

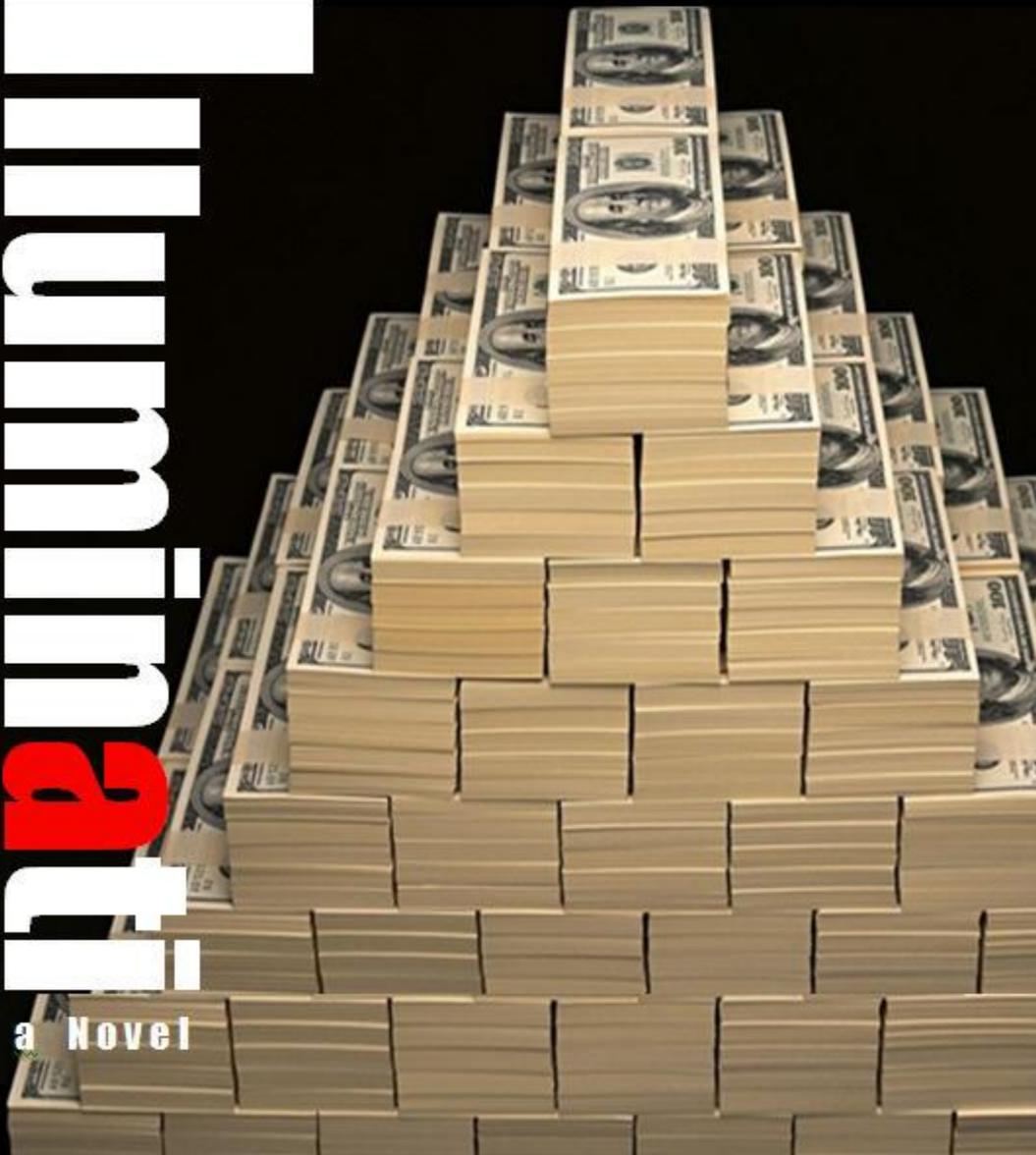
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**HARDING**

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**the New**

**Summit**

a Novel



**The New Illuminati**

By

David-Michael Harding

"The penalty good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men."

- Plato

1

The beer would warm in the glass before the cable news loop ran through its next cycle. No breaking stories to cut into the repeating drone. Just the too perky, too perfect, smiling then serious, practiced sincerity, happy pleasing torso of the anchor, cart wheeling from the rescued kitten to the dead soldiers through elder care and the DOW Jones. Regurgitation with titillation. Just enough to hold a viewer through the next money maker - an ad for a medication to control an illness unheard of a year before, but which now, "affects millions of people just like you."

The lukewarm beer listened to the numbing lecture alone as Clayton Rand had forgotten it and was anesthetized to the attention grabbing scam sandwiched between ever more desperate commercials. Even his beautiful massive curved plasma screen couldn't reel him in and turn him into a consumer. Overhead, a gentle hum from the ceiling fan provided subtle white noise and worked with the air

conditioner to keep the stifling heat of a summer night in Florida outside the walls of Clayton's sprawling home.

He sat in the formal living room - a room away from the plasma - one leg dangling loosely from the arm of an overpriced immeasurably soft brown leather chair, which offended the neglected ottoman that rested unused nearby. Clayton's propped up thigh was his desk and he covered it with a yellow pad and scratched notes with a cheap pen.

The advertising pen had a short life span, meant to be given away and read a few times in passing or boredom before changing hands or running out of ink. For now it worked with enough efficiency to capture the thoughts of its short term owner and those thoughts were coming in a flurry. Ninety minutes earlier the pad had been empty, the cheap pen still, and the beer cold.

A gratefully quiet evening in a busy life had been in pleasant predictable bloom. But it was shaken by twenty-three seconds of airtime, inadvertently captured from a local channel, as Clayton surfed while he waited on the soft white foam of his beer to fizzle itself into oblivion. Sealed indictments had been opened and implicated a local county commissioner in a bribery scandal. A land developer had donated forty-five thousand dollars to the commissioner's election campaign following his own failed attempt at pushing a housing development plan past the Regional Resource Impact Committee. Weeks later, with the freshly minted commissioner at the

helm of the impact study appeal, the decision was reversed and chainsaws began immediately biting into cypress trees that had provided shade and relief for peoples as widespread as the Seminole Indians, Spanish conquistadors marching inland from sandy beaches, migrant workers, citrus growers, and tourists of six decades. Seven seconds of video showed the site with a voice over describing the incalculable damage. Three hundred pristine acres stripped bare with only the beginnings of concrete pads and block walls held closely together by ribbons of still dark, uncured concrete curbs bordering bare dirt roads. A water truck drove through the frame spraying its load to keep down the dust. In the background, a mountain of two hundred year old cypress, scrub pine, and oak, choked with brush, burned violently as it raced to consume the evidence. The fire triggered a reminder in Clayton of the flame of Wyatt's Torch and he knew - as an epiphany - that it was time for Atlas to shrug again.

The pen snatched ideas and the paper trapped them between faint blue lines. Almost immediately, entire sections were crossed out - deemed undoable, illegal, too illegal, or merely laughable. Others stuck. By the time the news loop broke into its new cycle with a new painted face, a straightforward plan had emerged from the yellow pad. Clayton re-read his work, made the last of his simple choices for the night, and put the pad aside.

"To those whom much is given, much is expected. Something like that," Clayton said stiffly as he stood and stretched an ache which had settled into his back compliments of the awkward dangling leg. "Yea, much is expected, you sonofabitch," he poignantly directed while the mumbling television went quiet as though it had committed the crime and had not simply been the messenger. "And tomorrow comes the accounting."

A nearly soundless click from the rocker light switch signaled the end of the long day. The yellow pad rested quietly as a placid darkness followed Clayton away from the soft chair and down the hall. As he moved closer to his bedroom and the king-sized bed that waited there, the dark overcame the trailing light with each successive click. Soon the yellow pad and its outline sat in pitch blackness while Clayton brushed his teeth by the glow of a single light on his nightstand. In a few moments, even that light faded beneath a touch to the lamp's base. In the blackness of well after midnight, Clayton breathed a tired breath and welcomed the relaxing feeling that followed. A few more deep sighs and he slipped away, never noticing that he had given himself over to the sandman with so little effort.

Sleep was a prescription he needed badly. On other nights he would have turned into the comfort of the bed over and over looking for a position that would free him from the waken world. Clayton understood it wasn't the bed's fault or even his body's, but rather

it was his mind that was keeping the door to sleep closed. Thoughts and ideas raced through the days and reflected the needs, which were few, the wants, which were less, and the desires of his heart - a quest for justice in all things. This, and visible, viable production - all moving with an ebb and flow like a constant tide beneath the remarkable workaday life he had carved out of nothing.

On other nights, after the clock next to the bed flashed the dim recognition that hours had passed leaving him caught by sprinting thoughts, Clayton would get out of bed slowly, upset with himself for not controlling his restless mind and drift to the bathroom where he would force a piss if he could - one less reason to be woken up when he eventually did fall asleep. He'd pull open the small side drawer in the vanity and fumble through the litany of bottles for the Ambien, the muscle relaxers, and Xanax.

