

BRANDON CARLSEN

## Wrath of Greed



*First published by Westfall Publishing LLC 2025*

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*Second edition*

*ISBN (paperback): 979-8-9923811-3-9*

*ISBN (hardcover): 979-8-9923811-4-6*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.*

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“Continual success in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continual prospering, is that men call felicity; I mean the felicity of this life. For there is no such thing as perpetual tranquility of mind, while we live here; because life itself is but motion, and can never be without desire, nor without fear, no more than without sense.”

- Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes



# Characters

**Wesley “Wes” Jacobs:** aka The Reaper; aka Alpha One; former Army Ranger and private military contractor; personal Security detachment team lead at Radial Security Associates; husband and father to Jennifer Jacobs, Evelyn and Olivia Jacobs; target number twenty-three of the underground hunting game, *The Most Dangerous Game*

**Christopher “Chris” Jennings:** former Marine Second Force Recon; avid outdoors-man and hunting guide; father of Madelyn Jennings; target number twenty-two of the underground hunting game, *The Most Dangerous Game*

**Agent Hannah Larson:** Task force investigator for the FBI specializing in domestic and international weapons trafficking, lead investigator for the Wesley Jacobs case

**Donald Harper:** FBI blue collar crimes investigator assigned to Atlanta field office

**James Kelcey:** FBI facial recognition expert

**Jennifer Jacobs:** Wife of Wesley Jacobs; mother of Evelyn and Olivia Jacobs

**Lee Walker:** Owner of Radial Security Associates; former US Navy Officer; member of the Clandestine Operations Counsel

**Bradley “Brad” Carter:** aka Alpha two; Personal Security Detachment employee at Radial Security Associates; former 11 Bravo Army Veteran; confidential FBI informant

**Jackson Morales:** aka Alpha Three; Personal Security Detachment employee at Radial Security Associates

**Tatum Kinsley:** aka Alpha Four; Personal Security Detachment employee at Radial Security Associates

**Cameran Armstead:** aka Bravo One: Personal Security Detachment employee at Radial Security Associates

**Caleb Dotson:** aka Charlie One: Personal Security Detachment employee at Radial Security Associates

**Phillip Anderson:** Vice president of US Operations at Radial Security Associates

**Alexander Sidorov:** Former Russian Spetsnaz; former private military contractor; Russian Bratva Assassin; hunter for *The Most Dangerous Game* gambling ring

**Daniel Sanger:** Famous American hunting enthusiast; hunter for *The Most Dangerous Game* gambling ring

**Tom Washburn:** Wealthy CEO; member of the group that sanctioned the international gambling ring, *The Most Dangerous Game*; hunter for *The Most Dangerous Game* gambling ring

## CHARACTERS

**Margaret Bowers;** Wealthy CEO of CON-VYE Security; original creator and member of the group that sanctioned the international gambling ring, *The Most Dangerous Game*

**Howard Townsend:** Partner and original founder of CON-VYE Security; original creator and member of the group that sanctioned the international gambling ring, *The Most Dangerous Game*; International Arms Dealer

**Francis Eckles:** Operations Analyst at Radial Security Associates; member and hunter of the group that sanctioned the international gambling ring, *The Most Dangerous Game*; international arms dealer and business partner of Howard Townsend

**Steve Hassel:** Wealthy member of the group that sanctioned the international gambling ring, *The Most Dangerous Game*

**Katherine Rinner:** Wealthy member of the group that sanctioned the international gambling ring, *The Most Dangerous Game*

**Jason Albury:** Deceased; former board member of Albury Holdings; former member and hunter of the group that sanctioned the international gambling ring, *The Most Dangerous Game*

**Wyatt Richardson:** Underground freelance money laundering accountant

**Rick Myers:** Former CIA Ground Branch Paramilitary Officer; member and team lead of Seeker, hit team handled by Howard Townsend

**Tex:** Aka Henry Anderson; Employee and Security Operations Manager for Howard Townsend

**Cowboy:** Personal Security supervisor for Howard Townsend

**Berlin:** Private Assassin

**Sebastian Makarov:** Russian Bratva enforcer

**Joseph Albury:** CEO of Albury Holdings; confidential FBI informant

**Mary Langstein:** CFO of Albury Holdings

**Jordan Barringer:** COO of Albury Holdings

# Wrath of Greed

This novel is intended for mature readers and may not be suitable for all audiences. It contains graphic content, including depictions of blood, violence, and intense scenes that may be disturbing to some. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

# Prologue



Five months ago

Washington D.C.

Snow fell from the sky in a cascade, leaving a soft layer of white powder over the streets of the capital. At just under forty-two degrees, FBI Agent Hannah Larson regretted not bringing a thicker jacket. Even after sixteen years of living in D.C., she hadn't learned her lesson, despite the unpredictable weather.

The bitter air stung her nose and cheeks, while the humidity made her knees ache with every step. Nevertheless, she pushed onward through the snowy haze, focusing her mind on the task at hand. She was on her way to meet an asset who claimed to have knowledge of an international arms dealer operating within the United States.

Twenty-two hours earlier, Agent Larson had received a tip from the Public Access Center Unit of the FBI. After contacting the informant through



an encrypted phone line, they spoke briefly and scheduled a clandestine meeting.

She already felt uneasy about their conversation, particularly since her asset used an AI voice synthesis, also known as AI voice modulation system, which obscured the user's age, gender, and emotional state. Despite her reservations, Hannah was obligated to follow up on any and all tips—not only because of her position within the bureau but also due to her moral commitment to keep the United States safe from all enemies, foreign and domestic.

The asset insisted on meeting in public, despite the proximity of a safe and secure field office only a few miles away. The informant was paranoid, and in her experience, this made the person unpredictable and potentially dangerous. After working with her colleague, James Kelsey, in the Information Technology Branch (ITB) to reverse the AI voice modulation system and trace the phone call using a method called cell site location information (CSLI), she was able to learn more about the asset. This gave her some relief but also concern as she uncovered the individual's backstory. Fortunately, she would have five undercover agents in plain sight, wearing civilian clothing and monitoring for any signs of trouble, with additional surveillance listening and watching video feeds.

As her hand gripped the Vipertek VTS-989 stun gun in her jacket pocket, she could make out the outlines of two stone lion statues through the snow in the distance. She was just outside Columbus Circle, only minutes away from meeting a confidential informant who, unbeknownst to her, would change her life forever.

Union Station, on average, sees more than one hundred thousand people each day, so Hannah wasn't surprised to find the interchange crowded.

She first took note of all the exits, quickly scanning every person in sight for any potential bad actors. So far, everything seemed normal, and she blended in, appearing just like another tourist searching for her terminal. A group of college-age students, apparently returning home from Christmas vacation in D.C., swarmed around her like a school of fish, while nearby, a Japanese businessman rolled his suitcase and lectured someone on the

other end of his phone.

Finally, her gaze settled on a man sitting on a bench at the right of the station under an Amtrak Gate F sign. He had a small suitcase next to him, occupying the rest of the bench, and held a book in his hands, projecting the image of someone reading while waiting for his train. His legs were crossed, maintaining an outward appearance of calm, but Hannah could see the panic in his darting eyes.

Despite his anxious body language, which she, as a trained FBI agent, could easily read, he blended in well—an appreciated trait for someone with virtually no tradecraft. The book in his hands served as a visual identifier; it was *Lord of the Flies*, a classic she recognized instantly, having read it from cover to cover four times.

Hannah followed the flow of people that had just arrived via train, and at the last moment, she veered to the right, wrapping around an escalator, moving discreetly to the bench behind her informant. After patiently waiting nearby and receiving confirmation from her surveillance team that she was clear, she took a seat facing the opposite direction of the man with the book and relaxed.

Removing her beanie, she pushed her hair behind her ears, revealing her white Bluetooth headphones. It took another five painful minutes for the woman next to her to leave before Hannah placed her backpack, stuffed with towels, on the remaining part of the bench, blocking anyone else from taking a seat directly next to her.

The man behind her seemed virtually unaware of her presence until she spoke, causing him to tense up and emit a boyish yelp.

“You’re reading *Lord of the Flies*? That’s one of my favorite books.”

He paused, trying to regain his composure, then responded in a shaky voice, “Piggy always had the best quotes.”

“How can I disagree with that? Though, I always liked Jack Merridew’s character best,” Hannah said, leaning back against the bench.

Following his strict instructions, Hannah agreed to use names from the book for their conversation, a decision that sat well with her since she wouldn’t be revealing her own name tonight.

“So, what can I do for you, Mr. Merridew?” she continued.

“First off, how can I be sure you are who you say you are?”

“Is my presence here, knowing what I know, not enough?”

He regarded her question for a moment before speaking. “These are powerful people I’m dealing with. It’s hard for me to believe anything anymore.”

Piggy sighed. “Mr. Merridew, you reached out to us. I followed your instructions exactly as you asked. If that isn’t good enough for you, then I must go.”

She was already playing chess with him, and little did he know she was a grand-master. He was going to be eating out of the palm of her hand by the time she was done with him, and he didn’t even know it. Continuing the manipulation, Agent Larson stood up, causing a noticeable shift in the bench.

