

# **The Fixer**

**Season 1, Episode 1**

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### Acknowledgements

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This is a work of fiction. The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.



## Chapter 1

### Mr. Rothstein.

JC Bannister sat comfortably on the worn leather bench in a booth in the back corner of the bar. He was close enough to see the exit through the back storage room but not close enough to smell the bathroom. The tables around him were lightly populated with the Tuesday evening after work crowd. Lawyers, lobbyists, aides to politicians. Bannister hated D.C.

The man across from him had introduced himself as Mr. Rothstein. Expensive, well tailored, three-piece suit, probably Saville Row in London. Nice shoes to match, likely Italian. Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso watch that easily cost as much as the suit and shoes combined. It all added up to serious money.

Good for Bannister.

The man was near six feet tall, about the same height as Bannister. Similar swimmer's build but Rothstein was much softer. More slender. Calluses on his hands from the weights at the gym, but lacking the toughness of real work. Which meant neither military nor law enforcement.

Good for Bannister as well.

There was also a discrete and almost imperceptible earwig in Mr. Rothstein's ear, positioned just poorly enough to permit it being seen.

This was bad for Bannister.

JC's team was in place. Joan was positioned near the bar, about twenty-five feet away from the booth Mr. Rothstein and Bannister were at. She had snapped a picture of the client as she returned from her well-timed bathroom trip. Then uploaded it to Duke, who was waiting at the coffee shop around the corner. He had in turn uploaded the program to his own computer network, remotely run facial recognition software on the image and was now reporting back to Joan and

Bannister who could hear them through their perfectly positioned and totally invisible earwigs. Gorman, the fourth member of their team, had been shot and killed two days ago in Indonesia.

"Guys, this is not Rothstein. That was his mother's maiden name. Allow me to introduce Mr. Daniel Meier. Power player in D.C. and currently working for the law firm of Blah Blah Meier and Blah. His daddy's firm, it's based in Los Angeles with offices in New York, Miami, Chicago and D.C., which is run by our new friend here. He's thirty-two, unmarried and although wealthy enough to be sitting at this table, holding this meeting, nothing suggests he would be able or even willing to swim in water this deep."

At 5'7" Joan didn't have Bannister's height advantage to look over the crowd. She strolled around the bar scanning for who might be with Mr. Meier. The bar wasn't busy. It took all of a minute before she returned to her previous position. "Nobody sticks out here. Only one eyeing you guys is me."

JC took this all in through his earwig as he continued his conversation with the prospective client.

He took a deep breath.

He was about to begin his hard sell.

He leaned forward, elbows and forearms on the table, hands clasped loosely.

"Listen, Mr. Rothstein," JC said, using the pseudonym for now, "we both know why you called me. You're in way over your head. You have a problem that you don't know how to solve. That's why you're here, talking to me. You see, I am a kind of...fixer. That is the easiest way to describe what I do. People seek me out when they have problems that need to be fixed. Often the solution is someone getting themselves dead."

"So, you're really just a hitman? An assassin? A killer?"

"Well, that's an oversimplification. It's inaccurate and frankly a bit inelegant. I prefer to call myself a solutionist. Sometimes the solution to a person's problem is a dead body. Sometimes dead bodies occur on the path to said solution. But killing is rarely the goal. Solving the problem is."

"So how did you come to be a... solutionist?" Mr. Meier said.

"Through the course of service to my country, I was taught how to kill. I became quite good at it. A specialist, if you will. I don't enjoy killing, but it is a marketable skill, is it not?"

"Well..." Mr. Meier started.

"If it wasn't, we wouldn't be sitting here, having this conversation on a Tuesday night, would we?"

"True." Meier sipped his Scotch. The first time he had done so since the drink was served.

"I do not kill indiscriminately. There are lines that I will not cross. I know my limitations. I work with a loose team of other specialists whose skills compliment my own. Where I have deficiencies, they have strengths, and vice versa."

Duke snorted in JC's earwig. "Loose team, my ass. When was the last time you worked without us, JC? Bolivia? How'd that turn out?"

"Yeah, we're going to have to talk about these imaginary 'deficiencies' one of these days, Bannister," Joan said.

"Regardless" JC continued to both his team and Mr. Meier. "The service my team provides is world class. We have never had an unsatisfied client in the past seven years."

JC had finished his sell. Truthfully, it wasn't that hard of a sell. People who came to him were already looking to buy. Desperation. Fear. Hatred. Those were the big three. Revenge sometimes. Occasionally power. Rarely hope. Rarely.

He knew there would be a couple questions and then the big silence. Usually he would simply let the potential client wait it out, getting over their fear on their own. He never wanted to push a person to contract for his services. It had to be their choice. Their free will to go down this path. So he waited.

"How do you know I'm not a cop?" Mr. Meier asked.

"Three reasons. First, your hands. Too soft for law enforcement."

"Could be FBI. CIA? Military?"

"Hardly. Hands are still too soft. Body too. You exercise. You're fit for an office worker, but neither fit enough nor rough enough to be police or any of those agencies you mentioned."

"What's the second reason?"

"Your clothing. Too expensive. With clothes, shoes, and watch combined, I imagine we're talking almost 20,000 dollars. No agency would put up that kind of money. Maybe Mr. Bond's might." JC smiled as Mr. Meier chuckled. "But you're not 007, are you, Mr. Rothstein?"

"No, no I'm not."

"So I'm guessing executive of some kind. Maybe a politician's aide. Lawyer, perhaps."

Meier's eyes widened ever so slightly. JC knew he could easily beat him at a game of poker.

"And the third?"

"You don't feel like one. You don't have the law enforcement persona."

"Really? What persona do I have, Mr. Bannister?"

It was time to flatter.

JC brought his left hand up to his face, rested his chin on his thumb and let his fingers curl over his upper lip. Pretended to contemplate. All an act.

"Power."

"Power? What power do I have?"

"Hard to say. A lot of power flows around D.C. But you're accustomed to it. Being around it, serving it, dispensing it."

Mr. Meier became quiet and sipped his drink again, enjoying the compliment.

JC would usually let the client continue to stew in their thoughts at this point. But this was not a typical meeting. Mr. Meier's poorly concealed listening device saw to that. It was time to press.

"But this evening, Mr. Rothstein, you're not the one wielding the power, are you?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're not the one in control here, tonight, are you? You are not the decision maker. You do not hold the power of this decision."

"What are you talking about?" said Mr. Meier.

"Say it," Duke whispered.

JC indicated towards Mr. Meier's ear and the barely visible earwig. "Whoever put that in didn't do a good enough job," JC said.

"You're an errand boy, sent by grocery clerks, to collect a bill," Duke whispered one of his favorite movie lines.

"Tells me you have either enough disposable funds to buy some nice toys," JC continued, "or the powerful friends who borrowed it for you didn't listen very well when they were told how to use it."

"Duke, I'm going to beat you when this is done," Joan said.

JC said nothing. He knew Duke's penchant for quoting movie dialogue and his love of *Apocalypse Now*. And although he would need to scold the younger man later, right now he was more interested in one thing.

