

CHAPTER 1

They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.

—Benjamin Franklin

If the Communists took over, I'd go to them and say, "What do you want me to do?"

—Young woman at a party in the Hollywood Hills, December 1961

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The taxi driver suddenly swore, causing Drake to snap out of his reverie. He glanced at the back of the head in front of him. The man appeared to be looking in the rearview mirror. Drake spun around in the backseat, and an identical expletive escaped his lips. A truck was overtaking them at a high rate of speed. It couldn't pass them on the narrow road without crossing into the opposing lane of traffic, and the driver apparently had no intention of doing that.

"Step on it."

Drake's order came too late. He instinctively ducked his head an instant before the collision, which drove his face into the thinly padded seat back. The noise sounded like an exploding bomb, and he thought he was back in the army.

Then all was silent. Drake wondered whether he was dead, as he always did after a similar occurrence. He heard a noise. The engine of the truck was revving. He raised his head in time to see the truck backing up. Was the driver planning to hit them again? Probably not. He would have to drive into the field where the taxi had landed after being momentarily airborne. The truck swerved onto a side road. It skidded to a stop and then lurched forward, accelerating back toward Interstate 5.

The rear end of the taxi had telescoped, and Drake realized that a few more inches and he would have telescoped along with it. Through the broken rear window he saw liquid spilling out of what had once been the gas tank. Gasoline. He had to get out of here.

He heard a moan. He realized for the first time that the driver was lying in the backseat beside him. His seat back had broken during the collision.

"Are you all right?"

An answering moan told him that he would have to get them both out. Drake shoved at the mangled door beside the driver, not bothering to look for the door handle, which was surely non-functional. The door was jammed. He tried the door on the other side with equal lack of success. He reached across the driver into the front seat and found the handle on the driver's side door. Although that door didn't look as bad, it didn't respond to his pressure.

The easiest way out was through the rear window; the glass was already broken. Drake knocked out several loose pieces of glass that were still clinging to the window frame. He grabbed the shoulders of the driver who was lying on his back, his body partially on the errant seat back, and tried to lift him. He was greeted with a full-fledged groan.

No time to be gentle. Drake hefted the driver up, ignoring louder groans, and shoved him head first through the window. He stopped for a second to collect his energy and realized he was panting. With a supreme effort, he pushed the body after the head. The driver rolled off what was left of the trunk and hit the ground with a thump.

That had used most of Drake's strength, but he had to get himself out. He forced his muscles to move. He got his head and shoulders through the opening and became stuck. He couldn't go any farther. It would be easier to stay here and let things take their course. Which would involve him burning up in a fiery inferno, like the suttee he had seen in India.

You candy ass, he told himself. You've gotten yourself out of worse jams than this. Just not

recently. You're out of practice. Do this one thing and you can rest. He wiggled his body slowly through the opening, but when most of it was through, he didn't have strength enough to stop himself from rolling off the remains of the trunk, just as the driver had done.

He felt pain for the first time as his chest landed on a rock. But he was finished. No, not quite. They weren't safe yet. He smelled gasoline. He struggled to his feet and grunted as he lifted the driver under his arms near the shoulders, dragging him away from the car into the dirt of the field, which, fortunately, had nothing planted in it at the moment.

He stumbled backward, slowly, the earth and the legs and butt of the driver creating friction, noticing the sweat rolling down his face, his lungs feeling as if they would collapse. How far did they have to go?

A fireball whooshed into the air in all directions; Drake felt the heat from it, even though they were now a safe distance away. He dropped the driver and hit the ground himself, watching in awe as the car was consumed by angry red flames. He hadn't seen a fire this spectacular in a long time.

How was the driver? Drake sat up and looked at him. His eyes were open.

"How do you feel?"

"My neck hurts."

Whiplash. He also had some cuts from the broken glass. Drake took out a handkerchief and wiped them off, but they weren't bleeding badly. If those were the extent of his injuries, he was lucky. He noticed the driver staring up at him.

"You're bleeding, man."

Drake put his hand to his face, and his fingers felt the red liquid gushing out of his nose. He had been unconsciously licking it off his lips. He pressed the handkerchief against his nostrils to stanch the flow and jumped as pain radiated through his head. His nose was broken. What else? He needed to take inventory. In addition to the cuts he had suffered from the broken glass, his back hurt. Of course. His body had been twisted when the collision occurred.

He became aware of a car heading toward the still burning taxi, traveling at high speed, coming from the direction of the beach. It must be associated with the race he was supposed to be entering. The car stopped fast, not far from the taxi, and two men jumped out. They got as close to the fire as they could and appeared to be looking for something.