“No! Please stay. I believe you are who you say you are ... just don’t go.”

Piggy remained on her feet for a moment, flicking her eyes around the room and looking at the arrivals/departures sign to her left before adjusting her coat as if on purpose. She sat back down and leaned against the bench, the back of her head just inches from his.

“Okay, Jack. I can call you Jack, right?”

“Jack is fine.”

“Okay, Jack. Tell me why we’re sitting here in the middle of Union Station on a Tuesday night.”

“Yes ... Okay, I believe I have information about a very dangerous arms dealer,” the asset said.

“I gathered that from our initial call. You were reluctant to provide much more, so here we are. Can you tell me how you came by this information?”

“Well, my brother is missing, and I have reason to believe he was kidnapped by those involved in this weapons business.”

“Missing? I read he had passed away.”

“N—no. First off, he’s missing, but second, how did you know I was ...”

“Jack, we’re the FBI. This is what we do.”

He let out a brief, uncomfortable chuckle before falling silent for a moment.

“Right. The official story is that he passed away, but his body was never recovered. My brother has been missing for over five months now. I’ve done everything in my power to find him, even hiring a private investigator, but everything always leads to a dead end.”

“And you hope to use the FBI to find him by leveraging the lure of an arms dealer?” she asked, begrudgingly.

“Look, I filed a missing persons case, but no one at the state level is willing to do anything about it. After I found what I found, I knew this was my only shot at finding my brother. It’s a win-win for both of us: I get closure, and you take another set of assholes off the FBI’s chess board. The last I heard, my brother was traveling and working on some personal real estate deals. He’s an avid hunter, so I assumed he would go to his usual spots—Tanzania, Mozambique, Namibia, Cambodia—but none of my contacts or his usual hunting guides have any record of him being there.”

“So, he often just leaves on a whim for months at a time?”

“Well, yes and no. I don’t mean to sound arrogant, but he’s a billionaire. He’s the kind of guy that’s always itching to spend his money. If something catches his interest or seems exciting, he has to have it or be involved one way or another. At first, I figured he was just tied up in some new land investment, which explained why he hadn’t returned my calls or responded to inquires at work. But after a while, well past his usual disappearing act, he just never came back.”

“Jack, I don’t mean to sound insensitive, but face the facts: thousands of people go missing each year in the wilderness, just in the U.S. alone. How do you know this isn’t the case? Maybe this was just a freak accident.”

Jack interrupted quickly, “What facts? I’ve been left with no facts, nothing that leads me to believe he died hunting or went missing in the jungle. It’s not like him to just disappear like this.” He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “He’s what you would call a very controlled person. He has a plan for every situation, especially on his hunting trips. You have to understand that he and I have been hunting our entire lives. Since we were children, we would go with our dad in Montana. This isn’t new to him. He knows how to survive; he knows exactly what he’s doing.”

“Okay, I understand what you’re saying,” Piggy said, trying to navigate the conversation back to the main topic. “Why don’t we get back on track.”

Jack, now flustered and visibly irritated, reluctantly continued. “My brother and I aren’t as close as we used to be. We just grew apart over the years, especially after I was voted in as CEO of the Holdings company we started together. He still sits on the board as a founding member and supports the company, but I know it bothers him. Over time, we spoke less and less, to the point where I didn’t even know he was missing until he missed an important acquisition meeting. He would never have missed something like that. After that, I tried to reach out to him but got no response. I figured he might be out of the country on a hunting expedition, so I attempted to contact his satellite phone—again, nothing. Then, one day, while I was in Atlanta for a meeting at our sister office, I decided to call his satellite phone again, and that’s what drove me down this path and brought you to me.”

Piggy smiled. “And?”

“The individual who answered was angry and spoke in a foreign language. I tried to ask questions—who they were, where my brother was—but the person just shouted angrily before hanging up. Since then, they haven’t answered again.”

“Okay, Jack ... maybe try to tell me about the weapons so I can start piecing some of this together.”

His face tightened. “Well, a few weeks ago, I went to my brother’s house, hoping to find some information or a clue about where he had gone, and it just felt odd when I got there. Like things had been staged.”

“Staged? How so?” Piggy asked.

“Well, for one, all his computers and tablets were missing. Second, the main issue I keep coming back to is the note left for his service staff. Why would he leave a note telling them when he’d be back?”

“I assume that wouldn’t be a common thing for him, being that he’s a billionaire, right?”

“Exactly.” He glossed over her sarcasm. “My brother has many homes and travels often unannounced, so the service staff just operates under the

assumption he won't be there. Honestly, none of this makes sense to me."

As Agent Larson sat on the bench, her mind raced through dozens of scenarios, trying to piece together the information the asset had provided. She flicked her eyes up the escalator, then to the right and left, continuously scanning her surroundings while listening to her surveillance team confirm she was still clear of threats. Her gaze followed a man in a thick, puffy jacket pulling luggage toward Terminal E, then shifted to a woman walking by on a video call with a friend. Finally, she refocused on Jack after briefly making eye contact with one of the agents keeping watch over her.

Piggy crossed her right leg over her left and picked up her cell phone, pretending to scroll through social media before speaking. "So, your theory is that your brother may have been directly or indirectly involved in what I assume is an illegal arms-dealing group, which I assume you'll explain in more detail shortly, is that right?"

"Yes, exactly that."

"Okay, so let's say either scenario is true. What evidence do you have that can corroborate your story?" Asked Piggy.

"His computer."

Piggy paused, tilting her head to the side. "I thought you said his computers and tech were all missing when you arrived at his home?"

"Yes and no. Most of everything was missing, but this one was stashed in a place where whoever staged his house didn't know it existed."

"Okay. And so, what did you find?" Piggy asked with anticipation.

"I need to know first that my brother and I will be withheld from any liability and that our names do not come up in any reports, news articles—nothing."

"You know I can't guarantee that. This is a deal only the Justice Department can make."

"Then maybe you're not the right person to talk to about this," he said.

Piggy rolled her eyes and let out a long, melodramatic sigh. "I can't guarantee anything right now, but what I can give you is my word. I will do my absolute best to work with the Justice Department to keep your names out of it. I can't promise anything more until I know more about what's

going on though.”

“Fine,” Jack said, annoyed.

“So ... the laptop?” Piggy prompted.

Jack exhaled slowly. “It’s a pretty old model, maybe eight years old, but still a powerful piece of equipment. Unfortunately, he used some sort of wiper malware to clear the search history, keeping the laptop clean of any compromising data, so most of what could have been helpful is now gone. Except ...” he paused and urgently looked around the room.

“Except what?”

“As deliberate as he was, he made a mistake and may have shut down the computer too early, causing the malware to not execute the process completely.”

“What did you find?”

“I found the words ‘XP Logistics, not flagged by Saudi customs’ and ‘Diamond Transport flagged by Egyptian customs.’”

Now, Piggy was excited; anything to do with customs and shipments was her game and exactly what she came here for.

Jack continued, “I was interested in both names because they were, quite literally, my only leads. I eventually found that a crate with Diamond Transport on the manifest was confiscated by Egyptian customs earlier this year. With a little research, I discovered that thousands of rifle parts were uncovered in a few crates destined for Iran, with a manifest claiming OEM parts for Toyota Hiluxes.”

“Interesting. Did you find anything else on the other transport company, XP?”

“Honestly, not much. The only thing I found was that the shell corporation had a connection with a private military contracting company in Saudi Arabia called Radial Security Associates, but that was over two years ago. Radial was listed on the manifest as the recipient, once again, for vehicle parts, but that shipment wasn’t confiscated or flagged at the time by Saudi customs.”

Piggy followed up with another question. “This is definitely interesting information, but there’s not much to go on other than this Radial company.

Were you able to find anything else about them?”

“No, not at all. They have contacts with U.S. intelligence, which blocked much of what I tried to research. I kept hitting dead ends with them. Plus, the government wouldn’t be moving weapons illegally through a PMC. That doesn’t sound right.”

Piggy laughed at the statement, but Jack didn’t hear it. She responded, “Maybe if you give me the laptop, I can have my IT people look into it.”

“It won’t be helpful for you anymore.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“I already tried that. Unfortunately, the computer had a firmware-level kill switch that completely bricked the laptop. Even with a new hard drive, it’s inaccessible. The whole thing is unusable now.”

“I’ll take it anyway. I can have a courier go wherever you need to pick it up.”

Jack perked up at her words, happy to hear them. “So does this mean you’re going to proceed? Take the case?”

Piggy shrugged. “Yes.”

“Oh, thank god!” he said, disbelief etched on his face.

She continued, “But please understand, I will have no choice but to search the deepest corners of your brother’s life. His disappearance and his laptop are the only solid connections I have outside of a government contracted PMC. Whatever comes out of this, I can’t stop that. I will do what I can, but the law is the law.”

Jack took a moment to think it over. “I understand, thank you.”

She pulled out a card from her pocket and slipped it through the slats of the bench, where it fell onto the platform next to where Jack sat. “Don’t thank me yet. Call if anything else comes up.” She stood up, pulled her beanie down over her head, and prepared to re-enter the blistering cold outside.