Who was the one pulling Meier's strings?

Mr. Meier's face hardened. He had failed in his subterfuge and been exposed by the ones he had been trying to fool. An unusual position in his life. An uncomfortable one. He touched the earwig, pushing it slightly into his ear more. Looked down at the table. Nodded his head. Said, "OK." Then looked back up at Bannister.

"Tomorrow night. Central Library in Arlington on North Quincy. Be there at 6:30. In the north parking lot."

"Tell your boss we will be there, Mr. Meier." JC smiled slightly as he dropped Meier's pseudonym, twisting the knife just a bit.

Mr. Meier froze, eyes flaring. He then slid out of the booth. Stood. Adjusted his 7,000 dollar suit. Checked his 9,000 dollar watch. Looked at JC with poorly concealed irritation and frustration.

"Don't forget to bring your girlfriend at the bar."

JC's smile disappeared.

"Or your friend at the coffee shop next door."

Mr. Meier turned on his heel and left.

## **Chapter 2**

### **We Go.**

Duke was pissed. Raging.

"How could he know? How the fuck could he know?"

"Duke, we've been working together for three years. With Meier's money and power, I don't imagine it's too hard," Joan said

"I know, Mac, but come on. That guy? We got found out by that guy?"

Joan shrugged. "Tell you what, though. You call me Mac again, I'm going to stab you in the neck."

"Calm down you two," JC said. He knew Joan didn't really like the team's nickname for her. But Duke was glaring at her, ready to start an argument over nothing. Now was no time for infighting.

Duke threw up his hands and stalked around the playground. It was their pre-arranged rendezvous point if anything were to happen during the meeting and just

a swift ten minute walk from the bar. They had all left separately after Meier revealed they were under surveillance. It took Duke about twenty minutes to arrive, Joan and Bannister about thirty. They had all been over cautious.

Bannister was sitting on top of the jungle gym. Duke planted himself on the ladder to a small slide. Joan went and sat in a swing, waiting. She wasn't the boss. It was Bannister's next move.

"We go."

"What?" Duke exclaimed.

"We go."

"Come on, man! They know us. They know who we are. You've got no idea what we could be walking into!"

"Duke, the only thing we're sure they know is that you guys were with me tonight. That's it. All that means is maybe they had the bar under surveillance longer than we knew about."

"Or maybe we're finally done!"

"Or maybe we expected the wrong thing tonight. We went in there expecting a rich guy who needed us to fix a problem for him. That was our level of preparedness. We didn't expect a team with surveillance and multiple assets. We got outplayed. We didn't get found out by that guy. We got found out by his boss."

Duke was shaking his head. JC paused. He had put Duke in charge of surveillance. He had been asking for more responsibilities, for more duties. JC knew he was looking to the future, looking towards running his own team someday. As upset as he was at Duke for dropping the ball, he knew it didn't come close to how badly Duke was kicking himself. They had gotten lucky tonight - lucky that getting found out was all that had happened to them. Bannister knew Joan would support his play. She always did. But he needed to make sure Duke was going to back his play as well. Needed him to be with the team, ready to go forward, not looking back.

"Duke, it wasn't that guy who found us out. It was his boss and their team."

Duke stopped, beginning to understand JC's decision now.

"Don't you want to find out who's behind this guy?"

Duke and Joan both nodded curtly.

"Because I sure as hell want to find out whose hand is up this sock puppet's ass."

\* \* \* \* \*

Daniel Meier returned to his office. The team that performed the surveillance this evening was not his team but provided security for his boss. He did not meet them after leaving the bar. They had other places to be and truthfully, Meier had no desire to see them.

He had planned to get a late dinner but the meeting with Bannister had set him on edge. Going back to his office was the one place he felt he could go and relax.

"Hold my calls," he told his secretary as he passed by without looking at her.

"Of course, Mr. Meier," she said. Then, to his closed door, she said, "It's 10:30, who the hell is going to call you now?"

Meier sat at his desk. Turned around to the bookshelf behind him. Turned on his high-end audio system. Put on his equally high-end Grado headphones and

started up Miles Davis's Sketches of Spain. Maybe not his best or his most famous, but it was the one Meier liked best and that is what mattered to him.

He couldn't listen to it. Couldn't stop thinking about Bannister. Ridiculous waste of time for him to go to the meeting. His boss knew his feelings about the military and soldiers, both current and former. Knew he considered them a necessary evil. Contemptible but useful at times. But his father had secured the position for him, in addition to him running the DC offices for the firm, so he did what his boss requested. But tonight good old Miles was losing out to the irritating Bannister, so he turned off the audio equipment and went home.

It was almost midnight when he arrived at his two story townhouse in Georgetown. His girlfriend's shoes were just inside the front door. She apparently had come over. Lights were all off. No TV sounds from upstairs in the bedroom. Probably fell asleep. Dinner was still on the table. Meier didn't touch it. He couldn't stand her cooking and avoided eating it whenever possible. Sat down on the sofa. Sent a text to his father. "Meeting went well. Call me tomorrow for details." It was 9:00 pm in L.A. and his father wouldn't be asleep for another four hours. But he knew his father was conscientious about time zones, having lived in both New York and Los Angeles. He would wait until tomorrow to call.

Meier wanted to go upstairs and sleep in his bed. But that meant waking up his girlfriend. And the mood he was in he really didn't want to deal with her tonight. It had been four months already and he was tiring of her.

"Scratch that," he said out loud, "tired of her."

Worried that she might hear and wake up, he decided to sleep on the sofa. Leave early, before she got up. Skip the gym. Just go back to the office. Meier decided to call his girlfriend in the afternoon and break up with her over the phone. Made a mental note to call the security firm and have them come by around lunch time to change the locks and the alarm code.

*What had Bannister called me? Soft? Son of a bitch.*

## **Chapter 3**

### **Shot in the Back.**

Bannister checked out of his hotel room that night only a few hours after he checked in. The plan had been to stay in DC and prepare for the meeting the next day. But lying down in the deluxe suite at The Jefferson he couldn't get comfortable. He thought it was simply because he wasn't at home. No matter how nice the hotel he never slept as well as he did when he was in his own bed. But his discomfort continued. It was just past midnight when he remembered what was contributing to his sleeplessness; a rental truck full of guns parked in long term parking at Logan International Airport. His name on the rental agreement. His face on the closed circuit video inside the airport parking lot. His fingerprints all over the van.

The meeting with Meier and his boss could not happen tomorrow night. He needed to take care of that van. Which meant a one day delay. He called Meier.

"Do you know what time it is?" Meier said.

"Listen, Meier, I have other pressing business tomorrow. All I need is to reschedule for the following evening."

"This is bullshit. Waking me up at one in the morning to cancel our meeting tomorrow."

"I'm not canceling. Rescheduling. And I apologize for the hour of the call. It couldn't be avoided."

"The hell it couldn't."

JC was exasperated. He tried being nice, being professional. Now he had to try it the other way. "You don't like it? I don't give a shit, Meier. You're not the decision maker. You're barking like you have the power, but you don't. You and I both know it. Now shut the fuck up and relay the information to your boss. And if your boss doesn't like it, they can go to hell. Same as you."

