But coach, where's your star? I've been telling Jim about Dante."

"He's supposed to be here," Armstrong said, searching the floor for 16-year-old Dante Brown, a man-boy, 6'5, 200 pounds and still growing.

Brown was the unspoken leader among the 10 boys. He established that at the first practice when he dominated scrimmage, slamming what would otherwise be layups by ordinary players, hitting 3s with regularity, and stealing rebounds with an uncanny jumping ability.

Brown was a complete package, minus a stable emotion.

"Kareem, where's Dante?" the coach yelled across the gym to the tallest player on the court.

Kareem Hilson was Brown's "boy." They had been friends since grade school. Obviously, they were both stretched on the same rack, Hilson more than Brown.

Hilson stood 6'8, but he weighed the same as Brown. He was wiry and deceptively strong. Armstrong called Hilson's long arms his ticket to college.

Hilson's baby face and light skin made him look more vulnerable than he was. He stayed one step behind Brown wherever they roamed, but he was always willing to try whatever his friend did first, including things they

shouldn't have been doing. They were more mischievous than they were bad.

The giant 16-year-old strolled toward his coach. He looked serious. He motioned for his coach to compromise on their meeting ground.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Armstrong said, "I need to find out what's going on with my player."

"Coach, Dante on his way," Hilson said.

"Everything OK, Kareem?"

"Not exactly, coach. He gonna talk to you. He out for revenge."

"Okay, Kareem. Get the team on the baseline."

Hilson broke from his coach and yelled to his teammates to take the baseline for sprints. Before they were able to react, Dante Brown walked into the gym. When the team's attention went to Brown, Armstrong watched the young man walk toward the pack.

Brown looked different to the coach, not as tall, not as confident. He wore slacks and a dress shirt, school wear for Cardinal Gleason School where Brown and Hilson had been enrolled since the sixth grade. The Catholic institution also happened to be Armstrong's high school alma mater.

It was a somber huddle on the baseline as the boys greeted Brown with a handshake, fist bumps, and saddened faces.

"Mr. Langdon, would you mind starting the men with their warm-up sprints, please, while I have a chat with Dante?"

Langdon picked up the whistle from the scorer's table at half court and instructed the players to line up along the baseline. He blew the whistle to start them as Armstrong guided Brown away from the noise.

"Where are your shoes, Dante?"

"Sorry, coach, I got some issues to fix."

"What's up, son?"

"My brother, Antoine. He was shot. He at St. Ann's."

“Antoine shot? He’s younger than you, right?”

“He 14. He on my team in the league. Officer Jackson’s team.”

“I remember him, Dante. What happened?”

“He been staying with his dad and hanging out on the street. Some guys popped him. Mom and I don’t know why. She pretty shook up. But I’m gonna find out what happened and take care of it.”

“Listen, Dante, I’ll find out why Antoine was shot. That’s my job. You need to spend time with your mother. What about Antoine’s father? He’s not your dad?”

“My dad walked out before I was born. Antoine’s dad just as slippery. He bailed when we both in diapers. Floyd the closest thing to a father we had. He a white dude who worked with Mom at the railroad. He Darlene, my sister’s dad. They never married, but we lived with Floyd for six years.”

Armstrong listened to the all-too familiar story. He had heard it repeated many times in 25 years of coaching at-risk, intercity teens. They stood in silence for a moment.

“Coach, I can’t stay. Mom at St. Ann’s. Antoine not awake yet.”

“Did he get shot in the back, son?”

“Yeah. You know?”

“I was at St. Ann’s when the shooting was called in. It happened yesterday afternoon.”

“Yeah. They beat him and then shot him in the back when he was on the ground. He 14!”

“Listen to me. Don’t do anything on your own. This is a police matter. Streets don’t shoot other streets for no reason, Dante. Your anger now won’t stop a bullet when you find out who did this.”

“I be ready.”

“Don’t pick up a gun, Dante. They’re hard to put down once you pick one up.”

“I gotta go, coach. Sorry I missin’ practice. I love playing. So do Antoine.”

Brown left the gym without protests from Rodney Armstrong. The coach understood the boy’s feelings, but the cop in him knew that it was suicide for his man-boy star athlete to seek revenge on Baltimore’s streets. He was a big target whose talents provided no shield from bullets and bad intentions.

Armstrong also knew that if Brown went searching with a gun in his hand, it was like giving the bad guys a pass to get out of jail free. Killing an angry, vengeful, and armed 16-year-old man-boy in Baltimore was an easy case for lawyers.

Armstrong was on his cell phone to the desk sergeant at homicide within seconds after Brown disappeared through the door of the gym.

Mr. Langdon finished the wind sprints. Kareem Hilson wandered over to Coach Armstrong who was on his cell. The boy giant was afraid for his friend and it showed on his face.

The coach turned Hilson around with a gentle pull on his shoulder. They moved onto the court after the coach disconnected his cell. Pain crept into Armstrong’s right arm. His chest tightened. He stopped.

“Go on, Kareem.” Armstrong looked at Mr. Langdon near the scorer’s table. He saw his backpack at arm’s length from Langdon.

“Mr. Langdon,” the coach said in a softer voice, “could you get me the bottle out of my backpack sleeve and bring it to me, quickly, sir?”

Langdon saw that Armstrong was in trouble and knew the signs. He grabbed the backpack and rifled through pockets and flaps as he scurried toward the coach. He pulled the nitroglycerin bottle from the case and handed it to Armstrong. The coach quickly slipped a tiny pill under his tongue and tried to relax his anguished body.

“Come sit down, coach,” Langdon directed. He put his right arm under Armstrong’s left armpit and moved him toward the scorer’s table.

The coach sat on the edge and sighed. “That hurts,” Armstrong admitted. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I’ve seen that look before. Do you want to call off practice?”

Jim Axelrod brought Armstrong a bottle of water from the vending machines at the entrance to the gym. “Are you feeling okay, coach?”

“A little rough, but I’ll be all right. I’m sorry for all the drama. I know you just wanted to see a little basketball.”

