

Advanced praise for *The Assassin's Case*

"Craig Alexander's latest is a page-turning thriller that is a bold mix of Biblical themes and mainstream grit. Alexander takes the reader on a thrill-ride exploration of the need for vengeance and its effect on the body, mind and soul."

Jeremy Robinson - bestselling (and #1 Audible.com bestselling) author of sixty novels and novellas, including *Infinite*, *The Others*, *Alter*, *Space Force*, *The Distance*, *Apocalypse Machine*, and *Project Nemesis*, the highest selling, original (non-licensed) kaiju novel of all time.

Praise for *The Nineveh Project* Another great thriller from Craig Alexander

"A must read. The Nineveh Project reads like an action movie plays out on the screen—thrilling and non-stop. Craig Alexander puts the reader in the seat of an unremitting thrill ride that doesn't let up until the book ends."

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"Craig Alexander imbues his debut novel, *The Nineveh Project*, with the kind of kinetic excitement you might expect from a man who has a black belt in three Korean martial arts. Combining *The Bourne Identity's* fights and espionage with *The Da Vinci Code's* pot-boiling thrills ... "

From the Essential Gear column of Black Belt Magazine

"The Nineveh Project is an action-packed tale..."

The Rankin Ledger

"In the best thriller tradition, the book is gripping and hard to put down."

The Rankin Record

Also by Craig Alexander:

THE NINEVEH PROJECT

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for Terra

The only cure for grief is action.
George Henry Lewes

PROLOGUE

16 Years Ago

Grant Sawyer lay prone in thick, wild, grass on a hillside overlooking a salvage yard. His body was melded to the ground, the reticle of his Unertl ten-power scope trained on the brain stem of his target. A finger rested on his rifle's trigger guard, the power to grant life or death at its tip. Grass itched against his stomach, the faint hint of radiator fluid and charred motor oil drifted on the breeze. "I have the subject in my sights."

"Copy, Bravo One."

The subject was Vinnie Delfuco. A thug and racketeer with a history of violence, now branching out into the illicit drug trade. Delfuco's family, an old-style Sicilian mafia-like organization led by his father, had been the subject of a long running FBI investigation. The family was wreaking havoc in Memphis, Tennessee and the Bureau's best efforts had produced no convictions. Ambitious and greedy, Vinnie was going off the reservation. Just the break the FBI needed to nail him, maybe gain some leverage to pry open the layers of secrecy shrouding his father.

Vinnie was about to sell drugs to an undercover agent. After the transaction, things could become interesting. HRT, the elite FBI Hostage Rescue Team, of which Grant was a member, had been called in for backup.

Grant's job was to make sure no agents were killed. He kept his crosshairs on Vinnie's head as the other snipers called in the positions of their targets. The others had multiple targets, but Grant's primary was Vinnie Delfuco. The man carried an Uzi on a sling over his shoulder and no one believed he would hesitate to use it.

The drama unfolded in a large open area between stacks of smashed cars, washers, dryers, refrigerators, and mounds of scrap metal. It had taken Grant two hours to belly-crawl into position. Aided by a ghillie suit, a type of overall

covered in torn cloth shreds designed to resemble foliage, he was now part of the landscape. The baking sun made sweat trickle down his back and collected on his brow. Bugs dined on his exposed skin, but he ignored the discomfort. His focus, his entire being, existed only in the scope. The distance to his target was a little less than two-hundred yards, with little wind. A relatively easy shot with the rifle in his hands, a custom built .308-caliber on a Remington Model 700 bolt-action receiver.

As the cash and the drugs changed hands, Grant released a slow breath, nestled the rifle against his shoulder, and leaned into the cheek pad, its surface cool from sweat. He adjusted position, aligning his body with the recoil path to minimize muzzle jump. Mind, body, and weapon, one.

“We’re green.” The team was moving in.

Grant heard a shout of warning followed by the blast of a pistol. Something had gone wrong. Through the earpiece, and audibly with his opposite ear, Grant heard shouts to freeze and drop weapons. Through the magnified image in the scope, he saw the anger flash on Vinnie Delfuco’s face as he realized the betrayal. He brought up the Uzi. With bloodlust in his eyes he moved the gun into firing position on the undercover agent. They wanted Delfuco alive, but for him to survive, an agent would probably die. A body shot might not instantly incapacitate Delfuco and he would carve the agent in half at such close range with the automatic weapon. The agent or Delfuco. There wasn’t really a choice.

Grant’s finger caressed the trigger, methodically reeling in the slack to reach the trigger’s two-and-a-half-pound breaking point.

