Group Novel: Chapter 12                                                                                            Richard Forque

            Lancaster Manor was quiet for the first time in weeks. The three Blackstone children with an entourage of spouse, future spouse and newly returned mother had departed Lancaster Manor in a messy disorganized scrum at 5:30 am on a long day’s journey to Cuba.

The Manor’s remote location presented a solid three-hour drive to the nearest major airport.  This distance from a city was the one thing the group as a whole hated. Preston had summed up the general attitude of all in one statement. “Nowhere to go, nothing to do.”

            The zoo’s TOA at Jose Marti International in Havana was late afternoon. Jefferies had arranged all the flights and bookings by giving a voice command to his computer. The computer’s A.I. then organized flights, purchased tickets, and booked lodging. None of the family ever thought about or made any attempt to clean up after themselves. Jefferies’ day had been spent supervising a janitorial crew that arrived at 7:30 am to put the house back in order. The cleaning crew departed at 6:00 pm. At 6:37 pm, while doing a final walk through, Jefferies received an alert on his iPhone sent from Condor, his computer.

            The computer continuously monitored Ashley, Preston, Charles, Charlotte, Veronica, and Dannie’s email, internet activity, and social media accounts. Additionally, Jefferies had all of their personal phones cloned and monitoring software installed. Condor’s A.I. capabilities were Jefferies’ personal electronic and digital eyes and ears.

            Jefferies headed down into the Manor basement where the fifteen thousand square foot wine cellar was located. The wine cellar front wall looked like a stainless-steel bank vault, because it was. At the door, he stared into the retina scanner and heard a series of bolts click open. This vault had been installed years before to stop the two Blackstone boys, then in their mid-teens, from stealing rare vintage wines and reselling them. An enterprise they embarked on during a forced weeklong outing during spring break. With the help of AOL instant messenger, they collectively pocketed some twenty-five thousand dollars from 18 bottles of wine. The actual value of the 18 bottles was closer to seventy thousand dollars. The vault wall and door might have seemed an excessive reaction. It was not, the collection’s value at the time was north of nine million dollars. The incident prompted Jefferies to hire a commercial bank vault company to construct the now bomb shelter secure wine cellar.

            When Blackstone heard about the theft and Jefferies' plans, he laughed out loud and stated, “That will teach the little turds!” He then added, “What should the punishment be?”

            Jefferies replied, “I was thinking under my personal direction they could demo the old cellar partition wall for the new construction.”

             Blackstone reflected for a moment then replied, “That’s fucking diabolical…two-foot-thick sandstone blocks set with 100-year-old concrete...How long do you think it will take?”

            “I suspect it will consume their summer.”

Blackstone rocked back in his chair and asked, “Are you personally supervising them?”

             Jefferies’ grin and eyes possessed a malevolent quality as he answered, “Fuck Yes!”

For a heartbeat, Blackstone felt a bit sorry for the boys, but just for a heartbeat. Blackstone knew better than anyone Jefferies’ extraordinary strength and capacity for work. Early in their career while still employed on the dark side of society, they had a job go wrong. Blackstone took a NATO 7.62 ball round through his left calf. There was no bone or arterial damage, but he wouldn’t be running through the jungle. Jefferies packed the entry and exit wounds with tampons, cleaned it as best he could then bound it tight with duct tape. He then slung Blackstone piggyback and carried him a mile and a half through jungle to a boat rendezvous. Yep, the boys were fucked for the summer.

            Blackstone grinned, started snapping his fingers and singing, “ump..ahhh…ump..ahhh…

ump..ahhh.”  Without prompting, Jefferies joined in and they sang the chorus to Chain Gang.  “That’s the sound of the men working on the chain gang…that’s the sound of the men working on the chain gang!”  Then collectively they broke out in a fit of laughter. Blackstone, still laughing, replied, “I’ve got to get out of here, Mon Capitaine. I’ll see you later…gotta go buy some fiber optic cable manufactures…yep.”

