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The Destroyer

THE HEAD MEN # 31

by Warren Murphy

Remo and Chiun at the capitol—fighting assassins' plans for a capital crime against the president!

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The Destroyer

The Head Men

by

Warren Murphy

& Richard Sapir

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CHAPTER ONE

This death threat made him think.

It had that real quality about it, as if it weren't so much a threat as a promise.

The caller had sounded so much like an authentic businessman that Ernest Walgreen's secretary had put him right through.

"It's a Mr. Jones."

"What does he want?" asked Walgreen. As president of DataComputronics in Minneapolis, Minnesota, he had learned to rely on his secretary, so much so that when he met people at business functions he would instinctively look for her to tell him which person he should warm up to and which he shouldn't. It was a simple question of not bothering to use his own judgment because his secretary's had proved so much better over the years.

"I don't know, Mr. Walgreen. He sounded like you were expecting his call. He says it's a somewhat private matter."

"Put him on," Walgreen said. He could work while he talked, reading proposals, checking out contracts, signing documents. It was an executive's attribute, a mind that could be in two places at once. His father had had it; his own son did not.

Walgreen's grandfather had been a farmer and his father had owned a drugstore. Walgreen had thought there was a natural progression, from farm to pharmacy to executive suite, and on to possibly president of a university or perhaps the clergy. But, no, his own son had bought a small farm and had returned to growing wheat and worrying about the frequency of the rains and the price of crops.

Ernest Walgreen had thought the progress of the Walgreen family was a ladder, not a circle. There were worse things than farming, but few that were harder, he thought. But he knew it would be of no avail to argue with his son. The Walgreens were stubborn and made up their own minds. Grandpa Walgreen had once said, "The purpose of trying is trying. It ain't so damned important to get somewhere as it is to be on your way."

Young Ernest had asked his father what that meant. His father said, "Grandpa means it isn't how you put it in the bottle, but what you put in."

Years later Walgreen realized that that was just a simple contradiction of what Grandpa had said, but by then he didn't have too much time to think about it. He was too busy, and before Grandpa died he commended Ernest Walgreen for using his very modest skills, "to become one of the richest little pissers in the whole damned state. I didn't think you had it in you." Grandpa Walgreen talked like that. All the Walgreens made up their own minds.

"Mr. Walgreen, we're going to kill you," came the voice over the telephone. It was a man. A steady voice. It was not the usual sort of threat.

Walgreen knew threats. His first ten years out of the university were spent guarding President

Truman in the Secret Service, a career which, despite its promised promotions for one as bright and thorough as Walgreen, did not go as far up the ladder as Walgreen had intended to take himself and his family. But because of that he knew threats and he knew most of them were made by people who couldn't carry out real physical harm on their targets. The threat itself was the attack.

Most of the real dangers came from people who never sent any threat at all. The Secret Service still checked out the threateners and had them watched, but it was not so much to protect the President as to protect the department in the unlikely event that a threatener actually went out and tried to do something about his hatred. Eighty-seven percent of all recorded death threats made in America over the year were made by drunks. Less than three-hundredths of one percent of those threats ever resulted in anything.

"You just threatened my life, didn't you?" said Walgreen. He put aside the pile of contracts and his desk, wrote down the time of the call, and buzzed his secretary to listen in.

"Yes, I did."

"May I ask why?"

"Don't you want to know when?" said the voice. It had a twang, but it was not midwest. Walgreen placed it somewhere east of Ohio and south. Virginia in the west, possibly. The voice sounded in the late forties. It was raspy. Walgreen wrote down on a small white pad: 11:03 a.m., twangy voice, South Virginia? Male. Raspy. Probably a smoker. Late forties.

"Certainly I want to know when, but more than that I want to know why."

"You wouldn't understand."

"Try me," said Walgreen.

"In due time. What are you going to do about this?"

"I'm going to report it to the police."

"Good. And what else?"

"I'll do whatever the police tell me."

"Not enough, Mr. Walgreen. Now you're a rich man. You should be able to do more than just phone the police."

"Do you want money?"

"Mr. Walgreen, I know you want to keep me talking. But I also know that even if the police were sitting in your lap, you would not be able to trace this call in less than three minutes . . . and considering they are not, the real talking time is closer to eighteen minutes before you could trace this call."

"I don't get death threats every day."

“You used to. You dealt with them all the time. For money, remember ?”

“What do you mean?” asked Walgreen, knowing exactly what the caller meant. The caller knew Walgreen had worked for the Secret Service, but even more important knew exactly what Walgreen’s job had been. Even his wife didn’t know that.

“You know what I mean, Mr. Walgreen.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Where you used to work. Now, don’t you think you could provide yourself some good protection with all your friends at the Secret Service and with all your money?”

“All right. If you insist, I’ll protect myself. Then what?”

“Then we’ll kill your ass anyway, Ernie. Hahaha.”

The caller hung up. Ernest Walgreen wrote down the last note on the sheet. 11:07- The caller had spoken for four minutes.

“Wow,” said Walgreen’s secretary, bursting into the office. “I got down every word he said. Do you think he’s for real?”

