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*For my father, Lynn Elliott Stewart,  
who is always reading good stories and has modeled  
the kind of thoughtfulness and loyalties I hope to  
live out in my generation as well.*

## PROLOGUE

Friday, 5:40pm--PST

Former Naval Communications Outpost: Bremerton, Washington

**Lieutenant Zebulon Mordecai Dalton**, United States Army Signal Corps  
(retired), longed for a reason to stand down.

The musty Cold War bunker encasing him was no help. Its walls stood mute,

as did the aging computer console at his fingertips. Reviewing protocols, his right pointer flinched. A line of perspiration wandered downward, pooling at the tip of his forefinger and then dropping to the faded J of the sweaty, sticky keyboard.

*Insanity.*

American nuclear first-strike.

His nation had used this option once--two devices employed in desperate, quick succession. From there the tactic had been banished to the outer reaches of military and political feasibility.

But things were very different now.

Fifty-thousand Chinese troops occupied US soil--his hometown--and his orders were unmistakable.

He'd been given control. He was the one in the chair.

Humble hunt-and-peck key strokes would serve as the cause, sending his country's missiles skyward and west, out across the vast Pacific and to unsuspecting hundreds of millions. An entire arsenal of Chinese warheads would return, the immediate and irreversible effect. Mere inches and seconds separated this present moment from untold destruction of life, his own in the mix.

Dalton's headspace fluctuated from disciplined reason to barely-restrained panic; little more than an untended circus carousel spinning at a furious, increasingly nauseating, rate.

The man was desperate for a reason to stand down.

Anything.

Anything at all.

**The lieutenant froze**, hands outstretched in the same robotic pose. The cloak of mortality lay onerous, unshakable, as the ultimate no-win scenario circled overhead. No good choices to be made. At least none obvious, actionable, or desirable.

Dalton shook his head left to right and back again. Everything above his shoulders slowed. Heavy, listless.

"Zeb?"

"Zeb?"

The sound of another's voice called him to the present, drawing him back from the edge. But it did little to satisfy the question blinking onscreen.

Or the choice lingering at his fingertips.

## ONE

25 Days Earlier  
Monday, 7:00 am (PST)  
Seattle, Washington

*The strong, dark coffee radiated heat, forming a small vapor cloud on the aging, street-side window pane.*

**Inspiration struck.** Leaning forward and reaching out with his right-hand index finger, Dalton worked the glass and condensation canvas. Bold strokes, fine details; at least so far as his not-so-nimble digits allowed.

It didn't take long.

Round head, two eyes, over-sized grin.

*The classic happy face.*

Dalton nodded, certain of his first grade art teachers approval.

But then something snapped. The wide grin and carefree attitude suddenly became annoying. So Dalton set out to destroy the little man... in his thoughts.

The imagined courthouse scene was easily and stereotypically set. Much like a basic legal thriller, Dalton presided as the gilded presence of prosecutorial power--no, of *justice*. Defendant, judge, and jury sat immobilized by unmatched skill and reasoning. Dalton's strategy played flawlessly. Each line of questioning plunged mercilessly into the accused's right to happiness. No holds barred. No statements defied.

"So, you do admit to smiling without ceasing... "

"You do not deny this, do you... Mr... Face?"

The required dramatic pause.

"Please then, illuminate this courtroom--no, reveal to us your secrets, the

reasons for your ongoing condition of unrestricted bliss."

No stopping. No slowing the remorseless barrage.

"Do you find it plausible in a world filled with pain, betrayal, and greed that someone could be happy all the time?"

Dalton's voice rose again. "Do you find it reasonable they might be happy, ever?"

The fantasized litany burst forward. A dam overcome by a swollen springtime river would prove more merciful.

In reply, the sketched and now dripping face stared back, unblinking.

A few more rounds and the prosecution rested. Dalton re-buttoned the impeccably tailored suit coat of his daydream, took his seat and awaited the all but certain verdict of "guilty."

**Back in the real world** a delivery truck drove by. Tires. Pothole. Puddled water attacking glass.

Like a student awaking mid-lecture, Dalton tried to re-enter the room with subtlety and grace. A wipe of his shirtsleeve cleared the remaining evidence of what just happened and he released the happy-faced man, more smudge than image, to his own recognizance.

