

ALLEN GREGORY

A FLINT STRYKER THRILLER



DEADLY UNDERTAKING

The Dead Will Claim Their Own

THE *FLINT STRYKER* THRILLER SERIES

***DEADLY
UNDERTAKING***

ALLEN GREGORY

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Literal Genius

CONTENTS

[Deadly Undertaking](#)

[Just A Heads Up](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Synopsis of Lessons Learned](#)

[Lessons Learned Preview](#)

Deadly Undertaking
A Flint Stryker Series Thriller Novelette

by Allen Gregory

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JUST A HEADS UP

Here's a brief breakdown of the characters featured in this novelette. The story takes place at some point after Flint begins his career at Linchpin. It is a complete standalone story and other than the characters and settings, has no tie-in to the series and story arcs currently being developed. Hopefully this will keep you from wandering through the pages, dazed and confused. The descriptions that follow, while brief, will give you at least enough information to navigate the story and not be clueless.

Linchpin - A highly secretive, 'off-the-books' organization designed to ferret out and deal with threats to domestic U.S. security that fall outside the purview of the government and military. It operates as a private entity securing its funding from private sources – 'concerned' individuals and organizations with deep pockets.

Flint Stryker – Young(ish) (*Imagine taking six-plus years to graduate college and add a couple of years for training on top of that*) neophyte operative for Linchpin who was brought along with the goal of joining Linchpin after a too-long and less than stellar collegiate career. Although not considered one the 'brightest and best', Flint does have some attributes that make him a valuable asset for Linchpin. He is tenacious and has a dogged determination to see things through after while enduring some hard blows and challenges along the way.

Precog - Flint also has a unique physical gift. Flint is a developing Acquired Savant, possessing a precognitive ability that serves him well under duress. Think of a silent mental Early Warning System that alerts at opportune (and sometimes inopportune) times.

Dr. Morris Malloy – One of the principals serving in the leadership triumvirate** of Linchpin. Dr. Malloy’s skill set is all things scientific – especially the areas considered by many to be ‘fringe science’. Brilliant, quirky, and unflinchingly loyal to Flint, he works behind the scenes to ensure Flint has every opportunity to succeed. ***(Consisting of the organization’s acknowledged leader known only as Seven, and Serafina Ferrari, a mysterious, beautiful operative who is also one of the world’s deadliest assassins. *They are not featured in this novelette. That’s a story for another day.*)

Cho-Soon Jeong (CJ) – A young female operative of Korean descent who was in the same training class as Flint. The two of them have shared many of the same missions, experiences, and have an unmistakable chemistry between them in spite of Flint’s often boorish behavior. With her cool, calm demeanor, she provides the perfect counterbalance to Flint’s sometimes impetuous, impulsive nature.

Earl ‘Cinder’ Porterhouse - Linchpin’s resident expert on all things explosive. Think “loose cannon” times 10. With an unabashed affection (and astounding tolerance) for ‘adult beverages’, he and Flint frequently enjoy solving the world’s problems over a tall, cold one. His ability to perform his duties (often after consuming mass quantities of alcohol) are nothing short of incredible, and are a source of constant amazement to Flint.

ONE

Flint Stryker hated funerals. *Hated* them. Everything was so . . . so damn *final* about them. One minute you were going about your business dealing with weird threats to your country's security and whacked-out nut jobs trying to kill you, and the next minute you were . . . well, *dead*.

At least *he* wasn't dead, so there's that. But his fellow agent and friend, Hector Romero, was. Dead, cold, waxy-looking, and scheduled to be buried today at noon.

Flint splashed cold water on his face from the funeral home's restroom sink. *Up too late drinking again last night. Mouth feels like a Brillo pad. Tastes like it too.*

He grabbed a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and dried his face. Wadding up the towels and tossing them into the waste bin, Flint surveyed his reflection. *Not too bad. A little bleary-eyed, but nothing a quick dose of eye drops won't fix.*

Flint tugged at the knot of his black and blue diamond-patterned tie and shrugged, adjusting the collar of his dark suit. *Another reason to hate funerals. I hate black. It's so morbid. Why don't we wear bright colors to funerals? Don't people need a little cheering up?*

He blew into his cupped hand to get a reading on just how bad his 'morning-after breath' was. He grimaced. *Smells as bad as it tastes. That can't be good.*

Fortunately, he had a pack of breath mints for just such an occasion. He took the pack from his coat pocket and popped a couple into his mouth. *Do your*

work, O Magic Capsules of Sugar and chlorophyll . . .

He was just about to step from the restroom when the door opened, and Dr. Malloy stepped in. “Oh hello, Mr. Stryker. Good to see you.” His face clouded as he muttered, “I guess this isn’t exactly the place to say that.”

Flint laughed. Dr. Malloy was like that; a brilliant guy he’d known since before his less-than-stellar college career, he was a paradox. A genius by anyone’s definition, he often said or did things that would sometimes leave you scratching your head. There were many times Flint had to puzzle his way through a conversation with Dr. Malloy. He was responsible for Flint being with the highly secretive and ‘off-the-books’ organization, Linchpin.

