

# GAVIN REESE



AN  
**ALEX  
LANDON**  
THRILLER

# ENEMIES DOMESTIC

WHEN THOUSANDS OF LIVES ARE IN THE BALANCE,  
CAN A DETECTIVE'S GUTS EVER OUTWEIGH  
CIRCUMSTANCES AND EVIDENCE?

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

# Enemies Domestic (Exclusive Preview)

By Gavin Reese

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# One

## Maricopa County island. North Buckeye, Arizona.

A bare, red lightbulb intended for photography dark-rooms hung from the rough ceiling inside a small rotting plywood shed, expelled the nighttime darkness immediately beyond the open doorway, and cast Duke and his malicious undertaking in its eerie glow. Seated on an aging, rickety metal stool before a shoddy plywood-and-two-by-four workbench, he carefully placed a soldering iron upon a porcelain tile to avoid burning himself and the rough, splintery surface. *At least I won't hear the boom*, he thought. Wiping his sweaty hands atop his faded, six-color-desert fatigue pant legs, Duke took a deep, calming breath, shut his eyes, and gently opened and closed his hands to relax his unsteady fingers. After several unsuccessful seconds, he decided to break from his deadly efforts to better calm himself; opening his eyes, he carefully scooted the stool back away from the workbench and slowly stood on the unsteady wood floor. The beams strained and creaked beneath his weight as Duke first stretched his lower back, and then removed a small metal case that contained a stash of hand-rolled cigarettes and an American flag-engraved Zippo lighter from his right cargo pants pocket before turning to his right and approaching the shed's only doorway.

Walking from the stuffy shed and its low, red glow, Duke ignited his last rollup and stiffly strode a dozen steps into the cool darkness of the March desert night to loosen his legs. Having traded the bulb's tedious light for a dark and clear, moonlit sky, he deeply inhaled the burned tobacco smoke, stretched his sore shoulders and back, and then exhaled forcefully, clearing his lungs of the calming toxins. Early spring rains had recently soaked the Sonoran desert landscape, which now emanated the earthy, lightly sweet smells of wet creosote and mesquite. Duke shifted his gaze east; first from the lowly scrub brush before him to the stately saguaros just beyond his reach, to the taller, more distant Palo Verde trees along his parcel's dry washbed, and, finally, to the White Tank desert mountains backlit by the urban sprawl and nighttime light pollution of the Phoenix metropolx. Working to clear his head, Duke crossed his arms over his chest and stood still, moving his right forearm only as necessary to work the slowly diminishing cigarette.

After burning through the first half of the tobacco stick, Duke's thoughts drifted to Afghanistan's Kandahar Province and he again closed his eyes. Memories played in rapid, clear succession like a wartime highlight reel; the first time he ever fired a gun in anger, the first time he fired one in fear. A wicked smile spread across Duke's face as he recalled the joy of forcibly wresting life from another human being. He specifically relished the memory of his first hand-to-hand kill; his initial, palpable fear of death, then the lustful glee of gaining advantage and plunging his Ka-Bar deep into the Afghan's torso, the razor-sharp blade propelled deep into the enemy's left ribcage. Once he felt his victory assured, Duke had slowly and playfully continued carving, even after the man's gargling, muffled screams had long dissipated.

Images of subsequent battles in Fallujah presented themselves and he revisited the chaotic thrill of vicious house-to-house fighting there. He remembered the sound, a wet *thud*, of bullets impacting his enemies' flesh while he stood surrounded by pungent, acrid

odors of pooled blood, smokeless powder, and rotting death. Duke took another deep, tobacco-filled breath and calmly exhaled. *It was glorious.*

He found killing addictive, even erotic at times, and didn't initially understand how some of his compatriots had suffered anguish and guilt after delivering death to their enemies or witnessing the wartime horrors that felled their friends. Since his discharge, Duke found only pornographic snuff films approximated the arousal of killing, and had soon read enough criminal psychology articles to believe he may eventually be labeled a sociopath. Certain that futile medical treatments would only steal his freedom, he had privately self-medicated with the same, tired memories and underground snuff footage; but none of his previous kills or illegal videos any longer satisfied him. Duke knew he harbored an insatiable bloodlust for new, witnessed death.

Having devised a plot to both satisfy his inner demons and accomplish a political coup, Duke had again given his life purpose and meaning. Unconcerned about death, he now feared only arrest or defeat. *The Reaper's the only one that understands me.*

He opened his eyes with steely, renewed purpose and inhaled the last of his cigarette, its remnants heating up the last digit of his right thumb, index, and middle fingers. Forcibly casting the small roach airborne and onto the rocky desert sand, Duke held both hands up in front of his face, fingers spread wide, for examination. *Calm and steady.*

Duke turned and purposefully strode back into the red-lit shed and to the emerging shaped charge therein. He knew if this, his ninth test device, failed to detonate as intended, he would have to find better bomb-making reference materials. *Maybe there's a disgruntled EOD Specialist in Phoenix, he thought, some 89-Delta with a grudge I can manipulate.* He hoped another hour of solitude would allow him to successfully finish the construction, thereby averting the need for further, external resources. *Three can keep a secret only if two of them are dead, he reminded himself, and there are already well more than three of us involved.*

With renewed excitement for his plan to sequentially detonate a series of carefully placed explosives, Duke aspired to both maximize destruction on a single high-rise floor and eventually bring down the entire structure. *Well, actually, he thought, six structures.* He picked up the hot-tipped soldering iron and smirked upon recalling one of his conspirators labelling his plan "overkill," as Duke wanted to use more than twice the theoretically necessary explosive material. Despite the objection, he felt there was no better way to instill fear in the enemy and simultaneously supply his cause with dedicated believers, scapegoats, and sacrificial lambs.

*There's no problem high explosives can't immediately solve.*

## Two

### **Freedom Hall Terminal, Lawson Army Airfield. Fort Benning, Georgia.**

Roughly fifty feet from the large fifty-foot flag displayed behind the informal stage area, Colleen McDougal stood against the retractable seatbelt partition at the front of the amassed crowd. Colleen had arrived early to ensure she could be near the front, but she had always found the Freedom Hall and USO crowds friendly and accommodating, unlike those in much of the civilian world. The best part about the Hall, she had always thought, was that only military personnel and their loved ones ever entered. There were no protestors, no unconnected civilian onlookers, no one with a political agenda, and no judgement of the soldiers and their families' joyous noise. *Just a simple ceremony and an unapologetic welcome home that even The Waldorf couldn't surpass.*

Confident this would forever rank among the best days in her life, she scanned the gathering of what she assumed must be nearly two hundred friends and family who had gathered inside Freedom Hall on the US Army's expansive Fort Benning for a much-needed homecoming. Excited, nervous, and somewhat fearful this was only a dream, Colleen looked around at the Hall as the crowd collectively awaited their soldiers' arrival. She noticed, for the umpteenth time, the interior of the large, converted aircraft hangar; massive tan acoustic panels hung side-by-side on the wall in front of her, over which a large American flag hung just above a vinyl, camouflaged banner with "Fort Benning" in large white block letters. There was no podium, no raised stage platform, no fancy accoutrements to attempt to rival the emotion of the impending ceremony. At the far left edge of the crowd, she noticed, seemingly for the first time despite the number of visits to Freedom Hall, that several rows of chairs placed behind most of today's crowd were actually benches. *That's why they're always so straight!* Each individual space was just a plastic seat secured to the same bench, separated by metal arms that rose from the bench and formed a support for the padded backing. *Kinda funny the seats and arms are Air Force blue,* she thought, *I'll have to remember to rib Jonathan about that later.* Colleen looked up at the inadequate, florescent warehouse-style lights that hung from the ceiling, and the high, long windows intermittently placed at the top of the walls just below open steel girders that supported the roof. The bright, late winter light shone in and partially brightened fifty state flags hanging from the girders. Colleen found herself overwhelmed. *This is the last time,* she thought, *I won't miss it, but I'm so grateful to be here today. Just a simple, open building to allow enough space so that no well-wisher would be turned away,* she thought, although, in her experience, not that many folks usually came for the brief ceremony. *Lot of hassle to be here for fifteen-minutes.*

Anxiously looking around, Colleen scanned the immediate area and nearby crowds. *Where did they run off to,* she wondered. While searching for her family, she saw several of those around her already video recording their respective groups in anticipation of their soldier's imminent arrival. Colleen subconsciously fiddled with the collar of her white silk blouse before tugging its bottom seam down; despite being among Jonathan's favorites, it had been the final, last-possible-second choice after rifling through her suitcase to assemble the best and cutest "welcome home" outfit, which had to include her comfortable

shoes. The constant twinge of back pain that emanated from her lumbar vertebrae and shot down the back of her left thigh had gradually increased over the previous hour while she alternated between standing on the hard floor and sitting in an unforgiving plastic chair. *I need to sit down, but I think they're only a few minutes out. No, she thought, I can tolerate the pain for a few more minutes.*

"You look stunning, dear, and Jonathan wouldn't care if you'd worn a gunny sack." Her mother's words landed softly on Colleen's ears, and she turned to find her parents had snuck back through the crowd with Michael, her seven-year-old son.