            The boys spent the next summer working alongside Jefferies. It was the longest period of time Preston and Charles had ever stayed continuously at Blackstone Manor. The business of tearing out the original stone wall that partitioned the wine cellar was a massive undertaking. Before demolition could start, they had to build steel I-Beam supports across the span of the basement. Day one found them dragging 150 feet of heavy-duty air hose from a diesel-powered air compressor into the basement. It took the two of them to carry the 120 lb. Sullair Jackhammer downstairs. Then Jefferies started a three-man rotation with the jackhammer punching a hole for the column footings. The boys’ first 20-minute rotation on the jack hammer was pure torture. Those first twenty minutes would prove to be the easiest part of the day.

            The basement became a crucible of the unrelenting work. The first week working beside Jefferies and punching holes for footings with the jackhammer took six ten-hour days. Each night they went to bed with hands blistered and cramped into claws. Every scrawny muscle was inflamed with pain, every joint resisted movement. Their exhaustion was so profound, they struggled to stay awake for a meal and shower before collapsing into bed. The second week was worse than the first and they grew to hate their father for ordering Jefferies to work them to death. It was an absolute certainty they would perish the third week. However, they survived a third week, then a fourth, fifth and sixth. By the end of the summer they would each gain pounds of hard ropey muscles. In fact, they could stand with Jefferies swinging nine-pound hammers, busting mortar joints loose from the block.

            Preston and Charles were proud of their newfound strength and a new swagger appeared in their walk. Jefferies became “The Beast” or more often “The Fucking Beast!”  Jefferies’ 240 lean pounds stretched over a 6’4” frame. They were rightfully terrified of Jefferies’ physical strength and capacity for work. The stronger they got the harder Jefferies worked them. By the end of their stint in Blackstone Manor hell, they were putting in twelve-hour days six days a week. They were so tired by Sunday; they didn’t think about leaving the estate. After six weeks, they were chucking 100-pound stones while Jefferies routinely moved blocks that weighed 250 pounds.

            You can lead a mule to water, but you can’t make him drink, certainly applied to the Blackstone boys. Once out from under Jefferies iron thumb that summer, they reverted to their normal selfish, self-centered, entitled selves. They also stayed as far away from Blackstone Manor as possible.

             Opening the stainless-steel door, Jefferies entered a fifteen-thousand square foot wine cellar. He walked down a row of wine racks to the back of the cellar. At the back wall, he selected a Bottle of 1949 Château Loup-Garou Pinot Premier Cru. Cradling it in the crook of his left arm, he stepped to an abandon electrical box. With his right hand, he grasped the bottom of the box and pulled. It swung open on hidden hinges revealing a keypad. He keyed in 314159 and the wine rack he had taken the bottle from slid four feet sideways, revealing an entrance to a six-foot-wide wide stone passageway.

            As Jefferies stepped into the tunnel, motion sensor lights automatically illuminated the poured concrete pathway that pitched downward at a shallow angle. Fifty yards later, he reached another stainless-steel door. Placing his palm on a screen embedded in the steel door, caused it to swing inward opening into a larger room with stone walls rising into a barrel-vaulted ceiling. The walls and ceiling of the room were lined in stainless steel expanded metal mesh turning the room into a Faraday cage.

            The Faraday cage was located below the former servant quarters of the carriage house. There were two other ways in and out of the room, in addition to the tunnel leading from the wine cellar. The second, a short vertical stone lined tunnel with ladder rungs set in its wall, was part of the original manor construction. This tunnel terminated beneath the utility room floor in the carriage house. A section of that floor was a well disguised hydraulically assisted trap door. The third route was a long, low tunnel constructed of six-foot diameter corrugated steel drainage pipe. This ratline had been installed after Blackstone and Jefferies acquired the property. It was buried six-foot underground and had a two-foot-thick concrete slab poured along its length covered in three feet of topsoil. The exit was concealed inside a pump house three hundred yards to the west.

              Before they became Blackstone and Jefferies, these two were very bad men. Their specialty was disposing of political rivals through various means. Sometimes, it was destroying their character, sometimes it was killing the character. They knew that in any given transaction there were no good guys or bad guys. Generally speaking, all the players were fucking evil, just for different reasons. It didn’t matter to the pair, whoever was willing to pay was provided the service. They operated on a simple motto, “Kill them all and let God sort them out.” These events they engineered did reshape the course of a number of countries; rarely in a good way.