“Not to worry, Doc,” Flint said. “I knew exactly what you meant.”

Malloy headed to a nearby stall to take care of business, talking loudly to Flint as he did so. “It’s a shame about Mr. Romero. So young and so much promise. He was in your training class was he not?”

Flint leaned on the sink, crossing his arms, and replied, “Yeah, he was. Hector was a good guy. I hope they find out who ambushed him.” He paused and added, “It didn’t appear to be robbery - nothing was taken. He was just coming back from a run and got popped in the park just before he got home. One shot. Right to the forehead. Very professional and clean.”

Malloy flushed and came out of the stall, joining Flint at the sink. Flint stepped aside as Malloy washed his hands. *Like he’s headed into surgery*, Flint thought. Malloy grabbed a handful of towels, cocked his head, and narrowed his eyes at Flint as he murmured, “Yes, odd, that.”

Malloy finished drying his hands and tossed the paper into the bin. “Too clean, if you ask me, Mr. Stryker. And when he was discovered, he was laid out almost respectfully.” Malloy shook his head and sighed. “Ah, the times we live in.”

The two men exited the men’s room and headed for the room where Hector’s viewing was to take place. As they were very early, there were few people in the room at the time. The air in the room was fragrant with the scent of hundreds of flowers. They moved silently to the casket, where their former associate lay in eternal repose.

As they approached the bier, an audible chirp was heard from somewhere on Dr. Malloy's person. Flint whispered, "It would probably be a good idea to silence your mobile, Doc."

Malloy's thick dark eyebrows knit in concern as he responded, also in sotto voce, "I don't think that's my mobile, Mr. Stryker."

Flint turned and cocked an eyebrow as they moved closer to the coffin. "Well. Whatever it is, you probably need to silence it."

Malloy retrieved a small device from his pocket that was steadily emitting a series of loud beeps. He examined the small screen, which displayed a sequence of numbers and a spiking monitor line.

"No, Mr. Stryker, I'm afraid that these sounds are very important." He tapped the screen with his free hand. "We need to clear the room and call the Biohazard team at Linchpin. We're just inches away from some very toxic material."

"You mean . . ."

"Yes. I'm afraid Mr. Romero presents a very real threat to everyone within the immediate radius. Let's ensure that no innocent mourners unexpectedly join him on his sorrowful journey."

TWO

Flint and Dr. Malloy stared curiously at the body of Hector Romero, which laid on the steel examination table in the secure isolation room. Still dressed in his suit provided by his grieving mother, Romero looked as if he were just peacefully napping in the most unlikely of places.

Separated from him by thick panels of ballistic glass, the room was the latest in biohazard safety technology. Any conceivable airborne threat would be instantly whooshed away through a ventilation system designed to clear the room and isolate any pathogens released within its confines.

The Linchpin technician in the isolation room with Romero's corpse was wearing an almost otherworldly suit, which would protect its wearer from virtually any toxin currently known to man. He turned and nodded to Dr. Malloy and tapped the side of his helmet. Malloy nodded back and flipped a switch on the panel before him.

"And we're live, Dr. Malloy," the tech's voice filled the room.

"Yes, Mr. Lee," Malloy acknowledged. "Good to see you today. I'm sorry to pull you into this, but your expertise in this area is unmatched." Jason Lee was one of the preeminent microbial pathologists in the world. His research was considered groundbreaking and wide-ranging. If anyone could figure out what they were dealing with, he would be the one.

His helmet bobbed up and down as his voice crackled over the speakers. "Gosh, Doc. Keep that up and you'll give me a swelled head, and then I'll never fit into these damned suits." Flint imagined Lee's infectious grin as he moved

towards the body of Romero.

“Let’s get down to business, shall we?” Lee pushed the stainless steel cart containing the implements he’d be using in the examination closer to the table. “First, we’ll remove Hector’s clothing, and then I’ll start the examination. For the sake of posterity and to ensure we have accurate information, we’re recording this examination on video.” He glanced up at the clock, inching its way towards noon.

Flint nudged Malloy. “What do you think he’ll find, Doc?”

Malloy shook his head. “I’m not sure, Mr. Stryker. All I know is I’m thankful I’m so absent-minded that I neglected to remove my pathogenic indicator when I left the lab earlier this morning. I always wear it when I’m in the lab, as sometimes one can be exposed unexpectedly to dangerous materials.”

“Well, what difference would it have made? Two hours from now, Hector’s funeral would have been over, and he’d have been buried, right?”

“Possibly . . .” Malloy began.

“All right,” Lee interrupted, “Let’s get this show going. Coming up on high noon, we’re in Linchpin’s Pathogens Lab #1, examining the remains of one Hector Romero, whose body is emitting registered levels of an unknown pathogenic substance . . .”

Flint’s ‘Precog’ gave him an unexpected twinge, a worrying nudge somewhere in his brain. His eyes went instinctively to the clock.

The minute, hour, and second hand on the clock all clicked into place as the clock struck noon.

From within the isolation room came the muffled sound of a cell phone’s ringtone.