"Thanks, mom, you really think so?" Humbly embarrassed by the compliment she desperately needed, Colleen fussed with her ginger hair, again fiddled with her collar and blouse bottom, and leaned in closer to her mother. "Feel kinda bloated this week."

"That's more than I needed to know," her old-fashioned father quietly offered, "but she's right though, sweetheart, on both accounts. You're lovely." His sparkling Irish eyes had always warmed Colleen's heart.

*ding*

After hearing the digital alert, her father retrieved his cellphone from his shirt pocket. He unfolded and donned his small reading glasses, but still held the phone at arm's length to see the displayed message. "Army eMessage says they've finished processing, so he should be along any time now. They may be a polite and disciplined group, but I've never seen soldiers lollygag a homecoming." Colleen knew Jonathan and his soldiers had been on the ground for some time, but they had to go through a customs inspection, return sensitive equipment, classified documents, and their weapons before they marched into the Hall. *Oh, and the safety brief, she thought, there's apparently always a safety brief.*

A lifelong daddy's girl, Colleen shifted right to cut in between her father and Michael, held hands with both of them, and turned back to face the four sets of double doors through which the soldiers would soon enter in formation. Her mother shuffled in to stand against the retractable partition next to Colleen and in front of her husband, and placed her right hand over both of their already-clasped hands. Together, they anxiously awaited Jonathan's final return home.

Colleen's emotions had oscillated across most of the human experience since Jonathan agreed to resign his commission and return home to her forever: incredulous when the words actually fell from his mouth via Skype, fearful Death would break his promise, worried Jonathan would resent her for forcing him from his beloved Army, and finally, now, Colleen felt only boundless joy as she focused on having survived his military service together. *Never again, Colleen thought, leaning left and kissing her mother's cheek, will I have to see him off to war, or watch him oversee flag-draped coffins. And, now, there's no chance I'll ever have to meet his. Even though he'll be working for a private contractor, Jonathan's new civilian job will never again send him into harm's way.*

Colleen had hoped to surprise Michael with Jonathan's homecoming, like all the online videos that invariably made her cry; however, the administrators at his special needs charter school ultimately declared the unexpected excitement too overwhelming for many of Michael's classmates. She looked down at her little man, smiled, and squeezed his hand a bit more tightly. Michael looked up and smiled back at her, obviously excited by the crowd and spending the morning with his grandparents. "I love you, honey, Daddy's almost here."

She watched her son literally jump with joy at the reminder that his dad, his *hero*, was almost here. Bouncing up and down, his chronic illness returned. "Mom, I'm hungry again, can we eat after dad gets here? I bet he's hungry, too!"

“We’re going out to eat later, honey, after we see what you and your daddy are hungry for!” The normalcy of Michael’s declaration reminded her of the other reason she so appreciated Jonathan’s return. The last seven years had been so taxing because she often struggled, effectively, as Michael’s single parent. *Thank God this is now going to be better for all of us*, she thought.

Hearing the metal double-doors open and an NCO calling cadence, the corralled crowd cheered in response. Colleen looked toward the doors and saw the first B-D-Uniformed soldiers marching toward them. The cheers continued until the soldiers marched into three separate formations immediately in front of the large American flag, at which time the gathered well-wishers quieted for the short ceremony to mark the end of this most recent deployment and allow the commanding officers to thank those stateside who had helped support the soldiers during that time.

As the formality quickly approached its predictable close, the elation within Freedom Hall grew palpable as Army personnel quietly retracted the partition that separated the crowd from their soldiers. Colleen held her breath as everyone in attendance silently awaited the Colonel’s final order of the day.

“Dissssmissed!”

Colleen watched the camouflaged soldiers and civilian mass converge as loved ones sought one another out. A few minutes passed as Colleen, her parents, and Michael stood in place; her son was already overstimulated by the boisterous crowd and she knew navigating through it in search of Jonathan would only make him more so. *It was too much to hope for*, she told herself, *that he would be first this time*. Colleen greatly respected and admired Jonathan’s dedication to his troops, but wished he would have put himself, and her, first, just this once. *He’ll be the last one*, she knew, *always the caretaker*.

“You thought this last one’d be different?” Hearing the familiar voice behind her, Colleen turned to see Graciela, the wife of one of Jonathan’s lieutenants. Graciela smiled at Colleen and placed a supportive hand on her shoulder. “It would eat me up to always be the last one waiting here, but I tell you, Colleen, the men are gonna miss him. We’re gonna miss you, too.”

Tears welled up in Colleen’s eyes, and she turned around to hug her friend. Feeling herself begin to lose control of her emotions, she held Graciela tightly, as the two had often done during the last five years, having helped each other through three deployments and the innumerable crises that each entailed. Colleen sniffled hard several times, fighting back tears.

“Don’t cry now, you gotta wait ‘til he gets here to ruin your mascara.” Colleen’s shoulder muffled her friend’s words, but they laughed together just the same. Releasing one another, they both quickly dried their eyes and, before Colleen could say anything else, she saw Graciela smile broadly as tears fell freely onto her friend’s cheeks. Graciela clasped both hands over her nose and mouth to try to stifle their flow, but Colleen saw it was of no use.

“RAMON!” Graciela yelled and stepped forward, and Colleen and her parents moved aside to let her through. Colleen faced the middle of the room and, just a few feet away, she watched First Lieutenant Ramon Martinez meet his wife with joyful tears of his own.

Her father’s hand gently tugged at hers, and Colleen let him guide her and Michael aside so the other families could get by them. Disappointedly expecting another few minutes would pass before Jonathan’s arrival, Colleen followed her parents and helped Michael navigate through the ecstatic masses. They nearly reached the far side of the



gathered crowd when she heard and immediately recognized a male voice close behind her. “Mrs. McDougal?”

Colleen turned, saw Jonathan standing before her, and an overwhelming lump immediately expanded in her throat. Tears streamed down her face as they met and embraced, her emotions falling unabated onto his uniform blouse.

“DAD!” Michael wrapped himself around Jonathan’s waist. “Thank you for coming home, dad, I’m very glad you’re here!”

Her face still buried in his chest, Colleen heard her Captain’s voice break. “Me too, buddy, me too. Daddy’s never gonna go away for that long again.”

“Promise, dad? Pinky swear?” Colleen laughed at the innocence and love of Michael’s question.

“I do pinky swear, buddy, never again.”

Colleen pulled her face away from his shirt and stood tall to overcome their nearly one-foot height difference and kiss him. They stayed there for a long moment, lips together, eyes closed. She felt his right arm tightly around her back pulling her close and up toward his muscular six-foot, three-inch frame, and knew his left arm closely held Michael; at that moment, there were the only three people in the world. They both pulled back and Colleen smiled broadly, gazing into his bright, green eyes. “You didn’t make me wait.”

His toothy, movie-star smile beamed back at her. “Ramon wouldn’t let me, but he also said I couldn’t be first.”

# Three

## Colleen's parents' residence. North Phoenix, Arizona.

After several weeks of paperwork and outprocessing, Jonathan had finally flown home to join Colleen, Michael, and the rest of their family back in Arizona. He always hated that Colleen and Michael had to uproot their lives whenever he deployed, but Michael needed far more care than Colleen could single-handedly provide, and more than could be reasonably asked of their Army friends and neighbors. *Now she won't have to move back and forth every twelve-to-eighteen months, he thought, and we can give this 'normal' family thing a real go.*

Alone in his in-laws' guest bedroom, Jonathan Michael Patrick McDougal stood wearing only fresh boxer briefs, a wide, metal memorial wristband, and mild regret. He placed his Army dress blouse on a heavy wooden suit hangar overtop its matching pants; after apprehensively buttoning the shirt closed, he respectfully straightened the sleeves and folded them diagonally across the front of the shirt. Silently standing before the uniform he had donned and doffed dozens of times, Jonathan felt the magnitude of never wearing it again. A deep breath and slow exhale further belied his heavy melancholy. *It's time for change, he half-heartedly thought, they deserve all the passion and effort I ever put into this.* Jonathan quickly placed the hanging uniform in the open bedroom closet absent any further fanfare or ceremony, and walked back to the bed, where Colleen had laid out khaki shorts and a Hawaiian camp shirt she had packed for him. *Ex-soldier? Former soldier? Retired officer? Private contractor? SecureCorp manager?* While his family's muffled laughter, jubilant conversations, and classic rock-and-roll wafted through the bedroom's thin, closed door, Jonathan mentally examined his new potential titles, uncertain that he liked any of them, at least not yet. *Maybe 'escaped soldier of fortune living in the Los Angeles underground,'* he thought, chuckling to himself. "If you have a problem, if no one else can help," he told the empty room, "and, if you can find him, maybe you can hire...*pubhrr pubhrr pubhrr...*the Captain."

Certain Colleen would soon come looking for him, Jonathan decided he needed to rejoin the party without having to explain to her what he was doing. *She doesn't need to know this wasn't what I wanted for me,* he told himself. After donning the shirt and picking up the shorts, Jonathan saw Colleen had placed a pamphlet beneath the clothes. Despite immediately recognizing it, he picked it up, turned around, and sat on the bed where it had been. The eight-page "Welcome Home Ceremony" document, folded open to page four, contained a highlighted section entitled "What Can I Expect After My Soldier Redeploys?" and a subsection entitled, "The following tips are for returning service members." Jonathan smirked as he realized Colleen's efforts to passively start them toward a conversation on assimilating him back into their home environment.

