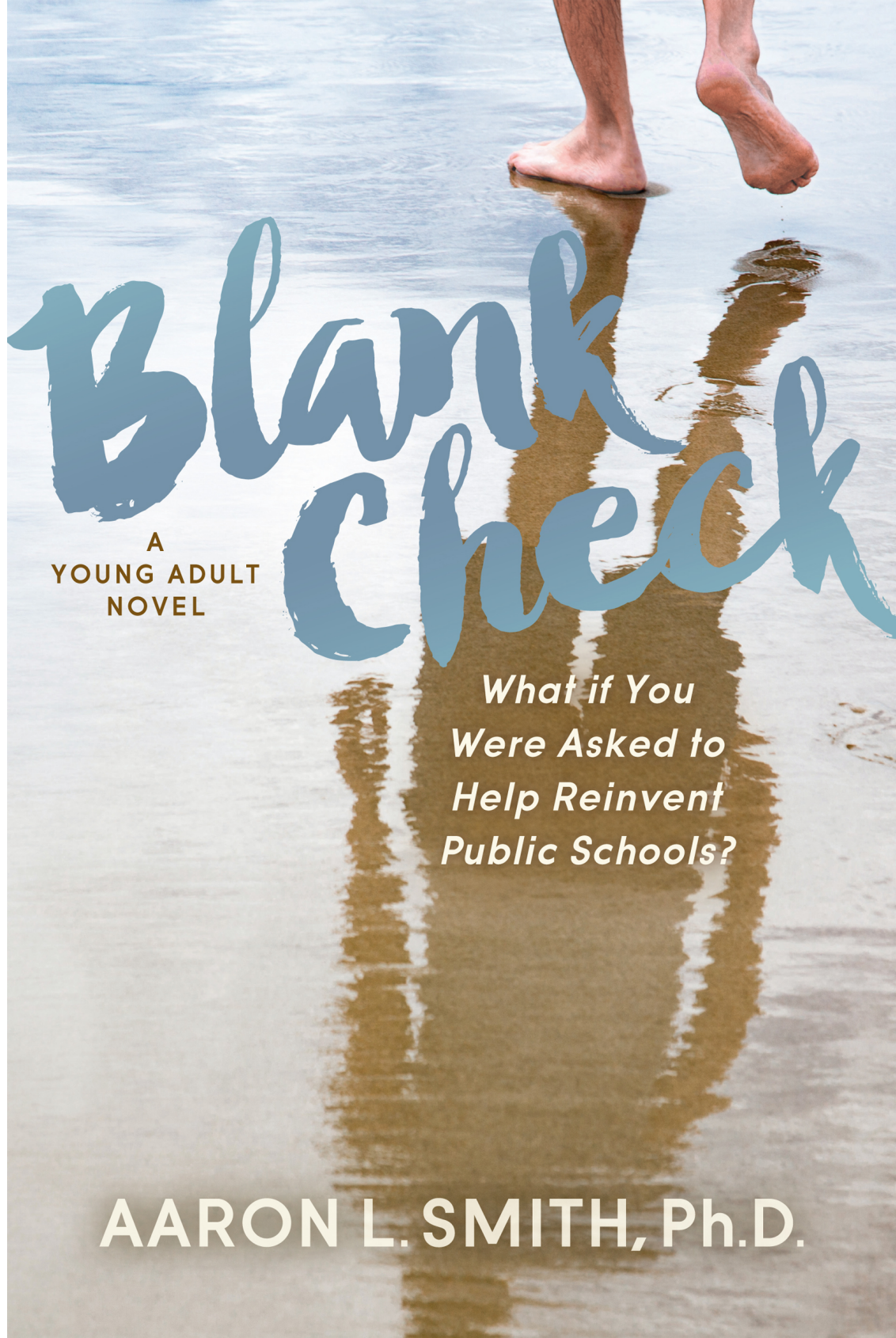




Blank Check

A
YOUNG ADULT
NOVEL

*What if You
Were Asked to
Help Reinvent
Public Schools?*

AARON L. SMITH, Ph.D.

Advance Praise for *Blank Check*

*“Blank Check—*a must-read for anyone interested in teaming together to reinvent public education. Dr. Smith’s book introduces a plan for addressing critical issues surrounding public education. The time is here. The time is now.”

—**Maurice Woods**, Chief Strategy & Operations Officer, Broward County Public Schools (Sixth largest school district in the United States) and author of *Audacious Social Impact: A Practical Guide to Building High-Performing Organizations That Deliver Great Social Value*

“Blank Check is a captivating, fast-paced, fictional presentation of a concept for remodeling an educational system where the author’s holistic ideas show how to ‘replace and promote’ an alternative educational system. Considerable thought and related research has been applied to the concept, which provides the reader with a positive first-steps approach. A great read!”

—**John Calver, MBE**, Senior Imagineer at Imagineering Futures

“What teacher, administrator, even parent, doesn’t sometimes imagine how they would reshape the system if money were no object and bureaucracy wasn’t an issue? *Blank Check*, while fictitious, makes you wonder, ‘what if?’ and begins the conversation that is long overdue.”

—**Leslie Polvado**, Texas Representative, T.A.I.
(Talent Assessment, Inc.)

“We all have choices in life; but please remember there are ALWAYS consequences for those choices. To grow in life is to learn to make good choices.”

—**Dr. Don Bagwell**, Youth Chairman, Tidewater Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen and Chief Science Advisor at Intelligence In Motion Systems, Inc.

“The discussion of how education, especially math and science should be taught, is important because of how it will impact our economy in coming decades. Dr. Smith’s book gives us much to think about regardless of our position.”

—**Lawrence P King**, Publisher *Stem News Chronicle*

“Education is a global topic. Dr. Smith uses a new way of expression to convey his understanding and suggestions for modern education to us. Although the story is fictional, I believe that on this planet, in the vast crowd, there must be many people like the protagonist in the book working for the change and development of education.

From ancient times till today, we have different definitions and needs for talents in different eras. In response to these needs, we are also adjusting educational methods and methods in a timely manner. Some of the key contents of this book provide solutions for current education issues. The ideas we draw on are worthy of our in-depth thinking and discussion.

Finally, thanks to the Dr. Smith for bringing new inspiration through this book, and I hope that the readers will gain different values upon reading it.”

—**Steven Tong**, CEO, Shanghai Heng Zan
Exhibition Services Co., LTD

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*What if You Were Asked to Help
Reinvent Public Schools?*

A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

AARON L. SMITH, PH.D.



NEW YORK

LONDON • NASHVILLE • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER

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What if You Were Asked to Help Reinvent Public Schools?

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Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

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To those educators across the world who make a difference in the lives of children we serve every day. You are their world, their inspiration, and their opportunity for a better tomorrow. Words cannot describe how much you are appreciated. Whether you are a bus driver, teacher, administrator, cafeteria monitor, nurse or staff member directly involved, I can't thank you enough for your work.

What you do makes a difference! That's why this book is dedicated to you.

Let us unite our efforts and bring awareness to making change in this vital aspect of our culture.

Foreword

Inspiring young adults to reimagine public education, *Blank Check* features the power of young people to confront adversity and rise to join a generation that is prepared to step in and re-engineer public education.

The key to restoring the effectiveness of public schools is re-designing how we teach Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) with Career and Technical Education (CTE) education.

The fact that our journey seems slow is not that it is unworthy of our attention.

It's not that it's unimportant to the future kids coming through public schools.

It's not that people do not get cheered when they champion new standards.

It's all of these.

The movement to inspire STEM and CTE education needs a story. Our culture advances things through storytelling. It needs a context. *Blank Check* is that story. It's a fictional tale grounded in pure reality.

It's the "what if?"

What if a wealthy philanthropist hands us a blank check and says, make it happen. What would we do? What would we do if we had the opportunity to create the perfect public school, with no restraints?

So here, for the first and hopefully not the last time, we offer a tale that can inspire us. Because when we can see the destination in the distance, it quickens our pace.

Bud Ramey, author of *Trusted Healers* with Dan Pelino, *The Familiar Physician* and *Lost and Found* with Dr. Peter Anderson, *No Colors* and *No Bullies* with Bobby Kipper, and *Awakening Your STEM School* with Dr. Aaron L. Smith.

Acknowledgments

B *lank Check* could not have been written without the support of those in my inner circle who inspired me to dream and find a solution. Special thanks goes to my wife, Sherri, and my children, Hunter, Ryan, Claire, and Addison for giving me the time to make this dream of writing a book into reality. My friends and network supported me with their time, whether it was discussing the book or rethinking about an educational issue.

Another thanks goes to my friend Josh, who helped me champion this book for others across the world.

A special thanks goes to my friend, Bud Ramey, who has helped me discover my talent and to reach new heights.

Prologue



St. Andrews, U.S. Virgin Islands

This story takes place on a fictional U.S. island, but the inspiration that evolves could help reshape public schools all over America.

After serving his country as an Army Ranger, high school principal Josiah Rollins quits in disgust over the broken educational system he can no longer serve. Little does he know this impulsive act would lead him to an unbelievable opportunity to change everything and serve his country and students in the way he always dreamed he could. Inspired and funded by a now-billionaire war buddy, Josiah tests his educational theories in a place with low standards and poor student performance—the American Caribbean islands.

The mission is simple: Give teachers the autonomy and the freedom to teach and provide the community with the power to make schools the center of their community. But many people of color on the island are

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not happy about the project, nor do they trust off-islanders selling them new ideas. Learn how Rollins wins over the people and the students by transforming the community and the economy into the American Dream.

Chapter 1

Teach

1300 hours

I cringe every time I see his face or hear his voice.