Axelrod shrugged his shoulders and looked at Langdon. “I expect nothing less than drama when David gets me involved in something.”

They all grinned a nervous smile of relief.

“I want you to see how quick these young men are up and down the court, Jim.”

Oxygen was feeding back into Armstrong’s bloodstream and brain. He gave a modest tweet on the whistle. “Grapevine.”

Nine players formed three lines, one line under the basket on the baseline, the other two on the out-of-bounds line on each wing. In the middle of the first trio with the ball was Jeramaine Fitcher, the smallest and fastest man on the team at 5’8, 140 pounds.

Fitcher, 15, a point guard, made decisions nearly as fast as his feet could motate up the court. His ebony skin glistened constantly, but no one ever saw a bead of sweat form.

He was always in control, which made him one of the best shoplifters in West Baltimore. Merchants knew to keep eyes peeled when the youngster poked around their stores, especially when he was with his usual pack.

On Fitcher's right wing was André Kanady, 16. The 5'11, 165 pounder, a shooting guard, was a streaky player, but always played with heart and reckless abandon.

On Fitcher's left wing was Jimmy Pipaski, 15, a bitter and somewhat careless individual. He was nevertheless a tenacious basketball player at 5'10 and 160 pounds. He and Fitcher shared point guard duties. Fitcher was the stronger offensive player and Pipaski, one of three white boys on the team, was the in-your-drawers defender. His intensity often set off combative situations during games. No opponent was too big for Jimmy to tangle with, so he often needed rescuing from himself.

Armstrong gave another short burst on the whistle and Fitcher leaned right. He passed the ball to Kanady who was already three steps onto the floor. Fitcher cut behind Kanady and the ball was in the air to Pipaski at half court.

The three young athletes weaved the floor gracefully, laid the ball up at the far end, and were headed back to the starting line.

The men looked at each other on the sideline, excited by the speed and body control. Pipaski made the second lay up.

Before the ball was through the net, Conrad Stuckey jerked it from the cords and snapped it left to Devon Randolph who whipped it to the younger Langdon and the next trio was gone.

Stuckey, 16, was easy to identify as Dr. Isaac Stuckey's son. At 6'1, 175 pounds, he was the brains of the court. He attended McDougal School, one of many private learning institutions in Baltimore. The schools were exclusive, expensive, but with an open-door scholarship program for minority students with extraordinary talents – star athletes, brainiaks and musicians.

Stuckey was an anomaly. He was African-American, so he looked like the scholarship kids, but he dressed and talked like the white kids. He didn't earn a scholarship,

although his brains deserved one; he went to McDougal because his old man could afford the tuition.

It was Stuckey's uncanny human instincts that his chums admired the most. He was born to heal. When he spoke, he soothed the air. When he touched someone, he mystified them with a sensation of instant comfort and calmness. Although humble, he stood his ground against the tough guys who were jealous of the attention he attracted.

Devon Randolph, 17, 6'3, 180 pounds, was not in the same league with the others intellectually, but he was a natural athlete, one of those amazing leapers whose head shot above all others when he jumped.

On the court he seemed smarter. He was always in the right spot, always knew where the ball was going before it got there, and always made tough plays look easy. He flunked a grade, but his mother, a migrant from the Dominican, was going to make sure that Devon finished high school and got a decent job to help his family. Community college basketball coaches had other ideas for Randolph's future.

Randolph's lead pass to Langdon was well out in front of him, but Langdon pulled it in with an outstretched, one-handed catch in full stride. With a touch of his blue-blooded father's flare, Langdon let the momentum of the pass whip the ball around his back before he released it on a perfect pass to Stuckey.

His teammates gave the showy move an artificial groan of amazement. The old man swallowed hard to keep from showing too much pride.

Like Stuckey, Langdon attended a private school, Gilbert Academy, in the heart of the city with a century-old tradition. Father involved the son in the Police Athletic League for more reasons than learning to appreciate the city's diversity.

Trey Langdon was picked up for selling marijuana and cocaine to his middle school classmates. He had started a moneymaking business with not-so-friendly associates. Closer oversight seemed like a more reasonable strategy to the elder Langdon than sending his kid to an out-of-state military high school for four years.

The younger Langdon found the solution more gratifying as well, and toed the line for the most part. Abstinence from drug trade was not as difficult as giving up the freedom and perks of self-employment.

Anthony Tony Spanni, 16, 6'2, 180 pounds, took the center position for the last set of grapeviners. He ripped the net and sent the ball to the boy giant positioned to his right.

Marcus Avery was the third person in the final group. Avery was built like Hilson, just not as tall. The 15-year-old stood 6'5 and weighed 175 pounds.

The three players covered the floor in about five steps each, all arms and legs cutting the air. Hilson took the last pass before the layup and stuck the ball through the rim like an electrician placing a bulb in a socket.

Kareem Hilson was born to be tall. His dad was 6'8 and loved basketball, too. The passion was natural and so was the name.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was the elder Hilson's favorite NBA player of all time. They both had grown up in Harlem where Abdul-Jabbar was known as Lew Alcindor. When Alcindor finished college, turned pro, changed his legal name and religion from Catholic to Muslim, Michael Hilson wanted to do the same thing. Catholic parents ended that dream quickly, but he clung to the name, Kareem, and gave it and his Catholicism to his son. He also gave him huge feet, long arms, and long legs.

Shy, Marcus Avery was still a rugged and gifted athlete. His thin frame couldn't out muscle Brown, Hilson, or the others, but Coach Armstrong had confidence he

would hold his position well. The mere fact that he battled with strong opponents during practice made it so.

Avery, just a freshman, had jumped from junior high to varsity basketball at St. John High School, archrivals to Cardinal Gleason. He had grown seven inches since his eighth grade year and already picked up some bruises and lessons from Brown and Hilson, varsity starters as seasoned sophomores.

Avery was a little timid at first, playing with Brown and Hilson as AAU teammates. He was afraid that the high school rivalry would spill over to their squad's practices. He was happily surprised when it didn't. Brown and Hilson seemed genuinely enthused to have Avery on their team.

