

“The greatest mistake you can make in life is to continually fear you will make one.”
~Elbert Hubbard, 1927

Prologue

■ April 16, this year.

There was simply no way Jack Mohney could get to his seat without drawing even more attention. The retirement ceremony began two minutes ago, so he stood in the lush green grass at the end of the makeshift stage until the pledge of allegiance was over. In order to create as little disruption as possible, he would time his final dash up the single step and onto the portable aluminum platform as everyone took their seats.

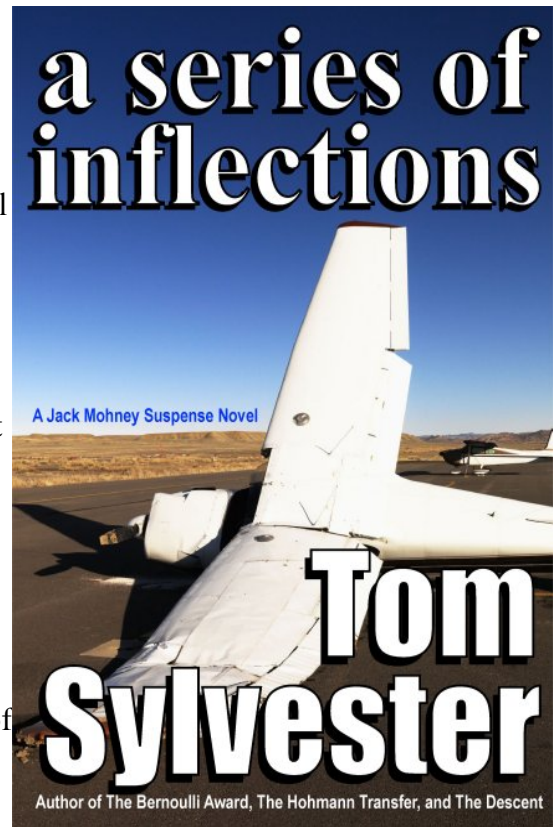
He had arrived out of breath and sweating, a black airline roller bag in one hand, his flight bag in the other. The seventy-five yard sprint from the curb to the grassy, open area had taken his breath away. He had walked the last hundred feet, so he wouldn't cause a commotion amongst the attendees. Of course, his awkward jog carrying his bags from the curb had been in full view of the people on the stage. He sat both bags in the grass on the side of the stage, behind the American flag, and caught his breath. He wasn't out of shape by any means, but he certainly wasn't twenty anymore. One seat was clearly open on the outdoor stage, a temporary structure positioned parallel to the eastern edge of the Potomac River. To make matters worse, he was still dressed in his airline uniform, which made him look like a French cruise ship captain. He should have been dressed in his Air Force Colonel Class A's.

But there had been no time for that. He got word of the ceremony only three days prior and had already left home on a regular trip pairing. Thus he didn't have his Air Force uniform with him anyway. Fortunately, he had been able to change his schedule, swapping the Dulles leg with another captain. As a check airman, he had much more flexibility than a regular line pilot.

His arrival—thirty minutes behind schedule—at Dulles from Tokyo's Narita Airport, required him to dash off the airplane and bolt through customs ahead of the rest of the crew. Then he ran to the curb and hailed a cab for a very expensive ride straight to Bolling Air Force Base—just in time to be late. He hated being late.

Major General Gary Mitchell “Snootch” Nogrady noticed him and couldn't help but chuckle. He didn't often see Jack frazzled and sweaty. The two-star general had known him since they were eighteen year-old “smacks” at the Academy.

Jack hadn't seen Snootch in several years and was shocked at how bad he looked, even from twenty feet away. Deep half-moons underlined his two vacuous eyes. Sure, he was smiling—it was his



retirement celebration—but clearly Snootch was not well. Nonetheless, Jack smiled back and shucked his shoulders. Better late than never.

When the opportunity presented itself, Jack glided to his seat with the rest of the dignitaries, mostly three- and four-star generals. The only other two-star was the incoming Defense Intelligence Agency Director, Robert “Ferd” Guessferd. Jack didn’t know him. There were also four men in power suits, most notably the Director of the CIA and the Vice President. Jack had worked with the director many years ago when they were just schmucks. But to have the Vice President show up: *Cool*. That explained the look he got from the two men in suits behind the stage, guarding the VP’s back, or “six.”

He slapped the shoulder of Snootch as he plopped into the open seat—the one reserved for him right next to the soon-to-be-retired Major General Gary Mitchell Nogrady. He never used the “Snootch” cognomen when anyone outside the old inner-circle was present.

Jack exhaled. He was still in the same uniform he’d been in since he dressed for work some sixteen hours earlier at the Narita Radisson. He needed a shave. He also needed to lean into a toothbrush for a few minutes.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the Director,” came a young voice through the portable loudspeakers. Everyone began clapping. The event had at most a hundred people there, with half of the attendees in some sort of military uniform. Most would be asked to carry back their respective folding chair back across the grass to the curb on their way back to the huge Defense Intelligence Agency Headquarters building looming a few blocks to the east, safely inside the fence at Bolling. The CIA director stood from his folding chair two down from him. Jack glanced at him, gave him a “hey old friend” nod, which was returned with pent-up glee as the middle-aged man moved up to the microphone. *What’s his name? Weber. Gary Weber. Boy, it’s been a while.* Jack then continued turning his head all the way behind him, and took in the incredible view of the small waves hitting the immaculately manicured rip-rap on the shore of the Potomac. Across the wide river was Reagan National Airport, busy as usual. The departures were to the north, up the river. Anyone seated on the right side of a departing airplane could see that some sort of festive event was occurring just beyond the shore, across the river. A perfect day in D.C.

The director spent about ten minutes describing in gross generalities about all of the accomplishments that Snootch had made, but of course he couldn’t really talk about the details due to national security concerns. The whole “I’d love to tell you how great he was, but then I’d have to kill you” dialog could have been entertaining, but the man was a horrible stand-up comic and made Jack wonder how this man made it all the way to the leader of Central Intelligence.

“Glad you could make it, fart breath,” Snootch whispered, and offered him a mint.

He took one. “Thanks, Snootch. That’s what I get for kissing airline executives.”

Snootch looked him straight in the eye. “Seriously, I am so glad you could make it, Jack. Listen, I get one more ride in the staff car after this is over. Come to the house?” It wasn’t a question. It was an order.

“Don’t you have more pomp and circumstance to endure?”

“We have to talk.”

Jack looked in his eyes. The man was sick. Maybe it was the strain of the job. No, he decided. There was something physically wrong. He’d known him too long. “O.K.”

Clapping and laughter erupted. Both of them missed it, and decided to pay better attention. This was about Snootch, after all. A few minutes later, the CIA Director introduced the Vice President who made a few remarks, then invited General Nogrady to stand and receive a medal. He already had a chest full of them.

All stood when the retirement orders were read by the Vice President. Typical retirement ceremony. Lots of clapping, little substance.

When the ceremony ended, all attendees remained in place until the VP and the Director walked back through the plush green lawn and over to their respective staff cars. The VP had five. The CIA Director had just one. Snootch slapped him on the back, said “I’ll make this quick” and proceeded to shake hands and smile with anyone and everyone who was there, all the way to the youngest airman, who could easily have been a son of his. He was a good man, Jack reminded himself. Jack had always been the subordinate, particularly during those tough years following Linda’s death—and that was so very long ago. It happened only a few miles from here, he recalled—at about this time of day.

“Jack, good to see you!” came from behind.

Jack turned around and saw a colonel—an old friend—extend his hand.

“Jeez, Greg. Are you ever going to retire?” he jibed.

“Someone has to watch the store. We’re running out of old school talent.”

“You can’t tell me the new kids aren’t up to the challenge.”

The colonel shook his head. “Sure. They’re smart enough. But they think it’s all done with electronics and software. You and I know that HumInt [human intelligence] is where the bacon is fried, and all these kids want to do is get techie with it.”

“Hey, Greg. What’s the deal with his retirement?”

“I don’t know. Pretty sudden. Seems like he was run out on a rail.”

They both stared at the two-star general who was working his way through the dwindling crowd, saying goodbye.

No one would ever guess that Jack and Snootch had once streaked through the Air Gardens together when at the Academy. Five times through buck naked and you’re an “Ace.” The ace connotation was easily understood, yet it all seemed a bit nubile these days. Jack was an Ace, many times over. Never got caught. He had the knack. Snootch, the now-retiring director of defense intelligence, never made it—he always got caught by some upperclassman or an officer, even when he tried it late at night. Getting caught was not enjoyable; not in the least. In fact, that’s why being an ace carried such distinction. The punishment usually involved some peer humiliation, lots of push-ups, and walking “tours,” or simulated guard duty for hours at a time while everyone else was at Arnold Hall drinking watered-down beer.

Jack looked at Snootch and thirty years of memories came rushing back. From a skinny freshman—a Cadet Fourth Class—to the head of Defense Intelligence. Hard to believe. Even harder to believe was knowing the kinds of decisions that Snootch had to make while holding that position. Yes, Jack knew all about those kinds of decisions, because he himself had been ordered by Snootch to do things that could have resulted in his own demise or foreign incarceration had things gone south. It couldn’t have been easy for Snootch to send his best friend out on high-risk missions: Jack wasn’t even a real spook—just a “spook of opportunity” or “rent-a-spook” as Snootch had once said. It did get him an O-6 (Colonel) promotion in the Air Force Reserves, but even to this day he wondered whether it had been worth the risk. No one at the airlines had a clue what he did on those long Hong Kong and Taiwan overnights.

Yet he learned much later that Snootch had probably *saved* his life by getting him reassigned after Linda’s death. Behind the scenes, Snootch got him out of the cockpit and into a temporary desk job as an intel officer for a year following his sudden loss. You can’t grieve and fly—Jack knew that all too well now. But as a twenty-four year old, he thought he was bulletproof. Snootch was more controlled than Jack could ever be, which is why he made it to the top of the intel world. “Flying can

wait—get your mind straight first,” he had told Jack a week after Linda's death.

Snootch, Linda, and Jack had all graduated together from The United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Snootch was Jack's best man at the wedding at the Cadet Chapel, the day after graduation. Interestingly, Snootch saw more of Linda over the first two years than Jack did, since he went off to undergraduate pilot training (UPT). Neither Linda nor Snootch went to UPT. So by the time he got Jack settled in at DIA, Snootch had a two-year leap on him as to how things were done in the intel world. He made sure that Jack's new bosses kept him busy, to keep his mind off of his horrible loss. Then a year later, Snootch worked out a deal with the Manpower and Personnel Center to let him get out and fly for the airlines while completing the rest of his Air Force commitment doing reserve duty as an intel officer. Snootch was a guy who could make things happen.

Soon, Snootch and Jack got into the staff car and headed towards the Wilson Bridge and Snootch's home just south of Alexandria, Virginia, about fifteen minutes away. As he crossed the newly-completed replacement bridge, he took in the beautiful view of the nation's capital to the north. He had always enjoyed DC, even though he hadn't lived there since the eighties.

Jack looked around the back of the black Lincoln Town Car, “How am I going to get back to Dulles?”

Snootch looked at the driver, a young airman. “Lenny, what time are you off duty?”

“Sir, I'm available as long as you need me,” came from the front.

“Can you give this fine man a run out to Dulles—”

“—Comfort Inn in Herndon.”

“Comfort Inn, say, at about ten tonight?”

“Yes, General.”

“Thanks.” Then he looked at Jack. Where to tomorrow?”

“Back to San Fran, and I'm done—six day trip back and forth to Japan. Good thing I'm a check airman and could rearrange my schedule to have an overnight here. I didn't get much notice. But I don't leave until nine P.M. tomorrow night so we can do some serious 'debriefing' with adult beverages. You've earned it, bud.”

“I'm glad you made it.”

“Me too.” Then Jack lowered his voice. There was no beating around the bush. “O.K. what's going on?”

“Leukemia. Pretty aggressive.”

“Aw, shit, Snootch. I'm so sorry.”

“The simple lesson is: Blow your retirement savings early.”

Jack didn't smile.

“Hey, it's O.K. I'm just chasing Rhonda. I ain't dead yet, though. I start chemo tomorrow.”

“I was wondering why I got so little notice for your retirement ceremony.”

“Yeah, I got the boot as soon as the diagnosis came in. All my stuff from my office is in boxes in my garage. It's already like I was never there. Some day you need to help me go through those boxes.” He gave Jack a hard look.

Jack changed the subject, “Who's this General Guessferd guy?”

“They call him 'Ferd.' On name alone, it sounds like he'd be a good guy to work with. But the word is he can be a real ass-bite. He's been over at NSA for years, doing deep black work. No one here knows him very well.”

“Yeah, I met everyone but the VP—who bolted right after it ended—and Ferd.”

They arrived at his modest house and went inside. Jack left his roller bag and flight case in the

staff car. Jack noticed that all of Rhonda's collectibles and artwork were still in the house. It was though she was still there and would peek her head around the corner at any moment. But it had been almost three years since she died. Jack had stayed with Snootch for almost three weeks after her death, having traded trips and rearranged his vacation time. It was the only time Jack had ever seen Snootch cry. Two guys, both widowers before their time.

For a good hour they talked about everything, and about nothing. Even if it had been a year since seeing each other, they talked as though they had just seen each other yesterday. Throwing back a few beers, Snootch excused himself and walked out to the staff car to bring Lenny a bag of Doritos and a couple cans of Coke. Jack went off in a different direction to the bathroom. Washing his hands, he looked in the mirror and saw a man approaching fifty, sorely in need of a shave and some sleep. He saw the scars of a man who never fully recovered from the loss of his wife some twenty-five years ago. He also saw a man who just found out his life-long friend was dying. He couldn't bear the thought. He washed his face which made him feel a little better. Life doesn't end, it just fades. Pity.

They talked for another half an hour about nothing in particular, then it got quiet. Snootch, closed his eyes for a couple of seconds, then looked at Jack, quite seriously. "I have something to tell you, Jack."

"Haven't you told me enough?"

"Twenty-five years ago this May the fifth, Linda died."

"I know. I wish it had happened on some other day. *Cinco de Mayo* never had the same ring to it." Jack still vividly remembered getting the call from the Park Service Police, "Mr. Mohny?" they had asked. He corrected them as "It's Lieutenant Mohny. Speaking," then he heard the bad news arrive over the phone, "I'm afraid we have some bad news, sir..."

Over the phone. Twenty-five years ago, Jack had been told that his wife had been murdered—over the phone. Sure, it was a procedural mistake, but a mistake nonetheless. When he hung up, he was completely alone in the world. That was so long ago, yet it was like yesterday.

"I have something I want to tell you. I feel I have to."

Jack sat back in his chair, took a swig of beer, and said, "Go."

"Linda's murder was no random act. It wasn't a drive-by shooting. She was targeted and murdered intentionally."

Jack looked confused. How would he know this now? "Seriously?"

"Yes. I thought this was something I shouldn't take to my grave with me."

"I should say not."

They stared at each other, with Snootch hesitating, then knowing what would follow, offered, "Look, nothing like this is cut and dry. Remember when we lifted the prints off the shell casings?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, we've gotten very good over the past five years at matching prints against millions of people around the world."

"Who was it?"

"You see, twenty-five years ago nothing was computerized. Now, everyone is ID'd. Back then, when Linda was working for the Foreign Technology Division she was about to blow the lid on some illegal microprocessor shipments to Taiwan. She discovered this when she analyzed the time and employee productivity estimates at ChipPro in Sunnyvale. They made a critical error in trying to hide their productivity—a raw materials uptick with no corresponding uptick in output, plus doctored shipping records. The FBI caught a batch of thousands of eight-bit microprocessors—big power back then—being loaded on a Taiwanese airline. They were going to be transferred by boat to Guangdong

by Chinese smugglers. Two days after the intercept, Linda is dead in her car at L'Enfant Plaza.”

“Who?”

“At the time, he was a thug inside the Chinese Embassy.”

Jack glared at him rather than saying “Who?” for the third time.

“His name is Cho Chu. And he's now the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Toto Motors, the biggest car maker in China and third largest car manufacturer in the world.”

“What? How did he go from thug to CEO?!”

“He was a patriot for his country. He's also quite smart and industrious. And obviously he never pissed off the wrong people. We've had a file on him for years, but we just got his prints when we started requiring them with customs entry into the U.S.”

Jack let the news sink in. He tilted his head up and looked at the ceiling, then asked, “How long have you known?”

“Two years. Look, there's no statute of limitations on murder, but all we have a print on the shell casing found near the murder scene. The bullet was never found. The injury was nonspecific to an exact caliber match. We would never get an extradition, much less a conviction. I'm only telling you this for closure, so you won't look at every yo-yo on the street wondering which dirt bag in our midst did it.”

Jack closed his eyes. He knew the news would not bring Linda back. Yet he waited for that warm fuzzy to pass over him, the contentedness he would soon feel by knowing the murder had been solved.

But it didn't. He thought about this man, Cho Chu, a captain of industry, who made it to the top by assassinating people in the name of his own country.

“Snootch. Thank you for telling me.” Then he tried to change the subject, “Look, I have to fly back to San Fran, but then I'm off for a week before I'm back doing line checks. I'll run back and help you with this chemo.”

“Your changing the subject means you are already scheming to go after him. I suggest you just move on and let God judge him in the afterlife. And, regarding your coming back here for some hand-holding—no thanks. I'd love to see you, but this is a battle best engaged alone. I'll get through it, then you can come out when I'm ready to play golf again. Listen,” he said at last, “sometime you'll have to help me unpack some of the boxes in the garage.”

Jack nodded, but thought that was kind of an odd request. They stood, hugged each other like lifelong friends would, then Jack left in Snootch's staff car. Jack thought about his life at age fifty. He wasn't going to just fade away. Call it revenge. Call it deferred justice. This man, Cho Chu, was marked. Jack had spent the last twenty-five years wondering what would have been. Poor Linda. Now he knew what he had to do. And he was going to need to pull together a team of old colleagues to make this work.

Major General Gary Mitchell “Snootch” Nogrady died the next day, one hour into what should have been a routine chemo treatment. ■

Part I: Blytheville, Arkansas

Chapter One

■ April 16, forty-two years ago.

One eye squeezed shut, the perspicacious second grader hovered his other eye over the microscope and squinted into the single eyepiece. Young Jack Mohny twisted the black, grooved knob back and forth until the small organisms appeared. He had been given only two days with it and wanted to check out every possible small living creature he could see during the weekend. He had been puzzled at the look that Mrs. Roberds had given him before school let out when he asked if he could bring it home and use it over the weekend. What had she said to him? “Wouldn't you rather play baseball or something this weekend?”

His response was quick and almost contemptuous. “Why don't you want me to learn more about microorganisms? Maybe *you* should teach baseball and let the P.E. coach teach your class?”

He got the same look that he got from his mother occasionally and didn't push it any further. She didn't say anything to him, just turned and put it in its Styrofoam container and slid it into the cardboard box. At last, she said, “I don't have to tell you that it's very fragile.”

He nodded, then grabbed the box and scampered away.

As soon as he got home, he set up the microscope on the kitchen table and began his investigations. He started out with blank glass slides and was amazed at the life already on them. He dipped one of the slides in Clorox, then looked again: No movement. It shocked him. How many squiggly micro-animals did he just murder? This was the first time he killed anything. It almost made him cry. He pulled out the glass slide and washed it off in the sink. He didn't want to kill any more creatures, no matter how small they were. They had done nothing to him.

Convinced that he cleaned off all of the Clorox, he wiped the wet slide on his bright green nylon gym shorts, then again with his white tank top t-shirt and wandered out the back door, the screen slamming back against the frame making a familiar *schwhapp*.

“Where are you going?” his mother asked from the den.

“To the ditch to get some specimens,” he replied, yelling back into the tiny orange brick house.

“Well don't get all dirty. And it's getting dark. I have to run pick up your little sister, then we're having dinner. So don't wander off.”

He said, “I won't” but his voice trailed as he turned.

The Mohny home was perfect, as far as he was concerned. He didn't know he existed in the lower middle class. It was on the very edge of town, its chain-link fenced backyard faced a large cotton field, freshly plowed for the new season. Beyond the cotton field was a big ditch that had snakes and turtles and ducks—and provided a natural border to the B-52 base where the huge jets sat in the distance, their tall tails sticking up everywhere to the northwest. He got an air show every day from his bedroom window.

At only eight years old, he already knew the pointy-tailed B-52s were the older “D” models and that the base was getting some of the newer “H” models with the tops of the tails cut off. He could also

recognize the KC-135s, the flying gas stations that refueled the B-52s when they had to go bomb the Russians.

Blytheville Air Force Base represented a link to the vast world beyond the confines of the tiny farm town—that and *I Dream of Jeannie*. Some day he would be a pilot. And a doctor. Oh yeah, and an astronaut too, just like Gus Grissom. His teachers told him he could be anything he wanted to be, and he wanted to be many things. All he had to do was study hard. That was no problem.

He walked along the edge of the field out towards the ditch, and looked at the huge dirt clods. He remembered how the huge tractors had tilled the field last year; the first run created big chunks of dirt, essentially flipping over the soil, burying last year's cotton twigs and stems, everything that was left over after the cotton pickers harvested the white puffs from the bolls. The tractor would soon be coming through again soon to turn the big clods into smaller ones. Maybe he would be home when the crop duster would fly by and spray some white stuff on the field. Last year he sat on the edge of the field for hours, hoping the distant crop dusters would do “his” field.

As he walked away from the straight row of tiny homes that lined the edge of the huge cotton field, he heard some kids playing at a neighbors house, but didn't bother looking back. They were all two years older than he was—fourth graders, age in double-digits—and knew they wouldn't let him play with them anyway.

He kept on walking, careful not to get his white Converse sneakers dirty. The sneakers were the latest, the kind the NBA players had: high-tops. It was cool to leave the top three eyelets open, but he opted to tie them all the way up so he wouldn't twist his ankle on a dirt clod. Shoes could be washed, he reasoned; a sprained ankle would hurt for days.

After about ten minutes he reached the ditch and carefully guided himself down to the muddy edge. No snakes yet—a little too early in the season. He took the glass slides out of his pocket and dipped them in the murky, green sludge next to the edge of the water. Then he dipped the mason jar into the stagnant water and held it up to examine it in the receding sunlight. It was virtually opaque. Perfect.

On his way back, he saw three boys in a tree—his tree! What were they doing in his backyard, inside his fence line? As he got closer he could see they were climbing out on a mid-level branch, trying to get to a bird nest. Jack started to jog, but unsure of the reception he would get when he got there, decided to walk and not mess up his specimens. Maybe they would be gone by the time he arrived.