I'm Captain Josiah Rollins. A six-foot-two, fifty-year-old decorated veteran. I served two tours in Iraq, seen someone's life pass in the blink of an eye. Today, I sit here having anxiety issues because I must interact with this moron.

My blood pressure spikes just thinking about the moron. Sitting here with my so-called executive director of school improvement, I try to amuse myself to pass the time.

Great. What have I done now? I'm a teacher—an administrator. I love working with young people, but I am ruled by an ignoramus who insists that we work inside a broken system.

Executive Director Sheets sits in his tidy, little sterile office, buttons his cheap suit, and begins the dreaded conversation. The bland-colored room describes his whole demeanor—dull and boring.

While he kills me with his lecture mode, I daydream. First, I look at the *Perseverance* motivational poster with three bald eagles hanging above him. I laugh internally as this man wouldn't survive a day in my school. He has no clue about how education has evolved since he taught PE (Physical

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Education) back in the '80s.

It's hard for me to decide if he reminds me of a mosquito or a gnat. Both are impossibly annoying.

"Mr. Rollins, are you listening to me?"

Oh, crap. He's speaking. "Yes, sir. I am."

"For a moment there, I thought you zoned out."

"No sir, I'm with you."

His phone rings. Thank goodness. Saved by the bell. My mind drifts again as he answers the call. I would give anything to escape and be somewhere else. *Seriously, why am I here?* Oh, crap, he is ending the call.

"Thank you for the update, Mrs. Jones."

Hanging up the phone, the parent-to-child style lecture resumes.

Then I see him grow fidgety. No, wait. More like squirmy, like a worm. Looks like he will tell me something . . . that he is uncomfortable with our conversation.

Great. Just what I want, another lecture from this idiot.

While waiting in purgatory, my mind runs through any resemblances. He is so much like . . . yes, that's it—an annoying mosquito.

Yep, he's always sucking the blood out of everybody. Mr. Sheets even loves to buzz around leaving irritating welts. Mosquitos also have the distinguished reputation of carrying deadly diseases.

Okay. Round two.

With no emotion, he looks up, removes his low-priced framed glasses and stares awkwardly at me.

He takes a breath as silence fills the room.

The glowering facial expression turns my stomach.

Yep. Welcome back to the clown show. And here he goes. Again.

"Mr. Rollins, there is no other way to put this to you—" Just like he begins his previous lectures, I sit back and take my scolding as I have done in many meetings over the two years.

Sheets drudges on initially and then reads from his notepad instead of looking at me like a man.

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“The superintendent has reassigned you to Byrd High School for the next school year as an assistant principal.”

Unsure of what I am hearing, I ask him to repeat it one more time. “I’m sorry. Would you repeat that, please?”

Sheets refuses to look at me and rephrases the statement. “You are no longer a principal, and the superintendent is transferring you to Byrd High. There you will support the new principal in getting it accredited.”

My attention shifts from a hurry-up, get-out-of-here mindset to a teapot whistling.

“Regarding your salary, it will remain the same for one year after which, it will be reduced to match the pay scale of an eleven-month assistant principal. The superintendent considered this given the short notice you are receiving today.”

Did I hear him correctly? Seriously? What a putz. I can’t believe this is happening. How much longer must I sit here?

In his lethargic voice, he drones on. “The school board will approve this transfer as a personnel item tonight at six, and I expect you to have your things removed by five today.”

This clown would not know leadership if General George S. Patton walked into the room.

Now, I hate the jerk even more.

Staring him down as if I was standing on the battlefield in front of enemy fire, I demand answers.

“You owe me an explanation, Sheets. More than just handing me an envelope.”

He quivers. “Mr. Rollins, let’s just say you and I have profound differences in our opinions on education.”

My cause for concern heightens as my DEFense readiness CONdition raises a level from DEFCON 5 to DEFCON 4.

“So, what are you saying? I am not a team player?”

“If that’s what you want to call it, then yes.”

DEFCON 3 level is reached.

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“You have no justifiable reason for this. Our school was accredited again, since I took over. The scores are up, and our climate survey is higher than in the preceding year. The press continues to post favorable and inspiring stories about our school, giving hope, whereas everyone else sees an austere community and a failing education system.”

Then it hits me. *Yep, he's definitely a mosquito. He doesn't realize that his irritating bite and nag will cause our thriving school to become afflicted with his micromanaged style or worse off, dead by his inability to allow the staff to develop.*

He lacks the confidence, skills, and aptitude for us to live together so by killing me, he no longer has any threats. Now I see his game, one played to gain the upper hand.

Instead of rolling up his sleeves and building schools where everyone wins, he eliminates the best players only to make himself look bold and decisive.

I begin my charge.

“This, sir, is pure bull. I can't decide which is worse, you demoting me or your cowardly choice to wait until three hours before the school board meeting to inform me.”

“I would expect better from someone who comes from the military with a distinguished career such as yourself, Mr. Rollins. Feel lucky you are not being fired altogether.”

He smirks as if he actually considered the option.

Stunned, mortified, and in anguish, I gather my pride. Weighing all options, I realize this decision is final.

DEFCON 2. *Best to leave me alone.*

Zippping up my binder, I gather what little pride I have left and attempt to leave without further incident. But he keeps firing back, and this next one strikes a nerve.

Direct hit.

“You had this coming, Rollins,” the round, five-foot-one, bald-headed insect pesters. “Nobody wants to hear about your incessant progressive

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ideas on how we do our jobs.

Oh, heck no! Did he just go there?

DEFCON 1 is fully engaged.

I snap.

“You are a pathetic excuse for an executive who could not even lead ducks to water. Stupid politics. The superintendent manipulates you because you are the lowest man on the totem pole who has the unfortunate task of relaying your successful backstabbing.”

A puzzled look emerges from the useless insect. I hold nothing back.

“You say I am not a team player, but you’re the one afraid of interacting with the team. You simply don’t like me because our school stands out better than the others in the district because we do things differently.”

“THAT’S NOT TRUE!”

“In the three years I have served as principal, you have been to our school only once, slinking, maneuvering, and avoiding the people who report to you. Has it ever occurred to you that maybe you should ask why I do things the way I do?”

Sheets assumes a defensive position. He rolls back from his desk as he crosses his arms in strife. “No, Mr. Rollins, tell me why.”

I lay into him. “We work in a broken system, and our kids continue to suffer.”

Unsure where I am going with this, Sheets plays along. “I don’t understand, Mr. Rollins.”

“You just don’t get it, do you?”

Sheets turns his head sideways.

“If we are going to teach children for the twentieth-first century, we need to see through a different lens.”

“We’ve heard all this many times before,” Sheets boldly observes.

“Here are just a few things: How about eliminating summer breaks, giving teachers the freedom to teach, authorizing uniforms, providing residency for middle and high school students, enticing corporate involvement, enhancing STEM focus, consuming better nutrition, and

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mandating community involvement?”

Sheets immediately fires back. “You want the impossible, Mr. Rollins.”

“No, sir. I only want what’s right for the kids. You’re the only one who is impossible.”

Sheets knows he is outgunned and changes the subject back to the meeting.

“Well, this decision is final, and there is no need to comment any further on it.”

Recognizing that Sheets will not engage in this conversation, I shift back to my job.

“Why can’t we meet with the superintendent to discuss his concerns?”

“It’s too late. The board already approved it in a work session this morning, and it is merely a formality. It is being recommended tonight.”

Now, the mosquito bites under my skin. “I understand. So, instead of dealing with confrontation, the both of you would rather avoid me altogether because what you hear might just make sense.”

He picks up his jaw from the floor and mistakenly points his finger directly at me.

“That’s my point, Mr. Rollins. You do what you want to do, and the superintendent fears you are a rogue.”

Like a shark smelling blood, I realize now is the time I have waited for and go into attack mode.

“Your excuses are the epitome of America’s travesty. The culture of this district is toxic because of your uninspired leadership, and your spineless decision-making results in all of us questioning our profession, much less our sanity.”

Sheets listens to my every word and attempts to come up with an interjection. I completely lose my surroundings as I pelt him with the harsh reality of today’s schools.

“Instead of empathizing with educators, you’d rather appease the parents because you don’t have the guts to deal with their nasty, in-your-face attitudes. Everybody knows you avoid conflicts. Then, in the other

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areas you can change, you evade it all together by hiding behind the pitiful excuse that there is no funding.”

He leans back in his chair and glances at the door to see if anyone on the outside is listening.

“Face it, Sheets, and let’s call it like it is. You’re a loser. You can’t see reality as it is in the world. That’s why you think you must look better than everyone else.”

He coils back. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me. Our kids face life or death situations every day. Students we fail to reach often end up in one of five places—pregnant, jailed, dropout, suicidal, or in a gang. Our education system is in crisis, and your inability to grasp reality causes system failure.”

Executive Director Sheets takes his beating as if I just swat him with an electric flyswatter. His face turns beet red, nearly matching the color of his cheap Wal-Mart tie.

Unreal. He actually seems irritated. For once, he appears to care about something. It’s too bad he only cares about himself and not the kids.

“Everyone knows you are merely idling until retirement next year and don’t want to rock the boat. You’ve coasted your whole kiss-up career.”

The spineless administrator attempts to take over the conversation.

“Mr.—” I interrupt.

“I will let you know when I’m done.”

I fire like a M1 Abrams MBT tank on an Iraqi battlefield.

“You represent a supermodel, a supermodel that characterizes a school-to-prison pipeline. You guarantee that many students will fail every year. Then you resent us when we suspend over one hundred and fifty students annually, but you provide no interventions in place to thwart their behaviors. To make any difference, we need to begin by building relationships where students and faculty care for each other.”