For the first time, Jack turned around and looked up at her. He regarded her face, realizing how young and beautiful she was. She looked nothing like what he had expected from an FBI agent—though, what did he even expect?



## PROLOGUE

“Wait, what if you need to call me?” he asked, confused.

“Don’t worry, I know how to find you,” Hannah said as she walked away.

## Part One.

Cruelty.

**“The world is made up of two classes - the hunters and the huntees.  
Luckily, you and I are the hunters.”**

**- The Most Dangerous Game by Richard Connell**

One.



## Walker, Virginia

As the evening sun descended behind the snow-capped mountains of Virginia, it left a radiant blend of oranges, blues, and yellows in its wake. The rays, still prominent through the valley, scattered as they hit the windows of the third-floor attic of the massive timber home, landing on an old mahogany table.

Originally built in 1792 by master craftsman Theodor Gravins, the table was designed as a centerpiece for the East Room of the White House, where it remained until 1949. Shortly after a massive renovation overseen by President Truman, it was auctioned off and passed through three different owners before being purchased by the Townsend estate.

Today, the historical table was used in ways not intended by its creator, serving as the setting for a secret meeting of an organization bent on accumulating money and power. A group of the world's top one percent gathered around it to plan some of the worst human rights violations in

modern history, all under the radar of the most powerful governments in the world.

In the back of the room sat a thin man, small in stature, observing the others with disgust at their irritating mannerisms. Generally antisocial, he often found his outlook on those around him unforgiving. He wasn't cut from the same cloth as the others; he was just a regular middle-class kid who had discovered an exceptional aptitude for technology and analytics. In his eyes, most individuals here were just trust-fund pigs with little regard for their outward personalities.

Known as the analyst, he had worked with the group for more than five years, handling the technical and logistical work that the others were too incompetent to understand. Howard Townsend, his mentor and boss, had recruited him shortly after his "real" employer, Radial Security Associates, hired CON-VYE to build a virtually impenetrable security system for their internal network. As the two grew closer, Howard recognized his potential in ways others hadn't and slowly began integrating him into the fold until he was trapped, knowing too much to escape.

Howard Townsend stood at the edge of the room, looking out the window in annoyed anticipation, rubbing his eyes after a long flight from Belarus. He watched as a Nextant 400XTi private jet descended from the sky and made a perfect landing on the private runway. It taxied toward the hangar just outside the home, stopping just before the building to let out its traveler. "Finally," he muttered, watching Margaret Bowers exit the jet. She carried a small backpack and a rolling suitcase behind her as she walked nonchalantly toward the house.

Moving, what he assumed was intentionally slow, she looked up at him from the runway, fully aware that her ex-husband would be looking down on her, cursing under his breath for being late. She didn't care; they had an entire week to finish planning this year's hunt, and her being an hour late wouldn't jeopardize that in any way. Howard was just an impatient prick, always angry about something she did.

Howard walked around the table, passing Francis, the analyst, and grabbed a new cigar from a small box. The others' eyes remained glued

to their computers and phones, acting as though Margaret's tardiness was of no concern to them.

Howard stopped at the oversized bar cart and poured himself a glass of bourbon before cutting the cigar and lighting it with a torch. A few puffs later, he settled into his chair, leaning back comfortably and waiting.

Finally, after an agonizing fifteen minutes, Margaret walked in wearing her signature black power suit and three-inch heels. As she entered the room, she couldn't help but reflect on the money she had made over the last sixteen years—money earned through the strategic planning and execution of some of the most dangerous hunting games in human history. Even Caesar himself would bow down to her if he knew what she had accomplished. She didn't care about the ethics of human rights; these people were merely pawns in a game for the elite to use at their whim. If governments could send young men and women to die in foreign lands, why couldn't she?

Margaret Bowers, recognized by *People* magazine as one of the wealthiest entrepreneurs in the country, co-founded EXIO Systems, the leading cybersecurity firm in America, nearly thirty-six years ago with her now ex-husband, Howard Townsend.

Howard and Margaret were matched by their families early in life to preserve their wealthy bloodlines. Combining their families' vast fortunes, they were expected to become one of America's top power couples.

Utilizing their wealth and connections, the couple soon crafted a business plan that, at the time, seemed outlandish and ill-conceived, but ultimately positioned them among the top fifty wealthiest people in the world.

Margaret was first introduced to the "Internet of Things" as a young girl in high school at a technology fair sponsored by the United States National Defense. Bob Thomas, one of the leading computer programmers at BBN, presented the capabilities of what is now known as the first computer worm. This experimental self-replicating program had no malicious intent, only designed to illustrate a mobile application's working principle.

The worm gained access via ARPANET, essentially the first internet, copying itself to remote systems, where the message, "I'm the creeper, catch me if you can!" was displayed.

As part of this demonstration, Bob handed off the presentation to Ray Tomlinson, the creator of the first antivirus program, who explained how his reaper program would travel through ARPANET and delete the Creeper faster than it could replicate, thus creating the first true antivirus.

The ten-year-old Margaret was sold. Her teachers soon found that she had such a high aptitude for technology that she was pushed to attend MIT, where she obtained a master's in computer technology. Margaret's interest continued to grow as computers and the internet took hold of the world, eventually leading her and Howard to create their own antivirus software.

The first few years were challenging for the young couple. They burned through a large part of their inheritance on technology that they weren't sure could even be marketable at the time. Even so, Margaret believed in her software and was confident they would succeed with time.

It wasn't until the late 1980s and early 1990s that the average American household could begin affording computers. The need for cybersecurity became more prominent as companies like eBay, PayPal, and other tech startups began to thrive in Silicon Valley. EXIO took advantage of this growth and embedded itself in the internet community, securing contracts with the U.S. government and tech startups, further cementing its dominance in the industry.

Margaret and Howard cornered the market while secretly operating projects designed to inject viruses and bugs into the infrastructures of large companies, crippling them into submission. Just as easily, they would turn around and sell their services at a premium, demonstrating their company's power to eliminate those same bugs and viruses they had created.

It was an ingenious plan that worked for a long time—until one day they attacked a popular virtual auction site known as SimpleAuction. The website turned out to be a money-laundering front for the Russian Bratva. With the Bratva's major ties to the Russian KGB, they had every resource necessary to come after EXIO. Once the representatives from the Bratva came knocking, EXIO had no choice but to strike a deal, designing and implementing security software for all of their online projects. Since then, they were wrapped around the Bratva's fingers, increasingly folded into its organization.

EXIO aggressively bought out and crushed every competitor in the field, cornering the market in the security sector while flying under the radar of the Federal Trade Commission and the United States Department of Justice Antitrust Division for years. It wasn't until 2007 that they were finally forced to break up into five separate businesses due to a lawsuit brought against them by the U.S. government under the Sherman Act of 1890, now known as the Clayton Act of 1914.

It didn't matter, though. The Townsends amassed a fortune of \$9.7 billion and still held stakes in businesses across the country while maintaining control of the new CON-VYE Security, which remained a dominant force in the industry.

Margaret took her time sitting down, retrieving her laptop and pouring a glass of wine from the bar cart. After a long drink, she got straight to business.

"Thank you all for taking the time to be here this week. We have a lot of work ahead of us, but I am confident this year's hunt will be the biggest and most profitable yet."

The group, excluding Howard and his analyst, nodded in agreement. Margaret continued. "I know the death of Jason hit us all deeply. Never have we lost a hunter, let alone a member of this very group, but I am confident that this won't happen again. Kathy, when we last spoke, you mentioned having difficulties with our Saudi contacts. Were you able to resolve the issues?"

"Unfortunately, no. Last year's debacle and Jason's death created waves for my contact, and now they're too scared their government is onto them. I won't go into too much detail, but they're worried that another situation like last year could lead to tensions between them and the U.S. government—something the Saudis cannot afford right now. That said, I was able to coordinate with one of my contacts in Brazil, who offered us a hunting ground in and around the city of Rocinha. The area contains one of the largest and poorest favelas in Brazil, surrounded by thick and dangerous forests. My contact noted that the rise in militia presence has impacted the economic growth of the area, wreaking havoc on civilians while militias and

gangs collide in turf wars. They made it clear they cannot guarantee the safety of our hunters, and if they encounter local militias, they should run and not engage.”

Tom Washburn stood up, forcing himself into the conversation like an ill-mannered child. “If I might add something?”

Tom was short in stature, though you wouldn’t know it by the platforms he wore. He came from a wealthy family, much like the others, but his family didn’t give him the same attention they did his brother. As a young boy, he starved for attention, often finding himself in trouble, only to be saved at the last minute by his wealthy parents, who frequently donated large sums to the private schools he attended.

Born into generational wealth, his family owned stakes in the gold and silver industry, becoming one of the biggest producers in the world. As Tom grew older, he sought more for himself, sharing part ownership of the family business with his brother. The worthless prick turned out to be far less business-savvy than Tom, but regardless, he was always the family’s favorite.

