

NOVEMBER 15, 1989 2035 HOURS TUNIS-CARTHAGE AIRPORT, TUNISIA

Sergeant First Class Dexter Diamond eyed the heavily armed warriors gathered in the cold, dimly-lit hangar. He stroked his mustache with his thumb and forefinger. Reality had set in; he was truly among the heavy hitters of the global counter-terror game. Directly in front of him stood members of the British Special Air Service, more commonly known as the SAS, considered to be the best Special Operations unit in the world. On his right, standing off to themselves were a team of Israeli Caesarea commandos, whose only mission in life was to assassinate enemies of Israel, and several Mossad agents assigned to Tunisia to monitor the activities of the PLO operatives that use it as a refuge. On his left stood a small contingent of Algerian Airborne commandos who assisted them briefly in Algeria and asked to stay with the mission as it moved to Tunisia.

Dexter believed that Destiny had called to him when his brother was murdered by terrorists in Lebanon six years ago. It was then he decided to apply to the Special Forces in hopes of becoming an elite Delta Force operator and take a more direct approach to fighting terrorism. But Destiny, as usual, had her own plans. Instead he was assigned to the SAS from his current unit, the United States European Command Protective Services Detachment in Stuttgart, FRG. And now, she had brought him to this moment.

Dexter looked up and noticed that the Senior Algerian commando was staring at him with a look of disgust and hatred on his face. He then realized that the Algerian had looked at him the same way back at the airbase in Algeria. Anger invaded his emotions as the realization set in that this guy didn't like him for some reason. But anger would have to wait. There was a job to be done tonight, a job that required him to be cool, calm, collected, and most of all, focused.

Dexter scanned the room and reflected back on the events that brought them all here.

Six days ago nineteen British archeological students visiting the University of Algiers had been taken hostage by the Islamic Armed Groups, also known as the GIA, a violent and deadly terrorist group that operated mainly out of neighboring Tunisia. One of the hostages, unbeknownst to the terrorists, was the youngest daughter of a senior official of MI6, the British Intelligence Agency. The media was temporarily gagged to keep the terrorists from finding out what an important catch they had. MI6 wanted the daughter found and rescued before the media leaked the information to the public and created an even bigger mess.

The search had been fruitless until Israeli and Algerian intelligence sources notified MI6 that the students had been taken to Tunisia since they are known to have a less than capable police and counter terrorist force. Israeli Mossad

agents in Tunisia used their considerable resources and network of informants to get the location of the kidnapped Brits.

Armed with that new information, the SAS counterrevolutionary squad, to which Dexter was assigned, flew to Tunis to conduct the rescue operation.

Someone clearing his throat to his left interrupted Dexter's thoughts. Dexter turned and looked.

The Algerian Commando was staring at him again, but this time he spit on the floor.

Dexter stood up and was about to confront him when his team commander approached him.

"I don't bloody like depending on the Israelis. They always seem to have a hidden agenda."

Dexter turned away from his antagonist. "True lieutenant, but we needed to find the hostages and they have the snitch that has the information on their location. That Caesarea hit squad is not here just to back us up. They're probably here to kill some unfortunate PLO puke and they're going to want us to back them up as repayment. So, we get to take out some GIA and PLO terrorists in one night. What's the problem?"

The lieutenant looked at him and frowned. "As long as that's all there is to it."

"Is it ever, sir?" Dexter turned back and found the Algerian staring at him still. "Something wrong with your neck?" So much for being calm and cool, he thought.

"What?" The Algerian stood up. His squad members stirred uncomfortably. They were all well acquainted with his violent temper.

"You heard me. Why are you eyeballin' me?" Dexter pushed his Heckler and Koch MP5SD submachinegun around behind him.

"You're American. I don't like Americans. You're too arrogant and too spoiled to understand the rest of the world. Your hedonistic ways make you soft, weak, and reckless." The Algerian took a step forward. His comrades stood up.

Dexter smiled and took a step forward. He could hear his teammates moving behind him. To his right, the Israelis stopped what they were doing and focused on him, awaiting his response. "You could be right, but it is a dangerous mistake to assume that all Americans are soft and weak; it could get you hurt. As for you not liking Americans, tough, that is your burden to bear."

The Algerian laughed loudly. "Dangerous? You? The entire world has seen how incompetent your Special Forces are! That so-called hostage rescue attempt in Iran was clearly the work of arrogant amateurs! The desert belongs to Arabs, not soft Americans. Perhaps you should have secretly paid us to do the rescue for you, then take the credit for its success! You Americans should stick to making music and movies, and leave global conflict to real warriors, such as your British and Israeli friends here!"

Dexter unslung his MP5SD and handed it to his team leader. "If you really believe that, then step up to the plate and take a swing." It was time to shut this guy up.

The other commandos immediately began exchanging wagers.

The Algerian handed his Soviet Kalashnikov AKS74 rifle to one of his teammates. "Such a shame that you will miss the rescue mission, Yankee Doodle!" The Algerian raised his fists and squared off.

Dexter smiled slightly. He was going to enjoy thumping the Algerian. He lowered his chin and raised his hands. Outside he was calm, but inside, a violent thunderstorm was brewing.

The rest of the commandos had just formed a circle around them when two Mossad agents entered the hangar with the Tunisian informant, an employee at the Carthage National Museum.

"What the hell?" The agents stopped and stared at the circle of commandos. "Hey! We have the location of the hostages, or does that not interest you all right now?"

"This is not over, Yankee Doodle. We will resume this conversation back in Algeria if you survive the rescue operation!" the Algerian huffed.

Dexter didn't answer. The thunderstorm wouldn't let him. Instead he took a deep breath, then exhaled quietly as he took his weapon from his teammate.

Destroying the Algerian could wait; other matters demanded his attention.

The Mossad agent shook his head and spread a map out on a table. "Very well then, the terrorists are holding the hostages in Carthage at the Roman ruins.

The exact location is the Christian Basilica of Damous Karita, a theater with an underground rotunda. It is only used during the summer months so now it is vacant. Their plan is to take them to the amphitheater a few hundred yards away and execute them in front of a video crew."

The SAS lieutenant stepped forward and surveyed the map. "How much time do we have?"

"Unknown. I'm guessing they'll do it between midnight and dawn when there are no people moving around."

"How many men?"

"Twelve at the theater, four at the amphitheater watching the main road from Tunis, and ten sentries around the entire theater compound. All of them are armed with AK47s and the sentries have RPG7s also."

The SAS lieutenant stared at the map. "Show me exactly where the terrorists are set up."

The Mossad agent used an ink pen to draw circles depicting the locations of the terrorists, according to his informant.

The SAS lieutenant nodded his head. "Okay lads, here's the game plan. The Algerian team will take out the terrorists at the amphitheater. The Caesarea team will take out the sentries, SAS will enter the theater and get the hostages." He looked at the map again. "We'll approach from the south and stage here, at the Archeological Park where we'll move in on foot. The Algerian team will be dropped off at the National Museum since it is closer to the amphitheater. I want the Mossad to have transport vehicles waiting at the staging area at the park. Are there any questions?"

Silent nods went around the room.

"Very well then. Set your watches to 2045 hours on my mark. Ready, mark. Radios on channel four. We will want our radios back when this is over, lads." The SAS lieutenant pointed at the Algerian and Israeli commandos, who smiled at him.

He was well aware that soldiers the world over, were all the same. If they could 'appropriate' extra equipment they would, whether they needed it at the time or not.

"L-T, I know those ruins. I came here on a PSD mission back in '85. We took the general out there on a tour," Dexter said just to make small talk.

"Oh. Very good then. You'll be the point man for the entry team. Let's get this done."

Dexter stood frozen for a second. Point man? On a hostage rescue mission? How did that happen?

This was not his first off-continent operation. He'd done numerous covert operations in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. But to be first chair on a hostage rescue this big was something he never dreamed of. Destiny was calling again, and she wanted an answer.

"Sergeant Diamond!"

Dexter snapped to. "Yes sir?"

"Are you up to being first?" The lieutenant's eyes drilled into his, looking for the slightest hint of doubt. The other SAS men were also watching the young American sergeant.

"Hell yes, sir!" Dexter said as he stared the lieutenant in the eye. He leaned forward and forced his feet to move. Everything appeared to be moving in slow motion as he trotted an old blue van. He looked over at his new adversary and nodded as they climbed into their respective vehicles. Come back alive so I can have the pleasure of taking you out, he thought.

Dexter kept quiet for the 12-kilometer drive to the Carthage. He smiled as he recalled how he got soaked the last time he was here. The US Ambassador to Tunisia was giving his general, Deputy Commander of US and NATO Forces, a lecture on Roman history when one of the region's frequent rains came. They of course had umbrellas, a luxury in which military protective agents could not indulge. His earpiece came alive, interrupting his thoughts.

"Team Two on site," the Caesarea commander radioed.

"Team Three on site," the Algerian commander radioed.

The SAS lieutenant acknowledged them. "10-4. Team One standing by." He turned to Dexter. "It's on you now. When they call again, take us in."

"Roger that sir," Dexter said calmly. His team was waiting in the shadows less than one hundred meters northeast of the theater. He watched through night vision goggles as the Caesarea moved toward the perimeter guards.

"Team Three all clear. All targets neutralized."

Dexter looked back at his teammates and held up his left hand, signaling for them to get ready. The man behind him put his left hand on Dexter's left shoulder to let him know that they were ready. When he looked back at the

theater, all of the guards were dead and the Caesarea were standing around the building.

"Team Two secure. Targets neutralized. Team One you are a go!" the Caesarea commander said.

Dexter didn't hesitate. He stood up, pointed his MP5SD at the rear door of the theater and sprinted as fast as he could. He could see the bodies of the dead terrorist guards as he got closer. Your comrades will be joining you in hell soon, he thought.

The Israeli commandos had the door primed for explosive entry, which they preferred because the explosion would destroy any booby trap the terrorists might have set up. "Eyes!" was shouted over the radio.

Dexter quickly closed his eyes as the night brightened suddenly for a second. He didn't even hear the small explosion, but felt the heat and pressure. He just kept running through the doorway, and training took over. Remembering the diagram the Mossad informant drew, he turned right and started down a dark hallway toward the stairs. The barrel of a gun poked out, followed by a body. Dexter squeezed the trigger and cut loose a three-round-burst, killing the terrorist. He turned the corner and ran into another terrorist. He grabbed the barrel of his opponent's AK47 and guided it downward as rounds pierced the air. Dexter put the barrel of his silenced weapon under the man's chin and fired. He kicked the body aside and kept moving. He could hear his teammates shooting the terrorists again to make sure they were dead.

Two down, ten to go, he thought. He knew that at least half of the terrorists would be upstairs in the administrator's office according to the informant. Half of the entry team was already headed upstairs to deal with them. By the time his team reached the hostages, the other group had eliminated the rest of the terrorists. Thirty minutes later, the hostages were quietly put on a private jet at Tunis-Carthage Airport and sent back to the United Kingdom. The rescuers settled in at the hangar again and waited for the Israelis to announce the next phase of their mission.

The Algerian was staring at Dexter again. "So you made it Yankee Doodle. Good thing this wasn't an American operation or we'd all be dead."

Dexter ignored him and spoke to the lead Mossad agent. "Now what?"

The Mossad agent spread another map, this time of downtown Tunis. "Now for part two. There are five senior PLO commanders and seven Hezbollah field commanders meeting at a PLO hideout in Tunis. We want to take advantage of the situation and eliminate all of them at once. Across the street is another villa where some of the terrorists' bodyguards will be housed. Our last count was four men armed with automatic weapons and grenades. I want the SAS team to address them and then enter the target house courtyard to eliminate the outer guards. The Caesarea will make entry into the main villa and complete the mission. The Algerian team will not be needed for this operation. You may return to Algeria."

"Why not?" the Algerian commander demanded.

The Mossad agent shook his head. "Orders from headquarters. They don't want you involved. I don't know why, and I don't care. I have my orders, so it is not up for debate. Again, you are free to return to Algeria." He turned to the others. "We move out in five minutes."

The Algerian moved toward the Mossad agent, but stopped when the masked Caesarea commandos all took notice and focused on him. He knew that their only purpose in life was to kill the terrorist enemies of Israel, and killing him would be just a side job for them. He turned to Dexter, who was smiling at him. "I am not through with you Yankee Doodle. I will wait at the airport in Algeria for you. If you come back alive this time, I'm going to end your career!" Dexter simply nodded and pulled his mask down over his face. He had already decided that he was at the very least going to maim the Algerian, or maybe even kill him.

The SAS lieutenant walked next to Dexter as they headed to the van. "You have my permission to break his fucking jaw when we return."

Dexter smiled underneath his mask. "I fully intend to sir. How many terrorists did he say were in the villa across the street?"

"Only four. You want them all to yourself, do you?"

"Yes, sir." Dexter pulled the partially used magazine out of his weapon and put a fresh one in. Killing four armed men in close quarters was not an impossible task. All he had to do was make sure all of the first shots were kill shots. If they weren't, and the terrorists began to shoot back, he could easily lose the fight.

"Very well then. Take Errol with you just in case."

Dexter and Errol were dropped off first, directly behind the guest Villa. A waiting female Mossad agent gave them a diagram and location of the men inside.

"Where's the rest of your team?" she asked.

"There's still only four right?" Dexter asked.

"Yes. But..."

"You're welcome to join us if you want," Dexter said, cutting her off.

The Mossad agent produced a Mini-UZI from under her coat and nodded.

"You ready Dex?" Errol asked.