He almost felt bad.

Almost.

Dalton was again present. While these musings were not extraordinary--he definitely carried a darker shade of humor than most--their frequency of late was probably worth noting.

*Whoa there, Dalton.*

*That was a bit more "Castaway" than you want to admit.*

*Pretty soon you'll name him Wilson and mourn his untimely passing.*

*Get a grip. Get a flippin' grip.*

Dalton reset and threw back a generous swig of the still-warm contents of his mug, another aroma besides the coffee appearing.

Buildings have smells, too. This one, standing now for well over a century, concocted a heady, unique ambiance. Untold layers of paint and stain cloyed on mature walls, floors, and ceiling. As sensory strata, their collective presentation spoke more industrial than people-place. Muscular, yet comforting.

Dalton inhaled deeper, zeroing in on the room, recapturing some emotional equilibrium. Closing his eyes, it washed over him.

*Okay, that's a little better.*

Dalton sat back, way back, eyes up.

Towering overhead, the open-beam ceilings offered quite the show. A rough-hewn tapestry of solid timbers and old-school plaster. These planked sentries brought majesty and reverence, elements sadly absent from modern shops and businesses. They spoke a covenant of sanctity over a neighborhood of tear-downs and new construction. Decrying modernity's unstoppable wave, this building said *been there*. Everything was right; the beans and the vibe. One could imagine a crusty old trapper making his way in from the wet and cold, wolf-dog at his side, shotgun in hand, feeling right at home.

While other spaces catered to the faux-elite, this place was an escape. And this particular seat--Dalton's regular spot in this fur warehouse turned Shangri-La for introverts--was the best in the house. Yes, a darkened thirty-foot long hallway complete with peeling wallpaper and aging wallboard tested the need for a fresh cup of joe, but the solitude it guaranteed was glorious. Two chairs adorned this secluded backroom. Dalton's faced streetside. The other sat a few feet back and to the left. Dalton felt like one of them was unnecessary, never more so when the second seat was occupied.

Like this morning.

## TWO

*For the last hour and a half on this cliché Seattle spring morning Dalton reigned as king over his coffee and silence domain. Now, out of basic courtesy, he'd be obliged to interact with another human being.*

**Sarcasm**, heavy and duly noted as such, came from behind an unevenly folded daily edition of *The Seattle Times*.

"So, the Hawks look like they're gonna blow it again, huh?" the voice

questioned and opined. "Wasting a first round pick on that beat-up tailback from Alabama? Sheer genius."

*Keep it simple. Keep it short. He'll go away.*

"Didn't follow it, man."

The paper came down, revealing a sad, almost pitying expression.

Dalton almost felt bad, for the second time today.

Almost.

Before crossing that emotional line, he simply tilted his mug to the spilling point, indicating more coffee was needed and therefore couldn't finish out the chat--as much as he would love to.

*That should work.*

It didn't.

Seahawk Guy kept going.

For the next few minutes Dalton feigned nominal interest while mostly glancing down. His mind landed elsewhere. His neighbor's dog, barking at all hours... and not even a real bark... mostly yipping... that girl, what was her name? Malisha? Marina?... man, he'd botched that one... the fact that this shop was so cool they let you keep your own mug at the front counter, cleaned and ready for your next visit... try that at a Starbucks, people...

Then he saw it.

The cup.

While waving it earlier had been a diversionary tactic, the F117 Nighthawk Fighter adorning his mug was slowly disappearing. It was supposed to work that way. Warm liquid: plane appears. Cold liquid: plane goes away.

Dalton flashed back to seeing this clever little 1990s Boeing giveaway for the first time. As a teen, he had just thought it supremely cool. Lost on him at the time was celebration of an aviation tech breakthrough forever altering the balance of power in global air warfare. As one of only a few boyhood items present in his college dorm rooms, it also remained one of the few things in his life still working some twenty years later.

He turned the fading image more fully toward the stranger, thinking it might help.