Jack focused on the gang leader and recognized him: J.B. Brown. He had a yard-long stick in his hand and slowly brought it back as he pulled himself closer to the nest. He moved with the grace of a leopard stalking a wildebeest.

Jack wanted to yell, “Get out of my tree!” but fully understood the concept of getting an ass-whooping by bullies. He continued to walk towards the house, albeit more slowly now.

Suddenly, J.B. slammed the stick down on the nest, the entire branch swaying from the force of his attack. The nest disintegrated and tumbled down through the trees, the tiny eggs falling to the grass below at a noticeably higher speed. “No!” Jack yelled, but none heard him because they were all yelling at the mother dove, who had been hit and was trying to fly away but was instead spiraling down to the ground. The older boys quickly scampered down the tree, onto the green grass in his yard and over to the bird, which was still frantically trying to fly but was clearly wounded.

A vitriolic rage erupted inside Jack as he ran the remaining hundred yards, gliding across the massive dirt clods. Mason jar in hand, its contents already emptied, he let it fly. The fist-sized jar arced well over their heads and impacted midway up the roof of the house with a deep thud and

simultaneous chime of glass exploding in a outward Brownian wave.

“Leave it alone! Get out of my yard.” Jack's deep blue eyes focused on J.B. as he bounded the fence, his hands firmly grasping the top, horizontal pole, legs whipping over the side. The boys moved in closer as Jack sprinted towards J.B., out of control, at full throttle. He dove into J.B., swinging.

And missed.

J.B. merely sidestepped, watching the flapping projectile sail past, land in the grass and roll.

“You monster. What did you do?!” He started to get up, but the boys pushed him down; he was clearly no match for the trio of ten year olds.

J.B. walked over to the bird and scooped it up. It was clearly alive, but one of its wings was partially extended. He walked a few steps towards Jack, smirked, then turned and threw the bird with all of his might over the fence and into the plowed field.

The bird never moved during its final, parabolic flight.

Jack bolted up with surprising speed and flew head-long into J.B., surprising him. The went backwards as a single heap. Jack, never having fought before, began swinging his arms at J.B., who quickly regained his composure and pushed him aside, then quickly got to his feet and kicked Jack in the gut, knocking the breath out of him.

At that moment, “Boys!” erupted from behind the screen door. It was Mrs. Mohny and she was all business. The boys sprinted away before she could swing open the screen door, thinking distance was the key to survival.

Jack knew he was going to die, right then and there. Why couldn't he breathe? He was trying to. He just couldn't. He started to panic, grasping for her—anyone really. Then his diaphragm recovered slightly and he got a half-breath in. He uttered something, but it was unintelligible. Then he caught a full breath, and did everything he could to not cry out like a baby.

“Are you OK? I'm going to call Annie Brown. That boy is not going to get away with bullying you.”

“No.” It's all he could manage. He rolled on his side, away from her as she approached. She knelt down and touched his shoulder. He raised the back of his hand to her, indicating he was OK, then stood up slowly and walked towards the back gate, never facing her. She would see the tears.

As he got to the fence, he said, “Don't call Mrs. Brown. It's over. He knows he messed up.” He walked out about fifteen rows into the field and located the dove. He dropped to his knees to get a closer look. It was indeed dead, though he didn't need to really confirm it. He witnessed its lifeless body tumble through the air.

He waved off his mother from twenty-five yards away, who turned and went back into the house. He heard the screen door close with a schwap. He looked closely at the bird. He had never seen one up close before. The eyes were solid black and non-responsive. He poked it. Nothing. He touched the wing, then slowly pulled the wing out and examined the shape, the airfoil. It was fascinating. All of the rigidity was near the front of the wing; the rest was feathers. He rolled it onto its back. The power must come from the bird's chest. He looked at the bird as he would a machine. Then he thought about whether there was a bird heaven. Then he got angry again, picked it up by one of its legs and brought it back to the house, laying it on top of the metal garbage can at the corner of the building. *This is not over.*

When he got in the house, he was instructed to clean up for dinner, which he did. When his father got home, they sat down for spaghetti, which he devoured. Mrs. Mohny told her husband about the fight, and Jack's dad looked over at him for confirmation.

Jack said, "I'm fine. He won't be bigger than me forever."

"When it comes to fights, run if you can. If you can't, be sure you get the first punch in before he knows what hit him," his dad said. His dad then finished the short lecture: "And contain him until he's no longer a threat. Fights aren't like in the movies. The guy that gets the first punch in usually wins." When his dad gave him advice, it was internalized.

Jack nodded. And that was that.

Almost like on cue, at two A.M., Jack got up quietly and dressed. He laced up his Converse, this time leaving the top three eyelets open. He walked through the darkened house, opened the fridge, the light blinding him temporarily. He grabbed the glass ketchup bottle. It was half-empty. Then he tip-toed over and opened the back door, being careful not to make it schwap when he closed it. He had never been outside this late before. The air base, a couple miles away, was glowing orange from the ramp floodlights, but was otherwise completely silent.

He went to the garbage can and grabbed the dead bird. The air was cold and damp as he glanced up at the sky full of stars. It was a bit spooky to be out at such a late hour, yet he never reconsidered his plan. He glided between the Steinsiek's and the Shouse's house, and crossed the parallel street and went straight to the garage of the Brown's. His heart was pounding, so he waited until he calmed down a bit. Their dog was always put out in the back yard at night. However, if the dog was awakened, his plan would be foiled. In Blytheville Arkansas in the late sixties, no one locked their doors at night. Their garage door didn't have both a screen door and a regular door—only one door, with two small windows, slightly offset, a post World War II style. Bird and ketchup in his left hand, he twisted the door knob with his right hand ever so slowly until it released. The door didn't creak at all when he slid inside into the darkened kitchen of the enemy.

He left the door ajar and walked through the tiny home through the kitchen, into the den, and down the hallway to the first door on the right. He had been to J.B.'s birthday party last year, just like the other neighbor kids, so he knew exactly where the room was.

He stood silently in the doorway, and at once, felt completely at ease. The streetlight was illuminating J.B. He was on his back, toes sticking out of the sheet, legs spread apart, one arm at his side. The other arm was hanging slightly over the bed.

He made two slow steps to the bed and laid the dead bird between his legs, on top of the sheet. Then he slowly poured a half-bottle of ketchup on top of the bird. He took his time, breathing steadily. When he was finished, he simply turned and left. At this point, he didn't care if he woke him. Yet the impact of the discovery would probably be more pronounced if he wasn't there when it happened, so he crept out of the house and just as carefully closed the door, then walked down the driveway to the street, then ran home.

The whole mission had lasted only fifteen minutes, tops. Once he got home, he threw the empty ketchup bottle into the field, reminding himself to go get it later and examine the ketchup under the microscope now that it would no doubt have some organisms growing in it by tomorrow. Only after climbing back into bed did he realize the extent to which he would go to punish the guilty. Though he certainly didn't realize it at that moment, this trait would stay with him throughout his life. This was an inflection point, not the first, but one of many he would have that would shape the person he would become as an adult. Nonetheless, he tossed and turned for the rest of the night, waiting for the phone to ring or for the police to show up.

Nothing happened.

The next morning, he began his microscopic research again. None of the ten year olds showed

up. He expected something, a phone call from J.B.'s parents to his parents, perhaps.

On Monday morning, he was standing outside the school doors talking to his friend Ross Dueber. Dueber looked beyond Jack, who turned to see J.B. walk right up and hover over him. J.B. was a full two inches taller than Jack.

“I'm going to beat you to a pulp,” J.B. announced.

Before the word “pulp” was finished, Jack brought his fist from his side in a straight line to J.B.'s throat. It happened so fast that it was over before it started. J.B. dropped to the ground, clutching his own throat.

Jack leaned down on a knee and calmly said, “If anyone touches me, *you* will die. Got it?”

J.B. began coughing.

Eight year old Jack stood and looked around. The kids all gathered around. Jack put his white, high topped Converse tennis shoe squarely in the jaw of J.B., who began to cry uncontrollably. Humiliated, he ran home and his seat in Mrs. Simon's class remained empty for two days.

No one saw a thing.

J.B. avoided Jack for the rest of the Spring, and his father was transferred out of town just after school let out for the summer. J.B. was gone, however the confrontations awaiting Jack in the future years didn't always end so cleanly. ■

Chapter Two

■ August 11, thirty-four years ago.

His eyes were on fire, and there was nothing Jack could do about it. The one hundred and five degree, salty perspiration worked its way from underneath his filthy Saint Louis Cardinals baseball cap, via various tributaries, dislodging soot and silt along its short journey directly into Jack's eyebrows. From there, this sludge would collect, then overflow into the corners of his eyes. He had no shirt to dab away the sweat. It had been used earlier to open the radiator cap on the tractor, which became his first practical lesson in Boyle's Law, though the blister from the hot fluid was now lost amongst his other maladies.

He could handle the manual labor and the endless monotony of the job. He could even endure the hundreds of tiny lacerations on his forearms, underneath all of the caked-on layers of dirt and grime, each one begging to be scratched. Hay straw was anything but soft. But it was the poisoned fluid in the eyes that made him want to scream. This amalgam of superheated contaminants created more distress than any other aspect of throwing hay bales on Mrs. Clothier's farm.

It wasn't like he needed the money. He really had no expenditures, other than buying Cox fuel for his radio controlled airplane. He got five bucks each time he mowed his yard, which was required twice a week, since everything grew at an alarming rate in the rich river delta soil beneath the steamy summer skies.

That was ten bucks a week, just for his house. He did three other neighbors' yards, too, at about the same price. The basics of economic supply and demand theory were tossed his way via his lawn mowing. But the more subtle aspects of diminishing marginal utility were lost on him, because mowing was easy and mindless. He actually enjoyed it. What he didn't know was most of the neighbors and even perhaps his dad would have paid twice what he demanded.

But tossing hay bales—that was different. Shit pay for shitty work, that's what that job was. He got an hourly rate that seemed impressive, even at today's rates. But the degree at which he suffered hardly made it worth it, regardless of the paycheck.

Yet, his dad had told him, “No matter what: finish the job. If you signed up for it, you do it. Don't ever quit. Ever. The job will end eventually, but never walk out on an agreement.”

So he slaved away. This particular day, he was working in the hay field at the threshold of Runway 18, just outside the tall fence that encompassed Blytheville Air Force Base. In fact, Mrs. Clothier had land inside the fence that she farmed. He always wondered how that had been arranged.

If it were possible, she would have farmed one hundred percent cotton. It was the big cash crop. But the soil, of course, couldn't handle the strain so she rotated other crops such as soybeans and hay straw to keep the soil nourished. Only about ten percent was actually hay. Most farmers were doing soy beans as the rotation, but Mrs. Clothier kept a small bevy of farm animals near her ranch house north of town, mostly because she was an animal lover and her late husband tolerated it. The soil was far too valuable to support cattle or hogs, but she had a few head of each, along with half a dozen dogs and the occasional cat or two to take care of the barn mice.

The baler machine had come through the week before, reaping the straw and compacting it into square bales, which were held together tightly with two looped wires. Now that the bales had dried in the field, he was hired to heave them from the ground, up and into a slowly moving flat bed trailer being pulled by an old black man on a small tractor. That man had been the Clothier's employee for more than forty years. Jack had no idea where he lived, who his family was, but there he was at work each and every time he went to the Clothier's farm. He spoke very little, but when he did, it was a gem of a tip to store away for future use.

Such as, "Don't never just twist open a radiator cap. Use your shirt, just in case. Even if the motor's been off all day, expect it to spew steam, so angle yourself away from it."

Good words, but he still got burned earlier that day.

The stacking of hay bales thankfully lasted only three days a few times each season, but this particular day was tougher than any day he had ever endured. It was unmercifully hot, and the three men were feeling the effects. The other teenager catching the bales on the trailer and stacking them was a guy from nearby Gosnell. Jack had never met him before and the dude was always complaining. They were all miserable and didn't need further reminders. And that guy got the easier job. Stacking involved less bending and heaving.

Suddenly, he heard it—long before the other two did. He turned around and saw a huge, black and green monster of an airplane coming right at them.

It was beautiful.

Jack ran ahead to where the tractor's front tire was creeping along and grabbed a bale, running back to the moving trailer, where he then he threw it at the dude's feet and jogged forward again. That gave him probably twenty seconds of free time to watch the B-52 fly right over their heads at less than two hundred feet. The sound was tremendous and the earth shook. God would he love to be there right now. As it descended right over his head he could easily see into the wheel wells. He saw the drooping Fowler flaps and had never noticed before just how far out and down they went when deployed.

The dude and the old black man looked up, of course, but could not have been less interested.

Then, right when it was nearing its landing flare, the mighty aircraft's eight Pratt & Whitney TF33 engines erupted in black smoke and the landing was aborted. Again, the ground shook. It was a practice low approach and a bonus for Jack.

Then he rubbed his eyes. Big mistake. He got back to work, miserable again.

An hour later, the trio were almost done. Only a few more passes back and forth and the bales would all be on the trailer, their third one stacked to the top.

Jack was walking slowly alongside the trailer, as he had done for the past two days. His back ached from the stooping and bending. His arms were like lead pipes from rotating the nasty bales by the two wires onto his chest and onto the trailer in a clean and jerk fashion.

They came to the turn next to the shallow drainage ditch just prior to the air base's fence line, when Jack noticed the tractor just keep going.

"Hey!" he yelled at the old black man, who was hugging the steel steering wheel of the old tractor. "Hey! Stop!"

The crash was not dramatic. The tractor's front tire went down into the ditch in slow motion, which jostled the dude in the trailer and knocked the old black man's foot off of the accelerator pedal. The tractor and trailer it was pulling came to a sudden stop, its engine stalled.

Jack ran up to the man, who was clutching the steering wheel, grimacing. "You OK?"

The old man shook his head no. Jack yelled at the young man in the trailer to wet his shirt and bring it, quickly.

“Heat?”

The man shook his head no, then said, “Chest hurts. Arm hurts.”

The man was having a coronary.

Jack started barking orders at the other guy who had arrived with the wet shirt, “Unhitch the trailer—now!”

Jack looked into the man's red eyes, and saw fear. “You're gonna be all right. You're gonna be all right.” But Jack wasn't sure. *Shit*. They were two, three miles from the Clothier's farmhouse. There were other farmhouses closer, but the only way to get there was by tractor, which only carried one person. The trailer was full with bales and couldn't handle a quick trip out of the field and to the nearest house.

He lifted the old man down from the tractor and hauled him into the shade of the trailer. “You're gonna be OK. Just wait here.”

Jack studied the air base's fence line, ten feet in front of the tractor's front wheels. It was probably twice the size of a normal fence, but perhaps it had some sort of alarm system built into it. He didn't know but he hoped so. He hopped onto the tractor and tried to start it.

But it was in gear and lurched forward. It almost threw him off of it. This time he mashed the clutch and tried again. It started. He had no idea what he was doing, really, never having actually driven the tractor before. So he revved the engine, grabbed the steering wheel for dear life, and slowly let off the clutch. It leaped forward, then the larger rear wheels bounded the ditch and Jack gunned it for all it was worth.

At the last second he turned the tractor twenty degrees to the left and aimed for an end post next to a locked gate. The post toppled like a domino and the fence gave up the fight instantly. The sound of bending metal, however, alarmed Jack. But as soon as the assault began, it was over and the tractor mowed over the downed fence and took off at a top first-gear speed of about eight miles an hour. The engine roared, yet the tractor simply hummed along. He didn't know how to shift gears.

He never looked back at the two he left behind. He headed straight down the approach lights to the edge of the runway, waving and trying to attract attention from the control tower over a mile away. He went up through the overrun and onto the right side of the three hundred foot-wide, two mile-long runway and began waving towards the control tower. Only then did he look behind him to see if another B-52 was on approach.

And it didn't take long for someone to notice. Within a minute he saw several flashing lights heading his way. Once he was sure he'd been spotted, he turned the tractor off the runway and onto a taxiway, where he stopped it and hopped off.

He held his arms high as they police cars approached, occasionally pointing towards the downed fence line to the north. His mind was racing. What had he just done?! He had just driven a tractor through the fence of an air base that had nuclear weapons on it. And he didn't hesitate.

Five military policemen, all looking not much older than his sixteen years, leaped from the first two military police vehicles, machine guns in hand. “Hit the ground! Down on the ground.”

Jack's heart was pounding, not that he thought he would get shot.

He got down face first on the concrete, which was boiling hot. “Ow!” The concrete was so hot, he lifted himself and assumed a push-up stance with his arms wide. He was shirtless, wearing nothing but a baseball cap, cut off jeans, and ratty tennis shoes. He was a filthy, sweating human being.

“My boss is having a heart attack over there.”

One of the airmen talked into a brick-sized walkie talkie.

“Over there?” one asked, clearly convinced that this shirtless teenager doing a push-up over hot

concrete was no threat.

“Yeah. Can I stand up? Concrete is burning my hands.”

“Yes, but don't move.”

After a few more cars showed up, some which were not police vehicles, he at last saw an ambulance dart out from behind a large hangar and head his way. Good.

“That a Case 830?” asked one of the security policemen.

Jack looked at him carefully. The guy was, maybe eighteen years old and carrying a weapon with a large clip in it. “Beats me.”

“We used to own one. That looks like an earlier 1960s model. Does it overheat a lot?”

“Yeah, it does. Sure does. But it keeps running.” Jack started to relax.

The airman lowered his weapon. The others followed suit. “One gallon radiator. Needs double that. They design these things up in snow country.”

Jack nodded, “I guess so. All I know is I burned my wrist earlier today adding water to it.”

Then the officer in charge, the OIC, the Major, arrived. The young men stiffened. He was dressed flawlessly in a tailored-fit staff uniform. This man was not sweating in the heat. Jack reasoned he had only been in it since he stepped out of the air conditioned car.

The major was furious, almost out of control. “The hell are you doing driving down an active runway in a tractor?”

“Trying to get your attention.”

“Well you got it.” He studied the young man. “Could you be any filthier?” Then he turned to the men, “I don't want him in my car. Put him in *your* car and follow me to the Base Commander's office.” They all nodded, but by that time the Major had started another sentence, “And I want that tractor moved at least fifty feet off the edge of the taxiway.”

Jack winked at the guy who asked him about its tendency to overheat. *It's O.K. You can move it*, was the silent message. Then he looked at the ambulance at the edge of fence line, some half a mile away. The technicians were there, kneeling, talking to the old black man. It was gonna be O.K.

In less than two minutes he was sitting in a small chair in the lobby of Base Headquarters, next to the Headquarters of the 97th Bombardment Wing. During that quick drive he couldn't take his eyes off those huge aircraft. There must have been twenty in all, with men and vehicles mulling around some of them. Pulling into the headquarters building, he couldn't help but notice how perfectly manicured all of the vegetation was: the sidewalks were all edged neatly, the shrubbery were all perfectly trimmed. This was his first look at Strategic Air Command of the mid-1970s. While the rest of the country was growing their hair long and wearing tie-dye t-shirts, SAC was no-nonsense, perfection and professionalism.

He sat on the edge of the small chair in the entranceway and enjoyed the cool air. He was only there for a minute when a young man—mid-twenties—emerged from behind a metal door, dressed in a flight suit. He looked way cool, like he was out of the movies. The guy had a single silver bar on his flight cap, which Jack knew was a First Lieutenant. The man nodded as he put on his flight cap, preparing for his exit out into the superheated outdoors.

Jack, nodded back, shirtless and filthy. “Do you fly buffs or tankers?”

The guy smiled and stopped, “Tankers. Copilot.”

“What's its max gross?”

The lieutenant was taken aback, “Almost three hundred thousand pounds.”

“J-fifty sevens?”

He was stunned. “Why, yes. Yes, they are.”

"I heard it's a handful when you lose an outboard at V-one."

"Matter of fact, it is. Doug Sander," he said, extending his hand.

Jack held up his red, grimy palms, dissuading him from the handshake, "Jack Mohny. Sorry, I'm filthy."

"Yes, you are. You got business here?"

"Yes, sir. I was throwing hay bales inside the inner marker of Runway 18 when my boss had a heart attack. I had no choice but to drive the tractor through the fence to get someone's attention."

"Well, sucks to be you. The base commander can be pretty uptight. Where'd you learn about aircraft?"

"I fly radio-controlled planes on the east side of town."

"No kidding. I do R/C too!"

Jack smiled, "What do you have?"

"An Ugly Stick, O-S forty-powered."

"No way. So do I! Except I shortened the fuselage. It's too stable, so I gave it some short-coupling. Now, you can breathe on it and it snap rolls. I also dropped the wing down to the center of thrust, so it will handle knife-edges better. You know, they are designed with about a one degree angle of incidence built into the basic design. I took that out."

"Jeez, Jack. I'd like to see that fly. You know, a lot of guys build R/C planes while sitting on alert. We fly on Saturdays out on nearing the old firing range. Wanna join us sometime?"

Jack couldn't believe a real pilot was asking him to join him to fly, albeit R/C. "Absolutely, sir."

"It's Doug. My dad and the Colonel in there are 'Sir.'" Doug pulled a pen out of a pouch from his left shoulder on his flight suit, and wrote down his number on a piece of paper he extracted from a pocket on his thigh. The flight suit had pockets everywhere. He handed the slip to Jack, who looked at it. It had a small logo atop the slip that said, "Fighten' Fourth."

"Thanks. What's the Fighten' Fourth?"

"Oh, that was my squadron back at the Academy."

"You went to the Academy?!"

"Yeah."

Clearly, another inflection point in Jack's life just occurred. "Doug, can you tell me about it sometime?"

Doug said "Sure" just as the metal door opened and an older, skinny man in an ultra-starved blue shirt appeared. He had birds on his shoulders: Colonel. The base commander. "O.K., son. Let's talk."

"Yes, sir," replied Jack, who then looked at Doug, who smiled back and winked.

The Colonel turned and retreated, obviously insisting that Jack follow him.

Jack began walking, then turned to say thank you to Doug, but he was already out of the building. When the boss is around, you don't loiter, he found out later.

"Do you know how much a fence like that costs to fix?" the Colonel asked as he took his seat behind his mahogany desk.

"I dunno. How much is a man's life worth?"

The Colonel must have not been used to being cross-examined, because there was a slight delay in his next question. Perhaps he was not expecting erudition from the young, filthy boy. "Don't you know that we are authorized to use deadly force on this base?"

"Perhaps the Russian Army should rethink its strategy for world domination by employing teenage boys driving old tractors."

Again, the colonel was jolted by the evenness of Jack's response.