Jonathan looked up at the thin bedroom door when the sounds of his homecoming party temporarily reached raucous levels, and he felt relieved to remain in the bedroom's quiet isolation a few minutes longer. He read on, although already aware of the general context:

1. Plan on spending some time with the entire family doing family things, but be flexible if teens have other plans.
2. Show interest and pleasure in how your family members have grown and mastered new skills in your absence and let them know you are proud of them. Comment on positive changes.
3. Expect it will take a little time to become re-acquainted with your spouse. Be sure to tell them just how much you care about them. Make an effort to do the little things—a single rose, a card, etc. shows them they are in your thoughts.
4. Resist the temptation to criticize. Remember that your spouse has been doing her or his best to run the household single-handedly and care for the children while you were gone. Give them credit for their efforts, even if their way of doing things is different from yours.
5. Take time to understand how your family may have changed during the separation. Go easy on child discipline—get to know what new rules your spouse may have set before you jump into enforcing the household rules.
6. Don't be surprised if some family members are a bit resentful of your deployment. Others often think of the deployment as more fun and exciting than staying at home—even if you know otherwise.
7. Infants and small children may be shy or even fearful around you at first. Be patient and give them time to become reacquainted.
8. Resist the temptation to go on a spending spree to celebrate your return. The extra money saved during deployment may be needed later for unexpected household expenses.
9. Most importantly, make time to talk with your loved ones. Your spouse and each child need individual time and attention from you. Remember, focus on the positives and avoid criticism.

Jonathan finished the list, recalled that he had offered similar advice to his officers and NCOs hundreds of times, and assumed they must have passed the same advice on to their enlisted personnel. Now, for the first time in a long time, he felt overwhelmed by what this homecoming really meant for him and his little family. Michael had grown up in the last year, and his symptoms had improved in that time. Colleen certainly had different rules now as she sought to give Michael a more normal childhood. Despite their frequent Skype chats and phone calls to stay caught up with one another, Jonathan suddenly realized the next few months may be harder than he thought.

As he contemplated his new reality, Jonathan flipped the stapled document over to page 5, and saw tips for military spouses. More importantly, below those nine tips, he recognized his wife's handwriting.

"I'll hold up my end of the bargain, and give you all the love and support you need to succeed. I love you, J, and Michael and I are so overjoyed you've come home to us forever. All my love, C". *Well, hell, I guess she's all in. I better meet her half-way.* He stood, dropped the document back on the bed where he found it, and walked to the bedroom door. As he grabbed its handle, he stopped for a moment and stole a long glance at the open closet and his dress uniform. After turning back to face the bedroom door, he consciously made an effort to smile before turning the handle and pulling the door open. Jonathan stepped into the hallway without again looking behind him, quietly pulled the door closed, and walked down the hallway toward his celebrating loved ones.

As he emerged into his in-laws' living room, Jonathan found everyone had gathered nearby and focused on the television. Colleen, smiling broadly, met him at the room's entrance and handed him a rocks glass with three fingers of cold Jameson Irish whiskey.

"You're not gonna like this, but you can hold Ramon responsible for it later." His wife seductively looked him up and down before continuing. "I think I did good, 'relaxed civilian' looks pretty hot on you."

"What, exactly, did Ramon do?" Before she could answer, Colleen's mother called for her from the kitchen and she turned away, leaving Jonathan standing alone beneath a large, camouflaged "Welcome Home" banner hung across the living room entrance. Curious about Ramon's actions, he lifted the glass to his lips, sipped at its contents, and looked at the television where he now saw that very culprit. *That dirty son of a bitch*, Jonathan thought after recognizing the video's significance, *he fuckin' recorded it*. Sensing impending public embarrassment, Jonathan leaned against the back living room wall and watched his family enjoy the video that Ramon had secretly recorded and given to Colleen, a video documentary of his unofficial farewell. During his last few days in Afghanistan, Jonathan's Colonel had surreptitiously lured him into the company headquarters before most of the other officers. Jonathan watched the television as it showed the somewhat censored antics of Ramon and several other officers, all of whom mercilessly ribbed Jonathan for the camera. *The Army's running a special on Embarrassment*, Jonathan thought, wishing Ramon hadn't done this, *two for the price of one*. However, even Jonathan had to smile at his friends' occasional kind words.

While everyone else in the living room laughed at Ramon's recorded stories and jokes, Jonathan noticed his mother watching him from across the room. She quietly walked behind most of the gathered crowd and stood next to him facing the television. Several silent moments passed between them. "Are you glad to be done with all that, leave it all behind forever?" She leaned against his left side with her head on his shoulder.

"Yeah, mom, sure am." Jonathan placed his left arm across her back and side-hugged his mother. "Time for new things."

"You're a terrible liar, Jonathan, just like your father was." They smiled, both knowing Jonathan felt he could no longer pursue his own dreams while doing so meant leaving Colleen and Michael home alone. "You're a good man, a good husband, and a good father, Jonathan, but a terrible liar. He was so proud of you, and would've been even prouder that you're putting your family first, despite what you'd likely do for yourself as a single man."

Jonathan paused, pondered her statement, and shaped his response. "Those are some of the best friends I'll ever have, mom, and, next time, they'll go into danger without me. I won't be there to help them."

"No, but they won't be here to help you raise your son, either." They stood in silence as the Colonel, with Jonathan in-tow, came into view on the television screen. The recorded, on-camera applause inspired similar cheers in the living room, successfully embarrassing Jonathan again. He didn't enjoy the limelight, even among his closest family and friends, but briefly raised the glass of Jameson in his right hand to recognize their jubilation.

His family watched the Colonel shake Jonathan's hand, present him with a large oak plaque, and address the suddenly hushed crowd. Just as though the Colonel and his commanding presence were actually in the living room among them, Jonathan's family grew respectfully silent to listen to a man they'd never met.

"Captain McDougal, or Jonathan, or Four Names, or *Cuatro*...did I miss any, Captain?"

“No, sir,” his video-recorded image sheepishly replied, “I think that runs the gamut.”

*That audio’s good enough that I’ll get to relive this whole thing,* Jonathan thought, hearing a few chuckles from the nearby couch.

“I feel we’ve known each other long enough, so I’ll just go with Jonathan, if that’s alright with you?”

“Yessir, it is.” The Colonel’s unusual, familiar tone inspired some stifled laughter among the officers, which Jonathan’s family now echoed.

Turning back toward the camera and the officers that had been assembled there, the Colonel continued. “Jonathan met his wife, Colleen, while they were undergraduates at Arizona State University, which nearly prepared him for Bagdad and Afghan summers. They courted briefly, got engaged, and were planning a wedding when Bin Laden and his friends took down the World Trade Center towers. Jonathan accepted a commission almost immediately, and he and Colleen have selflessly given this Country, and our Army, nearly sixteen years of their lives. Like most of us, he became a father while deployed overseas and met his son, Michael, when he was nine months old. Despite Michael needing more care than expected, Colleen found a way for Jonathan to continue to serve our country, which has undoubtedly brought them more trouble than they would ever admit.

“I met Jonathan in Iraq in 2005, where I first had the pleasure of his service, and then again, here in Afghanistan, several years later. Jonathan is the epitome of what it means to be a Man, a Father, a Soldier, and an Army Officer. I’m certain that this, his last deployment, is a tremendously happy occasion for him and his family, but it is with mixed emotions that I bid him farewell.

“Jonathan would have been promoted several more times during his tenure, but I could never convince him to leave his soldiers in the field. His gifts for strategy and battlefield tactics allowed his troops to safely run operations deep into dangerous and inhospitable territory. Time and again, his innate ability to venture outside the wire, accomplish the mission, and safely bring his men back from hostile Indian Country earned him their love, admiration, and respect. His sincere determination to leave his company better than he found it ensured his officers knew everything he knew. Whenever possible, he publicly praised his men for their accomplishments and chewed their butts in private when necessary. With his departure, Jonathan leaves behind an impeccably trained group of officers, NCOs, and enlisted personnel who have collectively aspired to follow in his rather large footsteps. I am grateful that, while he will be missed, his extraordinary impact on our Army will continue to benefit the rest of us for years to come.” The Colonel paused before again turning and speaking directly to Jonathan as he paraphrased the plaque’s inscription.

“Thank you, Captain McDougal, Jonathan, for your selfless dedication to training your men to take care of each other and come home together. Your legacy is assured by the men, whom you trained, training those who follow them. God Speed, son, you’ll be terribly missed.”

# Four

## Forty-seven miles west of downtown Phoenix. Dry Creek, Arizona.

Seated in an oxidized, orange Dodge Neon and surrounded by early nighttime darkness, Dry Creek Police Department Detective Alex Landon muttered to the otherwise empty sedan's interior. "If I were Rin Tin Tin, this stakeout'd be illegal as hell." Alex had almost-lawfully parked the undercover police car on the east side of Center Avenue nearly a full block south of 17<sup>th</sup> Street. In order to look more like he belonged in the HOA-less neighborhood, he had parked with both passenger-side tires up on the sidewalk and angled so that the front of the Neon took up a bit more pedestrian real estate than the rear.

