

Chapter 1

IT HAS BEEN FREQUENTLY REMARKED THAT IT SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN RESERVED TO THE PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY, BY THEIR CONDUCT AND EXAMPLE, TO DECIDE THE IMPORTANT QUESTION, WHETHER SOCIETIES OF MEN ARE REALLY CAPABLE OR NOT OF ESTABLISHING GOOD GOVERNMENT FROM REFLECTION AND CHOICE, OR WHETHER THEY ARE FOREVER DESTINED TO DEPEND FOR THEIR POLITICAL CONSTITUTIONS ON ACCIDENT AND FORCE.

Alexander Hamilton, Federalist #1

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Uncle Sam needed a good, presidential butt-kicking—a turn-over-the-tables, throw-the-bums-out house cleaning—and Henry Marshall wanted to be the man to do the job. *But*, he thought glumly, *there's not much chance of that happening, is there?* Marshall's candidacy was a shot in the dark. Running as an independent he'd garnered only thirty percent at the polls with little over six weeks to go—the election was as good as lost. *Still, I've got nothing to complain about. I've done much better than I thought I would. Got on the ballot in all fifty states. That counts for something, anyway.*

He stared at the square-jawed face looking back at him in the bathroom mirror. At sixty-two his once jet-black hair now had streaks of grey and was thinning in places, but his grey eyes had lost none of their intensity over the years; a steely glare could still freeze a subordinate in his tracks. Marshall

tugged on his tie, making a few adjustments. He grinned at himself. *At least I won't have to wear one of these dumb things for the next four years. And I won't have a Secret Service entourage following me everywhere I go. And, I'll get to drive myself. I guess it's okay.*

The United States Code stipulated that *major* presidential candidates and their spouses would be provided Secret Service protection within one hundred twenty days of a presidential election. It was the prerogative of the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security to identify who was a “major” candidate. Though by the Fourth of July Marshall was polling at twenty-five percent nationally, the Secretary determined he was not a major candidate. Lacking the bureaucratic inertia that the federal security apparatus produced, Marshall was able to be light on his feet, showing up at events and photo opportunities on an almost impromptu basis. When Marshall gained three points in the polls between July and August, the campaign manager of the Democratic candidate appealed privately to the President, also a Democrat, pointing out that the absence of a Secret Service detail was a great advantage to the Marshall campaign. Consequently the President reversed his cabinet secretary's decision and the Marshall campaign was offered a federal security detail. They declined, though Marshall's security chief did accept the offer to meet with a Secret Service liaison officer for thrice-weekly security briefings.

Henry maintained an optimistic front for the sake of his campaign staff, but as the pages of the calendar turned and the polls did not improve hope was fading. *So why keep going? Because it's the right thing to do. My ideas are right. My vision is right. But they can't be explained in twenty-second sound bites. I've been painted as an extremist, a political jihadist—a bomb thrower—by the mainstream media. Perhaps hanging in there for six more weeks will give me the opportunity to sell a conservative vision to a few more people. Maybe I am building the base for the guy that will win in 2020. In any case, I'm going to see it through to the end.* After one more pull on his reluctant tie, Henry turned on his

heel and went downstairs.

Haley was in the kitchen pouring coffee and putting some donuts on the table. She looked at the time as he walked in—it was quarter till six. “Your flight for Chicago leaves at ten. You’ve got time for a bit of breakfast. What else is on your schedule today, Hank?”

“Morning, babe. Got a strategy meeting this morning with senior staff, then I’m off to the airport. The Illinois Education Association is trying to decide whom to endorse, and they invited both major-party candidates to speak to the membership this afternoon. Apparently Adam McKenzie of the *Chicago Tribune* shamed them into inviting me as well, so I’m going as the token loon. That’s going to take up my afternoon and early evening. Tomorrow morning I’m headed for the south side of Chicago where we’ll shoot our final campaign ad in front of another failed HUD housing project. I fly home tomorrow afternoon.”

Sitting down at the table, Haley sipped her coffee, a quizzical expression on her face. “I thought the IEA was in bed with Pamela Hastings, the Democratic candidate. The teacher’s unions are the most reliable constituency the Democrats have, so why this interest in the Republican and you now at this late date?”

“They aren’t interested in me. But Wayne Bushnell has been making noises about raising the Department of Education’s budget by fifty percent. He’s dangling enough carrots that the rank and file are revolting against the foreordained endorsement of Hastings. In the end I think it’s going to be little more than a bidding war between the Republicans and the Democrats.” He reached for another donut, hoping Haley wouldn’t notice that he’d already had two.

She’d noticed. “Go easy on the fat pills, there, buster,” she cautioned. Marshall quickly took a bite so she wouldn’t insist he put it back, and winked at her. Both devoted runners, Hank and Haley were fit and trim but Haley wanted to ensure they stayed that way. She raised her eyebrows, shaking her head, and then resumed her comments about his schedule.

“Hank, you could have turned this opportunity down, you

know. It's a little over six weeks before Election Day. Don't you think you should be spending time on the undecideds, rather than those whose minds are made up to vote against you? Three-quarters of the education associations in the country think you're the second coming of Attila the Hun, and the other quarter thinks you're an ignorant knuckle-dragger. Why are you spending time and money to talk to them?"

Marshall put his pastry and coffee down and reached across the table, taking his wife's hands in his. "Haley, we're going to lose this race. I don't say that to anyone else, but you know it's true. There's just too much ground to make up between now and the 8th of November. The country hasn't had a fair hearing of my vision. It's being filtered, slanted, and spun through the mainstream media. Based on the cockeyed national coverage of my platform, I wouldn't even want to vote for me! Most of the country thinks I want women barefoot and pregnant, I want to feed the homeless to the wolves, push granny over the cliff, and destroy the planet with fossil fuels.