The rifle spat its deadly charge, a 168-grain bullet traveling at 2,700 feet per second. Vinnie Delfuco’s existence was eradicated in a spray of red mist before Grant’s ears registered the gun’s report. Vinnie’s lifeless body crumpled to the dust before he had a chance to fire a shot.

After their leader went down, the rest of Delfuco’s men surrendered when the Hostage Rescue Team swarmed them.

Two Weeks Later

“On the night before the Bear’s big day, they look at the moon, far, far, away.”

Grant lay next to his six-year-old, Pierce, in his single bed, an arm draped around his shoulders. Grant could have repeated the text of *The Berenstain Bears On the Moon* without opening the front cover. Pierce loved it. His latest craze was anything to do with space. Grant read through the book with only an occasional peek at the pages. "Now they look up at the stars, very, very far away. Will they go up to a star ...? Well, they may ... someday." He flipped the cover closed and kissed his son's forehead.

"One more story, dad. Please. I'm not tired." Pierce yawned, his eyelids fluttering. He was a near duplicate of his father; the only features he inherited from his mom were her striking ice-blue eyes.

"Oh, I know," Grant said. "But I am." He rolled out of the bed, switched off the lamp, and adjusted the covers around Pierce's shoulders. Grant cupped a hand over his son's face and gave him another kiss. "Get some good sleep."

"I will. I love you."

"Love you, too."

As Grant walked through the door Pierce called, "Dad?"

Grant gripped the doorframe and leaned back. "What is it, buddy?"

"Are you tougher than Houston's dad?"

Grant smiled and went back to kneel by the bed. Ah, the old my dad can beat up your dad. "Your mom's the tough one."

"Aw, dad."

Grant had to be gone a lot. Occasionally he had to be away for weeks at a time. He had just returned from a fifteen-day trip. Although Grant tried to make every minute count when he was at home, it was still hard on Pierce. Even so, his son thought he was a superhero. Grant knew all too soon that would change. But for now, he would enjoy every minute. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, Houston said his dad could beat you up, no problem."

Houston was Pierce's friend and classmate. His father, Rex Pittman, was Pierce's Tae Kwon Do instructor. He was a very nice guy and seemed to be a capable martial artist. He was definitely good with the kids in his Little Dragon program.

"Well, Houston is proud of his father. And he should be. But we would never get into a fight, so it doesn't really matter." Grant tousled his son's hair. "Now, go to sleep."

As Grant reached his bedroom door, Pierce called out again. "You could take him. I know it."

Grant shook his head and smiled. He walked down the hall of his family's one-story house toward his bedroom, surprised to find the door closed. When he began story-time Susan had been finishing up in the kitchen. He eased the door open. The room lights were dimmed, and candles burned on the nightstands. He shut the door and reached for the light switch.

"Why don't you leave them off?" Susan stood in the bathroom doorway, the light from within shining through a flimsy negligee. "I haven't had a chance to welcome you home properly."

She looked amazing. The silk gown accentuated every curve, the light caught the highlights in her blonde hair, framing it in a halo, candlelight gleamed in her blue eyes.

Grant crossed the room in three steps and smothered her in his arms.

Beep-beep. Beep-beep. Beep-beep.

"You have *got* to be kidding me." Grant untangled himself from Susan and grabbed his pager off the dresser. The numbers 888 flashed across the beeper window. Three eights meant the team was to immediately assemble at HRT headquarters. He had to report in. Grant sighed. "I'm sorry, baby."

He didn't have to explain, she knew what it meant.

After tossing his gear-bag in the rear cargo area of his Pathfinder, Grant patted his pockets and realized he had left his phone and pager inside. He closed the rear hatch and noticed the paper still sitting at the end of the driveway. *Might as well take it inside.* He scooped the paper off the drive and scanned the street. They lived on a tree-lined cul-de-sac in a quiet middle-class suburb of Fredericksburg, Virginia, a long way from the small Texas town where he grew up.

As he turned, his world ended.

His house erupted in a white-hot flash and a deafening boom. Though most of the concussion wave shot debris straight up into the night sky, the blast still lifted him from the ground and hurled him into the street. His back hit first, then his head. Sparks exploded in his skull, and the wind was knocked out of him, a scream stuck in his throat. Debris rained down. Though strained and muffled by his traumatized ears, he registered the screech of car alarms

and a thump as a large piece of wreckage slammed to the ground near him. As his vision faded to black and consciousness slipped away, the last things he heard were the cries of neighbors and a distant siren.

