

## **CHAPTER 01**

My Uncle Sor used to say, 'The worst thing in the world is a rigged game. It upsets the autonomic nervous system of the universe. The winner will feel hypocritically happy; the loser will seek revenge. Even if you, yourself, are not one of the competitors, do everything within your power to prevent a rigged game.'

That might have been the most important thing he ever said to me.

And it was why, six months ago, I'd quit my job at the Department of Defense.

When I left the building for the last time, nobody cared.

I shouldn't've cared either.

Except that, in his day, my Uncle Sor had worked for the DOD, too.

Retired from that organization, actually.

So his ethereal disappointment echoed deep inside me.

I often wondered how he'd kept his scruples alive for so long. But Uncle Sor had died before I was old enough, to know enough, to ask him enough.

Today was August the sixth. His birthday. No calendar had to remind me, though. Something intuitive always whispered the sensation deep down inside me. Even when I was a boy.

That's how I knew Uncle Sor was my favorite.

Not that there were any serious contenders.

Other relatives, including my parents, had been so subdivided by divorces and random animosities that any encounter with them nowadays could only be kept alive with distorted family myth, subjective summaries, and tall-tales from the past.

And so, during the sleepier hours of the morning, I started the long drive—from Washington DC to Overlook Cemetery, near Charlottesville, Virginia—to put flowers on his grave. Love and respect—but mostly a reliable alarm clock—had shoved me through the darkness of my apartment and had gotten me dressed. In the car, I directed every wince of focus toward traffic and road signs, the passing street-lights randomly flashing subliminals of his face. I silenced the car radio. But without the noise, my body had to fight against the earliness of the hour. So much so, that within twenty minutes, I'd entered the white florescence of a 7-Eleven and purchased a large, unsweetened ice tea. Back on the road, the caffeine helped me distinguish between the realities beyond my windshield, and the transparencies. Even this early in the morning, the car's air conditioner could barely convert the outside August air to cold. My skin was confused—trust the weak coolness of the air

conditioner, or prepare to sweat? Confined within the car, the smell of the flowers I'd purchased yesterday loitered in my lungs. Eventually, buzz from the Interstate asphalt became the murmuring ghosts of other things he'd said over the years, causing my inner compass to pivot, until daylight gently brought the world back to a predictable monotony.

Hours of road later, I arrived at the cemetery. The sun was yolk-yellow, and the cemetery gates were open. But the scene appeared to be on-pause. Surrounding the graves was a concrete driveway, which was garnished with archangels, frozen in white marble, their lips puckering the first note of the last trump. The lack of movement provoking accountability and inaction and Uncle Sor to argue inside of me.

I got out of the car.

The morning—August-humid and Hell-hot already.

I walked over to his grave.

Took a few deep breaths.

Deposited the flowers.

On the yawning drive back, fragments of the morning shimmered off the hot asphalt like a postmodern mirage. The exact sequence of events—from my standing above his grave to my being back on the Interstate—had existence only as feelings and nano-second images. By the time traffic started shoving me, a few feet at a time, back into downtown DC, my wallet suggested a cheap lunch.

After all, the rest of the day promised a light workload.

Minor repairs.

Calibrations.

During the evening, I intended to finish my yearly ritual inside the bar that Uncle Sor had once owned. On the mirrored wall behind the long mahogany counter, between the more expensive bottles of Scotch and the autographed photos of has-beens, was a simple photo of Uncle Sor himself—larger than all the rest. Every August the sixth, my routine ended the day, in his honor, with me sitting on a bar stool across the counter from his photograph, remaining anonymous, and tipping a silent beer or two in the direction of his image. Celebrating. Mostly inside my own head. Just him and me.

The waitress juxtaposed her breasts near my face and said, “Anything else?”

All the noises of restaurant reality returned with the sound of her voice.

As well as the distant smell of overworked cooking-grease.