He would have already glanced at the enemy by the bed and checked the time. If the night had completely escaped him, he'd break the pills in half, otherwise he'd never be up on time. Three AM was his unofficial cut-off. Pre-three was a whole pill. Post-three was a half if it was a work night. If it was the weekend he might treat himself and take two at nine o'clock with a couple of beers with a gin chaser and enjoy an induced sleep that would seem good, but not satisfy as it should.

Desperation to silence the clamoring in his head pushed him to pause over the myriad of bottles and conjure up cocktails of halves

and wholes - combinations by color and shape dependent on his temperament amid the self-diagnosis. It was not without risk. A body pummeled to unconsciousness as a semblance of sleep was a leaky vessel for a mind that had boundless energy and no seeming requisite for sleep. But neither his body nor his mind could keep up the pace so he'd limp along nightly until it would all collapse in a monthly ritual of a fourteen hour deep sleep. Then the cycle would begin again.

It was an unending battle to occupy, stymie, stimulate, or deaden brain cells. This struggle is what drew him into the complex work of electronic security he had pioneered. The demands challenged his skills and overactive anatomy to create higher, more intricate forms, languages, codes, and conventions until his hands and his company created firewalls of such astounding complexity, government and corporate giants begged for his protection.

The burdens of the day - contracts and codes - were seldom troublesome. His thoughts skipped ahead and raced to the inevitable conclusion long before his hands perched over the keyboard. It was the manufactured encumbrances of tomorrow that teased and tormented him at night. But not tonight. Tonight, with his mind laced around the well-conceived outline on the yellow pad, an easy foundation had been laid for sleep to rest its head. A mind prepared for rest welcomed it and comfortably left the concerns of the day behind with the dousing of the lights. The pill bottles went undisturbed and

the clock changed its faded blue digital lights unnoticeably and numbered the hours until dawn.

The following morning gave Clayton up for the day rested and renewed. There was a vigor that propelled him ahead as he settled into his home office. He would ferret his usual productions through the sieve of his company's mainframes and on into realizations of projects he'd left for himself. Contracts went from proposal to reality with minimal effort. While his hands plied his trade, his mind collected the thoughts from the yellow pad. It had traveled with him from the soft leather chair to the corner of his glass desk, upside down though it were.

His generation had eschewed paper for the electronic note, but surrounding his wizardry, there was a pleasure and fascination in things he saw as timeless. The nondescript notepad was such a thing. So simple. So beneficial. In this aged admiration was an explanation of his delight with black and white films and what he referenced as examples of modern classic writing - currently constrained to Steinbeck and Hemingway - accomplished in their time with pad, pencil, and loud hammering typewriters. Perhaps it was merely the tactile function. Or the clarity that followed the structure - the archetypal western movie's reliance on black hats and white hats that revealed intentions and agendas that were neither lost nor hidden, as well as the justice that was metered out before the closing credits. Clayton hid access for a living and

there was none better. None. But in his life away from the keyboard and the whirling drives, he reached for the simple conscience of John Wayne, the Texas Rangers, or the denizens of *Cannery Row*.

So he pumped out the necessary work before him while his mind danced on ahead of its own accord. It tightened the formulation from the scratch work held between the faint blue lines of the pad into more and more of a patterned, concise roadmap. Before noon, the inconsequential concerns of the day were complete and Clayton turned the yellow pad face up, looked with an air of cautiousness around the room - for the first of many times - and began the accounting in earnest.

"Time for payback," he said to both the note pad and his keyboard. He adjusted his monitor slightly, though he was alone in his home, and absently and foolishly leaned to the side to see for certain if the monitor filter was in place. At the extent of his lean the screen went to black. Then he turned his fingers loose.

They were long, thin and fluid - a match to his frame. Just thirty-one, he was in good shape, but not athletic by the stretch of anyone's imagination. Back in the days when such things were done, he was toward the end of the group of boys to be picked for flag football, basketball, or baseball. He had a tight look about him with unruly brown hair framing a narrow, but handsome face.

His hands skimmed the keyboard and immediately brought up the security folio and disabled the forensic software which he had himself devised and installed on every computer in his company. With clicks and sequences and codes he could very literally see every computer's activity in the company with ease and those outside the company, or outside the country, with only minimal effort. Clayton could review each site a computer visited; each email sent or received; each and every keystroke made - all captured in the computer and server's memories and coaxed out by forensic software he had developed. It had made him wealthy beyond measure. However, enough had become enough. The thrill and even the thought of more - more money, more of anything - had been relegated to a lesser standing. Now the scribbled notes on a yellow pad were paramount. With his standard production behind him, he moved on to his new, his real, his true purpose.

With the forensic protocol disabled, he performed a few tests. He typed "FL + lotto" in the search engine and hit enter. One hundred and six thousand plus sites came back in .37 seconds. He clicked the main Florida lotto site and was instantly there, looking at the results of last night's drawings. Six random numbers and you were a multi-millionaire. Five would have given you a quarter million in another game. Four, a thousand or so and on it went. But that meant nothing. What was important was that he was outside the initial blocking firewall of the company's restrictions.

He would test one more time. "Porn + Tampa strip club." Another click and the search was complete. He chose the third site for no particular reason and was rewarded with the presentation of a surgically enhanced blonde with breasts no bra would dare attempt to corral. All around flashed quasi-lights and signs promising 'Pure Pleasure,' 'Private Lap Dances and MUCH More!' There were phone numbers to call and other links to entice the viewer away from his money.

Clayton only smiled. The content of the site only interested him insomuch as it would have normally been prohibited by his own handiwork, but he had by-passed his own creation. No blocks came up. No warnings about corporate security alerts. No references to be passed on to internal security for review, action, and possible termination. As his screen continued flashing the digital equivalent of neon lights and beautiful wanting women, Clayton clicked his mouse and entered coding that put him further beyond the firewall.

Now he was operating beyond the reach of tracking software and off any memory path that might be retraced. With a few more flicks and clicks from his fingers, divergent reversing blocks were in place in the event that at a future time someone, not unlike himself, invented a way to retrieve the irretrievable. As he sat comfortable before a blank screen he entered a blur of coding. Should anyone begin to stumble toward him in this virtual world,

they would find themselves looped into the Library of Congress reviewing the millions of pages of text in each of its volumes, automatically and without a way to stop or circumvent the process.

Clayton relaxed and breathed that same breath he breathed the night before as he went to sleep. He was that relaxed and that content with the promise of his next steps. He pulled the yellow pad closer and reviewed the list he had all but committed to memory. His hands rested in his lap, a short distance from the keyboard, but close enough to the portal that would begin something new that Clayton had mused over for more than the a year. The errant commissioner had provided the final spark, but the powder keg had been slowly packed full by months and months of headlines and scrolling news bytes of misdeeds by those in power.

He brought his hands up to the black keys and flexed his fingers with sincere deliberation. This was serious business. The pause was not wrought of a true hesitation, but more a self-check of the digitalized path and the possible shortcomings. The pitfalls were few by his estimation, and easily avoided by the sleight of hand he sent through his keyboard like so much magic.

"Well," he said to himself and his hands before him. "Let's delve into the black arts for a time and see what spells we can render on the good Mr. Commissioner and his developer buddy."

Clayton's fingers began to skate over the keyboard without effort. Like an ice skater of flesh and bone, his hands jumped in

well-practiced leaps, seeming spins and twists, double axles and toe loops between 'Enter' and the space bar. Beneath his touch, the whole of the computer's repertoire was in full dance. In the computer's multi-towers, drives whirled and squealed as they kept up with the fluid commands. Information, encoded, encrypted, decoded and more, rocketed along the wired and wireless connections to retrieve, pull, and cajole bytes and digits into material and then push them to places Clayton wished them to be.

He started with the County's permitting department. His electronic scans slipped through the simple firewalls without effort. In seconds he was looking at a listing of permits pulled for construction. Clayton referenced his notes on the pad for names and performed a half dozen simple searches. Again, seconds were all that stood between his efforts and reward. The company's huge mainframes provided the power and he provided the precision.

In a moment, the shaded veils that had been erected in an attempt to cover the tracks of the commissioner and the developer - fictitious companies gilded by innocuous titles and apparent ties to reputable business and projects - had been replaced with people's names. Straight forward, easy to follow names. Names given by parents to sons years earlier. Names to make parents proud. Perhaps they had said, "My son, the new commissioner."

The calendar had flipped its pages and the bloom had lost its luster. Petals withered and fell, not drawn out by nature's course

and gravity, but under the force of greed and want for money. The stalk was bare. Perhaps too bare for the district attorney to stumble upon enough evidence to convict. An indictment was already in hand, but Clayton sought to give the prosecution the smoking gun. "Beyond a reasonable doubt," he mused to himself.

More rattling keys, adjusting dates and more names, not too much. "Let's not make it that obvious," and a wry smile appeared. He backed up and replaced a few lines with the original smoke screen.

The first request of the yellow pad complete, Clayton moved away from the county pages to another cyber world - email. Again, practiced typing made firewalls disappear and mass market virus software ignorant to Clayton's entry. He was at the commissioner's personal email. Click, and Clayton sat a moment as his impromptu search looked for the developer under a dozen different guises in the sent, received, saved, and garbage histories. They began to trickle in. First just a few followed by only a few more. Most of these were tagged as unanswered. He sat and read them all. Each held a vague reference to "problems" and "delays," but nothing like he had hoped. It was time to dig a bit deeper.