            The final contract Blackstone and Jefferies executed had netted them an astronomical amount of money…none of it related to the contract…all of it stolen. The job had started as a rather routine assassination of an up and coming politician. This young politician’s sin was the usual, trying to rally a Populist Democratic Socialist Movement among an oppressed, exceedly poor population, living under a sadistic despot known as The General. This young politician was the son of a wealthy expatriate businessman, who was a sworn and highly vocal enemy of The General. Some forty-two years past, The General in his march to power had slaughtered the man’s family in a public square. At two years old, the businessman survived because a group of Catholic nuns smuggled him out of the country. The man’s son now living in France was telling the world about the plight of his fellow countrymen. With the help of his father’s money, he was building an international coalition for change.

            The General had no qualms about personally whacking people in opposition to him. Often, he made a public spectacle of it, forcing those destined for execution to kneel, bound in chains for hours in public squares. Then, at a time of his own choosing, his motorcade would arrive. The cordon of armed soldiers who had circled the prisoners parted. The General, festooned in garish military regalia, would march to the condemned man or woman and beat them to death slowly. That said, he liked to keep his hands clean when it came to killing political opponents outside the borders of his country. That’s where the men who would become Blackstone and Jefferies came into the picture. The future Blackstone and Jefferies were set to complete the contract. Their target was not guarded at all and being young tended to enjoy the Paris night life at a level commensurate with his wealth. Blackstone despite his small stature was an exceedly charismatic individual. In many respects, a consummate con man who could assume any personality necessary to get a job done.

            Blackstone and Jefferies had spent a month in Paris studying the target. He was a creature of habit which would prove unfortunate for him. The woman they hired had run a number of honey trap operations with them. Liselotte Vlad had been a 2ndtier Romanian ballerina, which in the world of dance didn’t get you anywhere. She was identified at a young age for potential recruitment because of her high IQ, her natural facility at languages, her athletic ability and her stunning beauty.

            By nineteen, Liselotte understood dancing wasn’t going to work out. When the intelligence service came knocking, she understood there were no other options. So, she applied the same discipline, drive and intelligence to becoming a 1sttier Soviet Trained GRU Intelligence Operator. Now twenty-four years old and in her fifth year of service, she was operating in a variety of international theaters. What she was doing tonight was a side job, a little independent contracting, nothing sanctioned by the GRU. A situation should it come to light could be passed off as intelligence gathering on a potential asset.

            Liselotte snagged the target at his last watering hole. They retired to his luxury town house in the woman’s private car driven by a large black chauffeur. Inside the apartment, she removed a small metal cylinder and a single-edged gold-plated razor blade from her clutch purse. As the target prepared drinks, she tapped a pile of white powder from the cylinder onto the marble bar top. She expertly cut the powder into two long thin lines. He offered her the drink and indicated she should hit first. She smiled and asked for the bathroom while doing a little knee pressed together pose. Laughing she told him to go ahead there’s more then walked towards the bathroom.

            In her peripheral vision, Liselotte saw him retrieve a straw from the bar, bend over, seat it in his left nostril and greedily rip the first line. Without pause, he pulled a U-turn and ripped the second line in the same nostril. She stopped walking and thought, “Oh shit, this one’s going down for good.” She watched as he jerked upright, tilted his head back and let out a whoop. No surprise when he looked forward, shook his head twice, and collapsed to the floor, dropping like a rag doll. Liselotte pulled surgical gloves from her purse, donned them and collected evidence. She wiped the powder residue and everything she touched with a chemically treated cloth from her clutch. Exiting the house by the front door, she left it unlocked and walked back to the waiting cab. Blackstone, who had been hidden in the boot of the Citroen DS, now sat in the passenger seat beside Jefferies. He got out and held the door open for Liselotte then Jefferies drove her away.