JC hung up. One of the rules of business all over the world - you don't have to like the client. But when your client is an arrogant prick, it makes the work that much harder. He packed what little he had brought and called Joan from the lobby. Woke her up.

"Plans have changed. I'm going back to Boston tonight."

Joan said nothing. JC thought she hadn't heard him.

"Oh, shit. The truck, right?"

"Yep."

"Just let it stay there another day or two. It's not going anywhere. Nothing is going to happen to it," she said, then yawned.

"Needs to be done. I want to finish up with the Jakarta mess. I called Meier and postponed the meeting one day. You need to call Duke in the morning. Let him know you guys have the day off."

JC could hear her stretching over the phone. "Call him yourself, boss. If I call, he'll want to drag me to some damn film festival or something."

Joan was probably right, JC thought. Duke was the newest addition to the team and the youngest. He had been working with Bannister for three years. Although Joan fought with him it was more akin to sibling rivalry than anything else. He knew their argument after the meeting with Meier this evening was already forgotten by both of them.

"Alright. I'll tell him you went to Cincinnati early for a meeting but you'll be back late tomorrow night. Happy?"

"Thanks, boss." He could tell she was already drifting back to sleep. "When's Gorman's funeral?"

JC was quiet. He hoped she would fall asleep before he had to lie to her.

"Boss?"

"It'll be in a few days. Not sure if we're going to make it."

"We need to try." Joan yawned again.

Bannister said goodnight as he walked to his rental car. Got in, started it up and pulled out of the hotel parking lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gorman had already been buried. Shot in the back in Indonesia, the team had brought his body home on their chartered jet from Jakarta the day before. While



Duke and Joan had gone to their homes in the Boston area, JC had driven to Cambridge. He left Gorman with a medical examiner who owed him more than a few favors. She promised Gorman would be taken care of and laid to rest in Mount Auburn Cemetery later that afternoon. He had felt it would be best if they did not attend his funeral. Told himself that Gorman would have agreed. The job in Jakarta had been all over the news. Their involvement was unknown by the authorities, as it should be, but any kind of attention or mistakes greatly increased their chances of scrutiny. And a funeral of a gunshot victim that required the granting of favors to be accomplished could possibly increase scrutiny. Which is what Bannister hoped to avoid.

He arrived at Logan Airport at around 8 in the morning. Turned in his rental car. Picked up his van, the one he had driven to Cambridge with Gorman's body. Only thing it held now were three bags full of guns, sourced and paid for by their client in Indonesia. Headed over to Newton Highlands, a suburb of Boston, and parked outside of his bike shop, Strong Arm Cyclery. A legitimate business front. Put a quarter in the meter. Twenty minutes. Walked inside. 9:30 am.

"Hey, boss," his two employees, Tommy Coletti and Vincent Mercier, called out in unison. They were both 5'10", both had close-cropped military-style haircuts, both had biceps the size of most men's legs. Many people thought they were brothers, if not twins.

"Hey, guys," was JC's half-hearted response. He tossed the keys to Mercier. "I'll need you to drive that over to Gorman's later. Keep money in the meter. The van's loaded."

"Sure thing, JC. Just tell me when." Mercier put the keys in his pocket.

"Uhh, boss?" Coletti said. "Where's Gorman? Doesn't he usually take care of that stuff?" While Coletti and Mercier were aware of JC's career as a fixer and most people who worked for him knew each other, Bannister kept the operations of his front businesses and his other work strictly separate.

JC dreaded the answer. The first time he would have to speak it out loud. "We lost him in Jakarta." It hurt more than he thought it would.

"Aww, hell," Coletti said.

"Shit, man. I'm sorry," Mercier said.

"What happened?"

"Not now, guys. Give me a few minutes. Okay?" JC went upstairs to his office. Closed the blinds that overlooked the sales floor and repair area of the bike shop. Made himself a cup of tea and tried to relax. Tried to sort things out in his head. Recriminations started shooting through his mind again. He'd lost team members before. But this was the first time it felt like it was directly his fault. What could he have changed? In the end, he knew two things: given the same situation he would make the same choice again and nothing would change what had happened.

The only thing he could do is try to move forward while honoring his friend.

Which meant the job with Meier. He'd had initial meetings with intermediaries before. It wasn't uncommon. But something about this one was bothering him. It felt off. Maybe it was just Meier. It wasn't the guy's money that bothered him. In all honesty, JC was likely wealthier than Meier was. It was his attitude. Arrogance. Unfounded arrogance and contempt is what JC had felt most in the meeting. He had little patience with people like that.

The phone rang. Once. Twice. Then stopped. One of the guys must have picked it up. Footsteps up the stairs. A light knock on the office door.

"JC, there's a guy on line one. Says he's got the bike."

"Alright," JC sighed. Mercier closed the door.

"Hey, Vince!"

Mercier opened the door again.

"Yeah, boss?"

"Who was the armorer in your unit? The one that worked at the ammo depot you guys pulled me out of?"

"Uhh, Mickey Sparks? Skinny guy. Nervous energy, right?"

"Yeah, sounds like the one. He was supposed to be a machinist as well, wasn't he?"

"He was. Pretty good one, too. He did some work for us here until you opened that shop with Gorman."

"Good. Call him up. Tell him I've got a job for him. I need someone to run Gorman's machine shop. It's too good of a business for us to just let it go."

"Sure thing." Mercier left.

JC looked at the phone. Saw the red-orange LED light of line one blinking back at him. "Of all the rotten, God-forsaken damn times to get the call," JC muttered. Picked up the phone. "Strong Arm Cyclery. How can I help you?"

There was a pause. "Hello? Is this Strong Arm Cyclery?"

"Yes, it is, how can I help you?"

"Yes, I have an old bicycle that's sitting around, taking up space. Any chance you'd like to buy it?"

"That depends. What kind of bike is it?"

"It's an old British bike, a Royal Enfield Revelation."

The code had begun. Whenever someone needed JC's services they called the bike shop and jumped through a number of coded hoops. They could only learn the correct answers from a former client of JC's. This caller had passed the first hurdle. The Revelation was an exceedingly rare small wheel bicycle made in the mid-1960s. There were rumored to be only one hundred ever made. JC had two downstairs in the showroom.

"Really? A Royal Enfield Revelation? Is it the folding version or the non-folding version?"

"The folding one. There's a large hinge in the middle of the frame," the caller said. This was the second hurdle: the Revelation was never produced as a folding bicycle.

"Excellent. Any chance you know the serial number?" JC said.

"Yes, it's, let me see, it's 159,000." This was the third and final step: no Revelations were made with a serial number higher than 151xxx. If the caller had a real Royal Enfield Revelation he had just gotten all the questions wrong. Which meant he didn't have the bicycle. Which meant he needed a fixer.

JC rubbed his forehead. There was no way his team could pull two jobs at the same time. Not with Gorman gone. Not with the meeting with Meier's boss happening tomorrow. He was going to have to do something he hated doing. Something he had only done twice before.