The dancers began again on keys worn shiny by use. He was in the commissioner's text garbage pile - the bottom of the heap - far beyond the 'empty recycle bin' of a computer or the delete of a phone, into the bytes thought deleted and stated as such by the

commissioner's own machines. Clayton understood however, that each and every stroke of the keys, once typed or received, left an indelible trail. There was no way for a novice, or even someone with considerable skill, to completely erase the black board on which had been written a dirty word. Those simpler times were long behind the entire world. Another search among the forgotten debris and the true deluge began. Clayton scanned the dates and saw very readily the pile up as the Grand Jury convened and the indictment was handed down. Worded terror was visible as the men feverishly wrote back and forth, ending each email or text with the reminder to delete. They had followed their own advice, but never counted on Clayton seeing those old cypress trees burning.

Perhaps the police could and would find this, but perhaps not. Clickity click. Now they couldn't help but find it. Phase two was complete. Now for the money trail.

The stops and firewalls were more complex in some, almost non-existent in others. Through public records he found addresses for cross reference and the real estate holdings of each party. Another search via public domain revealed old divorce documents on file with the county and, much to Clayton's surprise, the commissioner's social security number buried inside. "This will be easier than I thought," he mused as he copied the holy grail of thieves. The developer wasn't much harder. Soon he had social security numbers,

dates of birth, mothers' maiden names, and addresses going back for years.

Records had indicated which banks the men had used. "Creatures of habit," he said to the screen as he began to crack his way inside the listed institution. "Hmmm...", marked only a slight delay. Another avenue in, around, over, and through, and the maximum security walls began to crumble.

Searches and scans presented scrolling lists that sped by the screen at such speed they were indecipherable. It was taking longer than Clayton had expected and he was startled by the ringing of his cell phone.

While the scanning continued, he glanced at the calling number glowing below the name Raphael. He accepted without hesitation.

"Hey, Ralph." Clayton's voice betrayed that the caller was a friend - best friend - closer than most brothers. "What's up?"

"The market. That's why I'm calling. I'm in need of a celebration. It has been a very, very good day."

Raphael was at his own desk on the other side of Tampa. He had more screens on his desk than Clayton as he monitored several exchanges and markets simultaneously and while he was excellent at anticipating the temperature of individual stocks and the market in general, he could not come near his friend's technological knowhow.

If there was another major distinction between the two it was that Raphael's desk faced the high rise windows. He watched every

available sunset while Clayton allowed the sun to set over his shoulder. This difference surfaced often but provided the ying to a yang chemistry that kept the two men balanced and their friendship enduring. At the other end of their personality spectrum was a common interest reflected in nearly every conversation. The two watched old films together ad nauseam. Their shared wit promoted the borrowing of dialogue from memorized movies. The habit had become a mainstay for Clayton especially and a measuring stick he used on Raphael often.

Clayton looked at his watch. "It's only eleven. That topsy-turvy world of yours has a few hours to go. You sure you want to start crowing so early in the day? You could tank by the closing bell then you're crying on my shoulder all night like--"

"Not a chance."

"-like last time."

"You're full of shit," Raphael said laughing. "I've been on a roll. Cyclic ups and downs. That's all."

"Cyclic ups and downs?"

"Yes."

"That's what you're calling it these days?"

"Calling what?"

"Losing enough money to put some poor kid through college."

"We're done. Sorry I called. Just looking for a friend to celebrate with, not a lecture from the Pope. Gotta run. Have a good day."

"I think last week it was, 'market trends.'"

"Watch your step before you trip on your vow of peasantry."

"Vow of poverty."

"With you, it's peasantry."

"Is that even a word?"

"A rose is a rose. And as I recall, Saint Clayton, you've made a few bucks along the way following my 'cyclic ups and downs' and 'market trends.' Probably enough to, what did you say? 'Put some poor kid through college?' Like you need more money. You could buy and sell me in two minutes."

"Touché," Clayton said in submission. "I bow to your swift justice, sire."

There was a silence that stretched across the invisible airways.

"Touché and ouch!" Clayton continued, smiling as he broke the thin, warm ice. "For someone who's ready to celebrate at mid-day, you're carrying an awfully sharp sword."

"Life is cheap on the front lines of Wall Street, my friend. Life is cheap."

"You live in Tampa, Raphael."

"I reside in Tampa. I live and die on Wall Street."

"Why is it that I can always tell the amount of money you've made in a given day by the demeanor of your language? There must be a Freudian connection there somewhere I've yet to unravel."

"As you ponder my life," Raphael countered, "I was wondering if you, Dr. Freud, and the Pope would join me for a late lunch, slash early dinner, and extended happy hour? It's been that good of a morning and I'm done for the day."

"So, you're concerned that the afternoon's trading could cause the flower to wilt?"

There was another pause, but this one ended in mutual laughter. "Clay, you own the business and you've probably got your feet up watching Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman. Are you going to meet me for lunch or not?"

Clayton thought of the non-related work beneath his fingers. "You know? Not just yet. I'm in the middle of something I can't step away from. How about dinner? My treat, Daddy War Bucks."

"Done. But forget the 'my treat.' This one's on Conoco Philips."

"Fair enough. We can leave a drum of oil as a tip."

"We'll discuss the tip over a Rob Roy. Where and when?"

"Yankee's?" Clayton answered as if it were a foregone conclusion.

"No surprise, but it'll serve the purpose. Time?"

"Four o'clock. Beat the traffic."

"And hit happy hour on the nose. I like your timing. Perfect. See you then."

"Hey! Raphael? You still there?"

"What's up? Still need a contribution to the orphan's fund?"

"No," Clayton said as he formulated his next words with a noticeable degree of caution. "This might sound like my strangest request to date, but I need a stock that's dying."

"A what?"

"If you had to pick a stock that's definitely moving in the wrong direction, which would it be?"

"You mean you're looking for something that's ready to bottom out and bounce?"

Clayton hesitated again. "No. More like an Enron type of bottom out."

"You looking for a write off?"

"Sort of. More like, call it a research type thing. What would be the last stock you yourself would buy, knowing what you know? Knowing, or at least surmising that this one's headed nowhere but south, and in a hurry."

Now it was Raphael's turn to leave a gap in space. "Have you read the papers? Check that. I forgot. You're a total cyber-geek. Let me re-phrase. Have you read the online papers?"

"What do you mean?"

"Xephclenor's been recalled."

"What's a Xephclenor?"

"A drug. And it's the only real seller Med-Pharm has left. All the rest have had their patents expire and are getting pumped out as generics by any company with a pharmacy license."

"And?"

"Damn, get your head out of your cyber ass, will you please? Med-Pharm was negotiating with GLK Pharmaceutical to sell out. Their stock jumped as soon as we got word on the buyout. We re-listed them from a caution to a very strong buy in less than an hour. Then yesterday, wham. The FDA sinks their flagship drug, Xephclenor, because it's killing people and Med-Pharm conveniently forgot to mention it. Xephclenor had billions in annual sales and seven years left on its patent, and, in truth, was the only thing GLK wanted. So that strong buy we ran up the flagpole got turned over in a heartbeat to an 'avoid.' Can you believe that - avoid?"

"That's bad I take it?" Clayton said as he scribbled 'Med-Pharm' on the yellow pad beneath his old notes.

"Bad? No one ever lists a stock as 'avoid.' Our thoughts are that by the end of the day they'll pull it off the Big Board entirely."

"That bad?" Clayton said, hiding a hint of glee in his voice.

"That bad and then some. Med-Pharm is a dead duck. Won't be worth the paper it's printed on as they say. If you need a loser to

throw into your tax return, that's the one, but you better do it quick. Like I said, my bet is it's off the board by tomorrow."

"Good to know."

"You want me to run some numbers for you? Don't lose too much. Just a bone to throw the IRS and a small bone at that."

"Got it. Just a small bone."

"Anything else? Remember, I get paid by the transaction not the hour."

"Dinner's on me then. See you at four."

"Cool. Later."

The soft light from Clayton's cell phone hadn't timed out before he had tapped into the commissioner's bank accounts. He found several financial statements in the commissioner's name, his wife's, and his children's. The same was true of the developer. There was some simple math on the yellow pad and a pause, thinking about the wives and the children. Lines were drawn through the figures and new ones replaced them. These numbers were smaller, but still would cut deep. "Gotta leave something in the orphan's fund," he said quietly.

In moments he nearly simultaneously opened trading accounts for both the commissioner and the developer, then retreated back to the banking end. Account numbers were entered along with the proper passwords and with the click of his mouse, the commissioner and the developer were both the proud owners of thousands of shares of Med-

Pharm stock. Even as Clayton confirmed the transactions and refreshed the page, the stock had fallen more. He smiled. "To those whom much is given."

There was one final misdirection magician's trick to be performed. The wireless pointed and clicked until a spammer's email account was tapped. Simple coding insured it would open automatically. The email was simple, "To those whom much is given, much is expected."

