

## Chapter 1

Cleveland, Ohio, August 25, 8:34 a.m.

Xavier Hawkins couldn't help but giggle a bit after imagining how the local news outlets would report his death. There would probably be phrases like “war veteran”, “self-inflicted gunshot wound”, “posttraumatic stress disorder”. Likely in that order and for the express purpose of delivering the whole story in one neat ninety-second package that would make it easily forgettable.

Although, none of that was why it was funny.

It was the notion that they might say anything at all.

The random discovery of an unidentified corpse in some abandoned, east-side shit-hole wasn't exactly reason to cut in to the primetime webisodes. A couple of tapped-out lines on the report of some overworked coroner was likely all he would get. He cocked his head and gazed crookedly at one of the boarded-up windows in the erstwhile living area of the old house. Laughed again, this time, at the thought he was getting ahead of himself. In this neighborhood, who was to say his body would even be found? Hell, three square blocks of this poverty-stricken paradise could be blown to smithereens without anyone so much as complaining about the noise.

Xavier pressed the gun's barrel hard against his lips, let the end slip all too slowly between his teeth. Jesus, just pull the trigger already, he thought. The mechanics of it were foremost in his

mind now. Preferably, the bullet would enter just above the tonsils and exit through the back of his skull, taking most or all of the brain-stem with it. There was a certain margin of error, but if all went well, it would be quick and hopefully painless.

A droplet of rusty water splattered on his nose and it felt like he'd been punched.

His grip on the gun waned a bit and the cold metal scraped the sore spot beneath his right eye. He winced, trying to recall what had caused it, but came up dry.

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Twenty-four Hours Ago

Somewhere in upstate Ohio

Having to be anywhere near this place was the only thing that ever made Miles Gabriel second-guess his career choice. And while one would think it was mostly about the countless amounts of weaponized agents and their by-products being cooked up all around him, in truth, that was a distant second. Plainly put, it was the people. The living breathing filth he had to contend with all because Wallace couldn't be bothered. A who's who of draconian cutthroats masquerading as diplomats and potentates. Or just run-of-the-mill paper tigers with an overblown sense of self worth. People like that Japanese mobster who was hooked on the very narcotics he sold--disgustingly unprofessional. And that vile prince from the Middle East who was nothing but a thuggish little pervert completely enamored with himself. How he hated them. Hated them just as much as Wallace did, if not for the same reasons. Wallace thought them scum, believed himself to be above them. But Gabriel held no such opinion. He'd done his share

of dirt in the past and would continue to do so so long as it was necessary. What really drove him up a wall was how they thought they had to constantly blow smoke up his ass in order to make their own agenda a priority. Because they wanted the person with a direct line to the manufacturer to know they were being taken seriously. The hypocrisy and outright disingenuousness of it was more than Gabriel could stomach. To hell with all this phony pomp and circumstance, he thought. Christ, as if Wallace or anyone else ever gave a flea's fart about their pointless cause, internal power struggles, or endless foreign rebellions. Someone just had to tell them that when you're trolling around a facility that isn't supposed to exist, buying weapons that aren't supposed to exist, with money that wasn't supposed to exist, you left your fucking theme music at home.

“We've increased the potency of the Saffron toxin so you can minimize the delivery system,” Gabriel assured his guest. “It will be ready by the end of next week, well ahead of schedule.”

“Good,” the pouty-lipped woman answered. “It should give us the last bit of leverage we need to put our demands on the prime minister's list of priorities.”

Gabriel smiled at her openly. Smart move, on the general's part, to send such a sleek and leggy attaché from--where was it? Uganda or something like that--to tie up the deal, he thought. Otherwise, he might have passed her off to the head lab-man and been on his way back to Cleveland. He needed to retrieve the information from the deployed prototype and be done with it. He lost an hour of sleep for every minute the damn thing was still active. He ogled the attaché and smiled more warmly this time, hoping she would notice. Maybe he could snag a quick lay after sealing things up. Besides, after having to actually sit just five feet from a hermetically sealed chamber while a deadly nerve toxin was unleashed inside, it was the least she could do.