Unseasonably warm, early spring temperatures, even for central Arizona, had turned the undercover sedan into a roasting oven; despite the sun having set more than two hours earlier, the car's interior had yet to significantly cool and provide Alex with much-needed relief. With only quiet, mind-numbing stillness outside the car, Alex struggled to remain alert and serve out whatever time remained of his self-imposed sentence. *It'd be nice to roll down the windows, or crank the AC on for a bit*, he thought, *but that'd for sure be the exact time some shitbag strolls by and IDs me.*

Alex sequentially shifted his gaze between the car's mirrors, and moved on to the next only after he felt certain no threats existed. Due to the dilapidated sedan's dark, near-limo tinting, he had to spend extra time and focus at night to look for movement toward and around the undercover cop car. Satisfied no one, and no thing, unusual caught his attention, Alex cautiously rotated clockwise in the driver seat, both to crack his aching back and to better check the passenger-side blind spots for anyone creeping up on the car. Again, seeing nothing of concern, he rotated all the way back to his left and did the same for that blind spot before turning to again face the windshield and the target residence beyond.

Alex inhaled deeply through his nose, filled his lungs to absolute capacity, held his breath for several seconds, and forcefully exhaled out his mouth; he noticed, not for the first time that evening, his lipper of Copenhagen and parched mouth had combined to expel a particularly unpleasant aroma. Wiping his sweaty hands on his damp, black t-shirt, he then leaned his head back and closed his eyes for nearly five full seconds. Based on his rough distance estimates from nearby alleyways and known hiding spots closest to the Neon, Landon figured that was the best head start he would offer anyone who might take malicious advantage of his momentary inattention.

After opening his eyes and again inhaling through his nose, Alex again scanned the full horizon around his position before looking down toward the floorboard; it was only then that he realized how well he was hidden inside the sedan. *Black cloth interior, plain black shirt, sunshade's blocking most all the streetlights. Hell, it's more likely someone would try to steal this piece of shit, not realizing I'm in it, than for someone to see me inside.*

Fighting the heat and boredom, Alex worked to remain focused on the target residence, which sat at the northeast corner of 17<sup>th</sup> Street and Center Avenue. He peeked through a small, intentional gap left between the sunshade and the driver-side A-pillar,

just as he had done for the previous five hours. *This really turned into a shit detail*, he thought, *it's still gotta be over ninety-five in here*. Having purposefully brought along nothing to pass the time, Alex understood distractions would have only conspired with the intense heat to erode what little remained of his mental acuity.

While he continued to watch nothing happen around the target house, Alex thought back to the decision that landed him in that miserable sedan. Although certain that bosses in every profession periodically order the FNG to complete a shitty assignment, he now recognized he had mistakenly volunteered for this one. After DCPD's Neighborhood Enforcement Unit, to which Alex had recently been assigned, learned a local resident named Jesse Franklin was suspected of trafficking bulk marijuana loads from Arizona to Georgia, Alex had quickly offered to take the "eye" and keep watch on the suspect's residence. He knew volunteering for that role meant he had to remain in place come Hell or High Water while the remaining detectives completed other investigative assignments for this case, but Alex hadn't realized the potential timeframe to which he had committed himself. Quietly suffering in solitary confinement, Alex buried a bit more of his naivety, spat tobacco juice in a long-empty water bottle, and passed a damp bandana across his sweaty face.

"The case sounded so quick and simple at the time," Alex whispered. He adopted a rough New Jersey wise guy/Yogi Bear accent to impersonate his boss, Sergeant Jones, and quietly summarized the briefing he had presented to Alex and the other NEU detectives. "So, ya knows, K9 Officer Chris stopped a rental truck on I-10 for a-un-safe lane change, smelled raw mar-i-juana coming from the closed cargo door, searched the fuck-in-truck, and found a pile of cash wit' weed debris scattered allll ovuhh iiiiit." Alex paused to evacuate the thick, amassing tobacco juice from his mouth before continuing with the cartoonish impersonation. "So, ya knows, de driver says he wants to co-operate, just so long as he gets protection from the Sant-a-Lina cartel, so we just need one guy to watch the house he's deliverin' to, and yous other guys to type and in-terragate." Alex shook his head and returned to his own voice. "And my dumbass stepped forward. This'll teach me to try to impress the squad." Pause. Spit. "Watchin' nothin' happen sucks more than televised golf."

Alex returned to the intolerable silence and inaction of the surveillance assignment for only a few seconds when he felt himself growing impatient, annoyed, and frustrated with the still target house and envious for the other NEU detectives who likely sat, at that very moment, in air conditioned comfort with immediate access to all the water, food, and bathrooms they needed.

Despite a growing desire to punch something, Alex decided instead to spend the majority of his remaining time focused on ancillary threats from the surrounding environment. *Nothing's going on at the house, and no one can leave without me seeing it. Fuckin' heat's makin' me angry*, he thought. *Hell, that could be a new definition for 'hangry.'* Alex intentionally diverted his attention from the Franklin's uneventful residence and looked at the streets around his sedan. He deliberately and methodically scanned the neighborhood and street west of the target for the slightest hint of thieves, stragglers, or mere pedestrians who could identify him or alert the suspect to his presence and position. *Nothing more dangerous to a surveillance assignment than Neighborhood Watch*, he thought, *or a vehicle burglar.*

He looked north on Center Avenue and confirmed the blue 1970's Chevrolet pickup remained parked there, with no movement around it. Gazing left from the truck, he saw the wrecked, light blue Chevrolet Cavalier was, well, still wrecked and not going anywhere. *With that much front-end damage, they must've run into a tank.* Just beyond and northwest of the wreckage, a silver Toyota Corolla sat parked in a driveway on the west side of Center Avenue almost directly across from Franklin's target residence. Alex slowly

scanned the house and front yard south of the Toyota until he focused on three Harley Davidson motorcycles in that driveway. Just south of the motorcycles, a faded red Toyota Celica faced south on the west side of Center Avenue. Alex noted that, still, there was no one moving around the Celica or the Harleys, and he continued scanning south. He saw the black, lifted late-90s model Chevy stepside truck remained in the driveway almost due west of him. And, he thought, there's no one moving around that truck or yard, either. Having run registration checks on all the vehicles near him when he first took up surveillance, Alex already knew one of the Harleys belonged to a known Hell's Angels associate. *Well, he thought, more of a hangaround. Intel on the guy basically said he was a nobody who liked to spend time with somebodies. Probably made him feel like a badass to have dangerous friends.*

Confident that he'd been in place long enough that an overly attentive neighbor wouldn't confront him or call the cops to report his car as suspicious, Alex scanned the rest of the street and visually searched for folks who didn't want to be seen. As if on cue, Alex watched a cyclist ride eastbound onto Center Avenue several blocks north, and immediately knew he'd turned off 15th Street. He saw the rider appeared to be an adult male, at least by size, but rode a medium-framed BMX bike without any reflectors or forward-facing headlamp, both of which were required by the State of Arizona.

"Of course he's got a backpack," Alex muttered to the sedan's interior, "BOB doesn't go anywhere without his backpack. Where would he keep the burglary tools?" He fished his Nextel phone from his left shirt pocket and pressed its push-to-talk button, grateful to have something to do and an excuse to speak with another human being.

*chirp chirp*

"Hey, Landon, what's up?" Officer Johnson's response came only a few seconds after Landon released the PTT button.

"You anywhere near downtown?"

"You know it, just standing by to stand by and see what happens with your thing." Johnson sounded characteristically bored, as though cop work had lost its excitement.

"Word's out, huh?"

"It's hard to keep that much money outta the local news."

Alex smiled at the slang, which Johnson had coined as an inside joke to refer to the rumor mill that ran a 24/7 operation in DCPD. "Just local though?" Alex felt certain a similar "local news agency" existed within every police department in America. *Call it the campfire, the sewing circle, the word on the street, it's all the same. Bullshit, gossip, and fearful speculation, he thought.*

"Yeah, no one outside the agency knows, but word around the campfire is the other NEU dicks counted cash for more than two hours. You need somethin' out there?"

"Yeah, I got BOB riding down Center Avenue, and I just wanted a marked car somewhere nearby in case I need you to chase him outta here."

"BOB, huh? I hate that guy."

"I know, right? What an asshole."

"Any idea who it is?"

"No, he's not close enough yet, but it looks like he's wearing the uniform."

"Undersized BMX bike, dark clothes, backpack, hoodie, no reflectors, no bike light?" Johnson asked the question, but his tone relayed his awareness of the criminal mind.

"Yep, one and the same."

"Hmm, it's almost as if he doesn't want to be seen."



“Yeah. He’s slow-rolling south on Center from 15th now. I’ll keep an eye on him and let you know if I need you to step in.”

“Copy. I’ll hang back four or five blocks southwest of Center, maybe the fire house on 20<sup>th</sup>.”

“Thanks, Big Johnson.”

“That’s what she said.”