"Yeah. Just watch my back." He went over the wall quietly and moved to the back door. There were numerous cigarette butts on the ground. Dexter checked the outer iron door that protected the wooden door. It was unlocked and slightly ajar. He quickly checked it for booby traps, then opened it. The interior door was also unlocked. Dexter figured the chain-smoking terrorists didn't want anything to deter them from their much-needed smoke breaks. It was a lapse in judgment that would prove to be fatal for them. Dexter moved quickly through the villa to the target room where he found the four men playing cards and watching the front of the PLO villa via closed circuit television.

Dexter held up his left hand and displayed four fingers, then pointed to the room.

Errol tapped him on the shoulder to acknowledge.

Dexter clicked the selector switch on his silenced submachinegun to single fire mode for better shot placement. He preferred to use a pistol for a scenario like this but didn't want to take the time to put the silencer on. He took a deep breath, stepped out and around the corner, and began squeezing the trigger. One, two, three, four, double-tap the last one, then he shot the other three terrorists in reverse order. In less than four seconds all four terrorists lay dead from precision shots to the head. "Team Three to Team One. Terrorists neutralized, you are clear to proceed."

Errol shook his head as he entered the room. "Holy crap, Dexter! That's some bloody good shooting!"

"I do believe I beat your record by two seconds. You're buying when we get back to England. Now let's clear the rest of this place."

The Mossad agent nodded her head as she surveyed Dexter's work. "Good shooting. You could have been a Caesarea agent. You're American aren't you?"

"Sergeant Dexter Diamond, United States Army. I'm assigned to the British Army temporarily. Round up these weapons while we clear the house." He turned and left with Errol.

The Mossad agent was watching the assault on the monitor when they returned. "It has begun."

"Is it true that only one of the Caesarea Commandos will be allowed to do the actual assassination?" Dexter asked. He moved next to her, close enough to just brush against her as they watched the raid.

"Yes. If the situation is stable, only the chosen Caesarea will be permitted to kill the designated target or targets. I come to England often to shop." She was staring at him.

"Oh? You should call me the next time you come over," Dexter said. He shifted and bumped her lightly.

"I was actually planning a trip over next week. Maybe I'll give you a call. We can exchange training ideas."

Errol shook his head and began carrying the terrorists' weapons outside.

"Over dinner?" Dexter asked. She was tall and athletic. Probably trained as a sniper, he thought.

"Of course." She pulled a pen and paper from her pocket. "Your number?" The raid on the main house was over in seven minutes. As was Caesarea modus operandi, the only people left alive were the women and children. The Israeli government would take full responsibility for the assassinations the next day once the media broadcast the event to the world.

Dexter rode quietly back to the airport as Errol told the others of his exploits.

"I've never seen anyone shoot so fast, kill so many men so quickly, and get picked up by a beautiful woman all at the same time. Dexter you are a true Operator in every since of the word," Errol said.

Dexter just shook his head. He was replaying the scenario through his head to see if he made any mistakes.

"You know that Algerian commando will be waiting for you when we get back to Algeria," the SAS Lieutenant said.

Dexter nodded. "I know sir."

"Well, what are you going to do if he comes at you?"

Dexter nodded again and smiled, but did not answer.

"Well, just don't bloody kill him, okay mate?" Errol quipped.

An Israeli Commando sat next to Dexter on the flight from Tunis to Algiers, where their respective planes would take them home. "Will you fight the Algerian when we land my friend?"

"I will defend myself if necessary," Dexter said quietly.

The Israeli laughed. "I am afraid you'll have to do more than that my friend. He has insulted you, your country, and your Special Forces. You must attend to him properly. I have been watching you tonight; he is not your equal. Besides, I was told how you dispatched the guards in the guest villa. If you fight the way you shoot, I fear for the Algerian."

The SAS lieutenant had been listening from the seat in front of them and turned around. "He's right Dexter. When we land, make quick work of him so we can be on our way."

1130 HOURS ALGIERS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT/MILITARY SIDE

The Israeli jet taxied to a remote corner of the airport and parked next to the jet that would carry the SAS commandos back to England.

Dexter looked out of the window. As promised, the Algerian was standing on the tarmac waiting for him. The son-of-a-bitch really wanted to get his ass kicked, he thought. He stripped out of his tactical vest and handed his weapons to Errol. The Algerian led them into the nearby hangar. The men formed a circle around them and placed wagers.

"I am pleased to see that you survived Yankee Doodle. I will enjoy telling my children how I taught an American Special Forces soldier a lesson in hand-to-hand combat!"

Dexter didn't answer. He knew that Algerian Airborne commandos were trained by the feared Soviet Spetsnaz, who were renowned for their brutal hand to hand tactics and devastating kicks. He began targeting attack points on the Algerian, just as he had done in Tunis the first time they clashed.

"Do you hear me Yankee Doodle? I'm talking to you!" the Algerian screamed. He was still angry from being kicked off the second mission and being faced down by the Caesarea, and he was going to take it out on the American.

Dexter smiled slightly, lowered his chin, and raised his hands. He came up on the balls of his feet, just enough to raise his heels off the floor. "Are you sure you want to dance this dance?" he asked his opponent.

"Yes Yankee Doodle, I do want to dance. But I will be dancing on your head."

The Algerian launched a roundhouse kick aimed at Dexter's head, a favored first move of Soviet Spetsnaz Commandos. If the kick connected, it could knock an opponent out cold, or disorient him enough for the killing blow.

Dexter simply leaned back and away from the kick, which missed his face by a few inches. Then he waited.

As expected, the momentum of the kick carried the Algerian around ninety degrees and exposed his right side to attack.

The men around the circle held their breath as they waited for Dexter to take advantage of the opening.

But Dexter waited, and assumed a basic Kyoshinkai ready stance by turning his feet and knees inward.

The Algerian realized his mistake, continued turning and went into a spinning back kick to keep Dexter off of him.

Dexter allowed the kick to hit him full force in the chest, and let out a loud hiss of air, all the while staring directly at the Algerian. He brushed the footprint off of his black Nomex flight suit and squared off again.

The circle cheered wildly at the display of strength.

The Algerian looked at him, then launched another attack, a series of kicks and punches that were all easily blocked or dodged.

The SAS lieutenant had secured enough sucker bets from the Algerian commandos to take home a nice profit. "Let's wrap this up lad. I'm ready to go home."

Dexter nodded without taking his eyes off of his adversary. Then, in a flash, he closed the gap between them and stung the Algerian with a back fist to the right side of his head.

The Algerian blinked from the speed of the attack, and his knees buckled from the force of the blow.

Dexter was standing directly beside the stunned Commando when he hit him in the back of the head with a vicious hook kick. Dexter's right heel landed squarely on target, dropping the Algerian on the spot. He stood over the unconscious man, poised to attack while the other soldiers cheered and exchanged money.

Dexter slowly backed away as the Algerian team medic moved in to revive his defeated comrade.

"Dexter! Let's go! Our plane is warming up outside," the lieutenant shouted as he walked toward the hangar door.

The Algerian, awakened by an ammonia capsule, got his bearings and looked around for Dexter. He unsheathed his knife and stood up. "Yankee Doodle!" His scream echoed throughout the hangar.

The other Algerian Commandos stood out of his way. None of them wanted to deal with his violent temper and risk getting stabbed.

Dexter turned and faced him. The smile left his face when he spotted the knife in the Algerian's right hand. The thunderstorm began to brew. "It's over. Let it go."

"Fuck you Yankee dog! I will gut you and hang you from the ceiling!" He began walking toward Dexter.

The SAS men raised their weapons.

"No! I got this!" Dexter shouted as he walked to meet the Algerian. The thunderstorm was in full brew.

"Dexter!" the SAS Lieutenant shouted. He knew that the Algerian was now risking his life by continuing his attack against Dexter, a black belt in three styles of martial arts, and a world class fighter.

"I got it L-T! Relax!" Dexter shouted back. Time to DDT this fucker, he thought.

The Algerian inverted the knife and lunged at Dexter with an upward slash, designed to cut him open from his belly to his chin. Then, in the same move, the blade would be brought back down quickly, just behind the collarbone, killing him instantly.

Dexter stepped smoothly to the left and struck the Algerian's knife hand with an open-hand strike, just at the wrist, causing him to loosen his grip on the knife. Dexter quickly followed up with a blazing low-angle kick to the Algerian's right thigh.

The femur cracked, and the knife dropped to the floor. The Algerian began to stumble.

Dexter continued his assault and broke the Algerian's nose with a left-handed back fist, then drove a pile-driving, overhand right fist into his chest.

Breathless and in agony, the Algerian dropped to his knees.

Dexter grabbed a handful of black hair and pulled his prey's head back to expose the throat. His right hand was formed into the deadly extended knuckle punch. He was about to kill the Algerian.

The SAS Lieutenant shouted as he moved slowly toward them. "Dexter let him go! Sergeant First Class Diamond, at ease! Dexter!" He prayed that Dexter wouldn't kill the Algerian commando. There was no way he could explain to headquarters why one of his men murdered a semi-friendly nation's soldier during a gladiator match.

"Dexter! Dexter!"

Dexter opened his eyes. He wasn't in Algeria in a hangar, fighting with an Algerian Airborne commando. He was more than ten years in the future, in the United States, in Ocoee, Florida, in bed, loosely holding his wife by the throat with his left hand as she sat on the side of the bed smiling at him.

Out of the corner of his right eye, he saw that his right hand was formed into the extended knuckle punch position, designed to do extensive damage to soft tissue targets. The blow could have possibly killed her in a matter of seconds. Dexter immediately sat up; his heart was pounding wildly. Another five seconds of dreaming and he would have accidentally killed or severely wounded the love of his life. He was about to apologize when she leaned forward and kissed him.

"I'm going to spinning class. Go back to sleep mystery man." She tweaked his nipple as she got up.

King Tut, the family dog followed her out of the room.

Dexter sat alone in the darkness for a few seconds, unable to move. Then it hit him. Monique had no clue as to what had just happened. It never registered with her that he was about to hit her or she would have had a hissy fit.

Tut came back into the room as he got out of bed. Dexter knelt down and said a prayer of thanks. Tut rubbed up against him as if to comfort him. Dexter stood

up and looked around the bedroom. This was not Algeria, and he was no longer a military counter-terrorist commando. There were no terrorists in his life anymore. He had a wife and children now, and was a well-respected sergeant on the Orlando Police Department. Everything was nice and simple, and fairly predictable. He looked at the clock. Soon it would be time to wake the kids up for school.

The Pitch

ATLANTA, GEORGIA NOVEMBER 5, 2000-0930 HOURS - MONDAY

Harold Ashford, Director of the Washington, D.C. based Urban Justice Research Institute, checked his equipment once more to make sure that everything was working. Using PowerPoint to make this presentation was not something that he wanted to do, but his staff had insisted he keep up with the times and use modern technology. It had taken him a month to learn how to use the high-tech equipment and he still wasn't sure he had set it up right. Ashford turned the computer on, then the projector. Nothing happened.

"Should have just used a good old-fashioned slide projector," he mumbled. He fumbled around with it a little more, and then started pressing buttons on the remote. The Windows icon materialized. He pointed the remote at the screen, targeted "Slide Show," and pressed the button. Suddenly, the image he was looking for appeared on the screen. Ashford smiled. Maybe this techno-video, computer-projection thing was not so bad after all, he thought.

Having conquered technology, Ashford walked over to the credenza where two polished silver pots sat and poured a cup of coffee. Never had anything like this in the Army, he thought as he sipped the expensive blend.

The office, located on the thirty-fifth floor of the glass-faced Mid-Town Tower, belonged to Donald Charles III, a powerful, nationally known attorney who acted as the legal paladin to some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the country. The glistening skyscraper stood in the heart of downtown Atlanta on Peachtree Street, diagonally west of the oddly shaped Marriott Marquis Hotel.

Ashford turned to the door as Ronald "Ronnie" Sapp, his senior intelligence officer, entered the room.

"Mornin', Harold," the young man said through a yawn.

"Good morning yourself, youngster. I'm glad you decided to get up and come to work. I could have used your help with that PowerPoint contraption. I think I got it right, though."

Ronnie checked the machine. "Looks like you did everything right. How much time do I have?" He was eyeing the coffee. He'd stayed out late drinking at Justin's while Ashford opted to stay in his hotel room.

"Not much. Why don't you go ahead and do your thing?" Ashford was ninety-nine percent sure that none of these measures were necessary because no one had any real reason to want to listen to the Board's conversations, but if they knew what was being discussed, that thought process would surely change. No, it was highly unlikely that anyone was eavesdropping, and they wanted to keep it that way.

"Yes sir, Major." Ronnie gave a half-assed salute and opened one of his briefcases. His job was to perform a "tech sweep" of the huge conference room. The first device Ronnie used closely resembled a walkie-talkie. He screwed the antennae into the device and turned it on. Then, under Ashford's watchful eyes, he slowly walked around the huge, ribbon-striped mahogany table, stopping at each chair and pointing the antennae at the undersides. He then swept the outer edge of the office, checking more furniture, statuary, paintings, and plants. The room was "clean;" the automatic bug detector gave no indication of any unauthorized "ears" listening in.

Ronnie carefully placed the sensitive instrument on a table near the double doors that led into the room. He brought his other briefcase, placed it on the table, and opened it. He set up his tape recorder detector, turned it on, then went back and checked the phones for signs of tapping. Pleased, Ronnie shot a smug look at Ashford and went for coffee again.

Ashford held up a big hand. "Did you forget something, young buck?" Ronnie stopped and frowned. What could he have forgotten? He turned in a circle, scanning the room. The sprinkler heads caught his eye. That was it. That's what he'd overlooked. "Where can I get a ladder?" he asked, remembering now how easy it was to disguise a camera as just about anything.