Standing up, he places his hands on his desk, “Mr. Rollins I have heard enough from you. Maybe, I should dismiss you all together.”

A cheesy grin comes through when he believes he has gained higher

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ground.

I've seen that look before from poorly-informed parents who try to intimidate me.

"Tell you what—you do that, and I'll sue your tail and visit the *Times* education reporter. Trust me, the press loves a good story. Especially when masks are removed."

I check to be sure my phone is still recording our meeting.

"You're just an assistant principal—nobody will listen to you now. They will think you are just reacting to the loss of your job."

I advance my position and throw it all on the table. "The beautiful part about working with the press is they listen to me. I have more credibility than you and your entire clown show combined."

"Shhh. You're too loud."

Man, I wish I had a can of insect repellent, so I can spray his disgusting face. That way, there would be one less pest in the world, and he would bother no one else.

Overhearing the commotion, Mrs. Frank, Sheet's secretary, pops in and tries to break the antagonistic atmosphere.

"Excuse me, Mr. Sheets, but you have a call you need to take."

Seeing a way out, he attempts to regain composure.

"Tell them—"

I interrupt. "No, he won't. He can return the call later."

She is shocked speechless.

Having a bystander in the room will only tarnish his weak reputation, and he knows it's best for her to leave.

"Mrs. Frank, mind leaving the room so we can finish having our private conversation?"

She closes the door slowly, overhearing part of my dressing down of this low-life scum.

"Mr. Rollins, you are creating a hostile environment. I expect you to act like a professional, as I'm sure you didn't work like this in the military."

"No sir, I did not. We had a productive and inspiring leadership. You,

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sir, are the creator and facilitator of this hostile environment.”

He reaches for the phone.

“If you want to take away a hostile environment for an educator, take something off his plate, make parents and students accountable, and allow teachers to do their jobs without all the barriers and bureaucracy. Even better, support the principals who try to fire the staff members who don’t do their jobs.”

He dials. “I need security in here! Now!”

Sheets peeks out of the window to see if anyone comes to his rescue. Thinking he has gained the upper hand, he shifts his maneuver.

“Since you are not doing your job, then I have your resignation, Mr. Rollins?”

Nice try.

“No, absolutely not. You reassign me to be in this position, and I choose to stay only for the kids that I might save. Rest assured, I will be a pain in your side for the entire year, and should you decide to do anything to sabotage me, you will go down with me. I can promise you that.”

His ears perk up, and a small smirk appears on his face as he thinks he found something on me.

1310 hours

“Did you just threaten me?”

“A promise.”

A security officer enters through his door. Sheets shows his true colors, authoritative and afraid of conflict.

“Escort Mr. Rollins off the property.”

The gray-haired, pepper-bearded man in his white shirt and black pants uniform steps towards me. I smile at my old friend. He knows I’m in the zone and not to infringe.

“Charlie, do you want to mess with me, a former ranger, with expertise in hand-to-hand pugilism?”

My old friend, security officer, Charlie Ramey smiles. “No, sir. I

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respect you, but you need to come with me.”

“Ok, Charlie. I’m not mad at you. Give me just one more minute, and I’ll leave without incident.”

Returning my focus one final time to the invertebrate, I complete the conversation. Officer Ramey overhears every word.

“As much as I love working with kids, I cannot stand the thought of working for you. It’s not worth the health issues, much less the mental anguish.”

The pathetic loser momentarily looks up at me and wonders what comes next.

“You remind me so much of a mosquito.”

“How so, Mr. Rollins?”

“Because you are annoying, irritating, and do nothing but carry disease and death with you everywhere you go.”

Sheets stands motionless except for his jaw, which drops to the ground. Ramey must turn around to avoid laughing in Sheet’s face.

1312 hours

“Screw this. I’m done. I quit.”

Having turned to exit, Officer Ramey restrains himself from more laughter. He holds up his hand in front of his face, but everyone in the hallway knows what just happened. Walking out, people point and whisper at me.

It seems like everyone in the building overheard. I hear parts of the conversations.

One secretary murmurs in admiration, “Did he just say, ‘screw this’ to him?”

Knowing that driving while agitated can cause my focus to be elsewhere, I deviate from going back to school immediately and park my truck at a nearby 7-11 where I collect my thoughts.

Driving the five miles to my former school takes an eternity. Pulling up to my reserved space one last time, I stare into my office.

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Mustering the courage to walk in, I sense I'm being watched.

Then it comes to me. Several staff members whisper as I enter the building. News travels fast. Officer Ramey greets me by shaking his head. He walks up with his distinguishing limp, smiling.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was told to come up and make sure you caused no more commotion."

"Me?"

Indirectly acknowledging me with another smile, I know he will be honest with me. "Josiah, what you just said to him is what we all want to say."

"Yep, I lost it. Don't know what overcame me."

"I admire you now more than ever. That's why the staff loves you. You respect us and stand up for the kids and for what's right. You've always had our backs."

"It cost me my job."

"Is the job worth more than the headaches? You are a retired veteran. Someone would love to hire you."

"Hopefully. Right now, I need to get my things. Can I go into my office?"

"Yes, but I have to see you leave the building. Promise you won't do anything stupid?"

"I won't. Just give me a few minutes, and I'll be out of your hair."

"That's all you get because I don't want to have to hurt you." Ramey winks at me. "The jerk told me to give you fifteen minutes. I'll be here to ensure that you vacate the property."

Charlie wants to say something else. I can tell as he laughs internally, his stomach and lips clenching.

"What?"

His ear to ear grin betrays his real feelings.

"I absolutely loved it, when you told him to 'screw this.'"

"He deserves it. I'm sick and tired of his crap, and it's about time someone stands up to him."

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Ramey shakes his head.

“So, what happens if I don’t leave quietly into that good night?”

“Then you’ll be arrested, but all kidding aside, I pray that we don’t have to go there.”

“Me too. Wouldn’t look too good for you in an ambulance, me in a police car.”

We both laugh it off. My longtime friend gets a chair and sits down next to my office.

I turn the key into the room for one last time.

Entering, I sit down in my favorite chair. Meanwhile, Ramey waits out in the hallway. But I overhear the scuttlebutt.

“Did I hear correctly about what happened to Mr. Rollins?”

“Yep, saw part of it. He told him to kiss his you know what, and he quit. Just like that.”

The circle of friends around Ramey shares a laugh. I overhear more comments.

“You know, he does wonders for kids and their parents.”

“He even does home visits to help kids figure it out—I’m so sorry to see him go.”

“Me too. Guess we will get another ‘yes-man’ who sucks up rather than doing his job.”

“More than likely. It just goes to show you that education is going to hades in a handbasket. They seriously screwed this one up.”

While they chat outside, I absorb the view of the varsity practice on the football field, collecting my thoughts as the realization sets in.

Why am I allowing this moron to get to me?

One by one, I take my photos, awards, and artwork from the wall. Looking at the teacher of the year plaque, a whirl of emotion hits me.

With no one in sight, I let my guard down in my final chance to reminisce. *I could see this coming, eventually.*

Scouring my drawers for any other personal items, I run across a folder entitled, “Read when having a difficult day.”

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I hold several letters from parents, students, and staff members. It may not sound like much, but as an educator, we keep these precious things and go back to them occasionally when we have days like today.

One card has a picture of our school on the front. I remember keeping this one from Ericka, one of my former students with autism.

“You have given me hope, and now I am going to graduate on time. Thank you, Mr. Rollins.”

Knowing if I read them all, I’ll break down, so I place them in a box with other items and turn to my laptop.

Sitting at my computer one last time, I compose an email to my faculty members.

Hitting the “send” button, I log off for the last time and move the boxes to my truck. After coming back into the building one final time to write a note to Tracy, my administrative assistant, I place my keys on her desk.

“Thank you for everything. You truly made my life easier. I wish I could talk to you about this in person, but I am not ready to discuss this yet. You’ll soon learn more tomorrow if you have not already heard. I’ll speak to you when I have the chance. Take care.”

* * *

1400 hours

U.S. House of Representatives

Education Committee

Hearing on the Future of Public Education in America

Decorated Marine veteran and now billionaire James Holloway reprimands the politicians for thirty minutes. Holloway paints a scene to remember.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I find it very ironic that you continue to build upon a clearly broken education model and deflect any suggestions to

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retool American education.”

TV cameras pan over the angry and frustrated members of the committee as Holloway concludes his remarks.

“Eleven of you have graduated from private schools while the other three attended a high-end public school. Before you turn down my ideas and once again drive more nails into the future of our young people, you should have your children and grandchildren attend the lowest performing school in your district.” Holloway fuming from the tense moments pauses as if he is trying to hold his tongue. But instead, he continues to give them a piece of his mind.

“Better yet, why don’t you go and substitute teach or drive a bus for a week to really see how these heroes are treated. You people have no idea how bad public education is in American cities.”

“Mr. Holloway, that’s enough.” Representative Hodges, the angry chairman, says to his uncooperative witness.

1403 hours

“At least you listen. For that, I thank you. Now, I will prove to you that it can be done.”

James Holloway walks out. You could hear the sound of people squirming in their chairs in the hearing room.

* * *

2005 hours

That night the sadness turns to lament, frustration, and anger, reminding me of the emotions that swirled the evening my father passed away. Glancing at the clock, I notice it’s past eight and know the board meeting has concluded well before now.

“Guess it’s final.”

Sitting in my recliner, I feel the urge to talk to an old friend and dial him up. He picks up on the first ring.

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“What’s you up to, James?”

He hears my frustrated voice. I hint around that I must talk. Comforting me as he has always done, we bring up old war stories that make me laugh.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Do you know of anyone willing to hire a retired veteran who has taught and is a licensed administrator?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I quit my job today. There is no need for me to be in this clown show anymore.”