“Very,” said Ernest Walgreen. He was fifty-four years old and he felt drained that day. It was as if something in him were crying about the injustice of it. As if there were better times for death threats, not when his son’s wife was about to give birth, not when he had bought the ski lodge in Sun Valley, Utah, not when the company he had founded was about to have a record year, not when Mildred, his wife, had just found a consuming hobby of pottery that made her even more cheerful. These were the best years of his life and he found himself telling himself that he was sorry this threat didn’t come when he was young and poor. He found himself thinking, I’m too rich to die now. Why didn’t the bastards do it when I had trouble with the mortgage payments ?

“What should I do ?” asked his secretary.

“Well, for the time being, we’ll move you down the hall. Who knows what these lunatics will do and there’s no point getting anyone killed who doesn’t have to be.”

“You think they’re lunatics?”

“No,” said Walgreen. “That’s why I want you to move several offices away.”

To his sorrow, the police also thought it was a call by a lunatic. The police gave him a lecture that came right out of a Secret Service manual on terrorists. Worse, it was a dated manual.

The police captain was named Lapointe. He was roughly Walgreen’s age. But where Walgreen was lean and tanned and neat, Lapointe’s fleshy expanse seemed held together only by his uniform. He had condescended to see Walgreen because Walgreen was an important businessman. He spoke to Walgreen as if addressing a ladies’ tea on the horrors of crime.

“What you’ve got is your lunatic terrorist, unafraid to die,” he said.

“That’s wrong,” Walgreen said. “They all say they’re willing to die, but that’s not the case.”

“The manual says it is.”

“You are referring to an old Secret Service manual which was acknowledged as incorrect almost as soon as it came out.”

“I hear it all the time. Just on television, a commentator said terrorists aren’t afraid to die. I heard it.”

“It’s still wrong. And I don’t think I am dealing with a terrorist.”

“The terrorist mind is cunning.”

“Captain Lapointe, what I want to know is what are you going to do for the protection of my life?”

“We’re going to give you thorough police protection, weave a defense web around you on one hand and try to identify and immobilize the terrorist in his lair on the other hand.”

“You still haven’t said what you are going to do.”

“I most certainly have,” said Lapointe, har-umphing indignantly.

“Be specific,” said Walgreen.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me,” said Walgreen.

“It’s very technical,” warned Captain Lapointe.

“Go ahead.”

“First we pull files looking for an MO, which is…”

“Which is modus operandi! and you’re going to find out all the people in this area who have phoned other people threatening to kill them, and you’re going to ask them where they were at 11:03 today and when you find a few who give funny or contradictory stories, you will annoy them until they tell you something that the city attorney is willing to prosecute on. Meanwhile, the people who are going to kill me will have killed me.”

“That’s very negative.”

“Captain Lapointe, I don’t think these people are in your files. What I would like is a team surveillance and some access to people who know how to use weapons. With luck, we might foil the first attempt on my life and be able to find out possibly who the killers are. I think it’s more than one which gives them more power but also makes them more liable to exposure, especially at their linkages.”

“Secondly,” said Lapointe, “we’re going to send out an all points bulletin . . . that’s an APE . . .”

Walgreen was out of Lapointe’s office before the sentence was finished. No help there, he thought. At home he told his wife he was going to Washington. Mildred was at her small Shim-oo pottery wheel. She was centering a reddish mound of clay and the spring heat had given her skin a healthy flush.

“You’ve never looked so beautiful, dear.”

“Oh, c’mon. I’m a mess,” she said. But she laughed.

“There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think more and more how right I was to marry you. How lucky I was.”

And she smiled again and in that smile there was so much life that the great death he knew he was facing, made no less great by its commonness to all men, was, in that smile of life, made less fearful for a moment.

“I married a beautiful person too, Ernie.”

“Not as beautiful as I did.”

“I think so, dear. I think so.”

“You know,” he said, trying to be casual but not so casual that Mildred would see the effort and suspect something, “I can finish up a Washington project in three weeks, if . . .”

“If I got away on a trip,” she said.

“Yes,” said Walgreen. “Maybe to your brother’s in New Hampshire.”

“I was thinking of Japan.”

“Maybe we’ll both go, but after your brother’s.”

She left without finishing the pot. It would be two days before he found she had spoken with his secretary and knew how seriously he had taken that telephone threat. He would realize later she knew why she was being sent away and did not let on so he would not carry the extra burden of worry. When he did realize it would be too late. She took an afternoon flight to New Hampshire and the last picture Ernest Walgreen would remember of his wife was how she fumbled with her purse for her ticket, as she had fumbled with her purses since he had met her so very long ago when they were young together, as they had remained until that airport, young together, always.

At Secret Service headquarters in Washington, when Ernest Walgreen got through the lower functionaries to finally speak with a district man, he was greeted by:

“Well, here comes the big rich businessman. How ya’ doing Ernie? Sorry you left us, huh?”

“Not when I buy a new car,” Walgreen said and added softly, “I’m in trouble.”

“Yeah. We know.”

“How?”

“We keep track of our old people. We do guard the President, you know, and we like to know what our old friends do all the time.”

“I didn’t think it was still that tight.”

“Since Kennedy, it stays that tight.”

“That was a helluva shot that guy got from the window,” Walgreen said. “Nobody can stop that kind of stuff.”

“You know better than I do. When you’re bodyguard to the President, nobody measures your success by how many assassination attempts fail.”

“How much do you know about me?”

“We know you think you’re in trouble. We know that if you stayed with us, you would have gone to the top. We know some local police are making noises and moves on your behalf that you’re supposed to be unaware of. How good are your locals, Ernie?”