Spanni was the enigma on the team. One hundred percent Italian and the third white player, Spanni enjoyed being mysterious. His teammates nicknamed him The Don. He played the part skillfully. He wore "wife-beater" undershirts that gripped his six-pack physique. Spanni spent hours in the weight room to stay muscled and tough looking. There was an overtly polite side as well. Sickening. Eddie Haskell like. But the kid could do amazing things with his strength and a basketball.

Spanni caught a final pass from Hilson and softly arched the ball at the basket from 18 feet away. Avery floated through the air with his right hand outstretched, caught the ball on the downward arc and slammed it into the basket.

Armstrong picked up a tenth player watching in the wings and the boys scrimmaged for 20 minutes until the coach withstood all the stress his body could tolerate. He blew the whistle and called the boys in, thanking the pick-up player and dismissing him from the conversation.

Before Armstrong could start his performance lecture, his cell phone began to vibrate. He pulled it from his

pocket and looked at the incoming number; police headquarters.

“Sit quietly a second. I need to take this call.” He tapped the phone. “Armstrong...”

The team, David Langdon, and Jim Axelrod watched the coach’s expression as he listened to the caller.

“Where’d you hear that? Is anyone guarding the Carver kid’s room?”

Armstrong’s gallery quickly grew still and attentive.

“Do you know where Brown is? There’s a chance he’s packing. Find him. Get him off the street for his own safety.”

Ritz-Carlton Hotel

Grand Cayman

That same evening

Allison McCrae was running through the sequence of duties that closed out her shift when the phone rang.

“Ritz-Carlton front desk, this is Allison.”

“I hope it is not too late to make my request, Allison from Windsor, Ontario.”

The sound of his voice excited her. “It’s never too late, Mr. Althaus. How may I be of service?”

“Well, Ms. Allison, I am in the mood for Dom Pérignon Rosé 1995. Do you think the hotel keeps a bottle of the rare champagne in stock?”

“I’m certain we have it, Mr. Althaus. Is there anything else?” Allison asked flirtatiously.

“Oh, yes, I’m not done. I also have a taste for Russian caviar. Do you have a recommendation, Ms. Allison?”

“I’m told the best is Imperial Ossetra.”

“That is what I need tonight, Ms. Allison, the best.”

“Two ounces or four-and-a-half, Mr. Althaus?”

“Well, let me see... do you like caviar, Ms. Allison?”

“I do enjoy caviar, yes, Mr. Althaus, but I cannot afford Imperial Ossetra.”

“Then you’ll have to join me and try it. Please make it four-and-a-half ounces, Ms. Allison. Please add French bread. And raspberry sorbet to cleanse the pallet. Do you have that, Ms. Allison?”

“Yes. It is now 8:30. Would nine o’clock be acceptable?”

“I will see you at nine; not a minute past.”

Allison McCrae called Chef Mikkael, who was also in charge of the wine cellar. She gave him the order. After a few unsavory remarks, which Allison expected because he complained with every order, he barked at one of his assistant chefs and then told Allison to be in the kitchen at 8:50, “not a minute before.”

That gave her just enough time to push the cart to the elevator, ride to the top floor, push the cart off the elevator, and be at Althaus’s room.

At 8:59, she stopped, checked the cart, pulled the scarf from her neck, opened a button at the top of her blouse, slipped on a simple gold necklace and fluffed her dark hair so that the right side fell over her face just enough to say, *I’m available*. She knocked.

Within a second, the handle turned. Allison immediately wondered if Althaus had watched her prep through the peephole. His reaction time was so quick.

“Precisely on time, my dear. I appreciate precision.”

Allison pushed the cart into the guest’s room with the practiced grace of a trained food servant, not a front desk clerk. “May I present the food and champagne on the coffee table in your sitting area, Mr. Althaus?”

“That would be perfect my dear, and may I say that you look even more stunning than I remember from this afternoon. Yet, I know you haven’t had time to change or freshen up.”

Allison gave a humble thank-you bow as she opened a white linen cloth across the coffee table. *He was watching me; I knew it.*

She lifted the iced champagne bucket to the center, placed the breadbasket to one side and iced caviar to the other. She sat the chilled sorbet, champagne coupes, and silverware behind the caviar. Her final settings were four crystal wine glasses and a small crystal carafe of a dark and thick merlot.

“The Dom Pérignon needs another five minutes on ice before you open it.”

“You are still uncertain whether you are a guest or a servant tonight, aren’t you, dear?” Althaus approached Allison and picked up her right hand with his left and stood in front of her, looking only at her eyes.

“I suppose you’re both, as long as you’re comfortable in that role.”

“I am not uncomfortable, but the moment is a little awkward. I’m very flattered by your attention. I don’t know anything about you, but I can tell that you are a man of prominence. I’m just Allison from Windsor, Ontario.”

Althaus enjoyed her quick use of wit to diffuse the romantic tension he meant to create. He asked her to sit while he poured a splash of the merlot.

“Chef Mikkael told me that the merlot prepares the palate nicely for champagne. I wouldn’t know. I rarely drink wine, and I know I’ve never had Dom Pérignon. A B-L Smoothie produces the only bubbles that hit my palate.”

“A B-L Smoothie...?”

“A Bud Light. It’s a silly euphemism. Sorry for my nervous chatter.”

“It’s all right. I’m a little nervous, too. Your Chef Mikkael, he’s good, I can tell. You see the champagne coupe glasses? He told you to put them next to the sorbet and not the champagne, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but I don’t really know why.”

“Many believe that French King Louis XVI designed the coupe in the shape of Marie Antoinette’s breasts so that he could be reminded of them when he drank his champagne. It may be true, but it’s not a smart way to hold the effervescence of the bubbly wine. A crystal wine glass, hand made and therefore, irregular in shape, does a much better job.”

“Fascinating.” Allison picked up the champagne coupe from beside the sorbet. “I guess Marie was a little flat-chested.”

“I believe it is time to try the Dom Pérignon Rosé and our Russian caviar, my dear Allison.”