As a young boy, Tom took his Daisy BB gun outside to hunt the local animals of the neighborhood. Unbeknownst to his parents, he took great pleasure in it—stalking and wounding his prey only to torture them in the end.

Tom never fully understood what was wrong with him. Looking through the lens of the world, he knew he was doing wrong, but in his twisted, delusional mind, he didn’t feel like he was doing anything bad; he was simply fulfilling some sort of need, akin to the feeling a man has when he sees a beautiful woman. Why he enjoyed it, he never truly grasped until he was a teenager. At sixteen, when he made a pass at one of the family’s maids and she refused him, he pushed her down the large central staircase, killing her in the process. Thankfully for the family, she was illegally working in the United States, so when his parents found out what had happened, they buried her body on their hundred-acre property and never spoke of it again, providing Tom with a comfort that fed his delusions, a comfort that would manifest as he got older.



Tom spoke up, “Margaret, I know we talked about this briefly, but I wanted to bring it up again. After what happened last year, I really think we need to add something exciting—something to help our partners forget about Jason’s death.”

Katherine interrupted him. “Margaret told me about this, and I don’t think now is the right time for changes. We need to double down on the existing formula and show our partners we have everything under control.”

“I beg to differ,” Tom said. “We need to ensure our investors stay engaged. With last year’s debacle, we look like we don’t have things under control. The only way to change the narrative is to provide a new, exciting one to take its place.”

Margaret replied, “Kathy, it’s fine. I want us all to discuss this as a viable addition. I agree with both sides of the argument, but I think we should put it to a vote. Tom, go ahead and explain your idea to the group.”

Tom side-eyed Kathy and smiled at his victory. “Okay. So, what if we added one more target to the hunt? We could bring in our most talented hunters, three of them instead of two, and have them compete.”

In the background, Francis and Howard made eye contact, Howard lifting his left eyebrow in intrigue. Francis pulled out a sticky note, wrote something on it, and placed it on the table next to Howard. Howard glanced at it briefly before crumpling it up.

Margaret spoke again. “So, theoretically, if we did this, what’s stopping the targets from teaming up and fighting back? The additional variables do create more concern or room for error, don’t you think?”

Tom looked around the room. “Sure, it’s possible—more probable than not—but under the right circumstances, I think we can control the targets’ decisions, influencing them not to work together. We lock them in a room together for one to three weeks, adding subtle forms of torture that break them down emotionally and physically. I know this goes against our usual approach of keeping them strong and energized to ensure fairness, but this time we want them irritable and unable to cooperate.”

Tom surveyed the quiet room trying to read the faces of those around him, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Hmm,” Margaret mused. “I’m not opposed to it. I think something new and exciting would help our partners forget about last year and reassure them that we have this under control. What do you all think?”

“I like it,” Howard said abruptly. “I say we take it to a vote.”

Tom was surprised; he thought it would take much more convincing to get Howard on board. Howard had shown little interest in this venture over the last six years, so Tom figured that aside from Kathy, he would be the biggest hurdle. Margaret looked around the room, noticing the group shaking their heads in agreement to vote. With a quick and simple process, she called names for a vote.

“Tom?” Margaret said. “Yay.” “Katherine?” “Nay,” she replied, clearly annoyed. “Steve?” Steve glanced at Katherine for direction before looking back at Margaret. “Nay.”

Tom shot Steve a disdainful look, knowing he was only following Kathy because of his backroom interest in her. Margaret then turned to Howard and Francis. “Howard, I assume you two are on the same page?” “Yay,” he said. “And I say yay as well,” Margaret added. “It’s settled. Steve, please select a second target from the Hunt List.”

Howard interjected before Steve could respond. “If you don’t mind, I think I actually have someone we can use. Margaret, you remember our little discussion from last week about our little problem?”

Margaret paused for a moment, adjusting herself on her chair and crossing her leg over the other. “Ah, yes. But if I recall, you had a plan already in place for that, didn’t you?”

“That’s still correct. However, I believe we can knock out two birds with one stone. Jason’s brother, Joseph, has hired Radial Security Associates for his executive protection and plans to go to Atlanta next month. I think he’s still investigating them in some ill conceived connection he made to Jason’s disappearance.”

“That man is insufferable,” Margaret said, tapping her fingers on the table in frustration.

Howard continued, “With a little effort, I think we can work this in a way that gets him off our backs while also dealing with that contractor that’s

been sniffing around.”

Margaret pondered this, feeling apprehensive for a moment. “If you think we can pull it off, I’m willing to hear more.”

“Great. Give us the night, and we can discuss it with everyone tomorrow morning.”

“Perfect. Steve, please get us a backup candidate just in case.” Steve nodded.

Howard pressed on, “With these changes, do you think it’s best to allow Tom to hunt this year? I’m sure Tex would leap at the chance to compete with Alexander and Daniel.”

“What the hell?” Tom exclaimed, shaking his head in disbelief. “This is my year! You can’t just take me out of it.”

Howard replied, “To be fair, Tom, you lack the experience for this one. Given the drastic changes and last year’s fiasco, I think we should have Tex, Alexander, and Daniel hunt. At least we can sleep at night knowing they’ll handle it. We need a guaranteed win, and we can’t afford another loss.”

Tom was flabbergasted, raising his cracking voice in frustration like a child that wasn’t getting his way as he turned to Margaret. “And by ‘loss,’ you mean I’d get killed or let the targets escape? What makes you think I’m going to die? I have plenty of hunting experience! I find it absolutely offensive that he thinks I’m inherently less capable just because I wasn’t in the military. This is bullshit, Margaret!”

Margaret set her wine glass down to speak. “Howard, it’s fine. The waiting list exists for a reason; Tom is more than capable. I have faith in him and his abilities. And regardless, we will have two other seasoned hunters there. There’s no way we could repeat last year.”

Howard responded, “I disagree. If we’re going to do this right, we need qualified hunters out there. Our partners will demand we produce a quality product.”

“Howard, it’s final,” Margaret snapped.

Howard clenched his jaw in frustration. He was used to Margaret overpowering him. She had done so throughout their marriage, and even now, she maintained that control over him. He was sick of it. He was sick of

her and sick of this organization. He needed to get out.

The dynamic between the couple was an odd one, often making the group uncomfortable. Once married, they now coexisted, forever intertwined in the businesses they created, knowing they were stronger together than apart. This created a toxic environment that often spilled over into the group, causing internal conflict and “look at me” syndrome.

Seventeen years ago, before things began to deteriorate between them, they founded what is known today as The Most Dangerous Game. The idea emerged when they discovered that one of their directors in R&D was selling company documents related to a program that would revolutionize machine learning in the security sector. Sickened by the betrayal, they concluded that the only logical way to eliminate a tumor was to kill it. He knew too much, and if his knowledge got out or if he worked for a competitor, it would jeopardize their growth and dominance in the security sector.

Margaret soon reached out to her contact in the Russian Bratva, who referred her to an assassin specializing in hunting down those who tried to leave the brotherhood without permission.

By the time Margaret contracted the assassin, the man had grown suspicious of being investigated for the leaks, so he resigned and fled to Mexico, planning to change his name and move his money to a non-extradition country. Little did he know, Margaret and Howard’s assassin had tracked him all the way to Mexico City. One night, while leaving a nightclub, he was lured into an alley and mugged.

The local police found him the next day with five stab wounds to his abdomen and a slit throat. An autopsy revealed his blood alcohol level was well over the legal limit. Not uncommon for a wealthy foreigner in Mexico City, the police classified it as a simple mugging gone wrong.

Margaret found a thrill in it all and one day devised a sinister idea, something she knew all her friends would be interested in: high-stakes betting around the concept of hunting the most dangerous game in the world.

## Two.



Over the years, Steve Hassel compiled a list of potential targets for the hunts. Men and women from various backgrounds, many suffering from specific drug and alcohol dependencies who would less likely be missed upon any disappearance. His list included fact sheets on each individual's height, weight, physical condition, and overall mental fortitude.

There was one rule Steve always followed when selecting a target or adding a new candidate to his extensive list. Ironically, the rule derived from one of his favorite childhood short stories, *The Most Dangerous Game*. "The ideal candidate must possess courage, cunning, and, above all, the ability to reason." A quote from the very book he idolized. This common denominator led him to those trained to kill—individuals who had served in military groups around the world. This ensured the hunt's natural intrigue and established their operation as the biggest high-stakes betting game in the world. They could have easily targeted homeless people, the mentally ill, or individuals from third-world countries with no names or rights, but where would be the thrill in that? It would be too simple and would eventually lose its appeal. Only those who could fight back were selected for this elite hunt, and only those capable of killing would be allowed to hunt.

As the final days approached, much of the logistical work for phases one and two of the hunt were complete. Steam rose from coffee cups around the table while some group members munched on bagels and chopped fruit prepared fresh by the properties house chef. Kathy and Steve had stayed up late together working on a PowerPoint overview of the two targets, so their tiredness was evident in their eyes and faces.