            Walking to the front door, Blackstone entered the house. An hour later, Jefferies parked the Citroen DS a half mile from the house and walked the rest of the distance. Approaching the house, he saw no lights. Using the key Liselotte had taken, Jefferies unlocked and opened the front door, entering quietly. A soft red light emanated from the room to the left of the foyer. He entered and saw the target lying on the floor in front of a Louis XIV mahogany and Ormolu mounted bar. The light came from Blackstone’s red lens military flashlight. He was sitting in a side chair reading from a bound folder, at his feet sat an expensive leather briefcase.  Blackstone looked up at Jefferies and said, “Mon Capitaine, you ain't gonna believe what I found.”

            “Is he still alive?” asked Jefferies, tipping his head toward the man on the floor. “Lise told me what happened, greedy fuck.”

            “Yea, he thought it was coke…no doubt had big plans for the night…he’s still alive.”

            “What did you find? What are you reading?”

            “What I’m reading is a meticulously planned, well thought out and fully funded blueprint for getting rid of the General. That guy lying on the floor over there is up to his eyeballs in some heavy shit with serious players.”

            “So how does that change shit about what we are getting paid to do? The General literally wants this guy’s head in a pickle bucket, that’s what we are here to do.”

            “Well…let me continue…say we don’t put his head in a pickle bucket and this plan I’ve been reading goes down seven days from now. The General’s head will be in a pickle bucket.  These guys have enough juice to air lift 2500 Cuban mercs in to Roratanga International. Yea, they got some names in here you might recognize like Alvaro Villa Lopez.”

            Jefferies replied, “Avispas Negras, Black Wasps …fucking Cuban Special Forces.”

Blackstone continued, “Did I mention the French AMG Armored Cars the Cubans are deploying? Those fuckers are rolling with enough firepower to take the airport, radio and TV stations, Government House and police station. They have air cover flying from the Congo. The Congolese will do anything to get rid of the fucking General. There’s an additional combat ground force coming in over the Border at Norum.” Blackstone held up the bound folio he had been reading. “Fuck sake dude, we know those guys in the ground force…French Legionnaires, British Paras and SAS. It’s amazing what oil rights can buy these days.”

            “Where the fuck is all this money coming from, who hired these guys?”

            “Executive Solutions International is handling the overall contract. The money? Don’t know for sure, but there aren’t many mother fuckers that can play at this level. My guess is the Chinese.”

            “Are you saying we walk the fuck away from this?”

            “Where the money’s coming from is not as relevant as where it’s at now.” With that, Blackstone shoved the leather brief case with his foot, sliding it across the marble floor. “I’m not sure exactly how much is in that briefcase but at least seventy, eighty million dollars in Swiss Bearer Bonds.”

            They chose not to put the target’s head in a pickle barrel and instead left him lying on the floor of his house. He would wake up from the anesthesia around two o’clock in the afternoon. They didn’t get terribly greedy and only poached twenty million in the bearer bonds. They left a note that read. “The General sent us to kill you. You should hire some professional security and don’t leave shit laying around.” They never forgot that every day they were proactively hunted by someone, maybe several someones.

            Blackstone and Jefferies covers had held for over thirty years; a testament to how tightly constructed they were. It had cost them millions of dollars to have their original identities scoured into nonexistence. They were both well aware, should certain elements ever track them to the Blackstone and Jeffries personas, there would be a reckoning.

            Jefferies used a clean cotton rag to wipe the outside of the wine bottle. Uncorking it, he sat it on the table allowing the wine to breathe. Turning to the opposite wall which contained a bank of OLED TV screens, he voiced a command and each screen come on displaying a news channel from across the United States and around the world. A quick survey of the news told Jefferies there wasn’t shit happening in the world today that hadn’t been happening the day before…in a nutshell same old bullshit. He eased himself into an office chair. With a voice command, the television screens changed to views of the various security cameras in the house and on the grounds. He ordered the system to start flipping through the various cameras. He watched the changing screens; they displayed nothing out of the ordinary which is what he wanted to see.

            “Alert!” It was a notification that Preston had posted a selfie to the website Doppelganger.com. This site searched images on the company’s personal database for your look alike. The only facial characteristic the Blackstone children had that reflected their father’s face were their eyes. Their noses were different, their cheekbones not quite right, their chins were not square like their father’s. But the eyes were the giveaway. The eyes, their shape, their placement, their color, and their intensity, spoke to blood lineage.