Heinrich Althaus removed his blazer and prepared to uncork the champagne while Allison positioned the caviar closer to the expert. She could tell by the way he manipulated the corkscrew and bottle that he was in his element, so she was content watching.

Besides, Mikkael told her the champagne was \$350 and the caviar \$755. She was not about to accidentally spill fish eggs worth more than half a month’s rent by being over exuberant with an unfamiliar sealed jar. He seemed quite competent.

“I could unleash the cork as they do in the movies and watch my expensive champagne spray the room, but I think I will save that for another time. Would you hand me the linen towel, Ms. Allison?”

Althaus wrapped the bottle and eased the cork out. It gave a muted pop. He poured a splash in one of the crystal glasses and held it up in search of imperfections. Seeing none, he filled two glasses halfway. He handed Allison the second crystal glass and sat next to her.

“Cheers, my dear. May this taste and this moment last in your memory forever.”

With that, her body melted into the couch. She was content to let the evening happen whatever way Heinrich Althaus chose to direct it.

Robert Barnsworth also had returned to his room for the evening. He had set up his laptop and linked it to various Asian markets that had already opened for Wednesday trading.

Barnsworth watched the screen half-heartedly also sending a text message to his wife, Roberta, in Chicago. She told him of her day of social activities, including dinner with their two sons.

He wished her good night and set the alarms on his computer. The alarms were to alert him if price swings or volume movement occurred. He didn't want to be caught unaware of important changes while he slept. He claimed it allowed him to gain better rest knowing he wouldn't miss critical trading.

Meanwhile, Pak walked with Jacqueline Lefebvre along the beach. The sky to the west held a sliver of the day's blue. It was accented by an orange glow where the sun had disappeared into the sea. The waves slapped the sand gently with a relaxing cadence.

"My spirit has been broken, Pak. I am no longer a good companion. I'm sorry."

"You are still healing. I do not expect you to feel anything but anger. I am angry. I have not expressed it well, because I do not want my anger to slow your recovery."

"I think I need time alone. You should sell my mansion next to yours and I will move back to Paris. I do not feel like entertaining people. I do not feel like talking to people, hearing their pity, and judging me as damaged."

"I do not want you to leave, Jacqueline. You will make my old heart stop."

"No, Pak. I am your secondary passion. I know my role in your life. You will be fine."

"You are wrong. I am a ruthless businessman, I know. But my heart is as fragile as any man's. I long for your

company even when I am deeply involved in my work. Perhaps more so then.”

“I am certain I must leave.”

Pak stopped walking. He took her arm and turned her to face him.

“Do you blame me, Jacqueline? Please don’t blame me. I am like one of those seashells covered with barnacles I am so burdened with guilt. Please forgive me.”

“Pak, the only thing I blame you for was allowing me to be so stupid. So stupid, trusting, and gluttonous. I made myself a fool. You spoiled me. I assumed I could have everything I wanted whenever I wanted it, because I was your companion. I would be protected. I let myself be a deer in a lion’s cage, Pak. That’s all. It’s my fault, my naïveté, my gluttony.”

Jacqueline laid her head on Pak’s shoulder. It was the first time she touched him since the evening she was raped.

He put his arms around her shoulders and held her.

When Pak and Jacqueline returned from their walk they found Dhon Du-Ho in front of Pak’s portable electronics, watching Asian and Australian media via the satellite-fed television newscasts. Jacqueline put her hand on Dhon’s shoulder.

“Good night, Dhon, my dear friend.”

Her touch was a welcomed surprise. “Good night, Jacqueline.”

Pak asked Dhon if he would like a cup of hot tea before retiring for the night.

“Yes, Pak, let me fix one for both of us.”

“Thank you, Dhon. Then sit with me.”

Dhon prepared the tea and sat with Pak. He patiently watched the television screens while he waited for his mentor to speak.

“Jacqueline wants to leave me, Dhon.”

“I thought she was feeling better...”

“She is acting brave for my benefit.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I must allow her to heal in her way. But I am very angry. I must heal, too, in my way. Through revenge. Before I discuss that, you and I must talk about our mission.”

“We are succeeding, Pak. Your strategy is working very well.”

“I agree, Dhon, we have the right balance of power and influence. The irony is that we do nothing special. You should observe that many people in the world could do what we do, but they make themselves too busy to think beyond their small spaces on the planet.”

“Why is that, Pak?”

“Because there is no vision for the earth’s future. There are predictions and fears, but no one has taken the time to study life on a global scale. They are too concerned about protecting opinions and philosophies, religions, politics, and superstitions. They want to save their places on earth more than the planet itself.”

“Is our network of followers large enough to withstand setbacks like we have seen through Jacqueline’s tragedy? What would we do, for instance, if something happened to Robert or Heinrich?”

“Those are astute questions and the reason I wanted us to talk, Dhon. Akinlana Zaira’s betrayal and the harm he did to Jacqueline have occupied my thoughts for three months. Jacqueline’s decision to leave me causes me great pain, but it also opens my mind to other vulnerabilities.”

Pak cleared his throat and sat quietly a moment.

“I expect to live a long time, Dhon, but not forever. My grandfather was in his eighth decade, which means I, too, will probably live that long. Your ancestors have a similar history. So, you will have control of our organization, and therefore, our organization’s agenda for a decade. What does this mean?”

“That I must have a protégé to replace me when that decade ends.”

“Exactly. Do you have someone in mind?”

“Yes, Pak, I have found a man. He has weaknesses that we must correct, but he is extremely intelligent and has many ideas that will fit our goals.”

“Then you have a new task, Dhon. You must begin your work when we return to Los Angeles on Thursday. Let’s meet him to make sure he is the right person for our team.”

“I will lay a plan immediately, Pak.”

“Good, but first you have an important mission. You must find the young American sniper and create a new life for him. Our facility in Madagascar with the Periwinks will be a good training ground. I have immediate plans for the soldier.”

CHAPTER 4**Department of Agriculture**

Washington, D.C.

South Building 4th Floor

Friday

Jack Fitzgerald didn't own a black suit, so he wore his navy blue, a white shirt and a solid dark tie, which he loosened as he stepped off the elevator to the Agriculture Department's South Building fourth floor.