Clayton exited every site, backed his way out, left no traces, and restarted his computer. He sat back, leaning against the spring's tension in his chair as the computer stopped momentarily then began to whirl back to life. From the comfort of his semi-reclined position he reengaged the forensic software of his own creation. Secure, the computer opened itself.

"I don't know... I don't know... Let's take a look at the headlines and go from there, shall we?"

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2

As Clayton began to scan the e-papers, across town the hard copy headlines, plastered on paper that was scarcely dry, were being handed out by a longtime friend, Sam Ciampiano. It was a figurative hand out as Sam only touched the daily papers in bundles as he set them on the counter on front of him. He snipped the plastic bands with a razor sharp k-bar knife that was much more than needed to clip the simple strip. Passers-by scooped up the daily papers by ones, twos, threes, even fours and fives then shoved the money at Sam as if he was at fault for not taking it fast enough or making change fast enough or not seeing them waving their crumbled dirty dollar bills at him from the other end of the battered newsstand. Most buyers disappeared into the foot traffic minus a thank you and were out of earshot of Sam's half whispered obligatory, "You're welcome," if and when it came.

Nearly half of the front wall of the newsstand lifted up and out to form a neat weather break over the papers, shielding them from rain and Sam and the patrons from the sun. The twelve foot

counter that held the majority of the dailies was covered with worn through linoleum - the same linoleum that was on the Ciampiano kitchen floor. There was no air conditioning. Two ancient box fans were slung from the ceiling by broken shoelaces of brown and dirty white. A Mr. Coffee machine, as old as the fans that looked down on it, sat stained and battered with a piece of black electrical tape over the burnt out switch that had stopped glowing red long before Sam's father had died.

This was not crunch time. That was early when the suburb people bolted into the city to their jobs. They parked their cars or streamed out of gray buses and made their way into the tall buildings, but not before stopping to grab a paper or two. For most, Sam's stand was a block or so out of the way, after all, this was Tampa, Florida - not New York - there wasn't a stand on every corner here. In fact, the Ciampiano newsstand was an oddity, but its uniqueness paid the bills and then some and had done so for longer than Sam could remember. Sam's father had sold newspapers, bolita numbers, and even Florida moonshine out of the shack seemingly forever. The bootleg business came to an end, but the numbers game went on as part of the Trafficante crime family's many interests. While bolita numbers were Sam Sr.'s day-to-day gravy, he occasionally left, all but unannounced, on long drives to New York, New Orleans, or Chicago. Sam had grown up with these absences and never thought to ask about them. He adored, idolized, and trusted

his father. He could never bring himself to question him. As a teenager and later, the trips grew less frequent, but the hesitant shadow cast over them by his father's demeanor encouraged Sam to not press for the why and who at the other end of the trip. It was enough that his father came home, usually with enough extra money for a new set of sneakers for his boy.

So now, taking his turn in at least one side of the family business, Sam opened the newsstand seven days a week. And the regulars laid down their money and walked away over a faint, "Thanks, Sam", not looking for any change.

After the crush and before the noontime crowd looking for information on a story shared at the water cooler that morning, business was slower. Depending on the weather there would be a steady run of downtown delivery people grabbing a magazine and the tourists moving between the historic cigar making section of Tampa, the sports complexes, beaches, and the museums. Sometimes they'd stop to buy a paper merely because there were no newspaper stands in their hometowns. It was the uniqueness of the sight, coupled with nostalgia for a few, which caused them to treat the newsstand as it were one of Florida's attractions. Some of these transient customers, all men, often tried to flip a quarter in the air and expected Sam to snatch it, like in a black and white movie they had once seen. Sam's dad had always grabbed the quarter then followed with something snappy to entertain, but not Sam. Not any longer.

He often let the quarter fall and even pretended to not be able to find it - easy to do when he didn't even look - thus changing a dollar paper into a dollar and a quarter sale. It was his way of getting back at them all - the tourists who flaunted their money and even the wealthy businessmen who didn't need or want change. Sam stopped thinking they were being nice, leaving him a tip, years ago when he last ran the stand with his father and he had never been much of an entertainer.

Somewhere in those years the stand had become work and not a place to go to be at the center of the world. Twenty-five years earlier it was a mini-Disney that whisked Sam and his young friends - Clayton Rand and his older brother Carl, and Raphael Bordaine - into the heart of downtown Tampa. There they raced and played all day until Sam's father signaled the day was over by dropping the wooden front flap with a resounding crack that called to the boys for blocks around. With that clap, any game instantly ended and the quartet raced for the newsstand with Sam always slapping the side of the building first.

A few years later Sam, Clay, Carl, and Ralph - a nickname Raphael had rebelled against from the onset which only reinforced it - worked the stand in earnest. Mr. Ciampiano began taking longer and longer breaks while delivering a wine stained drawstring leather pouch containing slips of paper, fistfuls of change, and crumpled dollar bills from the bolita game to a back table at The Columbia

Restaurant. Conveniently, the restaurant was only a few blocks away and at a mid-point between the newsstand and the Ciampiano stilt-built shotgun style house. When Mr. Ciampiano was engaged in a lively debate across the linoleum counter of the stand - the newspapers at rapt attention beneath his flailing hands listening to a language not captured in any of their papers - Sam would run the bag to the restaurant's back table.

The men there would smile and tousle his hair, give him lemonade and ice cream, but Sam could see they were hard inside and out - like his father. They were a tough, respectful lot who remembered his name, but usually called him, *Po' Martello* - Little Hammer - which pleased him to no end as he heard them refer to his father as, *Il Martello*, The Hammer. The guardians of the back table also waived him passed the long waiting line of the lunch crowds like he was special though his sneakers might have ten knots in the broken laces and most of the soles had long been left on the sidewalks and streets of Tampa.

Sam was about ten when someone grabbed him by the neck and jerked him off his feet as he went to the head of the line with the pouch.

"No budging, kid," the man barked through a sneer as he looked at his eventual lunch date, an admin assistant he was trying to bed.

The bag seemed to hang in the air for a moment in the place Sam's skinny frame had been. When the bag hit the floor, countless

quarters spilled and escaped in as many directions. The racket begged attention and drew it from the maître d who snapped his fingers toward the back table.

Two guys who wouldn't have fit through the wide front door of the restaurant side-by-side came up front. They stopped at the maître d and he whispered to them while several lunch guests knelt to help retrieve the errant change.

Sam was on his hands and knees picking up rowdy quarters when he saw the shiniest black shoe he had ever seen step on a quarter in front of his face. He looked up from the floor.

"Go open the front door, *Po' Martello*," was all the maître d said.

Sam was up and at the door. He held it open as the crowd instinctively separated nearby and left a wide gap like flighty antelope might do when drinking in the company of a crocodile.

Both big men walked on Sam's scattered money and crossed the foyer to the woefully overmatched diner who had grabbed Sam.

"You need to get out," one of the crocodiles growled.

"Look. I don't want any trouble--"

"Now."

"I'm just here for lunch. The kid ran into me and--"

It was a blur, but when focus returned, the antelope was literally upside down, his feet straight in the air, and he was being carried through the door. Sam saw the man pitched like a

bowling ball across the sidewalk. He was scraped and battered when he reached the gutter and moved, but stayed down trying to regain a sense of himself and what had just happened.

One of the bowlers walked close to him and squatted down. "Don't come back here no more. Be happy it was us and not the kid's old man. You'd wake up at the bottom of Tampa Bay. Get the fuck outa here."

Sam was still holding the door open when the big men stepped back in the restaurant. To a person, everyone in the lunch line was no busily bending down picking up scattered coins from the bag.

"Get your stuff, kiddo," one of the crocodiles said in his best rendition of a soft voice.

Sam grabbed the bag and walked down the line. People dropped in what they'd found. He thought about a scene from the old movies his father liked where Jesse James walked down the aisle of a train he was robbing and the passengers dropped their valuables in the nice-guy-robber's bag.

When his bag was burdened down again, Sam took it to the back. One of the men at the table took it with a thank you and vanished deeper into the restaurant.

"Sammy, listen to me," the head of the table, known to Sam only as Don T, said with some force. "You got to have your head on a swivel. All the time. See? You don't sleep on nobody. *Capisci?*"

"Yes, sir."

"Head on a swivel, *Po' Martello*. Or it could end up on a platter. *Capisci?*"

"Yes, sir."

"*Bene*. You like vanilla ice cream, Sammy? It's my favorite. You want some?"

Sam was a grown man again. He was back behind the counter of the newsstand, but allowed a small smile at the curious and pleasant memories of those days at the stand, *The Columbia*, his father, and running through the special little neighborhood called Ybor City.

"You got the *Enquirer?*" a voice asked over a loud yellow shirt plastered with seashells and flamingos.

"*Philadelphia or National,*" Sam asked absently.

"Philly. I don't read that other shit. I wanna see what's happening on the home--"

"Beneath the *Times*, before the *Washington Post*," Sam interrupted as he pointed down the stacks of newspapers, each well depleted by this time of day.

The loud shirt walked down the front of the stand and began to rifle through the stack. "I don't see it."

"Sold out."

"Damn it. What else you got that's close?"

"The *Times*. Right in your hand."

