

ARMAGEDDON CONSPIRACY

*"I think John Thompson is more than on his way.
I think he's there."*

— Anne Rivers Siddons

a novel

An aerial photograph of a city, likely New York City, taken from a high vantage point. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset or sunrise, with the sky transitioning from a pale yellow at the top to a deep orange and red near the horizon. The city's buildings are silhouetted against the bright sky, and the overall atmosphere is dramatic and intense. The Empire State Building is prominent on the right side of the image.

JOHN THOMPSON

BOOKS BY JOHN THOMPSON

ARMAGEDDON CONSPIRACY
THE HONG KONG DECEPTION
THE BAGDAD VENDETTA
SALEM VI: REBECCA'S RISING

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ARMAGEDDON CONSPIRACY

JOHN THOMPSON



CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four
Chapter Thirty-Five
Chapter Thirty-Six
Chapter Thirty-Seven
Chapter Thirty-Eight
Chapter Thirty-Nine
Chapter Forty
Chapter Forty-One
Chapter Forty-Two
Chapter Forty-Three
Chapter Forty-Four
Chapter Forty-Five
Chapter Forty-Six
Chapter Forty-Seven
Chapter Forty-Eight
Chapter Forty-Nine
Chapter Fifty
Chapter Fifty-One
Chapter Fifty-Two
Chapter Fifty-Three
Chapter Fifty-Four
Chapter Fifty-Five
Chapter Fifty-Six
Chapter Fifty-Seven
Chapter Fifty-Eight
Chapter Fifty-Nine
Chapter Sixty
Chapter Sixty-One
Chapter Sixty-Two
Chapter Sixty-Three
Chapter Sixty-Four
Chapter Sixty-Five
Chapter Sixty-Six
Chapter Sixty-Seven
Chapter Sixty-Eight

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Chapter Seventy

Chapter Seventy-One

Chapter Seventy-Two

Chapter Seventy-Three

Epilogue

PROLOGUE

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 21

STEVE ALBERS HAD NO IDEA it was his day to die. He simply knew his sales meeting had run late and he needed to run like hell to catch the five-ten train. Another train left at five forty-five, but that wasn't an option. Today was his daughter's birthday, her sixteenth, and in addition to a family celebration, Steve had an almost-new bright yellow Volkswagen Beetle hidden in his neighborhood garage.

He generally disapproved of sixteen-year-olds having cars, but Kate was different—honor roll every semester of her life, state champion gymnast in her age group, and class president. She deserved something special, he thought, as he rushed from the elevator and trotted toward the revolving door. Out on the crowded sidewalk, he broke into an awkward run.

The sun had set, the cold wind sliced through his muffler and gloves, and slicks of ice glinted from the sidewalk. He stepped around mobs of fellow commuters bundled in heavy coats, steaming warm breath into the air. After a block, his heart pounded, and he slowed to a fast walk, vowing to lose some weight. After another block he came to the throng of people moving down the escalators into the underground warren of Penn Station, and he began to burrow his way through.

The air grew warmer as he descended, and the smells of car and bus exhaust and the metallic tang of cold air quickly morphed into the stale, slightly urine smell of the station. The jostling worsened the long corridors that led to the commuter trains, and Steve shifted his focus, looking down for a dropped briefcase or some homeless person's outstretched leg.

He sidestepped quickly, nearly tripping over a stack of Coke cases someone had carelessly left outside a pizza kiosk, and then, after regaining his footing, glanced up at the overhead clock. Four minutes after five. He started to relax. He was going to make it, just barely.

• • •

Exactly seventeen minutes earlier, in the drop-off area outside Penn Station's other entrance, Yusuf ben Abu Sayeed checked his watch then stepped out of the taxi line where he had been standing for the past five minutes. He tightened his muffler, raised the collar of his cashmere overcoat, and strode away. Such a departure was unremarkable because cab waits often became infuriating, and the line simply shifted forward. No one gave him a second glance.

Abu Sayeed's exit had nothing to do with impatience but with the two men in Coca Cola delivery uniforms who had just ascended the escalator and wheeled their empty hand truck around the corner of the building. He'd been waiting to spot them, and now he crossed Eighth Avenue, walked eastward, and entered the revolving doors of a large office tower. He unbuttoned his coat and loosened his muffler, entered an elevator, and rode to the thirtieth floor. There, like a man who had simply chosen the wrong floor, he stepped onto the next down elevator. Seconds later he exited the opposite side of the building where his rented limousine had been waiting at the curb for almost forty minutes.

As the driver hurried around the car and held the door, Abu Sayeed gave a weary sigh, as though exhausted from the last meeting of a long day. He slid onto his seat and checked that the glass privacy partition was up. His mind whirled with almost unbelievable possibilities, as he glanced at the other passenger who had waited there the entire time. They were almost strangers, having met several months earlier in London, when the man had managed to contact him through an endless chain of intermediaries and make his extraordinary offer.

“Well?” the passenger asked as the limo pulled into traffic. He had sandy hair graying at the temples and blue eyes with a dangerous innocence.

“Your associates made their delivery,” Abu Sayeed answered.