Jack, continued, "Look, Colonel. I'm sorry about the fence. I'll have to mow a lot of lawns to pay for it. But I had no other choice. My boss was having a heart attack and we were no where near any help. I did what I thought was the most prudent action, given my predicament. If you were in my position, what—" Then the phone rang.

The Colonel picked it up. "Yes." Then, "I see." Then, "Just call the Mississippi County Coroner's Office. They'll take care of everything," and hung up. The Colonel stared at his desk for a minute, then looked up at Jack. "I'm sorry son, your boss passed away a few minutes ago at the base hospital." ■

Jack seldom went south of Ash Street, and certainly never after dark. Blytheville was only a town of twenty thousand, but there were areas to be avoided, nonetheless. Contrary to the belief that, in general, the nation's racism was fading, there were still delineations that were tough to break. Dr. King had been slain only an hour south of Blytheville, and only eight years ago.

That's why he was nervous walking straight through the front doors of the tiny Ezekiel Baptist Church, one block south of Ash. He had hoped that Mrs. Clothier would have changed her mind and attended the memorial service, but even with a quick glance he knew he was the only white person in there. The place was half full, with everyone up front.

Earlier that morning, he had arrived at Mrs. Clothier's farm, a box of Jeri-Lynn's Donuts in hand. For the next forty-five minutes, she told him stories about about the man that Jack knew well from being on the job with, but virtually nothing about the rest of the man. She had sent flowers to Mr. Harrison's church, but was afraid to go south of Ash. He offered to go with her, but she refused.

Walking into the church, Jack wasn't sure what to expect. He was wearing dress pants, a relatively new white dress shirt that was too small already (he was growing at an alarming rate, both in height and breadth), and a tie that was formed in a shape that indicated just how seldom it was worn. He was hoping to see some of his football friends so he would know someone. The team was equally split between black and white and everyone got along wonderfully. He could never understand why these friendships were just fine in neutral territory (i.e. the gym and practice fields), yet never extended beyond the demarcation that was Ash Street. When everyone went home, they went to one side of the line or the other.

He noticed the shiny, bald head of Mr. Clevon Harrison sticking just above the edge of the open casket. He thought, *gee the man is still sweating*. Even though Jack knew he really wasn't sweating now, it seemed appropriate, because the man had sweat his whole life. He tried to close the door quietly, but the warm breeze caught everyone's attention and they turned to see in a wave. No one nodded a welcome his way. The church was quite small and the floor squeaked. The whole place was old and could use a coat of paint and a little Windex on the windows. Even at ten in the morning, it was already hot. The windows were closed, probably painted shut. A few floor fans were placed strategically near the front, running on high. They provided the only sound inside. No prelude music.

This was a mistake. He studied them all and did not recognize a single one of them. He went about three pews up from the back, knelt down, bowed his head for a moment, then slid into the empty pew.

Some of them whispered, exchanging glances back his way. He knew it instantly: He was not welcome. It wasn't like someone was going walk over and kick his ass right there in the Lord's house, though. No, his attendance would be dealt with later. Jack had a knack for smelling trouble.

His suspicions were confirmed when a radical preacher strolled up to the lectern and began

with, "Another dead black man who suffered at the hand of the white man."

Uh oh.

The preacher continued, this time at an elevated semaphore, "But God ain't no honky!" which invoked a few "Amen's" from the crowd. It was a growing synergism of angst, commingled with the benevolence of the Almighty. "The Lord has welcomed Clevon home. He ain't got no calluses in heaven. He ain't got that sore back no more. Most importantly," the preacher said, looking straight at Jack, "he ain't working for the man no more."

The congregation yelled, "Hallelujah!" in a spirited but disjointed chorus.

Once they settled down, the preacher invited everyone to open their hymnals to page twenty, and everyone swayed to a jubilee song. Once it was over and everyone sat down, the preacher said, "Anyone got any words to say about this fine man, Mister Clevon Harrison?"

Jack stood up without hesitation. Sometimes the best defense....

Everyone was shocked. Here's a white boy wearing a white shirt and tie amongst a whole crowd of people dressed with full-on suits, even though it was well over ninety degrees in the sanctuary. Only then did it hit him that he was woefully under-dressed to the point of being disrespectful to God, Clevon, the preacher, and his flock. He almost turned and ran out, but held his cool and felt every eye watch him nod to the preacher and walk behind the lectern, grabbing it by the edges with both hands.

"Mister Harrison was my boss. I worked hard for him. And was with him when he was called home." Which wasn't exactly true. "I learned so many things from him. Things that may sound simple or unimportant, but not to someone like me. Mister Harrison was a master mechanic. He could fix anything."

He looked around. One old black lady in a big purple hat nodded. Fortunately the diameter of the hat made the tiny nod much more pronounced and did not go unnoticed by some of the others.

"Remember that tornado that came through two years ago?" He began to connect, as a few more nodded. "You know, his first thought was not to help himself, even though it took shingles off his roof. He went straight out to the widow Clothier's farm to check on her. She had recently lost her husband and had no family close by to check on her. But Mr. Harrison checked in on her. No one else thought to do that. That was a man filled with God's love and kindness."

He thought he heard an "Amen."

"Anyway, her big barn door came off the top railing and was laying flat on the ground. That big ol' door weighed, I dunno, maybe a thousand pounds. It was going to cost probably three or four hundred dollars to get it rehung on its top rail. With Mister Clothier gone, the farm wasn't doing very well and she didn't have that kind of money. Mr. Harrison studied it for a few minutes, then got up on a ladder, drilled a hole through the wood just above the rail. Then he pulled a rope through it and through a turnbuckle he anchored to the ceiling rafter inside the barn. Then tied the end of the rope to the tractor. In fifteen minutes her door was back on its rail. Didn't cost her a penny. She offered him a hundred dollars for saving her from spending twice that much or more. He wouldn't take it. Said, 'this was what friends do when their friends need help.'"

People were listening intently. Everyone. Even the young boys.

"He was much smarter than some college-educated engineer. He could look at something and figure out a way to fix it. And he was always willing to share his knowledge with me. I'm so glad I had the chance to learn from him. These were life lessons for me and I'll be grateful forever."

He had them. Wow. He was going to single-handedly solve the city's race problems right there in that tiny church.

Then a voice from the back said, “Yeah, right. You killed him.”

Some heads turned around. A black teenager, younger than Jack, stood up. “You heard me, white boy. You knew he was having a heart attack. Why didn't you do anything?”

All eyes were back on him.

So much for race relations. Now he was cornered. He could tell them how he had put his own life at risk by driving onto the air base with machine guns pointed at him. He could tell them how there was no room to put him on the tractor, how he probably would have knocked him off of it just trying to shift gears. Instead, he simply said, “Of course I did. I did everything I could. But God said it was his time. Let us pray,” and bowed his head before a retort could be offered.

“Lord, a good man arrived at your pearly gates two days ago. We will miss him dearly, but we know that he is happy now than we could ever imagine.” Then he played his research card, thanks to Mrs. Clothier: “We know he is with his dearly departed wife Ruth. And his parents Leon and Alma. Please bless his family who mourns his passing, namely Clevon Junior, Dennis, Tyrell, Lucille, and Cleo. We know that, as Paster Vernon said, 'He has no more back pain.' He also is wearing brand new, white-walled, size eleven Buster Browns.” A half-dozen or so laughed at the inside joke that he had only learned earlier that morning. Clevon was a shoe man. “We know that he is smiling down on us, and we know that he loved us all. Bless him, Lord. Amen.”

With that, Jack bowed his head, interlocked his fingers, and reverently walked back to his seat, his eyes never glancing up from the torn and tattered carpet that covered the squeaky wooden floor underneath the center aisle.

When he got to his seat, alone near the back, he said a private prayer for a man he admired. This was the first person he knew who died. It was a loss he couldn't explain to his parents. The man had helped him with some practical aspects of problem solving and he would never have the chance to repay him or even say thanks.

The moment the service was over, he left the way he came, before he could be cornered by the minor radical segment of the congregation. ■

Chapter Three

■ August 19, thirty-four years ago.

Once two-a-days began at eight thirty in earnest, the summer was essentially over for Jack and he actually looked forward to the beginning of his tenth grade school year. He had been doing the “voluntary” gym workouts Monday through Friday since school had let out. Technically, they were voluntary, but perhaps only in regards to the state's athletic association rules. If you had any hope of being on the football team, you were not allowed to miss a single one. The workouts were exhausting, but at least they didn't eat up Jack's whole day. He was usually showered and out of the gym by ten A.M.

Given his two-hour morning workouts, the lawn mowing regimen, swimming, and the occasional torture with the hay bales, Jack was strong and ready for the grueling late-summer Southern ritual of football two-a-days.

Two-a-days were pure hell. They went from eight thirty until eleven, then you went home, ate lunch and napped until two-thirty. Then at three you were back at it until eight pm. Jack used to set his alarm clock to go off every few hours just to make the night seem longer. It was eat, football, eat, football, sleep. Pray the night would last longer, because your days consisted of one hundred percent football.

First came weight lifting. This was not the casual atmosphere witnessed at a club gym. It was a combat environ, and Jack's field commander was his defensive line coach, Coach Ted Bale. A stump of a man, solid as a rock. A man to be feared. He was right there each day working the weight machines just like his players. No-nonsense. Driven. One player foolishly asked Coach Bale what his first name was. His response: “Coach.”

Bale's principal role was to keep the pace up, and he led by example. There was a strict time limit in the weight room, because other tortures awaited them. No rest between repetitions. Recover on your own time.

Then it was sprints, scores of them, managed primarily by the special teams coach. Finally, bleachers. Whomever designed the bleachers never knew just how punishing running bleachers could be. By the time you got to running up and down the steep, concrete-pitted bleachers of the forty year old stadium, you were already exhausted. Once you were completely drained, the actual practice could begin.

Coach Timothy Will was the head coach. There was no doubt who he was. He was the chancellor, the final magistrate in the hierarchy. Only one man was truly in charge, and everyone knew it. The assistant coaches were simply those who brought about the wishes of Coach Will. He was nowhere to be found until practice officially began, then he took over. It was a repetitive scene of break them down and I will rebuild them.

One certainty: Coach Will firmly believed that nothing be demonstrated nor practiced at half-speed. On the contrary, each play would be an explosion, a concussion of entropy that wouldn't end until the whistle blew. If you are on defense, you had better be controlling your zone or be at the ball

when the whistle blew. To except this rule meant a physical and mental admonishment you would not want repeated.

If you were on offense, all motion was forward. Period. Lateral motion was a waste of valuable time on the clock. The game was simple: Win by overpowering your opponents every moment of the game. You had to be stronger, faster, more explosive. And you had better keep up. Jack's friend Duebs twisted his knee on a previous play, yet hurried up to the huddle, his face showing the agony. Jack noticed through the cage of his Riddell fluid-padded helmet.

“You gotta take yourself out. You'll make it worse.”

Duebs's response: “Better to die than to look bad.” And that just about summed it up. Suck it up, it's only two weeks. The longest two weeks of the year.

Arriving home, the only compassion afforded him was by his mother, who always had a full meal awaiting him as he passed by on his way to his favorite place during these dark days of the waning summer: his bed. It was the only place he could exhale, where he could listen to the silence. Two-a-days meant bruises, contusions, muscle pulls, cramps, and the occasional strained ligaments. But his body healed quickly overnight, leaving just residual soreness and a chronic mental desperation at the prospect of yet another long day of punishment ahead. ■

The last day of two-a-days officially ended on Friday night with no fanfare nor markings. Before they left for the showers they were told (by Coach Bale; closing statements were always made by Coach Will's underlings) that Saturday was to be just a “light” workout.

The next morning, they were told to expect a low-weight, high reps event in the weight room followed by a three mile run to Walker Park and back. Stay together and run as a team, came the edict from Coach Will. *That's weird*, Jack thought. Over the past thirteen days it had been: The last guy in gets to do it again. So, as instructed, they left the gym en masse on a route that would cross the busy North 6th Street at the Dixie Pig, then east towards the post office. Then just a quick zig zag and down the older section of town straight out to Walker Park. Jack and Duebs, though both sophomores, somehow found themselves out front, setting the pace.

A patrol car had stopped traffic in both directions at the Dixie Pig so they could pass.

Strange.

At once, cars began honking, and Jack was first embarrassed at the idea that some sixty high school ruffians would be holding up traffic on the busiest north-south road in town. Then the honking crescendoed and at once he realized that the townspeople were not upset—they were actually cheering them on. On the other side of the road, at the Exxon station were the Blytheville High School Cheerleaders, dressed in full regalia underneath the hundred degree sun. He surveyed each one, a dozen in all, in her scantily-clad outfit, and realized it had been two weeks since he'd thought about the opposite sex. An impossible feat for a sixteen year old male, afforded only by the omnipresent battle that was called two-a-days. They began screaming and yelling the moment the cars started honking. As they approached the post office, Jack saw another police car with its lights on, now blocking off North Broadway. “Relax, men,” said Coach Bale as they passed him, leaning against the police car. “Stay together. Enjoy the jog.” *Still weird.*

When they got to Walker Park, half of the townspeople appeared to be there. Jack and his teammates were dripping with sweat from the weightlifting followed by the jog in the stifling heat.

Suddenly, a loud siren went off, followed shortly thereafter by a complete and total drenching of the entire team by the city's two firetrucks, stationed almost fifty yards on either side of the park's entrance. The cool water felt great—it *all* felt great.

Reaching the crowd, they were guided by the marching band to the grandstand area where the town had thrown a surprise lunchtime picnic for them. The mayor introduced them by name. It was a proud moment, and totally unexpected. He had not remembered the town doing this for previous teams.

The run was supposed to be a decrescendo, a wind-down to the successful completion of two-a-days, which he of course relished. However, the personal adoration by scores of well wishers was too much for Jack. His parents and grandmother were there. A few girls noticed him who had never paid him any attention beforehand. Many of the young men on the team were eating up the attention. Yet Jack was very uncomfortable in the limelight.

After consuming no less than two hot dogs and a hamburger, followed by some sort of cherry cobbler and a couple of cokes, he quietly doffed the celebration and jogged home to sleep until morning.

There was something intensely competitive within him, driving him to excel. But Jack Mohny was quite certain it wasn't self-glorification. ■

Chapter Four

■ September 9th, thirty-four years ago.

The “F” he got on his first English paper incensed him, but it was because the teacher had accused him of plagiarism. It had been fifteen minutes since he had been hit with the news—quite publicly, and he became more infuriated by the minute. This was unacceptable and would most certainly be corrected. The only problem was, the teacher was Coach Will's wife, Mrs. Coach Will, who made it clear on the first day of class that jocks got no special treatment when it came to her class. That was a premonition impossible to ignore, since she stared him down when she said it. But this wasn't about special treatment, this was about justice.

When she walked by and dropped the bomb on his desk, she made it clear that everyone saw it: F. It was even circled. The only thing that could have been more visible would have been if she had lighted it on fire. Jack first studied the grade written in bold red ink, with the angry-looking asterisk next to it. Stunned, his eyes dropped to the bottom of the page, where another bold asterisk preceded the text: “This report is clearly someone else's work, and does not contain any references to the original research material.”

The take-home assignment had been made on the morning of the first Friday of the first week of school. The instructions were both vague and arbitrary: Prepare a five page paper, explaining a technical or scientific activity or event to readers familiar with the topic, yet not fully versed on the details.

After the Friday night game (which they won), he should have been partying. He was a starting member of the kickoff return special team, then saw a little yet noticeable action as linebacker late in the game. Yet he chose to go home and plotted out his paper.

Most of the other kids had met up at the Pizza Inn out near the Interstate, then drove the teenager “circuit” up and down Tenth Street until well after midnight. But Jack had his first assignment and wanted to make a good impression. He had a light Saturday workout looming, followed by a couple hours of watching game films. He would be home by noon and would have the rest of Saturday and all day on Sunday (after church) to form his technical treatment.

The topic had been easy: Flying. There really was nothing else, although he could speak with broad strokes on just about any scientific topic. He knew that he could easily talk about the equilibrium of forces acting on an aircraft: Lift versus Weight and Thrust versus Drag. That was easy stuff and could be explained in a few short paragraphs.

Instead, he chose the topic: “Dynamic Stability: Variances in Design by Differing Performance Requirements.” He liked the ring of that.

He first covered the basics, how when Lift equals Weight there are no vertical accelerations, i.e. there is no climbing nor descending. And when Thrust equals Drag there are no lateral accelerations and the aircraft would continue at the same speed. Everything in balance.

Then he talked about the concept of force vectors and how dihedral in the wings provided roll stability (with anhedral wings giving the opposite effect). Then he started getting into the nuts and

bolts and presented a diatribe of terms such as the mean aerodynamic chord (MAC), the center of lateral area, the angle of attack, and how the shifting of the percent of MAC in balancing the aircraft had distinct handling characteristics. Fighter jets need to be dynamically unstable in order to perform maneuvers of evasion and precision. Others, such as training aircraft, need positive dynamic stability in all three axes to naturally help in correcting for student pilot missteps.

He laid it all out in well-ordered prose, then spent most of Saturday afternoon editing it. Long before the days of computers and word processors, he completed all of it and decided the finished product would look best typed using the family IBM Selectric typewriter.

It took him all Sunday, hunting and pecking his way through the report. When he was done, it was a paper worthy of citation, his best paper ever.

Instead, he gets accused of stealing someone else's work. When he came up to Mrs. Will after class to plead his case, she dismissed him, "I know plagiarism when I see it. You can't tell me you didn't open a book to do this report."

Jack was dumbfounded. No one had ever accused him of lying. No one had challenged his integrity before. It was a horrible sensation, a burning in his gut that made him want to reach over, grab her by her poofy hairdo, and scream, "I didn't cheat!"

Instead, he responded, "I've read hundreds of books on the subject. The first books I read at the library when I was six years old were about airplanes. I've designed, built, and flown a dozen radio-controlled models of them. I have ten years' experience as an aviator. I dare say I am a better pilot and aeronautical engineer than you are a judge of character, Mrs. Will."

He did it. He overstepped. He could tell by her glare. He continued, "I'm sorry, it's just that there are no copyrights on these laws of physics. That's like accusing me of taking someone else's idea when I say two plus two equals four. These are not theories. These are not postulates nor axioms. These are laws, generally accepted since the turn of the century."

She glared at him, then said, "You have your grade. You have a whole semester to bring it up."

He turned and marched down the hall, straight into the principle's office, who saw him promptly but clearly wanted to defend Mrs. Will. "I'm sorry son, but I don't overrule teachers' grades. You seem like a bright kid; you'll learn from your mistake and I'm sure you'll do fine in her class."

"Sir, she brought my integrity into question. I can't let this go. You wouldn't, either."

"Yes, I would. And if you know better, you should too. Just go along and get along. Everything will be O.K."

Jack was stunned. It was truly a kick in the gut. Two people didn't trust him, thought the words were not his. "With all due respect, sir, this is not over. I'd like to give you this one more opportunity to intervene on my behalf. It's the right thing to do."

"Sorry, Jack."

He checked his watch. The other players were already arriving at the gym to dress for practice. He nodded, then turned and left the principle's office wordlessly.

The more he thought about it, the more angry he became.

Reaching the gym, he walked straight past the men's dressing room, through the darkened basketball court and into Coach Will's office at the "business" end of the gym (i.e. no students allowed). The coach was in and looked up from his desk as Jack stated simply, "Coach, I'm sorry but I have a legal matter that demands my immediate attention. It is unavoidable. I will do my best to get back to practice as soon as I can." There, he said it.

"Fine," the coach replied, which was the first bit of good news he'd heard utter from an adult since the bomb was dropped an hour before. "But you miss this practice, you don't dress on Friday."

“This was not my doing. I have no choice.”

“But I do.” ■

It was a ten minute walk to his father's friend's office. He'd never actually been in an attorney's office before, and felt underdressed in his jeans and AC/DC t-shirt. The secretary led him in to a cavernous office with books along the entire length of the room, from waist-height to just under the ceiling. The other wall was full of pictures with politicians, golfers, and other group functions. A desk worthy of of king corralled the attorney who rose and walked around it to shake his hand, “Jack, how are you son. Jeez, look at you. You have muscles like a Greek god. I saw the game last Friday night. Glad to see they put you in. You're just a sophomore, right?”

Jack was embarrassed at the compliments, but couldn't get in a word edgewise.

“Had breakfast with your dad this morning. He says you didn't complain at all during two-a-days. Was it as bad as I remember it being?”

“I'm sure it wasn't as tough as when you went through it, but I'm glad it's over.”

“You hung in there great with the juniors and seniors. I saw that lick on the far sideline after Helena's fourth-down option. You know you saved the game for us.”

“I just made one of the four tackles during that series. It just happened to be the last one.”

The attorney turned and walked back to his desk. “So, Jack, what can I do for you?”

“I'd like to know what my options are when a teacher wrongly accuses me of plagiarism.”

The man leaned back in his chair, “Do you have the exhibit in question?” he asked, almost mockingly.

Jack noted the tone, but reached into his denim book bag and extracted it.

Before it landed in the center of his desk, he said, seeing the red ink, “I can see she was emphatic about the grade.”

“Yes, sir. She paraded it around like a cat who caught a mouse. Then she ceremoniously dropped it on my desk. In less than a minute, everyone in my class knew what grade I got.”

The lawyer took several minutes to read it. Jack was fully conscious of the fact that practice had already begun and he wasn't there. He just blew the next game.

The lawyer read every word.

When he was done, he laid down the paper. “Tell me something Jack. What is the difference between a slip and a skid?”

Jack knew that the attorney was a pilot, albeit non-current, and wanted to drive home his point. “Oh, please. Ask me about P-factor, boundary layer principles, Reynolds numbers, mach crit, whatever. No baby questions.”

The lawyer smiled. “Listen, this is not something normally remedied in a court of law. As singularly meaningful as this is to your ego, it's trivial unless you have been materially damaged.”

“What if I get a B in this class and some schmuck in Jonesboro doesn't, and he gets the congressional nomination into the Air Force Academy because his G.P.A. is point zero five higher than mine. It may just come down to that: Because a teacher was too lazy and/or too stupid to verify that these words are mine. I *was* damaged.”

“Who is the teacher?”

“Mrs. Will.”

“As in Mrs. Coach Will?”

“Yes, and I thought this was important enough to skip practice, effectively nulling any chance of my dressing for Friday's game.”

"I see." He stared at the paper, nodded his head, then looked at his watch and punched a button on the phone.

"Yes?" came over the phone's speaker.

"Dorothy, can you get Colonel Soby on the phone?"

"I'll try."