"Sir, I'm sorry but I am unable to help you in this matter at this time."

The man paused. "Do I have the right number?"

"Yes, you do, sir. I am deeply sorry but we are booked solid for the next month or two. Is there any way you can call us back then?"

"But I need to get rid of this damn bike."

"I understand. And I do apologize. Perhaps there is another solution you can find. Something that will tide you over for the next two months. Then give us a call back and see if we are available then?"

The man's hesitation bothered JC. He couldn't tell if it was due to irritation, apprehension or because JC was deviating from what the man was expecting.

"Yeah, I'll see what I can do." Spoken quietly and with resolve. JC regretted the delay, but it was necessary.

The man hung up. JC remembered that he had yet to call Duke about the postponed meeting with Meier. He made the call. Easy. The kid was stoked. JC hung up, leaned back and continued rubbing his forehead, trying to stop the pounding in his head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty minutes later Bannister went downstairs. Coletti and Mercier had the TV on one of the news channels. The big story was the violence in Indonesia two days ago. Reports varied between calling it an attempted coup and an attempted presidential assassination. All reports agreed that the attempt had failed and there were dozens of dead bodies all over Jakarta.

"Was that us?" Mercier asked.

JC nodded.

Coletti whistled. "Was the mission a success?"

"We achieved our objective. The client is happy. But losing Gorman? Makes it kind of hard to call it a success."

Coletti and Mercier nodded. Gorman had been well liked by the team.

"How did he die?"

"Shot in the back. Hung on for about ten minutes, but." JC trailed off.

Coletti and Mercier were quiet. Watching TV.

"And the guy who shot him?" Coletti said.

JC pointed to the TV. "That's him right there." Shaky cellphone video footage was being shown of a man crawling on the ground. Another man walked in frame, stood over him and pointed a pistol at his head. The network cut back to the news anchor before the man holding the gun could pull the trigger.

"Did he?" Mercier asked.

"Yeah. He took it in the head."

"Good."

"Fuck 'em," Coletti said. "Shooting a man in the back like a fuckin' coward."

Bannister had felt the same thing when he saw the video on the airplane. Unedited the first time because the network didn't know what they had. But now he felt more numb than anything. Move forward. If he said it a few more times it was going to sound almost like a mantra.

"Mercier, I need you to pick up Sparks and take him over to Gorman's shop. Take your car. I'll drive the van."

Coletti rubbed the back of his neck. "JC, yeah, I talked to Mickey. He's not doing so well. Divorced. Can't really hold down a job. Spends most of his time at a bar up in Waltham."

JC didn't care about that. Right now he needed someone who could run a machine shop. Someone he had a history with. Someone he knew and might be able to trust someday. "Go get him, Mercier. Slap him around. Scare him. Sober him up. I'll see you at Gorman's in an hour."

## Chapter 4

### Vargas.

The phone at the bike shop rang forty minutes later. JC knew he was close to being late if he didn't hustle. He was headed out the door.

"Get that, Tommy. I'm on my way over to Gorman's." He wondered if he needed to change the name of the machine shop.

"Boss, it's for you. It's Mercier."

"Tell him I'm on my way."

"Said he needs to talk to you."

"What the hell?" Bannister grumbled. The bell jingled as he let the door close. Took the phone. "I'm on my..."

Mercier cut him off. "We've got a local problem over here. Looks like some community outreach is in order, boss."

JC stood there, trying to understand what his friend was talking about.

"Boss, you there?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Vince?"

Mercier's voice lowered. "We've got some trouble here, man. I really need your help."

"On my way." JC ran out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gorman's Auto and Marine Machine Shop was located about ten minutes away in Watertown. JC pulled up in the rental van. Everything looked fine from the outside. Mercier's Honda was there. Looked okay. Front door of the shop was open which seemed odd, but it didn't look busted. JC got out, walked up to the door slowly, listening for any hint of what was going on inside. He heard nothing.

He entered the front door. Nobody was in the waiting room or office. He walked further in, through the door that led into the machine shop proper.

Coletti and Sparks were standing not fifteen feet from him. Motionless. Unharmed. A group of young thugs were gathered there as well. Some sitting, some standing. Others walking around. JC counted nine. Baseball bats, screwdrivers, pipes. One kid had an old Buck 110 he was pretending to clean his fingernails with. Everyone turned when he walked in. JC stood there, feet apart, hands in his pockets.

"Mercier. Everything okay?"

"Sure, boss. You know, just a little community outreach."

"That's right. We're reaching out to take whatever you got." One of the thugs stepped forward, trying to assert his dominance. JC ignored him.

"Sparks, how do you like the job interview?"

"Its, well, sobering."

"I'll say. We'll have to talk about that in a minute."

"Hey. Shut the fuck up." The lead thug put his hand in his back pocket and drew a Charter Arms Bulldog revolver, chambered for the .44 Special. Small, light and exceedingly powerful. He pointed it at the floor. JC turned his head. Focused on him. Thin, wiry, baggy clothes. Probably about twenty years old. Shorter than JC but not by much. White. Almost half of the group were. Two blacks, two Hispanics and one Asian. All late teens to early twenties. A real ragged crew, JC thought. And at thirty-eight, he suddenly felt rather old.

"I'm the owner of this shop," JC said. "How can I help you?"

"You can give me everything you've got on you. Then anything of value in this shop."

"Sorry, kid, but that's not going to happen."

The young man, already angry at the world and the hand he thought he was dealt, raised the gun and pointed it at JC. "The hell it ain't."

"You know what, why don't you put that down before somebody gets hurt." JC slowly took his hands from his pockets as he spoke.

The kid stepped forward and cocked the hammer on the revolver. "Yeah, you sayin' that cause you ain't the one with the gun, bitch."

*Man, JC thought as he shook his head, this day started bad two days ago. It just keeps getting worse.* JC looked at the other thugs gathered around the shop. One of the Hispanic boys seemed different. He was watching everything and everyone, analyzing, evaluating, but not acting. *How am I gonna get out of this without killing all these kids?* JC thought. *You're supposed to be a fixer. Fix this.* Then something Mercier had said finally clicked. *Community outreach.*

JC looked past the young man pointing the gun at him. He needed him closer. He addressed the group. "Which one of you guys is the smartest?"

The thug with the gun walked forward, holding the revolver out at arm's length. He stopped when the muzzle was about two feet from JC's face.

"I am, motherfu—" JC pivoted at the hips, moving his head and body mass out of the gun's sight line, his right fist smashing into the man's forearm while his left grabbed the gun. The blow loosened the younger man's grip allowing JC to wrench the gun away from him. Bannister put the gun in his waistband with his left hand while his right took hold of the guy's now empty hand. JC raised his right foot and stomped it on the man's knee, dropping him to the ground and raising his arm high. He put his knee against the man's shoulder, pulled backwards while pushing forward and downward with his knee and dislocated the guy's shoulder. The younger man screamed in pain. JC pulled out the revolver, palmed it in his right hand, grabbed a handful of the guy's hair, pulled his head up and pistol-whipped him. Smashed the pistol into his face four times. JC stood up, pointing the gun at the ground while the thug bled, writhed and moaned at his feet.