The man removed a cell phone from the pocket of his suit coat. He held it for several thoughtful moments as their limo snaked its way through the uptown traffic. Finally, he dialed a number then held the phone out to Abu Sayeed. “You have the honors.”

Abu Sayeed pushed the phone gently away. “I insist.”

The other’s mouth tightened. He gazed down for a time at the backlit screen and the waiting number. Finally he pushed the send button.

Instantaneously, another cell phone rang, this one buried in the three soda cases Steve Albers had just avoided. The ring triggered an electric charge to a small detonator, which in turn set off three pounds of embedded Semtex. The soda cans were packed with bolts and steel balls, and the explosion hurled them outward. The blast shattered all bodies within seventy feet. The shrapnel cut through another hundred, burrowing deep into the concrete walls of the underground station.

Over a mile away, the faint boom didn’t penetrate the limo’s soundproofing, but seconds later the first sirens sounded. Abu Sayeed closed his eyes, amazed at Allah’s beneficence. This act of retribution on American soil was glorious, but not the real reason for their meeting. His associate had arranged today’s explosion only to establish the seriousness of his intent.

“Well?” the man asked as the sirens quickly grew to a massive din. “What do you think?”

Abu Sayeed looked at this freshly scrubbed American who had just killed a number of his own countrymen. “You have impressed me.” He closed his eyes and nestled into the leather seat. There would be a flight to Paris and then several days of deliberation to make a final assessment about going forward. However, he was already sure. Allah had placed this extraordinary opportunity in his lap. It would be a sin against God not to make use of it.

• • •

In the smoke and wreckage of Penn Station, scores of bleeding, blast-shocked people staggered through the rubble. Others lay unmoving. Steve Albers was facedown, his back covered by a few ceiling tiles, but otherwise he appeared miraculously unhurt, as if any second he might clamber to his feet. Sirens blared in the distance, and people screamed for help. Yet Steve did not stir. The long, needle-shaped sliver that had penetrated the base of his skull had caused almost no bleeding. His last thought before the blackness washed over him had been of Kate.

• • •

Hours later the man who had met with Abu Sayeed knelt in his private sanctum in the basement of his waterfront mansion. The room was kept locked at all times, and he had the only key. Its walls were painted bright white, and a special air system hissed softly as it removed the smell of the room’s other occupants.

A table along one wall held a glass-fronted mouse cage where twelve white mice scurried through a bed of cedar chips. On the opposite wall was a second, much larger glass container. Inside, coiled

and quietly digesting its most recent mouse, a timber rattlesnake as thick as a beer can lay with its large triangular head pointing outward.

The man wore a white shirt and khaki trousers and sat in the middle of the room on a hard-backed chair. He had been praying diligently for the past forty-five minutes, and now the feeling he'd been seeking finally came upon him. He began to twitch and jerk as the spirit of the Lord began to pour into him, lighting him with a heat and power that made his scalp tingle as it shot all the way to the ends of his fingers.

As he'd done alone and in private for years—ever since he'd left his old Tennessee mountain church—he stood and went over to the terrarium where he gathered himself for a moment, his eyes shut tight. He prayed to God to witness this proof of his faith then reached down with both hands and scooped up the rattlesnake.

As always, the weight—close to twelve pounds—and the coolness of the smooth skin surprised him. He held the twisting body in both hands and heard the warning buzz of rattles. Had he been in his old congregation he would have passed the snake to another worshipper, but he was alone. If he were bitten, the Lord would protect him, as He had the three times he'd been bitten previously.

“Let the blood I have shed not be in vain,” the man prayed. “Let it be that any deed done to bring about Your Son's return is a blessing.”

He raised the snake over his head and continued to pray until his muscles ached from the awkward weight. Gradually, his mind quieted and faded back into the far reaches until the universe consisted only of himself, the serpent, and God—the three of them bound in a strange trinity. When his prayer finally ended, he lowered the snake and replaced it in the terrarium. As he withdrew his hands, a blur of movement.

He jerked away, seeing the red punctures in the thin web of skin between his thumb and forefinger. The fangs had gone right through the narrow band of flesh, which meant the amount of venom in his system would be slight. However, fire already consumed his entire hand. The throbbing pain rocketed up his arm and threatened to drag him to his knees.

He staggered to the chair and sat, willing himself to perfect stillness. He began to pray, knowing he had to embrace his pain, show God his absolute faith. This was a test, he knew, a demand for him to prove his fortitude. Only the strongest and most devout would be allowed to light the fires of Armageddon.

NEW YORK, JUNE 6

THE OLD GRANITE MANSION JUST off Fifth Avenue in the high Sixties lorded austere over its more mundane neighbors. Brent Lucas gazed at the brass plaque beside the polished front door, thinking it was no accident that the name “Genesis Advisors” was barely visible from the sidewalk. He knew Genesis Advisors, GA, as it was known in the financial community, understood that its very wealthy clients appreciated understatement.

Brent took a deep breath and started up the steps. At the top he re-centered his tie and rang the white buzzer. Almost as an afterthought, he pushed the record button on the tape recorder hidden in his pocket.