“Locals,” said Walgreen.

“Oh,” said the district man. It was a gray-fur-nitured office with the antiseptic cubicity of those who have very specific jobs and need not be expansive to the public. Walgreen sat down. It was not the kind of office that even old friends offered each other a drink in. It was more a file cabinet drawer than an office as Walgreen knew it, and he was very glad he had left the Secret Service for carpets and drinks and golf dates and all the cozy amenities of American business.

“I’m in trouble, but I can’t dot the ‘i’ on it. It was just a phone call, but the voice ... it was the voice. I don’t know how much you know about business, but there are people you know who are just for real. It’s a calmness in their voices, a precision. I don’t know. This one had it.”

“Ernie, I respect you. You know that.”

“What are you driving at?” asked Walgreen.

“A phone call isn’t enough.”

“What do I have to do to get you guys in on it? Be killed?”

“All right. Why does this person want to kill you?”

“I don’t know. He just said I should get all the protection I could.”

“Were you drinking?”

“No, I was not drinking. I was working.”

“Ernie, that’s a standard crank call you got. That’s a standard. They tell you to get a gun, to put on extra men, ‘because, buddy, I’m gonna blow your brains out.’ Ernie. Please.”

“It was for real. I know standard crank calls. You’re lucky you’ve got computers nowadays to keep track of them. I know crank calls. Moreover, I think you know I can tell the difference. This voice was not a crank. I don’t know the why of it but, between you and me, this one’s for real.”

“You know I’m helpless, Ernie.”

“Why?”

“Because in a report, it doesn’t have Ernie Walgreen looking me in the eye like you’re looking now and me knowing, right where you know it, that these people are for real. Knowing it in the gut.”

“Got any suggestions ? I’ve had a lot of practice making money.”

“Use it, Ernie.”

“With whom?”

“After Kennedy got shot out from underneath us, there was a big shakeup here. Pretty quiet but pretty big.”

“I know. I had something to do with it,” Walgreen said. The district man looked at him with mild surprise.

“Anyway,” the district man said, “it didn’t do anything because there was no way we could have stopped a guy getting in a shot like Oswald did, but we had to look like we made some changes so we could tell Johnson that the Secret Service that lost Kennedy isn’t the same as the one guarding you now. In the shakeup, some good men, really good men, quit. They were very bitter. And I can’t blame them. They have their own security agency now . . .”

“I don’t need some retired policeman in a blue uniform to discourage shoplifting.”

“No, they’re not your normal corporate security. They do super stuff for super people and I’m talking about protecting foreign heads of state too, designing their palaces and everything. They’re even better on protection than we are because their clients don’t have to go running around to every airport crowd shaking hands. God, that terrifies me. Why couldn’t a Howard Hughes hermit be ‘ President instead of some damned politician? It’s always a politician.” He paused. “What’d you mean, you had something to do with the shakeup?” he asked.

Walgreen shrugged. “I did some work for the President,” he said, “in the security area.”

“Which President?”

“All of them. Until this one.”

The firm name of retired Secret Service people was Paldor. He said the Secret Service had sent him and he was ushered into the kind of offices he was used to, a touch of strong elegance with a good view.

Cherry blossoms and the Potomac. A friendly Scotch on the rocks. A sympathetic ear. The man's name was Lester Pruel and Walgreen knew something about him. He was six feet one, tanned and healthy, with sharp, discerning blue eyes. He had a comfortable smoothness about him that government employees, in contrast, seemed to lack, the sort of manner that indicated he made decisions. The decision he made for Ernest Walgreen was 'no.'

"I'd like to help you," said Pruel. His gray-blond hair was marcelled in a very dry look. "And we do go out of our way for old friends from the Service. But fella, it's one frigging phone call."

"I've got money."

"We charge a hundred thousand for just a look. Now that's for sending some people out to figure out what we'd really charge you when we get down to work. We're not sending a bunch of cadoodles in blue uniforms and tin badges, two steps off the welfare rolls. This is real security."

"That's a lot of money."

"Fella, we'd do it for nothing, if we thought it was real. We like our contacts with our kind of people. We'd even like you, Walgreen, to come to work for us. Except you look like you're doing pretty well for an old service man."

"I'm going to die," said Walgreen.

"Have you been sort of light on sex lately? I mean, sometimes at your age we lose a sense of proportion about things. Now both you and I know from training that one phone call . . ."

The next night, Ernest Walgreen of Minneapolis, Minnesota, was flying to Manchester Airport in New Hampshire to identify the body of his wife.

A syringe had been pressed thoroughly into her temple, as if somebody had attempted to inject something into her brain. Except this was a veterinarian's syringe and it had been empty. What had been injected into the brain was the large needle to make the brain stop working.

And, as an added measure, a good dose of air. Air in the bloodstream killed. The body was found in the back seat of her brother's car, with no telltale fingerprints on the car, none on the syringe. It was as if someone or something had come into this little northern community, done its job, and left. There was no known motive.

The casket with her body was already at the Manchester Airport when Walgreen arrived. Lester Pruel was standing next to the casket. His face was grim.

"We're all sorry. We didn't know. We'll give you everything. Again. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. We thought, well, it was just a phone call. On the face of it, you've got to admit . . . look, we can't bring her back but we can keep you alive. If you want us to."