"Don't worry about it, youngster. I already checked. Go ahead and get some coffee." Ashford chuckled. He didn't need a ladder to see if there was a camera in one of the sprinkler heads. Hidden cameras, no matter how small or well designed, needed a view port. The "eye" of the camera had to be pointed at the target and that often meant altering the exposed surface of the object to accommodate the lens. But people never paid attention to small details such as those, did they?

Ashford had a distinct advantage over the young Mr. Sapp. A career military man, Ashford had over twenty years in the intelligence business. Conversely, Ronnie had spent only six years as an Army Intelligence Officer. But Ronnie was a Morehouse man and a whiz with electronic surveillance gear, which he felt put him well above the average agent. Still, as smart and educated as Ronnie was, at only twenty-nine years old he was still very naive about real-world, hard-core intelligence operations.

Ten minutes later, the board members began arriving. A table was set up outside of the room where the women's purses would be left. Ronnie used his hand-held bug detector to scan their persons. None of the well-dressed men and women complained of the ritual.

The fifteen board members milled around socializing until the chairman arrived. His bodyguards, four clean-cut but aggressive-looking men, took up positions in the office outside of the conference room. The chairman stopped in front of Ronnie and held his arms up.

"That won't be necessary, sir," Ronnie said nervously.

"To hell with that!" Ashford protested. "If anybody needs to be checked it's that sneaky bastard!"

The Chairman laughed. "You heard the man, do your job."

Ronnie did a quick sweep of the billionaire's lean five-eleven frame and stepped back. He wondered how much the Chairman's dark blue, pinstriped Versace suit cost.

Ashford walked over and shook his brother-in-law's hand. "Morning, Chuck. Everything's all set."

"Sorry I'm late. We stopped by the site to check on its progress. It should be complete in about three months, operational in four."

"Sounds good, Chuck. Did my sister come down with you?"

"No. She's attending a luncheon sponsored by the NAACP today. Your friend Steven will be there, and he wants you to call him as soon as you get back."

"Will do. I'm ready when you are."

The Chairman moved to the table and called the meeting to order. The members moved quickly, almost with military-style discipline, and took their seats.

Ashford looked at Ronnie and gestured with his head.

Ronnie frowned and left the room, mumbling under his breath.

The Chairman's sonorous voice echoed through the room as he spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Atlanta again. I want to thank you for taking time out of your extremely busy schedules to meet today. We have important business this morning, so let's get right to it. Harold is here to update you all on

the Institute's latest endeavors and some things that are going on in the nation as it relates to our mission. Harold?" The Chairman took his seat.

Ashford buttoned his suit jacket and cleared his throat, as he became the center of attention. "Good morning. In response to your requests for an analysis of recent developments across the nation, my staff has put together a brief presentation, after which I will make a recommendation for a course of action." He wondered if anyone noticed he had said "a course of action," and not "several options," as he usually did at these meetings. If they did, he couldn't read it on their faces. "Incidents of hate crimes in this nation have nearly reached the nine thousand mark this year; that's up from just under eight thousand last year." He clicked the remote and brought up a graph showing the pattern of incidents over a period of six years. "Notice the sharp increase right here," he said, using a laser pointer to direct them on the screen. "It seems that in 1994, the same year that O.J. Simpson was acquitted of the murder of his wife, anti-black violence skyrocketed and has been rising ever since. As a matter of fact, not only did acts of violence increase, my analysts have found an alarming pattern of significant increase in discrimination in the workplace, against Black men in particular."

He then switched the screen to a large, brightly colored pie chart showing the breakdown of known motivating factors for hate crimes. "This large, black area shows that sixty percent of the hate crimes committed are motivated by race. Does anyone want to guess which race ranks as the number one target in that particular category?"

None of the board members took the bait. They all knew the answer to the question.

Ashford paused and looked at the red, blue, and yellow sections of the pie, representing sexual orientation, religion, and "other." It did look impressive. Maybe he could get used to this high-tech stuff.

"The latest tally of known hate groups in this country has reached six-hundred plus, and more groups are forming all the time, taking up the banner of hatred against America's non-whites. You've all seen the news; you know that it's as bad now as it's ever been." Ashford clicked to a different screen.

"Since 1992, prison building has been the fastest-growing industry in America. This country now has the world's largest prison system with more than two million men and women as guests of local, state, and federal authorities. Not surprisingly, Black men and women account for over eight hundred thousand of that steadily growing number. Also, we've been tracking juvenile arrests nationwide and have found that a disturbingly high number of young Black boys are being convicted of felonies, thereby becoming ineligible to vote. Think about what effect that could have on who we put into office. Then we have the issue of the constant and relentless attacks on affirmative action programs around

the country, and we're losing a lot of those battles. But I'm sure you all know that already." Ashford paused to let the information sink in.

The faces in the group exhibited a mixture of concern and anger. Inwardly pleased, Ashford continued. "The Institute has determined that, given the frightening pattern of intolerance-driven behavior we've been tracking, this country is headed for a race-relations meltdown, with Blacks poised to suffer the worst of the fallout. We believe that there is an organized effort, by forces unknown, to diminish the morale, wealth, and political power of the African-American community of this so-called great nation. We haven't located the source of this activity yet, but my operatives are diligently working on finding more information. I know that this sounds like a far-fetched conspiracy theory, but remember, the Nazis openly spoke and acted against the Jews long before they moved to exterminate them." He paused again.

The group's whispered comments to each other were now accompanied by nodding heads and pointing fingers.

"Our main concern now is the rise in racially motivated violence against Blacks and the callous attitudes of those who commit the acts." Without taking his eyes off of them, Ashford clicked the remote. The computer ran video footage of an avowed white supremacist recently convicted for murdering a Black man, just for being Black. When asked by a reporter if he had any words for the victim's family, the killer responded, "Yeah, they can suck my white Aryan dick!"

The faces of the board members stiffened. Even the Chairman was visibly stung by the cruel remark. Ashford let it sink in before continuing. "I have initiated a three-prong counterstrike. We have two very powerful, very influential African-Americans working on our behalf as part of the plan to counter some of the social and political issues of racism. Those people and their missions will remain secret until such time as they are prepared to go public. I am also activating a unit of former military special forces personnel to perform any special operations tasks that we deem necessary. By that I mean dignitary protection for those who put themselves on the line for us, and to collect intelligence on violent hate groups. In extreme instances, they could act as a covert counter-terrorist team to antagonize, or if necessary, directly confront and/or neutralize violent hate groups to let them know that open season on Blacks is over! Hell, even the police are shooting and killing unarmed Blacks on a regular basis and they always get away with it! Anyway, we want to send a message that they can no longer terrorize good citizens and get away with it! Its time for us to act, and act decisively on this problem!" Ashford looked at the Chairman, who nodded his approval. Ashford sat the remote on the table and left the room, leaving the angry face of the hate-murderer frozen on the screen.

Ronnie approached Ashford in the outer office. "Har..."

Ashford cut him off. "Not out here, youngster!" he snapped, reminding Ronnie that only the conference room had been cleared.

Ronnie looked back at the bodyguards, whose smiling faces only added to his embarrassment. Ronnie had forgotten basic OPSEC, Operational Security, as they called it in the Army. He clenched his fists in anger.

Several minutes later, the Chairman poked his head out of the conference room and motioned for Ashford to come back in. He waited until the door was closed before speaking. "Tell them what you need, Harold," he said.

"We have most of the equipment we need thanks to Robinson Defense Technologies and DARKSTAR Communications. We also have a small complement of operatives and specialists that can be used to support the new special operations team. What we need now is an increased payroll and operations budget. We all know that an operation such as this is extremely expensive, but it will be worth it." Ashford went on to explain in detail what finances the Institute's new special operations unit would require.

The board took less than five minutes to approve the budget. They had access to funds that numbered in the billions, and Ashford's small operation wouldn't even put a dent in the interest.

Ashford thanked the board and quickly left the room. He didn't see Ronnie. One of the bodyguards pointed to a far corner of the office.

Ronnie was standing staring out of the window, still sulking from his earlier screw-up.

"You know this only makes you look even more foolish. Ronnie, you've got to learn to not take yourself so seriously. It's going to give you a damned heart attack!" Ashford advised. It hurt him to see his protégé like this.

"They laughed at me, man. I don't like that!"

"They're all ex-Secret Service and FBI agents, Ronnie. Their profession demands that they be able to laugh at each other and themselves or you end up a drunk or worse, eating your gun from the unbearable stress. Now listen to me, when the board members come out, gather up the gear and take it back to Washington. I'm flying directly to Orlando." Ashford didn't wait for a reply. He walked away from Ronnie, shook hands with the bodyguards, and left the office. He walked across the street to the Marriott Marquis Hotel, got his bags from the hotel room, and went downstairs where he grabbed a taxi to the airport. Ashford clapped his hands and rubbed them together in an attempt to allay his excitement, and nervousness. All components of the first phase had been set in

motion. Consequently, there was much to be concerned about, and even more to fear. But after all, fear was a necessary component of taking great risks, and taking great risks was the only way to effect meaningful change, wasn't it?

SWAT ROUND-UP, ORANGE COUNTY GUN RANGE, ORLANDO, FLORIDA - NOVEMBER 9TH-1300 HOURS

Sergeant Dexter Diamond and four other Orlando Police SWAT team members stood in the starting box as they waited for the command to move out. Dexter put his hand on his buddy John's shoulder. He looked up at the sky and filled his lungs with warm air. Though it was November, when most states are diving headlong into winter, Florida stubbornly held on to summer, holding at seventy-five degrees during the day, only giving in to mother nature at night with a staggering sixty-eight degrees, causing most true Floridians to shiver.

Today's weather was particularly suited for combat competition. Hurricane Michelle pounded Cuba, giving Castro a well-deserved wash down, and keeping Orlando's torturous humidity bearably low. Muscular clouds, soft grayish-white airborne giants that stood thirty thousand feet high and stretched ten miles long, ran interference by blocking out the sizzling winter sun.

The range official shouted, "Go!" The sniper ran to the rifle platform and set his long gun up for an eighty-five yard shot. He took a deep breath and exhaled, then gently squeezed the trigger. The bullet exploded out of the rifle barrel, striking the metal target down range, signifying a hit.

The two team members carrying the shotguns had to rush to the far end of "Survival City" to engage their targets. Dexter and Sergeant John Murphy, carrying MP5 submachine guns, then bolted across the grass field to a small shooting house for their portion of the exercise. Dexter and John stopped at a table set up in front of the "house" and flipped over one of the wooden blocks.

"Red!" John called out without looking up. That meant they had to engage all of the red targets inside the house. If they accidentally shot any of the other targets, which were considered innocent or no-shoot targets, ten seconds per target would be added to their score. The team commander gave the order for them to make entry.

Once inside they went live and began engaging the red pie plates in the room. Four shots apiece later, they put their weapons on "safe" and backed out of the house.

Dexter then picked up the one hundred eighty-five pound dummy used to simulate a downed officer. Running effortlessly at full speed with the dummy over his shoulder, he and John headed back to the rendezvous point where they

had to wait for the shotgunners to join them. Then, all together, they sprinted back to the starting position. Once there, the adrenaline-fueled assault team waited in the box as the sniper made his shot to stop the clock.

When the eight-inch metal plate sang out signifying a hit, Dexter tossed the "man" from his shoulders several feet through the air and onto the ground. There were a few moments of tense silence among them while the scorekeeper waited for the range crew to check all of the targets for hits or misses.

The other SWAT teams watching the performance began cheering wildly, already knowing the time because every team timed the others in this intense competition. When word came that there were no misses on the targets, the Orlando team took first place in the Three Gun Match and moved to first place overall in the fourteenth annual SWAT Round-up competition.

Some of Dexter's non-competing team members ran over and heartily congratulated John and the others on their performances. As expected, he only received a lukewarm, insincere tap on the shoulder from them before they walked away. Outwardly, he was unfazed, unwilling to show any emotion amongst this group of urban warriors. But inside it stung him more than he would ever admit.

The more enthusiastic praise for him came from the guys on the Orange County team and some of the other SWAT teams Dexter had come to know over the years. That included the Sheriff of Orange County who had served in the Army reserves with him, and had been trying to recruit him for years. Today, as he watched his teammates walk away, Dexter actually thought about making the switch.

"Damn, he's getting better responses on his performance from the other teams. That has to sting a little. Why does he put up with that nonsense, Colonel?" Harold Ashford asked.

"Well, Major, this is about as close to what he's used to as he's going to get in the civilian world. I believe that he thinks that if he lets SWAT go, he'll lose his edge."

As painful as the snub Dexter received had to be, Ashford was glad it happened, as it would only make his task easier. "Well, that makes sense, sir, and it's actually going to make it easier for us to convince him to come work for us. Not that you couldn't persuade him to on your own, but that look on his face speaks volumes about his mindset right now."

"You're absolutely right, Major. I could order him to do it but I won't. This has to be his decision. Come on, let's get you two reacquainted."

Dexter's eyes, now hidden by his trademark Ray-Ban Wayfarers, burned with anger as he walked quickly, and somewhat stiffly to the bleachers where the Colonel and Major Ashford were waiting to meet him.

"Harold Ashford, this is my son, Sergeant Dexter Diamond. Sarge, this is retired Army Major Harold Ashford. I believe that you two already know each other." The Colonel stopped there to let things run their course. He liked to let his son work things out for himself.

Dexter looked at the six-foot-five, heavy-set, dark-skinned man in front of him. He did not recognize him and was in no mood to play guessing games. He shook hands and nodded politely, but did not speak. His lips were pursed too tightly from anger for words to come out.

Ashford sensed the anger in him and decided to cut to the chase. "Good to see you again, Sarge. Maybe I should call you Agent Diamond; or would you prefer to be called, The Operator?" The last two words were pronounced with a poorly mocked British accent. Ashford smiled slightly.