*So, I'd really love to hear more about where the Spring owner's meeting landed on the issue of player's headbands without official logos on them but as you can see... my plane is gone.*

It did not.

Dalton half-rose from his chair only to encounter Seahawk Guy, re-positioned

and making passage difficult.

He sat down again, heavily.

**The lecture**, originally focused on rookie player acquisition but now blossoming to full oration on the game itself, wasn't necessary.

Dalton loved this favored American pastime. He did, although, engage it differently than pretty much everyone else on the planet. Most fans zero in on a popular player or obvious focal point of the play. Big run: eyes on the tailback. Great tackle? Zoom in on the hit and ensuing smack talk. Single points of focus. One, maybe two players at a time.

In contrast, Dalton saw everything. Literally everything.

An offensive lineman shifting six inches to the left instead of seven. A defensive back's first three steps at a slightly reduced speed. He not only noticed these minute adjustments, his mind registered their complex and interrelated impacts.

At once. Clearly. And to a degree of perception and prediction beyond reach of even the most advanced computing platforms.

To the former military man, American Football proposed a giant moving formula; a dynamic, living entity. Every action and reaction of the twenty-two men on the field provided an ever-changing array of potentialities. Like a giant, three-dimensional display hovering in mid-air, Dalton factored and connected the unending lines, arcs, and data fields. To anyone else: stunning and confusing. For the former signal corpsman? Simply the way he accessed his world. And the very reason his government had gone to such lengths in acquiring his services. Initially a frightening jumble of information, this innate sensitivity graduated to a hyper-aware, calculated view of all that unfolded around him. It was a gift. Most of the time. But like any such gift it had to be corralled, disciplined, lest it lead to chaos, potentially madness.

Even at this moment, it was in play.

Dalton looked away, into the near distance.

The rookie tailback came into view. Dalton swung the 3D imagery in every direction, probing past flesh and into sinew and bone. He'd read about the five surgeries. Rehab. Added in the data from the combine and team's notes. Doctors. Physical therapists. While not the confidential files, more than enough to do the job.

"Two games shy of two seasons."



Seahawk guy stopped talking, trying to harvest meaning from the statement. "85.68% it happens in the late third quarter and against a division rival."

More blankness.

"Nevermind," Dalton said.

A look down to his phone.

7:45am.

No last words spoken. No parting shots given. Dalton's beautiful cone of silence lie shattered before him. Cold coffee. No stealthy plane gracing the cup's exterior to indicate otherwise. And while the office wasn't too far away, the downtown congestion of the Emerald City could always be a bear on a weekday morning.

Frustrated, Dalton grabbed his stuff, dropped the mug off at the counter, and walked out the front door.

### THREE

Monday--7:45 am, Beijing Time Zone (UTC+8:00)  
Beijing, People's Republic of China

*Industrial smog. Slow, thick. Ponderous. Ever present in the modern Chinese Capital, it hung in an especially noxious manner this morning.*

**Junjie Zang stared**, probing the unnatural cloud bank through the clear, clean glass of his forty-third-story office suite. Barely penetrable gray. A perfect metaphorical match for the young man's state of mind. As clarity could not be found in the air surrounding the monstrous skyscraper, the same could be said of this thirty-one-year-old CEO's thinking and emotions.

It had been this way for quite some time.

On a good day this view was breathtaking. The pricey vantage point in and

above the Chaoyang District afforded a panorama of gleaming steel and glass, the happy result of an early 2000's construction boom in the downtown corridor. On a good day one could behold many of the architectural wonders gracing this city's always modernizing skyline. On a good, clear day.

Junjie peered deeper into the fume-laden void.

It stared back. Unfeeling, unmoving.

His heart and mind foundered similarly, going nowhere anytime soon. These particular quandaries shook him to his core, hounded him during waking and sleeping hours, and exacted an inordinate price--one he alone could pay. Surely, those closest to him had noticed his heaviness.

Was there a real-world limit to living in this kind of tension?

In private moments--like this one--he wondered how long? How long until his breaking point?

Silence.

Yes, a healthy storm and cleansing rain could reveal these dynamic views for the more affluent of Beijing's 21.5 million residents.