"The smartest guy never says he's the smartest. Unless he's a fucking asshole." JC thought of Meier for a brief second. "Now, I'll ask again. Which one of you guys is the smartest?"

Seven fingers instantly pointed at the one Hispanic kid JC had noticed before. He looked at his friends then started shaking his head. JC approached him. "What's your name?"

"Bruno."

"Bruno?"

"Vargas."

"Alright, Bruno. This shit sack is done. Out. You want to be the new boss of this crew? Lead them in a new direction?"

"The fuck you think you're doing?" The guy on the floor was trying to get up.

"Bruno, what's this knuckle dick's name?"

"George Ziccardi. Calls himself Z-dog."

JC looked down at him. "George, you say another word I'm going to kick the living shit out of you."

"Fuck you."

George hadn't finished the first word before JC started stomping and goal kicking him. Ribs, stomach, dislocated shoulder, legs, ass: anything was game for about a minute. JC stopped, winded.

"You come into my shop, threaten my friends, point a gun in my face?" JC was bellowing at this point. "Think you can tell me 'fuck you'?" Kicked him again for good measure. "Now shut the fuck up before I lose my temper."

The shop was dead quiet. Except for the sound of Z-dog coughing and spitting blood onto the floor. JC took a few deep breaths to compose himself. Turned back to Bruno. "You want a job?"

Vargas looked at him for about ten seconds. "Depends."

"On?"

"The job."

"Smart man." JC pointed at Sparks who was standing wide-eyed and stock still. "He's the new manager of the shop. Right now he's a bit of a drunk. I need you to keep an eye on him. Make sure he stays on the wagon."

"That's it?"

"Two grand a month. Meals included. Clean up the shop, run errands. He tells you what to do day to day, but you work for me. If you want to learn the ins and outs of a machine shop, Sparks will teach you anything you want to know. He drinks too much but I hear you won't find a smarter machinist. If you like the work and prove yourself I'll pay for you to go to any college or university you can get into."

"Community college?"

"Anywhere you get in."

"UMass?"

"Harvard."

The guys behind him whistled and chuckled.

"And if I don't like the work? I don't prove myself?"

"Then I'll fire your ass. And you'll have lost the greatest opportunity you'll likely ever see."

JC let the possibility sink in before he said, "There's a third option."

"Yeah?"

JC opened the cylinder of the revolver. Five bullets. Fully loaded. Closed it. Put it in his left hand. Handed it to Vargas, grip first. "Take it."

Bruno did. JC smashed him in the face with his right elbow, knocking him to the floor of the machine shop. Bruno scrambled back up, gun in hand, ready to fight. Blood trickling from his nose.

"Shoot him! Get that sonofabitch!" George yelled from the floor.

JC watched Bruno's face evaluate the situation. He knew the kid could try to shoot him in the head, get revenge for his gang leader's beat down. Maybe just rob the place, steal the cars. But he was betting Vargas had different plans for his life and his future.

Bruno looked hard at JC. Then handed him the gun, butt first. JC nodded. Smiled, clapped him on the shoulder. "Welcome aboard."

"You fuckin' pussy. Just like your older brother, ain't got no balls. Next time I see you, I'm gonna stomp the hell outta you. And your brother, too." George was losing it.

Bruno moved to kick George but JC stopped him. JC took out his wallet, took the money from it and dropped it in front of George. About a thousand bucks.

"Mercier, give me your keys."

"What?" Mercier looked surprised.

"Give me your keys." It wasn't a request.

Mercier walked over, digging his car keys out of his pocket. Put them in JC's hand. Walked back to stand next to Sparks. JC tossed Mercier's car keys on top of the thousand dollars cash he had dropped on the floor. "That's yours. Mercier will report the car stolen tomorrow at 10 am so get it to whatever chop shop you can find before then. Go to a hospital." He squatted down in front of George. "Here's the deal. Never come back here. Never bother anyone standing here or their families ever again. I hear of it, I'll find you. And I'll kill you." JC stood. "Now get the fuck out of my shop."

George struggled to stand. His knee was hurting, his face was bloody and smashed, nose broken and his shoulder was dislocated. Worst of all his pride was demolished. He picked up the keys, pocketed the money and limped away.

Mercier shuffled his feet. "Boss, you just gave him my car?"

"Don't worry. I'll buy you a new one. Coletti, too."

"Why?"

"You're going to need it. Something that can haul a few guys and some bikes.

Mercier continued to look at him, searching for understanding.

"Community outreach, Mercier."

The remainder of the gang watched all of this silently. Finally one of the black kids said, "What about us?"

JC smiled at him. "You know how to ride a bike?"

"Course I do."

JC looked at the rest of the guys there. "Anybody here can't ride a bike?"

Seven heads shook in the negative.

"Good. Tomorrow afternoon be at Strong Arm Cyclery in Newton Highlands at 4:30." He pointed at Mercier. "You'll see this guy and a guy that looks just like

him. This is Mercier. Other guy is Coletti. They are your new coaches. And you are the new Strong Arm Cyclery racing team."

The guys looked at each other in disbelief. The one who had spoken up before said, "You want us to ride bikes?"

JC smiled. "Nope. I want you to race bikes. You're my new racing team. Coletti and Mercier will train you. Bruno will ride with you as well. He's the team captain. You'll get new bikes, a place to stay, food, team clothes and a thousand bucks a month."

"Just to ride bikes?"

"What's your name, guy?"

"Louis."

"Good. Bruno is the Captain. Louis, you're my Co-Captain."

JC addressed the group. "Like I said, you're not just going to ride bikes. You guys are going to learn how to race bikes. And you're going to win."

"Why so generous? To all of us?" Bruno said.

Several others nodded in agreement.

JC's smile faded. "Simple. Two days ago a good friend of mine died in my arms. Shot in the back because of my mistake. Today, instead of killing a bunch of dumbass kids who think they're gangsters and are trying to rob me, I'd rather help a bunch of dumbass kids who could use a little direction."

\* \* \* \* \*

Thirty minutes later the guys had all left. Most of their questions had been answered. Sparks left as well, promising to come back tomorrow at 7 am, sober. Bruno promised he would be there to make sure. Mercier and Bannister were left alone, sitting in the front office.

"So, boss, what are we going to do with all the guns in that van?"

"Keep them here, same as before. The storage spot in the back is hidden just as well as it always was. Gorman and I dug it out, built it ourselves. It's not on any blueprints and it's completely invisible. We are the only ones who will ever know about it."

"Sparks?"

"He can't know. We'll see in a few years."

"That was a nice thing you did for those guys."

JC nodded.

"I gotta ask, though, JC. Why'd you hit Bruno like that? I mean, it seemed kinda cold."

"It was a job interview."

Mercier laughed. "You've changed man. I remember my interview with you. All you said was 'You like bicycles?' I shrugged my shoulders, said 'Yeah, I guess' and that was it."