* * * * *

Grant blinked his eyes. Pain thrummed through his head, followed by a wave of nausea. Through blurred vision he made out white sheets and the railing of a hospital bed. He continued to blink, and his vision slowly cleared. He felt a light pressure on his right arm and saw a hand resting on it. He tilted his head so he could see who was beside him. His best friend, Steve Jenson, one of the assistant special agents in charge in the Dallas FBI field office. When Grant started his career at the Bureau, Steve had been his training agent. But he had become more than that, a mentor, and later a friend. Pierce called him Uncle Steve.

Steve patted Grant's arm. "You've been out for two days. You took quite a blow to the head. A few burns too."

Susan. Pierce.

Fear constricted Grant's chest and he squeezed Steve's hand. One look in the man's haunted eyes told Grant all he needed to know. But he still had to ask. "My family?"

A tear pooled in Steve's eye and he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Grant. I'm so sorry."

Grant squeezed his eyes shut, stifling a yell, but not the tears.

"Grant."

Something grave in Steve's tone forced Grant's eyes open.

"There's more." Steve swallowed and smacked his lips before taking a deep breath. "Okay. I've just got to spit this out." More tears rolled down his face. "There were two more bombs. One at your parents and one at Charlotte's. Your parents didn't make it, but your sister's okay. She received an emergency page from the hospital. She was en-route the house went up."

Steve grimaced and Grant realized he had been clamping down on his

hand. He eased the pressure. "Why? How? Who?"

"Our bomb recovery and analysis team determined the devices placed at your sister's and parents' were detonated with pagers. So, they could have been set off from anywhere. But the one at your house was detonated using a short range remote." Tears flowed from Steve's eyes. "The bastard was probably close enough to watch." He took a breath. "As to the who and the why, we're pretty sure Carmine Delfuco is responsible. This sort of thing seems to happen to people who cross him. We just can't prove it. Yet."

"How did he know I was the one that pulled the trigger on his son?"

"We're pretty sure it was someone in the Memphis PD. Probably someone that worked the bust. At least that's what I believe."

Grant leaned back on the pillow. He gripped the bed railing hard enough to turn his knuckles white. His chest was so tight he didn't know if he could draw a breath, but he did. This time he didn't stifle the yell of anguish that bubbled from his throat.

*One sole desire, one passion now remains
To keep life's fever still within his veins,
Vengeance! dire vengeance on the wretch who cast
O'er him and all he lov'd that ruinous blast.*

Thomas Moore

ONE

Present Day

If Grant knew then what he knew now, would he have pulled the trigger? Would he have killed the scumbag?

Impossible to say.

The magic bullet. One shot that ended six lives. Grant's included. Francis Bacon said a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well.

Well Grant's wounds *were* green. He hadn't healed. And didn't want to.

Grant shrugged his shoulders and attempted to shake the grief and anger. He tried to focus on the brightly decorated shops in the mall. Christmas used to be a time of elation and joy, his favorite time of the year.

Now, not so much.

The myriad of twinkling lights, tinsel and bows, the throng of shoppers, laughing children, and every wish of a merry Christmas battered Grant like a body blow.

He located an empty bench among the crowd and fell onto it. The scent of baked cookies, cinnamon, and evergreen filled his nostrils. He closed his eyes, fighting against the wave of memories besieging his psyche.

He lost.

Everyone had known who was responsible.

Everyone.

Grant smacked a fist into his opposite palm. After his family's murder and a brief leave of absence, Grant requested re-assignment to an investigative unit. Of course he had been warned to stay clear of the Delfuco case. After almost a year with no convictions for his family's murder, Grant snapped.

He loaded his car with enough munitions to storm a small country and drove the seven hours from Dallas to Memphis. Justice would be meted out. He arrived at the Delfuco mansion and forced his way in, injuring several

hired thugs in the process. Carmine Delfuco fled in an armored limo, and before Grant could exact revenge, he was stopped. Local law enforcement, aided by the FBI agents surveilling the mansion, swarmed him. But they weren't after the bad guys, they were after Grant.

Even with friends high up the chain of command, Grant was suspended without pay. His future with the bureau dim, he quit before his pending appearance in front of a board of review. As a matter of fact, he was fortunate not to have been charged. For a while he retained friends in the Bureau, and they kept him informed. They eventually identified the assassin who had placed the bombs. Jimmy "Boom" Tedesco. In order to stay out of prison he gave damning evidence that brought the Delfuco organization down. Carmine was convicted and given two life sentences without the possibility of parole. But his prison term was cut short by a brutal stabbing with a shiv. Not long after that the attempts on Grant's life began. Someone still wanted revenge for Carmine and Vinnie. And nobody could tell Grant who wanted it.

Jimmy Tedesco still walked free, living plush in the witness protection program. The U.S. Attorney's office decided that the hand that pulled the trigger was more important than the gun.