The shirt pulled the thick paper up the counter. "Can't get away from New York even on vacation," the man said as he pulled the business and entertainment sections and a fist full of ads out of the paper in front of Sam and dumped them on the counter.

"No gutting of the fish, Philly," Sam said with no emotion.

"Just throw it in your recycle bin."

"We don't recycle here. Dollar fifty buys the whole fish - guts, head and tail."

The man laughed. "Everything's gotta be related to the ocean with yous people down here. 'Don't gut the fish.' That's funny."

Sam took the two dollars and instinctively had two quarters out and slapped them on the pile of 'guts' on the counter.

"C'mon, buddy. I don't wanna haul all that shit around," the shirt from Philly said.

Sam pointed to the trash bin chained to the streetlight at the curb in front of the stand.

"I got it. I got it. Yous people oughta recycle these papers. We do."

"We don't."

"You should. Makes for a lotta trash. Recycling keeps the city cleaner, you know?"

"Then why are you coming down here if Philly's so nice?"

"I said cleaner, not warmer," the yellow shirt laughed again as he dumped half his paper in the trash.

Sam didn't bother with a hundred come backs. He just let the loud shirt wander up the street. That was one of the best things about the newsstand. The design was such that it looked straight out onto the sidewalk and beyond to the street. It didn't allow much peripheral vision with its sideboards hanging down from the big braced up door flap. The sideboards were like blinders on a racehorse, to protect the papers against the weather and protect Sam from the world. On some days he lifted one end or both, but not often. He rather liked the darkness and security the blinders gave. As it was, when traffic or customers or annoying tourists in loud shirts passed just a short distance, they vanished from view and vanished also from a memory well practiced in erasing the insignificant or the painful.

From Sam's limited scope, his immediate world was simple and had few rules, each of his own making. The greatest offense in the realm of the newsstand was unfolding a paper without buying. Thumbing the stacks was alright. Even pulling a paper from beneath other cities' rags was fine, as he had long ago recognized the conscious or otherwise need of tourists to scan the headlines from home. But to open a paper without buying it was a sin. No one, no matter how carefully, could put the paper back together with the exacting standard of the original press. Then they would stuff it in most anywhere, Sam thought, as a way to hide their sin. You couldn't hide sin. No matter what you tried.

"If you want to read, go to the library," he remembered his father saying. Or, "That paper's for sale, mister, not for rent." Mr. Ciampiano's thick arms ensured little argument.

Then Sam would echo the same words and embarrass the dollar out of the pocket that had been its nest. He'd tuck away George Washington in his new home and the reluctant customer would move away and be forgotten. But the wisdom of his father was never far and there were other words fresh from his father's lips that jumped to the front of his mind with little prompting. Like the calls down the narrow central hallway of their small house at 4 AM.

"Let's go! Let's go! Early bird and all that jazz! The drop offs will beat us there!"

"The trucks have never beaten us to the stand," young Sam would say sleepily as he tied his cheap, dirty sneakers.

"Why do you suppose that is?" his father would reply to no answer from Sam. "Because we're up and at 'em! That's why. We don't get there before the trucks, half the papers would be stolen."

"Nobody would touch that stand, Dad."

"How's that?"

"Nobody would touch the stand or take any papers."

"Why not?"

"The guys at The Columbia are your friends."

"So?"

"They scare people."

"They do?"

"Yep."

"You scared of them, Sam?"

"Nope."

"How come? You a tough guy?" his father said as he grabbed Sam as though to wrestle.

Sam wasn't awake yet and it was too early. He went limp as his father eased from clench to hug. "No, I ain't tough, but they don't bother me. They like me. They give me ice cream sometimes."

The hug tightened. "Yea, they like you," the Hammer said.

"But I love you."

Sam only patted his dad's thick arm.

"C'mon, boy," the old man said as he squirted Sam up the hall.

"Let's get to work."

As the father and son went down the single corridor that split their small house, out onto the porch, and down the steps to the street, they kept talking.

"Dad? Will I have big arms like you when I grow up?"

"Bigger."

"Bigger than yours?"

"Yes. I feed you too good."

"When will they be as big as yours?"

"Tomorrow."

"Really?" Sam said as he looked at his lanky arm as it stuck out from his t-shirt.

"It'll seem like it. Time goes too fast, Sam. You'll see. Don't wish it away."

"I'd like to have big arms now."

"Might be a good idea in case somebody has snatched the early drops. You might have to wade into them to get our papers back."

"I would too."

"I know it. That's a good boy. And the sonofabitch probably took the quarters any early *paisanos* left for us. Our money and our papers, Sam. What are we going to do about that?"

"The sonsabitches...", Sam said as he grit his teeth and walked faster.

"He probably took the whole stack and is peddling them papers right now from under his arm around town just like it was 1920 all over again. Hey..." Mr. Ciampiano's wheels were turning. "Not a bad notion. A paper boy. Town crier. And I know just the boy for the job."

"PAPER! Get your paper!" Sam cried out up and down the street. His beat was the block and saved people the steps of walking the rest of the way to the newsstand if their timing was good enough to catch Sam at their particular junction of his route. His father was hot on the idea for a short while, and then brought Sam back into

the newsstand to help out through the crush. Clayton, Carl, and Raphael were hired to be Ciampiano Criers and even made it into the papers they sold as a novelty story, but the boys were unreliable at 5 AM and Sam was needed in the stand. Very soon the Ciampiano Criers were a thing of the past, as newsboys had been elsewhere for fifty years. A yellowed newspaper clipping of Mr. Ciampiano with Sam, Clayton, Carl, and Raphael in old style newsboy caps with bundles of papers under their arms was still in a dusty frame on the back wall of the newsstand. In the picture, Mr. Ciampiano's hands rested heavily on Sam's shoulders. There had been other pictures taken by the *Tribune* photographer of the boys with their newspaper satchels, but those pictures, like the boys in them, had disappeared. This one had lasted. Sam looked at it once in a while and let a smile slip out as he admired himself for not giving in to his father's idea of wearing knickers.

A few years after the short-lived days as a newsboy had passed, Sam filled out a thin card that had fallen from the *Sports Illustrated* magazine he'd been leafing through in the quiet library at his high school. The card carried with it the promise that he'd become an 'Army of One.' It was appealing with its picture of a gritty camouflaged faced warrior and its brief lecture on the advantages of enlisting - saving for college while saving the country. It almost seemed comical to him, 'Save the world and get up to \$15,000 toward tuition.'

"Doesn't seem like much of a reward for saving the whole goddamn planet," he remembered saying out loud to whispered hisses for library protocol as he filled out the simple card. "But, it's more than Spiderman makes," he laughed as he put the card in his shirt pocket beneath a faded light jean jacket he nearly always wore. Others saw the faded jean jacket with the worn out elbows and blached creases as a symbol that stood for Sam as much as his name. Sam just saw it as a layer of protection against the rest of the world - sort of like Spiderman's suit. It also covered the fact that he only had three nice shirts in his closet. The jacket hid his simple rotation.

As he left the library that day he remembered being pulled out of line. He was seventeen now, his father's thick arms were filling in, but he always thought back to that day in the Columbia. It seemed to Sam he was always being pulled out of line for something.

"What'd you slip in your pocket, Ciampiano?" the head librarian was drilling. "Let's have it," the snap in his voice matched the snap of his fingers. "Our magazines are for everyone's use. Something make you think you're special? Well, you're not. Let's have it."

Sam moved slowly, "like 'lasses in wintertime," he'd heard in an old cowboy movie when the bad guy had the drop on the hero and wanted him to hand over his guns. Like the hero, Sam already knew the outcome, so his moves were deliberate and full of suspense for

the movie goes in the library who watched him and the librarian face off on the carpeted floor that became for Sam a dark and dusty outpost in 1870.

The recruiting card came bit by bit into the view of all those who had gathered for the gunfight. The librarian was beaten - shot down dead by Sam's slow draw. But even dead, he tried to recover.

"That it?" he rudely questioned as he took the card then snatched open Sam's protective jacket.

Sam jerked away. "You don't tug on Superman's cape," he said with a grin, mimicking a line he'd heard in a song his father played on the oldies station in the newsstand.

"Easy, Ciampiano," the librarian said as he looked at the card. "Thinking of going in the military, are you? Probably the best thing for you. Teach you some discipline."

"What time did you get up today?" Sam asked abruptly.

"Excuse me?" the librarian said as he attempted to hand the card back to Sam.

"What time did you get out of bed this morning? It's not a tough question."

Caught off guard the inquisitor answered. "6:30. Promptly. Every school day to meet the buses."

"Four AM. No alarm clock. Seven days a week. Don't tell me I need discipline." Sam took the card, tore it in half, in half again, and then tossed it in the librarian's face.

The librarian was at odds with himself, but recovered enough. "Pick that up, young man."

"You wanted it. You pick it up," Sam said as he headed for the door.

The next morning Sam was called to the office yet again and given in-school suspension. Nothing to do but sit at a desk in a miniature cubicle and think of ways to annoy the monitor at best, damage the system at worst. The thoughts made him think of how an inmate must feel when faced with simple confinement and nothing to do but watch the calendar flip by. For Sam it was only the clock, not a calendar, and his sentence was just three days, seven hours at a time, but he lingered over the thoughts of the oppressed and imprisoned and of what the pressure of time coupled with the prowess of the mind would have men contemplate.