Kathy stood at the front of the large table, a smile on her face as she addressed the group. "Thanks to Steve for staying up late with me last night, we've compiled the necessary data on our two candidates and input that data into the website." She smiled at him teasingly before continuing. "Our first target, Christopher Jennings, also known as Target Twenty-Two, currently resides in Durango, Colorado, in a small cabin just outside the city limits. He is employed by the local park ranger's office as a mountain tour guide but generally keeps to himself apart from his job and visits to the local bar."

Kathy clicked the remote for a new slide. "Christopher Jennings served in Force Reconnaissance with the United States Marines for five years before being medically discharged after sustaining third-degree burns on about forty-five percent of his body. He has one child, Madelyn, who lives with her mother and grandparents in Orlando, Florida. Christopher lives alone, has no friends or close family, and based on the information we've gathered, he has an alcohol dependency and is living with acute PTSD and borderline personality disorder, making him a ticking time bomb." She clicked the remote again. "The data shown here is Christopher's medical assessments over the years, including before and after the military. His physiological profile, body composition measurements, fitness tests, injury records, and deployment information is all shown here to better assess his abilities."

Kathy clicked the remote again and continued. "Next, thanks to Howard and Francis, we have a second target: Bradley Carter, Target Twenty-Three. Bradley resides in Atlanta, Georgia. He works with Radial Security Services on a five-man PSD team, providing executive and diplomatic protection. He served in the Army with Eleven Bravo for four years before dropping off the radar after acquiring his DD214. The trail picks back up four years later

when he checked himself into a rehab facility, funded by an anonymous donor. Shortly after, he began working at Radial Security and now lives in corporate housing on company property. Unfortunately, we weren't able to gather any data on medical records after his time in the military besides his time in rehab, but nerveless, we believe he is in fact a perfect candidate for this year's hunt."

"This is great, thank you, Kathy," Margaret said.

Kathy continued, "I do have concerns about how we plan to get Bradley though. All indications suggest he rarely leaves the property. He has no close family, no wife or girlfriend, and his only friends are those he works with."

Howard interjected serendipitously, "We have a plan in motion that will get us what we need. It will knock out two noisy birds with one stone."

Kathy cocked her head to the side. "And what plan is this?"

"This, unfortunately, is going to be beyond your purview. Margaret and I have some personal business that will fortunately be cleared up in one go, something we can't divulge at this time. Just assume it's all for the best, and we will get our man without issue."

Kathy knew better than to question Howard or Margaret. She nodded her head like a good soldier and continued the presentation, hoping whatever they were planning would work out in the end.

## Three.



On March third, a website on the dark web notoriously named, The Most Dangerous Game, went live for the first time in a year. Hundreds of eager visitors, who had been waiting anxiously for weeks, rushed to log in and check this year's odds for the hunt.

Over the years, the program became increasingly sophisticated as its operations expanded. Eventually, the big-game hunting project grew too large for just Margaret and Howard to manage alone, so they brought in Steve, Kathy, Jason, Tom, and, more recently, Francis to help develop the project into what it was today.

From the start of her career, Margaret recognized the endless opportunities the internet offered—layers that could coexist, unknown to most of the consumer market. She just had to wait for someone to build it.

Finally, in 2000, just after the dot-com bubble burst, Margaret's vision became a reality when a University of Edinburgh student named Ian Clarke released his concept called The Free-net.

While working on a thesis project, Clarke aimed to create a "Distributed Decentralized Information Storage and Retrieval System" designed to facilitate anonymous communication and file sharing online. Clarke



succeeded, and soon the theory of a decentralized private net became a passion project for many tech enthusiasts around the world, each developing their own versions of Free-net.

The groundwork that Clarke established became the foundation for the Tor Project, which launched in 2002 and was released as a browser in 2008. With Tor, users could browse the internet completely anonymously and explore sites deemed as part of the “dark web.”

In 2011, the Townsends used this technology to communicate with their assassin for hire. The duo leveraged the principles of these projects to develop some of the most impenetrable security systems ever created, while simultaneously and unknowingly contributing to the development of what is now known as the eight layers of the internet.

Their private assassin, referred to them by the Bratva, was Alexander Sidorov, who was located using a secret server on the dark web. Shortly after accepting their job, he was transferred a total of two hundred thousand in US dollars via bitcoin, a new type of digital currency operating on a decentralized network using blockchain technology. While the average person at the time couldn’t comprehend its uses, Margaret understood its potential.

Just two years later, the duo established a website accessible only through Secure Socket Shells, which was not reachable by anyone on the planet unless they had a direct IP connection. This section of the dark web was known as Level 5, “The Charter Web.”

The Charter Web had two sections: one accessed through Tor, which was already extremely anonymous and secure, and the second known as the Closed Shell System. The Shell Systems were notorious for housing serious and illicit activities, including hardcore pornography, guns, drugs, experimental hardware information like Gadolinium Gallium Garnet Quantum Electronic Processors, and supercomputers. More sinister subjects, such as the “Law of 13,” human experiments, and human trafficking, also proliferated in this layer of the internet. By using this part of the dark web, they remained absolutely untouchable; thus, The Most Dangerous Game was created and became the largest underground betting scheme in the

world.

Four.



Radial Security Associates

Atlanta, Georgia

As Wesley Jacobs stepped through the main entrance of Radial Security Associates, he couldn't help but admire the large statue centerpiece in the room. It was a beautifully crafted depiction of the raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi from World War II, serving as a powerful statement of what Radial stood for.

The clicking of keys echoed in the lobby from the receptionist at the front desk, while in the waiting area, two men chatted over coffee as they waited for their host to arrive.

Jennifer, Wesley's wife, had a birthday coming up, so this morning, before heading to work, he stopped at the mall to pick up a present for her. She always insisted that he didn't need to buy her gifts and that their family was the only present she needed, but in his eyes, she deserved it. Jennifer

was the backbone of their family, and there was nothing he could ever do to repay her for her sacrifices.

Things had been good in Wesley's life since leaving combat. A few years back, while working for Academi, a private military company, he had the pleasure of meeting Lee Walker, who had just started a private military company called Radial Security Associates.

Lee had proudly served in the United States Navy for more than twenty-one years before retiring with full benefits, transforming the once small company into what he liked to jokingly call an empire.

The day Wesley's daughters were born was the same day Wesley decided to leave government contractor work. When he looked into their bright blue eyes, he knew it was time for the next generation to take up the fight. He had a new purpose in life: to be the sole protector of those little girls.

At a loss for what to do with his life and determined not to be stuck in an office, he bounced from job to job, often feeling miserable just weeks in.

That's when a friend referred him back to Lee and Radial Security.

At first, Wesley was apprehensive, as his goal was to avoid leaving the country again. But after Lee flew Wesley and his family out to Atlanta, Georgia to discuss the job opportunity and how he could balance work and family life, he was sold.

One month later, after relocating his family, Wesley began working full-time with Radial. His new role was as a PSD (Personal Security Detachment), and although the work wasn't as exhilarating as his previous career, it was fulfilling enough and gave him a sense of purpose outside of family life. Now, after a recent promotion to team leader, he had returned to the level of leadership he once held while working government contracts overseas.

A few months back, Radial secured a no-end contract with a high-profile real estate businessman from New York. With campuses in both New York and Atlanta, Wesley's team often worked as an executive protection detail, helping with transportation while the businessman visited Atlanta.

Wesley was already running late due to bad traffic. As he passed through the main lobby, scanning his key-card at the security station, he saw Lee standing at the top of the stairs on the second level, waving him over. Wes

smiled and began climbing the stairs.

“Wesley,” Lee said, reaching out for a fist bump.

“What’s up, boss man? What are you doing out here mingling with us lowly knuckle draggers?”

With a grin, Lee punched him in the shoulder. “You know I need to check in on you”—he lifted his fingers in the air to make air quotes—“knuckle draggers here and there. That and this Albury guy is talking about contracting us to manage all their corporate security at both main offices, so we have a brief meeting later this evening to discuss.”

“Yeah, I remember Phil mentioning it. Sounds like a solid idea to expand.”

“Well, you know how it is out there. Just trying to stay competitive. It seems like every year Constellis is buying out another security company. I’m still getting calls from them about a buyout. Drives me nuts.”

“Well, we do good work, and it shows in how we operate. That, and you’re a master salesman,” Wesley joked.

“Exactly! See, you get it.” Lee smiled and began walking beside him, knowing he had somewhere to be. He continued, “So, it’s been a while. How’s the family?”

“They’re great, man. Jennifer and I are planning a long, much-needed vacation with the girls. We just need to find the right time.”

“Well, just let Phil know the dates. I’ll make sure you get the time off you need. I know it’s tough now that you’re TL and you don’t want to leave your guys, but seriously, we can find coverage for you, its not the end of the world if you take some real days off without being on call.”

“Ten-four, brother. I appreciate it. Once we have a plan, I’ll let you know.”

After a few more steps, Lee slowed down, still squeezing Wesley’s shoulder. Wesley could tell he wanted to say something but was hesitant. “What’s up?” he asked, stopping to look at him.

“That obvious, huh?” Lee replied.

“Just a little.”

“Well, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Yeah, okay. What’s going on?”

“Not here. Let’s step into this conference room for a moment.” Lee

motioned to a room on the right and opened the door. He moved across the room to the back wall and sat down, his expression grim.