But not for Grant.

A woman burdened with packages plopped down with a sigh next to Grant and snapped him out of his reverie. Grateful for the distraction, he attempted a weak smile. He stood and began to navigate his way through the crowd. Under normal conditions, especially during the holiday season, he avoided anywhere crowds were gathered, but the only shop that carried his security guard uniforms was located in this mall. On his shift the night before he ripped his last pair of pants, forced to come here to buy more.

Ghosts weren't supposed to mingle with the living. And that's what he was. A ghost. Oh, he still drew breath, but Grant Sawyer died sixteen years ago. All that remained was a shade, a pale shadow of the man he used to be, a specter driven by grief and anger.

Still, out of habit he scanned his surroundings, looking, searching, his gaze attempting to identify the out of place, the unusual, the sinister.

A glance at his watch told him six hours remained until his shift began. He lifted his head, eyes darting from face-to-face. Though no one touched him,

the throng of people began to suffocate him as his thoughts strayed.

He sat again and gripped the edges of the bench. For sixteen years he had attempted to locate Tedesco and had failed. On *many* occasions he had been warned off, to cease and desist, losing most of his friends in the Bureau along the way. But he hadn't quit. Nor would he. One day the final thread would be tied and Grant could waste away in peace.

Enough.

Grant stood and stretched. Time to get this foray into the world of the living over and done.

Sometimes life can turn on the smallest of things, the most seemingly insignificant of circumstances. Call it fate, kismet, the hand of God. Whatever.

Nothing about the man seated on the next bench seemed remarkable. An older gentleman, probably in his sixties, gray hair, glasses, black trench coat, a newspaper held before his face. The only unusual thing about him was the briefcase on the ground next to his feet. Dull and black, not shiny like the typical leather attaché case, and thicker. It appeared to be very sturdy, able to withstand a lot of abuse. The silver locks also appeared durable and secure.

Grant took a step toward his destination. He couldn't take his eyes from a passing couple. A small boy walked between them, each of his tiny hands holding one of his parent's. Grant ground his teeth against another wave of pain tinted memories.

That's when it happened.

A man dressed in a stylish business suit, identical to a hundred other husbands-fathers-sons, utilizing their lunch hour to shop for Christmas, stepped in front of Grant. Without breaking stride the man leaned over and grabbed the case by the handle and continued walking.

The gray-haired man never raised his eyes from the paper. Grant's eyes alternately darted from the seated man to the retreating man's back.

"Hey," Grant said. "Stop!"

The gray-haired man didn't so much as twitch or look up from the paper, though several other shoppers turned their heads at the disturbance. For the first time Grant noticed beads of sweat on the old man's brow. The guy in the suit never slowed.

Why me?

Grant moved. He used his shoulders to push through the crowd. "Excuse me. Pardon me." A space opened in front of him and he ran. Within ten steps he caught up with the man in the suit. Grant bent and grabbed the case with both hands and wrenched it from his grasp. The man had a tight grip on the case's handle. As it was ripped away, it caused him to spin around.

The man had training. He didn't lose his balance. His eyes locked on Grant. "Give it back. Now."

Though his suit was tailored to excellence, Grant noticed the slight, but telltale, bulge of a concealed weapon beneath the man's left arm. "You stole it."

"The case belongs to me. You're making a mistake." The man's eyes were hard. He appeared to be calculating. His right hand drifted toward the front of his blazer.

"No. But *you're* about to." Grant stepped closer, within arm's length. He held the case in his left hand, his other hand drifted to the right pocket of his jeans. His fingertips rested on the CQC-7 folding combat knife clipped to the inside of the pocket.

The man's eyes narrowed, then without another word, turned and strode away, disappearing into a crowded department store.

Grant returned to the bench and found the case's owner still seated. But as he stepped in front of the man Grant could tell the calm was just a veneer. Although he seemed to be looking at the paper, his eyes were darting left and right, his skin pale, sweat dripped from his scalp line and ran in small rivulets along his face.

"I think this yours?" Grant held the case in front of him. He was struck by its weight; it must be at least twenty pounds.

The man just stared for a moment. "Yes ... No ... I mean ..." He laid the paper on the bench and stood. "It's yours. Just take it. I've done my part." He turned to walk away.

Grant snatched at his sleeve. "Wait."

The man's eyes grew wide with fear and he pulled away, his right arm slipping from the coat sleeve. For the first time Grant noticed the elderly gentleman wore a clear skin-tight glove on his left hand. The man shrugged out of the other sleeve and ran into the crowd.

Grant stood, holding the bag, literally, and the coat.