JC remembered as well. Mercier and Coletti didn't know about the extensive background check he did before he called them. The anonymous interviews with friends, employers, former co-workers.

"Yeah, well, I kinda knew you guys already. Dragging a guy out of a burning ammo depot in Kandahar then visiting him in the hospital while he's recovering can do that."



Mercier shrugged. "Okay, but why'd you hit Bruno?"

JC smiled. His friend had noticed the dodge. "I wanted to see what he did in a stressful situation. Would he give in to his immediate emotions and throw everything away or would he think first and try to find the best long-term solution to the problem?"

Mercier nodded. "Gorman would have approved."

JC smiled at the thought of Gorman. He missed his friend.

"Let's get these guns brought in and then get out of here, Vince. I've got a meeting down in DC tomorrow.

"DC?" Mercier's distaste was clearly audible.

"Yeah, I know."

## **Chapter 5**

### **Not by Half.**

JC called Meier back later that day. He told Meier the meeting would be at 8:30 the following night, not 6:30 as originally scheduled. The library closed at 9 and JC wanted as few people there as possible. Additionally, the location had changed; the Reading Room not the parking lot. Meier tried to bluster, stick to the original north parking lot location and earlier time, but JC simply told him 8:30 or no meet. Meier agreed.

Determined not to be outdone again, Duke arrived at the Central Library in Arlington two minutes after it opened the next day. He applied for a library card and spent a large part of the day surveiling the library and the surrounding area. He knew the library better than the people who worked there and almost as well as the architects and engineers who designed it. He walked all around the neighborhood, looking for surveillance, for trouble spots, for vantage points. There was a park just to the north of the library. It was large, about the size of eight city blocks. Baseball diamond. Basketball, tennis and volleyball courts. A small but nicely wooded area. The library itself had minimal parking in front, a large parking area in the back and the smaller parking lot to the north. There was underground parking as well, but it was closed for renovation.

Joan had spent most of the day either exercising or relaxing in the park. She showed up as an early-morning jogger and spent the next two hours jogging around the park. Disappeared for twenty minutes and came back with an entirely different disguise and a dog. Stayed there for another two hours, playing with the borrowed dog and getting to know where everything was on the edges of the park. She repeated this four more times with four more disguises. She had been a business woman on a long lunch break enjoying a book, a babysitter with a sleeping "baby" in a stroller, a student enjoying the afternoon while pretending to study and a photographer taking pictures of the spring flowers and the setting sun. This last outfit was the one she was wearing when Meier showed up at about 8.

JC was driving down from Boston. The Hyundai Santa Fe had a few extra weapons in the back, but not many. Bannister didn't know what to expect, but he didn't want to be driving around with an arsenal in the car. Duke had outfitted the vehicle weeks ago when they bought it to make it a secure haven, safe from any listening or eavesdropping devices. Turn on the radio, push a button for a pre-tuned station and the noise and music would stop. Powerful amplifiers pumped out inaudible white noise and radio frequencies that would render any listening or recording devices useless. JC had wanted a secure and mobile location to have a conversation with a client without concern for who was listening. It was the perfect vehicle for the situation. JC required a little one-on-one time with the person calling the shots this time.

Bannister's phone rang. Joan. 8:05.

"Meier's here."

"More than a little early."

"You'll never guess what he's driving."

"BMW? Porsche? No wait—a Range Rover."

"Bentley."

"Nice."

"Yeah. Parked it so he's taking up two spots. Nobody can scratch his precious car."

"I'd probably do the same. If I was driving a Bentley."

"No you wouldn't." Joan paused. "Can I blow up his car? Please?"

"No."

"Not now, of course."

"No. You sound like Duke."

"How about a couple of flat tires. He'll never see me."

"Don't approach or engage. Observe."

"But..."

"Goodbye, Joan."

JC called Duke to let him know who had arrived. Double checked with him to make sure he was ready. He said he was. JC was getting close. He liked the suburbs around Washington. Didn't like the district itself, but Virginia was quite nice. He was about ten minutes away when Joan texted him that Meier had gone inside. He knew she would have sent Duke the same text and that Duke would be picking Meier up and tailing him. Joan was probably positioning herself at the library's main entrance immediately after sending the text.

Bannister pulled up in the north parking lot, saw Meier's Bentley and parked between an older Benz and a Prius. Waited. Duke's text came in twenty seconds later: "reading room. alone."

"hold" was the reply JC sent. He sat inside the SUV, making Meier wait. At 8:39 he exited his vehicle. Resisted the urge to adjust his holster or check his pockets. Instead, he just set the alarm on the vehicle and walked past a mother and her twin boys with their arms full of books, heading toward the older Benz on the driver's side. They loaded up and were driving away as he pulled the library's side door open.

Meier was sitting in the reading room. 8:43. He had no books, no magazines, no newspapers. Just another expensive suit, pinstripe this time, and a different pair of shoes. Same watch.

JC located Duke, indicating he should approach. Duke got up and walked casually over, sitting at a table in the largely empty room. If Meier saw him, he didn't indicate it. All his attention was on JC, who did not move. Standing just inside the reading room entrance. Watching. Meier glanced at his watch. 8:44. He indicated that JC should join him. JC stood there another full minute. Staring. Then moved and sat at the table next to Meier. Meier turned sideways to face him.

"So?" Meier said.

JC was irritated by this man. It wasn't his wealth. Or his familiarity with being the one holding the power in most situations.

It was the arrogance that seeped out of every pore of his body.

"So? Tell me, Meier, what's different today?"

"I don't understand the question," Meier replied.

"Do you suddenly have more power today than you did the other night?"

"Pardon?"

JC spoke slowly, insultingly. "Where's your boss?"

"They will arrive shortly."

"Library's almost closed."

JC's phone rang. Joan. "Uhh, JC? Things just got a little busy out here. We've got a black limo and three SUVs. All with U.S. Government plates. They're pulling around to the north parking lot."

"Meet me there," he answered. Looked at Meier.

"They've arrived, I assume?" Meier looked pleased at this apparent show of force. He had no idea that despite having more men and more firepower, his team still wouldn't be enough if things turned sideways. Certainly not enough to save him. Bannister knew the truth; none of the team waiting for them outside would make a move to save Meier. If one of Bannister's team didn't shoot him, he would likely be cut down in the cross fire. The reason was simple.

No matter how much power he had, he was not the boss.

JC stood. Adjusted the cuffs on his own suit. Not Saville Row. Wouldn't be prudent to wear one of his Saville Row suits to a meet like this. Good chance of getting blood all over it. Besides, it was hard to have his favorite tailor in London adjust for the two Glock 23 handguns covering his kidneys. Or the deep carry Kahr MK40 riding in his crotch, to the left of his package. Or the knives. Bannister finished adjusting his cuffs and touched his tie.

"You ready?"

Meier nodded. Stood. "Yes, I'm ready."

Bannister stepped forward, throwing Meier off guard. He adjusted Meier's red and blue striped silk tie then fixed his coldest gaze inches from Meier's eyes.

"No you aren't, son. Not by half."