Wesley sensed that whatever Lee had to say wouldn't be good. He rarely saw Lee these days now that Radial had grown so much, and now he realized there was a reason he ran into Lee this morning—it wasn't just his meeting with Mr. Albury.

"You're not going to like this so just listen to me and don't speak ... It's Bradley, your number two. We may need to cut him lose."

Wesley's stomach dropped. It felt like a kick in the gut, and his body ignited with anxiety. Brad was one of his best friends; he couldn't fathom losing him as his number two on the team.

Lee added, "I know Bradley is a good guy, and I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, but damn, Wes, it's not looking good for him."

For the first time, still dumbfounded, Wes spoke. "What did he do?"

Lee took a deep breath. "Last night, Bradley was seen in the office rummaging through paperwork and going through one of the desktop computers."

"Last night? He and the guys were at the bar on Canal Street. Are you sure it was him?"

"Yeah, he must have come here afterward when most of us were out. From what IT could tell me, he plugged in a flash drive to one of the computers that force copied a large amount of internal data. The system couldn't determine exactly what was copied, and it didn't leave any trace, so we're not one hundred percent sure. But, goddamn, Wesley, it's not hard to figure out what he was doing. I'm half-prepared to yank him from this operation now."

Wesley rubbed his forehead and let out a disappointed sigh. "Yeah, this doesn't look good. Has anyone spoken to him?"

"No. I'm coming to you now because he's your guy; you brought him here. I need you to look into this and find out what's going on. My biggest concern now is whether or not this is an isolated incident or if he has done this before. That and who the hell is he doing this for. There's no way he's just doing it for himself."

“Right ... I mean, anything is possible, but the guy loves this job. I just can’t see him doing anything to compromise it. There’s got to be a reason.”

“Well, I hope you’re right. Wesley, if any of our clandestine activities or operations were to get out, it could put many of Radial’s teams at risk. The U.S. could pull our clearance and all our contracts—this could destroy the company.”

“No, I agree. I’ll talk to him and let you know what I find.”

“Good.” Lee stood up. “Let’s get you to prep; the analysts are going to have a fit if you’re late again.”

“Yes, sir.” Wesley followed Lee’s lead, standing up and shaking his hand.

## Five.



Minutes later, Wesley stopped just outside of the meeting room and adjusted his suit and tie. He ran his hands through his long, curled hair and wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes for a moment, resting his hand on the doorknob to regain his composure. He still couldn't believe what Lee had told him about Brad, his best friend. It didn't make sense. Why would Brad download and steal company data?

As he stepped inside, all eyes flicked to him and then back to the two operations analysts at the front of the room. Wesley felt the tension as he walked past them, their gazes piercing through him. He grabbed a manila folder from the table and scanned the room for his seat. In the right corner, his band of knuckleheads sat, trying to contain their laughter at his late entrance and the annoyance of the ops analysts. He shot them a warning look and a playful grin before settling into a chair and opening the folder.

One of the operations analysts stood up, visibly annoyed, directing his ire at Wesley before rolling his eyes. Not getting a reaction, the analyst moved on, clicking a remote to turn on the TV at the far wall. A map appeared, bright lines tracing the roads to various marked destinations.

"Now that we're all here and ready to go, please pull sheet number three



from the packet in front of you,” Francis, the analyst, said in a weak voice.

At that moment, Phil walked in. As the VP of U.S. operations for Radial, Phil didn’t typically sit in on these meetings, but Wesley knew that any operation involving Mr. Joseph Albury was significant, especially with the existing proposal that Lee and Phil had on the table for contracted Corporate Security at both of Albury Holdings’ corporate offices.

Wesley chuckled as he saw the analyst’s annoyed expression shift to wide-eyed surprise upon realizing who had entered. Phil scanned the room, locking onto a seat. Once he was settled, the analyst resumed speaking.

“Our principal’s executive assistant has shared the details and appointment lists for the day. We have conducted our threat assessment, determining this to be a level four operation.”

Level five indicated the lowest threat, with one being the most dangerous. Although this operation included three teams—Bravo and Charlie each having their own team leaders—Wesley, as a senior team lead, meant all three groups would report to him on the chain of command.

“On the screen and in your printouts, you’ll see the scheduled route and all our stops. As usual, your tablets will have three preloaded routes along with an emergency route to return home in case of an immediate threat. Green is your primary route, yellow is secondary, and red is your fast route home.”

The second operations analyst spoke up. “The three-vehicle motorcade will arrive at Albury Holdings’ sister office to pick up their CFO, Mary Langstein. While Alpha and Charlie’s teams cover perimeter security, each team leader will meet the CFO out front and escort her to the Bravo vehicle. After pickup, you’ll head to the airport to collect Joseph Albury, also known to you as Blackjack.”

Cameron Armstead, the TL for Bravo team, raised his hand. “This seems like a lot for a level four, don’t you think? It seems like every time we cover this guy, he adds more needs despite our RTVA—Risk, Threat, and Vulnerability Assessment.”

“That’s a great question. While we agree that, based on our Risk, Threat, and Vulnerability Assessment, a three-vehicle motorcade isn’t necessary,

we have to consider the additional context. Blackjack has expressed serious safety concerns, mentioning multiple threats to his life over the past few months. However, he hasn't provided specifics about who is behind these threats or what they entail.

"Furthermore, our Radial Protective Security Detail teams in the north have reported some concerning behavior from Blackjack. They've noted that he's been engaging in unusual late-night meetings and phone calls, including trips to his now presumed deceased brother's home. For instance, a few months ago, he asked Paul, his PSD Team Leader, to drive him to Union Station for a clandestine meeting in the dead of night. Paul reported that Joseph appeared extremely stressed and terrified, suggesting he's under significant pressure from something or someone. Although he seemed relieved upon returning, it was clear he was still deeply shaken.

"Given the cutthroat nature of the real estate market, we suspect these issues may be related to a problematic deal or something even more serious. However, it's difficult to pinpoint the exact cause without more information."

Phil stood up, now fully engaged with the room. "I completely understand your concerns. I find it troubling as well and recognize the limitations this may create for you. But regardless, we are Radial men, and we adapt and overcome. I have faith in all of you and your capabilities."

He paused, allowing his words to sink in. "We need to approach this with the mindset that even the smallest detail could be crucial. Use your instincts and training. TLs, I want you all to ensure your team remains vigilant; they should anticipate the unexpected. Keep your eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary during the perimeter checks. Remember, it's not just about what we know—it's about what we're prepared to handle."

Phil continued, "If the principal isn't sharing the full picture, it's up to us to fill in those gaps. This is no different than anything you have dealt with across the wire overseas. Let's leverage our experience and communicate closely. If something doesn't sit right, speak up. We'll adapt our strategy on the fly if needed. Remember, we're not just protecting individuals; we're safeguarding the integrity of the entire operation, including the company

itself.”

As the room settled into focused silence, Phil nodded appreciatively at the team then looked towards Wesley to take command. Wesley cleared his throat, breaking the tension. “Alpha and Charlie teams will have direct radio contact with Bravo. If there’s any sign of trouble, I want a quick heads-up, no hesitations. Drivers, you’ll need to assess the situation quickly and decide whether to proceed or retreat to a safer location. I will command all route options as a unit. TLs, you’re empowered to make decisions in the moment. Trust your judgment and the intel you have. If you feel the pickup or route isn’t safe, notify me immediately. We’ll re-evaluate on the spot.

“We have contingencies in place. Each of you should familiarize yourselves with both the primary and secondary paths. If there’s any indication of trouble on the main route, we pivot immediately. Hopefully, we won’t need to move to red route. Communication must flow both ways. If something looks suspicious, I expect to hear about it instantly. Don’t forget we have a rapid response unit that can be mobilized quickly. This is a fluid operation, and we need to be ready for anything.”

As the atmosphere shifted to one of determination, Wes concluded, “I appreciate your input and concerns, team. Stay sharp, stay focused, and let’s execute this operation flawlessly. Remember, we’re not just a team; we’re a family, and we’ve got each other’s backs no matter what.”

## Six.



An hour later, all the teams dispersed, with about forty-five minutes to prep, fuel the trucks, and handle any personal business.

As Wesley made his way down to the garages, his phone vibrated in his pocket. A call from Jennifer. He swiped the screen and raised the phone to his ear. “Hey, darling! How are you?”

Two little voices shouted from the other end. “Hi, Daddy!”

Wesley laughed, realizing the girls must have gotten hold of Jennifer’s phone again. He smiled and shifted his tone to match their energy. “Hi, pumpkins! Are you missing me already?”

“Yes! How are you, Daddy?” Olivia chimed in.

“I’m fantastic! But I miss you both so, so, so much.”

“I miss you, Daddy!” they replied in unison.

His heart melted. “Now listen, I won’t be home tonight before you go to sleep, so remember, bedtime is at eight p.m. sharp. Don’t give your mommy a hard time just because I’m not there.”

The twins giggled in response. “Okay!”

Olivia spoke up again, “Will you wake us up when you get home so I know you’re okay?”