            Giving Condor a voice command to open the website's file, Jefferies saw four images come into view, faces only no personal information. On the computer screen, Preston’s front facing photo was displayed. Below that image right to left, were displayed three doppelganger matches along with first names and countries. The first two matches were quite good, both were of men approximately Preston’s age. Close as they were, Jefferies knew that these two would not pass an advanced facial recognition scan. The third photo was old, black and white but with sharp resolution.

            The small hairs on the back of Jefferies neck alerted. It was a photo of Blackstone before the cosmetic surgery. Jefferies remembered taking the picture long ago in a dingy blackwater shithole close to the equator. He had done it to falsify a dead man’s passport so the pair could get out of another place they shouldn’t have been in in the first place. The photograph on the website should not have existed. Jefferies knew, that because of Preston’s extensive social media footprint, those who had posted the photo had likely figured out who Preston was and his whereabouts. He was also certain they had the resources to eliminate the other two matches quickly.

            Reaching behind the computer screen, Jefferies picked up a satellite phone and hit the number 1 on the preset menu. His iPhone chirped and the text messages about the poisoning from the family’s cloned phones popped up. He gave Condor a command to open microphones on all the kids’ phones. A moment later, five phone mics came online in a cacophony of voices.  He grabbed the mouse, selected and muted four of the channels so he could listen on one. Charles was down and it sounded like the group was coming unhinged. He heard the satellite phone quit ringing and Blackstone’s familiar baritone voice came on the line. “What’s up?”

            “Sharks are in the fucking water that’s what’s up. A photo of the former you showed up on a doppelgänger site. It’s the black and white from that passport we jimmied up…you know which one! You destroyed that fucking thing …right?”

            “Fuck yes I destroyed it… we set fire to that little photo shop. I assumed the negative was burned.”

            “Looks like maybe not. The negative survived and someone found it.”

            “Took it a long damn time for to show up.”

            “Whoever posted it has no doubt tracked Preston already. The picture he posted was a selfie taken at the airport in Cuba about an hour ago.”

            “What the fuck are they doing in Cuba?”

            “What the do you think, trying to untie your Gordian Knot of clues. Charles was poisoned just a few minutes ago. Don’t know his condition. I’m assuming the rest are all right because there is phone activity. I’m listening to the chatter on Ashely’s phone. Whoever made this move was an amateur. Bottom line, we need to get them the fuck out of Cuba before someone FedEx’s us their naked skin suits.”

            “Where are they staying? I can send people.”

            “Nope I’m not telling you. Don’t know who went after them, but they’re amateurs.  Condor’s already found the contract out on the Dark Web. Who doesn’t matter. There’s a cornucopia of psychopaths out there looking to cash in. You need to get the fuck out of there now.”

            Jefferies could hear another voice in the background. He couldn’t make out the murmured words, but the timbre and cadence of the voice was instantly recognizable. Closing his eyes for half a heartbeat, he drew a breath before speaking into the phone. “Is that the fucking Persian Princess…again…for god sakes…you fucking idiot. She is the original Savak honey trap.

 Well shit! Condor’s monitoring the contract and a picture of the new you just got published as an addendum with your name…this digital shit moves way too fast…the princess got her phone?”

            “Yes,” replied Blackstone.

            “How long do you think it will be before she gets a call from someone in Tehran? She’ll take her time killing you…likely live stream it to her boss Davani. You’ve seen her work. She skinned that Chechen alive for fuck sake. Remember that shit Mon Amie? You started puking, and I put a bullet in his head.”

            “Dude, you’re making my dick shrink up.”

            “Put your dick back in your pants while you still have it and get the fuck out of Cuba.  I’ve got to tend the fucking zoo. Let me know when you’re out and roosting.” Jefferies disconnected without saying goodbye. He turned away from the computer screen and looked back at the security camera. A flashing light on one monitor alerted the viewer to the front gate a mile and a quarter away. The camera’s night vision capability displayed a late model Chevy Suburban parked in front of the wide steel gate with five men piling out. Jefferies used his thumb to cursor through the satellite phone’s menu of presets to the 13thlisted and punched it.

