

Prologue

Late December, 2003

The old man played his bagpipes on the hill until the vehicle went out of sight. His friends called him “Old Silverback,” like the Silverback gorilla, the wisest and strongest of the family. He liked that term—*Silverback*. He took pride in it. The other bagpiper had come out of the church ahead of the casket and played as it was loaded into the hearse. The old man echoed the song of the lead piper. The song was ancient, used to bury the warrior dead a millennium prior. His intent was to bathe the crowd, to soothe them only the way the pipes could.

On this day, for this man, the crowd not only filled the church but some of the parking lot. No one turned and looked at the old man, even though he was just a few dozen yards away. He stood on a small hill, just outside the front of the church, on the other side of the parking lot. It was only a few feet high but it made the old man the tallest thing in the area, and the sound of his pipes launched into the air from there, right onto the throngs of people coming out from the church.

First came the immediate family, then coworkers. The outside crowd parted to let them through.

It had been a good day to die, the old man thought.

The melodic sound of the pipes carried over the church and across the street, as if it were chasing the hearse as it pulled away. Finally, the old man stopped playing and pulled on the ends of his curled mustache, making sure the wax tips were still in place. Tucking the bagpipe under his arm and, while holding the chanter in the same hand, he reached down into his sporran, the small satchel hanging from a chain from his belt in front, and freed the small silver flask within it. He uncorked it with his thumb and, after toasting the vacant street where the hearse was last seen, took a long pull on the container, letting the drink slide down his throat. The man in the hearse would have liked the drink as well, a long pull on a fine scotch—especially with the old Silverback.

“They all done?” a young man asked as he walked up behind the old man. The old man knew he was there, but didn’t look over at him. He nodded his head.

“That sounded good,” a second young man said, coming up on the other side looking in the direction of the departing hearse. “They’re on their way to the graveside?”

The old man shook his head. “Naw, the boy wanted to be cremated. There’s nothin’ in that casket but air, there is.”

“We’re heading out,” the second said as he and the first young man turned to leave. A third man had come up. He was older than the other two. He had a mustache and wore a bright Hawaiian shirt. He had a small paper plate and a plastic fork and was eating a slice of strawberry pie. He said nothing and simply nodded to the others. He stood for a minute. The old man looked over at him and gave him a small grin. The man in the Hawaiian shirt winked at him, then turned and followed the other two.

“Aye, right behind ya,” said the old man.

He looked over at the crowd. The old man knew them all and saw the news crews trying to get a late interview with anyone who would talk to them. The endless questions comparing this to 9/11; everything seemed to be compared to that day, even if it wasn't. His upper lip rose as if to snarl, but no sound came out.

Most of the mourners would never know the cost paid by the man they came to honor. Most didn't care about those final weeks leading up to the explosions and the killings. The old man knew what the news wanted and it wasn't the truth, just improved ratings. He put the flask away and walked off the hill, looking one last time into the throat of the crowd as he found his way down. He watched them for a moment. A smile came to his old gnarled face; slowly, almost without him knowing, a wide grin formed, then a slight laugh. *Nope, they'll never know the cost.* The old man stood there a little longer, and then turned and walked away, down the short incline following the path of the other three, off the short hill. In a few steps, around a far corner of the church, he disappeared from view.