After several moments the door swung back, and a plump woman with a helmet of dyed black hair held out her hand. “Brent! Let me welcome you to Genesis Advisors,” she said.

He recognized Betty Dowager, Executive Assistant to the firm’s chairman, Prescott Biddle. “Mr. Biddle is traveling,” she said. “If you’ll come with me, Mr. Wofford is going to handle your orientation.”

He followed her thick calves up the carpeted staircase. It was still early, the building hushed, the air smelling of oiled wood and leather. The firm was only a dozen years old, but the historic mansion provided an aura of prestige and stability. An atmosphere of blue blood and old money oozed from its mahogany paneled walls and from the impressive paintings and antiques.

They went down a hallway to a pair of tall doors. After several years in a Boston skyscraper, Brent thought it felt more like some exclusive private club than an office, as if any second he might stumble upon a game of high-stakes backgammon.

Betty opened the doors to an anteroom where a secretary worked at an antique desk with an inlaid leather surface, then led him through another door into an ornately furnished office with heavy brocade drapes over tall windows. The firm’s number two partner rose from his chair and stepped around the desk to greet his visitor.

“Welcome, Brent,” Fred Wofford rumbled in his slightly nasal twang. He was a bear of a man in his early sixties, with stooped shoulders, a heavy gut, and a halo of perspiration atop his mostly bald scalp, an utter contrast to the athletic chairman, Prescott Biddle. “Come on in and sit down,” he said, offering a damp handshake.

He waddled around the desk and crashed in his swivel chair, looked at Brent, and then let out a chuckle. “Yale, Stanford MBA, All-American football player,” he said. “You’re smart and competitive and analytical. Just the kind of man we’re looking for.”

Wofford went on in a similar vein for several more minutes then folded his meaty hands on the desktop. “We covered most of it in the interviews,” he said, his smile fading. “But there are a few details we didn’t get to—mainly about communications. Knowledge is power, Brent. All we’ve got to

sell here is our performance.”

Brent nodded, knowing what was coming next. Everyone on the street, and for that matter most investors in America, knew about Prescott Biddle’s legendary track record. Biddle had been among the first public investors in Microsoft, Cisco, and AOL. He’d ridden WorldCom up then shorted it within ten percent of the top, even shorted the whole market the summer before 9/11. More recently he’d been early in Research In Motion, Google, and Intuitive Surgical. He’d been in and out of real estate, commodities, and highflying stocks like a man with a crystal ball.

Prescott Biddle’s results had been nothing short of extraordinary. In the eyes of the Justice Department they’d been too amazing, and that was the real reason Brent was here. He pretended to scratch himself as he dropped a hand to his jacket and felt the slight vibration of the recorder, making sure it was turned on.

“People follow us on the street,” Wofford continued. “They hang on our conversations in restaurants, they search our trash to find out what we’re doing. My point is—we are very careful, and we don’t allow leaks—ever. I can’t overstate the importance of confidentiality.”

Brent nodded.

Wofford glanced down at his interlaced fingers then gave Brent an embarrassed smile. “I assure you I’m not bringing this up because of that little . . . incident in Boston.”

Brent’s gaze faltered momentarily. “I disclosed all that in the interviews,” he said.

Wofford held up a hand to stop him. “We know why you blew the whistle,” he said quickly.

He was referring to how some of Brent’s fellow portfolio managers had been making millions on their personal accounts by trading fund shares after the close of the market, at times when major news announcements would make stocks open sharply up or down the next day. It was done quietly and privately, but it happened to be highly illegal.

“In fact, your commitment to doing the right thing is one of the reasons we picked you,” Wofford said.

Brent nodded, feeling a twinge of guilt at the tape recorder running in his pocket.

Wofford waved a hand. “I only mention this because we are a Christian firm. We wouldn’t turn a blind eye. If you see anything improper here, you bring it to Prescott or myself. Have faith that we will correct our mistakes.”

Brent was about to reply when Wofford’s gaze left his face and drifted to something over his shoulder. He glanced back, thinking someone had come into the office, but saw only a large portrait on the wall he had missed when he walked in. It was savage and violent, a depiction of Jesus on the cross, hands pierced with heavy spikes, cheeks concave and inked with shadow, eyes haunted with unspeakable pain.

Brent turned back and waited. Wofford slowly tore his eyes from the painting.

“Welcome to the firm,” he said at last.

NEW YORK, JUNE 8

“HERE’S TO PROGRESS,” UNCLE FRED said, raising his wine glass in a toast. “It was a long slope but you got there.”

Brent smiled and raised his own glass. “Thanks.”

“But you’re in the same shitty industry,” Fred said, shaking his head. “After all that crap in Boston you should’ve wised up.”

Brent would have resented the comment coming from anyone else, but since Fred had raised him from the time his mother died, he shoveled a forkful of pasta bolognese into his mouth and took a bite. They were at a restaurant in Little Italy, Brent’s treat on his uncle’s first foray into Manhattan in probably ten years.