Lack of stimulation forced him to whisper first then pass surreptitious notes to the cellmate in the adjoining cubicle. Sam learned his neighbor was Clayton from the newsboy days who had, by Sam's crude standards, become a geek. Still, there was the history between them though it was nearly washed away by the years and the divergent paths they had taken. Clayton didn't have a job now that he'd outgrown the newsstand and Sam was still tied to it and also the dishes in the sinks of The Columbia.

While at the restaurant he was once asked to drive to Miami to make a pickup of something unknown. After asking his father to use

their old car, the need for the trip evaporated along with any future job offers from the back table. Sam only brought it up to the table one time as he delivered espresso when a senior in high school.

"If you ever need anything," he said shyly to the head of the table. "I can do it."

Don T, tall with thinning hair, simple classic features, a pockmarked face, and a mind for business ignored the espresso. "You need money, *Po' Martello?*"

"Everybody needs money," Sam grinned.

The entire table reached for their pockets. Tens and twenties flew from worn billfolds, tri-folds, and diamond crusted silver money clips, onto the table as if ante money was collecting to start a card game. Someone piled the money neatly and put it in front of Sam who looked at it, then to the head of the table.

"There you go, kiddo," Don T said proudly. "Problem solved."

"Thanks," Sam said without reaching. "But I can't take that. I mean, if you have any work, I can do it."

"I know you can, kid, but your old man says you're gonna be a General."

Sam smiled, a little embarrassed. "I don't know--"

"No, that's a good thing. This is the greatest country ever in the fucking world. I'll sleep better knowing you're looking out for

it - making things right. Keeping us all safe. Can you do that for me, Sammy?"

"I can do that."

"Bene. But until you're a General, you gotta concentrate on knocking the hell outa people on the football field." Don T stood up. "Make a muscle," he said.

"Aww--"

"Go on. Show the guys. Make a muscle."

Sam flexed his bicep and it stretched his white t-shirt. The man patted Sam's thick chest.

"Look at that! We got Jack-fucking-LaLanne here. He's like hitting a wall."

"Built like the Hammer."

"Bigger."

"Joe-fucking-Weider."

"What are you guys, fucking antiques? Arnold-fucking-Schwarzenegger."

"Fucking Superman."

"Relax, kiddo," Don T said as the boisterous table mirrored the boss's move back into his chair and settled down. "You kick ass on the football field and be a General." The Don folded the pile of money and stuffed it in Sam's pocket. "I'll let you know if something comes up."

Nothing ever did "come up." Yet all those men, and countless others, were at Mr. Ciampiano's funeral years later paying their final respects while the FBI took pictures from across the street. Each of them - hard men inside and out - gave Sam a hug that day. Lasagna dishes piled up at the house he had shared with his dad from birth until the freezer was packed and the refrigerator full. Taped to the casserole dishes were names to return them to. Also taped beneath the trays were envelopes full of cash. Sam never knew a single particular, but understood well enough.

While Sam worked and played football, Clayton and Raphael embraced the gaming and computer age. Carl, older by a year, left school behind for a paycheck on the Tampa docks. School had never agreed with Carl anyway. The genetics that provided gifts to one son led some to suggest had come at the expense of the other. Carl struggled with reading, math, and anything analytical, but if a solid back and kind heart were in the job description, he was your man.

The shared circumstances of the suspension room fostered a renewed friendship between Sam and Clayton that would normally have endured only the duration of the incarceration. However, and for reasons that escaped them both, they maintained a quiet friendship. Throughout the remainder of their senior year they talked at length when they ran across one another and ventured into unknown shared interests in the political structure of the day, college, and the

military. They understood that neither would be fully embraced by the other's circle of friends, but they were content with the clandestine notion that they had a contact on the other side of the tracks. By the time their tassels were symbolically moved and later tossed into the air - a ritual Sam chose to ignore - there was a mutual sigh that before long, their admiration and respect for one another's stances on life would no longer be constrained by the caste system of high school.

Shortly after the suspensions ended, Sam filled out another card, slipped from another *Sports Illustrated* at the newsstand and dropped it in a street corner mailbox, no stamp required. Within a month of graduation, he was in boot camp writing letters to his father, but also to Clayton.

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3

Across the base Sam called home for several years was a miniature law office - JAG - the Judge Advocate General. It was somewhat disorganized, understaffed, and manned by inexperienced spanking new law school graduates. They were fresh from a specialized basic training with little in common with the rigors Sam and similar recruits had endured. The novice attorneys came here to hone their skills, pay their dues, and absorb the useless rhetoric the military shoved down their waiting throats in exchange for a respite from the tuition loans of law school. A few might be enticed to stay on and serve their country in uniform, but the vast majority were there to reap the benefit of a reduced law school bill and would bolt for the gate to chase the dream of high dollar, high power jobs the day their obligation expired. The JAG assignment provided lots of experience - the cases were endless - but the rules of military justice were well removed from what they would encounter in the civil environment. The young esquires knew this, perhaps their eventual employers knew it as well, but it didn't curb the

tide. They came, served their time then moved on to jobs where the strict rigors of military protocol didn't apply. Many would flourish, but a good number would suffer the inevitable damage evoked by the lack of those same rigors and, nourished by greed and a form of lawlessness the profession seemed to foster, fall far from the stringent format of their earlier military training.

During the early years of his enlistment he had been trained as the advertised 'Army of One' and had demonstrated such a penchant and proficiency that he was permitted or invited, depending on the context, to apply for entry into the elite Army Rangers.

Sam excelled as a Ranger. It was the combination of discipline, ability and his unwavering diligence - his head always on that swivel - that set him apart within a group already set apart from mainstream soldiers. In sight of his fulfillment and release, Sam's talents brought him again to be invited to try out for still another choice group within the Rangers themselves and as before, he survived the initiation.

The selection process was little more than torture. Sam and the lucky few offered a shot at this best of the best troupe were starved, left without water, and deprived of sleep until strong men wept like children. Those that broke down were whisked silently away.

In the end Sam made it, as he knew he would before the process ever began. He was still a member of the Army, and still a Ranger,

but he was also a member of a very select team to which conventional Army practices no longer applied. They operated beyond the usual rules of engagement and ignored the regulations of the dated Geneva Convention with impunity. They were, to Sam, men in which his father's simple rules of life - hard work, discipline, strength - bubbled at the surface. And while many left families that blended in at parent teacher conferences and in little league bleachers, when they boarded planes at midnight on the far edges of the tarmac, they were all highly skilled assassins.

They traveled around the world as though covered by an invisibility cloak - flying in and out of countries, leaving misinterpreted destruction in their wake. Internal factions would blame each other and the bias of his own country's national news would fan the flames of strife with an overt bend toward the perceived good guys. All the while it had been Sam and his free ranging band.

Like men everywhere in all manner of work, Sam liked some guys better than others, though he wouldn't leave the least of them behind. But this was more out of a need to protect the operation, not something as trite sounding as bringing home a dead comrade in arms. They all knew why. Their uniforms - even the all black ones with no patches or labels - and their American faces gave away too much intel. Sometimes their uniforms were those of the enemy, but

they couldn't change the set of their American eyes and chins. Everyone, dead or alive, came out.

Several times, Sam wore the disheveled rags of a goat herder and once he was stuffed into a suit and tie. Papers in his pockets would match the garments. The larger contingencies - teams, squads, and platoons - operated under similar guises with similar impunity, but the invisibility came with a price. Few things were as they seemed. Aircraft down, reportedly the result of a training accident or mechanical malfunction, could be members of the elite team killed in a place a thousand miles from the listed crash site. Code words and scanned bar codes opened every door and quieted every question, but left anonymous soldiers dead of quiet causes when they had sacrificed themselves in the most violent hidden trenches of a war that had no boundary.

The soldiers talked little among themselves for an inbred fear that any question from a comrade was part of a test by the upper echelon to gauge a man for weakness or vulnerability. This was all true. Sam himself had been asked to question another soldier once, in absent fashion, regarding his next deployment. When the soldier smiled back and said nothing, Sam smiled too, relieved to be out from under the weight of whether the man might be prone to talking.

Months turned to years and operations came and went. Sam still wrote to Clayton occasionally and his father if he was away from Tampa and his barracks on MacDill Air Force base too long. He was

reasonably certain his letters were screened, but wouldn't have written or talked of work, where he had been, or where he was going even if he was assured otherwise. He was just a sergeant, he'd write, doing what he was told. Sometimes he was told to go overseas for six days or six months and he went, trips that filled his father with pride. Other times he would be at MacDill serving his country. Wherever the Army needed a simple sergeant, he would go, but each time he said it, it was a lie. Sam had long stopped being a simple sergeant. Tension of the missions kept him sharp, but concern for his father as the elder Ciampiano aged, was concerning and distracting - a dangerous combination for a man like Sam.