"I know it's over, babe. So when I have a chance to talk directly to educators, no filters, no interviewer cutting me off, I'm going to take it. Maybe I can convince two or three that Leviathan has gotten too big and doesn't know education half as well as they do. Maybe I can convince them that local control of standards and objectives and curriculum is far superior to federal mandates handed down from an entrenched, marginally competent bureaucracy a thousand miles away.

"My goal in these final weeks is to convince as many as I can that we need to rein in the feds and pick up the slack on a local level. That's why I'm going."

She squeezed his hands, her dark brown eyes sparkling. "Just my luck to fall in love with Don Quixote," she said. What she loved most about her husband was his commitment to do what he thought was right, no matter the consequences. Time and time again it had proven to be a costly commitment, but he never wavered.

Henry and Haley were married in '84, six years after his first wife, Rose, had been killed by a drunk driver. Alcohol had taken his wife and it nearly killed him, too. Unable to cope with the loss, Marshall found comfort in a bottle. For a year he stumbled about in a drunken, grief-filled fog.

Everything changed when he woke up one morning in a cheap hotel on the south side of Cheyenne. His car was parked outside the door but he had absolutely no memory of the previous three days, and no clue as to how—or why—he had driven to the hotel. Deciding that death was preferable to his empty, painful life, he began rummaging around the room looking for paper on which to write a suicide note. Instead of paper he found a Gideon Bible. It happened to open to the Gospel of John, and Henry Marshall began to read. Three hours later he placed his faith in Christ and never touched the bottle again. Everything had changed.

“So what are you up to while I’m tilting at windmills?” he asked, admiring her shoulder-length blond hair. Even at fifty-six, Haley was still a woman who turned men’s heads. He started clearing away the breakfast dishes.

“Well, let’s see. I’ve got two sections of advanced math this morning and I’m subbing for the algebra teacher this afternoon. The twins are driving down from Boulder this afternoon, and tonight we are going to the game. The Jags play Evergreen, and the boys really wanted to be here for that. Tomorrow morning Josh Cummings has me scheduled to speak to the Colorado Association of Wheat Growers, trying to convince them that your plan for unsubsidized markets are better for the country than the federal crop subsidies they’ve become accustomed to. It’s a tough sell, Hank. *Vote for my husband and he will cost you thousands of dollars.*”

Joshua Cummings was Henry Marshall’s campaign manager. A brilliant political operative, Cummings had plenty of experience masterminding presidential campaigns. Six feet tall, two hundred ten pounds, and packing all the stress of a high-powered consultant, Cummings should have been a heart attack waiting to happen. Instead, to the everlasting marvel of his doctor he was as healthy as the proverbial ox, a good thing

considering the rigor of campaigning across fifty states. He had constructed the ultimate marriage between hands-on retail campaigning, social media, and the Internet. The result was a legitimate three-way race for the presidency. Marshall was polling at thirty percent, the GOP candidate at thirty-one, and the Democrat at thirty-five, with four percent undecided. Whether or not Marshall won he'd already made history by mounting an effective campaign as an independent.

"That's why Cummings is sending you instead of me. You're better looking and he figured maybe they won't throw things at you while you're being escorted from the podium." He turned off the coffee pot and put the cups in the sink.

"Thanks a heap, buster."

Marshall turned around and embraced his wife. "Listen, Haley, in several weeks it will be over. You and I can resume being Mr. and Mrs. Nobody, and life goes back to normal."

She shook her head. "No, it doesn't, Hank. It will never go back to normal. This *is* the new normal. You've become the spokesman for the opposition to the two political parties. The Dems are the party of big government. The Repubs are the party of slightly smaller big government. There are very few people out there who can mount a credible challenge to the status quo, but you are one of those who can. This isn't the end, Hank, it's just the beginning. It will go on for the rest of our lives, but it is a fight worth having. So let's saddle up our horses and do this. I've got your back."

They say every man has his price. I guess mine is only twenty grand. Tim Hardy stared at the laptop battery in his hand. *Do I really want to go through with this?* he asked himself. *This is the point of no return . . . no, actually that was when I accepted the first payment. If I back out now they'll expose me, or maybe blackmail me. Or worse. I don't have a choice—I've got to do it.* He sighed and clicked *Shut down* on his boss's laptop. Stealing a furtive glance behind

him, he growled to the computer, “Get on with it, will ya?” He wanted to finish the job before his boss showed up. He removed his glasses and nervously cleaned them while he waited. Hardy was thirty-seven and unmarried. He wrestled frequently with the dark suspicion that life was passing him by, and that it was someone else’s fault. Though he had made the choice to work for the Marshall campaign as IT director, he still resented the fact that the salary was lower than a commensurate position in business.

He groaned. The laptop’s screen was petulantly announcing “**Windows is installing updates. Do not shut down or unplug the computer.**” *Why did it have to do this now? Come on, COME ON, you stupid computer!* Mercifully, the laptop completed its updates and shut down. With shaking hands he swapped the battery pack with the one he’d found sitting on the front seat of his car when he left the house for work this morning. Sweat beaded on his brow, though the room was a cool sixty-eight degrees.

The lure of fast, easy money had been more than Hardy could resist. It hadn’t taken much of a sales job to buy his betrayal. His conscience nagged him. *Am I really that cheap? Is that all it takes to get me to betray a friend and employer?* Hardy was a confessing Christian. He was also, now, a traitor.