            While the phone rang, he watched the men walk up to the gate and try to open it with zero success. They were dressed in an odd assortment of casual clothes and jogging suits. On the fifth ring, Jefferies heard Bear’s voice over a background of voices and music. “What’s up Mon Capitaine? “

            “Bear, I need some help!”

            Bear could hear the tension in Jefferies' voice. “What do you need?”

            “There’s a group down there, the Blackstone bunch, you may have run into them at your lodgings. I need you to track them down, round them up and get everyone to a safe house…that includes all your people. It’s at 425 Calle Neptune. It has an electronic lock. The code is Pi to the 7thdigit.”

            Bear replied, “Funny how that shit works. We happen to be in Cuba of all places and staying right where you need help. Haven’t heard a peep since you got us the book and movie deals for the round robin novel.”

            “Trust me, I didn’t plan this shit! But someone has already tried to poison them. You are all in the middle of a shit storm. There's a whole lot of players out there with no qualms about generating mass casualties in and around their targets. “

            “You talking RPG shit or what?” replied Bear.

            “Truck bombs, drone strikes, machetes, take your pick. There’s a contract on Little Dog.  They will be going after anyone who they think will draw him out!”

            Bear now understands the urgency in Jefferies’ voice. In her distant past, Bear had crossed paths with Jefferies and Blackstone. It had been an education. She had learned that if Jefferies said it was time to run, she was going to get the fuck out of Dodge. “Not a problem,” she replied.

             Jefferies used an old ruse to communicate the real safe house address. “First is last, last is first, second goes to the back of the line.”

            Bear punched 542 Calle Neptune into google maps. “That’s not far.”

            “I know.  Any operators besides yourself in that group?”

              “Not that I know of, but they’re all from Top City and used to random gun fire. I suspect they all know what a trigger for. Problem is I’ve got no access to gear.”

            “There’s a safe at the house, behind the bookcase on the northwest library wall. Grab the middle shelf and pull it straight back two inches, that unlatches the bookshelf. The safe combination is 11-22-63. I’ll get an extraction in motion for everyone. Get your people and the Blackstones to the safe house. I’ll patch you the location of their phones.” The last thing Jefferies heard before the connection terminated was Bear shouting above the noise of the bar. “Whooeeee! Saddle up comrades! We got us an upgrade…private villa!”

             The men on the television screens were now removing short barrel weapons from the back of the vehicle. The weapons had only pistol grips and stubby wooden forearms. The first magazine with its distinctive curve came into view telling Jefferies these were AK pistols. There were no optics mounted on top of the weapons, only rudimentary iron sights. Jeffries raised the volume on the front gate surveillance camera microphone. The intruders chattered and started activating lasers mounted to the weapons with a button on the hand grip.

            The whole setup smacked of amateurs. The fact that the intruders were clustered up, pointing lasers everywhere in the dead of night and illuminating their positions, affirmed they were idiots as well. Jefferies couldn’t recall any operations from his past that would have brought these clowns like these into play. These clowns were trying to cash in on a modern-day crowd sourced contract killing advertised on the Dark Web.

            The intruders were a decidedly noisy lot. A computer program inside Condor had already identified their language as Balkan Gagauz. It further informed Jeffries of the limited specific regions in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey where it was commonly spoken. He gave the computer a voice command, “Condor execute level one security lockdown.” Throughout the property, heavy steel roll up shutters started closing on every window and door, turning the exterior of the house into a stone and steel fortress.

            Jefferies walked to a bank of cabinets located by the ramp from the wine cellar. He quickly shed the casual wear he had worn that day, tossing it on a bench in front of the lockers.  Opening the first locker, he removed black tactical pants and shirt that were folded together on a shelf. He quickly donned the shirt and pants. Tucking the shirt in, he cinched the belt he always kept in the loops. As he sat and finished lacing his boots, he watched the men clumsily begin clambering over the ten-foot-tall chain link fence flanking front security gate. “Condor launch Mr. Peepers and acquire targets now identified on main gate camera.”  Instantly small circles appeared on the computer screen around the five men now at the front gate. Mr. Peepers was a small battery powered, whisper quiet drone with a digital night vision camera connected to the security system. Between the remote audio equipped cameras hidden every 100 meters along the road and the drones, Jefferies would have eyes and ears on these ass clowns virtually every step of the way.