For Mr. Ciampiano, who knew much of guises and secrets, it wasn't long after Sam's induction in Special Operations Command that the Hammer pieced together his son's military life. He never asked, but his heart swelled to near bursting. Then one day, it did, and Samiste Ciampiano Sr. died.

"How you holding up, *Po' Martello?*" Don T asked at the graveside service with an unaccustomed softness in his voice.

Sam was pinched into a new black suit. Black sunglasses designed for shooting protected his eyes from anyone looking for a tear. "*Bene.*"

A strong hug followed.

"You a General yet?" eased out through a tender smile.

"Just a sergeant."

"Just a sergeant..." The Don motioned to the casket, engulfed in flowers. "He told it a little different."

"I imagine he did."

"He never wanted our life for you, Sammy."

"I know."

"I've got some boys who were helping your father at the newsstand covering it." The Don was rubbing Sam's thick muscled shoulders. "All the businesses. Everything's taken care of."

"*Grazie*. Carl Rand has been helping Dad a lot. He's going to take it over for me. He's a good man. I'll probably close it up. It's way past time. It was Dad's thing, you know?"

"I do. Take your time. You'll get the Hammer's *vig* though. Let us know what you want to do and when."

"*Grazie*."

"You stay in touch, right? You ever need something, you come to us."

"I will," Sam said as he put his hand over his heart. "*Grazie di cuore*."

The Don and his handlers drifted away, each shaking Sam's hand, hugging him, and offering condolences in turn. Clayton, Carl, and Raphael took their place.

"Hey, Sam," they echoed softly.

Sam just nodded.

"I'm awfully sorry, Sam," Clayton half whispered. "We all thought the world of your dad."

Again, there was just a subtle nod and the three newsboys stepped away from the fourth and others slipped in. When the polite mourners had gone, Sam ran his hand over the gray granite marker and went back to the small house and the counters full of lasagna.

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4

Not long removed from the funeral, Sam flew into Andrews Air Force Base from points in the middle east and was immediately drenched in the oppressive heat and humidity of Washington, DC in August. The weather dwarfed anything Sam would have felt in Tampa. There was no coastal breeze from the Gulf. The air was heavy and stifling. He was still carrying grief in his heart and jetlag was carrying over from his last mission. Both conditions were clouding his mind and, combined with reactive training, aligned with unseen stars and led to an encounter that would impact the rest of Sam's life as well as many others. If a breeze existed at all, it happened to blow him out of line once more and into a corrosive drill sergeant's path. The sergeant, accustomed to having recruits jump beneath his words, bumped into Sam as the men met roughly at the door to the commissary - Sam going in, the other soldier coming out. The drill instructor reacted poorly and paid a price for it. In a fraction of a second, beads of sweat flew ahead of the man's face to the sidewalk and evaporated in a flash. The splatter of

blood that fell with the sweat dried as quickly, but left a story and a trail though it wasn't needed. The stunned sergeant's screams and the honest and near honest statements of the two men after the fact were evidence enough - buoyed by the mangled condition of the sergeant's right arm.

The soon to be helpless man started to say, "Make way, mother-," just as Sam's own words were forming.

"Sorry, I didn't--"

But all the words were interrupted when the drill instructor's right hand touched Sam's chest in the birth of a shove that never matured. With the beginnings of the push, Sam snatched the man's wrist with his left hand. His right hand drove up under the sergeant's right armpit. In a well-practiced move that was as fluid and quick as water spilling, Sam spun to his left and ducked beneath the man's outstretched arm slightly until he was in the seemingly unenviable position of having his back to the aggressor. The sergeant's arm was now held over Sam's shoulder, braced against it by the weight of his own body versus the upturned and unyielding joint of his right elbow.

Then Sam stood up. He pulled the arm toward the ground with his left as his right pushed up on the sergeant's armpit. The sergeant's feet said goodbye to the ground as he was effortlessly leveraged head over heels and thrown with the force of both speed and strength to the concrete sidewalk within the shadow of the

commissary door. It was an immaculately executed throw that had been all blur from start to finish, but the final passing frame of the blur held the real damage.

In that last nano-space of a second that the throw took, Sam, still holding the sergeant's twisted wrist, drove his own right forearm into the backside of the sergeant's already hyper-extended elbow and snapped the man's arm as easily as a twig. A vicious twist within the follow through brought splintered ivory white bone through the sergeant's skin like a pencil poking through paper toward Sam's face. Only then did the ingrained reaction stop. Start to finish had been a literal flash of lightning split in half.

Shocked and stunned from the coarse bully he had been, the sergeant laid helplessly with eyes widened by burning pain and fear. Sam's movement never broke stride as he slipped without notice from bone breaker to mender. As he began first aid and rolled the sergeant gently to his back, others from both in and outside the commissary gathered. The sergeant could now see his own blood and the tip of broken bone beneath Sam's hand as first aid was administered and pressure put on the bleeding compound fracture. The sergeant responded with a primal scream and tried to push away from Sam's continuing efforts when he took notice of his hand seemingly on his body backward and his arm nearly twisted off.

"Lay still," Sam said as he forcibly pushed the sergeant's chest to the ground.

"You... You crazy mother fucker... Get off me!"

"That's not a good idea. That splinter must have nicked your brachial artery."

While others made frantic calls to the military police and the base's medical unit, Sam continued working, fashioning a tourniquet from his belt and ID wallet which he neatly placed beneath the belt against the upper inner arm above the damage he'd inflicted. As Sam tightened the belt, the bleeding eased.

Two MPs appeared over Sam's shoulder. They watched for a moment as his bloodied hands worked the tourniquet. Sam didn't look up, but spoke to the police calmly. "Bring your first aid box."

"No need. Medical is pulling up. What happened to this guy?"

"I broke his arm," Sam said.

The MPs looked at one another then were jerked away by the sergeant's scream.

"Fucking bastard attacked me!"

"That's not quite right, sergeant," Sam said.

"Looks to me like he's your best friend," one of the MPs said as he pointed to Sam's medical handiwork.

"Bullshit! Arrest him!"

Sam moved the splintered arm slightly beneath his hand and purposely ended the sergeant's need to talk as he nearly fainted from pain. Meanwhile, the MPs stepped aside and Sam gave way as paramedics took over.

The first medic to snap on latex gloves knelt down beside the sergeant, who was lost in a stage of fainting, screaming, and moaning, and examined the arm. He glanced at Sam then back to the sergeant. "Sgt. Dermitt?" the medic said as he pulled the man's shirt tight enough to read the name sewn on the front. "Sergeant? Can you hear me? We're going to transport you to the med center. Stay with me."

Another medic appeared with a massive red plastic case, opened it and immediately retrieved an inflatable cast which he began to adjust on the sergeant's bloody arm. The first medic stepped away from the moaning and walked a few feet to Sam and the police who were talking to him quietly.

"I have never seen a break that bad. Compound spiral. His arm is almost ripped off. Right through the muscle and skin. And he's not a little guy," he whispered. "What happened?"

"We've got it," one of the MPs said stoically. "Would you come with me, Sgt. Ciampiano?"

As one MP led Sam to the open jeep, the medic watched the other move through the crowd, jotting down names and what they'd seen. He saw some in the crowd point at the jeep and shake their heads. Others looked back and forth from the broken sergeant to the jeep and covered their mouths. And still others seemed to be mimicking a judo throw as they tried to demonstrate what they'd seen.

The MP in the jeep clamored out and jogged over to the prostate sergeant. He pointed at Sam's wallet still tucked beneath the makeshift tourniquet. "Can you get that out of there for me? And do you have something to clean up my guy with?"

The medics replaced the wallet with a roll of gauze and gave the MP some disposable towelettes just before they placed the sergeant on a stretcher. As they wheeled him to the open doors of an ambulance, the sergeant pointed at Sam and the jeep with his only good hand. "I want him arrested! I'm pressing charges! You're headed to the brig, soldier!" Then he rested back on the gurney, his strength and bravado drained.

Sam sat quietly as both MPs returned to the jeep - one holding Sam's ID and the other looking inquisitively at what his partner held.

In a minute the trio was driving to the base police station, Sam riding in the front. The MP behind him leaned forward and handed Sam the damp throwaway towels. As Sam wiped the blood off his hands. The MP asked respectfully, "Ranger, huh?" followed by a simple question. "SOCOM?"

Sam looked at him intensely, hesitated, and then said clearly, "Blackbird."

The MP leaned back slowly without a word and the driver gripped the wheel a little tighter as Sam tried to get all the blood off his hands.

At the station, Sam was asked to wait in a small holding room with a glass door and windows for walls on two sides. The two MPs who brought him in disappeared down the hall while Sam sat at a small table with his hands spread in front of him and waited. He realized he had insanely overreacted and was going to pay for it. What he didn't know was how much.

Between thoughts, an attractive Naval JAG officer with shorter than shoulder length brown hair burst into the room carrying a single page of paper she was snatching from a crisp manila folder. She might have been twenty-five, Sam guessed, and right from law school and induction in her crisp white uniform.

Sam snapped to his feet and saluted the butter bars of a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant on her lapels - the lowest ranking officer in the military.