Fred hacked off a hunk of veal chop, shoved it into his mouth, and kept talking as he chewed. “I mean, you got a degree from that fancy-ass college in New Haven and a MBA from Stanford, and these Wall Street scumbags won’t hire you for six months cause you turned in a couple crooks at your old firm.” Fred waved his fork in disgust. “Guy as smart as you can’t get a job cause he’s too honest. Jesus H. Christ!”

“Can we talk about something else?” Brent suggested, seeing the way heads were starting to turn in their direction as Fred warmed to his topic.

“Why? Cause you don’t want me to remind you that you always said you were going to teach?”

Brent leaned forward, lowering his voice, hoping Fred would take the hint. “How could I? After growing up in your house, they wouldn’t allow me around children.”

“Lemme tell you, buddy, you were raised in the lap of normal,” Fred growled. “When people stop paying you ten times what you’re worth, you’ll understand what I’m talking about.” Fred took a gulp of red wine and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Boil this Wall Street stuff down, and it’s all about giving the big shot assholes blowjobs in the washroom.”

A well-dressed couple at the next table turned and stared with outraged expressions. Fred fluttered his eyes at them. “What?” he asked. “I can’t say washroom?”

“Forgive my uncle,” Brent said. “He’s suffering from Tourette Syndrome.”

The man threw a careful glance at Fred, whose pugnacious blue eyes held neither the compulsive tic of Tourette’s nor of the confused vacancy of an Alzheimer’s victim. A second later he looked away.

“Nice job,” Brent said quietly.

Fred raised his eyebrows. “I raised you to be something better than a money vulture.”

“Like maybe a dirt-mouth who can clear out a restaurant.”

Fred jerked his head at the couple and scowled. “Pussies! This whole city’s full of ‘em.”

“But you have to admit the food is good,” Brent said, forking up the last of his pasta and trying

again to change the subject.

“Not good enough to make a person live here,” Fred replied sourly. “Nothing is.”

• • •

When they left the restaurant the evening was pleasantly warm, and they decided to walk rather than take a cab. Neither of them spoke as they wandered up Mott Street then over to Lafayette, continuing to Great Jones. Brent went slowly to allow for Fred’s bum knee. At Great Jones they turned east, and as if by some unspoken agreement, came to a stop opposite the fire station that held Engine 33 and Ladder 9. They stared at the building.

“First time here?” Fred finally asked.

“Yeah,” Brent replied. He studied the dark brick façade and the Maltese Cross on the glass of the garage doors as if the structure contained some indecipherable secret message.

“You gone down to the site?”

“Nope,” Brent said, thinking he never would because the emptiness was too painful. That day was branded in his memory. He remembered sitting helpless in front of his office television as the Trade Towers burned, knowing his older brother had to be inside because nothing ever kept Harry back. He pictured Harry charging up the fire stairs, floor after floor, past the streams of fleeing office workers. Harry always in the best shape, the one who’d get to the top first. Get out of there, you stupid sonofabitch! he’d shouted over and over at the TV.

When the collapse came he knew Harry had been all the way up, right where spilled jet fuel would have been melting girders, the roar of flames drowning the cries of trapped victims. Even if Harry had sensed the building coming apart, he wouldn’t have budged.

Harry and his father were both firemen, both killed in the line of duty. His mother, too, was killed in her own fire. Brent still awakened sometimes at night from his old familiar nightmare, the one where he and Harry were trapped in the flames.

“God, I wish he’d been somewhere else that day,” he said.

“Harry made his own choices.”

“Shitty choices,” Brent said, and resumed walking. He heard Fred limping behind him.

“He did what he wanted to do,” Fred said. “So did your dad. So did I. Let’s talk about your choices. You work with slime bags and then you go back for more?”

Brent spun around. “Harry made what . . . maybe sixty grand, and he went in and rescued guys making a hundred times that much. You and Dad did the same thing, and you’re the only one who’s still around, with a bum knee and hardly enough money to hang onto to your house! And you tell me I’m the idiot!”

“We did what we wanted,” Fred said, his tone remarkably calm given his usual quick temper. “I just hope you’re doing the same thing.”

“I am,” Brent said, the words tripping out too quickly. He felt a white-hot anger but at the same time the sharp point of a knife in his heart.

Twenty minutes later they reached Penn Station, where Fred would board a PATH train to Hoboken and then catch the Morristown Line to his home. Brent was feeling calmer, having walked off the helpless rage that seized him when he thought about Harry’s death, but that was only until he saw the plywood barricades where reconstruction work was still going on from February’s bombing.

Over a hundred people killed, he thought as the familiar mix of anger and terrible loss seized him all over again.

Fred stopped at the bottom of the escalator and clasped Brent’s arm. “Harry did good,” he said in

somber voice. "All of us have to die sometime. We just want to make sure it counts for something when it happens."

Brent nodded. He was trying to count for something, too. He just wished he could explain.

• • •

Two blocks from his newly rented apartment, he turned into a nondescript bar that looked like a hangout for the over-fifty crowd. It was dimly lit, mostly empty, and he took a table near the front window. A moment later, a woman with gray hair, her plump thighs filling out a navy blue pantsuit, walked through the front door, glanced around, and then sat at Brent's table.