After losing the old man in the crowd, Grant located the sign for the mall security office between two stores. He walked down a long white-tiled hallway and pushed through a set of double doors into a waiting area. More white tile, light gray walls, and gray plastic chairs. At the opposite side was an employee's only entrance, next to it a waist-high rectangular opening like you would find in a doctor's waiting room. Soles squeaking on the tile, he moved to the window. The case in his left hand was heavy. He concluded that he had interrupted an exchange. Not a theft. And the glove on the elderly man's hand. Strange.

Grant peered through the window. On the opposite side was a small office with a desk right in front of the opening, beyond that another room. Through the floor to ceiling glass a bank of security camera monitors was visible. A man in a white uniform shirt with his back to Grant faced the video feeds. But he didn't appear to be monitoring them. His head was in his hands and he looked to be asleep.

Beneath the reception window, a pair of scuffed shoes perched on top of the desk. Another security guard in a white shirt reclined in a tilted back chair. He had an ample waistline. His left hand clutched some sort of jelly filled confection and his right swiped a napkin at a glob of goo on his black tie. He still hadn't noticed Grant's presence.

Grant turned away without a word. He didn't know why, but he felt the case was important. He wouldn't, couldn't, entrust it to the incompetent pair of security guards.

Grant decided to deliver it to the police instead.

TWO

Attempting to keep his shoes from squeaking on the linoleum floor, Grant patrolled the corridors of Paradise Haven retirement village.

Paradise Haven.

The name sounded nice. But, in fact, it simply seemed to be a place of waiting. Waiting for death. The perfect situation for him. Quiet. A place for those waiting to die was perfect for someone dead.

Even so, Grant took the job seriously. There was honor in what he did, using his skills to protect the residents. Though the need had only arisen once. The danger hadn't come from the outside, but from inside.

Making frequent stops to look over his shoulder, Grant patrolled the halls. The main structure of Paradise Haven, which housed the residents, was laid out like a giant square. Two corridors ran the length of the front and back, and two wider corridors containing the guest rooms on each of the sides, with two rows of rooms in each. The middle of the square consisted of a landscaped courtyard with walkways and benches. This design allowed everyone living here to have a view of the outside. For many of the bedridden residents, it was the only view of the world they would ever have.

He was edgy after the confrontation in the mall and was sure he had been followed. A new model Chevy Impala had appeared too many times in the rearview mirror on the way to work. Could this be about the case? Or had his past caught up with him? It seemed as if he had just settled here.

Grant completed the circuit and returned to Mrs. Wellington's room. When he passed the first time, he noticed her light on. If the dictionary contained a definition of a sweet old lady, her picture would be beside the text. He tapped lightly on the door.

"Come in."

Easing the door open, Grant poked his head through. Nice but dated furnishings rested on green carpeting. A small living area contained a light-

blue couch. A muted TV flashed in the dim light.

Mrs. Wellington lay on her adjustable bed, propped up with pillows, a novel in her lap. She smiled. "Hello."

"Can't sleep?"

"No." She held up the book, one of the Women's Murder Club series by James Patterson. "Besides, I just can't wait to see how this ends."

"How about a cup of hot tea?"

"I wouldn't want you to go to any trouble for me."

"It's no trouble. I'll be right back."

"Bless you, Grant."

Grant eased the door shut and turned toward the kitchen. Mrs. Wellington was one of the only friends he had left in the world. He went the long way around to avoid the nurse on duty at the front desk. The nurses and orderlies weren't very fond of him. When Grant arrived here two years ago, he had been appalled to find neglect and some outright abuse. The worst offenders were two male orderlies. Many of the residents had family and were frequently visited. But many did not and were utterly alone. The two orderlies, bullies both, harassed and harangued the residents with no family. Though the main form of abuse was verbal, some of it was physical.

His first week on the job, on a night much like this, he heard Mrs. Wellington crying in her room. Her door partially open, Grant stuck his head in. She sat in bed, holding her wrist. Though reluctant, she finally showed him her bruised wrist. Earlier in the day she had the audacity to stand up to the orderlies. When she demanded they leave her room, they began hurling expletives at her. One of them grabbed her wrist to reiterate the point.

Grant arrived at the kitchen and pushed through the double doors. He flicked on some lights, moved to the stove, and started water boiling in a kettle.

When Grant saw Mrs. Wellington's wrist and discovered what happened, he became incensed. Further investigation revealed similar incidences to be a common occurrence. It takes a special kind of coward to pick on the elderly.