Signs of life, Drake thought grimly. Well, don't keep them in suspense. He laboriously stood up and waved his hand. They still didn't see him. "Over here." Shouting made his head hurt.

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The one thing Drake insisted on was that the taxi driver get the medical treatment he needed and a brand new car, even if Drake, himself, had to pay for it. Why should he suffer when he hadn't been the target of the attack? He was collateral damage, as the military liked to say.

"It's all being taken care of."

Fred Rathbun had introduced himself as the race coordinator while he and his assistant, a man with a name that sounded like Peaches, helped Drake and the taxi driver into their car and drove them to a hospital in Chula Vista. After spending a lot of time on a pay phone in the lobby, Fred joined Drake in the emergency room where he waited for his x-rays to be developed.

"Giganticorp is going to cover all his expenses and pay him a salary while he recuperates. And we'll buy him a brand new taxi. Of course, we're also covering your expenses since you're a participant in Running California."

Was a participant. Giganticorp, the sponsor of the ambitious race from the Mexican border to San Francisco, had been difficult for Drake to obtain information about. It was privately

owned but apparently wealthy enough to easily afford the million dollar prize that would go to the winning team. That was enough information for Drake who was a capitalist at heart. He viewed free enterprise as a good thing. He had been working as a real estate agent for several years.

Fred wore a business suit, white shirt, and tie. His clothes made him look more like an IBM sales rep than a race coordinator. He smelled of some kind of aftershave. As an employee of Giganticorp, he was first and foremost a businessman, but race coordinators, in Drake's experience, usually looked as if they could run a race. Fred looked like the conception of an artist who liked circles. His body was round, his face was round, even his short haircut was round.

"Do you have any idea who hit you?" Fred asked.

The question was phrased in an interesting way. Not "Did you get a look at the truck?" or "Did you get a look at the driver?" How much did Giganticorp know about him? Probably not as much as he imagined.

"It was a pickup truck. I didn't get a look at the driver. I don't even remember the color. It looked pretty much like any other pickup truck, except that I caught a glimpse of the front bumper before it hit us, and it appeared to be larger than usual—perhaps reinforced."

"Hmmm." Fred wiped his sweating face with a large handkerchief. "So you don't have any idea who it was?"

It occurred to Drake that he'd better be careful in dealing with Fred. He might look like Humpty Dumpty, but looks could be deceiving. "I'm not on any list that I know about."

"I understand that you used to work for the government on some sensitive projects..."

Fred made it an incomplete sentence that Drake would feel he had to complete. He resisted the impulse.

"Yeah. That was a while ago."

"Do you want to file a police report?"

Drake hadn't gotten that far in his thinking. The taxi driver was being taken care of. He was being taken care of. He wouldn't be able to give the police enough information to help them find the culprit. If this were the work of a former enemy, the police would be powerless, anyway. But why would they come after him now? Because the race would undoubtedly generate publicity? Because his name might be in the papers? It didn't make sense.

"I don't think talking to the police would accomplish anything."

Fred nodded. "The red tape would hold up the race."

A thought tugged at Drake's brain. Something about the collision. Just before he had ducked his head, he had noticed something about the truck. Or heard something. That was it. The noise of the engine had lessened. The driver had backed off the gas pedal—perhaps even put on his brakes. He hadn't hit the taxi as hard as he could have.

What did that mean? Drake decided not to mention it to Fred.

"Isn't the race supposed to start in..." Drake looked at his watch "...about an hour?" By some miracle, his watch was still working. It was coming up on noon. As he recalled, the race was scheduled to start at one.

"The start has been postponed until tomorrow morning. Casey is with the other runners now, explaining it to them."

The race was already being delayed because of him. "I'm sorry I screwed it up. Are you going to be able to replace me?"

"Replace you? Of course not. You're going to be in it."

"Fred, perhaps you haven't noticed, but I'm in no condition to run a race. Especially a race

of six hundred miles.”

Fred sounded enthusiastic. “You’ll be fine. I just talked to the doctor. The glass cuts will heal quickly. The bruise on your chest is temporary. He’ll put a splint on your nose to hold it in place and protect it.”

“What about my back pain?”

“The x-rays show nothing but a little scoliosis.”

Curvature of the spine. “I’ve had that all my life.”

“That’s what the doctor suspected.”

“But what about the pain? I can hardly walk.”

“We’ll bring in physical therapists, massage therapists, whatever you need.”

“I couldn’t stand for anyone to touch me right now.”

“The doctor’s going to give you a prescription for morphine.”

“How come you know all this before I do?”

“Here comes the doctor now to tell you.”