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Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 24, 11:02 p.m.

A winsome bar of “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” tweeted from Stanley Edinburgh's lips as he strode through the new biotech wing inside the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's University Park. He was still on a high from his epiphany following another verbal death-match with Dolores and although, being a security guard at the institute was never exactly like policing the dark alleys of Roxbury--in that there was no need to wish he were somewhere else--tonight Stanley found his twilight rounds as soothing as a massage.

The argument had begun as usual: Stanley had come home to find a soggy cigarette butt floating in the toilet and his wife with that markedly “satisfied” grin on her face. Since Dolores didn't smoke and presumably went to the bathroom within the nine or so hours he was gone...well, it at least made the need for a detective obsolete. After that, Stanley didn't even have to open his mouth. He'd just looked at her, shook his head as if to say, “how stupid do you think I am?” and that was all the excuse she'd needed.

“What's your problem?” she blared, leading off with the classic reversal technique. He supposed it was nice that she still managed to feel a little guilt. From there it had segued into how he didn't make enough money and how she was tired of driving a goddamn bus every day to make ends meet.

“You're the man of the house! You should be paying the bills anyway,” she'd said. Funny, how when it came to paying the bills he was the man. The other twenty-three hours and

fifty-nine minutes of the day he was everything from loser to dickless wimp.

“As if being dickless was much of a problem for you,” he'd said out of earshot. Stanley had continued to get offhand reports of Dolores and other, usually younger men, like Bigfoot sightings--in and about town, ducking from motel to restaurant with her hanging all over them like seaweed on a beached dolphin. He was sure that somewhere there was a stupid undergraduate sapling bragging to his buddies about the forty-nine-year-old, borderline MILF who was buying him designer jeans and edifying him about the fabled g-spot. That's where all her money was going, anyway, along with hair salons, skin treatments and gym memberships, which weren't cheap and if it meant dipping into a nearly depleted 401k and driving on an almost drained battery, so be it. A shame really. Dolores wasn't at all unattractive when she put her best foot forward. However, in regard to her own husband, she was just the meanest, nastiest and most evil bitch in the history of evil bitches. And at the end of the day, there was simply no amount of pancake or perfume on Earth that could throw a mask over that.

Stanley's long overdue ah-ha moment had happened somewhere after “worthless fuck” and before “biggest mistake of my life”. It had been amazing. At the absolute apex of all the smiting and gnashing of teeth, it was as if the clouds had suddenly parted and he couldn't help but recognize that it was all past the point where he gave a shit anyway. How or from where it had come, he had no clue. But, without missing a beat, he'd just smiled at his wife and said, “I love you too, dear.”

And he'd meant it.

Not in the romantic “forever and ever” way he once did, but in the “it's all going to be alright” kind of way.

“You're crazy,” she'd bitched.

“Well, I might be crazy,” he'd rebutted, then paused for effect, “but I sure ain't miserable.”

The look on Dolores's face when he left for work was priceless.

As Stanley continued to rollick in his newly discovered liberation, he used his baton flashlight to tap on his shoulder the beat of another song he had queued up in his mental ApTunes. Halfway through the song, a soft clatter, from what seemed to be one of the student labs, wafted out into the dimmed corridor. He beamed his light at a pair of double doors just a few feet from his left. Keeping the light trained on them, he walked to the doors and selected a code key from his belt. He then decoded the lock and eased the door open while stepping sideways and aiming the light inside.

Carefully, but without alarm, Stanley angled inside the lab. He holstered the flashlight and rested a palm over the low-charged MAG strapped at his hip. He commanded the lights and a lusty whiteness instantly saturated the room. Millions of dollars' worth of state-of-the-art computers and 3D microscopes sat atop row after row of powder blue, laminate casework. Shelves filled with beakers, bottles and boxes of god-knows-what were hunkered beneath the raceways of industrial pipes traversing the ceiling. Stanley never forgot the disaster potential that existed in these rooms. He always regarded them as one stray shot away from Fukushima. I should have stayed in school, he thought. He continued to look around the lab in an imprecise manner, feeling his reflexive stomach-knot loosen with every undisturbed sight. It rebounded a bit when he perceived something odd about the air vent to his right.