The attorney looked at Jack and offered, "I'm on the Base-Community Council. I think I may have a solution, if you'll go along."

"*Ring...*"

"Thanks." Jack picked up the handset of the black phone on his desk. "Mike, it's Alex Abuyuan downtown."... "Good, you?"... "Yeah, hey, I have an idea for that charity event next Saturday night..." ■

The next day, on the front page of the Blytheville Courier News the headline was, "Local Teen to Face Air Force Pilots in Aero Quiz." Underneath, in smaller letters, it read, "Prelude to Base Open House and Charity Auction."

And the day after that he caught hell for it, both in class and later at the gym. According to the challenge posted in the paper:

"...local football player Jack Mohney has challenged his English teacher and wife of head football coach Tim Will to a quiz bowl competition at the Ritz Theater this Saturday evening, as part of the annual Base Community Council Charity Auction.

Colonel Michael G. Soby, Vice Wing Commander of the 97th Bombardment Wing, has agreed to provide the English teacher with up to three Air Force pilots to take on and test the knowledge of one of her students, whom she gave a failing grade on a paper due to alleged plagiarism.

Attendees are invited to pick a team to support. Mr. Jack Mohney, a sophomore at Blytheville High School has chosen his charity to be the local veteran's home. Mrs. Will has not indicated whether she would accept this challenge, but if so and she prevails, proceeds will go to the charity of her choice. If the young man loses, he agrees to accept the grade and sit on the sideline for the game the following Friday. If he wins, he dresses for the game and the paper is graded on its merit."

"Like I have any way of declining," she said, slamming the paper down on her desk. Jack was glancing at the clock. He had already missed one day of practice. "You think this is pretty amusing, don't you?"

"No ma'am. In fact, I think you have seriously underestimated my resolve. I asked you to let me prove to you that I knew the subject matter well enough to write that paper without references. I got no help nor intervention from the principal. This F grade is unacceptable. I don't cheat. I never have. And now I've challenged you to prove me wrong."

She looked up at him, over the top of her wire-rimmed glasses, "See you Saturday night, Mister Mohney." She wasn't smiling. ■

The support was astounding—and it wasn't just from his fellow students who rallied behind him. The challenge was picked up by the local Jonesboro TV station, who posted a camera in the balcony of the downtown theater.

The quiz provided synergism to the actual auction being billed at the main event. But, in reality,

the quiz was the event of the evening. Pledges came in from the Air Base, from the townspeople, and from the entire TV viewing area. The tally at the beginning of the charity gala was Mrs. Will's Team: \$680. Jack's: \$2210. Most of the donations were \$10 and \$20 coupons sold over the phone and at the door. The Base-Community Council had hoped to bring in a thousand dollars, total. They were going to triple that.

The local radio jock was the emcee. He walked out onto stage center in front of the dark maroon curtain and the crowd erupted like it was a boxing match. He grabbed the microphone and said in a very exaggerated voice, "Ladies and gentlemen. Tonight, a battle of wits looms. A David and Goliath match-up is here, on this stage, for all to witness. One team is composed of a single, sixteen year old—" The crowd went wild. He let them go with it for a while, then calmed them down and continued, "He is a student who is trying to convince his teacher that he is not a cheat and a liar, a miscreant of stolen ideas." The crowd went wild again, with interspersed hissing at the very thought of Jack being accused of subterfuge.

"And yet, the other team are composed of the very best and brightest that aviation has to offer, three men who are not only Air Force pilots, but have degrees in aeronautics and aerospace engineering." A much smaller, but equally enthusiastic crowd applauded. "One has a masters degree in aeronautical engineering from Cal Tech. They are led by Mrs. Tim Will, who—" Hissing and booing undertones erupted, followed by applause. "—who possesses, let me read this..."

The emcee held up a small card, then continued, "Clara Denise Will. Private Pilot, Airplane, Single Engine Land, Instruments Airplane. Well, what do you know, the teacher is a pilot, too!"

The crowd went wild. Jack simply smiled and nodded her way from behind the still-closed curtain. It didn't matter. Aviation is a broad subject and it was already stacked in their favor, anyway.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our contenders." And with that, the curtain opened. Jack was suddenly shocked at the size of the crowd. He knew, of course, they would be rooting for him, but that didn't calm his nerves very much. He was seated alone at a small card table with a white tablecloth edging. Ten feet to his right was the opposition, They were at a larger table, adorned with a tablecloth as well.

Between them and slightly behind was a large chalkboard with four columns containing five rows each. The topics were "Aviation History," "Science of Flight," "Even Tougher Science of Flight," and "Airplane Trivia." The individual selections were pieces of eight and a half by eleven paper, taped to the chalkboard, with large numbers written in magic marker on each one: "100" through "500" down the columns.

The emcee looked at the three pilots, each wearing his flight suit. Two were captains, one an older handsome man, introduced with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

"Teams, you will write down and agree upon your answer in twenty seconds or less. The questions were prepared by the Blytheville Aero Club at Blytheville Municipal Airport, of which there are an equal number of military members as are civilian. Neither team has seen these questions. Audience, I'll ask you to not yell out the answer or assist either team in any way. Teams, are you ready?"

A tympani drum, brought over from the band room, erupted as the team members nodded and the crowd erupted with applause.

Jack loosened his tie to keep his hands from shaking.

Suddenly from Stage Right, a beautiful high school senior appeared, dressed in a stunningly flowing evening gown walked over to the chalkboard and curtsied to the crowd. The crowd went crazy again as she smiled and hammed it up a little.

The emcee said, "A flip of the coin gives the first question to Team Will," to which she

responded into her microphone, “Airplane Trivia for one hundred.”

The girl lifted the letter-sized paper with “100” written in magic marker on it and pulled off an index card taped beneath it. She gave it to the emcee, who nodded and asked, “What holds the absolute speed record for an airplane?”

The crowd mumbled a little, which brought about an immediate warning from the emcee. Then he looked at his watch. Team Will compared written responses, then she grabbed the one from the lieutenant colonel. Jack noticed she didn't use her answer, so hers must have been incorrect. Jack was done a long time ago.

“Time's up. Team Will, your answer please.”

She held up a card, then said, “The X-15, made by North American.”

The crowd began cheering.

And Team Jack, your answer please.”

Jack held up his sheet, displaying his answer and stating, “The SR-71 Blackbird.”

Some knew the difference in the two airplanes, most in the crowd did not, but all applauded. Once the noise diminished, the emcee spoke, reading from the back of the card, “One of you is correct. The *Fédération Aéronautique Internationale* is the world governing body for air sports, aeronautics, and astronautics world records. According to them, the X-15—” which resulted in an eruption and applause as well as some disappointing utterances, “—is not an airplane. It is a rocket. Team Jack is awarded 100 points!”

The crowd went nuts. One question down, an easy one, but really having nothing to do with validating his knowledge of the science of flight.

“Team Jack, your topic.”

“Even Tougher Science for five hundred, please,” which elicited a standing ovation from everyone. The hardest question from presumably the hardest topic. The crowd didn't know airplane stuff, but they knew a good competitor when they saw one. The girl host lifted the paper with a large “500” written on it to reveal the index card underneath. She carried the card to the emcee, smiling through her thick lipstick.

He held the card up, then simply stated a single word, “Phugoid.” Some in the crowd laughed. A hint of applause and cheering. Jack's head was already down, writing. He glanced over at the three uniformed men and one woman. Two were writing. Two were staring at their pads. *This is going to be a massacre.*

“Time's up.” The emcee looked at Jack, then back towards Team Will, who were still conversing. “I said time's up.” They froze. He then looked over at Jack, who immediately held up a card to the crowd, the answer to Phugoid written as the equation:

$$T = 2 \pi / (g/CLV) (2 C_L - C_D)^{1/2}$$

The crowd didn't understand the equation, but cheered nonetheless. Then he turned it at an angle where both he and the audience could see it, and explained the equation in a smooth and confident tone, “A Phugoid oscillation is one in which there is a large amplitude variation of airspeed, pitch and altitude with a very small incidence variation—which I, personally, regard as a constant, but that's just me, simplifying things. You may think of Phugoid as the slow interchange of kinetic and potential energy about some equilibrium level, with the aircraft trying to go back to the equilibrium $C_{sub-L-V}$ -squared constant from which it started. You know—like a paper airplane does...” and proceeded to do a wavy motion with his palm down.

His delivery was poised and authoritative. The crowd applauded, understanding the last part.

Everyone has seen a paper airplane fly.

Jack smoothly placed the card face down on the edge of the card table, then interlocked his fingers, expressionless. Just when the emcee thought the crowd was about to settle down, they suddenly stood and really whooped it up, only then realizing how perfect the response had been.

It was all caught clearly on KAIT-TV's new high definition camera from the balcony, catching the crowd's reaction as well. His response would certainly make the evening's news clip.

The emcee looked at Team Will, who were clearly troubled. Mrs. Will held up a card—the wrong one—which simply said, “?” on it. The crowd began laughing hysterically as she realized her error. Fumbling, she produced the one she had intended to show, which said, “Fly and Stall, Fly and Stall.” Mrs. Will repeated the card's words, “Fly and stall, fly and stall. You know...like he described,” pointing to Jack and trying to imitate the same Phugoid hand gesture, but she simply didn't have his natural rhythm. The sum of her response in one word: Karaoke.

The crowd went crazy. ■

Chapter Five

■ January 16th, thirty-three years ago.

One of the many things that demanded Jack's attention was his role as president of the student body. It turned out that this was not much of a leadership position, but rather a role of chief concierge. In the past, the position had been reserved for the BMOC, the big man on campus, always a senior. Jack, a junior, was known and generally well liked, but he wasn't the outgoing type and otherwise would not have considered pursuing the position. He did it solely to build his resume for an Academy congressional appointment. However, he found the position to be quite enjoyable.

As a brevet junior, he had been given permission to dig into the school's records and got access to the Student Council Bylaws, which no one had probably read since World War II and realized that there was no requirement whatsoever that it had to be a senior. He had planned on running next year, but in looking closer at what it would gain him, there was no "added value," since by the time he could put it on his resume, his college applications would already have been submitted. In all of the years past, the position had been held by a high school senior. It was assumed that an underclassman was not legal to hold the position, and that assumption would be the perfect way for him to stay beneath the radar while he considered his plan of action.

Knowing he would be challenged by this assumption, he stopped by the lawyer's office again and presented him with a copy of the bylaws. Then he had the man prepare a "Memorandum for Record" regarding the consequences of attempting to change the bylaws when the election was in progress.

Then he went around quietly to every single student: male and female, black and white, and told them of his plan to run for the office as a junior, an eleventh grader. He took his time and made it a point to win each one of them over.

When nominations were announced at the monthly school wide assembly, two names were put forward, both seniors. The large auditorium clapped and yelled from pockets of each nominee's cliques. When the vice principle was about to close the nominations from his position on the side of the stage, Jack's friend Duebs stood up in the center of the audience and announced loudly, "Mr. Smalling, a point of order!"

And Mr. Smalling was a Man of Order. He believed firmly in the proper conduct of a meeting. With only a slight hesitation to let the crowd settle down from the outburst, he leaned into the lectern's microphone and said, "The floor recognizes Mister Dueber."

Duebs had to raise his voice so everyone in the auditorium could hear him. "Sir, I have in one hand, the additional nomination for one Mister Jack Mohny to be considered for the position of president of the student body, a.k.a. student council president. In this same hand are the signatures of some one hundred and eighty students who second this nomination. Also—"

"Mister Dueber, we already have—"

"With all due respect, sir. I have the floor."

A rumble erupted from the audience, mostly impish utterances. Once it quickly quieted down,

Mr. Smalling smiled and said, “Yes, Mister Dueber, indeed you do. Please continue.”

“Thank you. And I repeat my sincerest regards, sir. You well know that procedural rules stipulate that nominations and elections be held in strict compliance with the bylaws set forth in this document.” He held it up. “An adjudication of authenticity of this document, as well as the actions that I hereby propose hereto with, have been reviewed by our attorney.”

“But Jack's not a senior.”

“Sir, paragraph 12, subparagraph D stipulates that the nominee only be a student in good standing. Nowhere in the document does it specify that the nominee be a senior.”

“Is that so?” He was genuinely asking.

Jack smiled. He knew that Duebs was leading this dialog just as had been practiced.

“Yes, sir. In fact, I hold in this hand a Memorandum for Record, signed by our attorney, who is licensed to practice in the Great State of Arkansas. This MOR confirms not only that Jack be accepted as a nominee, but Paragraph Sixteen, Subparagraph D states that since the entire student body is present that a roll-call vote may be initiated upon the second of a motion.”

“You mean vote now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And any...” He flipped to the last page of the document. “...here it is. 'Any deviation from these methods established herein shall be agreed upon prior to the commencement of the voting process.' In other words, sir, your hands are tied. I hereby request that a roll-call vote be conducted at this time for the purpose of electing our student body president.”

Mr. Smalling was trying to keep up. “Agreed. Do we have a second to this motion?”

The entire crowd of students cheered, “Yeah!” and “Second!” followed by clapping.

“Opposed?”

The two seniors and their small cadre of supporters wanted to object, but they saw the enthusiasm of the crowd, and totally unexpected this entire discussion. A couple hands came up.

“The opposition is noted, but the motion passes.” Five minutes later, with a few wranglings of procedure, Jack D. Mohney, a junior at Blytheville High School, was elected and confirmed as the President of the Student Body.

He was told his primary role as student body president was to arrange the dances. In the past, they had been at the school with a DJ. Nobody attended them. It was considered mandatory fun—and cheesy. Prussian chaperons. Extreme oversight. He thought, *I can do better.*

So, with just a few phone calls and some financial commitments by local businesses, for his first dance in January, he brought in a live band from Memphis and rented out the armory on the south side of town. It was a raging success, but not for the reasons you might expect.

The theme pitched was, “Business, then pleasure. Trust us.” This was an appeal to two different and non-commingled groups: The kids and the adults. Sure, he knew he was taking a risk, but he quickly eschewed the concerns of both groups.

To the students, he pitched it as a chance to hear some world-class rock and roll live—away from faculty oversight. Once the dance began, no one over eighteen would be admitted. Seriously. It would be a test to “trust us” by self-regulation of the students' behavior. Of course, the Blytheville Police would be parked right outside.

To the adults, it was an opportunity for their kids to interview with the regional colleges, because for the first two hours, from six to eight, tables would be set up and college recruiters would be there to talk to the students. Thus, the students were 1) expected to dress up for it, and 2) this would preclude any pre-party drinking. Jack wasn't a teetotaler, but he was putting his reputation on the line.

Of course, getting the college reps there was self-serving, too; this was also a chance to bring them to him, rather than his having to travel to Jonesboro, Fayetteville, etc. to meet with them. He also ensured that the Air Force Academy's Liaison's Office was notified by the high school's senior counselor so they could perhaps send in the Academy's regional representative, probably somebody at the base.

He briefed the local Chamber of Commerce of this recruitment/dance at their monthly gathering. Blytheville was losing its best citizens, he told the group. The students graduate, leave for college, then stay in Little Rock or Jonesboro or Memphis. Blytheville was experiencing a brain drain and only a small percentage returned after leaving. Certainly Jack would be leaving too, but more for the altruisms of aviation that Blytheville could not provide, short of becoming a crop duster. Perhaps he would come back to fly B-52s in five years. But even that, statistically, was not going to happen. The Chamber was so impressed with his briefing that they pitched-in for the band—a cool one thousand dollars—and some of the larger companies out near the river would be there too, supplying the soda and munchies, in hopes of surveying the students for summer work. Many of the chamber members had kids in high school, so their interests were self-serving.

The National Guard Armory had already told Jack that they would supply the facility, too, with hopes of doing its own recruiting by having a table there, too.

Thus, with his expenses now covered, one of the chamber members suggested that it be free admission, but Jack quickly dismissed that idea: The door charge to get in was mostly to keep out the riff-raff. It also afforded “ownership” to the attendees, meaning there was intrinsic value in getting through the door, and those who pay to attend events generally behave better.

His scheme worked. When the word got out in the Blytheville Courier News, the parents got on board. But it was much more important that Jack get to the students before the parents did. He asked for and was granted permission to make a rare student announcement at the beginning of school. He told the assistant principal what he was planning to do and say, and the man was initially unsure if he would allow it. But then he relented, with the understanding that Jack would be held accountable. Seldom did students get to use the school's PA system.

So as soon as the bell rang for first period classes, he pulled out his tape player and mashed the PLAY button. He keyed the microphone and some upbeat Earth, Wind, and Fire music began echoing throughout the rooms and hallways.

The assistant principal frowned. Jack held up a finger, indicating he'd let it go for just a little while longer. Then he clicked the STOP button and began talking, “Ladies and gentlemen, I'm Jack Mohny, and I want you to jot some information down on a piece of paper. I'm gonna make your day.” He smiled at the assistant principal and double-raised his eyebrows in a Magnum P.I. gesture. As he continued, he swapped tapes out on his portable tape player. “How many of you have attended a school dance? Personally I wouldn't be caught dead at one. I'd rather sit through six hours of Mrs. Will's English lectures than attend a school dance.” He heard some commotion and laughter in the distance hallways. *Good.* He had their attention and their ethos. “Would you believe it if I told you I have obtained the rock and roll band *Gnarly* from Memphis to come down and play a gig just for us? Yes, *Gnarly*. Their manager said they had a cancellation and would be able to come here, maybe even try out some never-before-heard songs on us. I'm serious. They're coming here to give us a private concert.”

Mr. Smalling gave him a complimentary “wow!” expression from across the room. Of course, no one had heard of *Gnarly*, much less old Mr. Smalling. They were on the first rung above garage band status. But Jack made it sound like it was a band that everyone *should* know. He continued, “And it's not going to be held here at the school gym. The acoustics aren't good enough for a band of that

caliber. So we're going off-campus; it's going to be held at the armory. And the best part is, I have been given the assurance that no one over the age of eighteen will be allowed to be inside the doors after the music starts. No adults. Can you believe that?"

He gave a short pause, then continued, "But, it gets better. In the two hours—and two hours only—prior to *Gnarly* taking the stage, I have arranged every major college recruiter in the area to set up tables to talk with us. Arkansas, Arkansas State, SEMO, Memphis State, even Ol' Miss. In addition, if you're not planning to college, I have arranged several local businesses to be there to talk to you about jobs after graduation. This is the biggest event of the year, and for many of you this will be an inflection point for your lives. It's only five bucks to get in—no exceptions. The Blytheville Chamber of Commerce had agreed to pay for cost of this private concert by *Gnarly*." He kept repeating the name intentionally, i.e. that the band was a big deal. "But the catch is: you can only come in once. If you leave, you can't come back in. They're trusting us with this one. More details to follow. I'm going to leave you with thirty seconds of The Gap Band, only because Mr. Smalling is right here next to me, giving me the look." Then he pressed play and more upbeat music began playing.

Mr. Smalling was seated in his chair, expressionless, mostly because the PA system was never used to play music, much less late seventies dance music. Jack was on the other side of the office, tape recorder in one hand, microphone in the other. He thought Mr. Smalling would give him the cut signal to stop it. But when it was clear that he would not intervene, Jack suddenly began fumbling with microphone, saying things like, "No, Mr. Smalling. Just a little more...." Then, "Hey." Then, "Oh, yeah, well take this! Ow!" and fumbled with the microphone some more. Lastly, he said, "Ow! OK. OK. You want your glasses back? Do you?! Give me back my Gap Band!...Ow!" Then he turned off the microphone.

Mr. Smalling hadn't moved, was still sitting in his chair, only this time his jaw was dropped.

Jack just smiled, then gently placed the microphone down. "Thank you, sir. I had to convince them I was one of them, that this appears to be a student-run event. Sorry for the theatrics."

Luckily, Mr. Smalling shook his head and gave a little chuckle. It had been a hilarious reuse.

Just then two men and one woman burst into his office, ready to break up the fight. They found them on opposite corners of the room. Jack looked at Mr. Smalling and they both—fortunately—laughed out loud. It must have been a convincing performance. ■

The afternoon of the dance was a test of organizational competence and delegation skills for young Jack. For an event that was supposed to run itself, there was a considerable amount of labor to orchestrate, especially since his last class on Friday ended at three P.M. He barked out orders to those needing guidance. Only the band could use the rear doors. The armory manager assigned a couple soldiers who were there doing weekend drills to guard the doors while the band brought in their amps, drums, guitars, lights, etc. The armory wasn't in the best part of town and stuff like that tended to disappear if not guarded.

The front doors were for the loading of barrels of ice and sodas in the corner. Several large trays of party sandwiches arrived from the deli at Kroger. Just napkins—no plates.

The fold-out tables arrived from the Baptist church. Sixteen of them: four for the food and twelve for the recruiters, who would be arriving at five.

Then fire marshal showed up and heaved his chest upward as he spoke. All exit doors were to be remained clear and unlocked. A strict limit of four hundred people were allowed in. Four hundred and one people, and he would shut the whole thing down. Jack simply nodded. He had no time for this power trip.

Right at five o'clock the recruiters began coming in to unpack their supplies.

Chairs! There weren't enough chairs. He burst right through the front door and bounded right into Captain Doug Sander, United States Air Force. Almost knocked him down.

"Jeez, Captain. I'm sorry." He said, then got a view of his face. "And congratulations on your promotion!" Jack recognized him immediately, in spite of the new rank on his shoulders.

The last time Jack saw Doug Sander was two and a half years ago, when Jack was shirtless, covered from head to toe in sweat and grime. Doug was different, too. The time they met at the Base Commander's office, Doug was a First Lieutenant in a subdued flight suit, a "bag" as they called it. Now, he was a Captain, dressed in his "blues," the business suit of Air Force officers. He had scores of medals on his jacket, above a very impressive looking set of pewter wings pinned just above the pocket. Underneath the big pilot wings was a smaller set of parachute wings. The blue name tag, outlined in white, simply said, "SANDER." The man looked pressed and polished, like he should be attending a congressional hearing.

"Hey, Jack," he said, extending his hand. "It's Doug. Call me Doug. Busy?"

Jack regained his composure and shook his hand, realizing that he was working hard, but not necessarily smart. "No, I'm just excitable. But you know 'a pint of sweat will save a gallon of blood.' Watch how quickly I can fix that right now." He yelled at a guy in the parking lot, "Gary. Need seven chairs. Right now!"

As the guy waved from across the lot, Doug smiled. "Patton? You just quoted General Patton."

"Yeah. The guy graduated dead last from West Point. Maybe there's hope for me. By the way, what are you doing here all dressed up in your fancy uniform?"