Lee’s surprised voice crackled over the speakers, “What the . . .?”

The isolation room was rent by the fury of the blast, which created a thunderous shock wave that sent Flint and Dr. Malloy flying backward, slamming into the wall behind them.

THREE

Stunned by the force of the explosion, Flint vainly tried to focus on his surroundings. “Doc . . .? Doc! Are you okay?” The air was a fog of smoke and sheetrock dust. Overhead, vents noisily sucked the dust-choked air, quickly clearing the room of particulate matter.

He pushed himself up with one arm and surveyed his surroundings. An alarm was blaring, and emergency lights were flashing from the ceiling, indicating an ‘exposure incident.’ Most of the dust was now cleared from the room, and despite a persistent ringing in his ears, Flint was otherwise unhurt.

Malloy was already on his feet, staring in horror at the scene before him.

Just as it was designed to do, the isolation room had protected everyone outside of it. The reinforced structure was the product of superior engineering and construction and had done its job well.

Jason Lee had not been so fortunate.

The ballistic glass was covered with blood and viscera from the two men who’d been in the room when the blast occurred. One had already been dead, and the explosion did nothing to change that. The other was now also dead. Little was left in the room to suggest that two human beings had occupied it prior to the detonation.

Malloy examined the readings on the control panel for the isolation room. Aside from the grisly bits that were left, the room was clear of any contaminants. Any airborne pathogens had been swept instantly from the room and were now stored in secure canisters awaiting evaluation. The hazmat team would secure

the residue in the room and ensure it was handled properly.

“Just damn,” Flint mumbled, his voice barely audible.

“My sentiments exactly, Mr. Stryker,” Malloy agreed. “I didn’t anticipate this. I merely suspected Mr. Romero contained some sort of viral compound. I never dreamed he was a time bomb.”

Flint quickly removed his mobile from his suit pocket. “I’m going to call Cinder and give him a heads-up on this.” Stryker’s face was grim as he keyed the code of Linchpin’s explosive expert into his phone. He put the phone to his ear and heard the agent’s cell ringing.

Earl ‘Cinder’ Porterhouse was Linchpin’s expert on all things explosive. If it needed to be blown up, he was your guy. If you needed to *stop* it from being blown up, he was also your guy.

“I’m on my way,” Cinder’s out-of-breath voice filled Flint’s ear as he picked up. “What the hell was that?”

“Well, a bomb obviously,” Stryker said sarcastically. “You want me to do your job for you?”

“I’m surprised you’re up and about before two o’clock,” Cinder replied good-naturedly. “The last time I saw you, you were passed out under our table at O’Toole’s.”

Exasperated, Flint replied, “Did you see how much I had to *drink*, you asshole?”

“Lightweight.”

Flint laughed, “Just get here, and don’t be a dick.”

“Just down the hall. Do you want a beer?”

Flint blanched at the thought of another beer and disconnected the call. *He was still going strong when I passed out. How is that even possible?*

He turned to face Malloy. “He’s almost here, Doc. He’s just down the hall . . .”

Flint’s mobile chirped and he looked at the caller ID.

SHERMAN PEABODY.

What now?

He tabbed the ‘answer’ button. “What’s up, Sherm?”

Sherman Peabody was Linchpin's Chief IT operative. Quirky and unconventional to say the least, Peabody was perhaps the most brilliant IT mind in the world. He was also the shyest. Flint waited patiently as Peabody remained silent on his end.

“Seriously, Sherm. What’s going on? We have a little bit of a situation here in the isolation room. You may have heard that loud *WHOOMF* earlier. That happened where I am. I’m damn lucky to be alive. But don’t worry, I kept everybody safe. I . . .”

“Flint . . .” Peabody interrupted, clearing his throat.

Stryker chewed his lip impatiently. Finally, he said, “Yep. That’s me. You need to tell me why you’re calling, Sherm. It’s gonna be crazy down here in a few minutes, and we won’t be able to have this nice chat, so . . .”

Peabody spoke softly, his voice barely above a whisper. “You need to see this, Flint. At my station. I think I know what’s happening.”

FOUR

As Flint hurried down the hallway toward Peabody's station, his mind raced through the events of the morning. What had started as a bad day anyway with Hector's funeral had gotten exponentially worse with the explosion in the isolation lab. Fortunately, it looked like there was no contamination, and aside from the explosion and the death of Jason Lee, the damage had been contained. But what was the purpose of exploding a corpse?

Placing his thumb on the keypad at the entry door to the Communications/IT sector of Linchpin's operations, Flint paused as the device scanned his thumbprint. When the pad beeped, indicating that his print had been verified, the screen prompted him to proceed with the iris scan on the second screen at shoulder height. He stared into the scanner, and the door clicked as it unlocked.

He hustled inside, scouring the busy room for Sherman Peabody among the many faces all gathered around their computer stations, scanning drone feeds, traffic camera feeds, internet activity, and the Dark Web. Other monitors positioned around the room displayed news feeds from various networks. There was also a monitor specifically for Linchpin intel, which filtered information into short bursts, all coded.