It was 11:45 a.m. now. I was finishing up my cheap lunch inside The Spicy Chicken on 18<sup>th</sup> Street. Upscale Cajun food, the menu said. And it did a pretty good job of pretending to be. Until it made the turn into your large intestine.

Eventually my eyes made it all the way up to the waitress’s face. “Don’t turn around right now and look, OK?” I said. “But there’s a guy five tables behind you, on your right. He’s all alone. Maybe twenty

years old. No facial hair. Dark skin. Lavender and beige V-neck T-shirt. Blue jeans. What I need you to do is go get me some more unsweetened ice tea. But when you come back, tell me if you've ever seen him before. I think he's following me."

By now, the waitress had given up juxtaposing.

"What about the briefcase?" she said.

"I don't understand."

"Your briefcase."

"I don't have a briefcase."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

"OK, forget the briefcase," she said. "Let's get back to the guy five tables behind me. Say I do recognize him. What's in it for me?"

"A nice tip."

"How nice?"

"Depends."

"On?"

"On how much you tell me."

"What if I've never seen him before, but I..."

"If you fake it, I'll know."

Her smile warped, then she was on her way.

In spite of the upcoming holiday inside my head, I did have a little work to do. And it was on the table in front of me. In my whole life, I'd only created two Tracer machines. But their birth had

unlocked the door into a very special career. I carried one of the Tracer machines with me to use on my current assignment. The second one I kept in a safe deposit box, as backup. This week, however, I had the backup in my apartment, because the one I was using on the job was acting funny. Best described as an 'inconsistent malfunctioning.' Whenever one of my Tracer machines started acting schizophrenic, I always remembered what an engineer at the DOD had told me. *Machines are incapable of malfunctioning inconsistently. Machines either work, or they don't. Unlike people.* The engineer's statement always lit an Uncle-Sor smile inside me. Since only people malfunctioned inconsistently, all through lunch I'd been psychoanalyzing the Tracer machine with a set of miniature screw drivers attached to my key chain. Hoping I didn't spill Jambalaya sauce on the working parts. Or, on my shirt.

My cell phone rang.

The phone was too small to scotch against my shoulder, so I held it against my ear with my left hand and kept working on the Tracer machine my right hand, holding the machine in place with my elbow. "Yeah?"

"New assignment, Wilder," a voice said.

"I'm already *on* assignment, Tusk."

"Things have changed."

"Maybe so. But the old assignment runs through the end of next week. Even if things have changed, you're gonna to pay me through the end of next week for the old assignment. Right?"

"Listen carefully, Wilder."

"Is there really a difference between listening," I thumbed the key chain for a Phillips head, "and listening carefully?"

"Wilder?"

"I guess listening carefully involves me hearing my name a lot."

"Is this line still secure?"

"You're asking me?"

"It's secure on our end. I'm asking about your end."

The waitress was coming back.

"Hold on a second," I said. "Let me double-check."

I smothered the cell phone against my shirt and moved my eyes from her chest to her face as casually as I could.

"Never seen him before," she whispered. "When you're though looking at my chest, do you want me to bring you your briefcase?"

"What the living hell are you talking about? I told you I don't have a briefcase."

She snarled and slammed the glass of ice tea down in front of me. A few drops sloshed onto the Tracer machine.

"Jesus Christ."

"Sorry," she reached out to help.

I blocked her hand, dabbed at the slosh with a napkin, and yelled, "Don't touch it!" –before I'd had a chance to notice my own reaction.

She nodded at the Tracer. "Look. Just because I made a little mistake, you're not gonna beam yourself up to the mothership without leaving me a tip, are you?"

I stared at her face.

She continued. "What is that thing, anyway?"

"Cell phone," I lied, cramming the Tracer into its holster on my belt and putting my keychain back into my pants pocket.

She looked at my belt, then at the muffled noise coming from my real cell phone. "Two cell phones, huh? One for each ear, I guess."