"I'm the Liaison Officer for the Air Force Academy. I cover Northeast Arkansas and Southeast Missouri."

Jack's eyes widened. "No kidding. Can I be your first interviewee?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you're my only interviewee. I saw you at the Ritz when you did the quiz competition. We all laughed about that at the commander's call the following week. The Colonel really lambasted those three guys we sent to help Mrs. Will. Taken down by a teenager, he said. You're not old enough to vote, but you manhandled three professional military aviators."

"It was a familiar topic, that's all."

"No. It was more than that. I watched how you conducted yourself on stage. You were confident, but not cocky. You were polite and respectful, yet not subservient. I forgot that you were a high school kid when you were up on stage. I've talked to your school's college advisor. You have special mental and physical talents clearly above the norm. I think every recruiter in there tonight is going to offer you something. I'm here to sell you on the Academy."

"Sold."

"I figured as such. Now, of course, there are two hoops to jump through: The congressional appointment and the Academy Admissions Board. I'm here to help you with both."

This was his chance. Of course, he knew the process. What he didn't know was the gouge, the inside info that would allow him to be noticed. The competition wasn't really from others in Blytheville; he didn't know anyone else who was interested in the Academy. No, the competition was from Jonesboro, the larger town an hour west of Blytheville, and the sons and daughters of the officers at the air base, who attended tiny Gosnel High School just outside the main gate. There were at least a few of them interested, he reasoned.

But he never had the chance to finish their conversation.

He heard the engine rev and the gravel thrown even before he saw the Plymouth Duster appear

from behind the back of the armory. No sooner had it appeared than he saw his classmate Peggy Ball make a failed attempt to get out of the way. Jack's eyes opened wide as he watched helplessly from his spot at the north end of the armory.

The car's right bumper nailed her just below her right hip. Jack heard it from forty yards away. The noise of the impact sickened him. Yet the car was still accelerating. She never uttered a scream, there had been no time. Her body flung backwards over the hood, her head hitting the windshield with another low-frequency thud. The forward motion of the car put her into a violent spin off the right side of the car. By the time she landed in the rocky grass beside the armory's rear gravel road, the car was halfway to the main road.

Doug hadn't seen a thing, only turning to see the car as it screeched to a halt to avoid pulling into the traffic, narrowly avoiding a collision. Jack took a mental snapshot of the car: Light blue, 1974 Duster, broken right windshield, windows down. Driver was a young white dude, long brown hair, wearing a baseball cap. He instinctively began barking orders, first to Doug, "Sir, help her until the ambulance arrives," then to someone else, "You! Call an ambulance," then to another student closer to the road, "Get his license!"

The car made a right turn onto the asphalt road and its tires squealed, blue smoke coming off the tires. The next decision he made was one not well thought out. It was the one that would change his life forever. Beneath the armory's flag pole was a circular arrangement of white rocks, placed there to keep grass from growing. He grabbed a fist-sized one and burst away, reaching full speed in less than a second. He ran at an intercept angle across the crossing road separating the armory from the used car dealer's lot. The car would be passing about thirty yards from him in less than two seconds. The car was already moving at a tremendous speed and still accelerating. He had never seen a car go so fast on South Division before. And it was heading *into* town. Still running at full speed, anger swelling, he squinted with focused determination, took a long outfielder's stride, and threw the rock with all of his might, leading the car by a large margin. He threw it so hard his forward momentum tumbled him into the concrete pavement of the car lot. The rock never got more than head-height on its quick parabolic path towards the car.

It went right into the car through the open window.

Jack rolled a few times across the rough concrete and got back to his feet just in time to see the car pull across the center median, narrowly missing an oncoming car. The other car swerved into the other lane, then quickly back into his lane again. The Duster continued off the other side of the road and was probably doing eighty miles an hour when it hit the large oak just beyond a small drainage ditch.

Jack took it all in: The car seemed to compress, with dirt, steam, and small pieces of glass and metal encompassing the vehicle. There was perhaps a half a second delay in his seeing the man's life end and the accompanying sound from impact.

The car's rear wheels came airborne slightly, but otherwise the car simply squeezed into a gnarled hunk of metal, the way a soda can crushes. The sound of impact weakened his knees. No one could have survived a direct hit into a tree at that speed. He awkwardly jogged a few yards, then stopped as he saw other motorists rush to the steaming wreckage.

The car had accelerated perhaps a quarter of a mile before hitting the tree, and covered that distance in about ten seconds. He covered his mouth, knowing he had just killed someone and his eyes began to water. He somehow pushed aside the rising emotions and did a quick "delta V" calculation in his head. He quickly concluded the car could have been going as fast as ninety miles per hour in that ten seconds of acceleration.

He jerked his head back towards the armory. A dozen people had encircled Peggy, who laid motionless. Two people were on their knees, Captain Sander and Duebs.

He snapped his head back to the car wreck. Adrenaline sent his heart racing and he quickly concluded what his next tasks were and he turned to jog towards the car wreck. He was not going to help that person, however. As if he could sense the future unfolding, he got to the edge of South Division just as he heard the ambulance siren.

The whole incident had occurred in less than a minute. In one minute, his life changed and perhaps two lives were lost. He wanted to somehow press rewind, but knew there was no way to affect anything but the future. Logic was now fully in control again and Peggy was clearly the priority. She was the innocent victim. The driver was the culprit; even if triage dictated that the driver was the higher priority, Jack knew his sole purpose in life at this point was to ensure that Peggy got the first response.

In less than two minutes, the ambulance appeared with its red and white rotating lights. Jack commanded its movement directly towards him, waving his arms over his head. The ambulance must have spotted him, because instead of trying to go on the right shoulder to the car wreck, it turned slightly left and paralleled the stopped traffic in the opposite lane.

A half minute later the ambulance driver pulled up, the driver-side window already rolled down.

“Two casualties. We need a second ambulance, but she's the priority,” Jack said, stepping back and pointing toward the crowd of people a quarter mile further south.

Fortunately, the driver took him at his word and sped the rest of the way towards her.

Jack stood flat-footed for less than a second, before he resumed his “battle zone commander” role. He pointed at a car, motioning it to pull forward and to the side, allowing movement of the north-bound traffic to go onto the crossroad and detour around the accident scene. He directed traffic with an urgency, minimizing the drive-by gawking. The lighter the traffic, the lower the chance that the ambulance would get delayed in getting Peggy to Chickasawba Hospital, some three miles north.

After a couple of minutes, he summoned another motorist who had pulled over to help to take over with traffic control so Jack could get back to the armory. The police sirens were now clearly heard, which brought Jack's thoughts back to the realization that he had killed the driver. What would become of him once he tells the police what happened? It never occurred to him that he should “flavor” the truth, to omit the fact that he threw a rock at the car, causing the accident.

He arrived at the group of people just as the ambulance was pulling away. Duebs was addressing the group and he caught the tail end of his speech, “...anything else? Good. Remember, you are interviewed by the police, be brief and mention only things that you actually *witnessed*. If you didn't see it yourself, don't mention it. This is very important.”

“How's Peggy?” Jack asked, breathing hard.

Duebs finished talking to the crowd, “O.K., back to work,” and the crowd dutifully dispersed. He then turned to Jack and said, “Conscious. Probably a broken pelvis or hip, based on where she was hurting. Bleeding from the back of her head, too.”

He put an arm around his neck and dragged him alone. “No one saw the rock but me and that Air Force guy.”

“Captain Sander?”

“Yeah.”

“Jeez, what have I done, Duebs?” It was apparent, even from a quarter of a mile away, that it was a grim scene over there.

“You ran out to get the license plate number. That's all. Looks like you fell, too.”

Jack was bleeding from his right knee and elbow. “I’m fine. Look, I have to tell them what happened, what I did.”

“Tell me, Saint Jack, what will that gain you?”

“I just *killed* someone, Duebs.” The combination of adrenaline and a reflection of his actions made his eyes tear.

“Yeah, here’s a thief who just stole something from the armory, then hit a friend of ours with his car and didn’t even slow down. Then left the scene, then was doing a hundred miles an hour in a forty-five zone, endangering even more people. Yeah, I’d say you’re totally at fault.”

“You know what I mean.”

Duebs gave him a serious glare. “I didn’t see you throw *anything*, and I will contradict you if you say you did. You hear me? One of us will go to jail for lying. Go talk to the Air Force guy.”

Jack knew he was right. There was nothing good to be gained by admitting he caused the accident. Jack nodded. “I will.” And with that, he turned and jogged over to Captain Sander, who was retrieving a box of recruitment folders he had abandoned when the incident occurred.

“Doug?”

He turned and smiled.

“Sir, I need your advice. When the police show up—”

“—you tell them what your friend said, i.e. you ran over to the road to get his license number.”

“Doesn’t the Academy have some sort of honor code?”

The police were arriving. Three cars, blue lights flashing and sirens commingling. A second ambulance was heard from the distant north. Two of the police cruisers went to the wreck and one continued on to the far entrance to the armory where a uniformed national guardsman was summoning him.

Doug ignored the commotion. “Honor Code? Sure it does. And it sure would be easy if everything were black and white. You either cheated on a test or you didn’t. You either lied about being out after hours or you didn’t. Listen, Jack, and this is important: There are vultures out there ready to feed on others’ misfortunes and errant decisions. Would I have thrown that rock? I don’t know. Would you right now, now that you’ve had the chance to think about it? Probably not. This isn’t about redemption for your sins. Right now this is about self-preservation.

“And one more thing. I was watching you during this. You took charge. You barked orders in a controlled manner while under duress. And everyone accepted your role as leader. You took command of the situation and, for that, Peggy will probably survive this. You had someone calling for an ambulance before the car wrecked. You knew that I would have some training in first aid, and you sent me to her.”

Jack didn’t look completely convinced, so Doug continued, “You’ll soon realize the big world beyond Blytheville is cruel and unfair. If you tell the police you threw the rock, they will arrest you and charge you with murder. It’s not even a choice for them, it’s their obligation. You’ll spend the rest of your high school years sitting in jail awaiting a long trial. With a good lawyer you’ll get eventually get convicted of voluntary manslaughter based on your *mens rea*. Do you want that? Do you *deserve* that? You’re young and you’re not expected to get in these kinds of situations yet. But you did.

“This is what warfare is like. It’s truly a fog. All you can be expected to do is the best you can, but understand that you are under tremendous stress making life and death decisions and sometimes you’ll make a bad one. You just did. Don’t compound that decision with another bad one. It’s always better to constantly give yourself the opportunity to do the right thing. Only this time if you mention the rock and you’ll be doing the right thing—from a jail cell.”

Jack nodded just as Captain Sander said one last sentence, "Here's your chance."

Jack turned to see a policeman walk up, with everyone's eyes on him. He was six-two, two hundred twenty pounds, and was all business: "You Jack Mohny?"

"Yes, sir."

"Motorist over there said you threw a rock at the car."

Jack looked back at Doug, who maintained no expression whatsoever.

Then Jack turned squarely at the officer and replied, "Yes, sir. I did." ■

Chapter Six

■ January 16th, thirty-three years ago.

No phone call could have been more difficult. Jack was a choirboy compared to some of his other friends. He didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't do drugs, didn't do anything remotely nefarious. Yet, his one phone call offered before his official arraignment wasn't made to his parents—it was made to Mr. Abuyuan. The lawyer could certainly relay the circumstances to his parents, but Jack considered time to be his worst opponent. He needed this concluded before it got a life of its own, if it hadn't already.

This was a day of firsts, most importantly the first time he had witnessed someone dying. He had also never been arrested, never been handcuffed, never been paraded into an awaiting squad car in full view of Capt Sander and the other college representatives, his friends, and the myriad of observers who converged on the scene of the accident that took the life of some twenty-two year old guy from Hayti, Missouri named Bobby Rogers.

Sure, a guitar was found in the back seat of the wreckage, stolen from the back of the armory. And sure, Peggy Ball was being flown to Memphis with massive internal injuries because of this Rogers guy. He heard all of that over the police radio in the front seat. But was this worth a man's life? Jack kept re-living the events as he tried to reconcile his actions.

Arriving at the Mississippi County Jail, he was in-processed; they took his wallet and watch. No prison garb—that would happen later. No, he was simply told he had one phone call to make before he would sit in his cell until the next day when the county judge would confer the charges of murder.

The ride in the squad car didn't give him the jolt of reality normally expected when a person is arrested. However, his arrival at the jail, the fingerprinting, and the offer of the single phone call brought out a rush of adrenaline. He tried to control the shaking by taking a few deep breaths.

Had he made a mistake in admitting everything? Perhaps 'honesty is the best policy' doesn't always apply. He remembered from some Kodiak episode that it's not a good idea to talk before having a chance to talk to an attorney. *Did I screw up?* He put his free hand on the wall to keep it from shaking.

The phone rang several times before Mr. Abuyuan answered it. “Alex.”

“Mr. Abuyuan? Sir, this is Jack Mohny.”

“Jack! You just caught me. We were heading out to the Malco for a movie.”

“I'm sorry sir. This is my one phone call from jail. When you get back, could you do me the favor of meeting with me and telling my folks where I am?”

“You're serious?”

“Yes, sir.”

A moment of silence preceded a confirmation: “You said Jail.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hang on.” Then Jack heard him put his hand over the phone and was relieved to hear a

muffled, "Honey? I got an emergency here. Go ahead and I'll try to catch up with you after the show over at Pizza Inn."

"O.K., Jack. You have my undivided attention. First, where are you being held, and what happened?"

"I'm downtown at the country jail. Just got here. A guy stole a guitar from the band who was unloading their stuff at the armory for a concert tonight. He peeled out of the back and hit Peggy Ball, who was helping us set up. He didn't even slow down until he got to the main road, South Division, where he peeled out northbound and was probably doing eighty miles an hour before I chucked a rock at him."

"You threw a rock at him."

"Yessir. Right about then he cut across the median, off the west side of the road. Oncoming cars swerved into his lane to avoid him. He went right into the big oak tree near the end of the Angeline's driveway. He was killed on impact, I'm told."

"Jeez."

"Yes, sir. Jeez is right."

"Did you hit him with the rock?"

"Don't know. It was a good toss and his windows were open. I was running at full speed and tumbled after I threw it. That's why I called you before my folks."

"I see. Do you want to see if I can get bail posted for you?"

"No, sir. I'd prefer to see if you can get your hands on the police report as soon as you can."

"Why? Wouldn't you rather get out of jail?"

"No, I'd rather try to see if I actually hit him. If I hit him, it would leave a mark and the rock would probably still be in the car. I remember seeing some blue smoke and I'm thinking he might have blown a rear tire which actually caused him to lose control. If you find the rock out in the middle of the Angeline's yard, then I didn't hit him."

"I'm on it, Jack."

"Oh, and Mr. Abuyuan?"

"Could you have the police look for the rock? I'd rather that they find it than you. Not that they wouldn't believe you. Also, there are probably some skid marks crossing the road. Just want to make sure it's all documented."

"Good idea. You want me to call your folks?"

"I'm afraid so. They're going to have a rough time with this."

Mr. Abuyuan was taken aback by the last statement. Here was a seventeen year-old kid, had just seen his friend hit by a car, followed by seeing a young man die. Then he was summarily arrested and put in jail, yet his thoughts weren't self-serving. He was controlled and composed. "Jack, I'll drive by your house first, then go to police headquarters and grab the guy who is probably there typing up the report and see what he has."

"Thank you, sir. Sorry to spoil your evening."

"Hey, that's what I'm here for."

After he hung up, Mr. Abuyuan wondered if he was up for the task. These kinds of events didn't occur in Blytheville, at least not with clients like Jack. ■

At the same time the phone call was being made from downtown, Captain Sander located the rock. Fortunately, it didn't hit anything in the car; it simply flew in one open window and out the other. He picked it up and threw it another thirty yards further into the yard. The truth needed a little stretching. ■

One hour after Captain Sander left the scene again, and two hours after the sun had set, it was evident that the night was going to be a cold one. Yet Mr. Abuyuan and the lead patrolman were back on the scene with flashlights.

No rock had been found in the car, which was now at the impound yard not far from the accident site. In spite of the massive damage to the vehicle, there was no evidence of the rock having hit the car either on the inside or the outside. They would look at the autopsy report later that evening, once the coroner was done.

The skid marks already had, in fact, been clearly documented in the police report. However, several six-inch strips of tire tread were found near the beginning of the marks, and these had not been entered into the report. Also, the left-rear tire was, indeed, flat and severely damaged. Large pieces of the tire tread were missing and none had been noted as found at the impact site. Mr. Abuyuan insisted that this fact be entered into the police report, and the lead investigator agreed.

Now to find the rock. Mr. Abuyuan was dressed in a heavy jacket, but he hadn't brought gloves and was freezing. The officer, however, was dressed more appropriately with gloves and a watch cap that covered his ears.

It took almost thirty minutes but they found the palm-sized rock in the Angeline's yard, almost up to the edge of their front steps. Fortunately it had been found by the policeman and not by the attorney.

"Kid must have really thrown it with all of his might," he said, holding a flashlight up to it as he walked over to the attorney."

"More importantly, it couldn't have hit him, not and traveled this far."

"But it could have spooked him, though."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to mark the precise locations of everything."

"Of course."

"And then I'd like to buy you a cup of coffee at McDonald's."

"You bribing me?"

"With McDonald's? Jeez, John, am I that cheap? If I was bribing you I'd take you to The Grecian Steakhouse."

The officer chuckled. "Fine. Give me a chance to thaw out before I transfer my notes."

"Thanks, bud. Your son playing ball?"

"Yeah. He'll be a junior."

"A year behind Jack Mohny."

"Yeah, I'm sure they're friends. That's why this is so tough."

"I think we're going to be able to do the math on this one and prove that Jack had nothing to do with the accident, even though he did throw the rock at him. Who's the prosecutor?"

"Probably Wayne Brown. He's handling the big crimes these days."

"Mind if I call him, ask him to meet us at McDonald's?"

"Have at it."

"Thanks. I'll swing by the office and give him a call, then I'll head out to McDonald's. See you there at, say, eight forty-five?"

"O.K., Alex."

"Thanks, John. My wife and daughter are over at the Malco watching Star Wars. I'm supposed to meet them at Pizza Inn afterwards, which is right next door." ■

Reaching the office, Alex made copies of the precise measurements that had been marked off with the rock and its relative position to the road, the longitudinal distance from where Jack had told him he threw the rock from, and where the skid marks began. Then he called Wayne Brown at his home, but there was no answer. He still had a few minutes, so he swung by the jail to give Jack the notes and a copy of the preliminary report.

Jack's parents were there. They told Alex there would be no bail posted tonight; the county judge wasn't going to interrupt his evening for an arraignment nor a bond hearing. Arraignment would be at ten A.M. on Saturday morning at the earliest. Jack's mother's eyes were red, but his father was clear-eyed and he seemed firmly in control.

"Alex, thanks for helping us out. How bad does it look?"

"Better. We found the rock. We also found some tire tread near the beginning of the skid marks. Everything is marked off and measured. All we need to do is some trigonometry to determine which happened first, the rock or the tire blowout. He could have hit the brakes to avoid the rock, which makes him still culpable. Or the blowout could have occurred before the rock was thrown, which will prove him innocent, well mostly innocent."

"Yeah, I asked Jack if he needed anything tonight and his response was, 'Yeah, dad. His TI-30 electronic calculator.'"

Alex laughed and slapped the elder Mohney on the shoulder. "Your son doesn't need me. He'll get this resolved himself."

"I hope so."

Suddenly, from a block away, the fire siren went off, followed shortly thereafter by sirens from the firetrucks. In a small town, the launching of firetrucks always gave people pause. The Mohneys spoke loudly over the sound of the sirens, thanking Alex for all he had done tonight.

Little did they know the fire was at the Mohneys. And they wouldn't find out until morning that the fire had been set deliberately. ■

By the time Alex Abuyuan reached the McDonald's on the east side of town, John was already seated in the corner, writing on a large white pad.

"I see you already have coffee. You're simply too quick to be bribed."

John smiled, but got right down to business. "I think this one is too close to call."

"Hold onto that thought," he said, pointing to the counter. "You want anything to eat?"

"No thanks, Alex."

A couple of minutes later, Alex reappeared with a quarter pounder and a large coffee. "So, you think it's going to be hard to prove either way?"

"Well, one thing's for certain: He admitted throwing the rock."

"Yeah, he's either extremely honest or extremely stupid."

"Or both."

"Yeah, or both."

John swung the pad around for the lawyer to see. "Here's South Division. Here's the armory. Here's the used car lot where he threw the rock from. Here's the tree. Here's the skid marks. Here's where I found the rock."

Alex took it all in. The points were drawn neatly and shown to scale.

"This is the path of the rock as it crossed the road. The skid marks are prior to this point. He could have hit the brakes if he saw the rock coming, which blew out the tire."

"How fast was the car going, do you think?"

“It had to have been going well over sixty.”

“But you don't know?”

“No, Alex. I don't know. We have some math done on it. We have a guy coming in from Little Rock tomorrow to look at the car and the site. He'll make a pretty accurate estimate.”

Alex took a big bite of the burger and spoke before swallowing, “Jack will too. When his parents asked him if he needed anything, he said he wanted his electronic calculator.”

“I've seen those. They sell them at Wal-Mart. I guess the slide rule is on its way out.”

“Yeah, and I'll be by there in the morning; Jack will have done the math for us.”

“Is that admissible?”

“Sure. And if you validate that his math shows he had nothing to do with the crash, we can stop this arraignment dead in its tracks.”

“I can't. I just collect and compile evidence. But Wayne Brown can. He wasn't home?”

“No.”

“You want me to see if I can find him?”

“You'd do that?”

“We're the police. We do that sort of stuff. He's either eating out here on the east end, or watching Star Wars with your family.” ■

It was clear that Wayne Brown was not amused by the collaboration between the investigating officer and the attorney representing the accused. A patrolman was waiting outside the movie theater when the Prosecuting Attorney emerged with his wife. Since the patrol car had spotted his car so quickly and reported back, both John and Alex walked across the parking lot to the Pizza Inn and shared a few slices and a Coke, since Alex's wife and daughter would be arriving there after the movie as well.

Brown walked in and right up to the table. “This is not the place to discuss a murder investigation. My office. My wife's in the car. I'll drop her off and be there in five minutes.” He turned and started walking back to the door he just entered.

“Hey Wayne, wait just a minute. Ginny's meeting me here in a few minutes. I've already ditched her once tonight. We'll just give you the summary, hand over John's preliminary report, and the additional evidence he found upon a secondary perusal earlier tonight. You can take everything and decide for yourself. For now, go get your wife out of the car, sit down and have a slice. How was Star Wars?”