Amid this beehive of activity stood a forlorn figure, his mousy brown hair disheveled and unkempt, looking as if he'd just tumbled out of bed. A grey t-shirt coupled with pajama pants and bedroom slippers only heightened the perception.

Flint clicked his tongue. *No matter what he looks like, or how weird he acts,*

Sherman Peabody is the guy I want in my corner every time.

“Hi, Sherm, what’s up?” Flint reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a Pez container, this one bearing the likeness of Disney’s Gyro Gearloose character. “Here ya go, buddy. Look what I got for you when I was in California last month. I know you love this guy.”

Peabody reddened and he smiled shyly. “Thanks, Flint. That’s really cool.” He admired the dispenser for a few seconds before tucking it safely away into his t-shirt pocket.

“No problem,” Flint winked and added, “What’s up, my man? You said you think you knew something about the explosion?”

Peabody nodded and tapped the tablet he was holding and swiped its surface. The large screen above them instantly displayed whatever was on the tablet as Peabody went through several windows. With dizzying speed, the IT whiz sped through the various screens until he arrived at his destination.

Flint gave a low whistle. “How do you even know what you’re looking at?”

Peabody didn’t meet Flint’s admiring stare. “I just know what I’m looking for I guess.” He tapped the screen once more to enlarge an area that responded accordingly on the larger screen. “Look at this,” he said as he nodded at the overhead screen.

Flint’s gaze followed Peabody’s, his puzzled expression betraying his confusion.

“What am I looking for?” Flint asked, his eyes narrowing as he surveyed the monitor.

“Look at the section I’ve highlighted in yellow. It’s pretty clear when you see it.”

Flint gasped when he read the entry—*GUIDER test_1 successfully detonated at 1200 hours. Xxxxxx* He turned to see Peabody biting his fingernails and nervously searching Flint’s face for a reaction.

“When did this message appear?”

Peabody indicated a time stamp on the message with a cursor onscreen. “About thirty seconds after the explosion occurred. Do you see the one large X followed by the three small x’s after the message?” Flint nodded. “Those are

responses from six different entities acknowledging receipt of the message. They appeared one by one within seconds of the message being dropped by this GUIDER. It's like they were waiting for it."

Flint used his cell phone's camera to capture the screen image. "*Maybe they were . . .*" he murmured.

FIVE

Flint texted Dr. Malloy and alerted him that he was returning to the isolation room. Cinder was now on the scene and was in the process of trying to determine what the cause of the blast was. Lucky him.

Quickly going through the re-entry protocol, Flint barged into the lab just as Cinder entered through the safety door, wearing a bright yellow safety suit and helmet. The “safe area” was a transition chamber before entering the lab. Upon leaving, the individual was bombarded with a complex composite of sterilization procedures.

Cinder gave Flint a salute as he prepared to enter the contaminated lab. He was carrying a bulky case containing the materials and equipment he used to analyze explosive debris. Cinder’s cheery voice echoed through the room’s loudspeakers as Linchpin’s CSI unit scurried around the room. “Hey! Stryker! How about after I’m done we go get a late lunch? Are you up for some curry?”

Flint’s stomach performed several convolutions as he imagined a steaming platter of Chicken Chettinad or Phall Curry being placed before him. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to erase the image and stifle the hot gush of acid reflux.

“Asshole,” Flint muttered as he saw the CSI techs glance over their shoulders at him, huge grins on their faces.

“Funny guy,” Flint scoffed. “Let me know what you find, Cinder. I think I got a lead from Sherman that looks promising.”

“Copy that, buddy.” Cinder busied himself with the task of analyzing what

little evidence remained.

Doctor Malloy motioned Flint over. “I’ve done a very rudimentary analysis of the toxins which were released in the room after the explosion, Mr. Stryker. The short story is, the toxins are all man-made and not consistent with any known viral pathogens. I’ll need to spend more time analyzing the microorganisms in greater detail, but suffice it to say, the toxins are fast-acting, very deadly, and highly contagious. Had the explosion taken place at Mr. Romero’s funeral, dozens would have been killed outright by the blast, and hundreds would have been infected by the spread of the contagion within minutes.”

Flint stared at Malloy, his mouth open in shock. “Everything that happened in here was all contained though, right?”

“Yes,” Malloy said evenly. “*But*, Mr. Stryker, had this happened in an unprotected environment, say, Mr. Romero’s funeral service, thousands would have been dead within hours. Once infected, it’s a short time before death occurs. The pathogens can be transmitted via clothing, skin, virtually any surface. Borne on the wind, the toxins could infect millions in days. Worst-case scenario? The death toll would be incalculable.”

Malloy’s face was grim as he sighed. “Now. What was it you said Mr. Peabody might have uncovered?”

Flint held his phone up to Dr. Malloy’s face, displaying the picture he’d taken of Peabody’s monitor with the cryptic message he’d uncovered. “This message was uploaded to the Dark Web within thirty seconds of the explosion. Those six X’s? Sherman says that are acknowledgments that the message was received.”

“Can he determine the source of the message and responses?” Malloy asked.