"Well?" Ruth Simmons demanded.

"It's only been two days. I hardly know where the men's room is."

Simmons's lips turned down. "I thought you were a quick study."

She was a lawyer at the Department of Justice, running a special task force that focused on the financial industry. She was also a first class bitch, Brent thought, but she was the reason he had his job at Genesis Advisors.

She had first contacted him several months earlier, claiming they'd met sometime after he'd blown the whistle about illegal trading practices at his old firm. Brent had taken her at her word because there had been so many lawyers that names and faces were a blur. She'd taken him to dinner and asked if he'd be willing to do something else to help the government. She'd told him the new situation involved illegal use of inside information and was much bigger than the Boston case. Her country needed his help, she'd said.

At that point, frustrated from months of fruitless job searches and behind on his bank loans and maxed-out credit cards, Brent signed a heavy-handed confidentiality agreement, and agreed to help her after Genesis Advisors.

Now, groping for something to report, he repeated what a young partner named Owen Smythe had revealed that day at lunch—that the firm managed over a billion dollars of Prescott Biddle's personal money and that while the firm was a partnership in name, Biddle often ruled over his fellow partners like a dictator.

Simmons shrugged. "That's not evidence."

"No, but it's unusual." Brent tried to recall Owen Smythe's exact words. "Smythe said that Biddle takes control when he gets 'messages.' I tried to ask more questions, but he clammed up and wouldn't say any more."

Simmons's harsh expression softened a little. "I know I tend to get impatient. Don't push too hard. Give it time." A sardonic smile flickered across her lips. "After all, you *are* being paid quite well for your patriotic duty," she said, referring to Brent's three million dollar a year salary, paid bi-weekly in installments of a hundred fifteen thousand dollars before withholding. It was a staggering sum that was going to allow him to pay off his mountains of debt in only a few months. "Or maybe you'd prefer to trade that for a government paycheck."

"Unlikely," Brent said, wondering if bitterness over his salary was what made her seem so contradictory.

Simmons interrupted his thoughts by holding out her hand. "By the way, give me your cell phone."

Brent blinked in surprise but did as she asked. She put his phone in the pocket of her jacket then pulled another phone out of the opposite pocket and handed it across. "Use this one from now on. The first number on speed dial will reach me twenty-four hours a day," she said. "If you ever feel threatened or in danger, call me."

“In danger?” Brent smiled.

Simmons leaned forward, her voice dropping to a whisper. “You’re going to take their business down.”

“These guys are money managers, not drug dealers. They’re not going to pull something stupid.”

“If your cover gets blown, I wouldn’t assume anything.”

Brent thought her warning was melodramatic. Everything he’d seen so far told him the Justice Department had the situation wired, starting with how easily they’d maneuvered him into the firm. Even though his resume was rock-solid, there had to have been other strong candidates. But the Simmons had sent a twenty-five thousand dollar donation in his name to Prescott Biddle’s church, some kind of evangelical denomination called the New Jerusalem Fellowship. They believed in the literal interpretation of the Bible, but apparently they also believed in money because once the check had been cashed he’d been the only candidate that mattered.

• • •

Minutes later as he walked the remaining blocks to his apartment, he glanced over and imagined his brother walking beside him, Harry’s cheeks permanently chapped from flames and heat, the sleeves of his tee shirt rolled up to display the NYFD tattoo on his thick bicep.

Harry had his head thrown back. He was laughing. *My little brother, the secret good guy!*

Brent scowled.

So, what’s your beef?

“Even if these are bad guys, I feel like a traitor.”

You just hate taking crap from Uncle Fred.

Brent nodded. “I almost told him.”

About working undercover? Good call that you didn’t. Fred hasn’t kept a secret in his life.

“I know.”

Just remember, where there’s smoke there’s fire, little bro.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

We’re the guys who put out the fires.

“That was your life, not mine.”

You sure about that?

“I’m not too sure about anything.”

If Harry were still alive, he would have responded by slapping the back of Brent’s head or popping his shoulder with an elbow. Of course, nothing came. There was only the noise of the city all around and the echo of Brent’s footsteps as he walked the avenue alone.

GREENWICH, CT, JUNE 9

FRED WOFFORD'S PHONE JERKED HIM from a deep sleep. He felt his wife shift beside him as he opened his eyes in the darkened bedroom, checked the bedside clock then fumbled for the receiver. It was nearly five thirty, time to be getting up anyway.

He put the phone to his ear and listened as a disembodied voice in the background announced an arriving train, the sound echoing off a cavernous ceiling. He knew it was the sound of Union Station in Washington, D.C.

"Up two hundred thousand," the caller said.

"Two hundred thousand," Wofford repeated. "Go with God."

"Go with God," the man said.

NEW YORK, JUNE 9

IN CENTRAL PARK BRENT PRACTICED his taekwondo katas on the East Meadow as the day's first light began to pierce the dark, early morning sky. As a third degree black belt, running through all of them took well over an hour. The air was cool and the mist drifted from the wet grass like smoke. Slick with sweat, he ran hard around the reservoir as the apartments on the West Side began to glow with the dawn light, striking a hard contrast on a pale sky. Through it all he tried to keep his mind blank and surrender to the joy of physical exertion, to the insistent beating of his heart, the in and out of his respirations.