Dexter looked at his father, then at Ashford. He narrowed his eyes and scanned the big man from head to toe. He did know him, but from where? He chose to ignore the question about his former nickname. Hell, it was on his license plate. Anyone could see that. "Where do I know you from, Major?"

"You were in Protective Services in Stuttgart back in the mid-eighties, correct?"

"Yes I was." Dexter strained to remember the big man.

"Do you remember when you were doing the advance for the DCINC's visit to Geneva?" Ashford asked with a big smile. He knew using Dexter's former General's official title, Deputy Commander-in-Chief, would let him know that he was very familiar with what Dexter used to do.

Dexter almost smiled as his memory clicked. "That's where I know you from! You were the guy in that restaurant, the Yankee Clipper! What the hell were you doing there?"

His mind flashed back to that lonely trip, which was his first solo mission outside of Germany. The mission called for him to drop off his partner Joey and a skinny satellite communications NCO in Bern, then drive on alone to Geneva to set up his end of the advance. He'd done a full day's work, and then gone into the Yankee Clipper for dinner. He had been standing near the open grill in the restaurant watching the chef cook his steak when this Ashford guy approached him.

The half-smile left Dexter's face. "And just what the hell are you doing here?" he asked skeptically.

"I was with Military Intelligence back in those days. I was just making sure you weren't blurting out top secret information or meeting with one of Colonel Kaddafi's operatives."

Dexter nodded as the conversation came back to him. "So that's why you asked me what I was doing in Switzerland. The Army was worried that I might take Kaddafi up on his offer and take the four hundred thousand dollars he'd offered to us Black soldiers." He thought back to the day Colonel Muammar Kaddafi antagonized the US military by offering the money to any Black American GI who would defect to his country. Being the only Black male agent in the unit, the Captain had called him into his office and asked if he had been tempted. Dexter had laughed at him. Back then he was more than patriotic. He had been a super-patriot and had told the Captain that he would have gladly dropped into Libya and put the then-premier terrorist threat to the United States out of his misery.

"Exactly. But we mainly wanted to make sure you didn't have loose lips," Ashford said.

"I thought they used beautiful women to tempt and test us macho men," Dexter cracked.

"They did. She was the so-called German girl named Kuni that you met in downtown Stuttgart on Konig Strasse." Ashford smiled slyly.

Dexter smiled too. "I remember her. I guess the white guy that asked me all of those questions at the castle in Rosenhiem was one of yours too?" He didn't tell Ashford that Kuni was a much better lover than she was a spy. But maybe he knew and wasn't saying. It didn't really matter; it was a long time ago.

"Absolutely. You passed every test with flying colors. That's why my Commander, Lenny Canton, tried to recruit you for our unit," Ashford explained.

"Yeah, I remember that, too. Okay, so tell me what you're doing here in Orlando and why you're talking to me right now?" Dexter folded his arms and waited for an answer.

Ashford looked around. "I liked the way you handled yourself when you were assigned to Protective Services. Being the only Black agent in the unit couldn't have been easy."

Dexter nodded. "Actually, Mr. Ashford, it was a daily struggle dealing with the nonsense." A frown came over his bearded face.

"Yes, we heard some of the stories of how they tried to make you quit. Yet you were the first Black agent to leave the unit with honors. Hell, you were the first Black agent to leave the unit without getting kicked out or run out! That says a lot. I'm willing to bet that you have pretty much the same challenges now, don't you? I mean, being the only brother on the SWAT team. I saw the way they treated you after that event. Your team kicked everybody's ass but your own teammates barely shook your hand. As a matter of fact, you got better praise from the other SWAT teams. Why is that, Mr. Diamond?" Ashford's charming demeanor had suddenly disappeared.

Dexter suddenly felt as though he were a hostile witness in a courtroom cross-examination. His mind was racing through the many times he had been slighted by some of the guys on the team. Like the time he tried to teach them a new way to clear a stairwell. The old salts on the team gave him hell. They constantly interrupted his presentation by challenging his tactics and logic. When he arrived at OPD, they were taught to clear stairwells by lying on their backs with guns pointing up and using the legs to push the body up the stairs. The procedure was extremely slow, incredibly draining physically, and to Dexter, unnecessarily dangerous.

The SWAT Team was using the same tactic, and another equally strenuous tactic taken from the German Counter-terrorist team, GSG9, called Fast Tracking. On this technique, one team member would lay on his back with gun drawn while another team member picked him up by the belt and carried him upstairs.

Dexter pointed out that the technique was slow, dangerous, and used up too much energy. Dexter had gone to the team commander and made the suggestion that they change tactics. The commander agreed and told him to prepare a class for the team.

Dexter made the pitch to the team and was heckled and cursed mercilessly, until he demonstrated how to simply walk up the stairs and cover all points of danger at the same time. He even showed them how to clear different types of stairwells, then proved his point beyond any argument by giving them paint pistols and letting them play. The tactics were immediately adopted by the team, but no one, except his buddy John and the team commander, gave him any credit for it. Dexter couldn't understand the animosity or the resistance to learning the new tactics.

But was it him they didn't like, or was it because they hated learning something new? It was hard to say. Everyone knows that cops make the worst students in the world because they think they already know everything.

Dexter was also very aware that some of them didn't really care for Blacks. He had heard many of them joke of dropping nuclear bombs on Black neighborhoods to solve the crime problem. But even then he had asked himself if that was frustration talking, or had it been plain old racism? It seemed that they were always arresting the same people for the same crimes over and over again. After all, didn't he get tired of the same old crap too? Doesn't everyone?

Dexter's memory shifted back to when he had been a bodyguard in Germany. Those white boys had done everything they could to cause him grief. The first thing they had told him when he arrived there was that no Black agent had ever lasted in the unit. They had even jeopardized the General's life by sending the motorcade on a route blocked by construction, just to get him in trouble. Dexter had just been blessed as one of the few agents allowed to serve as the Personal Security Officer, referred to as the PSO. The PSO group was the elite among the elite. The PSO was the person in charge of the security team, and went everywhere the General went. The PSO rode in the car with the General, walked with the General, and talked with the General. It was a much-coveted position and only the most mature and well-rounded agents were ever allowed to rise to that position.

The morning of the incident, while bringing the General in to work, traffic was unusually heavy on the main route. Dexter called in to the control room and asked for an alternate route, as the General was getting impatient. The "Boss," as they sometimes called him, was well aware that he was the top target of every major terrorist group in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The General didn't like to sit in traffic, lest he get a taste of what General Kroesen got when his motorcade stopped for a red light in Heidelberg back in the seventies. The Red Army Faction had mapped out his route and waited for him, as he kept a regular schedule. A terrorist sitting on a hill overlooking the road fired an RPG-7 at Kroesen's armored Mercedes, blowing up the trunk and shattering the bullet-resistant back window. The motorcade was also hit by small arms fire, but no one was killed. The event caused the military to take protecting their generals seriously, and formed elite, professional bodyguard teams.

The control operator gave Dexter an alternate route, which was found to have major construction on it, causing traffic to be funneled to just one lane.

The motorcade was forced to wait for what seemed like hours, and then crawled past dozens of men working in and next to the road. It was a classic opportunity for an assassination or kidnap attempt, neither of which the bodyguards were likely to survive.

The driver, a black Staff Sergeant assigned to the unit with the specific job of driving the General, shook his head. He had been in the unit for several years and knew exactly what the other agents had done, and why.

The General put his paper down and made eye contact in the double rear-view mirror used by the PSO to check traffic. "Dexter, don't you know better than to take a route that has construction on it?" His eyes locked on Dexter's like a high-intensity tractor beam.

Dexter stiffened. The man in the back seat was a four star Air Force General with over thirty years of distinguished military service. The General had served in the White House under two presidents, fought in Vietnam, and was a champion boxer. He was also the second most powerful American military man in this part of the world. His deep voice was father-like, and stern. Dexter envisioned his short military career ending in a stint as a cook in the chow hall. All that high-speed counter-terrorist training that he'd received from the Germans would go to waste. He'd have to give up his elite troop status and go back to Headquarters Company and be subjected to regular Army-puke daily grind. He'd have to give up driving Mercedes Benzes, wearing suits, living separate from the other enlisted troops, and that air of awe and mystery that surrounded the agents of the Protective Service Detachment, United States European Command. Worst of all, he'd have to face his father and brother, both military special operations men, and tell them that he was going to be busting suds for a living because he picked the wrong route.

Dexter started to look away, but realized that would be a mistake. It would show weakness to a man who needed to know that the man in the seat in front of him knew no fear. Dexter needed the General to know that no matter what the situation, he was equal to the task. Dexter decided that he would offer no excuse, no whining about how his co-workers set him up. He knew that control knew about the construction because they call the German Police to find out which roads were being worked on. He also knew that blaming someone else for his misfortune is the worst kind of way to get out of this jam, as it would only make the General angrier. This would be his own moment of truth. Dexter picked up his MP5K submachinegun and laid it across his lap in case of an attack. He took a deep breath and answered. "Yes sir. This was the route advised by control sir." He spoke in a deep voice, and maintained eye contact. That was all he had. If he was going to go out, he was going out with his head up.

The General snorted. He knew that all of the agents knew that he was, by nature, a reasonable man. He also knew they knew that once angered, he could make a man disappear without a trace within a matter of hours. "Well, you should have known better anyway! It's your responsibility to make sure situations like this don't happen! I don't like to sit in traffic too long, it's just too dangerous! Do you understand?"

Dexter quickly scanned the construction workers for signs of malice in their eyes and body language. He checked the outside mirror to make sure that the chase car was as close as they could get without crashing into the rear of the

General's car. He knew that getting chewed out wouldn't be nearly as bad as dying in a hail of bullets, or being blown to bits by a bomb planted by one of the construction workers. Satisfied, he went back to eye contact with the human storm in the blue uniform that was sitting behind him, verbally ripping into his young ass. "Yes sir!" That was it. That was all the General was going to get out of him. If he wanted more, he was going to have to order him to talk. He'd learned from his father that excuses were for the weak. The Colonel had always told him that the maximum effective range of an excuse is zero, a point Army drill sergeants drove home every day of his basic training at Fort McClellan. The lesson served him well that day. The General calmed down and went back to his paper, and nothing more was said about the incident.

Once back at the office, Dexter stopped by the control room to let them know about the construction. The control room operator and a couple of the other agents all laughed at him and asked him how the ride into work was. Dexter pretended that everything went fine, and filed the incident away in his payback memory banks.

That was only the beginning. They excluded him from high profile missions and key out-of-country assignments every chance they got. When he finally overcame that obstacle, they placed a rookie sergeant that he'd trained, in the team leader position that he had been expecting to get. But not all of the guys were buttholes. He had his buddies Gary and Joel, who stuck with him until they went back stateside and left the military. Even they were not immune from the harassment of the "in crowd".

Then, he thought back to all of the racist jerks he had dealt with when he had been stationed in northern California at Sierra Army Depot, a high-tech, top-secret facility weapons facility.

His first week there out of basic training, a big corn-fed red neck on his squad had walked up to him and out of the blue had informed him he didn't like Blacks. Dexter informed him that he didn't care and that as long as he didn't bother him, no one would get hurt. Dexter never once had a problem out the redneck during his tour of duty.

Then, there was the new specialist that shipped in from Germany. Dexter's squad had been playing cards in the barracks when the new guy began harassing him with borderline racist remarks. What the new guy didn't know, was that Dexter was one of the First Sergeant's martial artists and that training was mandatory after work every day.

The squad knew of Dexter's martial arts expertise and tried to get the newcomer to back down. But the more they tried to quiet him, the louder he got.

Dexter never said a word, but kept watching television. That was until he heard the instigator call him "boy". To this day he doesn't remember how it happened, but in a split second, Dexter found himself on top of the big-eared troublemaker, with his hands around the man's neck. The storm had come quickly, and it wanted blood.

The room was filled with shouts for him to stop, but no one dared get close or tried to stop him.

Then, as the thunderheads cleared, so did Dexter's thinking. He loosened his grip and exhaled. It was then that he noticed that he was holding a beer bottle in his right hand, drawn back to smash the racist specialist in the face. Dexter tossed it aside and went into his room, trying to remember exactly when he picked that damned bottle up. It would have served the specialist right to have his face bashed in for bothering a man that he didn't know, and had no true beef with. What the hell is wrong with people? The rational part of Dexter's mind asked. Who knew? People could be really stupid at times.

Coming back to reality, Dexter's breathing quickened, his eyes glazed over. He pressed his lips together tightly as he stroked his mustache and beard. He was pissed again now, and getting angrier by the second.

"You didn't answer my question, Mr. Diamond." Ashford could see that his tactic had worked. He had gotten Dexter to think about what he'd been through.

"You came here to talk to me about something. What is it?" Dexter snapped. He stood there staring at Harold, arms folded across his chest, head tilted back slightly.

Ashford took note of Dexter's muscles, plainly outlined by the lightweight black long-sleeved shirt, and wondered if it was wise to piss off this battle-hardened, highly trained warrior. But there was much at stake, wasn't there?

He decided it was worth the risk. "I don't want to go into it now. We can sit down and talk about it after the competition is over. I'm actually enjoying watching you in action," Ashford said.

The Colonel interrupted them. "The Major is here to offer you a job, Sarge. When you get through dicking around out here, I'd like you to take a few moments to discuss it with him. By the way, you were a little sloppy on your shooting. You're rushing shots so fast that you're slapping that trigger like a man beating his cheating wife! Now you'd better slow down or you're going to screw up. Remember, smooth is quick."