Ouch. That stung. Even at almost six years old, they understood the dangers of his job.

“Yes, of course, I will. I love you both soooo much.”

“I love you too, Daddy,” they echoed.

“Now hand Mommy the phone, please.”

There was a crackle, a thud, and then Jennifer was on the line. “Wesley.”

“Hi, sweetheart. I see the girls got your phone again.”

With a weary chuckle, she replied, “I honestly don’t know how they do it sometimes.”

“They’re too smart for their own good.”

“Absolutely,” she noted, laughing.

Wesley talked with Jennifer for a few more minutes, discussing when he’d be home, her day, and their weekend plans since he had three days off from work coming up.

He felt genuinely happy. After everything he’d been through, he never thought he’d be here—living this life. His girls made him feel whole, grounding him. Each year, he felt his hardened shell dissipate, moving further away from the warrior he once was. As much as he loved his evolving self, he still wondered if that instinct to fight lingered deep within him and if it would ever resurface. He hoped not.

Twenty minutes later, Wesley rummaged through his locker for the gear he needed. He checked his Glock 22, ensuring the slide moved smoothly before holstering it. Looking around the garage, he saw Tatum loading the truck with rifles while Jackson and Brad stood watching.

Wes walked over and joined them, noticing they were gathered in front of the Suburban.

“Eyyy, TL! How’s it hanging, brotha?” Tatum, his newest team member, called out.

“What’s up, Tater-Tot?” Wesley grinned.

“Oh, come on, how long are you guys going to call me that? I don’t consent!”

“How about Tater-Puff?” Brad teased, slapping his back.

“Or maybe Tater-Nutt?” Jackson chimed in, continuing the banter.

“Ha-ha, you’re all so damn funny.”

Brad squeezed Tatum’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Tater. We were all new guys once. It’s just part of becoming a man.”

“I became a man back in the sandbox! You guys are just having too much fun; it’s been eight months already. I’m not even new anymore,” Tatum shot back, laughing.

As the team laughed, Brad turned toward Wesley, stepping away from the group. “Hey, man, we have a few minutes. Can we talk about something?”

Wesley sensed the weight behind Brad’s request. Something wasn’t right. “What’s going on, Brad?”

Brad looked down, clearly uneasy. “I need to talk to you about something important.”

Wes grabbed Bradley’s shoulder, and they began walking toward the end of the loading bay, exiting through the large garage doors. The mid-morning sun was hot, and inside their suits, sweat was already beginning to accumulate. Wes could sense the hesitation in Brad’s demeanor as they moved. The man had some weight on his shoulders.

Finally, when they were far enough from any listening ears, Brad spoke, “I’m in a bad place right now, and I hate to do this, but I need help.”

Wesley’s gut tightened, he knew this was coming. Just by Brad’s body language, he could tell this wasn’t going to be good at all. “What’s the problem?”

“A few weeks ago, I was approached by a woman who claimed to be with the FBI. She somehow manipulated me and . . . well, last night, I did something stupid.”

“What did you do?” Wesley asked, impatience creeping into his voice.

“The woman gave me an external drive. I plugged it into one of the analyst’s computers and it copied a bunch of internal data.”

Wesley’s anger surged. “What the hell, Brad?”

“I know, I know! I was going to tell you, but this is the federal government! What was I supposed to do?”

Wesley’s face flushed with rage as he confronted Brad. “You should have told your TL! You don’t work for the FBI; you work for us! What were you

thinking?”

“Damn it, I know I messed up,” Brad replied, his voice strained with anxiety.

“Yeah, you did! You could’ve put everyone at Radial in danger.”

“I realize that now, but I have no idea what to do.”

Wesley took a deep breath, trying to calm the storm brewing inside him. He ran a hand through his hair, attempting to process the magnitude of Brad’s actions. “Okay, did she establish any bona fides? How do you know she’s really with the FBI?”

“I’m confident she is. I’ve been talking with her for a few weeks now. When she finally came clean with me, I realized she had been probing me for a while, working to gain my trust. Remember that chick at Liam Fitzpatrick’s a few weeks ago?”

“Her?” Wesley asked, shocked. The memory of the mysterious woman flashed through his mind, and his suspicions began to solidify.

“Yeah, dude, she’s had been bumping me for weeks before even that,” Brad admitted, his eyes downcast, clearly grappling with the implications.

Wesley took a step back, deep in thought, weighing the potential fallout. “You really think she’s legitimate? This could be a setup.”

Brad nodded quickly. “I planned to talk to Lee about it, but she warned me that anyone could be in on her investigation. For my safety, she said to keep quiet about her affiliation to the FBI.”

“But what if she’s not? What if this is all part of a larger operation? We can’t afford any leaks, Brad. Not now.” Wesley’s voice was steady but filled with urgency. “We need to make a plan. If she’s playing both sides, we’re in deeper trouble than we realize.”

Brad swallowed hard, realizing the gravity of his choices. “So what do we do next?”

Wesley took another breath, his mind racing. “First, where is the drive now?”

Brad pulled a small blue external drive from his back pocket, lifting it for Wesley to see. Wesley snatched it and tucked it away.

“I need you to cease any communication with her immediately.”

"I have. I was supposed to rendezvous with her last night and give her the device, but I got cold feet."

"I'm glad you did," Wes responded. "What was she looking for?"

"She thinks Radial is involved in trafficking weapons, or that someone within the company is using our resources for it."

The absurdity of Brad's words sickened him. "That's a tall order. I find it hard to believe Lee or the system admins wouldn't know about this."

"That's what I said, but she was adamant. Honestly, I thought I was doing the right thing, but now I feel played."

Wesley considered Brad's predicament. Instead of responding, he pulled out his phone and dialed Lee's number.

"Wait, you're not going to ..." Brad started.

Wes held a finger to his lips, silencing him. Lee answered on the second ring.

"Lee, I have Brad with me. Can you talk?"

"Yes. Hold."

Brad looked at Wes confused and whispered. "Does he already know?"

Wes shook his head yes, slowly, making intense eye contact.

Moments later, Lee's voice was on the line. "I've encrypted the call. Go ahead."

"Brad has something important to discuss. You're not going to like it, but just hear him out."

"Go for it."

Brad recounted the past few weeks, sparing no details. Wesley could sense Lee's anger building through the silence.

"What in the actual fuck, Brad? You let a federal government agent gain access to our internal network? You were so willing to just give away confidential information to someone we don't know anything about without even telling me? Are you fucking kidding me?"

It was clear Lee was about to blow a gasket. Wesley interjected before Brad could be fired on the spot. "Lee, I retrieved the drive from Brad. He hasn't handed it over yet and thus far, anything the agent has or knows is just speculation. As bad as it is, he's doing the right thing by telling us."



A tense silence hung in the air. “Agreed. Wes, take the drive and lock it in your locker. I’ll retrieve it after you leave. But when you return, I need both of you in my office. Brad, cease all communication with that agent until I say otherwise.”

“Ten-four, boss,” Brad replied.

The call ended, and Wesley turned to Brad with a half-smile. “That actually went pretty well.”

“You thought that went well? What are you smoking, dude?”

“You’re going to be fine. We’ll figure it out. Easy peasy. You know I’ve got your back, bro.”

## Seven.



Forty-five minutes later, the three-vehicle motorcade arrived at the Albury Holdings sister office. Wesley had sidelined the situation with Brad for now, but the distraction lingered in his mind. *What were you thinking, Brad?* he mused.

Getting back into work mode, he glanced at the navigation system engaging the team radio. “Alpha Actual to all call signs. We’ve just received word that the VIP will be stepping out upon arrival. I want Bravo One and Charlie One on the ground in front of the vehicles to greet her. Over.”

Both team leaders quickly responded.

“Bravo One, good copy.”

“Charlie One, good copy, boss.”

As the motorcade came to a halt, security contractors remained in their vehicles, scanning their sectors through the tinted windows.

Moments later, a middle-aged woman stepped out of the building in a blue suit jacket and black slacks, her high heels clicking against the pavement. Following her was a well-dressed man. Wesley, along with Bravo One and Charlie One, exited their vehicles and approached their principal.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Langstein. My name is Wesley Jacobs; I’m the

team lead for today's protection detail. This is Cameron Armstead and Caleb Dotson."

"Gentlemen, it's a pleasure to meet you," Mrs. Langstein replied, gesturing to the man beside her. "This is Jordan Barringer. He's the Senior Vice President of Acquisitions with Albury Holdings."

Jordan stepped forward, locking eyes with Wesley. "Mr. Jacobs, Mrs. Langstein and Joseph asked that I join the trip today. I know this wasn't part of the original plan, but do you have any reservations about this?"

Wesley considered for a moment. The Suburban was designed for multiple passengers, but technically this change wasn't cleared by the operations team. He didn't appreciate last-minute alterations, but as the senior member of the detail, he needed to make the call. *It's your job to keep them happy*, he thought to himself.

"No reservations, sir. You're welcome to join Mary in the Limo." He pointed to the blacked-out vehicle.

"L-Limo?" Mary asked, peering past the men at the imposing SUV.

"Yes, ma'am, just a term we use for the vehicle our VIPs sit in."