He asked himself if it was time to own a black suit. His parents were in their 70s, he had older uncles and aunts, and many of the friends he grew up with on Maryland's Eastern Shore had older parents that could go at any time. Funerals, he thought, might be something he needed to prepare for.

He wasn't prepared for today's. He wasn't prepared to see Martin Johansen's children clinging to their stoic mother as the minister read the Lord's Prayer. He knew the image of the mourning family at graveside would stick with him for a long time.

"Jack..."

"Ralph..."

"Did you go to the cemetery? I rode with Undersecretary Clark. We had to get back. She and I had a meeting with a small delegation from Vietnam."

"I'm sure Johansen's family understands. I know they were pleased that so many people from the department were at the church."

"Jack, have you heard anything more?"

"They're pretty sure it was a military weapon. An Army issue. And my sources at the Pentagon think they know who pulled the trigger."

"Who?"

"I'll tell you later, Ralph. Donna sent me a text message. Got a couple of people waiting for me."

FAS Administrator Woodridge agreed to catch up with Fitzgerald later. “Quickly, Jack, Secretary Segura is doing well and asked about you. He wants to see you.”

When Fitzgerald opened the door to his outer office, two men were standing in front of his secretary’s desk. They turned and met him with the genial warmth of city cops.

“Are you Jack Fitzgerald?”

“I am. And you are...?”

“My name’s Maloney. And this is Herbert. We’re with the Metropolitan Police Department. We’re homicide detectives and we’d like to talk to you about the incident in the secretary of agriculture’s office.”

Fitzgerald explained that he was just getting back from a very sad funeral, so the “incident,” as they called it, was very fresh on his mind.

“Please come in. Donna, will you please take messages if the phone rings, and let everyone know that I’ll call them back as soon as I can? How far behind am I now?”

“Fifteen, Jack; a couple of media inquiries among them. I’ll keep your phones quiet until you’re done.”

“Thanks, Donna. Gentlemen, follow me.”

Detectives Maloney and Herbert thanked Donna Monroe for her courtesies and joined Fitzgerald in his office. Herbert closed the door behind him.

Inside Fitzgerald’s office, the detectives began their questions. Maloney sat. Herbert stood and searched Fitzgerald’s office with wandering eyes.

They were eager to hear from Jack Fitzgerald, the hero. He was the person that all law enforcers said was the one with the best vantage and clearly the most helpful assessment of what happened.

“We’re obviously here because a murder took place in our city,” said Maloney.

“And an assault on a member of the president’s cabinet,” Herbert added while picking up a picture from Fitzgerald’s desk.

Maloney told Fitzgerald that Homeland Security said the agriculture bureaucrat made some pretty rapid – and some might say astute – crime observations under pretty extraordinary and stressful circumstances.

Maloney asked him how he managed to stay so cool in a situation like that.

“Have you ever been in a firefight before? Is that why you knew what was happening?”

“Gentlemen, I presume you’ve done your homework. You know that I spent time in Iraq.”

“Yes, but officially, recent trips were for the Department of Agriculture. Were you in Iraq with the Navy?”

“Initially, yes. I joined the Department of Agriculture after I was discharged. I went back to Iraq on special assignment in cooperation with a couple of other departments. I’ve been to Iraq several times since I was an officer in the Navy.”

“Would you care to elaborate?” Herbert asked.

“That depends on your level of security clearance, detective.”

There was plenty more Jack Fitzgerald could tell the Metro cops about his covert operations, but it wasn’t going to help them in their investigation.

“Based on what you’re implying,” Maloney said, “I’ll assume the answer to my question is that you’ve been in situations where you’ve experienced gunfire. So, I’ll assume that’s how you knew before others that rifle bullets injured Secretary Segura and Agent Johansen. But why did you speculate for Homeland Security agents that the shooter was on top of the Natural History Museum?”

“I didn’t.”

“Say again...”

“I said the shots appeared to come from the roof of the Museum of American History, not the Museum of Natural History. The angle was obvious. The secretary’s office is on the second floor of the Whitten Building. The only sightline to those windows was that roof. And by the way, I hear that you’re looking for a soldier who’s AWOL. Have you arrested him yet?”

“How’d you come by your information?” Herbert asked.

“I still have connections at the Pentagon, but now I’m wondering why you’re here to see me.”

Maloney said that he needed to understand why a soldier would shoot at the secretary of agriculture. Why then and why was Fitzgerald and his particular agency meeting with the secretary at that moment?

“We’re hoping some basic answers might tell us where to look for the soldier,” Maloney said.

“Do you know the young man’s background, detective?”

“A little. Do you have more?”

Fitzgerald told the detectives the soldier, Duane Manchester, was a sergeant in the Army. He said friends at the Pentagon told him that Manchester got back from Afghanistan a month earlier and was assigned to Ft. Meade.

According to his sources, the sergeant had been despondent for months because he had learned that his father, an African-American farmer in Missouri, lost everything.

The son was sending money home, counting the days when he could get out of the service and return to the farm. That’s all he wanted. But local banks were foreclosing on his parents and Sergeant Manchester held the Department of Agriculture responsible.

“Apparently, the Manchesters exhausted every option. Their farm fell into an unlucky category. It was impossible for them to turn things around.”

Fitzgerald gave the detectives a quick lesson in agricultural realities.

“It’s hard for family farms to survive, especially once they’re in serious debt. But you didn’t come for that lecture, did you?”

“All we want to know is where to find the shooter,” Herbert said.

Fitzgerald told the detective that Manchester is a trained soldier. His instinct is to survive. He said that Manchester is going to go to familiar surroundings where survival is easier. The Missouri Bootheel, the Ozarks, northern Arkansas, that’s where Fitzgerald said authorities should be looking for him.

“But you’d better be careful. He’s a sniper and even though he missed one target, he won’t miss many.”

“Do you know Sergeant Manchester, Mr. Fitzgerald?”

“No. Why would you ask that?”