*Damn, Alex thought, his bored, deadpan tone makes that even funnier.* He dropped the Nextel back into his shirt pocket, thankful for the diversion from watching nothing happen at the suspect’s residence. Alex eyed the BOB, a local acronym to describe a “Burglar On Bike,” and saw his behavior was exactly what he expected from a man in his nefarious profession. The unidentified rider slowly proceeded south on Center Avenue, sporadically ducking between cars, stopping at the back of several as though checking to see if their trunk was locked, and moving on to the next potential target. *Kinda like a bee, Alex thought, but completely useless to society. Maybe more like a wasp. Useless asshole with an indiscriminate stinger.* The rider stopped and checked both doors on the blue Chevy truck parked north of the target’s house before continuing south on Center. *Waste of time to have patrol pick up now for Attempted Vehicle Burglary, the DA’ll never see that case all the way through to trial.*

As BOB rode near the intersection with 17<sup>th</sup> Street, he entered the downcast glow of the streetlight there, stopped, and stood up with the BMX bike balanced between his legs. The white male rider looked up and down the street, as though confirming he was alone, and then suddenly pulled his hoodie down and furiously scratched his hairline for a full ten seconds. He again looked over the surrounding area without any concealment and Alex realized he recognized the man. “I’ll be Goddamned,” Alex breathed as his eyes widened and he struggled to reconcile what he saw before him. “What the *fuck*?”

Alex chirped Johnson back and impatiently waited the eight seconds required for the officer to answer.

“Whaddyagot?”

“Hey, you’re not gonna believe this. It’s Steven Murray riding the bike.”

“No *shit*? Are you one-hundred-percent?”

“As sure as I am there’s a God in Heaven.” Alex watched the rider place his hood back over his head, despite the warm temperature, and resume slowly pedaling south, presumably in search of anything pawnable.

“So...seventy-five?”

“Call it eighty, but I got a full benji on it.” He saw the male stop again at the back of the faded red Toyota Celica parked northwest of Alex and the Neon. As Alex assumed he had done before, he watched the rider reach down with his left hand and attempt to pull the trunk open. After a few unsuccessful tugs, he pushed the bike forward, sat on its seat and pedaled in a counter-clockwise circle that brought him back toward the adjacent driveway and the three Harley Davidson motorcycles parked there.

“I’ll take that bet, Landon. Get ready to pay up, Murray’s got at least another five years in Florence.”

“Can you clear him for warrants, anyway?”

“Yeah, I’ll run him on the MDT now.”

“Thanks. Just remember to get me a crisp, new \$100-bill from the bank when you make good on this. None of those fucked-up ATM twenties.”

“Fuck off, you’re going delirious in that hotbox.”

“We’ll see. Let you know where he goes.” Alex watched Murray stand near the end of the driveway, as though contemplating whether he dared to steal anything from the motorcyclists’ property.

“Standing by to take your money, Detective.”

Several seconds passed while Alex contemplated ribbing Johnson about Murray’s behavior. He pressed the PTT and spoke. “Do I have to give you a refund if it turns out he’s still got the prison lice?”

“Fuck me, Landon, what did I ever do to you?”

“You’re a good friend, brother. Stay close.”

“Stay frosty.”

Alex let Johnson have the last word. *Damn, Steven Murray, that fuckin’ asshole got out somehow. How many dicks did he have to suck to get that much good behavior credit?* He watched Murray look up and down the street again before mounting his bike and continuing south. *Fuck me, he’s headed right to the Neon.* Alex felt like kicking himself for not predicting this sooner. *Murray checked every car on the street, why wouldn’t he check this one?* With his right hand, Alex quietly drew his back-up firearm, a Glock 19, from its holster inside his front waistband, slid his right index finger over the chamber indicator to ensure a round was present in the pipe, and used his left hand to ensure his Nextel volume was silenced.

Alex realized Murray’s attention had fixated on the Neon, which seemed his next target, and he momentarily felt as though Murray could see him and just didn’t care. With confrontation seemingly imminent, Alex felt his heart rate and blood pressure rise. In a single, right-handed grip, he raised the Glock up and closer to the closed, tinted window glass and leaned toward his right side as Murray drew near, pointing the barrel toward Murray’s center mass. Within only a few seconds, Murray reached the other side of the door, stepped up off the bike pedals, straddled the bike, and staggered forward while pushing the bike’s handlebars. He continued forward until Alex heard the front tire strike his door.

*thud*

Murray now stood immediately outside the driver’s door; he leaned forward and down toward the glass and cupped his hands on either side of his eyes to shield them from the street lights to attempt to see past the Neon’s tint. Alex watched him come closer until the outer edges of his palms contacted the glass; he then saw the compressed edges of Murray’s palms widen as he leaned against his hands to place his eyes as close to the glass as possible. Now that only two feet and a darkened window separated their faces, Alex did his best to slowly and slightly rotate his butt counter-clockwise in the driver seat by pushing on the front floorboard with his right foot, slightly bending his left leg, and softly placing his left knee against the front interior driver’s door. This allowed him to take a two-handed grip on the Glock while holding both wrists against his chest, and keep the weapon pointed directly at Murray’s sternum. Alex knew, at this range, he didn’t need to acquire his front sight; he could literally just point and accurately shoot to end any threat Murray presented. The convict now stood so close that, even in the low light, Alex could see a new vertical scar on his right cheek that looked like he’d recently been cut.

*Oh, fuck,* he thought as Murray’s right hand dove toward the exterior door handle, *I forgot to make sure the damned door’s actually locked!* Alex looked at the interior driver’s door lock, placed just above the inside handle near the far front of the door, but couldn’t clearly see its condition in the Neon’s low interior light. Quickly moving his gaze up to the lock’s pull-stem near his left elbow, he saw it was depressed into the door just as he heard Murray pull on the outside door handle.

*thack*

Somewhat relieved that Murray wouldn't ruin the surveillance mission so easily, Alex watched as he dumped his bike on the ground and stepped up against the driver's door. With the criminal's noticeably bulging crotch just the other side of the tinted window glass and at a nearly identical height as Alex's face, he kept his Glock trained on Murray's chest despite the awkward position he'd been forced to maintain. *That damned lock better hold up, or this may be the last crime Steven ever commits.*

Apparently satisfied no one would witness his felonious efforts, Murray leaned forward, pressed his crotch hard against the glass, and reached beneath his genitalia with both hands to firmly grasp the exterior door handle. Alex heard and saw Murray quickly and vigorously try several more times to pull the door open.

*THACK THACK THACK*

Alex unconsciously held his breath and waited to see Murray's next move. He watched the suspect back away from the driver's door, and sauntered to the passenger door behind him. Alex had to rotate further in the driver's seat to attempt to maintain a center-mass shot on his target. He quietly exhaled, pushed harder off his right leg, and pulled his left knee up and pressed it against the driver-side B-pillar. Breathing deeply and slowly through his mouth, Alex leaned back against the center console. *How has he not noticed me moving around this much?!* Alex canted the Glock counter-clockwise until his right hand was almost parallel to the ground and pushed the gun forward around the far side of the driver's headrest to ensure, if it came to it, that he only shot Murray and not the Neon's interior.

Murray leaned his left side against the back door, and Alex could no longer see his hands.

*thack thack*

Alex watched Murray step away from the Neon and move several feet out into the street. He pulled the backpack strap off his right shoulder and swung the pack around in front of his torso. *Oh, fuck, shit's about to get real.* Alex watched him unzip a small exterior pouch and dig around in it for about five seconds before coming out with a large screwdriver. *Yep, he's about to force a fight.*

Murray stepped back toward the driver's door with the screwdriver clutched firmly in his right hand. He had nearly reached the door lock--

*brrrrt brrrrt*

Alex recognized the vibration of his Nextel, and immediately feared Murray had heard it, as well. He realized Murray had stopped and now held himself motionless next to the door. Looking directly up into the convict's eyes, Alex saw incomprehension on his darkened face, but not emotions he would have expected if he knew he was about to break into an occupied cop car. A small eternity passed as Alex and Murray stared at one another through the equivalent of a one-way mirror.

*brrrrt brrrrt*

Murray shifted his gaze around the Neon, as though searching for a reasonable explanation for the sound. *Goddammit! Go the fuck away!! Go on, Murray, Alex commanded, move along before I have to ruin your fuckin' day.*

The sound of a baying, nearby hound moved Murray's attention southeast of the Neon, toward 18th Street. The dog continued until someone, Alex presumed its owner, yelled an indiscernible command. Silence returned to the street, and apparently renewed Murray's confidence that he had not been discovered. Murray looked directly west, to the lifted, black Chevy stepside truck parked in the driveway across Center Avenue from the Neon. He stepped back from the Neon, returned the screwdriver to his backpack, and then uprighted and mounted the likely-stolen BMX bike. The convict sat and slowly

pedaled west toward the Chevy truck; Alex lowered his Glock, but remained in the awkward position. As Murray entered the far end of the driveway across from Alex, a motion-activated light turned on at the front of the carport, and Murray immediately turned south and scurried his bike off into the darkness.

*brrrrt brrrrt*

Alex again retrieved the Nextel, depressed the PTT button, and spoke quietly even though Murray was now two houses away. “Yeah?”