“Yes, I do,” said Ernest Walgreen. Mildred would have wanted that, he thought. She loved life. Death was no excuse for the living to give up on it.

She was buried at Arcadian Angels cemetery, outside Olivia, county seat of Renville, amid the rich farmlands where Walgreen’s father had been born and where his own son now plowed with tractor through the ground that Walgreen had once plowed with horses.

It was the strangest funeral Olivia, Minnesota, had ever seen. Well-dressed men stopped mourners coming to the graveside to ask them what the metal object was in their pockets. They would not let them go near the grave unless they first showed what the metal was. An Olivia businessman, an old friend of the Walgreen family, said the strangers must have devices somewhere like airports had that detected metal on people.

A nearby hilltop was scoured and a hunter was told to move on. When he refused his gun was taken. He said he was going to the police. The men told him, “Fine, but after the funeral.”

The car Ernest Walgreen drove up in was also strange. While other tires left the pattern of their rubber-gripping tread in the fresh spring earth, these dug in a good four inches. The car was a heavy one. A youngster who got through the men always surrounding the limousine said the metal “didn’t make no hollow sound, like usual.”

It wasn’t a car. It was a tank with wheels designed to look like a car. And there were guns. Hidden under suitcases, behind newspapers, inside hats, but guns to be sure.

Residents wondered whether Ernest Walgreen had gone into crime.

“The Mafia,” they whispered. But someone pointed out that the men didn’t look like Mafia types.

“Shoot,” said someone else in a rare bit of wisdom, “the Mafia’s probably as American as you and me.”

Someone else remembered that Ernest Walgreen had once worked for the government. At least that was the rumor.

“It’s easy. Ernie must have become a spy for the CIA. He must be one of those fellas what has to be protected ’cause he shot up so many of them Russians.”

Walgreen watched Mildred’s white ash coffin being lowered into the narrow hole and thought, as he always did at funerals, how narrow the holes were and how small the last space was. And thinking of Mildred going down into that hole, he broke. There was nothing left but tears. And he had to tell himself it was not his wife disappearing, but the body. She had gone when the life went out of her. And he remembered her one last time, fumbling with her purse at the airport, and he thought: All right, let them end it now. Whoever it is. Let them finish me now.

So deep was his grief, it demolished hate and any desire for revenge. The Paldor security team decided his home was too exposed to risk. Too many blind entrances and exits.

“It’s an assassin’s delight,” said Pruel, who had personally taken over Walgreen’s protection.

For Walgreen, it was a relief to leave that house because Mildred was still there, in every part of it, from her potter's wheel to the mirror she had cracked.

"I have a vacation cabin in Sun Valley," said Walgreen. "But I need something to do. I don't want to think. It hurts too much."

"We'll have plenty of work for you," said Pruel.

The Sun Valley house proved to be an ideal fort, with what Pruel called a few modifications. Paldor refused to take any payment. To keep Walgreen's mind occupied, Les Pruel explained the latest techniques in top security.

"For all history, you've had imposing stone forts and moats and men standing around with weapons. That is until a new technique came about. Maybe it was stumbled on, I don't know, but it changed everything. And what it was is sort of magic."

"Mystery."

"No, no. Magic like Houdini. Like magicians. Illusion. In other words what you do is present something that isn't there. It sounds risky but it's the safest damned thing that ever was. It's absolutely one hundred percent foolproof. If Kennedy had it, he never would have been assassinated in Dallas. Never. Oswald wouldn't have known where to shoot."

Walgreen followed every step and as each new device was installed, he realized the genius of the new technique of illusion. It was not to stop an assassin from trying. Rather you wanted him to try because that was the greatest trap.

First the windows in the house that appeared to be normal see-through glass were changed so that what you saw inside was really three or four feet off. You really saw reflections from the polarized glass.

And there were two access roads that were opened wide. Or so it seemed. But the roads were wired and if cars didn't stop when ordered to by someone who appeared to be a forest ranger but was really a Paldor agent, the road would suddenly open up at a specified point, leaving two ditches in front and in back of any car which refused to stop.

The slope of the hill housed another electrical system that picked up urine odors of any human body. It had been developed in Vietnam. And all the surrounding hills were cabined by people who appeared to be just vacationers when in reality they were Paldor agents.

The illusion was that Ernest Walgreen's country cabin was a country cabin, instead of an electronic trap. It worked on the assassin's mind so that when he saw Walgreen pattering around in his garden from a nearby hill, he would think: I can kill that man just by driving up and putting a bullet in him. I can kill that man anytime I want. And I'd better do it now because he'll never be so open again.

Now if some assassin had a rifle on that nearby hill, a woman fixing her fence would tap an electronic signal and the assassin would not only fail to get off a shot but would in all likelihood end up with a bullet himself.

There was no way, Walgreen realized, that anyone could reach him and he was sorry he had not had

this earlier so Mildred could share this safety with him. The pine cabin was protected from every angle of approach. And on August fifth, as the heat crossed the great American plains backing the midwest, the foundation of the cabin rose. And when the temperature hit 92 degrees, a very volatile explosive, waiting in the foundation since spring, spread the house in one very loud bang across the Sun Valley recreation area.

Along with its sole occupant, Ernest Walgreen.

In Washington, this matter was called to the attention of the President of the United States. An Annapolis graduate and a physicist, he was not about to be panicked.

“Murder seems like a local crime,” he said.