Two months ago a burner phone had showed up in his man bag—he still wasn’t sure how it got there. But someone claiming to be a journalist writing a book on the inside story of Marshall’s campaign began contacting him through the phone, wanting inside information and paying generously for it. At first it was just harmless bits of information, but the demands had steadily grown—as had the payouts. As time went on, Hardy realized that the “journalist” story was in all probability mere window dressing for something a great deal more nefarious. He began to suspect that it was actually an attempt by one of the other campaigns to sabotage Marshall’s bid for the presidency.

Three days ago the journalist had texted him:

Verifying he’ll be in hotel room, 21:00 Chicago time, Friday.

Correct. Scheduled to skype with chief of staff at that time.

R u sure?

Looking at schedule now. I'm sure, ok?

Just checking. Package will be delivered Friday AM. Inform when installed.

The phone was in his pocket. He felt as though it was radioactive. The thrill of all that nice luscious money had faded within twenty-four hours. Since then he'd been miserable, sick to his stomach and depressed. His conscience was working overtime.

"Hey, Tim! What's up?"

Hardy whirled around, feeling exposed. He forced himself to calm down and remember his cover story. "Morning, Mr. Marshall. I decided to replace your laptop battery before you headed for Chicago. The network management client sent me two messages this week indicating that the battery is wearing out. Wouldn't want this thing to die when you're on the road."

"Really? Hadn't a clue. It's a good thing you caught it, Tim. I'm glad you're our IT director—you do a great job."

"Thank you, sir. It's a pleasure to work for your campaign." *I wish you hadn't said that, sir. You're giving kudos to Judas Iscariot, the man who's just betrayed you. Why don't you come a little closer, sir, and I'll just stab you in the back? Oh, Lord God, what have I done? What have I become?*

Tim had been told by the anonymous journalist that the replacement battery pack contained some hardware that would allow him to spy on the machine remotely, giving him access to its files and allowing him to connect to its microphone and camera surreptitiously. The data would be invaluable as an inside look at what the Marshall headquarters came up with in the final days of the intense presidential campaign. That's what he had been told the battery pack contained, anyway. It was nowhere near the truth.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Marshall, but you’ll have to put your laptop away. The captain is ready to back away from the gate,” the flight attendant reminded him. She leaned over and added privately, “I’m pulling the lever for you on November 8, sir. Best wishes. I hope you win!”

He flashed his trademark toothy grin and replied, “Thanks, Barbara. This campaign has been a long, almost surreal experience. I’m glad it’s finally winding down, one way or another. Can I tell you a secret?”

Joshua Cummings, his campaign manager, was sitting in the window seat next to Marshall. He paled and muttered under his breath, “Um, sir, I’m not sure—”

“Relax, Josh, I’m only going to tell her the most juicy one.”

Cummings rolled his eyes and sighed.

The pretty flight attendant looked around conspiratorially, then in a mock whisper purred, “Oh, tell me! I’m the soul of discretion.”

He nodded, glanced around, then said in a stage whisper, “I wish I’d bought twice as much stock in Southwest!”

“Really? Well, I’ll tell you a secret, sir. I’ve heard from Corporate that if you win, we’re going to be renamed *Presidential Airlines*.”

“That’s not funny,” Cummings groaned. Marshall just grinned.

When Marshall declared his candidacy he’d had to put his investments—of which he had millions—into a blind trust, including the large blocks of stock in Southwest Airlines he’d purchased two weeks earlier. Rather than chartering aircraft he’d decided that his campaign travel would be on Southwest whenever possible; he liked the airline and how it was managed and the spunk of the employees. The *bags fly free* had helped as well. His campaign staff sought to organize travel and events around Southwest’s standard commercial schedule. It was a decision that was saving the campaign thousands. It was also catching the eye of the public: travel on Southwest was burgeoning.

Marshall had taken a great deal of heat over the stock purchase. The Securities and Exchange Commission threat-

ened to look into the matter, but that had turned out to be little more than political posturing. A media storm raged for three months as a team of federal lawyers sought to find a way to turn the transaction into a case of insider trading. They finally backed off when the attorney general sent them a private memo advising that his office had investigated and concluded there was no case.

The purchase didn't fit the currently reigning politically correct populist narrative. Both major party opponents had trashed the move, calling it crony capitalism. Reporter after reporter attempted to maneuver Henry Marshall into some sort of *mea culpa*. Adam MacKenzie of the *Chicago Tribune* landed an exclusive interview with Marshall.

"You purchased eight million dollars of stock in Southwest Airlines two weeks before you announced your candidacy, knowing that you were going to use them as your primary airline, is that right?"

"That's right."

MacKenzie studied him with a curious look. "But why did you do that, sir? Surely you must have known it would come out in the news?"

"Of course I knew."

"So why did you make the purchase?"

"Because I wanted to make money when Southwest's stock went up, which I figured it would probably do," replied Marshall, looking the reporter straight in the eye.

MacKenzie blinked. "And you admit that? On the record?"

"Sure, why not?" Marshall replied casually. "What part of this troubles you, Adam? You look as if you're smelling a horrible odor. Do you object to wise investing? Is it profit that troubles you? Perhaps capitalism itself is odious to you?"

"But isn't what you did unethical?"

"How so? I have benefited every other investor in Southwest. I gambled on how the traveling public would respond to my use of the airline. I was right, but I could have been wrong. I have no ties to Southwest, other than what I own in stock, so how is my purchase unethical?"

"It's unfair. You had special knowledge."