“Fine. But this is not the place for this. By the way, I saw Ginny and your daughter in the theater. You're daughter's really growing up fast.”

“Yeah, I was supposed to be in there with them until this happened. I guess I'll have to go see it by myself.”

Wayne put on his glasses. Enough with the small talk. “You got two minutes. Whatta ya got?”

John explained the entire event, the evidence obtained, along with the confession.

Wayne waited patiently until he had finished, then at last said, “Looks like manslaughter to me.”

“Gee Wayne. I thought you might do a little bit of analysis first.”

“What's more to do? I can see clearly what happened.”

“You see the tire blowing out, him losing control, and planting himself into the Angeline's tree at a hundred miles an hour. How do you get manslaughter out of that.”

“I see a confession.”

“You also see a rock that sailed way over the car, never touching him nor the car. Can you prove the driver saw the rock coming?”

“You'd be amazed what I can prove.”

“Can I quote you?”

Suddenly, Wayne's face grew red. “Can I also report that you and the investigating officer are collaborating?”

“Nope. We're just eating pizza, waiting for you.”

Wayne stormed out, papers in hand. This wasn't going to be easy. ■

Chapter Seven

■ January 17th, thirty-three years ago.

They all appeared in front of the district court judge, precisely at ten A.M., in a special hearing to determine the charges that would be formally filed and to give the accused a chance to plead guilty or not. This was not the trial, simply the arraignment. It was vitally important to Jack that the charges be dropped, and dropped quickly. Otherwise, a permanent record would be made and that would kill any chance of Jack getting into the Academy.

In a sense, Jack was lucky, because the judge was an avid golfer and would never have agreed to convene his court on a Saturday. Otherwise, he would have spent the rest of the weekend in the Mississippi County Jail. But it was a cold January day and the judge didn't have anything else going on. Just a few phone calls and a court reporter, a bailiff, a county prosecutor, the defense attorney and the defendant were all inside the single, yet cavernous court room, just ten yards south of the county jail.

The initial evidence presented to Wayne Brown by the investigating officers was not sufficient for a tacit dismissal of charges. Alex knew this, and wanted to delay the arraignment until the crash expert from Little Rock had a chance to examine the files. However, when Alex stopped by the jail on his way home from the Pizza Inn to tell him that a delay was in Jack's best interest, the deputy on duty handed Alex a single page of handwritten notes prepared by Jack. "The boy's sound asleep," the deputy had said.

Asleep. *That Jack is one cool cat.* Here's a teenager facing murder charges, locked up in a jail cell, and the kid is sound asleep. Alex smiled for the first time all evening.

Alex looked at the document. The top of the page was a scaled drawing of the scene, equally as neatly prepared as the officer's had been. However, underneath was half a page of quite complex math showing—conservatively—how fast the rock must have been traveling in order to come to rest some ninety yards from where it had been thrown. This wasn't just "distance equals rate times time" or "thirty-two feet per second squared" mind you. It showed what the velocity that the rock would have to have been thrown along a parabolic path low enough to pass near enough to the car for the driver to be alarmed enough to attempt to swerve or brake in order to miss it. The next morning before going into the court room, Alex had asked Jack what kind of math this was—it didn't look like normal trigonometry. Jack told him it was a "derivative function based on a second-order non-linear differential equation" which "is the basis for modeling the mass properties of standard projectiles at various apogees."

When Alex asked what that meant, Jack told him that even at sixty miles per hour and the rock traveling at ninety-two miles per hour, the driver would have only had three-tenths of a second to take his foot off the accelerator, apply the brake, and have the tire explode before the trajectories of the rock and the car crossed. Realistically, the driver was doing at least twenty miles per hour faster than that. Thus: impossible. Case dismissed.

But Jack took it a step further. He reasoned that if there had been enough brake pressure applied to lock up the left rear wheel, shredding it, the other wheel should have evidence of the same.

Anti-lock brakes didn't exist on these cars thirty-three years ago.

For twenty minutes, Alex studied all of the case photos, some one hundred and fifty of them. The other wheel was pristine. There was only one skid mark. The other tire had no flat spot on it. This wasn't due to slamming on the brakes. The only rational conclusion was because of the differential drive on the car, one wheel spun out while the other didn't, weakening the tread enough that once the car reached its high speed, the tire simply "let go." Reasonable doubt. The additional conjecture on Jack's part was a gamble, but it paid off.

Jack's parents had brought in his one and only suit and tie, and he changed in his cell. He splashed his face in the steel basin and told them, "O.K., I'm ready." The deputy led him out; technically he was supposed to handcuff him. But with the attorney and the parents there, and just a few steps into the courthouse, the cuffs were waived.

The proceedings began like Jack imagined they would, having sat through hours of his mother's favorite TV show, *Barnaby Jones*. The judge walked in, no cloak—merely a suit and tie.

The judge said, "O.K." and Wayne Brown rose from his chair. The prosecution then laid out the case. When he finished, Alex rose and the defense laid out "what *really* happened," with a confident and erudite delivery that clearly outclassed the prosecutor's best efforts.

Given this evidence, when the floor was given back to Wayne Brown for a redirect, he quickly studied his options, and made the statement, "Your honor, the prosecution is willing to concede that there is doubt as to whether the defendant caused the accident that took the life yesterday of Bobby Rogers. However, the accused has admitted that he did, in fact, throw the rock at the car. Clearly, this man must be charged with reckless endangerment.

"Wayne, have a seat," was the initial response from the bench. The county judge looked at the evidence for a few minutes, then looked up at the bailiff. "Terry, you have any coffee made?"

"Yes, your honor. Black?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Jack looked around the room. His parents were in the back, dressed in their church clothes. He smiled at them, then winked. Then his smile vanished before he turned back around, resuming his solemn expression that Alex had asked him to maintain while in there.

After a moment, the judge looked up at the defense and asked, "Alex, did you do this math?"

"No, your honor. Too complex for me."

"Who did it?"

"The defendant, last night in his jail cell."

"Son, do they teach you this stuff at Blytheville High School?"

"No, your honor, they don't." Jack stood up as he replied, and by the time he was up, the sentence was completed. He began to sit down again, but reversed course and decided to remain standing.

"So, how do you know this stuff?"

"Sir, it's from An Introduction to Astrodynamics by Bate, Mueller, and White. It's the core astro course book used at the Air Force Academy. I had the Mississippi County Library order it for me, sir."

"You taught yourself astrodynamics?"

"It's not as hard as it sounds, your honor."

Alex looked down at his notes and smiled.

The judge willed himself to keep from smiling. He studied each line of the clear-headed analysis done by the defendant, then looked at his character as evidenced in bullet form prepared by Alex: A starting football player, an honor student taking the toughest courses that Blytheville High

School offered, Student Council President, and a school leader who had just witnessed a good friend who had been run over by the man involved in the accident.

The judge simply said, “Mr. Mohnney, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Your honor, I'd like to offer my condolences to the family of Bobby Rogers. He, like I, made a series of mistakes yesterday. Because of these mistakes, he died, and for that I'm truly sorry. I'd also like to apologize for my overreaction to witnessing my friend Peggy Ball being run over. I should have never thrown the rock. It was a mistake and I hope the court will not let this error in judgment destroy my future as an Air Force officer.”

“You want to fly airplanes?”

“Yes, sir. And I know this sounds corny, but I want to serve my country. I consider myself above average and I'm not the type of person who relies on others to defend our country, if I have something to offer.”

The judge was clearly impressed. Jack's response was from the heart, convincing and honest. Alex didn't have to say anything. Wayne was already putting some papers back into his briefcase.

“How was your night in jail?” the judge asked.

“Sir, not nearly as bad as Peggy Ball's night in the hospital with a shattered pelvis and other internal injuries.”

He looked at the back of the courtroom. “Mister and Missus Mohnney, how's your house?”

They looked at each other, then Mister Mahoney rose. He spoke loudly since they were in the rear of the mostly-empty courtroom. “Just the garage. A neighbor got a water hose on it quickly and the fire department was there in just a few minutes to finish putting it out. My insurance guy is going to look over the damage after lunch.”

“Arson?”

“That's what they're saying, your honor.”

“Hmm.” Then the judge looked down and continued reading something.

Jack turned around to face his parents. He knew nothing of this.

The judge picked out a piece of paper from the stack of evidence presented by both sides and placed it atop the pile. “Says here that 'In the critical seconds following the hit and run, Mr. Jack Mohnney immediately took charge of the situation. He directed people in a calm and authoritative manner, both managing the care of the injured victim and ensuring an ambulance was called. Based on the comments by the ambulance personnel and my own training in First Aid, Mr. Mohnney no doubt saved the life of Ms. Ball today.’” He dangled the statement high with two fingers as though it were on fire. “This document was signed by Douglas R. Sander, Captain, United States Air Force, Air Liaison Officer to the United States Air Force Academy and Aircraft Commander, KC-135.” The judge looked around, then over to the prosecutor. “Wayne, is this young man appearing before me today a menace to society?”

“No, your honor.”

“Good. I didn't think so.”

The bailiff arrived with the coffee just as the gavel came down, dismissing all charges.

Jack's math had been correct, but with erroneous data. He had no idea that Captain Sander had modified the distance Jack used in the equations. Knowing Jack's propensity for total honesty, Captain Sander saw no value in ever confiding with him that a simple re-tossing of a rock had changed Jack's future forever. ■

Chapter Eight

■ January 20th, thirty-three years ago.

Once school let out, Jack drove his Pinto to the front of the gym, jogged into Coach Will's office and told him that he had one more legal obligation to close out this incident. If he was nervous about what he was about to do, he didn't show it. He told the coach that after this quick meeting everything would be back to normal again. Missing practice, even if it was in the off season, was never an easy thing to explain away.

Especially with what he was about to do.

It was a thirty minute drive up to Hayti, in the bootheel of Missouri. In the passenger seat was a broken, charred bottle of Boone's Farm Mellow Days, which he had just emptied, filled with gasoline, smashed it on the abandoned concrete loading dock behind the old cotton gin, and set it ablaze. He had to put out the fire with a portable Halon extinguisher rather than allowing it burn out slowly. He also didn't want to attract any attention and he didn't have much time.

Reaching the town limits, he made a left on the third street and looked for the yellowed, decrepit clapboard house where the brothers of Bobby Rogers lived.

He pulled into the severely cracked driveway, the Pinto bounding over the chunks of rock and concrete before coming to a halt.

He got out of the car quickly; it wasn't in his nature to wait and gather his thoughts. No, this would be a test of wills, and he was surprised at how calm he was. He had a couple of days to think this through.

When he got to the screen door, he swung it open and banged loudly three times on the old wooden-veneer door inside, bypassing the lighted doorbell ringer.

He heard the floor creak and saw the window curtain move slightly, then he heard, "We don't want any."

"I'm Jack Mohney. You will want to talk to me."

After a moment, the door opened a quarter of the way. A mid-twenties redneck with a two-day growth encircling yellow teeth and deep-set eyes leaned forward against the door. He looked beyond Jack to see if anyone else was with him. "You got a nerve showing up here..." then turned back and yelled, "...Randy. Guess who's here."

Jack's heart was now racing. Good. He'd need a little adrenaline in his system if this came to blows. These were not complex people. A fight was not unconsidered.

A second man appeared, perhaps a few years older than the first, with a pronounced beer belly filling out the faded white undershirt he used to wipe his greasy face. Obviously he been eating something with ketchup or barbecue sauce because it ended up on the shirt.

"The hell do you want?"

"I'm returning your bottle." He dropped the large piece of darkened glass on the door's threshold, equidistant from them. "Careful, it's broken." Jack never took his eyes off of them.

"That ain't ours."

“The Blytheville Police Forensics Squad says your fingerprints are all over the other pieces they collected as evidence.”

The younger brother opened the door slightly wider, allowing both of them an easier route straight to Jack. The younger one said, “Oh yeah, then why ain't they here arresting us?”

“Because I told them I'd like to talk to you first. They didn't really want me to, but I persuaded them, told them you are in mourning.”

“Cuz you killed Bobby.”

“The District Court Judge of Mississippi County went over the evidence and concluded that I didn't. But I'm not here to discuss your brother. I'm here to discuss what's going to happen to you.”

“Oh, yeah. And what's that?” They both began exhibiting some aggression with their body language.

“Depends. You have two choices. The first choice is to get a bunch of two by fours, plyboard, insulation, paint, and caulk. Then you are going to completely and totally repair and paint my parents' garage. Get it back to the way it was to my satisfaction. You have until this Friday at five o'clock. If it still needs a second coat of paint at five oh one on Friday, I'll tell the police to go ahead arrest you for arson. Each of you will spend a minimum of five years in jail.”

“And if we don't?” the older one asked.

Jack moved in closer. “This is important, so listen carefully. I'm protected, even if you attempt to beat my ass right here and now.” He turned his head ever so slightly and leaned into them as though he was going to let them in on a secret. “Secretly, I'd love for one of you to take a swing at me, because I promise I won't stop fighting until I break both your necks. And if you do get lucky and get me, by the end of the week both of you will be dead, and by dead I mean like dead-and-buried dead—“ The younger one started to say something, but Jack cut him off, then pointed at the other one. “—Hear me out. Now. You, Randy. You were charged and convicted of grand theft of defoliant from the Harner farm two years ago. And you, Jimmy. You're a pot-smoking dipshit that the Blytheville Police is now itching to arrest every bit as much as the Hayti Police. If you do not repair the garage I will have them arrest both of you, and while you are away this house will be burned to the ground, and I will also burn down your girlfriend Mandy's house the next street over, and frankly I don't give two ounces of bat shit whether she's in the house or not at the time. Understand this: One. I'm smarter than you and I can get away with it. Two. Your thief of a brother who, before he kissed that tree, put my friend in a wheelchair for at least a year. Three. You tried to burn down my parents' house. None of you bastards give a rat's ass about anyone or anything and I give you my solemn word that if that garage isn't repaired completely by Friday at five P.M. you're going away. Maybe I'll date Mandy while you're gone.” Only he didn't use the word “date.”

They stood at the door for an eternity.

“You think you're some kind of tough guy.”

“I suggest you don't test me. Actually, the police think I'm soft for giving you a chance to fix the garage in exchange for no charges filed. Of course, it goes without saying that if I ever see either one of you again or if anything happens to me, or any of my family or friends, or even my sister's goldfish, I will put a quarter-inch Black and Decker drill bit through your knee caps and you'll never walk again. Don't ever doubt my convictions.”

Jack then turned away from them and headed back to his car, repeating “Friday at five P.M.”

He hopped in his car and was back at the gym before practice was over. It went well for him, he concluded. The only thing better would have been if the police actually had fingerprints. ■

Jack had been sitting at the kitchen table for about thirty minutes, talking with his parents after dinner, when the phone rang. Mrs. Mohney got up to clear off the table as Jack grabbed the handset off the wall hook, unraveling the long cord as he brought it to his ear. “Mohneys.”

“Jack, it's Doug Sander.”

Jack was surprised; Captain Sander had never called the house before. “Hi Doug. What's up?”

“Just wanted to fill you in. I talked with a few people today, greasing the skids.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I called Congressman Wilson's office this morning. I caught her on a slow day I guess and was able to actually talk with her. She was quite interested in the stories I had. How I met you, shirtless and filthy in the Base Commander's office, having tried to save that man's life; about your airplane quiz competition last year; about the football games and your meteoric rise to student council president as an eleventh grader. But when I explained to her this past weekend's events including your honest admission to the police and how you scientifically proved your innocence, she told me, 'When I think about service academy nominations, I'm reminded that some of these young people will someday have the responsibility of managing our nation's nuclear weapons arsenals. From what you've just told me, he seems to have the kind of character traits we look for: professionalism, intelligence, and honesty. I'm glad you told me about him and I look forward to getting his paperwork.'”

“That's fantastic! I can't thank you enough.”

“I also called the colonel who heads up the selection committee at the academy—”

“—Colonel Johnson.”

“Yes, Colonel Johnson. The congresswoman can nominate as many people as she wants; it's up to the selection committee to make the final recommendation for who actually gets the appointment. I promise this colonel will remember you when your name comes up.”

Suddenly a loud rumble appeared in the garage, followed by a guttural scream by Jack's mother. “Someone's in the garage!”

In a flash, Jack said, “I'll call you back,” hung up the phone, raced to the door and swung it open.

There, in the dimming daylight, were the brothers Rogers, unloading wood and supplies. They glanced at him, each unsmiling, then turned to offload more wood from the flatbed.

“Good. I'm glad you made the right decision.”

The younger brother spoke, not looking in Jack's direction. “Had to sell my dirt bike to pay for this.”

“Money well spent.”

Jack's dad had been in the bathroom and made it out just in time to join his wife at the inner garage door. When they saw the lumber and plywood being offloaded from the back of the old Ford truck, they turned to look at Jack.

“Mom, dad, these guys are going to fix the garage. They are quite handy and they owe me a favor.”

The elder Mohneys nodded at them and the brothers wordlessly returned the greeting.

“We're just dropping off the materials. We'll start on it tomorrow.”

“Fine. Thanks, guys.” And with that, Jack re-closed the door.

Inside, Mr. Mohney asked, “Was that a favor or the response to a threat?”

“Dad, there's an ancient Jewish adage that I read in the papers of Robert von Weizsacker, written after World War Two: 'Seeking to forget makes exile all the longer; the secret of redemption lies in remembrance.' I think those dudes might benefit from a little home repair work. Don't you agree?”

His father smiled. His mother didn't know what was going on. ■

Chapter Nine

■ August 16th, thirty-two years ago.

Coach Will looked out of his office window to see Jack Mohny, his star linebacker, tossing the football with his starting quarterback, Ross Dueber. They were warming up for the afternoon session, even though the rest of the team were sitting in the shade under the lone oak at the far edge of the practice field. They continued the back and forth passes at a constantly increasing distance, oblivious to the oppressive afternoon heat and clearly not interested in conserving their energy for the upcoming second half of two-a-days.

Both kids were tossing perfect spirals, on target. The coach put down his pen, crossed his arms, and gave the back-and-forth passes his full and undivided attention. He noted that Jack's passes were more powerful, and that Jack purposefully threw them off the wrong foot while jogging laterally.

The coach had seen both of these young men grow, both physically and mentally over the past few years. These two had become the team leaders, setting the example. Dueber was a tactician, a student of the game. He was strong and fast, but a full three inches shorter than Jack, who now towered over most of his teammates at six three. Jack was equally quick, and probably had another fifteen pounds of pure muscle over Duebs as well, which was perfectly proportioned to his role as strong-side linebacker. Jack had an explosiveness about him which always put him near the ball.

Watching the pre-game passing, Coach Will remembered reading the article in the paper from six months ago when it described Mohny's mathematics used to exonerate himself, specifically the distance he had thrown the rock.

The kid had an arm.

They weren't deep in quarterbacks. Perhaps he should let Jack run a few plays.

An hour later, after the exhausting "warm up," Coach Will pulled Jack from the defensive ranks and over to the offensive group, to the wonderment of the defensive coach. He told the assistant coach to walk through some options as he dragged Duebs and Jack off to the side.

"Jack, question for you."

Jack took off his helmet. His head was dripping in sweat. He looked back at the two groups of players, each being coached by their respective assistant coaches. "Yes, coach?"

Duebs took his helmet off, too.

"We're in an eye position. It's third and seven. I see a weakness in the middle of the opponent's split-four defense. Do I pass?"

"No sir."

Duebs and Jack exchanged glances.

Coach Will thought the response was too quick to have been considered properly. "Why not?"

"Sir, third and seven is statistically a passing play. They will be expecting this and will be back on their heels. I'd pull both guards outboard the tackles, bring the center right at the strong side defensive tackle, since Duebs is right-handed. This takes a little more time, so I'd have Duebs come up and pump-fake the pass and dive the halfback left. Then Duebs hands to the fullback through the

seam.”

“Pulling guards only works if the defensive tackles behave traditionally. If they slant, we're screwed.”

“No sir. Our first game is against West Memphis. They're defensive coordinator is not imaginative. Inside, they are taught to simply capture and guard the real estate assigned to them. A kind of zone play. Pulling the guards will daze and confuse them.”

Coach Will stared at Jack for a second as he gave the answer some consideration. Then he grabbed his whistle and motioned for both the defense and offense to meet up.

“O.K. Jack, run the play.”

Duebs looked at them both. *What's going on?*

“Me? I'm defense.”

“Humor me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Coach Will walked over to the defensive coordinator and gave him a simple command, “I want you to slant your tackles.”

“But West Memphis plays straight up.”

“Humor me.”

Duebs had the offense huddle up, then said, “Jack's running this play, then he took himself out of the huddle.

The offensive huddle was a strange environment for Jack. For two years, he was a defensive player. These faces behind the metal masks were of course familiar. Yet, the group was foreign, and every bit as confused as Jack was.

“O.K. Coach Will wants me to try out a play. Ron and T.J., we're pulling you outboard. Take one step out, as the tackles slant in, then go at the defensive tackles. Rick, I'm going to pump fake, so you've got a 'one Mississippi' delay then come hard at the left seam, taking out whoever shows up there. I'll make a read and option to the fullback, who also does a quick delay. Delay doesn't mean jog. It's delay, then explode—it's the only way this will work. Ron and T.J., remember that it's only one side-step, then forward. The tackles will be across your bow quickly.”

“Everyone got it?”

The helmets all nodded.

“One two. Ready.” and all replied “Break” with a single clap and jogged up to the line.

Jack walked up to the forming line and studied the defense, the tackles in particular. He noticed that they were each leaning more on their inside leg. *You've got to be kidding me.* The defensive tackles were cocked and loaded to slant. Coach Will was throwing him a curve! Quickly, he whispered to the two running backs, “Change that, option right, no delay.” He would let the line pull as planned, but he would have precious little time to run the option.

“Down!” With Jack's initial command, the linemen raised slightly before leaning into their three-point stance.

Jack took one more quick evaluation of the defense he was facing. He noticed that the two inside linebackers were stanced slightly closer to the line than they normally would be. This was a blitz, plain and simple. “Set.”

“Hut. Hut!” and the center slammed the ball into Jack's hands. A concussion of sound erupted as the offense and defense collided. Jack turned right, only to see the defensive end coming right at him. He barely had time to get the lateral pass off to the fullback before getting creamed just behind the line of scrimmage.

The blow was tremendous. It almost knocked the breath out of him and he soon found himself at the bottom of a pile of at least three defensemen. *Rats.*

Strangely, he expected to hear the whistle, indicating the play was over. Instead he heard a fading ruckus and some encouraging cheering from half of the players. He looked over at grass level through the mass of legs and shoulder pads to see the fullback jog into the end zone, the ball held high over his head. Plan B play had worked.