He had planned his workout in hopes that it would help him burn off some of his confusion about his current assignment. Only the moment he finished and started walking home, it came racing back.

If the GA partners were using inside information, he was doing the right thing if he helped buy them. He thought about the firm's client list, the eleven billion dollars they managed. It seemed preposterous, maybe even impossible, that the firm's senior partners would break the law. They were making tens of millions of dollars, so why risk it?

Even if Biddle occasionally overruled the rest of his partners, it was probably because he was a egomaniac. Nothing illegal about that—egomania was as common as pigeons on Wall Street. Brent shook his head, unable to stave off his doubts. What if the Justice Department was wrong and overzealous? It wouldn't be the first time. Maybe rather than doing a good thing, Brent was about to ruin the reputation of a brilliant man.

• • •

An hour later in the morning meeting, his uncertainty continued to nag as he looked around at the other members of the firm. It was a boys' club for sure. The partners were all Caucasian, and other than Owen Smythe, who appeared to be in his midthirties, they were all late forties to early sixties. Their hair was uniformly short, their shirts white. They looked as similar as members of some WASP fraternity, and he wondered how their investment style could be so much more aggressive and edgy than their appearance.

He heard little that appeared noteworthy, and it seemed like the meeting was starting to wrap up. Brent pushed away from the table and was halfway out of his chair when the room fell silent. At the head of the table, Wofford had folded his hands. "Let us give thanks," he said.

The others were still seated. They all bowed their heads, and Brent felt a wave of hungry expectation wash over the room. Instinctively, he put his hand in his pocket, found the recorder, and pressed the on button.

"Lord Jesus," Wofford intoned, "we give You thanks for making our minds keen so we may build wealth for our clients and Your church. Make our hearts true as we prepare the world for Your return. In Your name we offer our obedience, Amen."

Brent glanced around. The prayer was over, but no one moved. Wofford let the silence build. ~~“Biddle called early this morning from Europe,”~~ he said suddenly. ~~“The Lord spoke to him last night.”~~ He is blessing us with prosperity, and the economy is strong. So speaketh the Lord.”

The others began to stir. They exchanged knowing looks and brief nods as if important information had just been communicated. Several mumbled, “Amen.” As they filed out of the room, Brent remained frozen, wondering whether to risk a question. “Excuse me,” he said.

Wofford raised his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“The unemployment report is supposed to be announced at ten this morning.” Brent noticed that several of the portfolio managers had stopped and turned. “The market expects employment to be down by maybe a hundred thousand.”

Wofford nodded.

“Are you saying it’s going to go the other way?”

“I think *God* is saying it’s going to go the other way,” Wofford corrected.

Brent looked at him for a moment. “Okay,” he said.

• • •

From the hallway outside his office, Brent looked through Smythe’s open door and saw him hunched over his computer keyboard. “Got a second?” he said.

Smythe glanced up then pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He was probably six-foot-five, maybe an inch taller than Brent, but he had narrow shoulders, bad posture, and the tallowy skin of a non-athlete. “Just checking my cash position.”

“Was Wofford’s announcement supposed to be a buy signal?” If the employment report were out sharply, the market would explode to the upside.

Smythe nodded. He had a slight double chin and receding brown hair. “Better believe it.”

“Sounds like God tells Biddle what the market’s going to do?”

Smythe shrugged. “Whatever works.”

Back in his own office, Brent turned off the recorder. What he had on tape wouldn’t constitute evidence, but he understood its importance. Several large “short funds” as well as a number of hedge funds had made recent, highly publicized bets against cyclical stocks. The sudden perception of a strengthening economy would cause those stocks to shoot up, forcing the funds to cover their positions at significant losses, and that would push prices even higher.

Suddenly, his phone rang and he answered. It was Joe Steward, the head trader. “I’m waiting for your buy orders,” he said.

“I’ll get right back.”

Brent quickly scanned the cash balances in the accounts he’d been assigned, checked his buy list against current positions, and then called the trading desk. He invested fifty million dollars before the Commerce Department announced the much stronger than expected employment number, and then he sat back and watched the market soar nearly two hundred points.

NEW YORK, JUNE 14

THE FOLLOWING WEEK THE MARKET rally seemed to be holding and even extending, and the firm buzzed with the kind of confidence people show when they know they've got things figured out. A few minutes before eight on Tuesday night, Owen Smythe breezed into Brent's office with a bulging accordion file. "Fred asked me to bring this," he said.

Brent raised his eyebrows at the phonebook-size thickness. "Another account?"

Smythe winked as he dropped the file on Brent's desk. "Don't screw it up."

Smythe turned to leave, but Brent flicked on his tape recorder and said, "I have a question."

Smythe was almost out the door, but he stopped. "About?" he asked.

"The unemployment number."

Smythe studied Brent a few seconds.