“By that standard you’ll have to disavow this interview. How is it fair that I picked you, and did not pick one of the other dozen reporters clamoring for some time? Because now *you* have special knowledge, too. That’s not fair to them, is it? So if you are going to live consistently by this notion of fairness you profess, surely you won’t take advantage of your special, exclusive knowledge, will you? After all, it might mean that your paper profits by your reputation, selling more Internet subscriptions. You could even wind up with a raise. Maybe someday a Pulitzer, based on your knack for getting exclusive interviews. By your sense of ethics, that’s not fair. Or does this sort of ethic only apply to other people?”

MacKenzie deftly changed the topic of the interview. But inside he was mortified. Marshall had challenged one of the pillars of his personal worldview and dismantled it with ease. At the end of the interview, Marshall had asked to go off the record for his final comment.

“Adam, I like you. I like your sense of integrity and, yes, your fairness when reporting—that’s why you got this exclusive. When you post your article I’m sure you’ll put your own spin on it, but I’m equally confident that I won’t be misquoted or taken out of context. You and I inhabit different world-views, I realize that, but I want to challenge you. You’ll be much more formidable as a thinker if you start questioning your own premises and presuppositions to see where they lead. The liberalism of one hundred years ago had a well-earned reputation for its intellectual acumen. Unfortunately modern-day liberalism displays very little of that heritage—it’s become intellectually flabby.”

MacKenzie had driven from the interview to an Internet cafe to type up his notes. But Marshall’s parting comment rankled him, and he promised himself he’d be ready if the tables were ever turned again.

Tim Hardy was consumed with guilt. Every greeting, every

comment, every smile shared with coworkers was phony. He felt like a hypocrite, estranged from his friends and coworkers though they were ignorant of his betrayal. *There's no way the money is worth this. I feel miserable.*

Guilt became paranoia. As he went about his duties he found it difficult to resist the notion that people were watching him, pointing at him, and talking about him behind his back. *Nonsense! Get a grip! No one knows what I've done.* But the feelings intensified.

Stealing furtive glances about him to see if he was being watched, Hardy entered the men's restroom and locked himself in a stall. Using the prepaid cellphone provided by the journalist, he texted him.

it's done.

The response was almost immediate.

good. at precisely 10:30am go to sbucks. buy bagel. leave phone in bagel bag on table & walk out.

ok.

remaining pymnt will hit acct by morning.

ok.

do not attempt further contact.

He turned off the phone and stuck it in his pocket. Flushing the toilet, Hardy exited the stall and washed his hands. Thirty minutes later he'd ditched the phone at the Starbucks across the street. He didn't hang around to see who picked it up, figuring the less he knew the better. It didn't take a genius to see that they were eliminating any evidence that could tie them to the replacement battery. It never occurred to him that there was one more major piece of evidence to be eliminated.

Henry Marshall sighed as he surveyed the crowd. Some two hundred officers, board members, delegates, teacher's

union reps, and sundry notables connected with the Illinois Education Association milled about in the auditorium, finding seats and chatting with friends. He knew it would be a decidedly hostile audience. *Maybe Haley was right*, he thought, *this meeting probably is a waste of time.*

He was scheduled to speak first, followed by the Republican. The Democrat had the last word. Marshall was allotted ten minutes, the other two thirty apiece. Soon the assembly was called to order and almost before he knew it he was being introduced. In no time, it seemed, the meeting was over and he was driving his rental back to the hotel. He dialed Josh Cummings at a stoplight.

“Cummings.”

“Hey, Josh, it’s me. I’m headed for the hotel.”

“How’d it go?”

“Okay, I guess. Nobody was there to hear me—they wanted to know how much money Bushnell was willing to pay for their support. He promised the moon in federal dollars. Then Hastings took the stage and promised the moon plus half of Mars. This is after I got up and said I’m kicking the feds out of the equation.”

“Hmm. Let me guess: they decided not to endorse you?”

“Right you are. I’ll be back at the hotel in twenty minutes, where are you?”

“Just pulling into the parking garage. I met with the videographer and his crew. We’re all ready for the shoot tomorrow.”

“Good. I’ll see you there. Get us some room service, will you? Order something light for me. We can do some strategizing while we eat, before I call Buford at nine.”

Tim Hardy checked the backup server to make sure it was set for the evening’s automated backup. He scanned the system logs of his small server farm, on the lookout for hardware problems and other anomalies. Everything looked green

and clean. Next he turned to the firewall log. Other than the customary IP scans from would-be hackers and other things that go bump in the night, all was well. Tim was proud of the fact that no network for which he was responsible had ever been successfully hacked. Shutting down the monitors, he turned off the lights and locked his office.

“Yo! Hardy! Watching the game on Sunday?” The speaker was Joe Albaugh, one of the campaign’s principal strategists. An import from DC, he’d quickly fallen in love with Mile High and all things Broncos.

“Wouldn’t miss it, Joe. I want to see the Broncos clobber the Bengals. Been waiting for this one since the season began. What about you?”

“Oh, I’ll be watching. Looking forward to it. Just wish it was a home game.”

“Yeah, me too. I thought you guys never took any time off, especially this close to the election.”

“I’ve carved out a five-hour block on Sunday. I’m turning off my phone and shutting down my iPad. For five glorious hours I’m just going to be a football fan. I’ve got a big-screen TV, and I’m gonna start with all the pre-game nonsense. When the game is over, it’s back to the grind.”

“Well, at least you’ve got your priorities right. Go Broncos!”

“Darn straight. Go Broncos! Have a good weekend, Tim.”

The Marshall campaign headquarters was located at 1600 Jackson Street in Golden, Colorado, occupying the entire top floor of the building. Hardy stepped out of the building and looked up at the sky. Cloudless, it was a picture-perfect fall afternoon for the Front Range of the Rockies. To the west the peaks already had snow on them. The air was dry and crisp, the sky as brilliant blue at the horizon as it was at the zenith. North Table and South Table Mountains stood like quiet sentinels over the city. Beautiful as the scene was it could not erase the gloom in his heart. Marshall was a friend and fellow church member. Hardy had just turned him into little more than a meal ticket.