The next day Grant arrived early for his shift and waited for the orderlies in the employee locker room. He tried talking to the men, but they would have none of it, told Grant to shut up or they would see to it he was fired. Locking

the door to prevent intrusions, Grant put fear in their hearts. Making sure not to damage their faces, he beat them without mercy. After, while holding one by the throat against the wall, he pressed the blade of his CQC-7 against the throat of the other. He explained to them the error of their ways. He further informed them that if anything like it happened again, he wouldn't be as kind. Within two weeks both men had turned in their resignations.

The kettle whistled when the water reached a boil. He poured the steaming water into a cup, then dropped in a tea bag. After it steeped, he added a drop of honey and lemon juice.

The case from the mall was in his locker. He should have already taken it to the police, but he hadn't. And he still didn't know why. He had come to the decision to take it to the authorities the next morning, but still, the nagging feeling wouldn't subside. The old man seemed so scared. And the glove. Why?

Grant delivered the tea to Mrs. Wellington, placing the cup within easy reach on her nightstand.

Before he could leave, she clasped his hand in both of hers. "You're such a sweet man. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He patted the back of her hand. "Try to get some sleep."

"I will."

Grant turned to give her a smile as he walked out the door.

She called after him. "If I were a century or so younger, you wouldn't be on the market for long."

Grant smiled and shook his head. He eased the door shut and returned to making rounds. Every night he strolled the halls, alone, thinking. Well, it was actually more like brooding.

He had long ago come to the realization that all he had done leading to his family's death was propelled by fear. At fourteen his quiet home in a suburban neighborhood was invaded. Two men broke into his house and robbed them, terrifying him in the process. His father, a mild, yet, strong man, tried to stop them, and took a bullet for his trouble. Grant, his sister, and his mother, were forced to watch his father bleed into the carpet at gunpoint while the intruders completed the robbery.

Although Grant was a typical older brother and bullied his little sister

Charlotte when he had the opportunity, he was still protective of her. Like all siblings, it was okay for Grant to give his sister a hard time, but God help anyone else who bothered her. The abject terror on her face during the robbery gave Grant nightmares for weeks.

His father survived his injury, but Grant's innocence and sense of security didn't.

That was the key moment, the life changing instance which set him on his path.

After the robbery he swore never again to be a victim. He trained in the martial arts, coerced his father into buying a gun for their protection, and through hours of practice became proficient in its use. He trained his body and mind with ruthless determination.

He majored in criminal justice at Texas A&M, graduating in three years. While there, he met his wife. After a stint in the Army, where he became a Ranger, he decided to pursue a career in law enforcement. He had a future in the army, but he longed to hunt down criminals. The home-grown variety. After enduring an exhaustive interview process the Federal Bureau of Investigation hired him. At twenty-five he was living the dream. After two years of investigating crimes under the tutelage and friendship of Steve Jenson in the backwaters of Texas, he sought a new challenge. The elite HRT.

Funny how events can shape people differently. His sister had made a decision after the robbery as well. She decided to become a doctor. A healer with the skill to stop her daddy's bleeding.

At the rear of the complex near the employee's entrance it was desolate and lonely. Nothing back here but the locker room and the employee lounge. At least one nurse and one orderly were on duty twenty-four hours a day and they used the lounge to sleep when they weren't needed. A glass door led to the rear parking lot. Out of habit Grant went to check the door, though designed to lock automatically when shut, sometimes it would stick without fully closing. He placed a hand on the door, and it swung open. Something out of place caught his eye and he bent down. Scratches marred the door jamb indicating it had been pried open.

Instinct made him reach for his belt, but no gun was there, just a hefty Maglite brand flashlight. The metal device took three D-cell batteries and

could serve as a nice club if needed. He thought he spied a shadow, a hint of movement, in the parking lot near his truck. He wanted to check it out but chose to canvas the halls of building first to make sure no residents were in danger. It could be nothing, but then again ...

Pulling the flashlight from his belt he turned and shined the beam left and right. The rear door allowed entry into a long corridor at the back of the building, and no one else occupied it. Ears straining, Grant thought he heard the scuff of a shoe in the corridor to his right. He crept forward and leaned against the wall at the junction of the two hallways. Footsteps approached and a shadow fell across the floor in front of him. Flashlight raised to strike, he spun away from the wall.

A startled yelp preceded a tray clattering to the floor. One of the nurses on duty, Betty, clutched her chest and gulped in great breaths. "Dear Lord, Grant. You scared the beezus out of me."

"Sorry." Grant leaned down to help her pick up the shards of a broken glass and plate and collect the scattered silverware.

Betty seemed to recover. "What in the world are you doing jumping around corners like that?"

"I thought I heard something," Grant said. "Have you seen anybody inside? That shouldn't be here, I mean?"