Squinting suspiciously, Stanley walked over to the vent and found a piece of black, knit cloth protruding from its slots. He redrew his flashlight to inspect it. He unfastened the vent's catches

and found that the cloth was actually a shoulder strap to a lumpy black dufflebag that had been stuffed inside. He removed the bag and, when going to place it on the nearest table, glimpsed what looked like a faint boot-print on the otherwise spotless surface. He then cautiously laid the bag on an adjacent table and reached for his radio. The bag had an unzipped flap over a side compartment and, before uttering a word, Stanley curiously flipped it up with the tip of his light. His eyes locked instantly on the bold red LED numbers.

The timer was at three seconds.

For the second time in his life, Stanley felt what he now knew to be the presence of divinity that had told him to say “I love you” to Dolores, leaving her looking like a deer in the headlights.

He turned his head as if someone were in the room with him and said, “Boy, I sure hope nobody else gets hurt.”

Chapter 2

Cleveland, Ohio, August 25, 3:16 a.m.

Xavier gazed into the heart of the burning streetlight above him in some lame attempt at an ad hoc, sadomasochistic ritual. A half-minute was about all he could endure before he looked back at the duplex, trying to blink away the light's dancing imprint. The horrific eyesore of a house had seemed to just materialize under the brim of Granddad Willie's old baseball cap as Xavier wandered the streets of a particularly gritty section of East Cleveland. The first thing he'd noticed was how the bricked concrete steps leading to its porch were cracked in a way that resembled tiers of giant teeth smiling back at him. There wasn't a single square inch of paint that wasn't chipped or peeling and every window on the bottom apartment had been boarded-over with sheets of compressed wood. Perfect, he thought as he tossed back a shot of gin from his old stainless steel flask, flexing his jaw on the swallow. He then tucked it back into his jacket pocket and marched around to the rear of the house.

He found the back door unobstructed. No panels nailed over it barring entrance. Just a neon colored sign that read NO TRESSPASSING, UNSAFE TO OCCUPY. Which to a homeless person translated as “break in at your own risk; if you die inside, no one will find you”. He looked up and saw a window on the second floor scarcely covered by a rotted wooden board. He then tried the door's knob hoping for a stroke of luck. Stupid, yes, but not nearly as stupid as

almost breaking his neck climbing to a second story window only to find the door was miraculously unlocked the whole time. Besides, earlier, he'd tripped over his own feet and smacked his face on the gummy ground outside the liquor store. He was reticent to attempt anything that demanded genuine athleticism.

It took him almost ten minutes to divorce the stubborn door from its jamb. With a few good kicks and the unwitting aid of a heavy branch from a blown over tree, he'd considered it record time. He'd been as quiet as he could be, despite the minimal risk concerning noise. Many of the surrounding homes were, as well, vacant and the ones that weren't likely contained folks who were dead asleep or just wouldn't care.

Once inside, Xavier surveyed the first floor as best he could through the combination of murky space and drunken stupor. The road-mapped ceilings ran brown with water stains and scraps of old wallpaper formed curls of striped leaflets desperate to escape the remains of plaster. The parquet floors creaked ominously under his feet. They were shy a few boards in some spots, so he had to watch his step. If he wasn't careful, he could easily discover a ten-foot drop to the basement. He blew hard out his nose. A damp musty stench clung in the air: a mélange of rotted wood and rat droppings that bombarded him with all the mercy of the Japanese on Pearl Harbor. In a world of shit now, he thought and broke into a rapid sweat. What it had taken to get inside would not be without a price. Dropping to his knees and leaning over one of the larger holes in the floor, he heaved violently, his eyes feeling as if they would spurt from their sockets. Echoes of vomit splashing against the basement's cement reminded him of frying bacon, which added an extra wring in the pit of his stomach. Afterwards, empty and exhausted, a dry corner of the room appeared to him like a blissful desert oasis. He crawled over and crumpled into it, his last

thought a prayer that tomorrow's sunrise would be kind enough to pass him by.