"Hey! You almost spilled tea on my..."

She was already huffing her way back to the kitchen.

"Wilder?" a voice was vibrating against my shirt. "Wilder?"

"Sorry. Just wanted to be double-sure," I said into my cell phone. "But, yes, the line does appear to be secure on my end."

"This is important!"

"Not to me, it isn't. Not yet."

While silence festered on the other end of the conversation, I scanned the guy five tables down. What an amateur! Finally, I whispered into the phone, "OK. OK. What is it? Somebody kidnap the President?"

"Worse."

"Somebody kidnapped your delightful sense of humor?"

"Listen carefully, Wilder. Somebody's kidnapped Ken Miller. But you've got a Tab on him, right?"

"You mean Barb Miller's husband? The dork?"

"Barb Miller's husband, yes."

"Is this a simulation? Because I've got plans for tonight."

"This is not a simulation."

"Uh huh. Well, sure," I said, "I've got a Tab on him. That was the assignment, right? Did they kidnap anybody else? Because I've got a Tab on most of your other Republicans buddies, too. The President, the Vice President, Servod, and Jeters. All their wives. Barb and Ken Miller. Who knows? Maybe I put one on you, too. I can't remember."

"Wilder..."

"Every three days, I put a new Tab on all of them. Then, if something happens—like now—I tell you where they are." I reached toward my belt to pull the malfunctioning Tracer machine out and finish calibrating it. "Just give me a few minutes and I'll tell you where..."

"That was your old assignment. Your new assignment is finding Ken Miller."

"OK. I can tell you where he is. Just give me a minute to..."

"And," the Tusk added, "you'll have to bring him back. Plus, keep the media's nose out of the whole thing. That's your new assignment."

"Check my dossier, Tusk. I don't bring people back. Never have. All I do is locate them, then tell people like you where they are. For money. Up-front. As for the media, I don't deal with..."

"And," the Tusk added, "we need him back within the next thirty-six hours."

"Come on. This is a simulation. A game. Just like back in college, right?"

"No, Wilder. This is the real thing."

"We still talking about Ken Miller?"

"Yes. Have him back to us in thirty-six hours, or the deal's off."

"What deal? I told you I've got plans for tonight."

"Wilder..."

"I don't know whose dossier you're looking at, but I don't..."

"Five minutes ago, I wired half the money into your checking account, Wilder. Seventy-five million."

Dead air trumped the next few seconds, then I accidentally dropped my cell phone. When I picked it up, it was still working. "Sorry about that. My phone's been having some problems lately. It kinda sounded like you said you wired," I decided to whisper, "seventy-five million dollars into my checking account."

"And it'll have an additional seventy-five million in it when this is all over."

"I've only got ten fingers, but I think that adds up to one-hundred fifty million."

"Listen up. In order to bring Miller back, you're gonna need more than your ten fingers. You're gonna need insight into possible motives for the kidnapping. We've got a woman on the way. Should be there any minute. After you've had a look at the information, shred the paper at a public office supply store, or something. As of right now, you've got thirty-six hours."

I looked at my watch. "It's 11:55—well, almost noon—on Friday. So I've got until, what?—11:55 p.m. Saturday night?"

"We'll give you 'till midnight."

"Why the thirty-six hour deadline? Why midnight tomorrow night?"

"Because that's the last night of the Republican National Convention."

"So?"

"So, that's when Barb Miller will either accept the Vice Presidential nomination, or not."

"She does, or she doesn't. So what?"

"You still don't get it, do you, Wilder? That's why they kidnapped her husband. If Barb Miller accepts the VP nomination, my guess is they'll kill him."

"Your guess? I thought you were omnipotent."

"It's a guess because we don't have a ransom note. Not yet, anyway. The thirty-six hours is a head start."

By the time I realized the waitress had returned, I also realized she was positioning a briefcase on the floor against the side of my leg. "I believe," her angry eyes considered the ceiling, "you left your briefcase in the lobby," she said. "Sir."