“What about Secretary Segura? How’s your relationship with the secretary?” Herbert asked.

“Couldn’t be better, detective. How’s your relationship with the chief of police?”

“Just a simple, basic question we ask everyone we talk to, Mr. Fitzgerald,” Herbert said. “No need to get snippy.”

Maloney asked Fitzgerald to look at it from the police department’s perspective. He walked into the secretary’s conference room the day of the shooting at about the same time the secretary entered. He had a phone to his ear, which others in the room reported as well. And the shots began, Maloney said.

“All of that’s true, but where’s my motive? And why would I direct fire into a room that I’m entering. You know as well as I do that a bullet striking any object can change direction instantly. You’re not making any sense, detective.”

Fitzgerald said he appreciated that police had to look at all possibilities, especially when it couldn’t find a

suspect. However, he suggested that Maloney and Herbert do better homework.

“Don’t make up ridiculous theories from sketchy circumstances,” Fitzgerald said. “And don’t be surprised that I’m pissed. I suggest we end this conversation before I get moody and call some friends that your police chief doesn’t want to hear from.”

Police Headquarters

Baltimore, MD

Same day

Rodney Armstrong sat at his desk combing through more than a dozen files of complaints. They came from local businesses that had set up contracts with SpeedCredit of Columbia, Maryland. The business profiles were similar. They were small – sales of \$500,000 to \$5 million. They were retailers who used credit card accounts to accept payments from patrons. They were highly leveraged, trying to operate with reduced sales and thin margins through a rough economy. Most had exhausted savings from past profits and existed day-to-day. They had built relationships with SpeedCredit to try to outlast the recession’s slow recovery.

A phone call broke his concentration.

“Rodney, it’s Isaac. You need to get over here. Antoine Carver is dead. The youngster’s body couldn’t fight the shock and infection. Dante’s upset and his mother’s hysterical. Carver’s father is here and he’s drunk.”

“Get your security there, Isaac.”

“They’re here but they’re having a hard time keeping things under control. Someone saw the boy’s father hand Dante a gun. They saw Dante leave then come back a few minutes later. They presumed he put the gun in a car or someplace where security couldn’t find it.”

“You’ve got to keep Dante there, Isaac. And keep him away from Antoine’s father. He’s probably encouraging the boy to go after Antoine’s killers.”

“Conrad is here at the hospital, Rodney, it’s his public service day. He heard about Antoine’s death.”

“I can be there in 15 minutes. I’m calling for backup to get there faster. Get Dante away from his mother! Her hysterics will upset him. I don’t want him leaving with a gun.”

“All right. Be quick!” Stuckey demanded.

Dr. Stuckey went into Carver’s hospital room and approached each of the three grieving relatives, Dante first. After expressing his condolences to Antoine’s parents, he asked Dante to take a walk with him so Antoine’s mother and father could be alone with Antoine for a moment.

Dante looked at his tearful mother and Antoine’s stupefied father. He obeyed the doctor and followed him into the hall. Dr. Stuckey was relieved to see Conrad round the corner of the nurse’s station.

“I’m sorry, man. I know you were close.”

“Thanks. Right now, all I think about Antoine on the sidewalk and some street nigger, younger ‘an me, standing over him with a gun at his back, shooting him like he nothin’. I want pay back.”

“Conrad and I can understand your anger, Dante. I want you to know, I did everything I knew to do to save your brother.”

“I know you did, Dr. Stuckey. We all grateful that you the one helping Antoine. Conrad and I been knowing each other a lot of years now. Even though this is the first time we get to play together, I respect Conrad and I respect you. You always said nice things to me after games and all. I just felt good that you were here.”

“You need a Coke or something?” Conrad asked.

“That’s a good idea, son. Take Dante to the cafeteria.”

The doctor suggested that Conrad ask the cashier to put the charges on his tab. He was relieved for a solution to occupy Dante until Rodney got there.

Rodney Armstrong spotted Officer Marquis Jackson outside in his patrol car. He jumped in and directed him to St. Ann's.

As they drove at high speed with lights flashing, the lieutenant ran through the events since the shooting. Jackson knew most of it except the part about Armstrong being at St. Ann's when Antoine Carver was brought in by ambulance.

The officer said rumor on the street assumed that Antoine was the victim of a gang initiation. He was being recruited by one gang and the young shooter, 14, by another. The shooter's initiation was pulling the trigger on Antoine.

"Does Dante know the trigger?"

"A good chance he knows the person. Doesn't mean he knows he's the shooter. And the gang wouldn't care if Dante did know. He makes a high profile enemy. They'd like to have him come after the boy. They don't care who kills who, it adds strength to their war."

"But who are they fighting with, Marquis?"

"Just street angry. They're angry at anybody who has more than they do."

"I don't get it. I mean, I know they're angry at being poor and things they can't control, can't break away from, but I don't get why they keep killing each other. What does that solve?"

"I don't know, lieutenant."

As Officer Jackson roared around cars onto the ramp that merged into I-95 South, Armstrong continued his frustration.

"We had street fights, too. We blew off some steam, but this kind of black-on-black violence is deadly. Our street

fight caused fewer bruises than a football game between Poly and City. No one died. No one shot a 14-year-old in the back at point-blank range.”

Armstrong’s cell phone shook in the cup holder. He picked it up and recognized Dr. Stuckey’s number. “We’re turning off the highway onto Caton Avenue now, Isaac. I’ll be there in a minute. Dante still there?”

The lieutenant pushed the speaker button so Jackson could hear Dr. Stuckey.

“He’s in the cafeteria with Conrad. Your patrol officers got here a minute ago. I told them about the gun. They’re questioning Antoine’s father, but he’s not being cooperative.”

Armstrong told Dr. Stuckey that he and Officer Jackson would find the boys in the cafeteria. He wanted Isaac to tell the officers what he was doing; that the officers were to stay with Carver and Dante’s mother until Armstrong joined them.

Jackson pulled the unmarked police car to the main entrance on the east side of St. Ann’s Medical Center. The two policemen walked quickly to the cafeteria.