“Hey, it’s Johnson, you okay? Been trying to reach you.”

“Yeah, I’m good. You’re gonna have to grab Murray. He just tried to break into the Neon.”

“No shit?! *Your* Neon?”

“Yeah. Thought I might have to shoot him for a minute there. He’s got a new scar on his right cheek. Prison might’ve been rough for him, but he still looks like the exact same asshole.”

“Copy. What’s his direction of travel?”

“Rode south toward 18<sup>th</sup>, can’t see him now. If you can, try to stop him a few blocks away so it doesn’t spook our other suspect.”

“Gotcha. I’ll black out and roll that way. You good to give me a sup later?”

“Yeah, I’ll write it up in the next day or two.”

“On the way. Holler if he comes back.”

Alex allowed himself to relax, but only enough to realize the immediate threat was gone. He returned to a normal seating position, but remained vigilant in watching the Neon’s mirrors in case Murray came back to try entering the other passenger doors.

*BEEP BEEP BEEP*

Alex groaned at the sound of his department-issued Nextel alarm tone, which only Sergeant Jones had the indecency to use. After clearing his dry throat, Alex pressed the PTT button to ring Jones back.

“Yessir?” Maybe there’s an end in sight, he thought.

“Not exactly like the movies, eh, Junior?” Alex distinctly heard laughter in Sergeant Jones’ voice and felt assured the air conditioned detectives must be enjoying themselves at his expense. He decided against telling Jones about Murray’s attempted burglary. *Johnson’s gonna handle that guy, I can tell Jones about it after I get off this surveillance.* Returning his focus to the target house, Alex looked through the small gap between the sun shade and the A-pillar while he spoke with Jones.

“No, sir, not at all like the movies. I’m still waiting for the door-kickin’ part to happen.”

“Still got water out there?”

“Got water *bottles*, just no water.” Alex again spat into the tobacco-stained empty.

“At least you got something to piss in, though, that’s more important.”

*Apparently, Alex thought, the Complaint Department is closed.* “Yessir, Chris left that wide-mouthed jug in the backseat, worked out pretty well.”

“You bet, that’s why I like Gatorade bottles, you can push the whole sweaty head in. Lot harder to piss on yourself that way.”

“Seems legit, sir. Any word on the final money count?”

“Just over \$750,000, so Chris is pretty happy about his little traffic stop.”

“Is the driver still playin’ ball?” Alex expected the long delay had been caused by either the driver having provided a lot of good information, or he had changed course, asked for an attorney, and refused to provide further help.

“Yeah, he confirmed Jesse Franklin as the guy he was supposed to meet at the house, and confessed that he drove fifteen-hundred pounds of weed to one of Franklin’s contacts in Atlanta. The contact paid him for the load, and then he used the same truck to drive the money back. Probably shoulda tried to wash the stink outta the back first. Chris said he could smell weed before he even walked up to the back bumper.”

“What time was the driver supposed to deliver the money?”

“8-30, so Franklin might expect something’s up, may not accept the delivery.”

“Did the driver say what his take was gonna be?”

“Ten grand.”

“I’d say we’re in the wrong line of work, Sarge, but that only comes out to about a thousand a year for the prison sentence.”

“I like your optimism, Landon. The D-A’ll probably plea this out to misdemeanor possession.”

Alex chuckled at his sergeant’s cynicism. “Driver ever tell you what he’s so afraid of? I didn’t think a lot of money couriers turned informant.”

“Yeah, Franklin’s weed source in the *Santa Lina* cartel is some guy called *El Cuchillo*, driver’s terrified of him. Doesn’t give a shit about Franklin, but apparently *El Cuchillo* put the fear of God into this guy. So, Melner wrote a search warrant for the house and faxed it off to the judge, just waiting to hear back from her, should be in the next fifteen or so. Just thought I would keep you company for a bit.”

“That’s sweet, Sarge, I heart you too.” Alex looked at his watch and saw it read 2130. “Hey, you guys ask for a nighttime service exception?”

“No, Franklin doesn’t have any priors for weapons offenses, so there’s no way the judge’d grant it. We’re just gonna hafta move fast to breach the front door before 2200. Stay awake and I’ll hit you back when we’re headin’ over.”

“Thanks, copy that.” *They better hurry*, Alex thought as he settled back into the sweltering, renewed boredom, and contemplated donning his gear now. *Might be worth saving a few minutes just in case this thing does go off tonight.*

*Movement.* From the front, south-facing door of the target residence, a tall, thin white male emerged to interrupt Alex’s thoughts. He quickly wiped what sweat he could from around his eyes and lifted a pair of binoculars to them. Through the magnified lenses, he recognized the main suspect, Jesse Franklin, and saw that he looked antsy. Based on his appearance, Alex concluded that Franklin desperately wanted street credit as a legitimate gangster. He wore red-and-white K Swiss sneakers, sagging baggy jeans, “wife beater” undershirt, red bandanas in his right rear jeans pocket and on his head, full-sleeve tattoos of nude women and pit bulls, and a Cincinnati Reds flat-brimmed hat. *He certainly doesn’t want to be confused with an accountant*, Alex surmised, *and he musta thought the muscles came with the shirt.*

Alex watched Franklin repeat the same nervous behavior he had seen several times over the previous five hours: Franklin emerged from the front door while talking on a cellphone, walked south into the unfenced front yard, and looked at the area around his house in an apparent search for any sign of the missing truck or police surveillance. “Relax, young Jesse,” Alex whispered, “the truck’ll be along shortly.” *If the driver’s terrified of El Cuchillo*, Alex thought, *what’s Jesse gonna think about the consequences of losing almost a million dollars of cartel drug money?* Franklin’s presence reminded Alex to stay alert and cautious; despite his amateur efforts, the felony suspect was actively conducting counter-surveillance. “Desperate people do desperate things,” Alex quietly stated aloud.

After watching Franklin return inside the home, he calmly retrieved the clipboard from the front passenger seat to jot more shorthand notes for the supplemental report he would have to write later:

2132 hrs // f/door // cell call // chckd strt 4 trfc // back in < 1min

Franklin's behavior and clothing had not changed since he last emerged from the house eighty-one minutes earlier, so Alex decided not to broadcast his roundtrip to the other detectives. *No reason to distract the other guys with that, he thought, but it feels good that Jesse'll soon realize his paranoia's justified.*

*BEEP BEEP BEEP* The Nextel alarm went off again.

"Alex, anything new?"

"No sir, nothing out here but a bad man missing his truck."

"Good, warrant's signed. SWAT units are headed there now in a few unmarks to set up on the east and north sides of the house. We're going forward with the controlled delivery, but our wire is dead and we can't get a loaner here in time. The driver's wearing an audio recorder, but we can't hear what's being said. Can you see the front door and the entire, and I mean the *whole*, front yard?"

"Yessir, everything but the far, east end, maybe only about ten or twelve feet of grass out of view, but I got the whole front of the structure."

"Okay, time to step up from the bush league, so pay attention...copy?" Jones' tone revealed his typical impatience as the investigation approached its sixth hour.

"Yessir."

"Templeton is going to pull himself out of the stack to call the bust for his SWAT guys. If he can't get into a position to see Franklin accept the delivery, I need you to do it. The driver understands what we need Franklin to say to satisfy our charges against him, and after he does that, the driver will take off his ball cap and wipe his face with a shirt sleeve to signal that Franklin accepted the load."

"Copy. Bust signal is the driver taking off his hat and wiping a sleeve across his face." *Damn, Murphy's fuckin' with us tonight. Stay alert, he told himself, this is when shit goes south.*

"The driver said bad guy is supposed to meet him near the truck, so they should be well away from the front door when he calls the bust. That bust signal and the audio recorder the driver's wearing will lock down the case against Franklin, so just don't fuck up calling it out. SWAT's divided into two smaller tactical elements that will converge from unmarked cars parked east and north of the house, so, if Franklin runs, he'll probably go south toward you. SWAT's gonna detain and handcuff the driver just like the suspect so no one thinks he's an informant. Get your vest on, piss in Chris's water bottle again, and get ready. E-T-A less than ten. Copy?"

"Yes, sir!" *I'm almost outta this shitbox*, Alex thought, and dropped the Nextel into the Neon's cup holder. He reached onto the front passenger seat and retrieved his police radio to await word from Sergeant Templeton, a.k.a. "Zulu-2." Having worked previous investigations and SWAT callouts with Templeton, Alex knew the sergeant would do everything possible to avoid leaving the responsibility of calling out the bust signal to a junior detective like himself. He also understood that Templeton calling the bust signal like this was also unusual, as his normal position as the Special Weapons And Tactics Team Leader was to be fourth in the "stack" whenever the SWAT team entered a residence. From there, he served as their quarterback, and effectively called audible play changes whenever the environment or circumstances in which his team found itself varied from what they planned or expected. Alex deeply respected Templeton's work ethic and his tendency for assigning himself the most dangerous and accountable roles; in Alex's brief

career, he had already seen several supervisors who delegated responsibility away *to* their employees.

After confirming his police radio was set at a reasonable volume, Alex placed it by the Nextel, cautiously collected his ballistic raid vest and gear from the front passenger floorboard, and even donned the equipment without noticeably rocking the small car. *Fuck yeah*, Alex thought as he affixed his external ballistic vest carrier straps in place, *Jesse's going to jail tonight*.