Dexter smiled a little. He did rush through that last event, but how hard was it to hit the target with an MP5? The damned things practically aim and shoot themselves. But rushing was a drawback of an all out, balls to the wall

competition amongst such a highly competitive group. Each officer there considered themselves the elite of their particular agency, who were competing to be known as the best SWAT cops in the world. That desire to win often forces normally highly proficient SWAT cops to do things that they would never do in a real combat situation. Rushing through an event often led to missed or "dropped" shots, and other painfully embarrassing fuck-ups. The scariest thing to watch was a sniper that could not hit his target under pressure. Needless to say, team confidence in the man dropped dramatically. Thinking of screw-ups, Dexter recalled five years ago, a large Mid-western university sent their newly formed campus police SWAT team to the competition. It was a bad idea.

The group was woefully unprepared for the Olympics of SWAT competition. The team members were grossly out of shape, their shooting skills were poor to average, and their technical/tactical skills were even worse, as was evident when a chubby SWAT member hung upside down from the top of the rappelling tower for nearly an hour after rigging his seat wrong and panicking after he got stuck. That team never returned to the round up after that year.

Dexter nodded his head. "Roger that, sir. I'll slow down a little when we get to the pistol events tomorrow." He turned to Ashford. "I have to attend a dinner function with my wife Friday night. We won't have long to talk."

"This is important, son. You may have to show up late or cancel altogether." Retired Green Beret Colonel Jesse Diamond Sr. gave his warrior son the look that meant the topic was not open for debate.

Though Dexter was a full four inches taller than his father and outweighed him by nearly forty pounds, his upbringing dictated that he not argue with his father, who also happened to be a legend in the Special Forces community.

"Yes sir. Should I bring my black bag or do I have time to prepare for this mission?" Dexter said jokingly.

Harold Ashford smiled. The Colonel didn't. "You'll have time to prepare. We'll see you later." He turned and walked away with Ashford in tow.

Dexter watched them walk away. Ashford seemed happy, almost excited, as the two conversed about things he could only speculate about. He looked around for his team, spotting them near the rappel tower. He reluctantly trotted over to join them, all the time wondering what type of job that Ashford character was going to offer him, and how his father was involved.

"Well, Colonel, I'm glad to see that he's still in top shape. I just hope that he's willing to get back into the game."

The Colonel shook his head. "No Major, he's not in top shape yet. The second he decides to take the job, and he will, he'll start training seriously. How's the Washington project going?"

"Well, I don't really know. We expect completion any time, though. It will be an interesting first assignment for your son and his team. To be honest with you sir, I can't wait to see him back in the counter-terror game."

Ashford spent the following three days watching Dexter in action. He was impressed by the fact that Dexter seemed just as quick and efficient as he was over ten years ago. He was sure now that choosing Dexter to lead the new team was the right choice. But now came the difficult part. Ashford had to convince the formerly single, globetrotting Army counter-terrorist specialist, who was now married with two kids, a house, and a dog, to give up his nice, comfortable life, his career and pension, to once again engage in the deadly game of combating terrorists.

Thursday was the last day of actual competition of the SWAT Round up. The last team had finally completed the final event, the man-breaking obstacle course. Ashford watched as numerous hard-core SWAT cops collapsed and even cried as they stumbled zombie-like through the last obstacle, the staggered football tires. That was, if they made it that far. Normally rough and tough SWAT men were sprawled around the wet field, muddy, exhausted, demoralized, and on the verge of passing out. Some were receiving oxygen from the paramedics. A few had to be taken away by ambulance.

Ashford could tell that even the fittest of them was glad that the most mentally and physically demanding event of the Round-up was over. He walked over to where Dexter and the Colonel were standing. They, like the others, were standing around the scoreboard to see how their respective teams ranked.

The stellar performance of the Orlando team kept them in the number one position throughout the week, almost ensuring them as the overall winner if no other team beat their O-course time by too great a margin.

When the last team finally finished, the final score was tallied and posted. The Orlando team had held on to the lead and won. Friday afternoon, at the Hard Rock Cafe at Universal Studios, the OPD team would be announced as the winner of the fourteenth annual SWAT Round up.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON - 1300 HOURS

Dexter barely heard the announcer as the Orlando Gold team was named as the first place team. They had won the Round up, but he didn't really care. His mind drifted in and out of contact with what was going on around him. Why had this man come to see him? Surely it wasn't nostalgia that prompted his visit. Harold Ashford wanted, or needed something from him. But that was not the only thing on his mind.

The question of just how much of his white co-workers' attitudes were based on racism, or just typical police cynicism had been nagging at him all night. He'd mentioned it to Monique but she didn't really have any input.

He wasn't surprised though. Black women in the professional world rarely dealt with the same level of racism as Black men did, especially if they were attractive. It wasn't their fault that they were generally considered less of a threat than Black men.

Dexter knew that as a matter of preference, white men liked having smart, attractive Black women around them. Their presence kept the government off their backs and gave them more of a "woman pool" to dip into.

The paradigm dates back to the days of slavery when the slave owners generally kept the women and only a select few men close to the house. The majority of the men were beaten and abused regularly in the fields, whether they needed it or not. The women naturally didn't see things as "so bad" because they were protected. All they had to do was give the master a little "brown sugar" every now and then and everything would be all right. It was an old and successful tactic used to keep the slaves angry at each other, thereby keeping the chances of a rebellion or mass escape to a minimum. It also worked well to keep the men who worked in the master's house at odds with the male field workers. It seems that not much has changed in the last one hundred and fifty years or so.

Dexter unconsciously shook his head. He could see the lack of understanding of the depth of the problem in his own educated, and undoubtedly intelligent wife, who was the Regional Chief Inspector for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Dexter looked around the room. He'd out-performed every man there, yet some of them still considered him inferior because of his color. He knew better, but when were they going to figure it out? To hell with it, he thought. So things aren't so great when it comes to race relations in this country. At least I have my good government job, a beautiful family, and a nice big house, he told himself.

Contemplation

FRIDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 9TH - 1900 HOURS

Dexter cursed under his breath. He had been so preoccupied with Ashford's visit that he hadn't taken the time during the week to tell Monique that they might have to arrive at her boss's dinner party late, or possibly miss the entire event.

"I want to know why you're just now telling me that we might have to miss the dinner party. Who is this Ashford person anyway?" Monique demanded.

His wife's face was less than six inches from his, with her right arm akimbo, her other hand planted firmly on his chest, and her head cocked ever so slightly to the right. Her usually resplendent brown eyes drilled mercilessly into his as if to force the truth out of him. With the exception of his parents, Monique was the only person who could get away with getting in his face this way. The truth of the matter was that he loved it when she was fired up this way. Besides, his mother always told him that a man should worry about his wife when she stops caring about what he does.

No mystery behind that, Dexter thought, looking at Monique. She didn't hear that they would probably only be late, she only heard that they might miss the dinner. Dexter watched her mouth go. He didn't know which was sweeter, her breath or her perfume. Her long, artfully painted nails were lightly digging into his chest. He liked that, too.

Dexter ran his thumb and forefinger on either side of his mouth, stopping at his chin, as he contemplated his decision. He wrinkled his brow and squeezed his chin. It was a stupid idea to agree to meet on the night of the dinner party without telling her. He should have known that there was no way he would have been able to justify it. "Okay. Let's load the kids up. We'll make it to the dinner on time, he said confidently." Dexter was anxious to hear what Ashford had to say, and to find out if he knew more about his past than he was letting on.

Monique tweaked his nipple as he slipped away from her. "That's right, mister!" she called after him.

On the way to the Colonel's house, Dexter relayed to a still skeptical Monique the meeting at the SWAT Round-up and the history he and Ashford shared. She didn't ask any questions right away, but he knew they would be forthcoming.

Colonel Diamond and Harold Ashford watched as the Black Chevy Tahoe Sport pulled into the driveway.

"He's all yours, Major. Make a good pitch." The Colonel went into the house.

Ashford smiled when he saw how Dexter was with his family. This man he saw holding hands with his children seemed much different from the super-soldier he had monitored many years ago. But men like him never really change completely, do they?

Dexter introduced Monique and the children to Ashford and quickly moved on to business. "Okay, Mister Ashford, let's talk."

"Mrs. Diamond, I'm going to borrow your husband for a few minutes. Do you mind?" Ashford asked politely.

"No. Go right ahead," she answered coldly.

Dexter watched her take the kids into the house and close the door.

The former Sergeant and retired Major stood quietly for a few seconds, one waiting for the other to start the conversation.

"So Mr. Ashford, are you still MI?"

"Hell, no! I retired a long time ago. I run a private research firm called the Urban Justice Research Institute. We investigate hate crimes, hate groups, complaints of discrimination, and compile the results for civil rights groups and minority politicians that need the information. We also want to start providing protection for certain individuals who may be targets of violent extremist groups."

"Interesting. So the question remains. Why are you here talking to me?"

"Well, with all that's going on in this country, we're expanding operations. Mr. Diamond, I came down here to offer you a job as director of our new special operations group. But before I get into that, let me share some things with you. Dexter, hate driven violence is off the scale! Nobody's doing anything to keep hate in check so it keeps on growing! Have you seen the news lately? It's practically open season on minorities. The Institute has a plan to combat the problem, but we'll discuss that later, after you accept the job. Now I know that you have a lot of years invested in the police department, so let's get the money issue out of the way right now! Should you take the job, you'll never have to worry about money again. There's also many other perks that you can't even begin to imagine."

Dexter looked at him suspiciously. "Never have to worry about money again? Mr. Ashford, just what is it you want me to do again?"

"I want you to fly to D.C. so we can talk at length. I'll show you our operation there, and then I want you to see the new state-of-the-art operations center that we're building for your team in Atlanta. I guarantee that you've never seen anything like it anywhere."

"Wait a minute. Why don't you just hire one of those retired government types like a Secret Service or CIA agent to do the job? There must be tons of them hanging around the area up there," Dexter observed. It struck him odd that Ashford would come to Orlando when D.C. is crawling with people who are normally hired for jobs like this because of their government credentials.

Ashford held up his hands and shook his head. "That's exactly what I don't want. Besides, this job is tailor-made for you, but as I said, we can discuss that and the other fine details of your new job when you come up. Here's my business card. Call me when you're ready and I'll send a jet for you," Harold said, as if Dexter had already said yes.

Dexter laughed at him as he took the card. "New job? What makes you think that I'll walk away from ten years at OPD and take this job?" The truth of the matter was that he was already considering it.

Harold turned and walked toward the door that led into the house. "I know you will, Mr. Diamond, because I know you. I know your background. Plus, I'm going to make you an offer that you can't refuse," he said without looking back.

Dexter stared straight ahead, lost in thought as they drove East on the 408 to downtown Orlando, while Matthew asked him the same question three times. Young Matt was both relentless and annoying in the way he would repeat his request or question until he got a response, or was sternly encouraged to back off.

"Dex! Your son is asking you a question!" Monique punched him on the shoulder.

Dexter stopped daydreaming. "Sorry, dude. What's up?" His eyes cut to the rear-view mirror.

"I just wanted to know what that man wanted with you." Matthew made eye contact with Dexter's.

Dexter looked into his son's curious eyes. They were big and brown like Monique's, but he had Dexter's angular jaw and squared chin. He was going to quite a lady-killer, Dexter thought.

Monique turned in her seat and looked at him. "Yes, Dexter Diamond, what did the mystery man want with you?" She had been patiently waiting for an explanation since leaving his parents' house.

"He offered me a job." Dexter said absently. "He's the director of the Urban Justice Research Institute in Washington, D.C."

"The Urban Justice Research Institute? Never heard of them. What do they do?" Her forehead wrinkled slightly, openly showing her skepticism.

"They're an intelligence gathering organization. I guess they also do a lot of civil rights abuse investigations and he wants me to be his director of special operations," he explained. Something told him that there was more to it, but he wasn't quite sure what it might be. He decided to check into it more before he shared his concerns with her.

"Why you, Dex? What brought him all the way here to see you? What makes him think that you would leave your career behind to go work for him?" Monique, being a long time government employee, firmly believed in job stability, especially when it came to meeting the children's needs, and that meant she wasn't too keen on the idea of him leaving OPD before he got his pension.

"He said that if I took the job, I would never have to worry about money again."

Her practical mind went to work. "Never worry about money again? How much are they talking about paying you?"

"Don't know, hon. We didn't discuss it. He wants me to fly to Washington to go over it in detail."

"Well, maybe it's something you should look into." She was already seeing herself as a stay-at-home wife. She longed to leave her job and give the children more attention.

Congresswoman Sheila Elaine Winters, representative to the Watts and South Central areas of Los Angeles, locked the door to her office even though she had sent her staff home for the day. She sighed heavily as she sat down at her desk, swiveled her chair to the left, and looked out of the window at downtown Los Angeles. The colorfully painted nails on her right hand unconsciously tapped rhythmically on the glossy desktop.

She closed her eyes and thought about the daunting and potentially dangerous project that the director of the Urban Justice Research Institute, and the people from the United American Justice Forum asked her to undertake.

Initially, she told them no. She told them to get someone else to do it. They persisted. They told her that because not only did she have a reputation for making radical moves in Congress, her position as the Chairperson of the Congressional Black Caucus made her the obvious and best choice for the task. The only stipulation was that because of the nature of the project, absolute secrecy had to be maintained. That meant that she would have to work on the project alone, and she couldn't even tell her husband or daughter about it.

It also meant that she alone would have to sort through all of the research that the analysts from the Urban Justice Institute had compiled for her. Her aides couldn't help her; she would have to do all of the writing.