Junjie's anguish would require much the same.

**His phone vibrated**, sliding sideways on the sleek, onyx-toned desk.

*30 minutes.*

Junjie touched the appointment icon. The mundane act blazed a narrow path through his numbness. It was something to do, a simple yet needed respite from overwhelming moral concern. Phone dangling in hand Junjie let these matters, critical for his family and future, envelope him a while longer.

Twenty minutes later he entered the presence of powerful men.

**"Mr. Zang."**

A bow. A handshake. Each set the mood for business both Chinese and Western.

"Please, please come in. We have a good deal to discuss."

"General," Junjie replied. "I am honored again to be here."

The group of men, older and far more important than Junjie, stood at a table some twenty-five feet long and a full seven feet at its widest point. Junjie guessed, correctly so, that the wood was something rare, expensive.

*Probably hewn from the last of an irreplaceable stand of trees from a*

*rainforest. Safe to say Green Peace or ELF reps have never attended a briefing here.*

The unheard humor settled Junjie's nerves, if only a little.

Teak. Mahogany. Gold filigree.

Questions of no small matter were taken up and acted upon here. It was a relational calculus with a clear bottom line: make no mistakes, none at all. Weakness, incompetence will not be tolerated. Fools will not be suffered. In halls like this, men measured other men. Those found lacking would not merely be dismissed. No, they would be swallowed whole, consumed, and discarded.

Upon crossing the room's threshold, his heels sunk into plush, maroon carpet. The committee's responsibility-worn faces considered his worthiness as he approached like a goat readied for sacrifice. Junjie stopped at his place, pulling out the substantial chair he dare not use during the next two hours. He paused, settling into the earnestness demanded of such moments.

The general nodded.

Everyone else took their seats.

Leather folders creaked open. Triggered remotely, the room lights dimmed as a 72" video wall came to life and the elder-statesman soldier invited the younger man to begin.

"Mr. Zang, you bring good news of our venture?"

"Yes, general. Good, indeed."

A wave of the general's hand.

"Then please proceed. We are all quite anxious to hear about the current status of the program."

"Thank you, sir. We are on target in both hardware and software beta runs. Fail-points and overall systems integrity numbers all fall well within acceptability norms. We have experienced slower developmental partner response on some fronts than anticipated, specifically the components needed to build and maintain our server configurations; truly one of a kind. Yet even at this, our systems remain online and moving toward launch."

Junjie noted the technical details settling on this audience, subtle expressions of comprehension and the lack of remedial inquiries. Brevity was both expected and appreciated. Junjie continued as briskly as he dared.

**Fifteen minutes of charts, synopses, and spec sheets later came the questions. Some, he knew, could sink him outright.**

"May we assume you have resolved your personnel problems, Mr. Zang?"

"Yes," Junjie spoke as candidly as he felt he could. "The new hires suggested have been of great benefit."

The younger man looked across the room widely, not at his questioner directly. To do otherwise would be a display of patent disrespect. It would also be the tell revealing his unease.

But it was hard to hold back.

Friends and colleagues, co-laborers for years, ones risking so much joining this communications upstart when more lucrative opportunities were theirs for the taking. That they had transformed suddenly into a debilitating weakness--one requiring immediate action?

Truthfully, the replacements were performing competently. But it all seemed a bit prepared.

*Such specialized skill sets, both available and interested in this no-name enterprise?*

*In the right quantities? At their exact moment of need?*

Junjie struggled to imagine the broadscale failure of so many of his key people. Good, talented people. Yet the evidence seemed inescapable. Pouring over it for days he searched for a way out. None surfaced; at least not anything compelling enough to question the process and the parties behind it. If he were to put any stock in the formal findings of the Progress and Effectiveness Task Force, then as CEO he had no other choice.

They needed to go. All of them.

Even now it landed with the pain of a sucker punch in a darkened room. Another big bump on a very fast ride. One that his company, Dawn Star Integrated Systems, had occupied the front row of for three-plus years.