Meier broke first, trying to control the fear spreading through him. His limbs began to shiver slightly from fright. He moved towards the side exit to mask and hopefully end the panic that nearly made him shut down. "This way."

JC walked by his side, not allowing Meier to lead. Duke fell in behind them. Meier noticed him for the first time, stopped and turned as if to order him away,

not realizing he was with JC. Duke stopped as well. In one move, he cocked his head sideways, pulled back his black lightweight North Face rain jacket with his left hand, exposing a Heckler and Koch MP5 hanging from a shoulder holster while simultaneously drawing a nine inch Japanese kaiken knife halfway from its custom made sheath tucked into his waist belt with his right.

"I'm your huckleberry," Duke said in his best Doc Holliday drawl.

Meier's comment stuck in his throat. Duke nodded forward to the side exit. Meier turned woodenly and began moving forward, JC continuing as before. Duke eased back slightly.

JC leaned his head towards Meier as they walked.

"You know what you are?"

Meier was regaining a hint of composure. "What do you think I am?"

"You're an errand boy. Sent by grocery clerks."

The smile on Duke's face went from ear to ear. There was no need for JC to turn around to see it. He knew it was there.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Old Friends.**

The limo was sandwiched end-to-end between two SUVs. The third was parked on the driver's side of the limo, totally protecting it from any threat approaching it from the outside, save an RPG. The drivers of the SUVs stayed in position, but their passengers were fanned out across the immediate area. Most were white, a few black. All wearing variations of the standard Secret Service black suit. JC saw a few of them with earpieces in, knew they would all have them, would all have the mike "concealed" in the sleeve of their non-dominant hand. He only saw two with M4 assault rifles but knew there would be heavier firepower in the vehicles. He counted twelve agents.

Joan had come around the side of the library. Her .40 caliber Glock was in her hand. One of the agents holding an M4 trained it on her. Smart.

Duke peeled off, went to stand near the Santa Fe. The other M4 agent moved towards him, his rifle at the ready position, pointing directly in Duke's direction but at a forty-five degree down angle. Threatening but not fully engaged. Duke stopped.

Bannister stopped as well. Meier continued to the limo but pivoted towards the rear SUV when the passenger side door opened. A tall Asian man stepped out. Meier approached him and they conversed briefly. Meier went to the limo while the other man walked towards Bannister. As he moved away from the headlights of the SUVs and into the orangish glow of the city's streetlights, JC saw his deep set eyes, strong nose with a high bridge and realized he wasn't exactly Asian. He was half Korean, half Polish. JC's bunkmate from basic training.

"Guy? Guy Kowalski?"

"JC Bannister. In the flesh."

The two men embraced as they met. Old friends. For the moment.

"How long has it been? Fifteen years?"

"Longer than that, I think. Last time was when you were shipping out, right?"

"No, you're forgetting the Philippines, man."

"Holy shit, Manila. How could I forget those three days?"

"So you're running this show?"

"Naww, man. I'm the head of security for the person in that limo."

"I heard you joined the Secret Service. How is it? Treating you well?"

"Can't complain. How you liking the private sector?"

"Ups and downs. Having to deal with assholes like Meier isn't so good, but running into old friends has its perks."

"Yeah, Meier's okay once you get to know him." JC knew it was a lie and not even a good attempt at one. Guy was telling him to back off. "He's got the ear of the person in there, so, you know."

JC didn't say anything, just continued the old friend routine. Big ol' grin. Congenial. Waiting for the next lie he knew was coming.

"Look, man, sorry for all this bullshit. If I had known it was you we were meeting, we wouldn't have needed all this, all these guys."

There it was. No way Guy didn't know who the meet was with. If he didn't, he should have been fired or refused to allow it.

"Aw, that's okay, Guy." Bannister kept smiling. "It's cool. You only brought a couple of friends. No big deal."

Guy's smile toned down a shade as he realized what Bannister had just told him: Guy's team would have a real hard time if they had to actually go toe-to-toe with Bannister and the two people he could see. He had insisted that his boss allow him to bring more agents but the request had been declined.

"Listen, Guy, you know what this whole thing is all about? Can you give me some kind of heads up before it starts?"

"Wish I did, man, but honest to God, I've got no idea why we're here. Well, other than the obvious reason, you know—meeting you." Guy wasn't lying this time and JC saw it. He had no idea what the real purpose for the meet was other than the introduction.

They stood there for a second. Waiting. Smiles fading. Not really wanting to start because the start of this meet could mean the end of their old friendship. Or even their deaths.

JC spoke first. Attempting to gain control. "Well, let's get started, buddy."

"Yeah. Good idea."

Guy turned towards the limo waiting about fifteen feet away. JC followed. One of Guy's agents moved forward as if to frisk Bannister before he got any closer to the vehicle.

"Uh, Guy?"

Guy continued for a half step, not wanting to start the conflict. He stopped, turned. "What's up?"

JC indicated the agent who was moving towards him with his hands outstretched, ready to frisk him. JC made no effort to conceal his growing anger.

"Come on, JC, he's just doing his job. You know that."

"Yeah, and you know I'm loaded. I wouldn't walk into this clusterfuck of a meet without walking in loaded. So what's the fucking point of this sack of dicks trying to frisk me?"

Friendship was out the window at this point.

Joan had been edging closer to the agent with the assault rifle trained on her. He spent more time watching the growing tension between Guy and JC. Likely figured she was just a girl, what could she do? Problem was, she was close enough now to be able to snatch his weapon from him and he didn't even know it. Duke's agent was better trained and he was unable to move.

"Look, JC, there's no way you're getting any closer without my agent finding out what you're carrying."

Bannister planted his feet. Unbuttoned the button on his single breasted suit jacket. The only person on Guy's team who knew how bad things looked for his team right now was Guy. And the person in the limo. They were the only ones who had read all of Bannister's files. The official reports. And the unofficial ones.

"Not gonna happen, Guy." JC was speaking to his old friend but looking straight at the agent who was attempting to frisk him. The agent had also stopped. Caught between the order his boss had given him and the sneaking fear working its way up his spine. "Not going to fucking happen."

"JC. One way or the other, man."

"He comes any closer, he loses both his hands. At the elbows."

The window of the limo cracked. A woman's voice, mildly rebuking.

"Gentlemen, please!"

"Ma'am..." Guy began. JC squinted his eyes, still facing the agent who was backing away, worrying about his hands. And elbows. JC had heard that voice before. From TV news, sure. But before that, too.

"I know you're doing your job. But James isn't going to hurt me."

The window went down even further. JC looked over. Senator Catherine Marcus. JC's mouth hung open.

"Come here, James, and say hello to your old friend."

Guy's mouth hung open almost as much as JC's. He had no idea that the senator knew JC. And he had never heard of anyone call JC by his first name. Not even The General.

The senator opened the car door and stepped out. JC walked forward, politely helping her. His mind was running almost as fast as his heart was. Senator Marcus took JC's hand, turned and gave him a hug, which JC returned.

"How have you been James? How is your mother?"

"I've been okay. Mother passed on."