A feeling of fear and dread came over her as she thought of the danger that she would be placing herself and her family in. The small-framed, shapely Congresswoman was already well known for being outspoken on issues concerning Blacks. She had just recently been on the politics-based talk show circuit debating various conservative types on the attack of Affirmative Action across America. Her unrelenting, in-your-face blasting of her conservative opponents had earned her a barrage of hate mail and angry phone calls. Those things didn't bother her because she knew they wouldn't amount to anything.

But this thing they had asked her to do could amount to something, maybe even get her killed, and she knew it. Once the project became public, she would be thrust to the forefront of one of the most emotional and volatile issues that has plagued America for hundreds of years.

The Institute people warned her that she would certainly face the threat of death from people, who had recently proven time and time again, they were more than capable of carrying out such actions. But, they assured her, adequate protection would be provided when that time came.

The tapping was faster now, moving rapidly from pinkie to forefinger as she envisioned being blown to bits by a car bomb or gunned down by some faceless, snarling assassin. She'd had many dreams about such incidents, and she was barely a month into the project.

Two weeks after she agreed to do the project, she had second thoughts. She considered giving it back to them and letting someone else take the risk. Once she'd even picked up the phone to make the call, but changed her mind just as the phone began to ring.

Sheila Winters looked around her office and thought about all of the brave people that had been harassed, beaten, and even killed during the Civil Rights movement. People who had made it possible for her to be where she is today. No, if nothing else she had an obligation to finish this project and see it run its

course. To quit now would mean giving in to fear, giving in to them, giving in to hate. That, to her, was completely unacceptable.

The tenacious Congresswoman stopped tapping and got up from her chair. She walked over to the filing cabinet and unlocked it. From it she removed a metal briefcase that she carried back to her desk. She unlocked the briefcase by entering a code on the electronic locking mechanism, which, if tampered with, would automatically render the laptop computer inside inoperable.

She turned the computer on and entered a password that only she knew. Again, if the proper code was not entered, a safeguard would be activated, and the computer's memory would be destroyed by a corrosive agent inside, wiping out the entire project.

As the words on the small screen materialized, she realized that in about six months, maybe sooner, she would be embarking on something that could shake the very foundation of stability in America. She exhaled loudly, then knelt down at her desk and silently prayed the Lord's Prayer. When she finished, she repeated aloud the sentence, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

A tingling sensation came over her, as if God himself had touched her. As goose bumps covered her skin, she repeated the phrase in a whisper, "I will fear no evil." The feeling of dread was replaced by a sense of calm and determination. She quickly got up, kicked off her shoes and went to work.

WEST VIRGINIA – FRIDAY, 1930 HOURS

Dr. Jonathan Richard Burns was not a large man, standing 5'8" and barely weighing 160 pounds. With his full head of salt and pepper hair and deep-set eyes, he hardly looked like the leader of a violent white supremacist group. In fact, the fifty-eight-year-old grandfather, who was once a high-powered security consultant for the Department of Defense, looked quite harmless in his plain white shirt, cardigan sweater, black slacks, and horn-rimmed glasses. But Dr. Burns was not a harmless man. He was the powerful patriarch of the largest and most dangerous hate organization in the country.

He stopped pacing the wooden floor in his bedroom and lit his pipe. Dr. Burns checked his watch. It was five minutes past the last time that he checked. He tapped his sweater pocket to ensure that he had his cordless phone with him. It was there; quietly waiting to bring what he hoped would be good news. The event for which he waited had no set time, though he knew that it would be late enough to avoid rush hour, but early enough to make the eleven o'clock news. Dr. Burns took a draw from his pipe and closed his eyes. He began to reflect on what had brought him to this moment of what he could only hope would be God-sent victory and glory.

As the founder of the New American Frontier, he had singularly brought the cause from a basement Neo-Nazi, right wing separatist group, to a multi-national supremacist organization with its own radio station, magazine publications, and a recording company that distributed songs performed by rock groups loyal to his cause.

His vision and persistence had brought the movement millions, which gave him the clout that he needed to bring the major supremacist groups of America together to fulfill his master plan.

He realized that most of the groups were merely leaderless gangs of criminals committing random acts of violence against unsuspecting, unimportant, minority targets, and, other than making the nightly news, had no real effect towards the changes they were trying to force. Virtually all of the supremacist groups that he had watched and studied over the years had either forgotten, or never knew that the whole idea behind the resistance was to cleanse the country of alien influence.

Some of them even hoped to overthrow the Zionist Occupied Government that ran this once great country, but didn't have a clue as to how to make a move towards that goal other than a few well-placed, well-executed bombings. The only problem with that was that it had absolutely no effect on the government's ability to operate.

Dr. Burns smiled. He understood that this country was conceived, born, and raised under explosive, dangerous, and violent circumstances. The very forefathers themselves were considered revolutionaries and terrorists in their day. Surely anyone that sought to change the current system of government must understand that the only way to do so would be to do it from within. He understood that was why so many groups had failed to force a change, and would continue to fail as they needlessly murdered innocents in pursuit of their foolishly unattainable goals.

That was where he, a man of superior education and insight, came in. He could show these hate-filled Neanderthals how to focus their rage and make a significant impact in the war against the outsiders. His cadre of highly educated, dedicated cell leaders had taken rag-tag groups of ruffians and turned them into more efficient operatives that were quietly working behind the scenes as they continued to promote the cause. Of course there were still some renegade groups out there doing their own thing but that didn't concern him at the moment. They would be allowed to run free until his plan had been quietly executed and locked in. Then he would be virtually unstoppable. Dr. Burns smiled and nodded his head. That would be the day that he would begin putting all of America's bothersome alien races in their place. But before he even looked

at a Jew, Hispanic or a so-called American Indian, he was first going to crush the Black filth that swarmed the land.

In the theater of his hateful mind, Blacks had no business even being in his country, free or otherwise. By whining to the weak-kneed US government, they were unfairly taking all of the good jobs, making too much money, and living too close to white people. They were choking the schools and streets of this great land with their putrid, filthy presence and driving decent white people further away from the very cities that they had built and worked in.

The mud people had reached their pinnacle. Their free ride on the backs of good white folks was over. By the time they realized what happened, they would be lucky to pick cotton for a living.

Burns felt that the original Ku Klux Klan had the right idea when they were first formed. Their original mission was to hunt down and kill newly freed slaves. Initially, they were extremely successful until somewhere along the way they lost their focus. The more modern they became, the less effective they were in wiping out the Black vermin. The organization, which once included an American president, had grown to six million members in its heyday and was considered to be one of the premier private organizations. But they didn't finish the mission. Instead of cleansing the country of the walking Black plague that Lincoln had foolishly freed, they were only interested in their little boys club and making back room deals just like the greedy capitalist bastards that they were. Now it was up to him to finish what they started, and this time the job would be seen through until the end. Some of it he would even do legally, with the help of some well-placed friends, of course.

Dr. Burns walked into the downstairs study of the large Southern-style mansion that his great-grandfather had built with his own hands in the middle of an expansive 365 acres of God's own country, in the hills of West Virginia.

He opened a window and breathed cool air that was uncontaminated by the stench of urban America and its human scum that lie, steal, and beg their way in a country that was built on the white man's blood, sweat, and brains. He smiled slightly. Soon America will be experiencing a new frontier. A frontier that will be designed, pioneered, and run by white men, just as God intended from the beginning.

Batter Up!

FRIDAY 2000 HOURS - WASHINGTON, D.C.

Reverend James Johnson Sr. climbed into the limousine and had already closed his eyes by the time his police bodyguard closed the door. The black limo pulled smoothly out of Capitol Plaza, navigating the maze of barricades and guard shacks, and into the light evening traffic with an unmarked police car following closely behind. Johnson, Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Chicago, and founder of the One America Group, a non-profit, multicultural organization that promoted racial equality and defended civil rights, had just spent nearly twelve hours chasing down and meeting with congressional leaders in an attempt to quietly have them revise the 1965 Voter's Rights Amendment. An analyst at the Urban Justice Research Institute had done some research and issued a report that the bill that gave Blacks the right to vote was due to expire in three years.

Johnson was tasked by the Coalition and the Institute to press the issue, but found that no one on Capitol Hill seemed to know what he was talking about. Not one senator or representative with the power to raise the issue seemed to want to seriously discuss the issue with the holiday recess only a few days away.

Reverend Johnson had grown impatient and went directly to the Speaker of the House and gave him an ultimatum. Give him something in writing stating that they would handle the issue as soon as Congress reconvened after the holidays, or he would start rallying Black voters against him and draw the press and the rest of the country into the discussion. Johnson knew that with an election year coming up, none of the politicians that were up for re-election would want to be seen as the bad guy, particularly when it came to issues involving race and civil rights.

The Speaker grudgingly promised the Reverend that he would review the documents over the weekend and meet with him first thing Monday to resolve the issue. Reverend Johnson smiled slightly. He finally had that loud-mouthed Texas redneck on the ropes.

"To the hotel, sir?" Sergeant Michaels, leader of the security detail asked. He had called in several favors to land the security detail for one of the best known and influential men in the country, and possibly the world.

The Reverend was making a phone call on his cellular to a friend in Maryland. "Yes. Will you call ahead and tell my wife to order a steak from room service for me?"

"Yes sir." Michaels used his mobile phone to call the Ritz-Carlton in Crystal City on the other side of the Potomac.

Michaels ended the call with a smile on his face. "She said that you know better than to eat steak this late, but if you want to kill yourself, that's fine with her. She's got plenty of insurance on you."

Reverend Johnson smiled and nodded, then went back to his phone conversation as the motorcade quickly moved down Independence Avenue en route to the Rochambeau Memorial Bridge, more commonly known as the Fourteenth Street Bridge. Independence Avenue was dark, and lined with numerous vehicles on both sides of the road.

That, however, was no concern of the protective detail of D.C. police officers, three of them total, because they didn't really expect to run into any trouble. Reverend Johnson had no known threat against him, so their main purpose was to keep him safe from the District's notorious criminal element, and to satisfy the politics of his visit. For the three young officers, it was a resume builder, and a chance to get away from their regular police duties.

Therefore, none of them paid any attention to the dark SUV that pulled out in front of them as they stopped for the light at the intersection of Independence Avenue and Fourteenth Street. Nor did they notice a second SUV that pulled away from the curb and got behind them.

The driver of SUV number one swallowed the bitter taste that had formed in his mouth. He got a glimpse of the driver and the policeman in the front seat in his rear view mirror. For a brief second, he almost wished that he had not come on this mission. He had never helped with an attack on a fellow law enforcement officer before, at least not in this country. It just didn't feel right.

"Give him a little distance when we pull off, youngblood," the man sitting next to him, the group leader, told him.

Henry, the limousine driver, and father of four adult children, didn't pay any attention to the SUV either as he was tired from having been up since five o'clock that morning.

Reverend Johnson's motorcade, now expanded by two vehicles, crossed Fourteenth Street because for some ridiculous reason, one could not simply turn left at that intersection and get on the bridge.

Instead, they traveled to Fifteenth Street, turned left, and looped through numerous curves before being guided back to the Fourteenth Street Bridge for the ride across the Potomac River into Virginia.

The driver of SUV number one sped up and got some distance between his vehicle and the limousine as instructed.

The group leader smiled as he pulled a fuse out of the vehicle's fuse box. This was going to work.

As the motorcade neared the Pentagon City exit off of the bridge, SUV number one reappeared in front of the limo, though no one inside really noticed.

Henry followed the SUV down the dark, one-lane ramp that served as the Pentagon City exit. The area, semi-isolated and poorly lit, was surrounded by huge corporate buildings, hotels, and high-rise apartment buildings. There was no pedestrian traffic, and no one followed the motorcade off of the bridge except its two-ton shadow. Henry activated his right turn signal. His intention was to turn right on Army-Navy Drive and loop around to the Ritz-Carlton because that route had fewer traffic lights.

The driver of SUV number one approached the traffic light at the bottom of the ramp, which had just turned green. The scenario was now perfect.

The fact that the brake lights on the SUV had been disabled also played a major factor in deceiving the fatigued limo driver. The trick was an old one used by European terrorists because the security vehicles drove bumper to bumper with the dignitary's vehicle. The terrorists would disconnect the brake lights of their stolen vehicles, slam on the brakes in front of the lead car in the motorcade and if the security drivers weren't on their toes, the entire motorcade would crash into each other. The terrorists would then simply kill the trapped and startled victims with hundreds of rounds from automatic weapons. Such would be the case tonight.

The driver of SUV number one waited until he was directly under the traffic light before slamming on the brakes. The men in the SUV waited for the right moment.

Henry proved to be an exceptional driver. His expertise, derived from years of driving in D.C. traffic, took over and though the effort would prove futile, he managed to bring the black limo to a stop just inches from the bumper of SUV number one.

Reverend Johnson dropped the phone as he was nearly thrown to the floor of the limousine by the sudden stop. The security vehicle also managed to stop without crashing.

Sergeant Michaels was furious and intent on chewing the ass of the idiot driver of the SUV. Cursing under his breath, he ripped his seatbelt off and jumped out of the car.

Simultaneously, all four doors of the SUV swung open to reveal four armed men in camouflage uniforms and black watch caps. Their faces were painted with military camouflage paint. Sergeant Michaels froze in his tracks.

"Get your fuckin' hands in the air!" the group leader commanded.

Sergeant Michael's first instinct was to go for his gun, but with four assault rifles pointing at him, he knew that would be a foolish move. Behind him he could hear more commands. He looked back and saw his fellow officers in the security vehicle being surrounded by armed men as well.

"Get your Black ass back in that car right now!" The man who gave that command was slightly shorter than Michaels, but was much more muscular and as it turned out, very quick on his feet. The man charged the DCPD sergeant and rammed the barrel of his assault rifle into his solar plexus.