I put the cell phone against my chest again. "You're kidding me? You're work for them, too?"

One of her lips snarled. And her lip was right. No matter what her answer was, I wouldn't've believed her.

"What about the guy five tables down?" I asked her.

She put a paper-bill for the meal on the table and added a cheap ballpoint pen. The paper looked naked without some kind of leather folder to hold a credit card. Then again, a cheap meal was a cheap meal. "First, write a nice number on the tip line, tightwad. Either that, or show me some cash."

I put the cell phone on the table and started the process of removing a twenty from my wallet. Quicker than a snake-bite, the waitress had it in her own hand. "Nice tip. But don't forget to pay for the meal." She started walking away. "Like I told you. Never saw him before."

Loud grumbling was coming out of my cell phone.

"So. The waitress," I said. "She's on the payroll?"

"Of course not," the Tusk said. "We paid her three hundred dollars to deliver a briefcase. To you."

"That's a bargain. Considering she had to carry it all the way out here from the kitchen."

"If she did work for us, Wilder, do you think I'd tell you?"

"Fair enough. But what about the guy five tables down? If he's one of yours, you don't have to tell me. Not with words, anyway. Just clear your throat twice."

A pause. "I thought seventy-five million dollars would take the smart-ass out of your attitude, Wilder. Do you have the briefcase with the information about Ken Miller, or not?"

"Yes. But I haven't accepted the assignment yet."

"Sure you have."

"No, I haven't. That's a lot of money. What's the catch?"

"Until now, we've had you on retainer," the Tusk said. "We haven't paid you much. After all, you're just putting your little Tabs on people every three days, or so. We kept you in place as a backup. In case we ever had a real problem. Well, now, we've got a real problem. This event could put a Democrat in the White House. We can't have that."

"A Democrat in the White House doesn't bother me. Neither does a Republican."

"Pick a side, Wilder."

"Why should I pick a side? I really don't care either way."

“Well, at this exact moment, you’re working for me, so listen up. This is important. The husband of a Vice Presidential nominee’s just been kidnapped, and you’ve got one of your little Tabs on him. We need you to find him. Within the next thirty-six hours. A few minutes ago, your checking account had two-hundred dollars in it. Now, it shows seventy-five million two-hundred. Have another glass of iced tea, Wilder. On me. Then, transfer it to the urinal and get moving.”

I took a deliberately loud sip. “You got something against iced tea?”

“Saturday, at midnight, Wilder. That’s the new assignment. Verify that the seventy-five million’s in your account, if you want to. Then, get moving,” he said and hung up.

I put my cell phone away and prepared to leave the restaurant. But the guy five tables down was still stuck in my craw. For at least a week, he’d been following me. On and off. And he was so stupidly bad at it. Or, pretending to be.

Just in case I really was a millionaire, I decided to be generous. I laid the last twenty dollars from my wallet on top of the paper-bill to pay for the indigestion. Just in case the waitress really *was* a waitress.

I removed the Tracer machine from its holster on my belt. Ran a blank Tab through it, just to see if that part of the machine was still working consistently. After fifteen seconds, the prepared Tab emerged—a transparent, half-inch square adhesive. I positioned the Tab on the tip of my index finger, like a piece of tape. Under the

table, I waved my finger left and right; the Tracer machine's GPS indicator dots moved left and right on the screen. On the calibration menu, I fine-tuned the search-parameter-synchronization with a screw driver on my key chain. Then, I put the Tracer machine back in its holster, lightened the Tab's hold on the tip of my finger, and picked up the briefcase.

Got up.

Started walking.

Toward the guy five tables down.

As I approached, he turned his head away.

Pretending to be nonchalant.

I continued toward the restaurant's exit, went past him, turned left just behind his booth, and with an ever so gentle touch of my index finger, transferred the Tab to the back of his Lavender and beige V-neck T-shirt.