He started across the three lanes of Jackson Street for his customary end-of-day cup of Starbucks. Absorbed in his

thoughts, he did not notice the white Cadillac Escalade pull out of 16th Street and accelerate toward him.

“Look out!” someone screamed. Hardy snapped out of his reverie just in time to see the Escalade bearing down on him. He tried to leap out of the way but it was too late. The bumper caught him midair, spinning him upside down. Slamming into the windshield, he was launched into the air and flipped over the accelerating vehicle before crashing onto the hard pavement. Hardy groaned, and descended into pain-wracked blackness.

Job complete.

Good! Did you get the phone?

Of course.

Destroy it. Hang around until expiration verified. The money will be in your usual account.

Roger that.

Sergeant Grady Wilson was at his desk when the call came in at 5:45 in the evening. A hit-and-run on Jackson was looking more and more like an attempted vehicular homicide to the responding officer. An eyewitness reported that the driver appeared to target the victim. The officer had requested the assistance of the department Investigations Unit, which was under Wilson’s supervision. He checked the duty sheet; every available investigator was out on other calls. He’d have to go himself. The union would complain, but as far as Wilson was concerned the union could stick it in their ear.

“Tag, you’re it,” he said to Janice Ortega, the desk officer as he walked past.

“Where you off to, Grady?”

“That call on Jackson. Dispatch says they need an investigator and I’ve got no one else to send. Call me if you need me.”

“Will do,” she replied, making a note in the log.

By the time Wilson arrived the ambulance had already left with the victim. A portion of the street was cordoned off and he observed two officers taking detailed measurements and photographs as they bagged physical evidence. A third policeman directed the bottled-up traffic into the west lane.

“Who’s the officer in charge?” Wilson asked.

“That would be me,” responded Billy Blake, clipboard in hand. Blake was a five-year veteran with the force. “What are you doing out here, Grady? I thought you were handcuffed to that desk.”

“Somebody’s got to do the work, Billy. You beat cops are spending too much time at Dunkin’ Donuts, so they sent me out to pick up the slack.”

Blake smirked, “Well, it’s good to know you still remember how real police work is done, old-timer. No, seriously, why are you here?”

“Sanchez quit last week. Thought you heard about that. He’s accepted a job as police chief in Buena Vista. Anyway, it left the Investigations Unit short-handed so I thought I’d take this call, and here I am. Whatcha got for me?”

“The victim is Timothy Hardy, thirty-seven, male Caucasian. He was crossing the street—”

“Jaywalking?”

“Of course. He was hit by a white, late-model Cadillac Escalade. The Escalade didn’t hang around. We have two witnesses who saw the accident occur, plus three more who heard the impact, turned, and witnessed the Escalade driving away. No one got the license plate number, although two witnesses verified it was a Colorado tag.”

“Figures.” Wilson examined the scene for a moment, measuring distances in his head. “Any evidence from the car, broken pieces, anything fall off?”

“A few pieces of the grill, part of a windshield wiper.”

“Well, that’s something, at least. If we can locate the

vehicle there should be threads from the victim's clothing hung up on the broken parts. Have to check all the body shops. But it's gonna be hard to find the vehicle with no plate number."

"Uh huh. He stepped off the curb over there," Blake pointed. "The area of impact was here, according to the witnesses."

Wilson walked the path the vehicle had traveled just before impact. "I don't see any skid marks—not even a hint. Didn't the driver try to stop?"

"Nope. That's why we called you guys. We've taken statements from all the witnesses. The two that actually saw the accident stated independently of one another that the driver of the Escalade appeared to target the victim. One of the witnesses had to leave after we got her statement—she had something of a family emergency—but the other witness is still here. I asked him to stay until a detective arrived to interview him."

"Okay, I'll talk to him. How about the victim? How is he?"

Blake shrugged. "Well, he was alive when they took him to Saint Anthony's, but he was in bad shape. I don't know that he'll make it, Grady. He was drifting in and out of consciousness when the EMTs were working on him. They said he kept muttering something about a battery."

"A *battery*?"

"That's what they said."

"Hmm. Odd. Must be a nerd. Most people talk about their momma when they're about to die. Okay, where's your witness?"

Blake nodded toward his cruiser, "Squad car."

Seated in the back of the car was a seventy-something old man with shoulder-length grey hair and a matching beard. His leathery face held a pair of bright blue eyes and the unlit stub of a cigar clenched between his yellowed teeth. A torn denim shirt draped on a thin frame, well-worn jeans, and scuffed work boots completed the outfit. All that was lacking, Wilson mused, was a burro laden with a prospecting outfit.

Wilson introduced himself, and after a moment of small

talk to put the old fellow at ease he began his questions. "What did you see?" the detective asked.

"Well, that man, see, he started across the street from t'other side, front of that building—"

"Was there much traffic?"

"No more 'n usual, Officer. Jackson's always a little dicey to get across, but this boy shoulda been fine."

"So what happened next?"

"Well, as I was saying, he starts across the street, an' then this here white Caddy jumps out, comes after him."

"Wait—what do you mean, 'jumps out?'" Wilson asked, as he scribbled in his notebook.

"He'd been parked over there on the side street for ten, mebber fifteen minutes. I knowed it 'cause I was watchin' him. Son's got hisself a car just like that, and I like those Escalades, so I guess I was just sort of enjoyin' the view."