“Run it again,” erupted from behind the players.

“Huddle up!” Jack exclaimed, rising up from the pile.

“Jack.” Coach Will called him over, the assistant coach having joined him.

“If I’m not back in five, call in the air strikes,” he said to his team mates, then jogged the ten additional yards to the waiting coaches. When he got there, the coaches ignored him, arguing about whether to “see it against a split four or a four-three” defense.

When they were finished, Coach Will asked, “Why didn’t you run the play we discussed?”

“Coach, I looked at their stances. I saw blitz and now the central zone was saturated. I could have called time out, but I had to make a decision and knew we only had the corner to beat to make the option work.”

“Good call. And I liked the way you sacrificed yourself as you lateraled.”

“I’m not used to being on the receiving end.”

“O.K. Now it’s second and six. There are twenty-two seconds left on the clock and you are midfield. What are you going to do?”

Jack wasted no time in replying, “I’d run a wishbone, with Duebs in at halfback.”

“O.K. Why?”

“We’ll fake an option, and put Dueb’s throwing arm in play, cross-field to the flag.”

“Razzle dazzle?”

“Only if it works.”

“Try it.”

Duebs had been standing all alone, fifteen yards closer to the sideline. “Duebs!” Jack called.

Duebs jogged over and joined the huddle, tossing out Rick. Jack explained the play, then added, “After I lateral, I’ll stay behind the neutral zone, in case you get stuck.”

“This is razzle dazzle,” said Duebs.

“Yeah, more like desperation tactics. On one, ready..” and they all said “Break!” with an accompanying clap.

Jack surveyed the defense, now in a four-three configuration. The defense would be able to cover the flats and flag zones more carefully. Jack jogged back to Duebs and said, “Scratch that last statement. I’ll cut up the middle to give you another receiver. The flats may be covered.”

Then on his way back to the line of scrimmage he said to the fullback, “Your shoe’s untied. Made you look,” just to appear that he had something to say to him as well and take the focus off of Duebs.

“Down!” followed by a short delay as he took one last mental snapshot of the defense positions. “Set. Hut!”

Again, Jack was astonished at the sound of offense meeting defense directly in front of him. Usually he was either back from the line of scrimmage where the sound wasn’t as pronounced, or he was blasting into the sycophancy of sound, becoming part of the noise.

He turned and immediately lateraled to Duebs, who was running to the right. Jack continued his turn into a three hundred sixty degree arc, accelerating down field as he realized the weak-zone was

secure. Duebs stopped hesitated as he realized the flag zone was, indeed, covered. He looked at Jack penetrating the middle and with no further hesitation pumped the ball through a slit in the defense. Jack brought his arms up with no wasted effort and never losing stride. He cupped the ball and pulled it down, accelerating directly into the path of the free safety, hitting the smaller player with such force that the hit was heard by the coaches some thirty yards upfield. Jack never slowed. The safety ricocheted away and this time Jack was the one holding the ball up as he went into the end zone alone.

“O.K. Jack, put on the yellow—you're back on defense.”

Jack nodded. *Good.* He wasn't after Dueb's job nor looking for glory. He just wanted to win. ■

After practice ended at eight P.M., they all hit the showers quickly for the short night before the nine A.M. show-time for next day's two-a-day. Jack's parents knew the ritual well, as this was his third year with the dreaded two-a-days. He would come home, scarf down a meal, then hit the sack, usually by nine. The alarm was set for eight-thirty, and his body needed every moment of sleep to recover from the accumulated strains and contusions.

“Jack,” Coach Will called as he left the gym. The coach was leaning against his truck. He took off his baseball cap and scratched his thinning scalp, the one and only indication that coaches got tired, too.

“Yes, coach.” Jack said as he neared.

“Duebs is still our quarterback, but I'm going to need you as backup. Can you get here each morning at eight? I need you to study the play book.”

“Yes, sir.” *Rats. There goes another hour of sleep.* ■

With fate as the hunter, Duebs only got three plays in his senior year before tearing his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) while diving for a fumble in the first quarter of the first game.

Jack took over, and initially performed miserably. However, he was quite comfortable at linebacker and had an outstanding game on the other side of the line. In fact, he made some critical defensive plays that saved them from starting out with a loss, and squeaked by West Memphis with a narrow victory.

The coaches were concerned that his playing both ways would result in neither position being conducted well, but as Jack got used to the pace and the view from the offensive side of the line, he honed his style and eventually set the pace of the game. Over the summer he had read Carl von Clausewitz' On War, and adopted his treatise on warfare to the battle on the gridiron. There were numerous parallels between real war and football, most notably, “The course of war will tend to favor the party employing more force and resources.” That meant that his playing both ways was most likely a detriment and he conveyed this to the coaches. He told them he hated sitting on the sidelines, but understood if they chose to make him play only one-way. Clausewitz's book showed that strategy belongs primarily to the realm of art, while tactics belongs primarily to the realm of science. All of Clausewitz's dialectic reasonings fascinated him and he applied them readily to every aspect of the competitive facets of his life, mostly football but not exclusively.

In the waning months of the Academy nominations period, Jack managed a multi-front “war” on both his congressman's office and the Academy's selection committee. He asked Coach Will to “run into” the congressman one Saturday morning at the Sharecropper's Restaurant. Normally the coach detested those who congregate and socialize over coffee, considering it an utter waste of time when that time could be used to improve the body or the mind. But Jack asked him to consider the value of having him “recruited” as yet another Division One football player to add to the coach's list of

accomplishments. That seemed to work, as the congressman later noted when the call came to the house a few weeks later that he was pleased to offer him a congressional nomination to the United States Air Force Academy, and hoped that he would play football while there.

However, congressmen give out nominations like candy at a parade. The true selection was done by the Academy, who made their selections from the list of nominees. Jack spent many hours honing the essays and questionnaires, ensuring that the selection committee knew that he wanted to be an officer first and a pilot second. Of course, that wasn't the case. To be sure, he wanted to serve his country, but being an Air Force officer wasn't the goal; the goal was to fly their airplanes. However, Clausewitz played a role in the selection war, because Coach Will agreed to contact the offensive coach of Air Force, fully armed with the knowledge of where the team's strengths and weaknesses were: Air Force was fat on linebackers but woefully thin on quarterbacks. His offensive stats were incomplete at best due to his recent role as starting quarterback. But they soon found out about Jack's thorough understanding of the game plus the fact that, at six foot, three inches and two hundred twenty pounds of lean muscle and tremendous acceleration, he was the perfect size for a Division One quarterback. Though he had the explosive power needed to be an all-state linebacker, he was actually too lanky to play linebacker in the top-tier college ranks.

Thus, the emphasis would be to get his QB stats up throughout his senior year and spark the interest of the Air Force coaches.

Grades, of course, weren't an issue. He had the best academic scores in the entire congressional district, irrespective of his athletics acumen. ■

Ironically, for a kid who despaired over a dead bird as an eight year old, for a kid whose life had hung in the balance of a rock thrown as instant retribution for the injuries of an innocent classmate, Jack's future was cemented on a hit that put a Jonesboro linebacker in the hospital, barely conscious.

Jonesboro was the chief rivalry, and it was Blytheville's homecoming game, both teams undefeated, late in the season.

Both the Jonesboro and Memphis TV stations had cameras set up. The winner of the game would most likely be the state champion as well, because the AAAA-East Conference had no rival that year in Arkansas.

With the score tied at twenty-eight all midway through the fourth quarter, Jack had already played the game of his life. The rest of the team had made numerous mistakes and errors, but Jack was singularly magnificent. He was already over three hundred yards passing, an astonishing statistic for high school. He also had two interceptions on defense, and made some punishing stops on fourth down, changing the course of the game.

Yet, the noted inflection in not only the game but in his life came while running an option to the weak side on third down. With the backfield sweeping left, Jack had one blocker slightly in front of his halfback. But following an instant scan of the flow of the defense towards the left side of the field, it was clear that if he lateraled to the halfback, he would most likely hit a log jam. Jack saw a tiny seam open, and faked the lateral, then turned instantly upfield, keeping the ball for himself.

Jonesboro's all-state linebacker suddenly filled the hole, but was slightly off balance when Jack delivered the blow.

Jack only had one step to adjust to the oncoming collision but used it to establish a launching pad for an upward blast that impacted the linebacker right in the number "51" on his jersey. Even Jack was surprised at the concussion he enacted upon the other player. Leading with his facemask, Jack thrust his entire body upward, right into the linebacker's chin strap, which immediately let loose,

sending his helmet ten feet in the air. The helmet-on-chinstrap impact also sent the linebacker's jawbone rearward, jolting his cranium with such force that his body went limp and Jack accelerated right over the top of him even as he was still falling backwards.

Certainly the hit was violent. However, on film it looked downright horrifying. The helmet's ejection skyward clearly showed the power of the impact. But the way that Jack drove over him made the hit look all the more vicious.

Jack bolted untouched for thirty yards into the end zone so quickly that it was almost secondary to the hit. In fact, the Jonesboro station's camera inadvertently stayed on the linebacker, who lay motionless as half of the other twenty-one players moved down field, trailing Jack.

Jack's biology teacher was also a gifted photographer who captured many of the school's greatest sports moments from the sidelines, often better than the staff newspaper photographers. That night, he happened to be in the perfect spot on the nearside sideline. He snapped the picture when the helmet reached apogee and Jack was stepping over the linebacker, who had not yet hit the ground but was nearly horizontal. From a sports perspective, it captured the essence of the brutality of the game. It was perhaps the best picture he had ever taken. After developing the negative in his home photo lab, the biology teacher gave a black and white print to the Courier News sports photographer, who placed it under copyright to the Associated Press, along with a short article. The beneath, "Photo by Jim Roberds," adorned over three hundred papers, topping many of the NFL pictures available from the weekend.

One paper, the Colorado Springs Sun, picked up the photo from the AP, along with the article of the circumstances surrounding it. It was viewed by the offensive line coach, who recognized the quarterback's name and went to his notes to confirm that the quarterback shown in the photo was the same Jack Mohny whom he had discussed with that coach from Arkansas a few weeks before. He brought the photo into the office of Air Force's head coach, who saw it and made a call to the Academy's selection committee who found and tagged his file. Being a star football player won't get you an appointment to the Academy, but it sure didn't hurt.

Jack probably would have gotten the nomination even if he wasn't a football player. But without a doubt, that photo cinched the appointment.

The linebacker had awakened in the ambulance enroute to Chickasawba Hospital. Jack found out a few weeks later that the guy's parents had been so shaken by the episode on the field that they never let him play ball again. But at least he had a nice picture of the last instant that he played football.

■

Part II: The United States Air Force Academy

Chapter Ten

■ June 26th, thirty-one years ago.

The phrase that stayed in his mind was “Ladies and Gentlemen, today will be the *second* longest day of your life. Tomorrow will be the longest.” These were the first official words spoken to him by an upperclassman whose job was to gather and transport the bus loads of new cadets from the hugs and goodbye's of their loving parents into the strange new world just a mile up the Rampart Range of the Rocky Mountains. The cadet's words held true. His first day at the Academy was a cacophony of events. He knew it would be hectic, but the number of tasks he performed during in processing was simply overwhelming—by design. He was given an impossible amount of tasks and a limited amount of time. He soon realized the beauty of the place was reserved for the tourists on the wall next to the Cadet Chapel.

The ride to the cadet area from “down the hill” was surprisingly gentle. He had seen movies about new military recruits standing at attention as a drill sergeant blew insults and spittle their way and he expected the same general behavior. The bus ride, however, was more civil and completely professional. A crisply-dressed cadet with the incredibly shiny belt buckle and shoes walked at attention up and down the aisle as the bus worked its way up the hill. His voice was commanding and authoritative, even though in reality this cadet had made that same scary drive up the hill only three years before.

There were no women on Jack's bus. “Gentlemen, this will be the most difficult series of events you will ever have to endure. Beginning today, you begin a summer-long process of converting you from a care-free high school teenager into a military warrior. You will learn the military customs and the discipline required to someday command men in combat and the responsibility of safeguarding our nation's nuclear weapons. This is serious business, beginning the moment you boarded this bus. We expect your best effort.”

He continued, “Please take a glance outside your windows and understand that you will not see a modicum of freedom again until September. Once you step off this bus, you will stand at attention when not moving. When you are moving, you will be running. Walking is prohibited. Today will not be easy. Tomorrow—your first full day at the United States Air Force Academy—will be even harder. Look at the other people on this bus. Statistically, half of these people will become some of your closest friends for the rest of your life. Thirty years from now, you will be able to call any of them and they will stop whatever they are doing to help you. The other half will either quit or get kicked out and you'll never see them again.”

Jack took a quick look around. They all looked nervous which made him wonder whether he had the same expression. He certainly felt nervous, but made a conscious effort not to display it.

“The Academy has an Honor Code. We will not lie, cheat, nor steal, nor tolerate among us anyone who does. This evening, when you take your oath and become a member of the U.S. armed

forces, you also will be subject to this code. The quickest and most expeditious way to become an *ex-cadet* is to lie or cheat.”

The bus rounded the corner through a grove of pine trees and the Cadet Area came into view. It was a stunning place, backed right up next to the steep Rocky Mountains. The bus slowed as the upperclassman finished his monologue, “Gentlemen, we welcome you here. You were all valedictorians and all-state athletes. You are all leaders at your high schools. We would not have selected you if you weren't. The Academy boasts more Rhodes Scholars per capita than any other school in the nation. We have Olympic gold medalists and national champions in our ranks, impressive in its own right, but even more impressive given our high academic standards. Our graduates are fighter aces and astronauts. Over thirty-five thousand applied to come here this year. We are more selective than any Ivy League school. Sixteen hundred of you got in. Only about eight hundred graduate. Statistically the person sitting next to you will not make it. But understand this: We are *not* here to eliminate you. We are here to help you graduate. Believe it. It's true. We would be thrilled if all one thousand five hundred and sixty-seven of you graduate four years from now. However, make no mistake, graduating from the United States Air Force Academy requires a dedication on your part that you cannot even imagine at this point. But you can do it. We simply ask that you do your best.”

With that the bus stopped and the door swung open.

“Remember, walking is prohibited. Good luck gentlemen.” The upperclassman never smiled. He simply motioned for everyone to get off the bus.

That was when the hectic in processing began in earnest. A cadre of upperclassman, equally crisp and professional, directed the bus load of “smacks” into two lines and began a one-on-one lesson on how to stand at attention. The chin was pushed in, the eyes straight ahead. The shoulders back and down, chest out. Arms at the side, thumbs forward. Heels together, toes at a forty-five degree angle apart.

Lesson One, How to Stand: Done. Next there was a quick lesson in how to march in step, but that was short-lived because they were soon running as an element to their first stop, the barber shop. It was a good thing he got his head shaved as the first event; now he couldn't even contemplate going home with a buzz-cut. Not that he was even considering quitting. As Jack watched the electric razor make a reverse-Mohawk rearward across the top of his head, he thought about the advice given to him by Captain Sander before he left Blytheville two days ago: “Take it one minute at a time.”

The haircut took only ninety seconds. But in that time, he caught a glimpse in the big mirrors in front of him the image of a young, skinny blonde girl walking with another element past the doorway. She was moving quickly in the middle of her group of incoming cadets, eyes forward. She was still getting used to marching, looking more like a robot than an airman. Part robot, part Barbie doll. Her hair had not yet been trimmed to her collar. She was absolutely, astonishingly beautiful. And utterly terrified.

Jack would remember that image of Linda for the rest of his life. ■

The morning was filled with gathering uniform pieces, the issuance of equipment and supplies, being taught the basics of military protocols and bearing. He was glad that he had arrived early, because the stragglers and procrastinators ended the day much more frazzled than he did. In fact, he and his new roommate were in Room 6E10 by noon, when the last of the incoming class were just getting off the bus. Jack's roommate introduced himself as Cheng Yu-tung from Taoyuan City. There was a considerable amount of noise in the hallways, and Cheng was rather soft spoken, which coupled with Cheng's physical traits was why Jack thought he said he was from a “Hawaiian city.”

“Which one?” Jack had asked.

“There's only one.” was the response right as an upperclassman—a senior which Jack knew was by the straight bars on his shoulder boards—came in the room and introduced himself. Both Jack and Cheng sprung to attention.

“Gentlemen, I'm your daddy and your mother for the next three weeks, the first half of Basic Cadet Training, BCT, or 'Beast' as we call it.” The cadet was dressed sharply, but not as professional nor formal as the others he had encountered throughout the morning.

“My name is Cheng Yu-tung,” his roommate offered, still standing at attention. The Asian accent was quite pronounced, particularly to Jack whose only prior exposure to non-drawl diction had been via television.

This outburst caused the cadet to turn towards Yu-tung. “Excuse me?”

“I am most pleased to meet you. My name is Ch—”

“Whoa! Hey, maggot, I don't think you get it. I'm not your friend. There are only five things that come out of that pie hole,” he said, clearly angered, “Yes sir, no sir, sir may I ask a question, sir may I make a statement, and no excuse sir.”

“I'm sorry.”

Jack tried not to grimace.

The cadet turned towards Jack. “Why don't you repeat those five things to him.”

Jack was now unsure. Was he to utter all five phrases, or preface the list with “Sir may I make a statement?” He decided to play it safe, “Sir may I make a statement?”

“When I ask you, you talk. But if you feel compelled to talk, which should be a rare occurrence, you are to use one of the five phrases. Now, repeat them so—what's your name?—Don Ho—here can commit them to memory.”

Jack kept his eyes straight, his chin in, his shoulders back and down, his chest out, and stated, “Yes sir, 'no sir,' 'sir may I ask a question,' 'sir may I make a statement,' and 'no excuse sir.’”

The cadet then turned back to Cheng and said, “Do you now know the five phrases?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So when I ask you the next time you screw up, what's your response?”

Cheng swallowed hard, then answered, “No excuse sir.”

Jack didn't come up with the response that quickly. *Well done, Cheng.* The kid was smart.

The cadet then put the two at ease and showed them how the t-shirts were to be folded, how the socks were to be rolled with the crease showing a “smile” facing upward in their drawers, which clothes were to go in the closets, how they were to be spaced apart, and how hospital corners are made on their beds.

After twenty minutes, he referred them to the military specification document that gave the detailed instructions on how to prepare their room, and told them to sit at their respective desks and memorize their small red book entitled “Contrails” until they were summoned for the swearing-in ceremony. He also placed a sheet of paper on the vanity and told them that the information on the sheet will be posted at the squadron desk each morning and will be committed to memory each and every day. Today, they got their own personal copy.

The cadet began to turn towards the door, then stopped and said, “Whenever an upperclassman enters or leaves a room, you will snap to attention.”

The two did, quickly.

The cadet nodded and began to leave, but Cheng yelled, “Sir may I make a statement?” It took Jack and the upperclassman by surprise. Jack thought, *Oh, Jeez.*

“Yes, *Don Ho*. What's on your mind?”

“Sir, I won't make any more mistakes.”

The cadet walked right up to him and said, “I don't care that you make mistakes. What I care about is you making repeated mistakes. Do you remember twenty minutes ago when I said you are to speak rarely?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That's a repeat mistake. Drop and fire off fifty push ups.”

Cheng dropped, leaving Jack standing. Instantly the wrath was redirected his way, “Mister, are you going to let him do those push ups alone?”

“No, sir!” Jack hit the linoleum and joined Cheng, whipping off repetitions in order to catch up with Cheng's count.

“Start over. Do them together.” The cadet then left the room and walked into the room next to theirs.

When they were finished, they slowly rose. *One minute at a time*. Cheng walked over to the vanity and picked up the sheet of paper that they were told to memorize. It had a list of every incoming cadet in their squadron. It listed their full name and the city and state from where they lived. The paper also had how many days until each class graduated. The last one, his class, had one thousand, four hundred, and forty days until graduation. Jack sighed. Almost fifteen hundred days before he would graduate—*if* he would graduate. His first face-to-face with an upperclassman didn't go well.

Lastly, it listed the meals for June 26th. Tonight's menu showed fried chicken, green beans, pasta salad, milk, and brownies. Reading the list reminded him of how hungry he was.

As he began reading the list of the other cadets, Cheng spoke up, “Who is Don Ho?”

“You're from Hawaii and you don't know who Don Ho is?”

“I'm from Taoyuan City, near the Taipei airport in Taiwan.”

“You are?!”

“Yes, I am an exchange cadet. Taiwan sends three to the United States, one to Great Britain, and one to France.”

Jack's mind was swimming. He wasn't exactly sure where Taiwan was located, just somewhere in Asia. “You're a long way from home.”

“Yes, and if I fail, I disgrace my family and my country.”

Jack spoke softly. “You won't fail. Try to be invisible. And don't talk—ever—unless you are first spoken to. I'm here for you. I have a feeling we're going to do a lot of push ups this summer, but that's O.K. It'll keep us in shape.”

Cheng didn't smile; Clearly the weight of the world was on his shoulders. Standing in front of Jack was a young man, in a strange new country, knowing none of the nuances of the local customs, a foreigner in every sense of the word, attempting to graduate from one of the most difficult schools in the world, both academically and physically. Jack got the sense that Cheng wouldn't last until sunset.

“By the way, Don Ho is a handsome entertainer from Hawaii. A real ladies man. All the girls go nuts over him.”

Cheng smiled. Then Jack smacked him on the back and said, “But you don't look a thing like him. O.K., what's my name?”

“It is Jack.”

“Nope.” Jack pointed to the sheet, “Jack Douglass Mohney, Blytheville, Arkansas.”

Cheng repeated it, “Jack Douglass Mohney, Blytheville, Arkansas.”

Jack asked another question, “And how many days until the seniors graduate?”

“Three hundred forty-four.”

“Good. You're going to do just fine. I'm glad you're my roommate. We're in this together, Cheng Yu-tung, Taoyuan City, Taiwan.”

“Me too, Jack Douglass Mohnney, Blytheville, Arkansas.” Cheng finally smiled, albeit forcedly.

“Just take things one minute at a time.” He was reminding himself inasmuch as he was giving advice.

They each turned and sat at their desks and began reading the little red *Contrails* booklet, which contained an enormous number of quotes, a history of the Air Force, and other minutia, which had to be committed to memory.