"No." Betty wrinkled her eyebrows. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Everything's fine. I'm just a little jumpy" Grant stared down the corridor and didn't see anything amiss. "The back door was left open. I just wanted to be sure." He grabbed the tray from Betty. "I'll take care of this for you. And since I'm going that way, I'll walk you."

After escorting Betty to the employee lounge, Grant eased along the corridor, continuing his search. He almost called the police, but for all he knew there could be a reasonable explanation for the condition of the door. Heading to the other residents' corridor he passed the employee locker room.

Something clanged inside. Soft but distinct. The faint sound of metal scraping metal. Grant set the tray down next to the door. Praying for well-oiled hinges he eased the door open. Relieved when no protesting squeal gave him away, he peered into the room. A man worked to pry open a locker, his back to the door. Grant's locker. Identifiable by a strip of manila tape with his

name etched in black marker.

The man wore a black suit stretched over a frame better suited to a beast of burden. He virtually had no neck and his massive shoulders appeared about to burst the fabric of his coat. Short, coal black hair, stopped about an inch above his collar, and the visible portion of his neck was a deep tan.

Grant stole to within ten feet of him and stopped. "Can I help you with that? The lock seems to be giving you a bit of trouble."

The man spun on the ball of his foot. Though he appeared a little surprised he made no move. His face was wide with a flat nose. It appeared as if he had stepped out of an episode of the *Sopranos*, or off the set of *Goodfella's*. Though just a shade shorter than Grant's six-three he seemed to fill the room. The man's eyes narrowed when he looked at Grant's face, as if realizing who he was. "Where's the case?"

"And you are ...?"

"It belongs to me. I need it."

Grant whipped a phone from his pocket. "Well. I'll be more than happy to return it to you. Once we get the police here, we'll get this thing straightened out."

The man drew in a long breath. His chest swelled. It must have taken a lot of energy to expand the massive cavity. He released the breath and pinched his lips together, almost as if resigning himself to a course of action he didn't really want to take. When his eyes narrowed Grant realized what that course of action would be.

The man charged from the wall; arms spread for a tackle.

If Grant had a red cape he would have been tempted to yell, *Toro!* Grant stood his ground until the last instant. He stepped out of the way, sweeping the grasping arms away with his left hand. He snaked out a foot, tripping the big man at the ankle. As he stumbled by Grant bashed the back of his head with the Maglite. On impact the flashlight's lens housing snapped off the handle and the batteries spilled onto the floor.

The trip combined with the blow sent the man flying headlong toward a wall of lockers on the opposite side of the room. He raised his arms and banged into the lockers with a booming clang. The clamor loud enough to wake everyone in the zip code.

The man pushed from the wall, shook his head, and charged.

Grant knew if his opponent ever got a grip on him, he was finished. The man was too large, and no amount of grappling skill would tip the scales in Grant's favor. Heaven help him if the man forced him to the floor. Grant dropped the flashlight's remains to the ground.

Just as the man reached him, Grant dove away from his grasp. He landed in a roll, coming to his feet, facing his opponent.

The man bowled into the lockers again and turned. Talk about your bull in the china shop.

His eyes studied Grant as if taking his measure. The man approached; this time slow. "Look, you don't understand. I don't want to do this. But I need that case. It's important." While he spoke, he moved within arm's length.

Grant saw the blow coming. A right aimed at his chin. Catching the inside of the arm, Grant pulled the man onto his hip, rolled his body with the momentum, and slammed his opponent to the floor. He landed in a heap; the impact accompanied by a loud thud. Somewhere a seismologist was scratching his head at the sudden blip on the Richter scale.

Before he could land a follow up kick to the head, the man spun onto his stomach, and pushed himself off the floor. He stole a fleeting glimpse at Grant while he ran from the room clutching his side.

Grant held the phone, but something made him hesitate to call 911. He pushed through the door and scanned the hallway. Betty stood with a hand over her mouth, the other clutched her cell phone, as the man ran by her before pushing through the back exit.

To satisfy himself the man was gone, Grant moved to the rear door, watching while a Chevy Impala peeled out of the parking lot. Grant held the door open, staring after the car, while in the distance sirens approached.

THREE

Grant finished a set of pushups and used a towel to mop the sweat from his forehead. He sat on the edge of the small bed in his tiny bedroom. His shift at the nursing home had ended at midnight, though he had stayed later answering, well more like evading, the police's questions. Exercise helped him sleep. If he was bone weary, the nightmares weren't usually as severe.

He tossed the towel toward the bathroom, frustrated at his self pity. Some days were better than others, but the holidays, well ... they were almost unbearable. Thanksgiving started it. He had allowed himself to be persuaded into dinner at the nursing home. Some of the sweet elderly ladies, including Mrs. Wellington, couldn't bear the thought of Grant being alone. It simply served as yet another grim reminder of all he had lost.