The detective stopped writing and frowned. "Was there anyone in the car while you were watching it?"

The geezer held the stub of cigar and stared at it as though he'd forgotten it was in his mouth. "Huh. Dang thing went out again! What? Oh, couldn't tell. Tinted windows, you see. But must'a been, because I never saw anyone get into it."

"Alright. What next?"

"The fella was in the far west lane, had just stepped off the curb. The car jumps out and zooms across all three lanes, all the way over to that lane. By that time, the poor guy was in the middle lane and the Caddy moves back into the middle like he was aimin' for 'im. So I shouted and just then the feller sees the car. Tried to dart out of the way but that ol' Caddy just tracked him, step for step. Boom! Nailed him, hit him full on."

The detective made a few more notes, then asked, "As far as you could see, the driver didn't try to avoid the man?"

"Avoid him? Heck no! Looked to me like he was tryin' to hit him. Didn't even hit his brakes—not once. Almost chasin' him, like."

The detective questioned the old man for a few more minutes then let him go his way. It would have been a fairly simple hit-and-run except that two witnesses were positive the

driver was trying to run the victim down.

Sergeant Grady Wilson had interviewed thousands of witnesses, perps, and victims in his thirty-year career. After twenty years beating the streets in New York City, he'd come to the Wild West thinking maybe life would slow down. It hadn't happened. He'd found that people were pretty much the same everywhere—only the accents were different. As a detective he'd been treated to just about every fanciful tale, excuse, and rationale for crime that the warped human mind could invent. He'd interviewed many skilled liars, but something in his gut told him the old guy was shooting straight.

He walked back to Officer Blake and asked, "Billy, did you get anything else?"

"Yeah, I've got a few more statements to give you. One of the victim's coworkers showed up to see what all the excitement was about and recognized the name. Turns out that Tim Hardy was—or still is, I should say—the IT guy for the Marshall campaign headquarters—you know, that guy who's running for president as an independent."

"No kidding?" Wilson scratched his chin, thinking, and then muttered, "Well, that adds an unpleasant little twist to our investigation."

"Really? Why?"

"We shouldn't assume Hardy's occupation is unrelated to this accident, especially since it appears he was targeted."

Blake stared at him for a moment before responding. "Whoa. That would put this incident on a whole different level. Don't you think you're being a little premature, Grady?"

"Nope. Far better to send out the warning and be wrong than sit on it and let someone take a free shot at the candidate."

Blake removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "Okay. So what now?"

"Tell you what—you finish cleanup here, and I'll call Dispatch and have them send an officer to the hospital to keep an eye on Hardy. After I write up my report I'll sit down with the chief and let him make the next decision. It's not mine to make."

Haley Marshall looked at her watch: it was 6:30 p.m. If they were going to eat before the game they'd have to hurry. She called to the twins from the top of the stairs, "Hey, boys, let's get a move on! I thought we'd grab a sub on the way to the game. How does that sound?"

"Great, Mom," Charlie answered from his room. Charlie and Conner had driven down from Boulder earlier in the afternoon, where each was enrolled at the University of Colorado. The Jaguars of D'Evelyn High School were playing the Arvada Bulldogs, a rivalry sufficiently intense to bring the twins back from college. Though neither boy had played, football was a passion for the whole family.

Turning to go downstairs, Haley accidentally missed the edge of the first step and stumbled. She cried out as she pitched forward. Flailing, she grabbed for the banister but missed, and tumbled head over heels down the stairs, slamming her head onto the flagstone landing at the bottom.

Charlie and Conner raced to the stairway and looked in disbelief at the unmoving form of their mother sprawled at the bottom of the stairs, her left arm trapped underneath her body at an unusual angle. "MOM!" Charlie cried as he raced down the stairs. "Conner, call 911, NOW!"

He knew enough not to move her. Kneeling beside her unresponsive form, he assured himself that she was still breathing. A small pool of blood puddled under her head. *Oh, Lord, please help!*

It seemed an eternity before the emergency crew arrived. Charlie had never felt so helpless as he did while waiting on the EMTs. The boys followed the ambulance to the hospital, Charlie driving while Conner tried to reach his father. He wound up leaving a message on his dad's cell. "Dad, it's Conner. Mom's had an accident and she's in an ambulance headed for St. Anthony's. Please call as soon as you can."

“Thanks for the update, Sergeant Wilson. I’ll tell Mr. Marshall. Let me know if anything else turns up, and we’ll keep eyes wide open on our end.” Carlos Estrada ended the call and dropped the phone in his pocket. He looked at his watch—it was after seven-thirty in the evening, central time. He knocked lightly on the door connecting the adjacent hotel rooms. Henry Marshall’s room was in the center of the block of three rooms, his on one side and Joshua Cummings’ on the other.

“Come in, Carlos.”

The big man let himself in. Forty-five years old, Estrada was the chief of security for the campaign, doubling as Marshall’s personal bodyguard and driver. Tipping the scales at two hundred thirty pounds, the six-foot-four-inch Mexican had become a naturalized US citizen at nineteen. When the landscaping service he worked for went belly-up two years later, he found himself unemployed. Desperate for work, Carlos enlisted in the Navy and fell in love with the life of a sailor. His Navy career eventually led him to the SEALs. After seventeen years spent wearing the SEAL “Budweiser,” much of it on deployment downrange doing things that remain classified to this day, Estrada retired with the rank of Chief Petty Officer.

For the last four months he’d been running security for Marshall with a staff of four assistants, two of whom usually stayed at the headquarters liaising with law enforcement, the FBI and the Secret Service, running down leads, assessing potential threats, and making security arrangements at venues where Marshall was speaking. All five men were operationally capable. Besides Estrada one was a retired SEAL, another was a retired FBI agent, and the remaining two had retired from the Denver PD.