“Sherman says that normally, stuff on the Dark Web is highly encrypted, and is hard to track down. But he thinks he can find the sources relatively quickly. He says he knows . . . ‘*some tricks.*’”

Malloy smiled and nodded. “Yes. I imagine he does. I’m grateful for our young Mr. Peabody. You know, when I found him, he was living alone . . .”

Flint’s mobile chirruped, interrupting Dr. Malloy’s reverie. He glanced at the

caller ID and saw SHERMAN PEABODY. “Speak of the devil,” Flint mumbled.

“What’s up Sherm?” Malloy watched Flint’s face go from mild annoyance to complete shock within seconds. “Got it. We’ll be right there.”

“What is it, Mr. Stryker?” a concerned Malloy queried.

“Looks like the first one was just a test. There are six more scheduled for five o’clock. Unless we stop them, your worst-case scenario will become a reality.”

SIX

Flint and Dr. Malloy arrived at Peabody's station in Communications/IT within minutes. They were confronted by the nervous figure of the young IT genius pacing back and forth, intently focusing on the tablet in his hand. Flint glanced up at the monitor, which displayed the contents of Sherman's tablet screen. Windows were being opened, closed, and swept aside with such dizzying speed Flint couldn't imagine how the young man could make any sense of it.

The two men stood watching Peabody closely, searching for any clue to his success. Peabody gave no indication, his furrowed brow giving his youthful face the appearance of total concentration. He abruptly stopped and exhaled loudly. Flint realized that the whole time they had been watching him, Sherman had been holding his breath.

"All right—done!"

Malloy and Flint looked at Peabody expectantly. Finally, Flint offered, "And . . .?"

Looking up from his tablet, Peabody appeared genuinely surprised to see them. "Oh! I didn't realize you were here. Sorry!" He reddened, embarrassed that he had been so preoccupied.

"It's all right, Mr. Peabody," Dr. Malloy smiled. "We appreciate your focus and attention to detail. I gather you achieved some success with whatever it is that you are doing?"

Peabody nodded nervously. "Yes, sir. I was able to isolate the sender and the recipients of the messages earlier. I placed a digital object identifier nested

within their e-data signal, which will enable me to track them surreptitiously. They'll never know it, but we'll be able to precisely pinpoint their locations sooner rather than later."

Malloy glanced at his watch. "It's a little after one o'clock now. When do you think we might know more?"

Peabody studied the progress indicator on his tablet. "If I had to guess, I 'd say in the next thirty or forty minutes, Dr. Malloy. Unfortunately, that's the best I can do right now."

Malloy placed a reassuring hand on Peabody's shoulder. A huge smile split his craggy face as he said, "Excellent, young man! I know you'll keep us informed of any headway you make going forward."

Peabody lowered his eyes and blushed again.

Malloy turned to Flint. "Now, Mr. Stryker, I think we should go and see if our friend Mr. Porterhouse has made any progress with his examination."

As they turned to leave, a low digital tone caught their attention, and the two men turned to see Peabody's eyes wide in shock, staring at the monitor above them. They turned on their heels to see the following message:

GUIDER test_1 detonated @ 1200 hours. Infection unsuccessful. Reaper 6 @ 1800 hours. Prepare for the Age of Reason.

SEVEN

All three men stared at the mysterious message in shock. They were further dismayed to see the six X's appear within thirty seconds after the original message's posting.

GUIDER test_1 detonated @ 1200 hours. Infection unsuccessful. Reaper 6 @ 1800 hours. Prepare for the Age of Reason<500MM Xxxxxx

“Whoever’s involved has acknowledged receiving the message. And what the hell does *that* even mean?” Flint muttered somberly.

“Yes,” Dr. Malloy agreed. He turned abruptly to Peabody, causing him to jump slightly. “Mr. Peabody, please give this matter your utmost and diligent attention in the short term. We must decipher this message and determine its origin posthaste.”

Peabody nodded and returned his attention to his tablet.

Malloy motioned Flint to join him as they headed back to the lab. As they were walking, Flint studied Malloy’s worried face and asked, “Are Seven and Serafina aware of what’s happened?”

Malloy nodded and replied, “Yes, they are Mr. Stryker. But they are at an undisclosed location involved in a mission that I’m not at liberty to discuss. I feel certain that they expect us to handle this situation without disrupting their mission.”

If Seven, who is the titular head of Linchpin, is involved, it must be a really big deal. If Serafina, who is one of the deadliest assassins in the world, is involved, something really bad must be going down. So, if that was supposed to

lower my stress level, it didn't work.

Flint wondered aloud, "Maybe Cinder had some luck with his research, Doc."

"For all of our sakes, I certainly hope so, Mr. Stryker."

RETURNING TO THE LAB, they saw scores of lab technicians hustling about the room, testing all the surfaces, evaluating the air quality, and running computer simulations. As Dr. Malloy entered, one of the techs handed him a tablet before resuming his task.