“It’s not just murder, sir,” said his aide in a thick Southern drawl, so syrupy most Northerners drummed their fingers waiting for the man to get through the vowels and on to those rare consonants Southerners occasionally allowed to enter their speech.

“What is it then?” asked the President.

“It was an assassination that might be a warning for us. We believe it is.”

“Then give it to the Secret Service. They’re responsible for my protection. I’m fairly certain this man didn’t have as good protection as I do and besides, assassination is always with a President of this country. It’s part of the job.”

“Well, sir, this isn’t just any old assassination, You see, sir, it wasn’t that he had worse protection than you. The Secret Service tells us he had better. And the people who killed him . . . well, they say you’re next, sir.”

CHAPTER TWO

His name was Remo and he was exercising. Not the way a high school coach would exercise a team did this man exercise. He did not push muscles or strain ligaments or drive his wind to the breaking point so that the breaking point would be farther back next time. Straining and pushing were things long past, only dim remembrances of how other men used their bodies incorrectly.

Nothing fighting itself ever worked to its utmost. But that which did what was attuned to itself was the most effective it could be. A blade of grass growing and reaching for light could crack concrete. A mother, not reminding herself she was a woman and therefore incapable of strength, could-to save her baby-lift the rear end of an automobile off the ground. Water falling with gravity cut through rock.

To be most powerfully human required divesting oneself of that which was most human, a pure undiluted thought. And Remo was one with himself as he moved out smoothly and his body, with the snap of his toes extended out and restful with the gravity, let the forty-five feet of air between him and the sidewalk below take him down from the building ledge.

There were forces that acted on the body in free-falling flight, that if one allowed fear-triggered adrenalin to dominate, could crush the bones of the body as it collided with the pavement.

What one had to do was to be able to coordinate the meeting with the pavement ... to make the fall slower at the bottom.

It would not be really slower, any more than baseballs pitched to the great hitter Ted Williams were slower than those pitched to anyone else. But Ted Williams could see the stitches on the pitched baseballs and therefore could hit the ball with his bat more easily.

Remo, whose last name had also been Williams a long time ago but was no relation to the ballplayer, also slowed things down by becoming faster with his mind, the most powerful human organ but the one used least by most people. Less than eight percent of the human brain was ever used. It had become almost a vestigial organ.

If men ever learned to use that mind, they would, like Remo-his hands extended now before him-catch the world on the sidewalk, compress it back up so that there was no sudden push on the body, but only a minutely accurate division of stress, until ... no more. No stress and back up on feet and look around. Salamander Street, Los Angeles. Empty sidewalk, just daybreak in Watts.

Remo picked up the two twenty-five cent pieces that had fallen out of his pocket and looked around for more change. Early morning was always quiet in black neighborhoods, a special nothing-doing time of day, where if you wanted you could do compression dives off buildings and no one would go running around saying:

“Hey, did you see that guy do that? Did you see what I saw?”

Remo was six feet tall with high cheekbones and dark eyes that had an electric cool about them. He was thin and only his extraordinarily thick wrists might indicate that here was something other than the normal decaying flesh most men allow their bodies to become.

There had been high dives by people without full body control, but they used foam and inflated giant pillows to absorb the smack crack of forty-eight feet so that the material, not the diver, controlled the impact.

They also lacked control of their organs, assuming the intestines and liver acted like independent planets. Considering what foulness they consumed for energy and how they breathed, they were fortunate that cells were allowed to control themselves. If the people had done it, they would hardly have lived to reach puberty.

Remo looked back at the building.

Exercise now had become a re-realization of what his body was and what he did and thought and breathed. The flat slap of a soft rubber tire hobbled through a pothole two blocks down. A yellow car with a light on top indicating a cab for hire slowly came up the street.

Remo waved at him. He had to get back to the hotel. He could run it but he did not need the running, and if he should be fortunate enough to luck into a cab at this hour and this place, why not?

Remo waited as the cab came close. There were important things to do that morning. Upstairs had come up with a new wrinkle. Remo could never follow the code words and always ended up snarling middle-aged Dr. Harold W. Smith:

“If you can say it, say it. If not, don’t. I’m not going to piddle around with letters and numbers and dates. If you want to play with yourself, feel free. But this code nickypoo is the pits.”

Smith, who to the outside world ran a sanitarium called Folcroft on Long Island Sound, was in the west to deliver personally something he had been unable to say in code on the telephone. The few words Remo had understood meant that it had to do with the new President and some safety measure. Smith was to be at the hotel for exactly ten minutes and out again, under the rather workable and usually successful theory that if there is something that is dangerous, one should do it as quickly as possible. Don’t give disaster a lot of operating time.

And there was always a danger in Smith meeting Remo, because to be seen with the killer arm of CURE would be a crucial link to admitting that there even was a CURE, the government’s extra-legal organization, set up in a desperate attempt to stave off the impending chaos of a government weakened by its own laws but still resolved to administer them publicly.

Remo watched the cab slow down, then take off by him. The driver had seen him. Remo knew that. The driver had looked right at him, slowed, then stepped on the gas.

So Remo kicked off the loose loafers, so that the soles of his feet could skim better along the pavement.

He wore a tight black tee shirt over loose gray pants that snapped as the wind pressure whipped on the skimming, darting legs. He was moving on the cab, out into the cool morning asphalt of the gutter. Stench-burning smell of slum and slam. Bang onto the rear of the cab. Remo heard all four doors lock.