Marshall and Cummings were sitting at the suite’s small dining table, papers scattered everywhere. Marshall looked quizzically at his bodyguard and asked, “What’s up?”

“Sir, I just took a call from the Golden PD. It’s bad news. Tim Hardy was hit by a car while crossing Jackson Street this afternoon.”

“Tim? My word! That’s terrible! Is he—how is he?”

“He’s in the ICU at St. Anthony in pretty bad shape. The officer wasn’t specific about the nature of his injuries, sir,” Estrada replied.

Cummings offered, “I’ll call Carly, Hank, and ask her to check on him and get back to us. She can notify the staff.” Carly Johnson was the office manager of the campaign headquarters.

“Thanks, Josh. Let me know what she finds out. Let’s pray for him right now.” Estrada sat at the table and the three men bowed their heads while Marshall prayed for Tim Hardy, that his life would be spared and that he would not sustain any debilitating injuries from the accident.

“There’s more, sir. The head of the investigative unit believes there is a strong probability that Hardy was targeted by the driver. Two witnesses reported that the car actually moved to intercept Tim as he crossed the street.”

“But why would anyone want to harm Tim? I don’t understand.”

“Sir, there are three people in a tightly contested race for the presidency of this nation. Tim just happens to work for one of them,” Joshua Cummings said as Estrada nodded.

“The Golden PD thinks it could have something to do with my campaign?”

“They don’t know if it’s related, but they want to make us aware of the possibility,” replied the security chief, as he stood up.

“What do you think, Carlos?” Marshall looked up at his bodyguard, knowing how he would answer. As he watched the big man, it struck Marshall that Estrada looked like a pirate, or perhaps a Mexican Mr. Clean. Completely bald and clean-shaven, he sported a thick gold ring in his right ear. On the left side of his face was an old scar running from his mouth to his ear. *A memento from a dearly departed bad guy*, Estrada had called the disfigurement, chuckling, when asked about it. He had refused to go into detail.

“I think it’s time to bring in the Secret Service, sir. There’s a little over six weeks to go—but a lot can happen in six

weeks.”

“You’ve been arguing that point for months now,” noted Marshall wryly.

“Yes, sir, I have. We’ve been lucky. But now I must insist, sir. You must accept Secret Service protection.”

Marshall looked at Cummings, who nodded and said, “He’s right, Hank. Don’t tempt fate—please.”

“Alright,” Marshall sighed. “You’re the security expert. You can call them on Monday morning, Carlos.”

“No, sir. I’m calling them right now,” the bodyguard said over his shoulder as he returned to his room.

Marshall felt his phone vibrating in his pocket and realized he’d neglected to turn the ringer back on after meeting with the IEA. He groaned, thinking there would be a raft of messages waiting. There was only one and it was from Conner.

“Hang on a minute, Josh. Got a message from my son.” While Henry dialed his voice mail, Josh followed Carlos into his room to discuss the details of Secret Service protection. When he returned Marshall was just hanging up, his face ashen. “I’ve got to return to Denver immediately,” Marshall said, rubbing his face with both hands.

“What is it, Hank? What’s happened?”

Marshall looked up, his eyes glistening but his voice steady. “I just learned that Haley’s also in St. Anthony’s ICU. She fell down the stairs at home and struck her head. Thank God the boys were there—they heard her fall and called the rescue squad. Conner was on the way to the hospital when he called. I just spoke with him. Haley hasn’t regained consciousness. They know there’s a concussion, but they’re fearing worse.

“I’ve got to return home right now, Josh. Call Carly, have her book Carlos and me on a flight that will get us back to Denver as soon as possible. You stay here and shoot that ad tomorrow.”

“Me? I can’t—you’re the candidate, Hank. We’ll just reschedule—” Cummings objected. He hated getting in front of a camera.

“Can’t, not enough time. The election is in six weeks.

We've already purchased the airtime. Just rewrite the script so that the message is from you."

"But—"

"Josh! Listen! We're out of options! Are you going to vote for me on Election Day?"

"Well, of course! But—"

"Just tell 'em why, then. You know my position on HUD. Explain it. Sell it. I need your help on this one, Josh. I've got to get back to Haley."

Cummings nodded. "Okay. I'll do it. You pack, I'll contact Carly and then tell Carlos to pack up, too."

Soon Carly had secured tickets on an 8:50 p.m. departure. Hank and Carlos had to rush to make the flight.

Ares was the Greek god of war. He was also a State Department employee. Sometimes the fit was perfect.

After spending thirteen action-packed years on SEAL Team 8 in various parts of Africa, training local troops, kidnapping troublesome warlords, rescuing hostages, taking down pirates and being involved in multiple black operations, Ares had precisely the skill sets and African contacts needed to implement the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF), authorized by Section 1207 of the fiscal year 2012 National Defense Authorization Act. The purpose of the GSCF was ostensibly to carry out security and counterterrorism training. It was also charged with helping at-risk nations develop a stable judicial infrastructure by implementing rule-of-law programs. The funding for GSCF initiatives came from combining budget portions from the Departments of Defense and State.

But like many good ideas that hovered in the grey margins of legality, the GSCF experienced mission creep, and before long the State Department found itself involved in both intelligence and quasi-military operations. But State Department political appointees lacked the experience and skills of high-

ranking military officers, and soon the GSCF was making hundred-million-dollar messes, as the Benghazi debacle in September of 2012 demonstrated.