The senator was taken aback. "I'm so sorry to hear that. I truly didn't know. She was such a wonderful woman."

"Thank you."

"When did it happen? How?"

"About three years after my dad died. After his accident, she just, well, deflated. Started going downhill fast."

"I am so sorry to hear that."

"Thank you," JC repeated. "How is the doctor? The girls?"

"My husband and girls are well, James, thank you."

JC looked at the woman, an old family friend. He had absolutely no idea why she would want a meeting with a fixer, a solutionist, a hitman like himself. And he had no desire to find out.

"It was wonderful seeing you again, Mrs. Marcus. Have a good evening, Senator."

He turned and walked away, towards his waiting Hyundai. Shaking with anger and doubt.

He passed Guy.

"You fucked up," JC growled as he passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Calm down, man."

Guy caught up with JC before he reached his SUV. JC got ready to yell at the slightly larger man but held himself back at the last minute. When he did speak, his voice was far quieter and more damaging than if he had yelled.

"You know what this looks like, right?"

"I know, I know."

"Do you? Because to me it looks like a fucking setup."

"Believe me, if I were in your shoes, I might think the same thing."

"A senator, Guy? A goddamned sitting senator? Chairwoman of the Armed Services Committee? Rumors have it she's on tap to be one of the candidates for president, man. Jesus, Guy. I used to play with her kids! I grew up going to dinner parties at her fucking house! What the fuck?"

Guy's hands were held up, trying to placate JC. Bannister scanned the scene: Joan had moved closer to him, alternating watching for his lead and searching the horizon for movement, the hint of a sniper rifle. If Guy had shooters hidden down, they probably wouldn't be stupid enough to make any mistakes, but you never know. One communication glitch and everything could go south at an instant. Duke had gravitated back towards the rear door of the Santa Fe and was watching Joan. Ready to follow her interpretation of JC's lead. Ready to grab the belt-fed light machine gun inside and start cutting down any and everyone he could. He was JC's computer guy, a goofy kid who loved surfing and movies. But he had been an Army Ranger. And when his team needed it he was a stone cold killer.

Guy's eyes had never left JC. That worried him.

"I'm telling you. It's on the up-and-up. It's a legit meet."

"Legit as in on-the-books? Approved? Officially sanctioned?"

Guy's placating smile turned grim.

"JC, if it was, then you know there'd be no reason to call you. Right, buddy?"

JC didn't reply. He knew it was true.

"You turned that page seven years ago when you told The General to go fuck himself."

Bannister started to argue but knew there was no point. He had said those exact words seven years ago. To a standing general in the United States Army. His commanding officer.

"The senator needs your help. She has a situation that only someone in your position can help her solve. Someone with your skill set. With your temperament

and discretion. Listen, I truly didn't know you guys knew each other. She told me to find you. Told me and Meier to set up the meet. Gave us your file. Honest."

His old Army buddy's soothing words and posture worked.

"I'll hear her out. But we're taking my car. Just me and her. We're going to take a ride."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Forget it. Not going to happen."

Meier was adamant.

"Mr. Bannister has questions, Meier," Guy said. "Reasonable questions that need to be asked." Meier was shaking his head. Arms crossed like a little boy. He looked like he might be ready to stamp his foot. "If I was in his shoes, I would require the same thing."

"You're a known entity, Guy, a proven asset. I don't know this guy from shit."

Guy sighed and shook his head at Meier's use of the word "asset." He looked at Meier. "Yes, but I do know him. Look. You know me. You trust me, right? Then trust me."

Senator Marcus put her hand on Meier's elbow. She smiled. Disarming. Engaging. And commanding.

"It's okay, Meier. Nothing will happen to me. I've known Mr. Bannister since he was a boy," the senator said.

Meier's arms stayed crossed but his resolve seemed to soften. Senator Marcus walked over to Bannister. She was in her mid-50s, silvery hair once blond cut in a long bob about an inch above her shoulders. Attractive, strong face. Kept up her running schedule in the Congressional gym.

"Besides." Her mouth and face continued their disarming smile but her eyes did not. "Mr. Bannister knows that if anything happens to me while I am in his care, Guy and our other friends will kill him and his little friends and leave nothing behind but piles of ash for the Arlington PD to sift through in the morning."

She took his arm, a senior stateswoman requiring a younger and stronger man to lead her across the sidewalk to his waiting car.

"And I don't think he wants that to happen."

JC was compelled to lead her to his waiting vehicle. He had issued a demand and received it. However, it didn't feel like he was in charge, despite the win.

"We'll be back in a bit, Mr. Meier. Thank you for the introduction, Mr. Kowalski."

Bannister and Senator Marcus walked over to the Hyundai Santa Fe. JC opened the rear passenger door and helped her inside. Moved around to the front and slid the seat forward for her. Got in, backed up and then drove directly forward, hopping the curb and driving straight into Quincy Park adjacent to the Central Library.

He stopped after about thirty-five meters. Left the car running. Turned on the radio, loud. Pushed a button and let Duke's setup conceal any conversation they would have. The vehicle was quiet and secure.

JC turned to the senator sitting in the back seat.

"I truly am sorry to hear about your mother," she said. "If I had known, I would have come by. She was a good friend back then."



"I understand. I was out of the country when she passed."

Tears came to her eyes. One of her greatest fears was dying alone. JC saw it in her face. He held out his hand and took hers.

"She wasn't alone when she passed. Her side of the family was all there. She was in one of the best hospitals on the East Coast. It was painless."

"Still."

JC gave her a moment to compose herself. And himself, but for different reasons.

"Listen, Senator."

"Please call me Catherine."

JC smiled. "How about Mrs. Marcus? That's what I've always called you." She nodded and JC continued. "Mrs. Marcus, you arranged this meeting. I don't know how you got my name and frankly it's not important. Whoever gave it to you had good reason to do so."

Mrs. Marcus nodded her head, not wanting to interrupt.

"I have to tell you I'm at a bit of a loss. Now is usually when I explain to a client what it is that I do."

Mrs. Marcus nodded again. Listening.

"But you know what I do. Because whomever gave you my name told you all that."

She was ready.

"James, I..."

"JC, please. Everyone calls me that, now."

"OK. JC."

She still didn't start. Looked out the window. Pursed her lips. Sighed.

"JC, I have a problem. I need your help."

"I understand. This vehicle is secure. You can explain without fear of anyone hearing."

"This isn't easy to say, JC. "

She paused.

"I need you to kill someone."

JC nodded. He'd heard that phrase many times before, from men and women. But this was the first time it had made him feel ashamed about what he did. He didn't say a word. Always allow the client to explain with minimal vocal urging or cues. One of the rules of the meet.

"Oh, JC, this is so hard to say." She looked out the window again, at the small park they were in the middle of. Streetlights washing out the colors of spring. She gathered her resolve.

"I need you to kill someone, JC."

"I understand. Who is it, Mrs. Marcus?"

She sat there for a long time. Silent. JC waited.

"Me."

## **Acknowledgements**

This book is for my wife and daughter. I love you both. Never give up.

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[NOTE: *Other Episodes not yet available.*]