“You really quit?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“He just didn’t get the big picture. So when he reassigned me to an assistant principal job, I snapped.”

James pauses, and the phone goes quiet. He replies humbly. “Yes, I’m sure I can help you find another job. Come on up.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. Take your time getting here. I’ll have a pot of coffee ready for you.”

Listening to my best friend’s advice, I can salvage at least something from this horrific day. Heading into the bedroom, I lie down and replay the whole experience. Still angry, I don’t doze off until past one, tossing and turning the entire night.

0414 hours

Next Morning

While I attempt to catch a few winks, James also fails to get a full night’s sleep. Noticing that it is about four in the morning, James frowns at his phone as it disrupts his slumber.

Blank Check

“James?” It’s a grouchy man with a distinct island accent.

“Who is this?” James says, half asleep.

“If you expect to see your son again, you will transfer me two-hundred fifty thousand dollars.”

James is stunned. He attempts to wake up and understand the situation.

“How do I know you have him?”

James hits the speaker button so his wife, Eleanor, can listen. She sits up on their bed and pulls her hair back.

“Let’s just say I have his phone as you can see from the caller ID.”

James confirms that the caller ID says *Colby*. “How do I know he is okay?”

Colby’s voice quivers. “Dad, I’m in trouble. Just give him the money. That’s all he wants.”

“What are you talking about son? Where are you?” James asks as he puts on his long robe and points to Eleanor to grab paper and pen.

“I think I’m in Haiti, Dad.”

“Where?”

Eleanor retrieves a small notepad and jots down every word.

“Not sure. They kidnapped me. This thug wants a quarter of a million, and you have until tomorrow to pay him.”

“How in the world did this happen? And who is this guy?”

“I took a late-night walk at the beach in Playa Juan de Bolanos. I sat in the sand. Then suddenly, these men in military fatigues come from behind and surround me.”

In the background, James hears someone tell Colby to hurry up.

“One of them points his assault rifle in my face. ‘Get up now,’ he says and motions me to come with him. About a minute later, this black speedboat comes and takes us away.”

“WHAT!” exclaims James.

He hears Colby, now in the background of the call, in pain.

“Ahhh. Sorry.” Eleanor hides her face with her hands as she tears up.

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Another man in the background shouts, "You talk too much."

James hurriedly puts on his sling over his frail shoulder.

Omar now speaks. "You give me two-hundred fifty thousand by five tomorrow, or your son be dead."

"Who are you and where do I send the money?"

"My name is Omar, and I will text you instructions on where to send the money."

Click.

The call drops. Just a ringtone.

"What are we going to do, James?" Eleanor whispers.

He turns to her with watery eyes. "Not sure, Babe. Not sure."

James goes into his office. He cranks up his laptop. "These idiots have no idea what they are messing with—"

James attempts to hide the discomfort of his arm. Eleanor hears her husband grunt and goes to support him. She places her hand on his other shoulder.

"You need help."

"Who am I going to call, Eleanor?"

"Your best friend." James pulls his hands away from his face as he knows she's right. "You know he'd do anything for you."

"He's going to be here in the morning anyway. He may not be in the frame of mind to help."

She holds his hands as their eyes meet. "Call him."

James pulls out his phone again.

* * *

In the dead of night, a loud ring wakes me up. Scared out of my wits, I scramble to pick up the receiver. "Hello?"

James's tone is shaky. "Can you come now? I have a situation."

Not his usual voice.

"What's wrong?"

Blank Check

“Don’t have time to explain on the phone. Let’s say I need some serious help. My boy’s been kidnapped.”

“Be there in an hour. Call General Colvin.”

“Already on my mind. See you soon.”

After I scramble to put on a fresh t-shirt and workout shorts, I grab my hat and race to my truck.

James selects General Colvin’s number from his favorites.

“Hey, Chris.”

“What’s up, James?”

“I’m sorry to bother you at such a later hour, but I am desperate.”

The general listens with great interest. “Sure, what’s going on?”

“My son has been kidnapped in Haiti by some thug named Omar. We have less than twenty-four hours to respond. I need Intel.”

Colvin prepares to jot down vital details. “Go.”

“He used my son’s cell phone, an Iridium 9575 satellite phone to this number. Other than that, he gave me until 1700 tomorrow afternoon to pay a sum of two-hundred fifty thousand. We spoke for four minutes at 0414 hours.”

“On it. I’ll call you back.”

Unable to sit and wait for help, James conducts his own Intel gathering. His initial thoughts are to contact the ambassador of Haiti but scratches it off his list as it limits his options. Nix the Haitian police. They are probably involved in it.

James scours the web until he finds information on Caribbean kidnappings. Glancing at each link for the best information, he discovers one.

“Eureka.” Printing off the pages of information, he grabs a highlighter.

Eleanor sits on the couch and listens to her husband.

“Listen to this Eleanor. Haiti ranks in the top ten for the worst kidnapping statistics in the world.”

She shakes her head in disbelief like this cannot be happening and can only think about the *Dateline* episodes that chronicled others’ horrific

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stories.

“Somewhere between fifteen to thirty thousand kidnappings happen each year. Many of them take place in the Caribbean. In fact, kidnappings in Haiti continue to increase each year.

“Kidnapping is a lucrative criminal enterprise that carries a high reward for low risk. They use the ransom money to finance other operations.”

Wanting to know more, she assists her husband in thinking more about how to save her son. “But what does it say about kidnapping in the Dominican Republic?”

The mouse scrolls until he finds a passage. “It says here that the nature of the threats is ‘minimal’ and are conducted around border areas mainly.” He gets a small chuckle from the last words. “Minimal my arse.”

“What else?”

“The highest percentage of kidnapping in the Dominican Republic occurs around the border to Haiti or the vast water that surrounds the island.”

“The police know there’s a problem but won’t do anything about it for fear of retaliation.”

“Why?”

“Because they are on both payrolls.”

Still trying to connect the dots, she asks, “But why would they kidnap our Colby?”

Using his pointer finger to lock in reasons, James blurts out. “Here it is—organized criminal gangs conduct for-ransom kidnappings to target affluent families. These guys ask for just about anything. A quarter of a million is a considerable sum of money, but they could have asked for more.”

“James, what are we going to do?”

He confidently hugs his beloved wife. “We’ll get him. I’m gathering information and Josiah is on the way.”

Wiping away the tears, she looks up at him. “Do what you need to do. Go get our son.”

Blank Check

“Thanks, Babe. Love you.”

“I love you, too.” She gets up from the couch to make coffee.

As she leaves the room, James returns his focus. Writing down any possible relevant information, he becomes overwhelmed with worry. Eleanor returns with two cups in hand and stands next to her husband. She rubs her hand on his back and puts her head on his shoulders.

The phone rings.

“James, Chris here.”

“Tell me you have good news.”

“Actually, I do.” His stern, crisp voice affirmed hope appeared on the horizon. “I called in your favor to four-star McMath. She says to tell you hello and looks forward to seeing you next month. I have a ‘classified’ folder that will assist you in retrieving your son. You still have clearance which made this much easier to request.”

The news is better than James expected.

“A courier will drop it off in less than twenty ticks. The chopper is leaving now.”

“Can’t thank you enough.”

“It’s all good James. Hope everything works out.”

Closing out the call, James goes to his window and looks upward into the starry sky. The wind suddenly picks up, and the flowers and grass sway. An unmarked helicopter with blinking red and white lights arrives, and a manila envelope is politely delivered by a nicely dressed NSA agent. James opens the door.

“Thank you.”

He returns to the kitchen, grabs another cup of coffee, and reads the file.

I pull onto his street as I see the chopper taking off, blinking lights now overhead.

0700 hours

The security guard waves me in. *Dang, this place is massive.*

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The enormous 26,000-square-foot, Blue Ridge Mountain mansion features forty-five rooms, including ten bedrooms, twelve bathrooms, seven fireplaces, and two kitchens. On the first floor, huge windows oversee the vineyards. The spiral staircase sits in the center of the home and connects the second floor and the basement.

I pull up.

At the doorway, Eleanor greets me. "Thank you for coming, Josiah."

"Not a problem, Eleanor. Where's James?"

"In the kitchen. Let me take you to him."

We travel through the massive estate to the kitchen. Granite countertops with stainless steel appliances reflect the pre-dawn early morning light. He pours me a cup of coffee.

"Colby?"

His body language confirms my presumptive notion.

"Right after I hung up with you, I watched some news and listened to the rainstorm."

"Then a bit after zero four hundred, the phone rings." I move the story along.

"I pick up the receiver. My worst fears are realized. I panic."

He looks out his kitchen window. The sunlight touches the mountain treetops. James describes the awkward conversation and how it abruptly ends.

I fire off the first question that comes to my mind. "What have you done so far?"

"A lot. Got Intel on the abductors."

He shows me his highlighted papers and the top-secret folder.

"What'd you learn?"

"We know where he is. Just need to go get him back."

I think of the serendipity of this. Trying to break the tension, I attempt to crack a small joke about my recent events.

"Well—my calendar actually indicates free time tomorrow." His eyes lock in with mine. "I'll go get him."

Blank Check

"I was hoping—?"

"Yes, I'll bring him home."

"Thank you."

Just then, Eleanor returns to the kitchen and James fills her in.

"Thank you, Josiah." She shakes from the whole ordeal.

"Are we calling Bud?"

Relief comes across his face. I guess he spots my expression. He's seen that look before, when in a firefight.

"I thought you'd ask. Bud will be here shortly."

We outline the plan as a tactical mission. Just like old times, minute by minute, we think through the six-hour operation using our intelligence and experiences in combat.