Michaels let out a loud grunt and dropped to his knees. He hadn't been hit like that since he played ball in college. The stocky terrorist continued his assault and kicked Michaels in the mouth. Michaels fell backward against the limo. He thought about reaching for his gun again. Anger had a way of clouding a man's judgment.

The terrorist must have read Michaels' mind and put the barrel of his weapon to his head. He then took the pistol out of Micheals' holster and passed it to one of the other terrorists. He grabbed Michaels by his jacket lapel and dragged him to the car door. "Get in the fuckin' car, monkey, or I'll kill your Black ass right now!"

Michaels complied, but stared directly at the snarling face of his attacker. His teeth hurt, and he was swallowing his own blood. Fear turned to rage, and thoughts of revenge danced through his mind. No man liked having his ass kicked and the fact that he was a policeman made the insult even greater. But more importantly, he was from D.C. and no self-respecting brother from "Chocolate City" would let anyone kick his ass and get away with it. For the moment, however, Michaels had no other recourse than to sit back and take it.

The burly terrorist walked to the back door and smashed the window out with his weapon. He reached in and unlocked the door. "Get your ass out here, Reverend! Now!"

Reverend Johnson was unable to speak or move. He was suddenly back in Mississippi during the Civil Rights movement. Or was it Alabama where he and his associates had been stopped and beaten by masked Klansmen? Then he remembered. The Mississippi beatings had been carried out by officers of the State Police. Alabama was the Klansmen. He couldn't move. Reverend Johnson

simply stared at the man's hate-filled eyes. They had the same look as the men who had brutally beaten him so many years ago.

The stocky terrorist grew impatient. He and another terrorist reached into the back seat and grabbed the Reverend. They dragged him out, violently, cursing him as they did, and carried him bodily to SUV number one. The men dropped him on the cold pavement, rolled him on his stomach, and pinned his arms behind his back. Somebody put a wet boot on his neck and pressed his face into the ground. One of the assailants hissed the word, "Nigger" at him, then twisted his wrist and applied pressure. The wrist cracked. Reverend Johnson screamed briefly, then felt his hands being tied.

The terrorist leader approached them. "Stand him up. I want him to see this."

The stocky terrorist yanked Reverend Johnson to his feet and turned his head toward the limo. "Watch this, Rev!"

The terrorists who were standing guard over the policemen opened fire. Henry and Sergeant Michaels died instantly as .223 rounds punched through the limo's windows and destroyed their bodies.

The two policemen in the follow car had been similarly executed, their faces literally blown off as a result of being shot from behind by the team from SUV number two. The passenger, a young patrolman that was only twenty-four years old, had dropped his cellular phone during the initial attack but did not disconnect the call. His fiancée had heard the entire event and the subsequent gunfire, and was now screaming frantically, albeit vainly, to her presently deceased future husband for a response.

The driver of SUV number one looked in his rear-view mirror and watched as his fellow assassins tossed the Reverend into the back of his stolen vehicle like a bag of trash headed for the dumpster. His eyes shot left to the outside mirror and caught a glimpse of the bullet-riddled limousine. He closed his eyes and thought a prayer for the dead men.

"Let's go, youngblood!" the team commander shouted as he climbed into the front seat and slammed the door shut.

The young terrorist snapped to and punched the accelerator, leaving behind four bullet-riddled bodies, three widows, six fatherless children, and fifty-three spent cartridges in their aftermath. The terrorist convoy turned right, then sped down the deserted Army-Navy Drive to the entrance ramp of 395 South.

Five minutes after the attack, the phone in Dr. Burns' pocket rang.

"Good evening, sir."

Dr. Burns' heart began beating faster. "Walker. How's the hunting going out there?"

"Excellent, sir. We bagged a big one this time. You should have been there."

"Maybe next time. When are you boys coming home?"

"In a few days, sir. We're going to drop off some of this meat at a friend's place first."

"Very good then, son. Have a safe journey, and God bless you." Dr. Burns disconnected the call and hurried into the family room to turn on the television. CNN should be very interesting tonight, he thought.

Twenty-five minutes later, the terrorists arrived at the Stafford County Regional Airport where a small, chartered plane waited for them. Four armed men met them and took possession of the Reverend. Two minutes later, the plane was starting toward the runway.

The "snatch" team waited until the plane was airborne before driving the SUVs to a remote location in the woods.

"Let's hurry and get to the hotel. I want to catch the news as it breaks," the terrorist leader said, as he and his team cleaned up and changed clothes. They transferred their gear to their new vehicles, set the stolen ones on fire, and headed back north on I-95.

Colonel Diamond and Harold Ashford were getting into the car for the ride to the airport when Mrs. Diamond burst out of the house with a look of horror on her face.

"Jesse! You two had better come see this!" She turned and ran back inside without waiting for them. Ashford's cellular phone began ringing as he followed the Colonel into the house.

The three watched in silent shock as CNN broadcast the aftermath of the kidnapping of the Reverend James Johnson Sr. Someone had contacted the press, which allowed them to arrive at the scene before the police department. CNN news crews showed raw footage of the bloody bodies still in the vehicles.

Loretta Diamond's eyes filled with tears. Reverend Johnson and his wife had been friends of theirs for years, having had dinner at each other's homes

numerous times. She went into the kitchen to call Ashford's wife, who was also a close friend of the Johnsons.

Ashford finally answered his phone. "Ashford. Yes I see it, dammit! What? That's right! Okay, um, get everyone together and see what you can come up with!" Ashford looked at the Colonel. "Let's go see your son, Colonel. It's time for him to make a decision."

Ashford's phone rang again. "Ashford!" His brother-in-law was on the line.

"I'm going to assume that you've already seen the news?" His voice was unusually monotone, like a man trying to control his anger. Chuck Robinson was also a close friend of the Reverend's.

"Yes, Chuck. Jesse and I both saw it."

"Well?"

"We're on the move right now, Chuck."

"Good. Let me talk to Jesse, please."

Harold handed the phone to the Colonel as they sat in the silver Mercedes 420 parked in the garage.

"What's up, Robbie?" Jesse Diamond and Charles 'Chuck' Robinson met in college at FAMU, joined the Army together, went through Officer Candidate School together and joined the Special Forces together. They both served in Vietnam after which Robinson got out and built his empire.

"You know what to do, right?"

"Roger that, Chuck. We'll be in touch. Out here."

Monique's boss had reserved a private room at Lee's Lakeside Inn on Lake Eola for their office Christmas party. Dexter stood straight up when his father and Ashford stuck their heads into the room. The Colonel motioned for him to come outside, then waved to Monique and the children.

Dexter excused himself and moved quickly. The look on his father's face was as serious as any he'd ever seen.

The three men went out to the Colonel's car, which was illegally parked in front of the apartment building/restaurant.

Dexter sat in the back seat and closed the door. "What's going on, Colonel? Is mom okay?" Dexter knew that she was, otherwise they would have called him first. Something else was wrong.

"Have you checked the news on your pager?" the Colonel asked.

Without answering, Dexter took his pager out of its holder and clicked to the CNN news site. "Damn! Somebody kidnapped Reverend Johnson! They killed three policemen and a driver in the process?"

"That's right, sergeant. They showed everything on CNN. It looked like a classic European-style terrorist kidnapping. The bodyguards and driver are killed, and the principal snatched. This is right up your alley."

"Right up my alley? What do you mean, sir?" Dexter looked at his father.

Ashford stepped in. "What he means, Dexter, is that we have the means to locate and rescue the Reverend and we want you to do it."

Dexter frowned. "What? You want me to do what?" His brain seemed to refuse to process what he'd just heard.

Ashford turned his large frame around in the seat and faced Dexter. "Okay, Dexter. Everything that I've been trying to tell you boils down to this. We have built a secret operations center designed solely for the purpose of supporting a special team that will not only provide protection for VIPs like I told you, but they will also conduct high intensity intelligence operations against violent hate groups. I came down here simply to offer you the job of heading up the team, but for now I'm asking you to come rescue the Reverend from those terrorists!"

Dexter squinted and frowned again all at once. "Do what? Are you crazy? You want me to go and rescue Johnson from who? How do you even know where he is?"

"Listen, Dexter. We asked Reverend Johnson to look into something for us concerning the voting rights of Blacks in this country. In doing so, Reverend Johnson had to meet with key members of Congress to gather information and push them to make the necessary changes in the Voting Rights Act. We wanted to know what they talked about so we monitored their conversations. The device that monitored the Reverend's conversations also acts as a tracking device.

It's virtually undetectable and the Reverend doesn't even know that he's wearing it," Ashford explained.

"I don't believe this! You bugged conversations in the House and Senate?" Dexter didn't think that was even possible.

"Yes son, we did," the Colonel answered.

Dexter looked at him. He could feel the skin pulling tighter on his skull. His own father was involved in illegal wiretapping of a federal building.

Ashford settled forward in his seat. "We don't have an exact location yet, but as soon as our people task the satellites, we'll have his location in no time. Dexter, it's time we stopped singing 'we shall overcome' while they beat us and kill us at their leisure! We need to send a clear message that they must leave us alone or face the consequences! Let's change the rules, Dexter! Go out there and bring the Reverend home alive!"

"With who? And with what? I'm just one person! You don't even know how many people are watching him!" Dexter was leaning forward in his seat now.

"It's not like you haven't done it before, son. But we will have that information for you by the time you're ready to go in. The Major has a team of former military special ops people that work for him in Washington that you can use.

They're more than capable of doing the job. There's no more time to talk, Sergeant, we need to leave right now," the Colonel ordered.

"Now? I'm in the middle of dinner with Monique's boss and co-workers! I'm not in the Army anymore and I've been out of the counter-terror game for a long time! I have a family now; I can't just leave right this moment for some illegal suicide mission! You need to turn your information over to the FBI! Let the HRT go in and get him!"

Ashford turned and looked at Dexter as if to be disgusted, then turned back around in his seat to speak to the Colonel.

"No, Dexter, the FBI will try and negotiate and probably get the Reverend killed. Furthermore, it would compromise our operation. You see, Colonel, this is exactly why we Black people are in the fix we're in right now. As soon as we get comfortable in this society, we forget what the struggle was like to get where we are and we simply bury our heads in the sand. I'll bet you that if the Sergeant's department-issued pager went off right now and he was told to respond so that the SWAT Team could go after some two-bit drug dealer on a bullshit search warrant, he'd jump like a good house nigger and abandon his wife and this dinner without a second thought. And guess what, Colonel, he'll do it even quicker if some dumb-ass decides to barricade himself in a house and threaten to kill himself, while some smooth-talking, lying-assed police negotiator tries to convince him that this world really is a great place to live,

when he should let the bastard go ahead and blow his own brains out so normal people won't have to worry about him snapping again! Meanwhile, all the so-called highly trained SWAT cops sit on their asses until the dickhead decides to give up or pull the trigger! Hell, Colonel, the good Sergeant killed for God and country without so much as a blink when they told him to back in the day! Not only that, but he killed for other countries as well! But don't you ask him to save the life of a Black man who is an American civil rights hero, a husband, a father, and a personal friend of mine and his own parents. No, because then he'll want to tuck his fucking tail between his legs and hide behind his wife's suede skirt! What's the matter, Sergeant Dexter Diamond of the Orlando Police Department, who's number one on the lieutenant's list? Have you lost your nerve and become one of those I got my degree and good job now leave me alone type Negroes that sit back and enjoy the benefits of the hard work that people like Reverend Johnson and other great civil rights workers fought and died for? Have you turned into a fucking REMF?" Ashford's voice boomed inside the car.

Dexter's entire body stiffened. He stared at the back of Ashford's head for a moment, and then looked at his father, who had turned to face him. Ashford had called him a REMF, the ultimate soldier/warrior insult. He'd called Dexter a Rear Echelon Mother Fucker, military slang for non-combatant, paper-pushing personnel. To make matters worse, Dexter found no sympathy in his father's eyes.

"Well, Sergeant? Have you lost your warrior blood? Have you become soft like your department with its bullshit C-O-P attitude and goody-two-shoe image? If so, go back inside and finish your dinner and we'll forget this conversation ever happened. Or, you can step up to the plate and save a man's life. What's it going to be, son? We don't have a lot of time. As a matter of fact, we don't have any time. But before you decide, consider Isaiah 6:8; Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, here am I, send me." The Colonel turned around and started the car.

Dexter sat motionless, speechless, and suddenly ashamed for having become the type of person that he despised the most. He had essentially become a hypocrite. Ashford was right. He never questioned orders when he was in the Army. When they said go, he went. When they said kill, he did without a second thought. Even the police department had him jumping through hoop after pointless hoop. No one really cared about fighting crime. Everything they did was a function of political policing; doing only what was necessary to keep the people happy by giving the illusion that they were enforcing the law. He had become just like the other supervisors and managers. He was simply putting in time towards his pension and looking for the next promotion. Dexter dropped his head and blew air out his nose. If his brother Flash were alive, he would have jumped at the chance to save the Reverend's life, with no hesitation, no matter who was holding him, or where.

The Colonel turned in his seat again. "Come on, Sarge. It's time to go to work. A man's life depends on us, right now! It's time for the Operator to operate."

"What do I tell Monique and the kids? I don't even know how long I'll be gone."

"Tell her as good a lie as you can, son. You can give her some truth; just don't tell her any fine details. You know the drill." Jesse Diamond made a motion with his head for Dexter to get moving.

Dexter nodded and got out of the car. He walked inside slowly to tell his family that he and his father were leaving tonight with Ashford.

Oddly, a verse from an old basic training cadence popped into his head. Mission top secret, destination unknown! I don't know if I'm ever comin' home! A faint smile came across his face as he entered the private dining room and drew the attention of the curious diners. He actually didn't have any idea of where they were going. He guessed Washington, D.C., but it was a safe bet that the kidnappers wouldn't be dumb enough to hold the Reverend there. He announced to the group that he had a SWAT callout and asked Monique to step outside. Dexter explained to his wife that he was leaving for Washington, D.C. As expected, the fireworks started immediately.