Shake it off.

After a shower, he moved to the small table in the dining-slash-kitchen-slash-living room in his small apartment. He stared at the case, wondering for the thousandth time what it could possibly contain. And why hadn't he turned it over to the police? Something about the whole thing had his curiosity pricked. The look of horror on the old man's face. The attempted theft of the case. Something in Grant's gut told him to hang onto it.

He picked up the business card lying on top of it. It was plain and white, with no decorations, graphics, or logos.

Biodyne Technologies
Playas, New Mexico
Research and Development Division
Dr. Alfred Morgan-Senior Vice President

No phone number, street address, or e-mail.

The card was retrieved from the pocket of the trench coat the elderly man left Grant holding.

In addition to the attempted theft of his locker his truck had been broken into. When he entered his apartment, he had a distinct feeling someone had been inside, even though nothing seemed to be missing. Grant still had enemies, so he remained vigilant. It had been a few years since anyone had tried to kill him, but it still paid to be careful.

He switched on the television to check out the news and glanced at the collection of DVD's in the entertainment center. There was never anything on after work, so most nights he popped in a movie. He loved them. For a couple of hours, they allowed him to escape. Turn his mind off and enjoy the action unfolding on the screen. If the intruders had noticed the titles, they knew way too much about him. He smiled at the thought of a stranger flipping through them. Though the case was filled with action and martial arts movies, it also contained some guilty pleasures. He loved classic movies and even owned a few chick flicks. Next to *Enter the Dragon* sat a copy of *Romancing the Stone*. Side-by-side with *The Last Samurai* was a copy of *When Harry Met Sally*. By *The Legend of Drunken Master* sat *North by Northwest*. Well who could blame him? Cary Grant *was* the greatest film star of all time.

He decided to try to sleep on the situation and attempt to track down the case's owner in the morning. If he didn't have any luck, he would hand it over to the police. Something he should have already done. But that nagging feeling just wouldn't subside.

* * * * *

Jimmy *Boom* Tedesco finished wiping the beer glass and set it on the bar, then tossed the towel over his shoulder. The glasses were already wiped but he needed something to keep his hands occupied. A phone sat on the bar in front of him and he returned his gaze to the picture filling its screen. Tedesco shook his head. *Boom*. A trite and clichéd name for a hit man to say the least. But the moniker was bestowed on him long before he took the path which brought him here.

He drew in a long deep breath through his nose. The smell of stale smoke,

spilled beer, and wood, all stirred by the gently rotating ceiling fans, comforted him.

"Boss?" You there?" The small speaker made the man's voice sound tinny and far away.

"Just a second, I'm thinking." Tedesco considered the next move. Though he still thought of himself as Jimmy Tedesco, he hadn't heard the name spoken aloud in years. When he went off the grid, he changed his name again. After the second attempt on his life, he realized that regardless of the U.S. Marshal's best efforts, he wouldn't be safe in the witness protection program. He had gone by Ted Rivers for years now. Not terribly original but the best he could do on short notice.

The man once known as Boom Tedesco stared at a ghost from his past. How in the name of all that was holy had Grant Sawyer gotten hold of the case?

Grant Sawyer?

He stared at the picture. It had taken some convincing to insure the people who wanted the case that he could regain control of it. He had to think fast on his feet to work out a new deal. But, he knew they were desperate and dangerous. And if they could get their hands on it, they would, and cut him out. That wasn't acceptable; he had to have that case. He needed the deal to go through. He needed it more than he had ever needed anything. It was his last chance.

"You want me to grab it?"

"No. I know this man. If he sees you coming, he'll kill you. You were lucky. You don't know just how lucky." Tedesco stared into the neon glow created by the signs advertising his goods. "Where's the Doc?"

"Al's with him. The guy who was supposed to get the case tried to nab him outside the mall. We had to... uh... take care of it."

It took an act of will for Tedesco not to crumple the phone in his fist. This deal was coming unraveled. "I'm sure you did what you had to. Are our *clients* onto Sawyer?"

"Yeah. They're parked right in front of his place. If this guy knows anything he'll spot 'em right away."

"Okay," Tedesco said. "Stay with Sawyer. Whatever you do, make sure you

keep track of that case. If you see an opportunity grab it. But be careful.”

“You want me to take out the guys watching Sawyer?”

“No. We don’t need that kind of attention. Yet. I’m going to have enough to explain already. We should be okay ’til morning. I’ll come up with something.” Tedesco jabbed the phone and shoved it in his pocket. Grant Sawyer. This was a wrinkle he never imagined.