Then a familiar, deep southern voice with a trace of Carolina twang enters.

"Hey, ya'll." And a good friend comes into the kitchen.

"Thanks for coming, Bud. Josiah and I have been working on a plan."

"Whatcha got?"

"One mission —three options."

The three of us sit at the nook, studying the map, making notes, and scripting final details. Then we review it one last time.

"Here's the plan. Bud and I split up. He scouts the area looking for problems and joins me after I engage the perps. We go in and get Colby and people may get hurt if they don't play nice."

"Works for me, let's go get your boy." Bud echoes as he puts on his worn-out Ford Motor Company hat.

We drive to the nearby Charlottesville-Albemarle Airport. The early morning mountain light is, as usual, beautiful. Showing my credentials, security allows us to access the hangars.

Ah. There it is.

I envy the sleek Gulfstream IV.

"She's a beaut, ain't she?" Bud ribs at me.

"Sure is."

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James's white Gulfstream IV-SP sports red, blue, and tan stripes that go from forward to aft, touching the tip of the vertical stabilizer. I hear the humming of the engines. I like this sleek, six-window beauty. I have always wanted to travel on his plane. But not this way.

Getting last-minute items out of my truck, my peripheral view catches FATS0 (FAster Than SOund).

"What's up FATS0?"

The tech-savvy Texan who always dresses in the most progressive fashion reaches his hands towards me and embraces me in a hug.

"Hey, Teach. WHASSUP?"

"Not bad, FATS0. Time to get to work, comrade!"

"I know, just like the good old days, right?"

"You got it."

"Excuse me, gotta get ready for takeoff."

I turn to James in appreciation. "Nice call. Great pilot."

"Why not? The best in flying covert ops in Iraq, I trust him to fly my Gulfstream."

"This is quickly becoming a reunion," I joke at James.

I find assurance in having Bud and FATS0 reliving memories of serving together in Iraq. Bud's cleverness and ability to go undercover make him valuable on this mission. I'll never forget the time he confronted the Iraqi general holding a little girl hostage and takes him out. Our CO raves about him being the best sniper he'd ever seen.

Then there's FATS0, who not only flies secret missions, he spends hours developing new gadgets and tinkering with artificial intelligence and high-tech innovations. Two of the best people I want to have my six.

Bud climbs on the plane right behind FATS0, leaving me a private moment with James. James walks with his slight limp, coupled with his arm in a sling, and I call an audible. I gently touch him on his shoulder, and he turns around.

"We need to talk about Plan D."

A puzzled expression comes across James's face.

Blank Check

“Plan D? We didn’t discuss a Plan D.”

Keeping my focus, I know not to let my emotions compromise the mission.

“I know. Didn’t want to say anything until the last minute.”

“What is it?”

“Plan D, command central, eye in the sky, is having you call in the cavalry if all three options fail.”

James’s head drops in recognition of what he is hearing from his best friend.

Trying not to make it personal and to avoid making him feel guilty, I redirect the conversation.

“You know—the fewer people there, the better. Too many moving parts. Plus, we need you here in case of unexpected difficulties. Eye in the sky can be manned from any place on earth.”

He softly nods his head in agreement; a twinge in his shoulder reminds him he might be a liability under fire.

Placing both of my hands on his good shoulder I look him squarely in the eyes.

“I promise. We will not leave without him.”

“I know you won’t. Now go get him.”

Still feeling guilty, I climb on board and pull up the stairs.

While FATSO conducts his last-minute pre-op flight checks, I gawk at the large cabin space, which models supreme comfort. I count fourteen generous leather seats.

Wow.

Leather couches in the aft turn into beds, and the galley has two heating ovens and a refreshing bin. I see the router making it Wi-Fi accessible.

Okay, enough dreaming. Back to the task at hand.

We see James has several things on board: a briefcase with a quarter of a million dollars, a file, a map, and keys to a car.

Suddenly, Bud notices we are missing one. “Where’s James?”

I say nothing.

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“You did what you needed to do, Josiah. Never compromise the mission.”

Bud reaches for the folder and points at the picture.

“Omar? What mother would name her child Omar?”

FATSO gets up from his pilot’s chair and secures the door. “Let’s get started, shall we, Teach?”

Bud unfolds the map, looks at the keys, and hands me the file. FATSO listens in on the plan.

I trace the road from the beginning. “We’ll land here so we can go undetected. It takes a few minutes for the GPS to synchronize so I would suggest keeping them off until we land.”

“How long is it to Haiti?” I ask.

FATSO replies. “About thirteen hundred miles from Charlottesville to Labadee, Haiti, so I’d say a two-and-a-half-hour trip. Remember—there is no time difference.”

We review the plan just like we had with previous sorties.

“We’ll land around 1030 hours, dressed like tourists, scout the area first, and then go in and get him. I expect resistance. Assuming everything goes to plan, we’ll be off the deck at fourteen-hundred.”

“Resistance is futile,” Bud quips.

“In and out as fast as possible is the best tactic. I’ll have the plane fueled, ready for departure.”

“FATSO, let’s get this bird in the air.”

0835 hours

We buckle in as FATSO conducts a hot refueling exercise. Within a minute, he climbs up to twenty thousand feet.

I attempt to relax but find it difficult. Even though we are less than an hour away from landing at a private strip where there are no customs agents, we continue to review our steps. Bud and I recite them until we have them perfected.

“Cell phone tracking confirms Colby is at a restaurant four miles from

Blank Check

the airport.”

“We suspect Omar has several thugs around him.”

“You know, these may not be amateurs.”

“Cake. What else does the file say?”

“The report also shows his patterns. He expects others to do his dirty work and will not confront people when outnumbered or outmatched.”

“Sounds like my former boss,” I muse, shaking my head.

Bud couldn’t resist but to break the tension. “You’ve mentioned him before. What a loser. James says you actually quit?”

“Yep. Remind me to tell you more about it later.” I have some restrained aggression to express today.” Our conversation swings back to saving Colby as I am not ready to talk about the ordeal.

“What kind of wheels do we have?”

I pull out a photo of the car.

“A black BMW by the hangar, ready for our convenience upon landing.”

“Nice. Any other things we need to know?”

Bud notices one last thing, a slip of paper James tucked into his top pocket on the tarmac.

“Interesting. Not sure whose number it is.”

“Me either.”

Folding it in my pocket, I turn to Bud. “We got this. Let’s relax for a few minutes.”

“Come on back to my toy store.”

I see several zipped black bags. He opens them up on the couches and pulls out each item one by one.

One briefcase, quarter mil, check. “Where did he get—”

“Don’t ask,” I suggest.

Tzuki’s Extreme cell phone charger, check.

Taser x2 Shooting Stun Gun with a dual laser black, check.

Ankle holster, check.

Battery pack and refill cartridges, check.

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Parrot Bebop 2 UAV with military grade GPS and backpack, check.

Pulsar Edge GS night vision goggles, check.

Swiss Champ Victorinox XLT pocket knife, check.

Cable ties, check.

Slim Jim, check.

FNX 45 Tactical with a silencer and bullets, check.

GoPro Hero 4 Silver HD, check.

C12/Remote detonator, check.

iPad, check.

Toothbrush, check.

Four cutting-edge Caps headsets, check.

Shocked at his toys, I couldn't help myself. "Man, you have not forgotten how to equip a soldier."

"I got into a new hobby once I retired."

"I can tell," I say, shaking my head.

Over the speaker, FATSO advises us to take seats as we are inbound and less than five minutes from landing. Sitting back down, I recognize we are a couple of miles from the private airport as the color of the ocean changes from the deep royal blue to the turquoise color seen on postcards.

Thankfully, FATSO knows better than to land at Port-au-Prince International Airport, for it would take time to get through customs. And they may not like our armory. Instead, we land at the Jacmel Airport, which is located away from civilization and off the grid. From low altitude, you can see the piles of rubble beside the runway, cleared from the impact of the last Category 5 hurricane, which wasted the entire region.

1030 hours

As we taxi, FATSO notifies James of our status. The plane stops in front of the hangar where we see the promised BMW and taxi cab.

Scurrying off the Gulfstream, we put our plan into action. Bud hops into the cab.

"FATSO, see you at twelve hundred or earlier—"

Blank Check

He turns back, raises his arm, returns the hoot, and yells, "Go Teach!"

Hopping into the BMW, I grab the briefcase, and we pull out of the airport and head to the restaurant where Omar is holding Colby.

FATSO carefully launches a drone as we pull away from the hanger. The eye in the sky, by satellite, will give James a bird's-eye view of the extract. Within a minute, the link connects.

"James?"

"I'm here."

"You able to see everything?"

"Perfectly. I'll take it from here, and I'll advise the guys about potential problems. Go get my son."

"Roger that."

Just like any previous battle, I carry a ton of adrenaline. Regardless of what's happened in the past twenty-four hours, my mission now is to extract Colby from hostile territory.

* * *

Using prior Intel and the GPS coordinates we received, we confirm Omar is holding Colby hostage at this hole in the wall. I check my watch and know Bud has positioned himself.

A greasy spoon on the edge of an alley where no tourist would want to visit, the faded blue sign with white print reads, "Kwizin Manman An." The window has a red neon "open" sign with the letter P blackened out. Litter is everywhere.

"Hmm. The front has windows while the back is nothing but brick and mortar. I'm guessing if he is in there, he's in the back."

"Walking through the cracked glass door, I sit down in a booth across from the bar. Seeing the bartender whispering to one of Omar's bodyguards, I remain calm. They approach me and see the briefcase next to my foot.

"I'm here for Colby. Take me to him, so his dad can settle this once

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and for all.”