"You're going where? Tonight? Why? What's going on, Dexter?" Monique had gone from zero to sixty in half a second, firing one question behind the other without waiting for an answer. She moved closer, to get in Dexter's face.

Dexter, however, was in no mood for her spoiled rich girl antics tonight. He put his hand out and stopped her. "All I can tell you is that it involves the kidnapping of Reverend Johnson. The foundation that is raising the money for his ransom has asked the Colonel to act as a consultant and he wants me to help him. I wish that I could tell you more but that's all I know right now except that they're going to pay us some big money for a couple of days work. I'll call you as soon as we get there." Dexter went back into the room and gave the kids a kiss, then gave Monique one as he half-trotted out of the room, leaving her standing with a thousand questions running through her head.

Dexter told his father what he told Monique. "Not bad, Sarge. That line of crap sounds almost believable." The back end of the Mercedes lowered to the ground for better traction as Jesse Diamond shifted into drive.

"Wait, dad. I need my bag out of the truck." Dexter was referring to his green canvas carry bag. Monique called it his "assassin's bag". In it he carried his Sig, two magazines, a small flashlight, handcuffs, and a D-ring. He also kept his wallet, comb, brush, checkbook, and spare change. A large number of OPD

officers, male and female, kept a similar type bag in their vehicles. Dexter retrieved his bag and began rummaging through it as they drove.

"We have any gear that you might need at the operations center, Dexter," Ashford said.

"That's fine. But I needed to get a phone number. Besides, what about my special gear? You know, the non-issued stuff." Dexter was well known on the SWAT Team for carrying unusual extra gear.

"Got it. You forget that your father is a fellow operator. By the way, last year I took some of the ideas that you came up with and gave them to Chuck's Research and Development people. They merged them with existing technology and came up with some equipment that's going to change everything when it comes out," the Colonel added.

Dexter looked up from what he was doing. "You sold my ideas without asking me? I was going to do something with them eventually!"

"It was actually going to be a Christmas present. I already signed a contract with Robinson Defense Technologies for the designs and to act as a trainer and consultant on the equipment. You and your new team will be contracted to test the equipment in the field and to train other teams. I arranged for your money to be deposited just before Christmas day."

"So how much do I get, Colonel?" Dexter asked anxiously, temporarily forgetting about the crisis at hand.

"Let's just say that you and Monique can both retire right now if you want to. And that's not including what the Major is going to offer you, or your compensation for this operation. Right, Major?"

"That is correct, sir. I can assure you that you will be well compensated for your services. Hey, no hard feelings Sarge, okay?"

Dexter didn't answer. He stared at the back of Ashford's head, as the Mercedes turned right on Colonial Drive and powered east to the Orlando Executive Airport. "So, Colonel, how long have you been involved with these people? And does mom know?"

The Colonel smiled into the rear-view mirror. "Your mother and I have been involved with these people since you and your brother were little. The Institute was quietly conceived and built after Dr. King was murdered. It's always been a small operation up until about five years ago when a group of very wealthy people, led by Chuck Robinson, began pumping money into it. Son, it's the same Chuck Robinson that I served with in the Special Forces back in 'Nam.

He's also married to Major Ashford's older sister. And I know you remember his daughter, Dawn. Chuck is now the CEO of Robinson Defense Technologies. Your mother and I do consultant work for him and the Institute from time to time.

Haven't you noticed that we've been going to D.C. a lot in the last year and a half?"

Dexter suddenly felt embarrassed. He hadn't really thought about it much. He was too busy running on that American dream treadmill. "Well yeah, but I never thought anything like this was going on."

"Son, you've been living in fantasyland too long. There are things going on out there that could tear this country apart and most people won't even see it coming. It's time for you to wake up." The Colonel looked at Ashford.

Dexter dropped his head and began rubbing his chin. Wasn't what he did for a living real enough? He knew the answer to his question. He had operated in the real world and Orlando wasn't it. It was a nice town, a good place to live and raise children, but it was mainly a vacation town, dominated by Disney World and Universal Studios who were arguably the largest purveyors of fantasy in the world. Maybe it was time he opened his eyes to the real world again.

"So I guess once you get a fix on his location you'll want me to go in with minimal intel?" Dexter asked.

"That's the beauty of our operations center, Dexter. With the technology that you'll have access to, you should hit the door with fairly good intelligence. But even if we had zero intelligence, I know that you could bring James back alive. That's assuming he's still alive," Ashford said.

"Dead or alive, I want you to bring him home. Odds are that you're going to have to take out the hostage-takers to free him. Do you have a problem with that, Sergeant?" the Colonel asked.

"No sir. No problem at all. Harold, can you get a plane to Detroit to pick up someone?" Dexter's tactical brain was already working. If he was going to do this, he wanted someone he trusted with him.

"Yes, Dexter. We can arrange that," Ashford answered.

"Good. I need to use your phone Major." Dexter took the phone Ashford and dialed a Detroit phone number.

"Yep," the young man on the other end answered.

"Eric. This is Dex. What are you doing?"

"Yooo, hey old man? I'm just sitting here watching the telly with my mom. What's up?"

"First off, how is she doing?"

"Not too bad. The treatments are starting to get better for her. The doctor says she can beat this thing."

"Good. Listen, have you seen the news?"

"Yeah, we were just watching the thing with Reverend Johnson. Why?"

"Can one of your sisters sit with her for a few days? I'm going to need your help regarding that incident."

"Ummm, yeah. What's up?" The former Marine Gunnery Sergeant sat forward in his chair.

"I want you to come with me to pick up a package."

There was a short silence on the line. "Do I need my black bag?"

"Yes, you do. What's the closest airport to you?"

"Detroit City airport. I can be there in about thirty minutes."

"Good. By the time you get there, a jet should be ready to bring you to our location."

"This government or private?"

"Private. Take down this phone number so you can call me when you're airborne." Dexter gave him Ashford's cellular number. "Eric, just so you know, this is the real thing. You don't have to come if you don't want to, but you'll be well paid."

"Man, please! If you're into it, I'm up to it." Eric missed the excitement of secret operations, and if Dexter had something going, he wasn't going to miss it.

"Roger that, Gunny. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

"Who was that?" Ashford asked.

"That was Eric Campbell. He was on the department with me until his mother took ill with cancer. He resigned and moved back home to take care of her. He's

also a former Force Recon Marine with plenty of experience in real-world operations. I told him that a plane would be waiting at the Detroit City airport to bring him to us. You'd better get on the phone and make it happen." Dexter tossed Ashford the phone.

Ashford's phone rang just as he was about to dial. "Ashford." The car was quiet as Ashford grunted and nodded his head as the person on the other end talked. "Okay. Good job. Hold on a second." Ashford lowered the phone from his ear. "They've picked up the Reverend's signal. He's moving southwest. They believe he's in an airplane."

The Colonel took the phone from Ashford. "This is Colonel Diamond. Pack all the gear ASAP and meet us at the RDT hangar in Atlanta. We'll set up shop there!" Jesse Diamond handed the phone back to Ashford.

"Before you go, call BizJets in Detroit and charter a jet. Have them go to Detroit City airport and pick up a guy named Eric Campbell. Tell them bring him to Atlanta and come to the RDT hangar. Got that?" The person on the other end acknowledged and hung up. Ashford clapped his big hands and rubbed them together. "Well, Colonel, looks like its time for us to put up or shut up."

The Colonel nodded but remained quiet as he turned right from East Colonial Drive onto Herndon Drive. Less than one minute later, they were at the Orlando Executive Airport.

Dexter unsnapped his seat belt. "Somebody in this car has a lot of explaining to do. Don't they?" His eyes met his father's in the rear-view mirror.

The Colonel half-smiled and nodded again. He pulled up to the gate and held his card up to the electronic reader. The chain-link gate lurched to the right, allowing them access to the airfield. The Mercedes followed the large yellow stripe along the outer edge of the flight line to a row of reserved parking spaces behind the flight operations center. Dexter shook his head. How could he not have known about all of this?

"Come on, son. We'll talk about it on the way there," the Colonel said. He knew what his son was thinking and feeling. He'd felt the same way when his eyes were opened many years ago at an NAACP meeting that he and Loretta attended at the request of their friend, Chuck Robinson.

Dexter stepped out of the car and looked around. The last time that he was here, five years ago, he was working a joint stakeout with the FBI, Customs, and DEA, waiting for a planeload of drugs to come in from Miami. The federal agents went to sleep as soon as the initial briefing was over, leaving him to stay awake all night to watch for the plane.

Of course the plane never arrived, but if it had, he would have been the only one coherent enough to react to it. The experience made him leery of any operations that he had with the Feds from then on.

A gleaming white jet with black and red stripes down the side was parked on the tarmac not too far away from them. Ashford and the Colonel began walking toward the Cessna Citation X.

Dexter followed slowly, eyeing the jet suspiciously. No way the government doesn't have their hands in this, he thought. He nodded politely at the young man in the dark suit that stood at the top of the stairs. The smell of new leather caressed his nose as he entered the jet. The Cessna was big enough that he didn't have to slouch or bend over at all.

"Last I heard this is the fastest executive jet in the world, Dexter," Ashford looked at the male flight attendant for confirmation of his statement.

"That is correct, sir. This particular Cessna can nearly reach the speed of sound and easily reach across the Atlantic. We have seating for nine passengers, a mini-galley, on-board movies and satellite television, and other, um, essential equipment," the slim crewman said.

"This belongs to the Institute?" Dexter asked. He sat across the aisle from the Colonel and Ashford.

"Yes, Dexter. But more specifically, this jet belongs to you. It was purchased specifically for the director of special operations and his team. What do you think?" Ashford smiled slyly at him.

"I think that your organization has some extremely deep pockets. Are you sure that this is not a government operation? I mean, who has this kind of money?" Dexter made a sweeping gesture with his hand.

The Colonel smiled. "Son, you have no idea of the power and influence that the board members possess. We won't even get into the political and corporate connections that they have worldwide."

The flight attendant interrupted and instructed them to buckle their seat belts, then moved to the front of the plane.

Ashford got out of his seat and retrieved a computer carrying case from one of the cabinets. He sat down, buckled his seatbelt, and opened the case. He took the sleek, black laptop computer out and handed it to Dexter. "Turn that on. I want to show the presentation that I gave my board of directors." The plane began moving quickly toward the runway.

"I thought that you weren't supposed to turn these things on during take-off," Dexter said.

Ashford laughed. "Forget that and turn the damned thing on. Here, put this CD in." Dexter complied, and waited while the machine went through its activation process. He inserted the CD and opened the file marked, "Board Presentation." The Institute's blue, white and black logo materialized on the screen.

"Dexter, this information was put together by my people, who at the request of the board did an analysis of recent race-related events in the nation. You see, Sarge, hate crimes have reached well past the nine thousand mark this year. Click to the next screen. That graph represents the pattern of occurrences over the last ten years. Notice the sharp increase right here." Ashford pointed to the year 1994. "It seems that right after O. J. was acquitted of the murder of his young white wife and her alleged lover, anti-Black violence skyrocketed and has been rising ever since. As a matter of fact, Sarge, not only did acts of violence increase, my analyst have found a pattern of increase in discrimination in the workplace, against Black men in particular."

Dexter exhaled as he studied the chart. He had noticed that more major corporations were getting in hot water because of racial discrimination. Texaco had gotten hammered, and Coke had recently settled out of court for its anti-Black promotion practices.

"Go to the next screen," Ashford ordered.

Dexter had not noticed the jet had already taken off and was leveling off as it streaked toward Atlanta. The next screen showed a brightly colored pie chart depicting the breakdown of the motivating factors for hate crimes.

"That large black area shows that sixty percent of the hate crimes committed are motivated by race. I'm sure I don't have to tell you what race ranks as the number one target in that category. And I'm sure you can guess that white men commit the majority of violent acts in these cases," Ashford said.

Dexter nodded, though he really hadn't given it much thought until now. He looked at the red, blue, and yellow sections of the pie representing sexual orientation, religion, and "other." Things looked bleak for peace, tolerance, and harmony in America.

Ashford continued to drive home his point. "As you can see, Dexter, more and more hate groups are forming and taking up the banner against non-whites. That's not even counting the non-traditional crime groups like the motorcycle gangs, who engage in virtually every form of criminal activity known to man. They are also infamous for their racist attitudes. But you've been watching the news, right? You know that racism is as bad now as it's ever been. Hell, there's

at least six hundred hate groups in the United States alone! We believe that there's a conspiracy against Blacks in this country, a real effort to demoralize us! What do you think of that, Dexter?"

"You know what I think, Harold? I think that what you're seeing is typical. Some of it's racially motivated, I'm sure, but I think a lot of it is plain old cronyism and greed. But even if there was some secret organization that was trying to destroy the standing of Blacks in this country, how would you stop it? Better yet, how could you even go about proving it?"

The Colonel broke his silence. "We don't intend to prove anything, son. We already know what's going on and we are doing something about it. That's why the Board put so much money into this operation. That's why we put the team together, and that's why we're taking other steps to deal with the problem. That's also why you are going to rescue the Reverend tonight instead of the FBI Hostage Rescue Team. We want all hate groups know that we don't need the government to protect us! We want them to know that the rules of the game have changed!"

Dexter shut the computer down and set it in the seat in front of him. "Well, Colonel, if your intel is good, I'll get the Reverend back and I'll take out the terrorists if necessary, but that's as far as I go with it. Unless you're talking about some major bucks, there's no way that I am going to leave my job just to chase conspiracy theories."