Cabs had become little fortresses nowadays because sticking a gun in the back of the head of a driver

had become a very easy way to collect money. So the American taxi in large cities had evolved into a rolling bunker, with bulletproof windshields behind the driver's head and doors that locked simultaneously with a switch near the driver's radio and a special beep in his dispatcher to indicate that a robbery was in progress. This driver did not have a chance to use the beeper.

The unfortified weakness of the cab was the top. Remo felt it as his body pressed against it. He crushed his straightened fingers down into the thin metal sheet of roofing and, closing his hand on vinyl interior upholstery compressed with insulation between and bright yellow painted metal on top and he yanked, ripping off a slab of the roof like someone separating Swiss cheese slices. One, two, three rips and he could wedge himself down next to the driver who, by now, was accelerating, twisting, slamming on brakes, and screaming all sorts of incipient mayhem to his dispatchers.

"Mind if I ride in the front?" asked Remo. "No. Go right ahead. Want a cigarette?" said the driver. He laughed lightly. He wet his pants. The wet went down his leg to the accelerator. Every once in a while he looked up over him where the roof had suddenly opened to great metal-chomping rips. He had thought he was being attacked by a dinosaur that ate metal. The thin man with the thick wrists told him where he wanted to go. It was a hotel.

"You really know how to hail a cab, fella," the driver said.

"You didn't stop," said Remo.

"I'll stop next time. I got nothin' against anybody but you stop in the colored neighborhoods and it's your life."

"What color?" Remo asked.

"Whaddya mean, what color? Black color. You think I'm talkin' orange already? Colored colored."

"There's yellow, there's red, there's brown, there's pale white. There's off white, there's pink. Sometimes," Remo said, "there's even a burnt umber perambulating around."

"Spook," said the driver.

But Remo was contemplating the rainbow of people. The divisions by simple color of black and white or red and yellow were not really the colors of people but racial designations. Yet races were not the big difference. The big difference was how people used themselves, raised themselves closer to what they could be. There were undoubtedly differences between groups but they were inordinately small compared to the difference between what all people were and what all people could be.

It was like a car. One car might have eight cylinders and another six and another four. If none of the cars used more than one cylinder, then there was no real difference among them. Such it was with man. Any man who used two of his cylinders was considered a great athlete.

And of course, there were one or two who used all eight cylinders.

"Forty-two Zebra, you still being eaten?"

"No. Nothing is wrong," said the driver.

“Is that your code for trouble?” Remo asked. “That nothing is wrong?”

“Nah,” said the driver.

“That is inordinately silly,” Remo said. “Here I am sitting in the front seat with you and that police car several blocks back there is going to chase us. Now if there’s a fight, look who’s right in the middle.”

“What police car?”

“Back there.”

“Oh, Jesus,” said the driver, finally seeing police markings back down the broad street.

Up ahead, another police cruiser stuck its nose out into the street.

“I guess we’d better stop and give ourselves up,” said the driver.

“Let’s run for it,” Remo said. He winked at the driver who felt the wheel move on its own accord, and then that lunatic, the guy who had ripped the roof and climbed in the torn hole, that guy who didn’t know how to get into a cab decently, was leaning into him. He was steering. Then the cab was going crazy, throating out full throttle, whip, zip, almost hitting the squad car that was in front. Now it was in back, pursuing the cab, then up onto the sidewalk and taking a phalanx of morning garbage cans like bowling pins.

The cabdriver glanced into the rearview mirror. Strike. There wasn’t a garbage can left standing.

Sirens screamed. Tires squealed. The driver moaned. He couldn’t even budge the wheel from the lunatic. He tried punching. He had been middleweight champion of his high school, so he punched. Right and left and the lunatic had his hands on the wheel and was leaning into him and he missed. The lunatic was anchored to the wheel. But both punches missed. Right and left missed.

How did the lunatic move his body that way? It was as if the lunatic could move his chest, attached to two arms attached to the steering wheel, faster than the driver could throw punches. Eight and left punches. Punches from the former middleweight champion of Pacifica High.

Guy was good. Great maybe. Rips out car roofs with his hands. Wasn’t that good a roof, maybe. Lunatic could dodge punches while going eighty-five miles an hour. Eighty-five miles an hour?

The driver moaned. They were going to be killed. At eighty-five miles an hour, you weren’t driving in Los Angeles, you were aiming.

The driver tried to kick the lunatic’s foot off the pedal. It didn’t kick. The lunatic could hold his foot out with more stability than the car itself. It was like kicking a lamp post.

“I’ll sit back and enjoy it,” said the driver. Lunatics, he knew, had abnormal strength.

“Your cab insured?”

“Insurance never covers,” said the driver.

“Sometimes it covers more,” said Remo. “I know a lawyer.”

“Look. You want to do me a favor? Leave me alone.”

“All right. Bye,” said Remo and kicked open the door to his right and let the cab careen across an empty lot as he floated free and out, the sidewalk moving quickly beneath him, his legs running-which was the key, to keep on moving quickly and not to stop-out onto the street, behind the hotel and in through the alley. He entered through a back kitchen, asking who bought the fresh meat for the hotel. Workers didn’t notice salesmen coming into a kitchen area, looking to sell something. For a guest to enter, however, would have attracted attention. The kitchen reeked of eggs bubbling in cow grease called butter.