The villains stare at me. Wearing a simple Quicksilver t-shirt with khaki shorts, I sense they are hesitant to touch me even though I resemble a tourist. While they assess me, I do the same to them. Both have dark skin. One wears a blue wife-beater shirt and faded jeans while the other man sports a goatee with a plain, faded white shirt with large smudge marks on his brown pants. The bartender wears a white apron and a food-stained shirt.

They don't appear to be overly physical even though they are a couple of inches taller than me. Good—no visible weapons.

One has a thick Haitian accent. “Get up.”

Then another opens the door behind the bar.

They escort me into the back room where I notice five round tables lit by candles. The bartender swipes the suitcase from me and opens it up. His eyes light up.

1050 hours

The bartender places the briefcase in front of Omar, an ugly man who resembles a guerilla fighter or gang leader. His scraggly beard and his short, greased black hair remind me of a typical movie villain. One about to get waxed. I recognize a distinctive feature on his ear, what appears to be his birthmark. *It's Omar all right.*

The bartender opens it up and turns the suitcase around for Omar. A smile appears on his dark-skinned face.

“Go back outside. I suspect others come.”

Then Omar turns his attention to me.

“Who are you?” He scans me up and down.

“A friend of Colby's dad. They call me ‘Teach.’”

I give him a steely-eyed stare so he knows not to get funny with me. Recalling that Bud has my back, I prepare to seize my moment. My words ease their tension a little. I am not a cop, and they believe me.

Assessing the room for additional threats, I observe Colby lying

Blank Check

motionlessly inside a large dog crate; I make sure not to tip my hand. Thankfully, Colby does not know I am here. Colby raises his head and stares at Omar.

“You SOB. I told you not to look at me,” shrieks Omar as he takes a long stick and jabs it in the cage.

Colby screams in pain. My mind suddenly flashes back to the streets next to the Jalibah Airfield in Desert Storm with Bud and James.

Returning to the present, I feel the bodyguards relax their grasp. Now I have the chance to act. Repositioning myself with two moves, I now face my assailants directly.

Omar shouts, “Get him.”

The men attempt to grab me. Pushing off both large men to gain distance, I turn to the first one and throat punch him. He collapses to the ground, grabbing his neck. The other goon thrusts a blow towards my face. I dodge the strike. Raising my hand to counter his incoming shot, I guide it to the ground. Stomping on his toes, the vulnerable man reaches for his foot. I gain the advantage.

The second one regains his breath. Infuriated and wounded, they recover. One of them grabs a chair and swings it at my head. As I evade, the momentum turns his large body frame around. His back now faces me.

Grabbing a half-empty Corona on the table next to me, I swing and he goes down bleeding. The other fool reaches for his gun, but not for long. I remove the .40-caliber Glock from his hand and do some dental work.

Staggering back, he reaches under his left pants leg for his knife. He opens the blade and dives toward me with an angry expression as he spits blood and teeth. We go to the left and then the right, dancing around the table.

“You gotta be quicker than that.”

Colby raises his head to see the commotion. He recognizes my voice and knows his escape is imminent. The assailant stumbles on a chair leg.

Wiping the blood from his eye, Colby yells out, “Watch out! He’s getting back up.”

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Finally, I make my move to free Colby. Taking a knife from a table, I cut the cable ties securing the dog crate and open the sliding locks. The door swings open. Colby slowly crawls out and gathers his senses. Noticing his weakness, I change my direction back to the attacker. Meanwhile, there's Bud, standing at the door, just watching and smiling. He waves at me as he gives me permission to try out his toy.

"You're dying to try it out, aren't you?"

A huge grin emerges. "Please?"

"Go ahead. You know you want to."

It's taser time. Bud grabs the taser strapped around his left ankle and throws it. Catching it and turning it in my hand, I lock in one and fire.

The Taser X2 Shooting Stun Gun with Dual Laser Black has a laser sight. I find my target eight feet away from me. Its Pulse Calibration System delivers the exact amount of electrical charge needed, which allows it to recalibrate twenty times every second. Having cartridges that easily discharge permits me to reload within seconds.

I zap the first one. Direct hit! The wires hit him dead on his chest.

"Ahhh," mumbles the shaking assailant.

"This thing is incredible—"

Bud laughs, "You can't have it."

Making sure the assailant does not get back up, I now focus on the second villain who is rising slowly. Reaffirming that my taser is ready, I fire.

The zap combined with the blue spark and constant clicking sounds assure me this dude will not be getting up anytime soon.

The insects lay on the ground moaning from the throbbing pain, and I can't help but smile. For just a fraction of a second, a nanosecond, I wonder what Bozo the Clown would look like right now if he was on the receiving end.

Bud yells out. "You can borrow it, but I need it back by next Friday."

"Hot date?"

"Well, let's just say I have a meeting with an IRS auditor."

Blank Check

“Yeah, you probably need it then. They are sometimes rather rude and uncooperative.”

Scanning for more threats, I see the assailants on the ground, out cold in their pools of alcohol, saliva, and blood.

Omar remains motionless and in shock. He contemplates his escape. “Rete! Come no closer, or I will kill you.”

I should eliminate the threat. Protocol. Should he pull a gun, he’s done.

Omar looks at the door and then the suitcase.

Omar backs away slowly and walks around the walls of the room to the front door. He points to Colby.

“I’ll be back for you.”

Surprisingly, Omar leaves the suitcase of money.

Having cleared the room, I focus on getting Colby out of there. I walk over to where he is stretching his legs.

“Nice to see you, too.”

“Shut up. Can’t you tell I have a headache?”

“Um, yeah, but what have I always said about late night drinking. You ain’t changed a lick since graduation.”

He starts to regain his wits. “I know. Wow. I just saw a side of you I have never seen.”

Walking side by side, I ensure Colby can walk out on his own strength. He had remained in the crate far too long.

Outside the bar’s main entrance, we hear murmuring. Two more goons enter the bar and see Omar coming out of the door. They have confused and perplexed expressions on their faces.

Omar points and shouts, “Get them!”

One nods his head and moves toward Bud, drawing his pistol. Big mistake. Within seconds, Bud grabs his arm and punches him with a right hook. Bud then grabs the gun out of the bodyguard’s grasp, unloads the clip, ejects the remaining cartridge, and tosses it to the furthest corner of the bar.

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“This here ain’t none of your concern,” Bud says to the goon.

The overweight goon repositions himself and grabs a Red Stripe beer bottle and hits it on the side on the bar.

Bud calmly returns the conversation. “Please do. Make my day.”

The angry attacker swipes the jagged edge at Bud, who avoids the move and grasps the assailant’s hand, pulling it behind him. Having the elbow of his enemy in the air, Bud strikes.

He dislocates the aggressor’s shoulder. He’s now screaming in pain, and Bud punches him multiple times in the face until he drops to the ground, unconscious.

“Guess you didn’t know I am *Army Strong*.”

Bud sees the kid and me right behind him.

“You just can’t handle things diplomatically, can you?”

“It’s not my fault this time.”

“So here we are again, side by side in a fight.”

“At least this one is a bar fight.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Could be worse. Like that time, we trained in Cairo.”

“Oh, yeah. Forgot about that one. But I swear he acted like a jack—.”

“That’s the problem with you.”

“What?”

“You are too honest.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t gonna let him abuse the waitress that way.”

In the corner of my eye, I observe Omar, who had returned for the money, hiding behind a table. Omar recognizes his subordinate is in obvious pain and realizes he cannot win. Seeing Omar attempt to flee, Bud grabs him by the arm, clenching his fingers around the triceps and notices a broom closet.

Turning to Bud, I ask, “What happened to the bartender?”

“The Gin and Tonic was weak. So I gave him positive and constructive feedback as any manager would appreciate.”

“Thought you liked fruity drinks?”

Blank Check

“You’re thinking about FATSO.”

“You’re right. He loves those little umbrellas.”

Letting our guard down, Omar momentarily escapes from Bud’s grasp. He attempts to swipe the money and run. Instead, we surround him, and he stands motionless. Here up close, I can see the terror in his eyes.

Omar screams out. “You idiots. Don’t you know who I am?”

Bud grabs Omar and separates him from the briefcase.

“No, and if you say another word, I will do the same thing to you I did to your friend over there.”

Omar stops shouting. Bud reaches in his pocket for the zip ties and places Omar’s hands behind him.

I cannot help myself. Hearing the zip ties secure Omar, an idea hits me. “Bud, throw him in the closet over there.”

As Bud walks to the closet, he notices Omar’s phone on the ground. “We gotta go.”

Unknowingly to all of us, Omar’s cell phone was active, relaying everything to reinforcements.

“Roger.”

Rechecking the area one last time, I do a final scan.

Outside the bar, the hovering Parrot Bebop2 drone with the GoPro camera captures inbound activity.

James’s voice comes on the radio, signaling us to expect company. A swarm of vehicles is quickly approaching.

“How long until they get here?”

James insists we must exit the area. “Planning Fail Safe for 1120 hours.”

“Fail Safe?” Bud asks.

Turning my attention back to Colby, I glance at the yellow and black bruises on his face and arms.

“You look fabulous.”

“Shut up.”

Continuing to assess his injury, I notice the red rings around his wrists.

AARON SMITH

I grab him gently. "Don't worry. We're going to the airport."

Just when I say it, I notice he has difficulty walking. Wrapping his shoulder and arm over my head, I assess if he can put more weight on his legs. Colby's legs wobble like a ten-month-old baby's.

I grow concerned about a possible concussion.

"You okay? Tell me who I am."

"Seriously."

Bud pulls up. Step by step, we walk out the door and get into the BMW. Slamming the doors, we burn rubber screeching into a fast getaway.