When Ares retired from the SEALs the State Department snapped him up and used him as a three-way liaison officer between State, the DOD, and the African governments involved in the GSCF program. It wasn't long, however, before Ares had decided he was no longer in the game for mom and apple pie—not when there were massive amounts of money floating about with few controls and little accountability. Ares discovered that many African leaders and militias were more than willing to provide a twenty-percent kickback for American aid dollars. Soon he'd established a Swiss bank account that was prospering like a Vegas casino.

And then that meddling presidential candidate Henry Marshall appeared on the scene. The man was a radical, as far as Ares was concerned, filled with idiotic notions about states' rights and slicing the federal government down to size. At first his campaign could be easily ignored, but when he started polling above twenty percent nationally and his platform began to push the major party candidates in a more conservative direction, Ares realized he had to do something before it got out of hand.

Among Marshall's other ridiculous notions, he held that America should not be spending money on foreign military aid unless it was clearly, directly, and explicitly in the national interest. Foreign military aid to the African nations such as those under GSCF did not qualify; Marshall wanted to terminate the program.

If the lunatic had just kept his bright ideas to himself there would have been no problem. But as luck (or unluck, Ares mused) would have it Marshall's idea struck a nerve with the American public, and after the two major campaigns poll-tested it and found it to be a winner, all three campaigns were calling retreat on the GSCF. As Ares saw it Marshall was threatening his livelihood. That simply would not do. At first Ares had tried a series of dirty tricks to discredit the Marshall campaign. But nothing had worked and it was time to escalate

the tactics. The fix, as Ares saw it, was straightforward: Marshall was pushing the other two campaigns toward isolationism by his constant pressure on the foreign aid issue. Eliminate Marshall and the pressure—hence, the problem—goes away.

And how to eliminate Marshall? Perhaps a nine-cell laptop battery, two cells of which were packed with C4 explosives on a timer, would do the trick. It would be done when the man was alone, minimizing collateral damage. Ares had no desire to kill Americans—he just wanted to eliminate Henry Marshall.

Between his pockets and his briefcase, the man whose code name was Ares was carrying four phones. One, a burner phone—a prepaid cheapo—contained the text messages to and from Tim Hardy. It would be destroyed as soon as he was able to get away from the office. Another was a standard iPhone used to contact him by family, friends, and coworkers. The third was the official, secure State-Department-issued phone employed for his official-but-confidential legitimate business. And finally was his personal Boeing Black Smartphone, complete with a biometric security package and 8192-bit-third-party encryption, something the NSA couldn't even come close to cracking. This phone he used only for his personal nefarious activities. Whenever asked about it, he intimated that it was for an authorized GSCF black op in the you-don't-want-to-know-about-it category.

Ares stayed late in his office. He had a contact in China he had some business with—on his State Department phone—regarding the purchase of ten thousand Russian-licensed but Chinese-made Kalashnikovs for a GSCF project in Ghana. Later he would communicate with a government official in Ghana—on his Boeing Black—and clear a personal fifty thousand on the deal.

He was on the phone with his Chinese contact when he

felt the iPhone vibrating in his pocket. Ignoring it, he wrapped up the deal and completed the call. Then he pulled out the iPhone and checked the screen: his only child, Lucy, had left a message.

Ares was a very wealthy man, compliments of the US taxpayers, but he was also a very lonely man. His wife had succumbed to cancer twelve years ago and it had left him bitter and angry. Though he did not believe in God, he blamed God for taking his wife. In the years since, a cold fury had grown in his heart and he began lashing out at God in any way he could, living recklessly on the razor edge of life. It was the grief and rage of that loss which pushed Ares over the thin line from patriot to predator. His buddies in the SEALs saw what was happening and realized he'd be a danger to any operation he was attached to. They talked him into retiring for his own safety as well as theirs. Shortly after that the State Department had picked him up. But the canker of his anger and bitterness had corrupted the man, and it was not hard for him to justify skimming cash off the top of his GSCF operations.

His only real pleasure in life was his daughter, Lucy. She was twenty-two, a beautiful, loving girl who doted on her daddy. If there was one area of his personal life he handled with the utmost care, gentleness, and integrity it was his daughter. She was his one remaining reason for living. He would do anything for her.

Ares swiped his finger across the screen of his iPhone to access his voice mail, and listened to the message.

“Hey, Daddy, it’s Lucy. Listen, if I lose you it’s just that my battery is almost out of juice. I’m on my way to Denver for a job interview. You’ll never guess who’s on my flight, Dad. It’s that guy Henry Marshall—the independent candidate for president. It’s so cool! I got a chance to talk to him while we were waiting to board. I really like him, Dad, and I think you would—”

At that point his daughter’s phone dropped out and the message terminated. *What? Marshall’s on Lucy’s flight? He’s supposed to be in his hotel room. Oh, dear God, no, not*

Lucy! Frantically he called her back, but the call was immediately directed to voice mail. His legs turned to rubber and he sank to the floor, groaning, “Oh, God, no, please, no!” He looked at his watch: it was six minutes before ten eastern, six minutes before nine, Chicago time. Six more minutes. He stifled a sob. “Baby, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” He broke down and cried.

Mechanically, he clambered to his feet and stumbled through his tears to his office door. He locked it and then opened his office safe. Ares pulled out an M45A1 handgun, a remake of the venerable Colt .45 M1911 designed for special operations forces, and placed it on his desk. Reaching into his safe again, he withdrew a bottle of Johnnie Walker. Dumping the cold coffee from his mug into the trash can, he refilled the cup with scotch. He placed the cup next to the handgun then turned on his office television, which was more or less permanently tuned to CNN. Taking a large swallow, Ares looked at his watch—in two minutes the last vestige of happiness would be wiped out from his life, and it was his own doing.