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“Hold it!” the voice exploded. It cut through Xavier's short hours of heavy slumber like a jackhammer through concrete. He looked over and saw that wood rot had finally claimed a victim among the boarded windows during the night, and the sound had tailed in on the morning breeze.

“I said hold it, you little shit!” the voice then resounded and Xavier's head felt like it would split in two. He warily pushed himself to his feet and followed the sounds of running footfalls along the side of the house. Looking down, out of the window, he spotted the frame of a young boy, twelve maybe thirteen, zipping through the small alleyway between the house and the old brick building next door. To the rear of the building, a trash dumpster gave him the barest pause as he lobbed something into it. He then sprang like a cat for the chain-link fence that divided the property from the adjacent street. A misshapen piece of fencing caught the hem of the boy's pant-leg like a bear trap and it wasn't long before a huffing, burly policeman had his prey by the scruff of the neck. The instant Xavier saw the police uniform, he plunked beneath the window and peered cautiously over the sill.

“Little bastard,” the policeman grumbled. He was panting uncontrollably, angry as hell that the youngster had incurred such extreme physical exertion. “I ought to break your fucking legs!”

“Fuck you, man,” the boy hollered back. “I ain't do nothing!”

Xavier watched as the boy was carted away. Thank god he hadn't been spotted by the

uniform. It seemed like every suburbanite cop on the street these days had it in for the homeless, and he had been pretty badly roused and even shoved around a few times by the worst of the bunch. Those jerks never learn, he thought. One would think the corruption scandals would have straightened them out, but if anything, they were just taking out their added frustration on people like him. At times he supposed he could take more care not to look so much the bum. But then he'd think, why bother? What women used to call his boyish, head-turning features were long gone and the hassle to restore even a hair's worth of them was beyond pointless. Easier to stick with the drawn, sullen mugshot it had taken him so long to perfect. Xavier zipped up his dirty blue flight jacket and rubbed a knee through his stained khakis. He flattened a foot against the floor and pulled at the flap of sole from its worn boot. He stayed put until the boy had been thrown into the back of a squad car and the policeman had driven away. Once the coast was clear he headed downstairs and outside to the alley.

With all his time on the street, dumpster diving had never been much Xavier's style. However, the kid had tossed away something he didn't want the cop to find on him. That could mean valuable. It could mean a few pints of the good stuff for a change. As Xavier sifted through the mess of things he deemed best left unidentified, he soon found what he was looking for wrapped in an old copy of National World Weekly--a tabloid often better used for crude insulation and toilet paper than reading. How it made enough money to still justify paper copy, he'd never understand. He extracted the bundle and unwrapped two specific pieces of indictable boodle. The first was an old .38 caliber revolver, nickel-plated with a bulldog grip. No different than the one that once belonged to his grandfather as he recalled. One day, when he was eight years old, Granddad Willie had caught him playing with it following a fishing expedition

through the downstairs pantry. It was the only time the old man ever got mad at him.

Xavier threw open the gun's cylinder and saw five Smith & Wesson bullet rims staring back at him along with one empty chamber. This piece wouldn't even scare off a schoolyard bully, he thought. Modifiable magnetic accelerator guns--or MAGs as they were often called--were the standard weapons of choice between your average street thugs and gang members these days. If the kid ever got into a shootout, he might as well be packing a squirt gun. The other item in the wrapping was an oddly-shaped piece of metal with a cylindrical stem, roughly three inches long. An automatic powered lockpick. A handy little gadget, incorporated with a series of individual rotors and upgradeable software designed to simultaneously decode an interior locking matrix. It literally made the correct key, electronic or otherwise from inside the lock. The kid probably had an apprenticeship with a local crew. Those punks had gotten awfully organized in the past few years, co-opting tricks of the trade from the pros and fortifying themselves with ex-gang muscle. They'd committed a shitload of high-scoring robberies and had every homeowner in the tristate area cashing out their kids' college funds for security upgrades. Xavier weighed the idea of using it and then pictured himself getting shot by a retired investment broker's twenty one-year-old trophy wife. He then pocketed the items and headed back into the house.