They spotted Conrad with Junior Wilson dressed in hospital scrubs near the cash register island. Dante wasn’t with them. Armstrong and Jackson were already suspicious. Wilson was a street informant who worked the hospitals as an orderly.

“Conrad,” Armstrong spoke excitedly, “Dante with you?”

“Hey, coach. Coach Jackson. Surprised to see you here.”

Wilson said nothing, although the two cops made eye contact with him. Wilson knew both policemen. He turned and walked away with no acknowledgments.

“I don’t see Dante. He still with you?” Jackson asked.

“Yeah, he just ran to the car for something. He said he’d be right back.”

“Do you know which car or where it’s parked?” Armstrong asked.

“No, I guess he came with his mom.”

Armstrong instructed Conrad to take Officer Jackson to Antoine’s hospital room. Then he told Jackson to get the other officers and the three of them meet him at the corner where Antoine was found the day he was shot.

“Did I do something wrong, coach? Dante said he’d be back.”

“It’s okay, Conrad. Let your father know what’s going on. I think Dante may try to do something stupid.”

“Oh, geez. I’m sorry, coach.”

“We’ll take care of Dante. Go tell your dad what’s happening.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Marquis, move fast!”

Conrad and Officer Jackson skipped the elevator and ran for the stairs to get to the second floor. The police officers were there with Dr. Stuckey trying to learn more about Dante’s probable destination and what kind of gun he carried.

Armstrong began to jog to the cruiser outside the hospital entrance when he slowed back to a walk. His right arm began to tingle. His hands shook as he struggled with the small bottle, finally freeing the lid and shaking a tiny pill into his hand. He popped it under his tongue. He took a breath and exhaled slowly. He stepped gingerly.

“I’ll make it. I’ve got to make it,” Armstrong said quietly to himself as he picked up momentum. A March breeze hit him in the face when the automatic doors swung open giving him a burst of energy.

He heard a siren leaving the hospital – a police car, not an ambulance. He assumed it was the other officers with Jackson getting a head start on the lieutenant still fighting off his chest pain. He slid behind the cruiser steering wheel

and sighed. This was no time to die. “The boy needs me. Stay alive.”

He started the engine and turned on his siren. He threw the car into gear and leaned into the accelerator. The cruiser jerked and squealed as Armstrong willed himself to be a cop.

Corner of Lombard and Schroeder

West of Downtown Baltimore

Dante Brown filled the driver’s seat of the 1999 Toyota Camry better than most men, but he was still a boy in the eyes of the law. He was alone. He pulled the Camry against the curb on Lombard next to the tiny park at the intersection with Schroeder. The park was not much more than an empty lot with a few trees.

This is where his brother lay face down, spread-eagled with a dozen gang members encircling his frightened and beaten body. This is where another 14-year-old kid put a 38 into Antoine’s back.

Dante looked down Lombard toward the city skyline. A bus leaving downtown pulled up on the other side of the street. It stopped to let a lady off.

When the bus pulled away, five young men appeared on the street looking at Dante’s car. They must have come from one of the row homes on Lombard.

He felt nervous for the first time. He recognized a couple of the thugs from pick-up games at the outdoor court about a block away. They weren’t very good. They talked trash and thought they were hot.

Movement in front of the stores to his left caught Dante’s attention. Two boys stood looking at him. They were a little younger than the others farther down Lombard.

Was one of them the trigger? How’d they know I’d be here?

Three more boys appeared across Schroeder on the same side of Lombard where Dante parked.

Are you prepared to die? Coach Armstrong warned me. I show my piece, the odds change. They don't want a 9-millimeter any more than Antoine wanted a bullet in the back.

The group of five that appeared from behind the bus, moved toward Dante's car.

"This it," he said to himself under his breath.

He pulled the handle and pushed the door open and stepped firmly onto the street. He tucked the Glock into his belt where everyone could see it. No one looked impressed.

Dante walked toward the five approaching gang members as they began to spread like a scene from the movie, "Shoot Out at the OK Corral."

The man-boy walked a few steps and stopped where he could still see the two boys to his left and another set of three to his right with his peripheral vision. The five fanned figures moved closer.

The older gangster in the middle Dante remembered as a mouthy player on the basketball court. He stopped about 15 feet in front. Dante tried hard to stay calm and confident.

"Wha'chu doin' here, nigga, and why you carryin'? You lookin' for fight?"

"I'm lookin' for one person, the trigger that done Antoine."

The mouthy leader turned to his right and panned his head left as he spoke like an orator in an arena.

"This here's mister basketball, Cardinal Gleason. He too good for public school. He Catholic. He a saint or somethin'. He big, though, ain't he? That chest make a big target for a 38. Don't you think?"

A chorus of chuckles and "amens" came from the surrounding brothers.

“Look, Cardinal Gleason, I gonna to save your ass, ‘cause I like beatin’ it under the rim. You ain’t so tough; just big. You dumb fuckin’ brotha shoulda chose different, that all. He tougher’n you, though. He took them hits like a man. He don’t whimper and whine like you when you catch these elbows. He ain’t no pussy. He a man. He dead now, but he a dead MAN.”

Dante grabbed the handle of the Glock. The two boys on the outside of the five pack reached behind them and each pulled sawed-off shotguns quickly to their front and aimed them at Dante.

The mouthpiece raised his right hand.

“It cool. Cardinal Gleason ain’t got the guts to die like he brother.”

Sounds of police sirens moving closer to the stilled intersection caused the boys to Dante’s left and right to split. The two with shotguns slowly stepped away, but kept the barrels pointed at the perspiring figure in the center of the street.

“Well, well, pigs to rescue,” mocked the mouthpiece. “Look who got the piece and look who don’t. Don’t look like a fair fight to me, CG. Might be some deten for the superstar.”

Dante looked around for a place to ditch the Glock. Fortunately, there was a city trashcan overflowing in front of the Camry.

He looked to see if the police car was within sight. When he saw nothing, he pivoted and ran toward the can, stuffing the gun as far down into the mess as he could force it.