At Remo’s suite of rooms, a shaken Smith waited at the door, face gaunt, hands knuckle-white over his briefcase, his middle-aged body taut with anger.

“What in God’s name was that downstairs ?”

“What downstairs?”

“The police. The chase. I saw from the window. The taxicab you came flying out of.”

“You wanted me to be on time, didn’t you ? You said this was important enough for you to come out here personally. That’s how important it was. You said you could only stay ten minutes for the meeting, so that there would be no chance of us being seen together. You said this was touchy. What’s touchy?”

“Presidential assassination,” said Smith. He took a step toward the door.

Remo stopped him.

“So?”

“I can’t be seen here with you. Not even in the same hotel. With the lunatic assassination theories and committees running around, they could easily turn over a rock and find all of us.”

“What’s the problem, other than you’ve lost your sense of reason ?”

“The problem is the President of the United States is going to be assassinated. I don’t have time to go into how I am sure of it, but you know we have our sources and our calculations.” Remo knew. He knew that the organization, for well over a decade now, had been secretly prompting law enforcement agencies to do their jobs properly, leaking information to the press on great frauds and, as a last resort, unleashing Remo himself during a crisis. He also knew that since the advent of the organization, the chaos had grown in the country. The streets were not safe; the police were no better. There was even a very well-paid police commissioner on a national television show complaining how the police were only “a very efficient army of occupation for the poor.”

The one thing that man’s police was not was “very efficient.” Pregnant women were shoved alive into incinerators in that man’s city. His own police rioted. Never before had so many people paid so much money for so little protection.

Remo had become hardened over the years but that was too hard to swallow. There had been a war against crime and chaos and the first to surrender had been the police. It was as if an army had not only let an invader through, they had demanded from their helpless country a higher tribute for their worthlessness. Then again, maybe the citizens had abandoned the decent policemen first. Whatever it was, the civilization was slipping.

So another politician's life did not send shivers of respect through Remo as it did through Dr. Harold W. Smith.

"So the President's going to be killed. So what?" Remo said.

"Have you seen the Vice President?" Smith said.

"We've got to save the President," Remo said.

"We have to, but not for that reason. This country is so weak we can't afford to lose another President. We're trying to convince the President that his life is in danger and he may need added protection. But he says it's up to God, Remo. Remo, we just can't take another assassination. I can't stay. You brought the police here. When I saw them, I gave Chiun the details. I don't know how you two slip in and out of dragnets and things so easily, but for me this is a dangerous place. Convince the President he's in danger. Goodbye."

Remo let Smith leave, his body sweating the heavy meat odors, his face persimmonously acid. A lemon bitter pall coated his whole demeanor.

Smith also left Remo with an awesome problem. For Smith, a westerner, did not understand what words meant when he spoke to Chiun, a Master of Sinanju, the age-old house that had provided assassins throughout history.

Remo knew he was in trouble when he saw the delighted smile on the face of Chiun, a delicate uprising half moon on a yellow parchment face, wisps of white beard and hair like a touch of silver cotton candy. He stood in a regal pose, his gold and crimson kimono made by ancient hands, flowing with the grace of an emperor's gown.

"At last, a proper use of a Master of Sinanju," said Chiun, his eighty-year-old voice as high as dry brakes in a desert. "Lo, these many years we have been degraded by working against the criminals and all manner of lowlife in your country but now, in his wisdom, your Emperor Smith has come to his senses."

"Jesus, no," said Remo. "Don't tell me." The large lacquered steamer trunks were already packed in Chiun's room, sealed with wax, lest any be opened without Chiun's knowledge.

"First, Smith was wise enough to at last put the true master in charge," Chiun said.

"You're not in charge, Little Father," said Remo.

"No back talk," said Chiun. "You are not even standing in a respectful bow."

"C'mon, get off it. What did Smith really say?"

“He said, looking out at that disgusting, disgraceful scene in the street, how you, while learning the greatness of Sinanju in one respect, had become insane in the other.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said we had done wonders considering we had a white man to work with.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said he felt sorry for someone as kind and understanding as your teacher who had endured your shoddiness of breathing and blood control.”

“He did not say that.”

“Your breathing has gotten so irregular even a white meat-eater can hear the crude rasps.”

“I’ve corrected that and the only thing someone like Smitty knows about breathing is that it’s bad when it stops forever. He knows no more about breathing than you do about computers.”

“I know computers have to be plugged into sockets. I know that,” said Chiun. “I know when I hear slander from an ingrate against the very House that found him as dirt and through labor and discipline and with the expenditure of awesome knowledge, transformed a sluggish half-dead body into a large part of what he could be.”

“Little”Father,” said Remo to the man who had indeed transformed him, although in often very annoying ways, “Smith could not possibly understand anything about breathing, any more than you could understand anything about the democratic process.”

“I know you lie to yourself a lot. You tell yourself you have friends you choose but you really have emperors like everyone else.”

“What did Smitty say?”

“He said your breathing was a disgrace.”

“What were the specific words?”

“He heard the noise and looked out the window and said, ‘what a disgrace.’ “

“That was ’cause the cops were following me. And he didn’t want commotion. He wasn’t talking about my breathing.”

“Do not be a fool,” Chiun said. “You lumbered out of that vehicle, breathing like a stuck hippo, as if you had to concentrate to keep your nostrils open. Smith sees this and then you think that he is concerned not about your breathing but about the police who are no danger to anyone, especially someone who will give them coins?”