Like many startups, Dawn Star experienced lean yet reasonable early growth. More bacon burger than filet mignon. Getting by. That was about all you could say for this ragtag squad of geeks and their equally geeky entrepreneurial leader. In year six everything changed. Their white paper at the China Computer Federation's annual meeting brought government representatives and a succession of engineering and development deals totaling in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Could they handle it?

The answer of course, was yes.

A boon to the fledgling team and its very green captain, the contracts also brought the tensions taunting him daily. Growing from a handful of young

engineers into a bustling corporation of over 3000 in such a compressed span of time was akin to riding a Tsunami from deep in the Pacific onto the shores of an unsuspecting island nation. Thrilling? Yes. Complete chaos? Also, yes.

Fourteen to sixteen hours per day usually sated the volatile expansion. But it was not uncommon for his office couch to see more of him at night than his wife and young son. Junjie's personal toll mounted, a greater sacrifice with each year passing. Slowing enough to look back, which he rarely did, only accused him of trading it all away with little to no chance of commensurate return.

Junjie loved his work.

But he adored his family, a bright and lovely part of his sojourn on this planet. He longed for more time with them and thought himself fortunate, no, more than that--blessed--when his mind shifted from the ever-mounting pressures of the workday to his home life.

*I will make this up to them* was his silent, daily promise.

## FOUR

*The Q&A portion of the presentation halted as two men at the table engaged in a subject of no importance to anyone but themselves.*

**The needless sidebar** created a moment in which Junjie drew up pleasant images. His beautiful wife. Their energetic, inquisitive son.

The general's authoritative voice broke in, refocusing the room and dissipating Junjie's half-conscious bliss.

"We will waste no more time. Today is a day of forward strides for our people. Too long we have followed. Our communication abilities have lagged both in quality and technological advancement." A crescendo grew, a preaching-like timbre emerging.

"And we shall soon rise to the level of our glorious purpose!"

The general waited, controlling the room before proceeding.  
"Minister please, lend your voice to this destiny, for all of us."

**Zhou Dhe** paused before responding. His silence stopped just short of disrespect.

As the senior political official in the room, he exuded authority, engendering ready submission to his desires and directives. Inset eyes focused unwaveringly, powerfully. A big man, six feet two inches tall, he ranked in the 99th percentile in height of adult males with respect to his countrymen. Even sitting he drew a formidable presence. Dhe made good on these physical advantages. Whether a room of subordinates or an intimate exchange, his bearing often left people feeling lesser and weaker.

He liked it that way.

Though presuming power and influence, Dhe was nothing more than a common coward. For him the ancient adage, "Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting" was an escape, not a position of strength. Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War* and originator of this ideal, would not have approved. Still Dhe was suited, even if functionally, for the role he'd occupied for the better part of two decades.

Established in the mid-1970s with minimal oversight, the Strategic Communications Ministry was a well-funded yet largely unknown organ in an already secretive system. Operating in the realms of deepest darkness, its decisions were reached by those few enjoying the privileges of limitless resources and hidden budgets. As the Director of SCM, Dhe held enormous clout. His word stood virtually unchallengeable, except to those outranking him in the Party apparatus. Still, countering the man was never taken on lightly. He embraced and relished his immense influence in the smallest and elitist of power chambers, in this most populous of nations. A highly placed fall-man, his life's work encouraged those above him to engage in misdeeds while providing the requisite cover.

Failure? Exposure?

Dhe alone would suffer the consequences.

Far more pragmatist than patriot, his greatest fear was a worthy opponent unmasking him. At 73, the director's formerly imposing stature now bent forward of the rigid spine, chest-out presentation of his youth. The secrets he carried more than made up for it. The man knew where every single

metaphorical and literal body was buried, having dug many of the holes himself. Yes, people feared Dhe, and for good reason.

**Ten minutes of rehashed propaganda** later he shifted toward Junjie. The move and his words bore down heavily. The young man found it a challenge to look anywhere near the minister's direction as Dhe's eyes burned into place, never lifting from Junjie even while addressing the room broadly.

"Today is a momentous day my comrades. The last three years have seen both ample investment and significant gains, promising tremendous returns for many years to come. I assure you: our leaders are watching with keen interest and anticipation."