            Three of the men that started climbing the fence with significant effort made it over one didn’t. The older, heavyset one gave up at eight feet. He tried to reverse course unsuccessfully and fell a good seven feet onto his ass. After dusting himself off, he passed his firearm to the small, wiry one who had been sitting in the truck. The little one went over the fence like a spider monkey. Jefferies made a mental note of that one’s speed and agility. The four started walking down the wide crushed rock road toward the house. The gate was a mile and a quarter from the house. Jefferies watched as they moved in a disorganized group, paying no heed to tactical intervals. One grenade would have gotten them all.

            Jefferies opened a second locker and selected a suppressed Colt LE 6920 with an integrally suppressed 16 in barrel, chambered in 300 Blackout. He seated a 30-round magazine loaded with subsonic ammo into the gun receiver well. A visual check of the selector switch verified it was in the safe position. He placed two extra 20-round magazines of subsonic ammo in a deep pocket on the right side of his pants. Donning a headset, he placed the power pack with a computer brain in the left front pocket of his tactical shirt. Touching a small button on the side of the headset, he saw the micro HUD display above his left eye come alive. Condor had already linked to the headset. The view from the drone in the HUD was four white dots meandering down the road. “Condor open vertical hatch.” An expanded metal hatch dropped open above the ladder leading into the vertical tunnel. Jefferies hauled himself up steel rungs and exited the utility closet floor. Once out the back door of the carriage house, he took off at a dog trot around the main house and down the long stone road towards the main gate.

            Jefferies' HUD display showed the group still moving slowly down the road a half mile out. Jefferies trotted a hundred yards down the road to a bridge equipped with a cattle grate. The fifty-foot-long bridge spanned a deep twenty-five-foot wide gully. Fifty yards past the bridge, he took a position below the old oak that held the tree house and waited. The intruders came around the last curve in the road and gazed down the long straight final stretch to the house. They walked past the oak tree and gawked at the tree house. They passed within fifty feet of Jefferies cloaked in the darkness still as stone.

            As the intruders approached the bridge with cattle guard, they paused before starting across. Anyone who had walked railroad ties would have recognized the process. The first man slung his weapon around his neck and started walking across, focusing on where he stepped, arms stuck out to his side for balance. The other three followed in single file spaced a few feet apart. After they passed Jefferies’ position, he slipped silently in behind them, crouching low, moving with practiced catlike steps. When the group reached the cattle gate, they paused.  A cattle gate is intentionally difficult to walk across and this one was even more so, as it was designed with wider spacing on the horizontal rungs. A human foot could not span two rungs at a time. This forced an individual to focus totally on careful foot placement.

            As the four reached the center of the bridge, Jefferies stood up and advanced to the bridge edge. The moonlight and night vision sight combined to present him with a bright picture of the men. He laid the illuminated dot of the sight on the spine between the shoulder blade of the last man in line squeezed the trigger. There was little muzzle flash, the only sound it made was a mechanical crunch of the rifle’s bolt cycling and the dull thud as the subsonic 30 caliber bullet slammed into the man’s back. Instantly dead, his heart blown apart, he pitched forward and dropped like a rag doll. The other three died in much the same manner each a split second apart.

            Jeffries spoke into the microphone, “Condor lower the walkway.” The flat diamond steel side guard rails spanning the length of the bridge dropped, forming four-foot-wide walkways on both sides. Walking up to the corpses, he saw a cell phone screen light up in one of the men’s pocket.  “Condor link gate camera one.”  A miniaturized view of the main gate opened on the HUD display. A heavy-set man was pacing in front of the gate looking at the phone in his hand. Fishing the ringing phone out of the dead man’s jogging suit, Jeffries accepted the call. A heavily accented voice came on the line, “Wat de fuck up…what taking so long?” Jefferies immediately disconnected the call and typed “bring car” into the message box then hit send.