Chapter 3

Washington, D.C., August 25, 8:13 a.m.

As Isaac strode the halls to the senator's office, the echoing webscreens drowned out any hope he had of not having to cancel his date with Vera Stucky from the secretarial pool. The entire country was either waking up to the smell of fresh brewed coffee and or the frantic news flash about MIT. He sighed with an exhausting dread. The camarilla of corporate news heads would just love to stamp this one on Beaumont's Washington time-sheet, accuse him of spurring on these kinds of attacks. In the last three months, the senator had been firing some real curveballs at the biotechs--just getting back into shape after recovering from rumors of his indirect ties to Chad Maguire and his delinquent son. Isaac had told him he was overcompensating a bit, going on about things like the pending lawsuits against insurance companies that were selling their genetic stock from coverage exams and the movement to implement genetic "upgrades" for the military. All subjects that added buoyancy to the senator's assertions of technology run amok. These damn biotechs, Isaac thought. Antiglobalization, corporate plutocracy and radical environmentalism were all big issues inciting small minds. But none matched the painful growth spurt of biotechnology and its detractors. The duplicating technologies of the already rife biotech firms made them monsters, omnivorous moneymakers and, on average, they were being hit three to four times a year. And, true, many had significant financial relationships with higher education. However, until now, no one had had the stones to

actually bomb a school, let alone the likes of an MIT. This would change things.

In his prime, Shane Beaumont had made a name for himself as a staunch liberal activist and cutthroat attorney, honing a reputation for being a real thorn in the side of big business. He'd won more billion dollar judgments on behalf of the American consumer than any attorney in history. Given that he maintained this unique integrity, even post the formative years of his Washington career, Isaac was fairly confident that, press-wise, he could keep things to a dull roar both coming and going. Unfortunately, with the incidences of domestic terrorism having nearly doubled in the last five years, the public was really jonesing for a scapegoat. Nothing like a casserole of rising ocean levels, corporate crime and easier access to bomb-making materials to bring out the worst in people.

Isaac paused just short of the senator's office door as a volley of profanities bounded from inside. "Fuck! That little cowboy pecker-wood son-of-a...", he heard and then thought, Oh that's right, this could be another public opinion windfall for the president. He decided to delay his entry until the all-clear. Almost three years ago, pharmaceutical, health insurance, and biotech company dollars had landed the president on the White House lawn like fresh dog shit. Beaumont knew drilling through the brickwork of corporate money that had achieved such an end wouldn't exactly be a walk in the park. Goodness knows it was proving next to impossible on the Hill. However, in spite of such powerful and often cantankerous opposition, the senator kept his fingers crossed; the low tide of re-election would rise to a tsunami before long, and there were swirling press rumors that the president was being advised to dump the biotechs from his list of contributors. It had become far too easy for his democratic opponents to exploit his reputation for pandering and corporate ass-kissing in the years following the election. Just weeks

into the new administration, a Boston-based biotech company, ArtiGen, was accused of illegally cloning a human. The reproduced child was rumored to have suffered massive physical complications and ensuing ailments that eventually led to his death. Yet, for every such sensational account nipping at the heels of the growing biotechs, their egregious expansion never waned. The ubiquitous entities had an addictive stock appeal that nurtured a love/hate relationship among the public and as much as that fact may have worked in Beaumont's favor, it made a dead security guard at MIT the last thing he needed.

That reminds me, I need to grab some ibuprofen on the way home tonight, Isaac thought. He sighed into a hand as the cursing and vitriol eating a hole through the door began to wind down.

When Isaac finally entered the office, Beaumont was standing behind his desk, morosely hunched over with his palms suctioned to the blotter. He'd abandoned the profanity, but was still shouting--probably at some arrogant journalist just trying to rile him. Beaumont's shaded dark eyes were lasering the video on his desk-com and he wore a frown that must have added twenty years to his already wind-burned face. His coarse hair had a tangle or two in it, as always, and his full figured nose, characteristic of his Lebanese decent, was gnarled at the corners. A committed vegan, Beaumont's shabby suit fit so loosely against his thin frame, he could always get a job standing in a cornfield should he ever lose an election. But what Isaac noticed most, was how the senator's corrugated brow was out-muscling his antique-style horn-rimmed glasses. It made Isaac want to double back and reenter draped in Kevlar.