Dhe changed tack abruptly, directing his comments exclusively to Junjie. Beside him now. So close his breath brushed off the CEO's cheek.

"What exactly may I tell them?"

Silence prevailed, the blatant dismissal of protocol shocking all present.

"May we count on your full commitment?"

Leaning in, closer still.

"Are the systems operational?"

It was Junjie's moment to seize or squander. The very reason he had been invited. An opportunity thousands of CEOs wouldn't hesitate over, not a single second.

Yet the question nagged.

*Had they had done too good of a job, creating something more potent than was for anyone's good?*

He had to admit, the final product was far afield from where they'd started. More power. More access. Initially a superior and more efficient utilizing of existing bandwidth--no small feat in a developing nation with infrastructure challenges--there were now aspects of the code more closely resembling AI.

And that's what scared him.

In his professional opinion the final code was more appropriate to outcomes other than those stated in the agreement. Add the sudden removal of valued men and women and their handpicked replacements, chosen by nothing less than high-level authorities in Beijing, and the whole thing was terribly disconcerting.

*Maybe I should walk away, make some mistakes, be forced to hand over the work to someone else.*

It would not be so simple. Dislodging Dawn Star from her contractual

obligations would be both highly impractical and quite difficult to explain.

**Time was up.**

Junjie's mouth opened.

"My firm pledges itself in every way. Full implementation in the next twenty-four hours."

The statement sounded far more convincing than he actually felt. Nonetheless, the deed was done.

Dhe nodded. They were finished. The other men stood in unison, suit coat buttons refastened and notebooks gathered.

Junjie retrieved his materials, bowed, and exited the room.

With the door shut, the other men talked. Dhe first.

"He was not so credible this time. We have come too far to allow his weakness to jeopardize the good of the whole... and need I remind you... the good of the whole is why we are doing this."

General *Chien Wie* stared back, unflinching at the stinging rebuke. He knew Dhe well enough to obey, but he would not honor the man. He'd stood beside many of the same ilk; naked ambition cloaked in love of country. His next words came slowly but confidently.

"There are sufficient measures in place. The young businessman will finish what he has started."

"And then?"

Silence.

Dhe did not wait for an answer. Turning, with neither acknowledgment nor disagreement, he simply left.

## FIVE

*Dalton's usual routine brought him across mid-town, toward the waterfront piers*



*and ferry landings.*

**From there he would** head south past Safeco Field and Century Link Stadium, edging his way into Bay City Printing Company's shared lot as the workday began.

Dalton was your basic sales guy. His trade: full color, offset press work. Corporate identity. Brochures, catalogs. Lots of pages. Perfect or spiral binding.

Need something printed? *Z. Dalton--BCPC*, had you covered.

The stark contrasts in vocational and professional histories were intriguing, to say the least. A near-decade in worldwide, active-duty hot zones. Life and death, comrades and enemies. Nowadays he sold printed paper products to mom and pop shops and medium-sized businesses. Two years on the outside, the closest he got to a danger-fed adrenaline rush was a customer signing off on a sales contract.

In triplicate.

So today's first step, the beginnings of another presumably mundane day, would be simply getting to his car three and a half blocks away.

**Dalton headed out**, taking in the fresh morning air while navigating the sharp vertical orientation of his hometown. Though the overnight hours deposited a brief shower on the city--expected and ordinary--this spring day was starting out as clear and clean as they come in the Northwest. A nominal breeze moved in and among gleaming high-rise structures, landing a hint of the salted waterfront at Dalton's nose.

His medium build attracted no unwarranted attention among grumpy, early rising pedestrians. Slightly over five foot ten. A few pounds added along the way. Still, at thirty-seven, keeping a burgeoning belt line from becoming the first thing people noticed when you walked into a room had to count for something.

Dalton's hair lay longer than military-standard but still quite short. This was nothing new. Even in high school he chose a well-groomed cut over the predictably long and wild expressions of his classmates. Its color held, even now a dark brown with only slight hints of gray. Physically, Dalton owned the middle ground in all things average, with a composite appearance rating somewhere between nondescript and lackluster.

Until you caught his eyes.