“Yes. Especially since I worked out that breathing thing.”

“You went high?” Chiun asked.

“How else?”

“I thought you looked almost adequate down there,” said Chiun. And then with a modicum of joy, he outlined the instructions that Smith had hurriedly given to him.

He and Remo would enter the presidential palace.

“The White House,” Remo said.

“Correct,” said Chiun. “Emperor Smith wants us to let this other man who thinks he is the emperor know where the real power is. That he who has Sinanju as his sword is emperor in any land, and that any man may call himself emperor but only one is. That is what Smith wants.”

“I don’t understand,” Remo said.

“We call it the leaf. It is an old thing but I let Emperor Smith think he had thought of it, although for generations the House has done this thing hundreds of times. It is quite common.”

“What is ‘the leaf?’” Remo asked. “I never heard of it before.”

“When you look at a forest in the springtime from a distance, you see green. And you say the green is the forest because that is what you see. But this is not true. And when you get closer you see the green is made up of leaves and you say, aha, the leaves are the forest. But this is not true. You must be really close before you realize that the leaves are but little things made by trees and that the trees are the real forest.

“Thus, the real power in a land is often not he whom the people think is emperor, but someone far wiser, such as he who has grasped the House of Sinanju to his heart.

“And then it is the duty of the real emperor’s assassin to show the false emperor who the real emperor is, show the leaf that it is only a part of the tree. It is a common thing. We have done it many times.”

And by the “we” Chiun meant the House of Sinanju, the Masters who had rented themselves out to kings and pharaohs and emperors throughout the ages to support the poor village of Sinanju on the coast of the West Korea Bay. Years before, Chiun, the last Master, had taken the job of training Remo, and every year the secret organization CURE sent tribute to Chiun’s North Korean village.

“And we are supposed to do what specifically?” Remo asked.

“Put fear into the President’s heart. Expose his vulnerability. Make him cower and plead for the mercy of Emperor Smith. It is good to be working among proper folk again.”

“You must have gotten something wrong, Little Father,” said Remo. “I don’t think Smith wants that done to the President.”

“Perhaps,” Chiun said, “we will take the President at night and bring him to a pit of hyenas and hold

him over it until he swears eternal loyalty to Smith.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what Smith wants. You see, Smith serves the country; he doesn’t rule it.”

“They all say that but they really want to rule. Perhaps, instead of the hyenas, we can cripple the President’s finest general. Who is America’s finest general?”

“We don’t have fine generals anymore, Little Father. We have accountants who know how to spend money.”

“Who is the most fearsome fighter in the land?”

“We don’t have any.”

“No matter. It is time that America saw what a true assassin is like instead of all the amateurs that have plagued this land.”

“Little Father, I am sure Smitty doesn’t want the President harmed,” Remo said.

“Quiet. I am in charge now. I am not just a teacher anymore. Perhaps we can remove the President’s ears as a lesson.”

“Little Father, let me explain a few things. Hopefully,” Remo said. With little hope.

CHAPTER THREE

The President was hearing from some “good ole boys” how “this here White House, it got more protection than a twenty-year-old coonhound with bad breath and a kerosene ass.”

“My advisers tell me I don’t have enough protection,” said the President softly. He worked at a table stacked with reports. He could read as fast as some men could think and liked to work four uninterrupted hours at a stretch. During those times he could ingest a week’s information and still there would be more. He had discovered early in his presidency that a man without priorities in that office was a man who swamped helpless immediately. You and your staff culled what you absolutely had to do and then added what you should do and then cut that in half to make a work week only two weeks’ full.

In that manner did men age in this office. No one ever left the presidency of the United States young.

“Y’all gotta remember, sir, these boys up heah in Washington, they sure ‘nough know how to worry.”

“They say I’m a dead man unless I listen to them. They say we’ve had serious threats.”

“Shoot. These boys’ll sell you the smoke from a horse’s nostrils. Everybody heah looking to protect you from something. For a lot of money.”

“You don’t think I’m in danger? A man was killed in Sun Valley, just as an example to me, they said

“Sure you in danger, sir. Everybody’s always in danger.”

“I’ve told the Secret Service people who guard me that I think I’ve got enough protection and I don’t want to be bothered anymore. There are other things more pressing. But I wonder sometimes. It’s not just my life. This country can’t take another presidential assassination. The air is already so poisoned with rumors and doubts and stories about conspiracies and plots and counterplots.”

“To say nothin’ of us losing our first President since James K. Polk. There was a long while there we didn’t have nobody from the South. Long while. Don’ worry. We ain’ gonna lose you.”

The President smiled graciously. His old friend from back home who had been a state trooper showed him what his own Secret Service had shown him, how the White House itself was impregnable and that the only time anyone ever really got through the gates was when the President was on a trip somewhere.

“You already got the best heah. Cain’t do no better, sir,” said the old friend from Georgia. “Why, cain’t even get a gnat through these people. They got guards guarding guards guarding guards and more radar and stuff like that than any place on earth.”

“I don’t know,” said the President. He knew without saying that too many people had come too close to too many Presidents recently. Lunatics had gotten a loaded revolver to within a handshake of the previous President. Someone had even gotten off a shot. A man had crashed a truck through the White House gate just the year before and a woman with a stick of dynamite on her body had been

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