            Jefferies ordered, “Condor open gate one.”  On the HUD display, he saw the gate start to slide open. The moving gate startled the man with the phone, and he jumped back cursing. After watching the gate slide open, he shrugged his shoulders, crawled into the Suburban and started it. The headlights came on and the vehicle started down the road. The road in from the gate was purposely laid out with sharp turns and oversized humps interspersed with sharp dips. The design forced a driver to drive slowly or get beat to death.

            Jefferies spoke, “Condor raise the bridge.” The cattle gate opened in the middle, lifting vertically in draw bridge fashion stooping in vertical position. Jefferies dumped the four bodies in a pile hidden by the bridge entry ramp. Jefferies walked fifty yards off the side of the road and took up a position behind a large lilac bush. The Suburban approached the draw bridge slowly stopping a hundred feet short of the raised deck. The driver sat looking around for a moment then picked up the phone and made a call. Jefferies had all of the men’s phones in his pocket  turned off.  After a couple of tries with the phone the man opened the vehicle's door and stepped out head twisting looking about.  When he reached inside to retrieve an AK Pistol from the dashboard Jefferies shot him in the back.

             Jefferies showered and changed into clean clothes. He then returned to the bunker and his bottle of wine. The Suburban with its five dead occupants had taken a drive off the end of the peninsula at a point where the Atlantic Ocean’s strong current would quickly carry it offshore into a deep watery grave. Jefferies checked the status of the zoo in Cuba. Bear and company had done their magic. All the phones appeared to be located in the safe house.  An extraction contract had been initiated through Omega Security Solutions, a premier security firm, run by former CIA spooks. Jefferies instructed Condor to initiate the Black Hole Protocol.

            It had been almost thirty years since Jefferies retired from the killing business. But killing, like riding a bicycle, is a skill once acquired you never really lost. Now at age sixty-two, Jefferies felt way too old for this shit. Ordering Condor to Maximum Security level, he went to the last locker along the basement wall and pulled out a small pack containing everything he needed to function for a few days. He exited the underground room via the second escape route. Outside the pump house, he located a large moss-covered stone and lifted it, removing a small watertight container. Opening it, Jefferies removed a packet of documents and a set of car keys. In place of the AR, which had been ditched in pieces into the ocean, he carried a licensed suppressed MINI-14 Ranch Rifle and a 9mm Sig 226.

            Moving fast along the cliff of the bay, Jefferies covered the distance to the main gate in twenty minutes. As he walked, he heard panting coming from behind. He pivoted bringing the weapon to bear. Twenty-five feet behind him stood a white Pitbull, its coat almost iridescent in the strong moonlight. Dogs mean people, so Jefferies scanned his rear and flanks with the night vision scope on his Ruger Mini-14 rifle. He tapped the headset, but Mr. Peeper’s aerial view showed only himself and the dog on the HUD. He lowered his weapon and looked at the dog. It was skinny. Its whip like tail drooped and its head, large and square, hung down.

            Jefferies had no idea why, but he walked up to the dog.  Even in its rough condition, it sat quietly wagging its tail. He squatted down and looked the dog in its eyes. “You’ve had a rough go of it haven’t you boy?” The dog responded by wagging its tail a little more vigorously and licking Jefferies’ hand. Jefferies scooped the dog up and carried it the last hundred yards through the trees to a single car sized shed in a thick stand of trees.

            Sitting the dog, pack and rifle down, Jefferies unlocked a steel pass door. Inside the shed sat a white 2015 extended cab Ford F150 4 X 4 with a topper. Using the car key, he had retrieved outside the pump house, he unlocked the truck. The Mini-14 with 5 extra magazines was secured in a Tuff brand horizontal lock box under the rear jump seats. He stowed the pistol in a custom lock box in the center console, picked up the dog placing it in the passenger seat. From the inside the shed, he unlocked an overhead door and raised it.

            Jefferies started the truck, switched on the lights and began driving a cross country route that would deposit him on a nondescript county road in five miles. He looked at the dog and said, “There’s a McDonalds down the road a bit. We’ll get some burgers and fries for us bud.” The dog laid down in the seat, propping his head on the center console, and looked up with big eyes. The man formerly known as Jefferies reached over and laid his hand on the dog’s head stroking the short soft fur behind its ear. He felt the dog released a slow sigh with it the man felt a bit of stress in his soul seep away.