He walked back to his spot on the street as Officer Jackson and the other two officers pulled up along side of Dante and quickly got out, the car still running, lights still flashing, and the doors left open.

“What’s going on, men?” Marquis Jackson asked.

“We talking about how hot our lady mayor lookin’ these days, Officer Jackson,” the mouthpiece offered with his trademark sarcasm.

“LeRoy, I think you and the brothers need to go belly down against the hood of the cruiser so we can check the pockets.”

The three complied, but as they walked toward the police car, the mouthpiece – LeRoy – complained.

“That one there, the pretty white boy,” pointing to one of the officers accompanying Jackson, “that one there came awfully close to my privates last time, Marquis, can you let him know that made me uncomfortable, in an excited sort of way.”

The other two laughed.

“I’ll remind him how sensitive you are, LeRoy.”

Jackson turned to the two officers. “He’s afraid you’ll find out he has no balls.”

One of the gang members spread across the cruiser, the one called Tat2, let out a guffaw, which drew a kick in the shin from LeRoy.

“What are you doing here, Dante?”

Brown was relieved to see Officer Jackson, a familiar face, somebody who cared about Antoine.

“I don’t know,” Dante stuttered, still tense from his confrontation. “I’m upset; I’m angry. I want my brother be alive.”

“I’m going to have to take you downtown, Dante. It looks like you were instigating a street brawl with known gang members.”

Lieutenant Armstrong pulled his unmarked cruiser behind the Camry. He saw Dante safe with Jackson. Three thugs were spread and being searched by the other patrol officers.

He also surveyed the surroundings before getting out of his car. Several folks had come out of their buildings to see what was happening at their intersection.

Armstrong observed a few young men lurking suspiciously. He pushed his door open, clutched his cell phone in his right hand, and stepped onto Lombard. He looked at the three gangbangers pressed up against the patrol car and let out a disgusted sigh.

“LeRoy, what the H are you doing west of Charles Street?”

The mouthpiece lifted his head and looked at Armstrong approaching.

“You look like shit, lieutenant. Got you doin’ drugs again, pretendin’ to be somethin’ you ain’t?”

“And, by the way, LeRoy, I heard they gave you a bunk at Jessup. Why aren’t you keepin’ it warm?”

“Too many questions, lieutenant. Good behavior. I out on the street wit’chu.”

“Aren’t we lucky.”

“They’re clean, lieutenant,” said the officer who had been frisking the three thugs.

“I knew they would be. Let ’em go. I’m sure we’ll meet up with them later.”

Armstrong looked at LeRoy and his two equally tough-acting companions.

“This is my space, LeRoy, so tell the three brothers gawking at us from the unit next to the store that I’ll have the search warrant here in about 10 minutes. I’m looking for a 38, a murder weapon. Can you believe that, LeRoy, a 38? Who still uses a 38? Oh, that’s right, you carry a 38, don’t you? You happen to know where I might find it, LeRoy?”

“I don’t know nothin’ about you talkin’, lieutenant.”

“LeRoy, I find that surprising, since you and your entourage happened to be here at the place where a boy was shot. He’s dead. But you know that, don’t you? And how did it happen that you boys were here when the victim’s brother stopped by for some soul searching? How’d you know he’d be here?”

“That what you superstar basketball player doin’ here, lieutenant? Soul searchin’? I seen him make a basket, but I sure that was a gun, not a ball he drop in.”

Armstrong and Jackson turned and looked at the city trash container that the mouthpiece and brothers were staring at. Dante was shaking his head, looking at the ground.

“See ya around, Cardinal Gleason. Best be spendin’ more time in chapel than in school. Get what I mean?”

LeRoy and his two followers shuffled north across the street as slowly as they could, stopping traffic in both directions on Lombard.

When the trio was far enough out of hearing range, Lieutenant Armstrong turned to Dante.

“I told you not to pick that thing up, son. Did you wipe it clean before you dropped it in the trashcan?”

“No, sir.”

“Officer, you gotta gun rag in your cruiser?”

“I do, lieutenant. You need it?”

“Give it to Mr. Brown here. You take the rag and you wipe it down so no prints show. You understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you stuff it back in the can without your fingers touching the metal or the handle. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Officer Jackson retrieved the rag from the other officer and forced it into Dante’s hand. He turned Brown’s shoulders in the direction of the trashcan and gave him a push.

The cops all turned their backs on Dante. He reached deep into the muck and pulled the Glock to the top of the can where it couldn’t be seen from the street. He wiped it clean and shoved it back into the container.

Dante walked the rag back to the officer and stood quietly.

“Gentlemen, Officer Jackson and I are going to take this young man downtown. I’d like for you to wait for the warrant and search the unit where those young gang members are watching us. First, get the gun from the trashcan and bag it. In the apartment, I want you looking for a 38-caliber pistol. If you find it, bag it carefully.”

“The one boy had a sawed-off shotgun that he pointed at me, too.”

“Look for a sawed-off shotgun as well. Clear?”

“Got it, lieutenant,” the officers answered in unison.

“Jackson, put cuffs on Brown; make it official. The charges are...

“Attempting to incite a fight with known gang members.”

“Three nights of solitary confinement won’t be enough thinking time, but we got to get him out for his brother’s funeral Monday morning. You’ll miss tonight’s practice. But you better be there for Monday’s, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Lieutenant Armstrong drove Officer Jackson and Dante downtown to Central Booking. He made Dante call his mother and explain what was going on.

She wailed again hearing the news that Dante was arrested. She screamed at Antoine’s father for giving Dante the gun.

Armstrong took the phone and told her that he would personally bring Dante to the funeral. He said he was going to watch Dante, so he wouldn’t try any more stupid stunts. For that she was grateful.

When Marquis and Dante got out of the unmarked cruiser, Armstrong rolled his window down and tried to breathe in some fresh air. He popped another nitro and waited for relief. When the pain in his arms and chest eased, he pulled his cell and pushed speed dial 22.

“Rodney? I haven’t heard from you in awhile. What’s up?”

“Can you do an old friend a favor?”

“Maybe. What do you need?”

“I need a good basketball coach and I need him tonight.”