Malloy scoured the tablet, his bushy eyebrows rising occasionally in surprise, at other times knitting together in concern. "It appears that the safety equipment and protocols in place did their job. The good news is, our bio-hazard team indicates that the pathogens were completely contained and securely stored. The bad news is that their real-time assessment also concurs with my initial evaluation that the toxins are all man-made and not consistent with any known strains of viral pathogens."

"Any chance you can identify the toxins more precisely?" Flint quickly added, "Or, more importantly, develop an antidote?"

Malloy eyed Flint thoughtfully. "Possibly. But it would take some time. And if Mr. Peabody is correct in this interpretation of the message he intercepted, it is something we have precious little of."

"I see what you mean, Doc." Flint shuddered as if an icy finger had run the length of his spine.

"I'm here. What can I do?"

The two men turned to see the petite Cho-Soon Jeong standing quietly beside them.

How does she do that? Flint wondered. *I never heard a sound.*

"CJ!" Flint exclaimed. "I wondered where you were. We didn't see you at Hector's funeral this morning."

"I was running a bit behind," CJ replied. "By the time I got there, you guys

had cleared the place, so I tried to make myself useful. I picked up enough information about the alert to understand that Hector was emitting measurable levels of a dangerous pathogen, so I headed to the funeral home to see if I could get a lead on anything there.”

Flint did a mental facepalm. CJ was truly something else. The two of them had undergone their basic training together, but there the similarity ended. She always seemed to be one step ahead of him. They’d had a brief fling during their basic training, but now they seemed to be doing an awkward social/professional thing that made it difficult for them to know what to expect day-to-day.

CJ was physically slight, but strikingly beautiful, and her long, luxurious jet black hair and dark eyes presented a deceptive package. Flint had seen her take down men three times her size in short order. She was tough, smart, and intuitive. It was no surprise that she had taken the initiative to check out the funeral home.

“Excellent!” Malloy beamed. “And what did you find out, Ms. Jeong?”

“Not much,” she shrugged. “As far as the owners knew, Hector’s procedure was remarkably unremarkable. Except for the cosmetic repairs done to Hector’s head wound, the embalming was pretty straightforward.”

“Did you speak to the embalmer?” Flint asked.

“No,” CJ replied. “And that’s the weird thing. The guy who did the embalming? He hasn’t been to work since he did it the day before yesterday.”

Malloy and Flint cast each other sidelong glances.

“I know, right?” CJ handed Malloy a small head shot of a young man whose picture looked as if it had come with a wallet—squeaky clean and painfully nondescript. “I got his file photo from the funeral home and checked out his ID. All of the stuff in his personnel file? Gone. Everything they’d used to verify employment? Either scrubbed or bogus.”

Flint studied the employment record. “Carl Murphy? Nice and ordinary-sounding name.”

“Yes. And aside from what we suspect of Mr. Murphy, his time at the funeral home was extremely ordinary. Lots of funerals, lots of embalming. Lots of dead people that didn’t explode.”

“Was he a new employee, Ms. Jeong?” Dr. Malloy asked.

“You’d think so, sir, but actually, no. He had been on the job for over three months, and according to the owners, he’d done outstanding work.”

Malloy chewed his lower lip reflectively. “Hmm. That indicates that whoever is behind this has been preparing for today’s events for quite some time. They have the resources, people, and above all, *patience* required to make something like this happen.”

Flint nodded. “Three months is certainly long enough that he’d not have anyone looking over his shoulder while he worked. It would have been relatively easy for him to rig up the body with the pathogens and the explosives.”

“All too true, Mr. Stryker,” Malloy agreed.

Their discussion was interrupted by a loud knocking sound. They all turned to look at the isolation room, its ballistic glass still bearing the grisly residue from the earlier explosion.

Cinder was standing on the other side of the glass, wearing his bright yellow protective garb and helmet, smeared with blood, bone fragments, and other gory souvenirs from the two Linchpin operatives’ obliterated remains. He was pressing something against the glass.

They moved closer, and there, clutched in the oversized safety glove of the Linchpin explosives expert, was a tangle of metal, melted plastic, and broken glass—all that remained of a cell phone.

EIGHT

Flint handed Cinder a cold bottle of water. The explosive expert's face was bright red after being in the confines of the protective suit.

"Thanks, Flint." Cinder grimaced as he took a swallow. "God! Seriously? *Water?* Are you trying to poison me?"

CJ rolled her eyes and shook her head. "What is it with you two? Have you never gotten out of 'frat-boy mode'?"

Cinder looked wounded, his eyes huge and his brows knit like a sad puppy. "That hurts, CJ. I consider drinking to be an art form, an endeavor to be undertaken by true believers with a passion for fine spirits, unlike our heathen friend here, Mr. Stryker." He grinned wickedly at Stryker, winking conspiratorially at CJ.

Exasperated, Flint pleaded, "Can we just talk about the matter at hand? Time is running out if we're to believe Sherman's interpretation of the intercepted message."

Malloy nodded somberly. "Yes, please, Mr. Porterhouse. Time is of the essence. Perhaps after we deal with our present crisis, we will be in a better position to appreciate your sparkling wit and humor."