This was the calm before the storm. The dorm room door was to remain open at all times during the day, but Jack didn't dare look out into the busy hallway. There was trouble out there. ■

Jack and Cheng were sitting at attention in their respective dorm room desks, as instructed. They had their backs to each other, as the desks were against opposing walls. No talking was allowed. Jack was tired of this “study period” and was ready to get on with it. The assault on the incoming Forth Class Cadets (freshmen) wouldn't begin in earnest until everyone reported in. In the past thirty minutes, he had heard some random shouting from the upperclassmen: “Get next to the wall!” “Double-time, mister!” “Greet me when you walk past me, mister!” “I want your right shoulder against the wall. You think you own the whole hallway, mister?”

Though he was supposed to be studying, he had turned around and watched Cheng from behind. Each time a verbal barrage erupted in the hallway, he saw Cheng flinch. This was going to be tough on him.

Jack took a cheap, black ink pen from the desk drawer and jotted a couple of notes in his *Contrails*, then quickly stood and darted the four feet behind him to Cheng's desk, then whispered, “Let's switch *Contrails*. Mine has a couple of extra quotes in it. Might help you get a grip.” Jack opened it to the inside of first page. Neatly written was:

“I am an old man and have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.” ~Mark Twain

Underneath that was:

“How much pain they have cost us, the evils which have never happened.” ~Thomas Jefferson

Cheng looked up at him and asked softly, “I know of Jefferson, but who is Mark Twain?”

Jack whispered back, “An ancient American philosopher.” Jack winked. “Just take everything one minute at a time. This summer is going to suck, but these fun and games won't last forever.”

Cheng smiled as they swapped books. Jack swung around and was about to dart back to his desk chair when a buzz-cut skinny kid bolted into his room and looked around, out of breath and frantic. He was another freshman as he was dressed in the same “USAFA” t-shirt, military fatigue pants and combat boots that Jack and Cheng were in. Above the bold-faced USAFA print on his shirt was his last name written with a magic marker: “Nogrady.” He said, “Guys, I'm in deep shit.”

Cheng sprang to his feet, already accustomed to rising to attention anytime anyone entered the room. Jack's nervousness translated into a chuckle, followed by “Join the club.”

Cheng was shocked that Jack was talking; it was prohibited.

Nogrady said, “I had to go pee. No one was around to ask, so I ran to the bathroom. I was standing in front of the urinal trying to get the buttons on my fly open. There was a guy in the stall behind me who yelled out, 'You are to urinate at attention, mister!' I don't know what came over me, but I said, 'Yes, sir.' Then I mumbled, '..if can get my fly undone.' Apparently that was not one of the five phrases, because he yelled at me to stand there, then I heard him flush the commode. I thought, 'Screw this,' and I ran out—in the wrong direction. Now I can't get back to my room.”

“Did he see your face?”

“Well, there was a slit between the door and the stall partition, but I don't think so.”

“Good. So you just need to get back to your room. We all look alike. Let's get you back to the bathroom. He won't expect you to return to the scene of the crime.” Jack didn't hesitate. He motioned for Cheng to join them, “Let's go. Our first military mission!”

“I'm not going.”

“Come on, Don Ho. Safety in numbers. We're going to get yelled at anyway. Might as well be yelled at on an empty bladder. I'll go first. Nogrady's second. You're the caboose.”

Jack got to the door jamb and saw an upperclassman approaching. *Good.* He yelled quite loudly while at attention, eyes forward, “Sir, may I ask a question?”

The upperclassman turned toward him and walked up very close to him, deep inside Jack's personal space, his “bubble.” He then spoke quietly, which was a very intimidating and effective volume level. “Yes, if you'll stand at attention.” It wasn't a request.

Jack couldn't have stood more at attention, but he tried.

“I need your chin back further. Further. I want to see double-chins—all of you!” The volume went up as the sentence was completed.

The trio stood erect, their chins moving increasingly backwards into their Adam's apples.

“Push it back. I wanna see more chins than a Chinese phone book!” He yelled, then saw that the third guy was clearly Asian. A pregnant pause ensued.

Jack kept his eyes straight ahead, but didn't have to look to see that the upperclassman hadn't analyzed his audience before making such a crass comment.

The upperclassman focused on Jack. “What's your question?”

“Sir, as a team we would like to urinate.”

He got the feeling that the upperclassman was going to say something else. But instead, he simply said, back to a volume level that was just above a whisper. “Go. You have one minute.”

Jack didn't say anything. He took one step into the hallway, made an immediate right and—as previously instructed—began jogging until he got to the next alcove of two dorm rooms, walked past it, then jogged to the next alcove, and walked past it as well. Run, walk, run, walk, all at attention, right shoulder against the wall. He couldn't sense that the two others were immediately behind him, so he slowed the running portion, allowing them to catch up. In no time, they made it to the communal men's bathroom, squared the corner, and went in. The bathroom was at the intersection of two perpendicular hallways, with doors opening to each. Cheng and Nogrady were right behind him.

No one spoke as they entered: Too dangerous. But when Nogrady continued past the urinals and headed towards the other door, Jack whispered as loud as he thought he could, “Hey, where are you going?!”

“Back to my room.”

“But don't you have to go?”

“Yeah. It can wait.”

“Jeez, get back here. Don't be a—” He was at a loss for words. He started to say “sniveling wimp” and had already gotten the first two letters out. But Jack realized they were all working through the stress in different ways. He didn't need to pile on. He just made up a word out of the first two letters and said, “—Sn..ootch. Don't be a snootch. You're here, take a leak. It will be your only pleasure today.”

Nogrady hustled over to the urinal closest to his exit and fumbled with the buttons on his fatigues. “Can't the Air Force afford zippers?”

“They haven't caught up with the new technology.” The three of them, spaced apart, were starting to relax, though Cheng refused to speak. The bathroom, it appeared, was a place of solace, if only for a few seconds.

“What's a 'snootch'?” Nogrady asked.

“You are. O.K., you're on your own now.” Jack said, flushing the urinal and re-buttoning his fly, fully aware of the one-minute time frame. “See you 'round.” With that, he snapped to attention to get back into combat mode for his trip down the other side of the hallway back to his room. Cheng was right behind him.

“Thanks,” Nogrady uttered, still fumbling with his trouser buttons. ■

At precisely two o'clock, all hell broke loose.

The last of the incoming Basic Cadets had been in-processed and had arrived at their dorm rooms. At least Jack felt he had a two-hour head start on those who had waited until the last moment to show up. He had over half of *Contrails* committed to memory, and actually enjoyed the various quotes from military leaders such as “A pint of sweat will save a gallon of blood. -General George S. Patton” and “Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after the changes occur. -Field Marshall Douhet.” Clearly the stragglers hadn't had time to even open their *Contrails*.

The yelling and banging on the walls and doors erupted with such violence that Cheng actually bruised his thighs when he sprang up from his desk. It caught Jack totally by surprise, too. An Apollo-like creature appeared at his door and barked out in a booming baritone voice, “Grab your ball cap in your right hand, your *Contrails* in your left hand, and get out in the hallway!”

The guy was wearing a light blue Air Force shirt that looked so starched that it could stand up on its own. This Cadet First Class (senior) had the name “SWEENEY” embossed in white on a dark blue name tag. The guy was one huge muscle. His stiff, black shoulder boards had two silver bars on them—a Cadet Captain. But between the two shoulder boards was a telephone pole of a neck anchored by a chest that looked cartoon-like in its size relative to his pencil-thin waistline. Clearly this man was a football player. At almost six feet five inches, he was perhaps the biggest human being Jack had ever encountered. Yet C1C Sweeney moved with the grace and speed of a gymnast. For the first time in Jack's life, he felt small, even below average.

“Yes, sir!” the two Basic Cadets responded in unison as they rushed towards the doorway. Jack grabbed his plain black baseball cap from its place above the closet and double-timed into the hallway where he saw the an assembly of Basic Cadets forming in a single line against the wall.

For some reason, the upperclassmen were never satisfied with the degree to which a Basic Cadet could get his chin in. A Basic Cadet in front of him was told to turn with his back against the hallway wall. An upperclassman placed a nickel behind his neck, then told him, “Hold this nickel against the wall with your neck. Don't drop my nickel.”

Jack, with his right shoulder against the wall, had no choice but to look at the Basic Cadet just

inches in front of him. This Basic Cadet, perhaps from the adjacent room, started to sweat and turn red as he struggled to keep the nickel pressed against the wall. Jack felt sorry for him, but it was short-lived as “Mister!” was yelled in his left ear. Jack wheeled-around ninety degrees to see the Adam's apple of C1C Sweeney. Jack contorted into an intense position of attention as Sweeney barked, “You need to help your classmate. Squat down at attention, extend your right hand behind his legs and be prepared to catch that nickel if it falls.”

Jack squatted while still trying to maintain a position of attention. Sweeney said, “I want your knees bent exactly and precisely ninety degrees, your right arm extended parallel to the ground.”

Uh oh. Jack knew where this was leading. He was in the best shape of his life, but had been warned by Captain Sander that there is no level of conditioning that would keep you from being embarrassed and humiliated by an upperclassman. Even as he assumed the awkward position of being squatted at attention, back against the wall with his chin in, eyes staring straight ahead at the crotch of C1C Sweeney, he felt the burn in his *quadriceps femoris*. In less than thirty seconds, he could feel the heat of the exertion consuming his whole body. He could feel the sweat beginning to form on his reddened forehead. Clearly they knew how to quickly break down even the toughest of Basic Cadets.

Jacks body began trembling as he held the position. His thighs were burning. His only view was of a shiny belt buckle.

Suddenly the nickel hit his cupped hand, squarely. It didn't bounce and Jack didn't even flinch, though it surprised him that the coin hit perfectly in his palm. He didn't dare flinch. However, with his mission completed, Jack started to rise up, then quickly realized that would be a mistake. To do so would highlight the fact that his classmate had failed his task. That's just what they would want him to do.

But his legs were screaming to his brain to stop the punishment. His arm and right shoulder were starting to cramp. It was a no-win situation. He knew he couldn't last another thirty seconds.

That's when he heard, “Go! Go! Move! Move!” in staccato succession from his right, followed by the blur of Sweeney's hand motioning him to rise back up. Jack clutched the nickel and with considerable effort rose back up to a standing position, did a right face just in time to fall in line behind the guy who had dropped the nickel.

As he jogged towards the stairwell, Jack thought about his parents. They had been so proud when they hugged him goodbye. He guessed that they probably drove around a bit to see the eighteen thousand acres of the Academy property before heading back into Colorado Springs for lunch. Then perhaps they'd go back to watch the gliders and parachuting at the academy's airfield for a while, then stop by the visitor's center before heading over to the Cadet Field House where the official swearing-in ceremony would occur at five P.M. They had no idea what he was up to at the moment.

Jack was amazed at how many tasks he had accomplished in the four hours that he been there, even with a two-hour “study period.” He had already been issued all of his clothes and put them away in exact conformance to the cadet regulations. His personal items such as his wallet and watch were surrendered for the summer. He had already been taught the basics of military protocol: How, when and to whom a salute is to be rendered; how to stand, walk, march, and even jog. He learned how a group of cadets make a right turn, a right flank, and a to-the-rear. He was issued an old M-1 rifle with a shiny wooden stock and told how to salute while holding the weapon, and how to properly put the rifle on his right shoulder. He was told what the Air Force ranks were, from Airman Basic to the four-star General, the differences between the officers and the enlisted, and by the time the day was done, he was responsible for knowing the rank insignias for the other services as well.

He was taught how to properly wear the uniforms, including gig lines, “cables,” creases, and

even the angle at which the bill of his black baseball cap protruded. Regulations covered every aspect of his existence.

All of this was expected. He had been warned about how everything was about conformance and standardization. It was all new, but the one thing that bothered him was of all things: eating...

At eleven thirty he had been double-timed over to Mitchell Hall with a dozen or so others where an “informal” lunch was being conducted. He was instructed to sit at attention, with his rib cage precisely one fist's distance from the tablecloth. The white plate in front of him had an Air Force Academy emblem on it which was to be oriented to the twelve-o'clock position. When used, a utensil was to be placed at a forty-five degree angle from the top of the plate. Two plain glasses, one for milk and one for juice (or water, if other than breakfast), were to be positioned at the eleven- and one-o'clock positions.

Again, these detailed place setting arrangements were derived from the “a place for everything” concept. There was no randomness at the Academy, but Jack could handle that.

On the other hand, the actual act of eating—well that was another matter. He was not allowed to slouch nor tilt his head down to his plate. Only his eyes could rotate down. It hurt his eyes to glance down along the edge of his cheeks. When he was told to put his chin in, he was accused of having his forehead angled down. When he rotated his forehead back, his chin came out. It was a vicious circle. Once a minuscule piece of food was placed on a fork, the fork had to move at right angles on its way to his mouth.

The big danger, he quickly learned, was trying to consume each piece of food with three chews or less. The first morsel of Air Force food he put in his mouth was followed quickly by “Mister!”

Jack turned to the upperclassman at the head of the table.

“How dare you look at me with food in your mouth!” Jack turned his head back to straight ahead and swallowed the bolus whole. He then turned back to face a table with all eyes upon him. “That was a pretty big bite, mister. You have three chews and one swallow. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And get your chin in.”

“Yes, sir.” Jack then rotated his head back to a position of attention and sucked his chin back into his Adam's apple. He was starving. If he sat there, he'd get no food—and probably get yelled at for not eating. So he picked up the fork from its forty-five angle, scooped up a few snap peas which he knew he could swallow whole if need be.

Just as the peas entered his mouth, he heard it again, “Mister!”

Jack swallowed them whole, then quickly rotated his head to the front of the table again. “Yes, sir.”

“No short cuts. You went straight from the plate to your mouth. How tough is it to follow directions? Do you have trouble hearing or comprehending English? Do you think you get special dispensation here? Maybe the rules don't apply to you. Perhaps you're a non-conformist...”

Jack stared at the upperclassman as he continued the verbal assault. He wanted to swallow badly, but his chin was wedged into his throat.

“...and you're going to be nothing but trouble. We have neither the time nor the inclination to train and retain someone who feels it unnecessary to conform to basic norms of behavior. Are you a troublemaker, mister?”

Jack's mind was wondering. He wanted to look around. The dining hall was huge, serving all four thousand, four hundred cadets at once. There were almost five hundred tables, seating ten cadets

each. It was only about a quarter filled now, since this was not a singular seating event. Jack had read in the Cadet Regulations that typically half of the table would be upperclassman. There was a “table commandant” who was always a senior. The freshmen (“Doolies” “smacks” “wastes of human flesh”) would be seated at the far end, and are responsible for obtaining refills from the waiter, again in a specific form (“Mrs. Zapher, may we please have more apple sauce?”). After the meal is completed, a designated Doolie was to ask the table commandant, “Sir, does Cadet [Smith] or any other gentlemen have any remarks or suggestions for the Form Oh Dash Nine Six at this time?”

Jack already knew of the Form 0-96. It was the Cadet Food Acceptability Report, completed in black ink by the freshmen at the end of every meal. Usually, an upperclassman would have something to bitch about: “The ice was too cold” or “the sugar was too sweet” as Captain Sander had told him. Jack also knew that if there were no remarks or suggestions, that the six selections were to be noted, “Fast. Neat. Average. Friendly. Good. Good.” These corresponded to questions such as “How quickly were you served?” “How was the table's appearance?” etc.

The phrase “Fast, Neat, Average, Friendly, Good, Good.” is universally known by every cadet who ever graduated from the academy. Even Jack heard the phrase uttered. He knew that prisoners of war in the Hanoi Hilton in Viet Nam tapped out “Fast Neat Average” in code through the walls and received “Friendly Good Good” in response. He noticed the Form 0-96 at his end of the table when he first sat down. There was so much information to absorb in such a short period of...

“Mister!”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, you are going to be trouble?”

“No, sir.”

“How many days until I graduate?”

Not soon enough. “Sir, your class graduates in three hundred, forty-four days.”

“What's for dinner?”

“Sir, dinner tonight includes fried chicken, green beans, pasta salad, milk, and brownies.”

“Comment for the Form 0-96: Put nuts on top of the brownies, not in them. That way, I can scrape them off. I hate nuts. And my favorite guitar solo is from Jimmi Hendrix, two minutes and twelve seconds into the song Purple Haze.”

“Yes, sir.” Of course, this trivia would have to be recalled later.

“Eat. Quit wasting my time.”

Jack sat at a fist's distance from the tablecloth and ate tiny bites at right angles for another ten minutes while salvos of “Mister!” occurred in tables surrounding him. Each time he heard it, he swallowed his food whole and tensed....

...He was bounding down a flight of steps while being yelled at for moving too slowly. He thought how every soldier, Marine, sailor, and airmen who ever attended basic training must have gone through this. None of it was difficult, it was simply unpleasant. He could stand there and get yelled at. No big deal. He was in perfect physical condition, so that wasn't a problem, either. He could memorize all kinds of nonsense and regurgitate it with ease. But his stomach was in a knot.

He was afraid of the unknown. The academy was so foreign, so totally different from the small farming town Blytheville in the flat lands along the Mississippi River, which had been the center of his universe for his whole life until now.

His fellow Basic Cadets had graduated first from the best and largest high schools in the country. They were all all-state athletes. Jack was nothing special. Sure, he graduated as valedictorian

and was an all-state football player, too. But now he was dressed like every other Basic Cadet, with the same buzz-cut, getting yelled at for the most minuscule of errors and omissions. When he had caught a glimpse of him in the mirror, he saw how pale his scalp was relative to his face and neck which was tanned golden.

He knew their goal was to tear him down, then rebuild him as the perfect Air Force officer. His mind wandered again. He remembered, oddly, the incident with the dead bird back in grade school. The upperclassmen reminded him of that neighborhood bully—what was his name? They didn't appear to be particularly vicious nor spiteful, but they were on him constantly, testing his will. He knew it would be a bad decision to cross any of them. He didn't know it at the time, but it would be a couple of weeks before he would lose his temper and do something really stupid. ■

Chapter Eleven

■ June 27th, thirty-one years ago.

T rue to the words from the first cadet he saw yesterday, today was the longest day of Jack's life. It began at 0500 hours with reveille playing throughout the Academy's PA system. A synthetic trumpet started playing, but on a toot or two played before the banging on the doors erupted. Jack was in deep REM sleep when it shattered the quiet. The upperclassmen were showered, dressed impeccably, and fully limbered to deliver the concussion of the morning wake-up call.

The banging was followed by a phrase yelled by the upperclassmen. This phrase was repeated in jest throughout the rest of most Air Force Academy graduate's lives: "Get up, you're late!"

The idea that he was late, less than a second after reveille started playing was indicative of how the day was going to evolve. The Basic Cadets were told to put on their Air Force blue bathrobes, shower clogs, white towel rolled and gripped in their left hand, and run/walk/run/walk to the showers.

The three female Basic Cadets in his squadron were at a distinct disadvantage because they had to run/walk much further to reach their bathroom, which was shared by two adjacent squadrons. Only ten percent of the cadet wing was composed of women, and the Academy was still getting used to accommodating the new female cadets. Thus, one quarter of the bathrooms were for women, a higher percentage than the population, but their locations were still less convenient than the others. The upperclass women cadets chose their dorm room locations next to the women's rest rooms, but the Basic Cadet women weren't given any such luxury, and statistically it was a longer distance to travel, all when time was at a premium.

The Academy had forty numbered squadrons of a little over one hundred cadets each. Of those, some thirty-eight of them would be the incoming freshmen, or Cadets Fourth Class. However, during Basic Cadet Training, the Basic Cadets were grouped into ten alphanumeric squadrons A through J, nicknamed "Aggressors," "Barbarians," "Cobras," etc. Jack was one of the one hundred and fifty-seven Basic Cadets assigned to the Barbarians Squadron.

So was the gorgeous chick that Jack had seen when getting his hair cut. But Jack found this out to his chagrin. During the melee of morning reveille, Linda threw on her blue bathrobe, yanked it closed, jumped into her shower clogs, rolled her towel, grabbed it with her left hand and ran—into the men's bathroom.

There, naked and wet, was Jack, reaching for his towel.

She screamed and turned around to leave, bumping into more Basic Cadets who were piling into the communal bathroom. Jack covered himself, but couldn't take his eyes off of her. She was beautiful. But she was also stressed, and he knew it. Once she was gone, he quickly toweled-off and put on his robe, the one with "Mohney" written in magic marker inside the collar.

He heard some yelling just outside the door that the girl had retreated through. It was not the door that Jack had used—it was the entrance from the other hallway. But the yelling was "Can't you read? Do you think you own any bathroom you enter? Get your chin in when I'm talking to you!"

Jack couldn't allow this to continue, and without thinking he charged out of the door, made a

right turn and purposefully piled right into the upperclassman who was reaming this Basic Cadet girl, almost knocking him over.

Jack knew the five phrases perfectly, but decided to depart from the expected script, saying, “Oh, I’m sorry sir. Did I get you wet?” He touched the cadet on his shoulder. He clearly wanted the focus taken off of her, and he got it.

“What?!” The upperclassman said, pushing him away, truly enraged. He turned to her and said, “Move! You’re late!”

She said, “Yes, sir,” then glanced at Jack just long enough to see him wink at her and give her a quick smile. Then the smile vanished before the upperclassman could see what just happened. She disappeared, fully understanding the bait and switch that had just occurred.

For five full minutes—an eternity when everyone else was dressing and forming up, the upperclassman reamed Jack about walking near doorways, running elsewhere, what the five phrases are, how he is never to touch an upperclassman, how his chin needs to be in more, shoulders back and down, eyes forward. The whole time he was taking the verbal assault, he thought about this girl. She was absolutely gorgeous.

He had dated girls throughout high school, even a couple of the “top-shelf” cheerleaders. But his singular focus had been on being an Air Force pilot, and he never got too involved with any of them. But this girl swept his emotions into a whirlwind of thoughts, most importantly how was he going to get to know her given the environment he was in.

She had seen him naked, albeit briefly. From the way she screamed, that would probably cause some awkwardness when they finally meet, he thought. She was horrified, scared, confused, and frantic, all at the same time. He only added to her morning trauma by standing in front of her, fully exposed. It had embarrassed him as well—no girl had ever seen him naked—but he was more concerned about her.

The cadet finished his tirade, and Jack said his final “Yes sir!” and was sent on his way back to his room. Cheng was already gone, and both beds were made. *Thanks, Don Ho.*

Jack threw on his fatigue pants and USAFA t-shirt, laced up his boots, grabbed his hat and bolted out to the formation, the last one to arrive. Fully five cadets were in his face, admonishing his being the straggler. But, he stood there at intense attention, letting it go in one ear and out the other. *Gorgeous. I’ve got to meet her.*

Total time elapsed since reveille: Eleven minutes. ■

This book will be available for sale in December, 2009.