"Zulu-2, radio." The sound of Sergeant Templeton's voice on his police radio gave Alex pause, and he intently waited for the team leader's transmission.

"Go ahead, Zulu-2."

"All involved units en route to the SWAT destination. We're taking our traffic over to Tac-3."

"Copy. All units involved in special operation, move your radio traffic to Tac-3." Alex pinched the tall channel dial between his right thumb and index finger before twisting it two clicks clockwise to reach the desired frequency. After several silent seconds, he picked the radio up to look at the digital display despite being certain his muscle memory had not failed him. Satisfied with its settings, he now secured the radio in the front left pouch of his external ballistic vest carrier and strapped it down with a Velcro fastener; he then depressed a small black button on the center of his vest, just below the neckline, which turned on his Bluetooth headset, and slid the attached silicone stem into his left ear canal.

*booDOOP*

With his earpiece and mic activated, Alex mentally rehearsed a series of "if-then" scenarios to prepare for the most likely outcomes and visualized the impending delivery. *The truck rolls in, he imagined, Franklin comes out, looks around for cops, sees none, gets lippy with the driver for being late, whips out a stack 'o benjis to pay the man, SWAT steamrolls in, Franklin ruins a pair of pants, and nobody gets hurt*. Alex then played through various threat scenarios and preplanned his responses to them, which, should one of them come to fruition, would save critical seconds and potentially mean the difference between life and death.

Reenergized over what the next few minutes held, Alex surprisingly felt no additional misery wearing the vest and its heavy ballistic rifle plates inside the still-broiling Neon. Despite having done so several times over the course of the evening, Alex rechecked his most critical gear: two sets of handcuffs, handcuff key, nitrile gloves, flashlights, Taser, police ball cap. He drew his Glock 17 9mm handgun, the one he couldn't easily access to point at Murray, from its holster on his right hip and slid his right index finger over the protruding chamber indicator on the slide's right side. *Yep*, he thought, *Roscoe's still locked and loaded, just like always*. He similarly checked the Glock 19 back-up gun inside his front waistband, although he already knew the condition of that particular weapon.

Several anxious minutes passed before Alex recognized the dilapidated work van driving south toward him on Center Avenue. Despite being a mechanically sound vehicle, the van appeared dangerously unroadworthy, which helped prevent civilians and criminals from associating it with law enforcement. As it reached 17<sup>th</sup> Street, the van made an unsignaled turn east, continued past Franklin's house, and drove beyond Alex's field of view.

A tan, unmarked Suburban next drove south on Center Avenue, but its driver parked against traffic on the east curb just south of 16<sup>th</sup> Street near the old, blue Chevy truck, and only one house north of Franklin's. Almost immediately thereafter, northbound headlights approached and passed Alex and the Neon, at which time he recognized the white Cadillac Escalade. NEU had seized it from a meth dealer last year, and it presently

served as Sergeant Templeton's unmarked police vehicle whenever he required it for SWAT operations. The Escalade slowed and parked facing north on Center's west curb across from Franklin's house, its driver-side tires up on the sidewalk.

Alex's long-silent police radio came to life and Sergeant Templeton's voice sprung into his left ear. "David-33, Zulu-2, I have eyes on the front and will call the bust."

Thankful to be finished with the Nextel for the time being, Alex clipped it onto his vest's right epaulet. He depressed the police radio mic button, this time to transmit, and dropped his chin a bit toward the device's microphone. "Zulu-2, David-33, I copy, sir, standing by." Alex hoped he sounded calmer than he felt. The last few minutes before an operation kicked off were always the tensest for him. *Is it strange that I feel calmer in the middle of a raid than I do in the minutes leading up to it?*

"Zulu-2, Sam-9, we're now two minutes out, just behind the delivery truck. I'll stop north of the first team and let the truck go the last block on its own."

Alex fought against his body's sympathetic nervous system to remain as calm as possible despite the potential impending danger. *Two minutes*, he thought, *combat breathing, in for four, hold, out for four, repeat*. It felt like an eternity, like the last two minutes of a hotly contested basketball game.

*Relax*, Alex told himself, *and run through the 'if-thens' one last time. Suspect runs toward me, I confront him, shout "POLICE! DON'T MOVE!" loud enough for him and the neighbors to hear it, let him dictate the outcome, get a cover officer, and take him into custody. Suspect runs with a gun, use the engine block for cover, cover him with the fuzzy front sight, yell commands. If he raises the gun, find my clear front sight, squeeze, assess, and repeat until he's no longer a threat.*

A cargo truck turned south onto Center Avenue from Jefferson Street and started the last four blocks to Franklin's home. Alex saw Sergeant Jones' red Ford Expedition, which had also been acquired courtesy of a drug seizure, followed closely behind, which immediately confirmed the conspirator-turned-informant drove the cargo truck.

"Go time," Alex quietly told himself, then watched the cargo truck approach and turn east on 17th, and lawfully park on the south side of the road across from Franklin's home. *Directly in my fuckin' line of sight*, Alex thought, *at least Templeton still has a view of the front yard to call this thing*. Alex sought to hear what happened on the other side of the truck and slowly turned the manual control to lower the driver's window a few inches. A slamming vehicle door announced the driver had exited the rented truck, but, Alex knew he would hear little else because the driver left the truck's diesel engine running. "Nice work, jackass," Alex said aloud, no longer concerned about being overheard.

"Zulu-2, standby, two suspects walking out, white male matching description from briefing and an unknown black male wearing a red hat, red Cardinals football jersey, white pants, and white shoes." Alex assumed the black male to be Jerome McGregor, Franklin's longtime friend and a locally grown criminal. *I never saw him come in*, Alex thought, *so he must have been in there all afternoon*.

The juxtaposed loud, idling diesel and silent police radio captivated Alex's attention and substantially increased his anxiety. He felt and heard blood pumping through his carotid artery. *Come on, give him the money*, he thought, *there's nothing worse than these last few seconds*.

"Zulu-2, white suspect arguing with the driver, pointing at his watch, now at the driver's head with a *finger-gun*, NO visible weapons, repeat, *negative weapons, standby....*"

Radio silence, idling diesel...

Alex couldn't see or hear the commotion on the other side of the truck and fought to control his body's physiological stress responses. He wanted very badly to throw open



the driver's door and rush the front yard. *Deep breath, combat breathing*, he told himself, *in for four, hold, out for four, repeat...*

"Zulu-2, Bust. GO! GO! GO!" Alex opened the Neon's front door and pushed it wide open, leapt from the front seat, and drew his Glock 17 from its holster. He knelt several feet behind the door hinges to use the small engine block and burnt orange door as ballistic cover and elevated the pistol to a high-ready position. The Glock, held in both hands with his arms extended just below being parallel to the ground, barely cleared the Neon's hood and Alex kept its front sight just below his field of view. He held his right index finger extended straight along the right side of the pistol's frame, and, should the need arise, prepared to reflexively find the trigger in a fraction of a second. *Deep breath, combat breathing*, he repeated to himself, *in for four, hold, out for four, repeat...*

Due north of the Neon and apparently out of the suspects' field of view, Alex watched the second tactical team pour out of the tan Suburban toward the residence. At a controlled jog, the team formed a tight, single-file column and quickly stacked up behind a ballistic shield as they hustled to a spot just north of the southwest corner of Franklin's residence. Alex pictured the first team's assumed, similar approach toward the southeast corner of Franklin's front yard, which ensured the teams had a tactically sound "L"-configuration around Jesse and Jerome that prevented crossfire between the two stacks.

"Bang out," calmly broadcast over the police radio and Alex prepared for the impending concussion.

***BANG!*** *merp merp merp ooahh ooahh merp merp merp*

The "flash-bang" diversionary device immediately activated several nearby car alarms. Even though he expected it, the sudden, intense flash that accompanied the *bang* surprised Alex, and produced enough light that Franklin's front yard momentarily appeared as though in daylight. Alex saw the corresponding and equally momentary shadow the rented moving truck cast onto the street in front of him, and he reflexively closed his eyes and looked down despite the light having already passed. Designed to momentarily confuse and disorient the SWAT team's adversaries, Alex knew from his own training and experience the effectiveness of the non-fragmenting, concussive device.

"POLICE! DON'T MOVE! POLICE! DON'T MOVE!" Alex recognized Officer Talbert's loud, booming voice. He alone gave verbal commands to the suspects, thereby avoiding the din of fifteen officers yelling for compliance. Despite being almost a block away, Alex clearly heard Talbert's directives and knew any honest witnesses nearby would, as well.

As he watched the second tactical team move southeast beyond his field of view on the other side of the truck, Alex's discipline kept his feet planted behind the Neon's open door. "GET ON THE GROUND! GET ON THE MOTHERFUCKIN' GROUND!" Alex chuckled at Talbert's characteristic vulgarity. *Talbert's got a good goddamned set of lungs in him*, he thought, *the neighbors fuckin' definitely heard that shit!* "HANDS BEHIND YOUR BACK! DON'T MOVE!"