Realizing that he was testing Dr. Malloy's patience, Cinder nodded and cleared his throat. "Right, Doc. First, let me say, whoever dreamed this up is a real sonuvabitch. This was a two-fold design. First off, the explosion itself would've created significant damage. And secondly, the dispersal of the toxins would've had far-reaching and devastating consequences." He paused to observe

the somber faces of the others.

“Proceed,” Malloy said grimly.

”The detonation system is pretty straightforward. The explosive setup was placed inside the body cavity at the time of embalming, along with the propulsion system for the pathogens. A cell phone was placed somewhere on the body or underneath it in the casket. As long as cell service was available, the bomb could be detonated from anywhere. A quick phone call and—*BOOM!*”

“Doesn’t heat usually destroy pathogens?” asked CJ. Flint looked at her and thought, *Beautiful and smart. Why can’t I ask questions like that?*

“Sometimes, yes,” replied Dr. Malloy. “This particular pathogen, however, seems to have been created in the laboratory to be heat-resistant. Even so, the wave of the force of the explosion would carry the payload of toxins away from the site where it is stored, the goal being to disperse them in as wide a range as possible. This microorganism is a ‘designer death germ,’ created to withstand conditions which normally make it hard for them to survive.”

“So, you’re saying these things are created to live forever?” Flint asked.

“Not at all, Mr. Stryker,” Malloy replied. “That would be foolhardy for its creators. How could they survive in a world in which an unstoppable pathogen has been released? No, I would guess that whoever created this has also created the means to survive it. We can devise an antidote, but it will have to be reverse-engineered.”

Flint glanced at his watch. “I’m guessing not by 6:00 p.m., though?”

Malloy shook his head, his face a bleak mask. “No, Mr. Stryker, I’m afraid not.”

The four of them grew even more subdued as they considered the mammoth odds against them.

Suddenly, Flint brightened. “Wait a minute! Cell phones all have RFID chips in them, right? Which means they can be tracked!”

Cinder nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, virtually every mobile device has an RFID chip in it, as do automobiles, credit cards, and lots of other things that are tracked nonstop 24/7.”

“Well, using Linchpin’s database, we should be able to narrow down the

number of funerals scheduled around the country today at 6:00 p.m., and . . .”

“You may have something there, Mr. Stryker,” Malloy interjected. “What was the message again?” Stryker held up his mobile to show him the message’s text.

Reaper 6 @ 1800 hours. Prepare for the Age of Reason<500MM Xxxxxx

“It’s not a huge stretch to postulate that *Reaper 6* is a probable reference to the ‘Grim Reaper’.” He tapped the phone’s screen lightly. “Mr. Peabody said that the six X’s probably represent six different entities who are responding to the original message. If I understand him correctly, he is trying to isolate the locations of those six entities. If he can do that, it will go a long way in helping us narrow our search parameters.”

Flint’s phone vibrated, silently announcing a new text message. He quickly scanned the text, raising his eyes to meet the other’s gaze before saying, “I just received a text from Sherm. He thinks he knows what’s going to happen, and it’s bad. *Very bad.*”

NINE

Sherman Peabody stood rigidly at attention, uneasily shifting from one foot to another. He was intensely uncomfortable being the focus of attention by the four Linchpin operatives who stood before him. “Ah . . .” he squawked before his throat closed up, and he was unable to speak.

CJ brought him a glass of water, and Dr. Malloy put his arm protectively around the young IT genius’ shoulder, murmuring, “It’s all right, Mr. Peabody. I know this is difficult, but we are counting on you to help us see a way out of the dilemma we find ourselves in.”

Gulping loudly, Peabody emptied his glass in seconds. He belched loudly, reddening with embarrassment as he mumbled, “Sorry.”

“*Awesome*, Sherm! Atta boy!”

“*Geez*,” CJ muttered, shaking her head in disgust. “It’s like a non-stop ‘Bodily Function Fest’ around here.”

“S-sorry, Agent Jeong,” Peabody stammered.

CJ smiled at Sherman, patting his forearm, hoping to reassure him. “It doesn’t bother me, Sherman. I’ve been around Flint long enough that it’s almost impossible to gross me out.”

Flint stared at CJ with amused annoyance. “But you said you liked a rugged he-man type.”

“I do, Flint,” replied CJ, batting her lashes at him and smiling sweetly. “I just prefer that his social skills surpass that of the average middle schooler.”

Flint scowled at her, but smiled inwardly when he saw her attempt to

suppress a grin.

Dr. Malloy ignored the banter, attempting to focus Peabody on the matter at hand. “Now, Mr. Peabody, can you please enlighten us as to what you think you’ve deciphered?” He pointed to the cryptic message on the overhead monitor—*Reaper 6 @ 1800 hours. Prepare for the Age of Reason<500MM Xxxxxx*

“Yes, sir. I’m a fan of skeptical science, urban legends, and conspiracy theory websites. The more offbeat and unusual the theories, the more I’m intrigued. It’s kind of a weird hobby I know, but I’ve cataloged a LOT of information in a relatively short time, so I have a pretty impressive database.”