"V-I-P?"

Jordan turned to explain to Mary. "It's just universal terminology used in their type of work."

Mary nodded, looking back at Wesley in embarrassment. "Please forgive me, I've never had to do anything like this before."

"Completely understandable, ma'am. If you have any questions or concerns at any point, just ask. I'm here to help."

"Thank you," she replied.

Jordan stepped forward again. "I'm ready to go if everyone else is."

The group shook their heads. "Ten-four. Let's head out." Wesley keyed his mic. "Alpha One to all call signs. Principals are on the move."

Forty-five minutes later, the motorcade arrived at Hartsfield International Airport, ushered through a rear private gate behind a small pickup truck. Joseph Albury was expected within ten minutes, so both Alpha and Charlie vehicles remained in place, parallel to Bravo VIC.

After sitting in silence for nearly ten minutes, Wesley spotted the Cessna

Citation X taxiing down the tarmac. He felt a wave of relief wash over him; he needed the distraction.

“Alpha Actual to all call signs. I have Blackjack in my visual at your three o’clock, moving down the tarmac. Charlie One, I need two of your guys static behind the vehicles at each point. Alpha Two and Three will do the same at the front of the motorcade. I need a full Bravo team, less Bravo Three, to join us on the tarmac while the VIPs meet with Blackjack.”

He waited for the team leaders to relay his commands before hearing their confirmations.

Once the plane stopped, the PSD contractors exited their vehicles, forming a diamond shape around their VIPs, ensuring enough space for comfort. They halted ten feet from the plane, waiting for the hatch to open, revealing a set of stairs.

A tall, thin black man in a pilot’s uniform descended first, glancing back into the plane. Wesley recognized him from previous pickups.

Both Mary and Jordan smiled as CEO Joseph Albury emerged, shaking hands with the pilot before approaching the group with a welcoming grin. The group exchanged pleasantries before heading back to the motorcade, ready to embark on their busy day.

## Eight.



Five and a half hours had passed, and as the detail moved the VIPs across town to their final destination, dark clouds began to gather. Sheets of rain fell from the sky, blocking out the sun and transforming the once-clear visibility into a hazy darkness. The droplets of rain bounced off the vehicles' roofs, while thunder rumbled ominously overhead, growing louder as they drove deeper into the storm.

Wesley's extensive experience from years in the military and as a private military contractor had taught him to trust his instincts. Right now, his subconscious was on high alert, sensing something brewing. Was it just his unease about Brad, or was there a real threat to their VIPs? Either way, he felt the tension in his gut, and he didn't like it one bit.

Unbeknownst to Alpha One, the actions of the next two hours would change Wesley's life forever.

Just as the anxiety filled his mind, the all-team radio crackled to life with Charlie One's voice. "Charlie One to Alpha Actual, over."

"Go for Actual," Wesley responded.

"Alpha One, be advised, we have one vehicle trailing the motorcade, fifty feet back—a Black Ford Explorer. Charlie Four has tagged this vehicle three

separate times today.”

“What’s your assessment, Charlie One?”

“Hold.”

There was a brief pause while Charlie team discussed further. “Alpha, I think we should change course to determine if this is a bad actor.”

“Copy, Charlie One. Hold for instruction. Over.”

“Roger that, Alpha One.”

Wesley glanced at Brad, then down at his tablet, unlocking it. The device featured a proprietary mapping system built on Google Maps, allowing the Radial team to seamlessly transition to secondary and tertiary routes. He quickly reviewed the map and selected the yellow route, which automatically rerouted them to exit toward a toll plaza and a new highway.

After deciding on the new course, he switched the radio channel. “Ops Center, be advised, possible technical in close pursuit at this time. We’re routing to yellow, over.”

“Alpha One, we understand you are now evasive. Relay status when complete.”

Switching back to the intra-team radio frequency, he zoomed in and out of the map one last time for clarity.

“Alpha Actual to all drivers. We are moving to yellow route. I repeat, we are moving to yellow route. Tighten up. Break.”

Both teams acknowledged.

The motorcade closed ranks, with vehicles moving within ten feet of each other. The exit ramp to the toll plaza appeared to their right, and without signaling, the motorcade executed a synchronized maneuver, entering the ramp.

Wes allowed Charlie to monitor the Explorer’s movements before engaging. “Alpha Actual to Charlie Actual, what’s your sitrep?”

Silence filled the radio.

“Charlie? How copy?”

Finally, after a tense moment, Charlie One responded. “Alpha Actual, be advised, the Explorer has continued pursuit. It looks like they changed direction with purpose to follow. Monitoring threat ... wait ... hold one ...”

Wes couldn't decipher the next words through the crackling interference.

"Charlie, say again your last?"

"We've got two vehicles now in pursuit. One is further back, but the other is ... shit! Contact rear!"

A violent crash echoed as one vehicle slammed into another. Charlie VIC swerved, throwing the men inside around the cabin, but the driver regained control. Years of training kicked in as all drivers slammed on the gas, propelling their vehicles away from the pursuing threat.

"Charlie One, what's your sitrep?"

"They're trying to run us off the road!"

Another piercing crash rang out as metal ground against metal. The rear technical closed in on Charlie Vic. Behind them, Wesley heard tires screaming as they skidded across the pavement.

"Charlie One, I need you and your squad to push the Explorer back. Alpha and Bravo will pull ahead and get the VIPs to safety. Break."

In the midst of the chaos, a minivan that couldn't keep pace with the motorcade began to merge between Charlie VIC and the Explorer. Without hesitation, the Explorer accelerated and clipped the minivan's rear, sending it veering off to the right, where it crashed into a guardrail.

"Civilian down! I repeat, civilian down!" Charlie One's voice shattered through the radio, filled with urgency.

Wesley's heart raced. In his many years with Radial, he'd never faced a situation like this.

Charlie VIC slowed, blocking the Explorer from the front vehicles while swerving as a shield. The Explorer became more aggressive, bumping the Suburban again.

Wesley switched channels. "Ops Center! Ops Center! Charlie VIC is being targeted! Requesting immediate CASVAC; location, exit number three of yellow route. Civilian down. Charlie VIC is blocking the technical while Alpha leads Bravo VIPs to safety. Requesting immediate QRF to red route RP Foxtrot."

A deep, gravelly voice responded from the Ops Center. "Alpha One, Ops Center copies all. We have you geo-located. QRF twenty mikes out. Break."

Wesley glanced at the tablet again, then ahead at the road. He re-engaged the all-team radio. "Alpha One to team leaders, Bravo and Alpha will move to red route RP Foxtrot. Break, Break. Charlie Vic, continue to block the rear technicals. Over."

"Alpha One, are we weapons RED!" Charlie One's voice crackled through.

"No! I repeat, no weapons red. We are not clear to fire in public. Keep moving forward and continue to report. Break, Break. Bravo One, please advise QRF is twenty mikes out. Over."

"Copy, Alpha One," Bravo's team leader responded.

Bravo's leader remained calm, assuring Blackjack and the other VIPs that they were in control, but he couldn't prevent Joseph Albury from glancing back, panic etched on his face.

"What is happening? Why is the other vehicle so far behind?" he asked, his voice rising.

"Everything's a-okay. We have everything under control," Bravo One insisted.

"I don't like this. I don't like what's happening," Mary Langstein said, her anxiety palpable.

"Ma'am, I can assure you ..."

Suddenly, Bravo One and everyone in the vehicle watched in horror as Charlie VIC broke formation, moving up next to them slowly to the right. Bravo One glanced in the rear-view mirror, noticing the Explorer had backed off.

"Uhh ... Alpha One, are you seeing this?" Bravo One reported.

Just as Wesley was about to respond, he noticed the same thing. *What the hell?* he thought.

"Charlie One. What in the hell are you doing?"

Silence filled the radio.

"Charlie One, how copy?"

Then, chaos erupted. Panic filled the radio, voices overlapping in a jumble of fear and confusion. Wesley and the members of Alpha and Bravo teams, including the VIPs, watched in horror as Charlie VIC veered sharply to the right, crashing headfirst into a highway attenuator.



The impact was deafening. By the speed of the vehicle, it was evident there would be no survivors. The entire front end of the Suburban split in half, sending the engine and its many parts into the seating area where the men sat, causing an immediate explosion of hot gas and fire.

The radios went dead silent.

Wesley's mind struggled to comprehend the horror he'd just witnessed. Before he could gather his thoughts, he called out through the radio, "Charlie, are you ..." His words were cut off by a high-pitched screech that pierced their eardrums, forcing all four members of Alpha to yank them out in agony. The radios then went completely silent again.

"Boss. Radios are down. I can't connect to any channels now," Brad said, panic creeping into his voice.

Jackson, Alpha Three, turned to look out the rear window. "Uh, Boss, the Explorer is coming around to the left side, trying to get adjacent to the limo!"

Wesley turned to look back out the rear windows of the Suburban. *This is bad.* He turned to Brad and gripped his shoulder. "Brad! Cut them off!"

Recognizing the urgency, Brad tightened his grip on the wheel and yelled, "Grab onto something now!"