With most of the SWAT team now out of sight and apparently in control of the front yard, Alex blinked hard a few times to relax his eyes. He turned his head left and right to check his surroundings for any threats, and then returned his focus to the cargo truck and Franklin's front yard. Alex heard only the idling diesel engine, car alarms, muffled verbal commands he assumed to be those necessary to handcuff the driver and both suspects, and a still-silent police radio.

"Zulu-5, show three in custody, suspect advised of search warrant. Mark time of entry for warrant and standby while we clear the residence." Alex glanced at the watch on

his left wrist while keeping his Glock in a two-handed, low-ready position. *2157 hours*, he thought, *just in time, and one less thing for the defense to 'bitch-and-motion' about later.*

Several long minutes passed, filled with nothing but the idling diesel, dissipating car alarms, and continued radio silence. *Time to start really watching everything else now*, Alex told himself. He periodically turned around to check the street and neighborhood behind him for potential threats, and saw several people emerge from nearby homes to investigate the commotion. *Search warrants and SWAT teams, Alex thought, like free food and open bars, tended to bring out the neighbors.* Since being confronted by an aggressive neighbor during a SWAT callout last year, Alex had grown especially vigilant to watch anyone else around him. He looked northwest to check on Templeton's welfare, and saw the sergeant doing the same thing for him. They exchanged a quick, grateful nod before again dividing their respective attention between the neighbors, their own back, and each other.

Another several minutes passed while SWAT cleared the residence of any other occupants, during which time Alex had nothing to do but maintain discipline, hold his position, and wait. Despite his curiosity about what was happening on the other side of the cargo truck, Alex knew his premature presence in the front yard would only earn him a righteous ass chewing from any one of the supervisors now on scene.

"Zulu-8, radio, residence secure, code 4, send in detectives."

"Zulu-8, I copy code 4, residence secure, dispatching detectives." The female dispatcher's calming voice parroted back his directive to ensure her accurate understanding.

"Sam-9, I copy Zulu-8 direct, you can show me, along with David-31, David-32, and Edward-2 on scene." Sergeant Jones, aka "Sam-9," informed police dispatch that he and the two other NEU detectives, Douglas Melner and Michele Lindsay, along with the evidence tech, were on scene. Alex returned the Glock to his right hip, closed and locked the Neon, and walked to Templeton's Cadillac. Two more unmarked DCPD police cars and the fully marked Dry Creek Police Department Crime Scene van drove north past Alex and parked in front of the target house. The DCPD Crime Scene van backed into Franklin's driveway, to both avoid blocking civilian vehicle traffic and to convey official police presence to passersby.

With the target residence now secure, SWAT team members transferred responsibility for the scene and its integrity to NEU detectives. For Alex, that meant an opportunity for more cop work and overtime, which he desperately needed.

"Need anything, sir?" Alex asked as he approached Sergeant Templeton, who was securing his seized Escalade before approaching the residence. The Team Leader, Alex knew, would be around for a while debriefing the warrant service with his team despite having no further assigned tasks at the crime scene.

"No, I'm good, Alex. Thanks for your help. Have fun on surveillance?"

"Big party. Gotta buy Chris a new jug, though, I don't think he wants that one back." After Templeton worked his key fob and a single chirp announced the Escalade's alarm activation, the two men walked toward the front yard together.

"He's been so stoked over finding the truckload of cash, I don't think he even knows yet. Just rinse it once or twice and give it back. Good work. Pound it." Templeton smiled broadly at Alex and held out his left hand to exchange a brief fist bump. In the modern age of ever-present video cameras, Alex knew the image of cops celebrating the successful outcome of a dangerous, high-risk scenario could easily be misinterpreted by the public. "On-camera knuckles?" Templeton asked while scanning their surroundings to identify anyone recording them.

“I haven’t seen any yet, but it’s only a matter of time. Everybody’s got a video camera that also makes phone calls.” *Actually, Alex thought, it’s kinda weird that no one is blatantly filming us.* As they stepped onto Franklin’s crabgrass-and-goat-head lawn, Alex saw several neighbors east of that residence standing in their front yards or on their porches, several clustered with friends and a few with a camera phone pointed toward the officers. *Well, I stand corrected, Alex thought, the media’s JV team is already hard at work.*

As expected, Alex found the officers in the front yard calm, professional, and organized, and saw Franklin, Jerome, and the driver all handcuffed and seated on the front sidewalk. Alex smelled the flash-bang’s burned powder and saw the visibly shaken driver looked just as nervous and guilty as the other two. When one of the SWAT officers pulled Jesse Franklin up to his feet, Alex hastened his steps to try to help.

“Hey, man, you got no right to search me or my house! What the FUCK, man, I don’t care what your paper says! I was jus’ chillin’ wit’ my homie when this dude shows up and asks for directions ‘cuz he’s lost! This is bullshit, man!” Alex saw Franklin pause for breath and look at the nearby officers as though searching for a sympathetic face among them. None found, Franklin changed tactics. “FUCK you, motherFUCKERS, I’m gonna get every one of you fired! Wait ‘til my attorney hears ‘bout this shit!” Now standing at Franklin’s right side, Alex held the suspect’s right arm while a balaclava’ed SWAT officer searched his left pockets. “Get your hands outta my pockets, faggot, I bet you like this, huh?” Franklin turned his head left and yelled into the officer’s ear. “FUCKIN’ COCKSUCKER!” Alex wrapped his left arm around Franklin’s head and pulled it down toward the suspect’s right shoulder.

“Landon, I got the grape, you keep the fucker’s right arm still.” The words no sooner fell on Alex’s ears than Officer Talbert grabbed Franklin’s forehead from behind, and pulled his head up and back until Franklin stared straight up at the night sky.

The searching officer responded calmly, as though nothing unusual had just taken place. “Yep, you got me pegged. Favorite part of my day is searching a sweaty man’s pockets and ball sack, Mr. Franklin.” Alex saw him feign a look of shock and dismay, which Franklin missed due to his stargazing position. “Stop the presses, what’s this, young Jesse? You don’t have a medical marijuana card, do you?” The officer produced a glass smoking pipe with burned marijuana residue and a small bag of hydroponic marijuana from Franklin’s left pants pocket, holding the felonious evidence out for the other three men to see.

“Fuck you, man, these aren’t my pants. They’re my buddy’s, he left them here last night.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever worn another man’s pants, Jesse, but you can talk to the detectives, try to help them find your buddy so they can charge him with the pipe and weed.”

Alex watched Franklin visibly deflate before them and felt the suspect’s body relax. His shoulders sagged forward, and, accordingly, Talbert slightly lessened his grip and restraint on Franklin’s head. With the apparent resolute understanding that the officers could not be provoked into using excessive force or intimidated from carrying out their tasks, Franklin appeared to resign himself to the impending consequences. Having stopped making a fool of himself, Alex hoped NEU could interrogate Franklin while he remained psychologically vulnerable. “Man, fuck you guys. This is bullshit.”

“Alex!” Sergeant Jones yelled across the front lawn and walked to meet him. “Hey, Johnson’s looking for you on channel one. You ask him to arrest some guy for you?”

“Yessir, Steven Murray tried to break into the Neon a bit ago. Johnson was on it quick, so I figured passing that along would just be a distraction given everything else we had going on.”

“Well, sounds to me like you mightuh fucked up, but let’s discuss that tomorrow since you’re already on overtime. Go ahead and bounce. A couple Property Detectives are still hanging around, they can help us go through the house. Go home and see your wife before somebody else does.”

“I really wasn’t that worried about it since you’re still here, sir.” *Fuck*, Landon thought, *I didn’t piss in a jug for five hours just to go home now that the skirt’s off.*

“Good work today, on this at least, keep it up. We’ll sort the Murray thing out later.” Jones extended his right hand, which Alex reflexively shook, and then walked toward the open front door of Franklin’s home. Keeping his thoughts to himself for the moment, Alex switched his police radio back to channel one, and shared a few handshakes and fist bumps with other officers and detectives as he made his way out of the scene and spoke with Officer Johnson. *Good*, Alex thought, *he grabbed Murray trying to break into another car a few blocks away. He’ll have a whole new number to kill now, and more good behavior credit to earn.*

After dropping his gear into the Neon’s trunk, Alex texted his wife, Genevieve, to let her know he was safe, and stowed his gear to drive back toward the station. *Damn, we could use a few more hours of overtime off that warrant*, he thought, *another month of creative budgeting coming up.* Alex sighed and thought about the dark, seemingly empty home he expected to find. Genevieve often went to bed early since she lost her job the previous year and hadn’t yet found new employment. He couldn’t remember the last time she stayed awake much past sunset. *Too bad there’s not a decent bar nearby*, he thought, *a few pints and some darts would be good right now.*

GAVIN REESE



AN  
**ALEX  
LANDON**  
THRILLER

**ENEMIES**  
**DOMESTIC**

A large, stylized eagle emblem with spread wings is centered behind the title text. The eagle is rendered in a light, textured style, possibly a watermark or a subtle background element. Its wings are spread wide, and its head is turned to the left. The emblem is positioned behind the words "ENEMIES" and "DOMESTIC", which are written in large, bold, serif and sans-serif fonts respectively.

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