“Don't call me here again,” Beaumont shouted at his desktop His fist slammed against the panel, cutting off the call. When he noticed Isaac, he straightened up, wriggling like he had a small knife lodged between his shoulder blades. “Goddamn reporters! They can't wait to hang

me out on this! And where the hell have you been? I've been fielding this shit by myself all morning!"

"Sorry, sir," Issac replied. "I was on the phone with the Boston FBI trying to get an update."

"And?"

"They got a call a half hour ago from a claimer." Isaac paused. "PHANTOM."

Beaumont sighed impassively, like no other answer was possible. Nothing of this scale had happened for almost a year. The bomb that exploded in the security guard's hands was just one of three such devices strategically planted around the annex in University Park. The combined blast pattern had devastated at least fifty percent of the south wing, where they had just completed construction. It all seemed to be done with the precision of a professional demolition job. Which was a perfect match to the Modus Operandi of the so-called Patrons of Humanity And Natural Tendency Of Mankind.

"My contact in the bureau says they're going to be working overtime on this one," Isaac said.

"Yeah, I guess so," Beaumont quipped, "especially, considering that PHANTOM is supposed to be history!"

Isaac pulled his PDA from his pocket and began tapping. "I've been coming up with some ideas on how to use this."

He had more to say but Beaumont raised a hand, cutting him off.

"Do you believe in what I'm doing, Isaac?" Beaumont asked, straightly.

Isaac blinked, unsure how to answer.

"I mean, do you believe I'm doing what's right for this country?"

"Well, sir, I..."

“Because I do,” Beaumont declared.

Isaac hid his relief that the question was rhetorical. He was far too uneasy about this one. Beaumont had spent the last two months griping about the biotech firms gaining too much influence with higher education. In fact, the senator had specifically gone on a tangent about Hudson Labs and MIT more than once. He hated that merger. Thank God, Isaac had convinced him to largely sit on his opinion in public. It wasn't so wide a leap to imagine such a coincidence giving way to another juicy scandal or even an investigation.

“What is it about our own destruction that fascinates us more than space exploration or curing disease, or achieving an end to world hunger?” Beaumont asked. “Did you know we secretly piss away millions of tax dollars every year trying to develop a weapon that creates artificial earthquakes? Earthquakes! For fifty years, our kids went to bed every night wondering if they'd wake up to their last minutes on earth. Now, it's like nobody remembers. We say we love our world, but we can't stop looking for more efficient ways to destroy it. For some stupid reason, we just have to keep picking at it.” Beaumont snorted. “Guess it's true what they say about those who don't know their history.”

He sauntered over to his office window with his fists tucked tightly into his ribs. He then gloomily stared down at the cabals of various protesters and news media people making their daily rounds, as it were, on the capitol steps.

“Bombs, guns, tanks,” he said, “Those are weapons they understand, weapons they'll rage against. But when we threaten to slowly and methodically wipe out humanity with a few well-constructed and well-placed strands of DNA, they suddenly don't know their ass from their elbow.”

Isaac was speechless. Beaumont had become increasingly somber with every word. “Perhaps you should pull back until the vote is over, not give them any more reason to accuse you of instigating these maniacs' actions through political rhetoric.”

“It's too late for that. Not to mention our 'independent' friends from Maine and Vermont are vacillating like broken paint-mixers; if I stop pushing now we'll lose them. Do you know how hard it is to increase regulation on any industry, let alone one as prevalent as biotech?”

Beaumont exposed a fist and it trembled beneath his chin. “Those biotech bastards have to be stopped,” he said, his teeth encased behind narrowed lips.

He turned from the window and looked at Isaac as if he'd just seen him. “But these damn screwball terrorists are just as dangerous,” he said. His eyes then fell back to the crowd below. “Jesus, why can't we just stop picking at it?”