Sitting in the back seat, Colby's senses come to him.

"You have dad's jet? How far are we from the airport?"

"A few miles."

1110 hours

Feeling momentarily better, I breathe a big sigh of relief and gently tap Colby's right shoulder, showing him my affection. I glance back to make sure no unexpected guests have tagged along. Savoring the ride to freedom, I notice the green, leafy palm trees towering over the dirt road. They wave goodbye as we pass.

Back at James's home, he monitors our adventure with the military-grade GPS drone, which reveals trouble approaching fast.

"You've got company. SUV inbound. One click south," James reports.

"Lose them," I say to Bud.

"Nah, I think I will let them catch up."

"That's actually a great idea. Slow down and pull over to the side of the road."

"Are you insane?" asks Colby.

"Well—I used to be an educator. So many people would think I am—"

He does a double take.

"Just do it."

Bud makes the car appear to have mechanical issues.

In Omar's car, the driver says, "They're slowing down!"

Blank Check

“Speed up. They not escape now,” Omar confidently states.

The black Ford Explorer races toward us and pulls up right behind us. Then another one behind the Explorer pulls in front of us. Men from both vehicles surround us.

We’re trapped.

Turning to Bud, I whisper, “Plan C.” Giving him a wink, I get out of the car.

With guns pulled and all eyes on me, I approach Omar’s car. The bodyguards stop me.

“Let him come.”

I lean down and speak to Omar in a low enough tone so only he can hear my voice.

“What’s he doing?” Colby asks Bud.

“Acting crazy like he normally does.”

“So, we’re as good as dead now.”

“Probably.”

Keeping their focus on Omar, they see his eyes light up. Within seconds, we are walking between the cars. Guns are pointed at the car with my friends and me.

Bud turns to Colby. “Don’t say a word.”

Omar is curious. “Why so interested in this kid?”

“A man like you understands, we all have debts, and one debt I have is to take care of the boy. And I’m taking him with no problems. If not, you’ll die. Plain and simple.”

A small laugh comes from the adversary, “What makes you think you can escape?”

Turning my attention to the car, I point to the back of their Explorer.

“Come, let me show you something.”

Puzzled and curious, Omar slowly follows me. With a quick click, I show him the beeping contraption that Bud had planted an hour ago, resting inside the compartment. He sees the C-12 explosive attached to the remote detonator.

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"This right here is an explosive device that we call a makeshift sticky bomb. With one click of this button, I activate it. Should I take my finger off of it, it explodes. If one of my associates dies, then you die. It's that simple. Only I can deactivate it. You are all one second from death, Omar."

I grab Omar by the shoulder. "You're coming with us."

Omar does not comprehend the gravity of the situation. "I'm not going."

Turning to him, I put the remote to his face. "Boom. Now tell your friends you're going for a ride."

He speaks in Creole to throw us off.

"Li di ke li te gen yon bone epi yo pral sèvi ak li."

Bud overhears and understands the conversation.

"He said 'he has a bomb and will use it. Meet us at the airport and get every man available.'"

I push his shoulder to get him inside our vehicle.

We speed off.

"Good planning, Teach."

Then Bud floors it, and we listen over the com. "Guys, ready for takeoff."

Meanwhile, I speak to Omar in no uncertain terms.

1122 hours

"You're alive because of my good graces. If you try any more stupid tricks, you're coming back to the States with me, where I'll make your life a living nightmare."

I can tell Omar wants to choke the life out of me. We arrive at the landing strip where the plane awaits at the hanger. Bud parks closely so we can assist Colby onto the jet.

"Come on, Josiah. More cockroaches inbound."

"Hold tight. Let's take our time."

Bud looks confused. "Now what in the world are you doing?"

"Omar, let's go. I warned you."

Blank Check

"If I go with you, I will not come back."

"If you don't come, you will die."

Colby frantically asks, "Why do you want to take him?"

"If we take Omar, then his entourage will compromise the takeoff."

"You're crazy," Omar says.

"Sorry, you're just realizing who I am, but I have a wonderful personality, and once you get to know me, we could be pals."

Omar is bewildered.

"Now do me a favor—shut up and grab the briefcase. I'd hate to forget it and pay for shipping to have it returned."

Reluctantly grabbing the case, Omar hands it over. Picking up the ladder, FATSO starts to taxi. Colby points and says, "LOOK!" We all see them quickly gaining ground.

"Step on it."

Securing the door, we scramble to take our seats and buckle up.

Moving as fast as a cheetah on the attack, the black Ford Explorer driver floors it to the open hangar where our car is parked. Getting out of the SUV, three men emerge hastily. The plane stops in front of the vehicle as if it is a showdown at the O.K. Corral.

All three men have weapons and mean business. Looking at them, I see a pistol and two semi-automatic rifles holding their ground.

"Ready for takeoff," FATSO says.

"That's a problem."

I hand Omar a phone, "Call your friends and let them know you want a vacation, and you're not sure when you'll return."

Omar grins.

"Tell them to move the SUV, or it will be blown to smithereens."

I remind Omar of the detonator and the three blinking lights on it.

"You stupid Americans."

"What's so funny?"

"That not the same SUV."

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1128 hours

That's when I realize this vehicle differs from the one we saw moments ago.

"Dang it. Teach, look."

"James, you copy?"

"Copy that."

"Options?"

"Stand by. Fail Safe in route. Stall for two."

Turning my focus to Omar, I lay it on the line. "Your life and we leave. It's that simple. Speak English, not Creole."

"It's rude to talk about others when they don't understand."

Omar dials up the bodyguards.

"I walk out with this Teach guy. Leave SUV. I be left as they take off."

Omar looks at me, and I nudge him.

The men talk amongst themselves.

FATSO remains calm. "Wonder what other unexpected things will happen today?"

Bud breaks the tension. "Do we have plenty of coffee?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because if we don't, you gonna have to turn the plane around and get some."

He rolls his eyes and smiles as he returns his focus to the departure. Then the moment we all have waited for arrives.

FATSO conducts his last preflight checks, and we lower the stairs.

Omar waddles out of the plane as I step behind him.

The vehicle screeches away, and I climb back on the jet.

We see Omar standing there and laughing as another vehicle comes. The goons scramble out with guns drawn.

"We gotta problem."

Then the original SUV comes back and drives Omar away. His driver hands Omar his cell phone back.

Omar calls. "After three minutes, make it appear as if an accident

Blank Check

happened.”

“What’s wrong, FATSO?”

“They’re not moving.”

Tension rises on the plane while we face uncertainty.

“We’ve used our ace. Options?”

“Fail Safe thirty seconds,” James says calmly.

Anxious seconds tick away as we sweat the show down. Then, a familiar voice on my com emerges.

“Josiah?”

“General Colvin?”

“See you are in a predicament.”

“You might say that. Got any advice?”

“I do. Tell your friend he has a bird overhead and unless he lets you go, he will be part of a crater.”

“James, you copy?”

“Fail Safe.”

“Thanks.”

“Welcome. I’ll keep an eye here to make sure there are no more surprises. Call your friend.”

Seeing the special phone, I dial.

“Is it done?” Omar asks.

His eyes reveal it is someone he does not know. “Sorry to disappoint you, Omar.”

“Who this?”

“This is Teach. Look straight up.”

Scratching his beard and perplexed, he motions his driver to stop. Getting out, he cups his hand over his eyes. The sun reflects off the big drone, soundlessly hovering at about 1,500 feet.

“I have him in sight, target locked, Josiah.” Colvin says.

“That thing over your head is a United States Air Force strike drone with two heat-seeking missiles that will obliterate you. My targets are locked. You have ten seconds to decide.”

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The pause tells me he thinks I'm bluffing.

"Eight seconds."

We still hear silence on the other end.

"Your call. Move your friends away, or you'll be a crater. Five seconds to decide."

Omar screams in frustration over the phone.

"Good, now you know I am serious."

Omar relays to his squad to release us. They pull away rather suddenly.

"We are clear, General."

"Acknowledged."

"FATSO, get us the heck out of here."

"You got it, Teach!"

"Buckle up. We're leaving in a hurry."

Peering out of the cockpit window, I see the strip is not long.

I have that same sinking feeling but can't determine if it's fear or if FATSO is adjusting his take off.

Closing my eyes, I see my life flash in front of me.

"Here we go," FATSO says.

Gripping the handles of the seats, I wait for the purgatory to end. Then a loud yell comes from the cockpit.

"Yee-haw!" The Texan exclaims.

"Fail Safe—" James says over the com radio.

High-fiving Bud and Colby, we observe the men and vehicles disappearing.

Omar observes our plane ascend into the cloudy sky. The drone leaves as quickly as it came.

Feeling the turn after the abrupt take off, I shake off the stress of the last hour.

Yesterday I called it quits on a job I loved, and now I am literally on cloud nine after saving my best friend's son. I settle in as we climb into the thick clouds.

Seeing Bud piecing things together, I respond. "Yes?"

Blank Check

“How did you know Omar’s phone number?”

“Just put two and two together.”

Bud attempts to connect the dots. “Then how did Omar get his phone when he hid at the restaurant.”

“Everyone is attached to their phones nowadays. I knew his life hinges on his phone, and he would not rest easy until he had it. Seen it too many times in school.”

Shifting my focus to Colby who is in serious distress, I observe him gingerly sitting in his chair. “You okay?”

“No. I’m in pain.”

“Where?”

“All over.”

“We’ll get you taken care of. Just try to relax.”

The humming of the engines takes over momentarily as Colby sees us assessing his injuries.

“You know, I’ve always wondered how you guys got together.”

Grabbing an apple from a basket, I bite into it.