"It seems like somebody's got a crystal ball."

Smythe raised his eyebrows. "I assume you belong to the same church as all these other guys. Maybe you ought to ask one of them."

"I'm a new member."

"Yeah, right." Smythe closed Brent's door and leaned against it. "Just between us girls, I think you're full of shit."

Brent sat perfectly still, but his pulse began to kick. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'm probably the only guy in this firm who's not a member of the New Jerusalem Fellowship, but they keep me around because I'm smart. I don't know how the hell Biddle and Wofford get the information, whether it's God or something else—but I don't stick my nose in it."

"You're telling me this for a reason."

Smythe nodded. "I checked you out with a couple buddies in Boston, and I know what you did at your old firm. Wofford and Biddle certainly ought to know if they did their homework, but they don't seem to give a crap. I don't know why you're really here, but whatever's going on, you stay out of my backyard, cause I'm clean." He nodded once then turned and walked out.

Brent waited a few seconds then picked up his cell phone and called Simmons in Boston. Without preamble he reported the conversation.

"What do you want to do about it?" she asked.

"Nothing. He's not one of the insiders. Now that he's said his piece and covered his ass, I think he'll keep quiet. Still, the fact that he came in and said something suggests that we're on the right track."

Simmons was quiet for another few seconds. Finally, she said, "Just keep that cell phone with you."

Brent hung up then sat for a few seconds trying to shake off the feeling that Simmons wasn't

telling him the whole story. Did she really believe these guys might come after him? He thought about Wofford—a fat, lumbering guy. Biddle was too much like a professor, and Smythe was just trying to keep himself out of it. Very unlikely, he decided.

He reached for the folder Smythe had brought and read the name on the cover, Dr. Khaled Faisal. His eyes widened in recognition. Dr. Faisal was an Egyptian billionaire, famous for having spent millions in efforts to promote peace in the Mideast.

Brent opened the file and let out a low whistle. His other accounts were between five and fifteen million—average-sized for the firm—but this one was huge. Suspecting a mistake, he pulled it up on the computer and saw that, indeed, it was one of the largest accounts in the entire firm, some seven hundred fifty million dollars. His name appeared beside it as the manager of record.

The correspondence folder accounted for much of the file's thickness. In testimony to Faisal's philanthropy, there were perhaps a hundred letters directing the firm to send money to various universities, hospitals, and health care organizations. Brent shook his head as he read. It didn't make sense to assign such an enormous account to a "new guy."

He sat back and checked his watch. It was getting late. Deciding not to waste time on an account somebody would undoubtedly take away first thing tomorrow, he tossed some research into his briefcase and walked into the hall. A light glimmered under Owen Smythe's door, and on a whim he knocked and stuck his head inside.

Fred Wofford was leaning on one of the visitor's chairs talking with Smythe. "Sorry," Brent said as both men looked in his direction.

"No problem," Wofford said as he turned and moved toward the door, almost rushing. "We weren't just killing time." He pulled Brent inside and went out. "You fellows chat or go out for a beer," he said. "Don't let me keep you."

Brent listened as Wofford's heavy footsteps faded down the hall then he turned and studied Smythe.

"Don't worry," Smythe said after several seconds. "We weren't talking about you."

Brent looked down at his hands a moment then looked up. "You know, being a whistle-blower on your place doesn't mean you make it a habit."

"Whatever you say. Just as long as you know where I'm coming from."

"It sounds like you think there's something going on."

"I don't see, I don't know, I don't ask. We straight on that?"

"Tell me something, how is it that I'm being given Dr. Faisal's account?"

"You joined the right church," Smythe said with a cynical smirk. "Biddle wanted you to have it."

"I thought it had to be a mistake."

"Nope."

Brent nodded, started to leave, then change his mind. "Feel like grabbing a beer?"

"You serious?"

Brent smiled.

Smythe gave a self-deprecating laugh. "My bark's worse than my bite." He glanced at his watch. "Give me a rain check. I told my wife I was leaving thirty minutes ago."

Brent waited while Smythe swept some papers into his briefcase then they went downstairs and outside into a cool evening drizzle and air that smelled of humidity and car exhaust. Overhead, low clouds cut off the top floors of taller buildings and made the evening unnaturally dark. Three or four streetlights were burned out along Fifth Avenue, leaving the sidewalk deeply shadowed. Smythe stepped toward the corner to flag a taxi on Fifth, so Brent said goodnight and started walking east.

He had gone about fifty yards when he heard an alarmed shout and looked back to see two men in hooded sweatshirts standing beside Smythe, who was bent over as if he'd just been slugged.

Brent started toward them, breaking quickly into a sprint, running on his toes to cut the noise. The nearest mugger sensed motion and looked around, his eyes registering surprise and shock, but too late. Brent's shoulder slammed the guy's chest just below the armpit, lifting him off his feet and into the crosswalk light. The guy bounced off the post and collapsed, while Brent kept moving, spinning leftward around Smythe, letting his heavy briefcase swing wide and catching the second mugger in the hip. The man grunted and splayed on the sidewalk. He came back up in a low crouch, holding his side, and Brent saw the glint of bare steel.