"You Ciampiano?" she asked abruptly, before the door was closed behind her.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Sit down, Sergeant," she said as she scanned the single page while she pulled a chair up to the empty table in the center of the room. Sam could see it was the MP report. At the top above his name was the single word 'Blackbird' and a question mark.

"Sgt. Ciampiano, my name is Lt. Auburn and it's been my fortunate luck to be the next available attorney to pick up incoming reports. I've drawn you," she said slowly as she read the report.

"Or you've drawn me, depending on how you want to look at it. But either way, no perspective looks good. It says here you had an argument with a Sgt. Dermitt and that you summarily proceeded to try to tear his arm off. True or not true?"

"Partly--"

"True or not true, Sergeant?"

"Not true, Lieutenant."

"Okay. Not true. See, that wasn't hard, now was it? I ask the questions, you tell me the answers."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What was the argument about? The one you had with the victim..., Sgt. Dermitt?"

"There was no argument, ma'am."

"So, for no reason, you attacked this man and broke his arm. Is that what you're telling me? Not much for me to go on in order to mount your defense."

"There was no argument and I didn't attack him. The sergeant put his hand on me and I overreacted. I'm very sorry. I'd like you to enter a plea of guilty for me."

A moment passed. The Lieutenant finally looked up from the single paper at Sam. They stared at each other for almost a minute before she spoke as she closed the folder on the one page report.

"Sam? May I call you Sam?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Let's try again. Sam, my name is Karen Auburn," and she stuck her hand out.

Sam's hand still carried dried blood in the creases and around his fingernails. He looked at it then at Lt. Auburn. She thrust her hand at him a bit further.

They shook hands, but the lieutenant kept his and took it to the table between them. "Look, Sam. I'd like to help you, but I need a little more than a full confession and an apology. That guy got mangled if I can believe this," she said quietly as she glanced at the folder. "I need to know what happened. Or maybe I need to know why. Instead of what, how about we start with that? Why?"

Keeping to his code, Sam was silent. He looked through the officer until a gentle yet firm clasp of his hand brought him to look to the hands on the table. Sam allowed his eyes to drift slowly over her hands and away, but with a constant intent about them that said they wouldn't stop until they met hers.

He noticed her manicured nails - white ends painted so neatly it was as if done by a precision machine - the tips looking as sharp as razors. Her hands were youthful, porcelain, even fragile. The wrists were stick thin and her forearms tight, muscled, and tanned. The white short sleeves of her uniform were bright and starched, crisp as new money. At her throat he saw the same muscled tan skin and from habit detected a pulse where her carotid would be. The face was prettier than he had noticed earlier and nearly void of

makeup. A little on the high cheekbones, but that was it. Her eyes needed no help. They were brown, dark as a forest, not black, but a deep dark brown that looked elegant and regal. Sam recognized a natural beauty he had never noticed in a woman before and he felt a change creep over him that he hadn't expected and had no defense against.

"I... I've had training...", he heard himself say unbelievably. "I reacted to a threat that wasn't there. He was... he was... the aggressor. I'm use to reacting in a certain way."

"What way is that, Sam?"

"Protect the mission. Protect yourself. Head on a swivel. I overreacted, as I said. I'm sorry," and he began to pull his hand away.

Karen reached for it again and grasped it just a little tighter. "What is your assignment, Sam?"

He baulked noticeably.

"It's alright, Sam. I'm your attorney. You can tell me anything."

"No I can't."

"Sure you can. What do you do?"

He looked for an easy way out of the conversation, but it was difficult to escape Karen's sincerity.

"I follow orders."

"You and everybody else," Karen smiled. "Where are you assigned?"

"SOCOM. MacDill."

"Special Operations Command?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Karen knew the structure. United States Special Operations Command, USSOCOM, covered the globe from MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida.

"That's pretty intense stuff. Anything troubling you, Sam?"

The hesitation was so slight it would have been missed by anyone watching the conversation, but from within, it was unmistakable. While Karen weighed the signs of posttraumatic stress for a defense, Sam was thinking of his father's death.

"That's okay, Sam. I imagine you've had defensive training."

"Yes. Some."

"Alright. We've got a start. I think there's something here. That's a defense. We--"

"No, Lieutenant. It's no defense. It's improper discipline. Improper action. Unacceptable," and he roughly pulled away, leaving her hands clutching at an empty space.

There was a long gap in the conversation. She was sizing him up and in the process saw something beyond the usual jar-head, macho, drunken assaults she was accustomed to representing. Beneath the thick arms and the rough exterior was another man. Somehow she

caught a glimpse of the newspaper boy she had never known, now conditioned to be something else. A man who embodied the Army of One so well, he found it difficult to turn off. She saw a man who needed help.

The door flew open with such a shock that it shook the room. "Lieutenant, what's going on here?" The speaker was a full bird colonel in faded battle garb with sleeves rolled up just above his elbows.

Sam jumped from the table and stood at attention with a frozen salute. His thoughts instantly clear again.

Karen recovered quickly and said sternly. "I'm interviewing my client, Colonel."

"Not any more. You're dismissed."

"With all due respect, sir, this is client counselor privileged information. I respectfully request you allow me to continue."

"Out, Lieutenant. Now."

"Sir, my client has rights. He has--"

The colonel now ignored Karen entirely and returned Sam's salute. "Ciampiano. You come with me."

"Sir," Karen complained. "Are you assuming Sam's... Sgt. Ciampiano's defense?"

"That won't be necessary. All charges against the Sergeant are waived. He has been remanded to my custody."

Karen was stunned, but quick and defensive. "Colonel, if all charges have been dropped, why is he in anyone's custody?"

Now the colonel moved close to Karen. He spoke softly, but with great confidence. "Lt. Auburn. You will soon be debriefed. You should never have seen this," he said as he slipped the single page report from the table and crumpled it into a tight ball in front of her. "I understand that you took the next case that came in, but Sgt. Ciampiano will be coming with me and there is no case."

Karen thought for only a moment. "There's a drill sergeant in the medical ward with an arm nearly ripped off--"

"Lucky to be alive, I'd say. Ciampiano? Let's go."

"Yes, sir," Sam said as he moved in crisp military fashion toward the door.

Karen followed them out into the hall. "Colonel, I'm entitled to an explanation."

The colonel spun on his heels, his patience with the novice officer expired. "You, Lieutenant, are entitled to nothing, but I will tell you this. If you had been awake in your interviewing classes, you would have known that 'Blackbird' means something besides a fucking crow!"

Karen stopped in her tracks unable to catch her breath for a retort. She knew what 'Blackbird' was and the exemption it meant for ghost soldiers like Sam. The colonel stomped out the two sets of doors with Sam close behind, but between the two doors, Sam

glanced over his shoulder at Karen. It was only a flash, but she saw something in his eyes that she had begun to see and hear across the table. It was a hint to a very private search and once witnessed, Karen was quite certain she could not ignore, regardless of a simple debriefing for her and the MPs that basically said, "Forget everything you may know or think you know."

For Sam's part, he had tipped his hand with the entire affair. His officers were beguiled and leery of a soldier who demonstrated poor command of himself and Sam agreed. He thought of his father and the closeness he pined for and mentioned his death as an explanation, not an excuse, for his lapse.

Soldiers and Rangers who were themselves limited to only pieces of the puzzle that was Sam's life, quickly began to connect dots. You couldn't say 'Blackbird' without inviting a crowd though the intent was just the opposite. 'Blackbird,' a simple word meant to open closed doors and protect men when their weapons could not, had been his undoing. Sam was asked to resign. He knew too much and his apparent lack of control could threaten himself, others, and operations. He signed the papers without question. All he said was, "I'm sorry." Within a week of the chance encounter at the commissary door, Sam was out of the Rangers, out of his 'Army of One,' and back at his father's house where he slipped into his old room and a dead man's life, burdened by secrets and buried in loss.

So Sam worked the newsstand where he had started. He wrestled himself out of bed to the ghostly echoes of his father's voice at ungodly hours and set the papers out by himself and missed his dad. When he dropped the large wooden flap at the end of the day, Sam put his hands in his pockets and wandered home where he sat among his father's things, his own old football trophies, and his increasing sadness. His father was dead. His military family was gone. He was alone.

In the beginning he just went through the motions. Later, after the shock of it eased, he fashioned a resume for job interviews as best he could, but it lacked any substance. He had a high school diploma and eight years undistinguished military service, which showed him as a simple infantry sergeant, with not a single skill transferable to life in this lighted part of the real world. There wasn't a big call in the classifieds for assassins though he did allow a slight smile as he considered a new definition of the term 'head hunter' and his potential jobs. Despite the brief smile, Sam came to realize that for all his specialized training and years of service, he had no skills to list on a resume that could land him a civilian job.

There was The Columbia, but he knew his father did not want that life for him so he stayed away. He thought about applying with the Tampa Police Department - maybe they could use a sniper

who took his warm-up shots at four hundred yards - but after the commissary incident he began to second guess himself and his ability to gauge threats. Someone would get hurt bad, far worse than a shattered arm, so he never applied. Nearly ten years of discipline and extreme military training had left him with the skill set to be a greeter at Wal-Mart and even that would probably get some shoplifter's neck snapped. So he rolled out of bed seven days a week and sold the papers he still thought of as his father's.

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