“Well—FATSO’s from Waco, where he used to fly F-15s. They transitioned him to do experimental flights. Part of his job included being on a tech team where he used the latest gadgets the military had created.”

Finishing up another bite of the apple, I share my story. “I first met your dad in Green Beret training. We fought in Operation Desert Storm in the second Brigade, twentieth-fourth Infantry Division, in a town called Jalibah. It’s there where we met Bud when he was in Special Forces from another unit.”

Bud adds, “One of the first sorties we had together was to take over the Jalibah Southeast Air Base. They had over 2,000 enemy soldiers, eighty anti-aircraft guns, and a battalion of tanks that surrounded us. But thanks to Col. Paul Kern—he ordered your dad to save Josiah and a small squad from a massive firestorm. He took the airfield in a four-hour clash.”

“No, Colby. It’s the other way around.”

Bud immediately interrupts us, “Negative. I saved both of you.”

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Colby cracks a smile as he loves to see us joke around. Turning back to Colby, I notice a sheepish grin on his face.

“Before I got rudely interrupted—“

“Oh, yeah. Josiah was fighting, an aggressive counterattack that pinned him against two buildings that appeared to be getting worse with more artillery shells. Noticing and expecting an inevitable outcome, James rescues and thwarts off the threat.”

“Seriously?”

Bud nods his head. “It’s true. But how much do you really know about your dad?”

“Your dad is a quiet man,” I add.

“Tell me. He’s like a lot of military guys. Doesn’t talk much about the past.”

Bud gives me the look. “Well—guess it’s time you heard more about him.”

Both Josiah and Colby listen attentively. If the engines weren’t humming, you could have heard a pin drop.

“In that same firefight, James drops after being shot in his right shoulder from a sniper. Surrounded and comforted, we carry him back right after we secure the base.”

“Dang.”

“Surgeons feverishly work to repair his shoulder.”

“Dad never gave me much detail on his wounds. He just says he’s had the condition for years.”

“Your dad doesn’t want any sympathy, which is why he does not say a word.”

Bud continues, “He earned a Purple Heart and was honorably discharged about a month later.”

Sitting up, Colby craves more.

“He enrolls at Embry and Riddle University and earns a degree in Aerospace Engineering with a minor in Chemistry.

“While working on his thesis, he creates composite material, which is

Blank Check

stronger and more durable and that withstands the impact of bullets and major artillery shells. Applied to a vehicle makes it virtually indestructible.”

“Learning the true potential, he patents it and earns his master’s degree.”

“This is filling in some gaps for me.”

“He shows Lockheed Martin the new product, and they buy the patent from him. He receives several hundred million dollars in the acquisition and royalties.”

Bud continues for the benefit of everyone.

“Through some wise investing, his fortune grows faster than he can imagine—more money than his legacy could spend.

“He establishes a foundation and buys six hundred acres in the Appalachian Mountains and settles in Charlottesville, Virginia where he and Eleanor purchase the vineyard named the Pillin Hill Farm. The peaceful view of the home you grew up in gives him a sense of comfort as he has battled PTSD for years. The harsh city life creates too much stress for him.”

“A bunch of rag-tag army brats?”

“Pretty much. Except for one Air Force baby,” as I point to the cabin. His eyes roll around.

We hand Colby a bottle of water, and he gets more comfortable. He looks up and wants to know about the rescue.

“How did you know where—”

I explain the ransom call and his dad’s response in full detail.

Not trying to scare him, I paint a bland picture. “So we put together a plan to go pick you up.”

“Thanks guys.”

“You’re welcome. Glad it’s over.”

“Me too.”

While we chat, we slowly relax.

As with any crisis, we are exhausted, and I recognize Colby needs rest. “I’m beat. Let’s get some sleep.”

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We all kick back.

Drifting off to sleep, my mind travels back to my former school, where I met with a parent and her son.

“David, I think we should get together in a few weeks to create a plan. Looking at your cumulative folder and now meeting you, I know exactly what to do.”

A happy mother cries.

“Since his dad’s in jail, he needs to have males in his life. I can’t thank you enough.”

I look at her and smile. “It’s my pleasure. This is my job. We’ll get him back on track.”

“David, I’m going to ask three things from you.”

He listens with great interest.

“First, give me everything you have. Don’t want you perfect, but I expect one hundred percent.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Second, ask for help when you need it. There is no shame in asking, and it even makes you more of a man when you know you need help.”

“Okay.”

“Last, what you put in life is what you will get out. The harder you work today, the easier your life will be tomorrow.”

Awakening abruptly, I hear FATSO on the PA system.

“Guys, inbound within twenty.”

“Josiah, what we have here is the Taser X2 Shooting Stun Gun with Dual Laser. It has two cartridges that can shoot up to fifteen feet away. The paralyzing gun transmits intense electrical pulses through wires into you, thus immobilizing you. The X2 recalibrates twenty times every second.”

“Nice. Ever use it before today?”

“A little target practice?”

Blank Check

"I gotta get me one of these."

As the sunlight hits my face, I can't go back to sleep. Might as well stay up so I can sleep tonight.

Colby begins to stir.

"Does Dad know I'm free?"

"Yep, he's the one who called in the cavalry," Bud replies.

"I want to speak to him. Would it mess up FATSO's landing?"

"Shouldn't. Use my phone."

Colby dials. As he walks by, the smell of sweat and body odor permeates the cabin. Knowing the situation is beyond his control, I ignore it. Bud and I remain in our seats, giving them some privacy. I point Colby to the aft where he can talk without distraction. A minute later, he returns.

"How's the old man?"

"He's pretty happy."

He observes Omar's photo in my hands, and I hand it to him.

"That's him, Omar Violine."

"Dude— check out the thing on his ear," Colby immediately notices.

"Ugly, ain't it?"

As he hands the photo back, I study the picture. The dark, deep red skin on his right earlobe appears to be swollen and inflamed. Under the picture are his stats: height five-foot-five, weight 285 pounds. A close up of his birthmark with the medical term of his birthmark reads hemangioma.

Looking up, Colby asks with keen interest, "Tell me everything about him."

Pulling the folder closer, I start.

Deep in our conversation, FATSO gets clearance to land from customs and the tower.

Can't wait to get this bird on the ground. So glad Colby didn't hand the phone over to me. Never celebrate until the job is complete.

Finally, the airport surfaces on the horizon.

"Buckle up, guys!" FATSO shouts his accustomed celebration line.

"Yeeha!" Touchdown. The bumpy follow up with the initial thrust

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in engines finally subsides. Gathering our belongings, we then unbuckle. Our captain waits to disembark.

“You’re home.”

He leans to his left and looks out of the window. James waits impatiently. Time to wrap this mission and call it a day.

Operation Extract is a success!

After landing at the Charlottesville-Albemarle Airport, I finally enjoy the evening calm of the Appalachian Mountains. Feeling every bit of the anxiousness a soldier returning from a deployment feels, I can’t help but smile, too.

James sees us stepping out one at a time, and a customs agent with a clipboard asks James to sign documents. Colby needs a doctor. With the ladder deployed, Colby gingerly limps down the stairs attempting to put as much weight on the handrail as he can. James waits at the bottom of the stairs and notices his son’s shredded and soiled clothes. Colby hugs him as tears roll down his face.

Looking straight into his father’s eyes, he musters, “I’m sorry, Dad.”

James remains concerned about his only son’s health, but his relief is unmistakable.

Here I stand, a proud godfather soaking in the moment. One cannot put a price on parents celebrating a reunion with their children after a gruesome challenge.

Greeting me with a bear hug, James becomes overwhelmed with emotion.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

“Glad to help.”

Eleanor embraces her son. James and I catch up.

“How was it?”

“Not bad. We’ve been through worse.”

Bud emerges from the plane with the file and briefcase followed by FATSO.

“That guy is a mean son of a gun.”

Blank Check

“Why do you think General Colvin assisted us so expeditiously?”

“You told him about the ordeal. Why?”

“I had a feeling this was not an ordinary kidnapping. Once I read the file, I called Colvin back to see if he wanted to do a joint mission.”

I get it now.

“So, it does not appear to be a military ordeal.”

“Exactly.”

Bud and I lock eyes. Makes complete sense.

“Did Colvin say what he would do with Omar now that he is free again?”

“Nope, guessing Intel we shared will help him with his next steps.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Colvin said if we ever needed him again to call him.”

Switching gears, James hands me a present. A mystified look comes across my face as I inspect the gadget.

“What is it?”

“It’s a Gizmo Gadget.”

“No. That can’t be the name.”

FATSO’s eyes light up.

“It is. This satellite thing allows you to call and send brief text messages. The best part is it has a GPS locator so I know your whereabouts. It will alert us if there is no pulse. Plus, we can listen to the calls any time we want to.”

“Who makes it?”

“It’s from LG, and I tweaked it, so it’ll never lose power. I’m getting one for my son.”

“No, thanks.” I hand it back.

James takes it back and attempts to sell me. “Colby is getting one once he recovers, and if he is ever in trouble again, you and I will know where he is.”

He offers again. “Sure?”

With some reluctance, I take it and thank him for the gift.

AARON SMITH

“I’ll touch base with you guys once I take care of Colby. Get some rest.”

Understanding that James and Eleanor want to leave with their son, we vacate.

“Want to grab a bite?” I ask Bud and FATSO. Together we hop in the truck and leave James, Eleanor, and Colby in front of their limo.

“This has been the wildest twenty-four hours since Iraq. Yesterday at 1430 hours, I told Bozo the Clown to visit the devil’s playground. Now, I stand at an airport, and I just rescued my best friend’s kid. It’s 1430 hours.”

So glad it’s all over, but I still worry about Colby—something ain’t right.