He dropped his briefcase, deciding it was too unwieldy against the knife. The first mugger was still on his hands and knees, stunned but trying to stand. Before he could, Brent grabbed him by his pants and the neck of his sweatshirt, jerked him off the ground, and hurled him into his partner. Both muggers went down in a tangle. Brent rushed over, pinned the second man's wrist with one foot, and stomped on his hand with the other until he heard bones crack.

He kicked the loose knife into the gutter as sirens sounded in the distance. When he looked around, he spotted Smythe with his cell phone to his ear.

"I already called 911," Smythe said breathlessly.

Brent glanced back at the two men, both getting to their feet, one cradling his wrist. Heedless of the horns and screeching brakes, they scuttled across Fifth Avenue and disappeared over the park wall.

"Come on," Brent said as he bent over and picked up his briefcase. "Let's get out of here."

"We have to wait for the police," Smythe said.

"You'll be looking at mug shots all night. Your wife will be pissed."

Smythe gave him an amazed look. "You're a damn Kamikaze!" Still, he started walking. Halfway down the block he turned. "You do stuff like that all the time?"

Brent winked. "Every chance I get."

"I owe you," Smythe said. He shook his head as he continued to look at Brent. "Thanks."

• • •

On the second floor of the Genesis Advisors building, Fred Wofford stood in the window of his darkened office. He had witnessed the entire confrontation—in fact he had arranged it. Even though he hadn't intended for Smythe to be involved, it had worked even better. He nodded to himself. The kid with the injured arm would have a fat wad of cash to compensate him for his discomfort, but more important Wofford had seen what he needed about how Brent Lucas would respond.

NEW YORK, JUNE 14

A HALF HOUR LATER, BRENT perched atop an unpacked moving box as he sipped a cold beer and gazed out his apartment window at the shrouding yellow mist. One hand was bruised and his shoulder ached, yet he felt pleased. He'd reacted purely on instinct, just like a Lucas, like his father or Harry or his Uncle Fred, having no thought for self-preservation.

The building across the street had large picture windows, and there was a dinner party underway. In other apartments couples watched television; a man read to his daughter on a couch. He watched them, thinking that these were normal people, not those who would risk everything on a random confrontation. He sipped his beer, thought about how unlike them he was, and his mood darkened.

He'd been brought up to think he was different from the others in his family. He was smart—high school they'd called him "gifted." At Yale, as an All-Ivy football star, he'd been swept into a different world. Courted by wealthy alums, he'd gone on to become an analyst with a prestigious investment bank. Two years later he'd entered business school then joined a fund manager in Boston. His rise had been meteoric and had shown no signs of slowing until the ugly truth of an ugly business began to chip away at the fairytale facade.

The greed of his co-workers had been a slap in the face and brought the values of his family rushing back. He'd blown the whistle without a thought of what it would do to his career. Now here he was at GA, still making great money but an outsider and a short-termer. Where was he headed from here, he wondered?

He took a sip of beer and shook his head because his career was only part of the problem. The bigger piece was Maggie. He closed his eyes and pictured her. Lush black hair, worn short but always sexy. Serious face that could thaw in a heartbeat into a teasing smile. Dark eyes full of cool intelligence one minute and fiery passion the next. Maggie defied labels, a wild combination of lush and sparse, serious and funny, sensual and tough. Her contrasts worked perfectly for him.

He'd never opened up to people easily, but with her—especially after Harry's death—it had been different. Even though they hadn't spoken in months, he imagined her walking through the door right now. Lithe and athletic, her movements quick and sure. Even in her absence she remained a part of him, like the enduring sensation of an amputated limb.

He took out his cell phone, dialed her number, but then hesitated. What would he say—confess to being lonely and confused? They'd broken up because she had wanted a bigger commitment, one that he still wasn't ready to make.

For him, two other things had always come before marriage, namely his debts to Fred and Harry. His older brother had dragged him from the fire that destroyed their house and killed their mother, then protected and guided him for years afterward. Fred had taken in the two orphans and become the family they had lost.

For Christmas 1999, Brent had given Harry a brand new twenty-eight foot Mako because his brother loved saltwater fishing. ~~Borrowing a hundred thousand dollars on top of tens of thousands of dollars in education debt was something most people would never understand, but Brent knew Harry could never afford that boat on a fireman's salary. In hindsight, it was the best decision he'd ever made. He and Harry had spent irreplaceable weekends fishing during the summer of 2000.~~

In Fred's case, Brent planned to buy him a small house in Florida. It was something Fred might have afforded on his own, only not after the expense of raising his two nephews. Brent's salary from GA would soon make the house a reality. Then, if the job even lasted that long, a few more months of scrimping and he'd finally be free of tuition debt and able to start thinking about other things.

In the building opposite, couples were still laughing, talking, and sitting together in contented silence. The sight added to his hunger for the sound of Maggie's voice; however, instead of pushing the send button, he closed his phone.

His regret was a cold stone in his chest. He'd never fully explained his reasons to her but he'd put them inside the way he did so many things. Now he was paying the price.

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