He paused and searched the others’ expressions, looking for the first glimpse of ridicule. He saw nothing but rapt attention, so he decided to press on.

“Anyway, a couple of phrases in the message struck a chord with me, so I decided to search on my database, and, well—I had some luck.”

Malloy watched Peabody intently and urged him, “Go on.”

Peabody swallowed. “Well, I think the first part of the message, *Reaper 6*, indicates that the ‘Grim Reaper’ is going to be invoked six times. 1800 hours is 6:00 p.m. on the military clock.” He paused again, awaiting derision, but was pleased to see them all listening intently.

“What about *Prepare for the Age of Reason*? What does that mean?” Flint asked.

“That’s a little tricky. The Age of Reason is referred to in quite a few philosophical teachings, but one source that ties in most closely to the other references in the message are the Georgia Guidestones.”

Dr. Malloy’s eyebrows arched sharply upward, disappearing into the tangle of his salt-and-pepper hair. “Indeed?”

“Yessir. The Guidestones were constructed in 1980 in Elbert County, Georgia. The circumstances surrounding the financing and construction of the Guidestones are pretty mysterious, and there is some uncertainty as to who is actually behind their construction.” Peabody swiped and placed a photo of the Guidestones on the overhead monitor.

Flint eyed the photos and remarked, “Pretty offbeat stuff. I’ve heard of them before, and if I remember correctly, there’s some pretty weird stuff on the stones,

right?”

Peabody nodded. “Yeah. One of the most prominent features of the Stones is the ‘*Ten Guiding Thoughts*’ inscribed on them.

The previous photo was replaced with another photo displaying a closer view of the Stones, with three of the ‘Guiding Thoughts’ circled in red. “Most of those are pretty harmless, and a lot of people would probably agree that many of them are good ideas. But the first three, recommending population control, the widespread practice of eugenics, and a single world language constitute some pretty scary concepts for most people.”

He swept a cursor to one of the circled items. “See this? It recommends that we ‘*MAINTAIN HUMANITY UNDER 500,000,000*’.” He swiped up to reveal a graph showing global population figures. “In case you didn’t know, the current world population is 7.8 billion.”

CJ covered her mouth and gasped. “You mean . . .?”

Malloy nodded grimly. “Yes, Agent Jeong, this group believes in eliminating 92% of the world’s current population!”

TEN

The five of them were too stunned to speak for a few moments, pondering all they had just discussed.

Malloy glanced at his watch. The minutes were rapidly ticking away, bringing them all closer to Armageddon. Flint spoke first.

“We’re under four hours to Zero Hour.” He studied Peabody, who was nervously chewing his nails to raw nubs. “Sherm—any way we can isolate those six locations for the ‘Funerals of Doom’?”

Cinder smiled admiringly at Flint. “Did you just make that up? Damn. *‘Funerals of Doom.’* Wish I’d thought of that.”

Flint rolled his eyes at Cinder and pressed on. “If we can isolate the locations of the funerals with the weaponized corpses, we should be able to stop them from exploding using cell phone jamming technology—if we can find them and get to them in time.”

Peabody rushed to a nearby desktop station. “Way ahead of you. I’ve been running a targeted isolation program on the original sender of the message and the six recipients who responded. The sender is most heavily shielded, so I haven’t isolated that yet, but I’m still working.”

“Dammit,” Flint swore under his breath, scrutinizing the other disappointed faces.

“*BUT,*” Peabody continued, “I have narrowed down the locales of the recipients, and by cross-referencing them with nearby funerals scheduled for 6:00 p.m. today, I have a fairly focused group to choose from.”

Malloy stroked his chin. “Depending upon where they are, we can narrow down the list even further by evaluating the corpses for toxin levels with the devices that most agencies and/or hospitals have readily available.”

“Exactly,” CJ said, her dark eyes flashing with excitement. “We should also be able to use jamming technologies to block any triggering mobile calls until we can secure the bodies.”

“We can place the bodies in blast containment units until they can be disarmed or safely destroyed,” Cinder added. “There could be some resistance from family members about turning over the remains of their loved ones, but I’m guessing saving 92% of the world’s population could be persuasive.”

“Where are the six locations of the recipients, Mr. Peabody?” Malloy asked.

Peabody tapped a tab on his tablet and a list of five cities popped up on the screen: New York, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

Flint surveyed the list. “Big population centers, all of them, with very mobile and transient populations. Ideal for spreading the contagion.”

Malloy agreed, “Exactly, Mr. Stryker. It looks like we have our work cut out for us.”

“Not as much as you might think, sir,” Peabody said quietly, looking at the figures on his tablets. “Between those five cities, there are only thirty funerals scheduled for today at 6:00 p.m. I’ve already alerted Linchpin operatives in those cities along with Homeland Security, and we have individuals en route to try and find the weaponized bodies as soon as possible.”

Flint grinned at Peabody. “Way to go, Sherm. We could all just go home while you solve this thing.” A troubled look quickly passed over his face like a dark cloud. “But what about the sixth location and the sender of this message—the one who started it all?”

Peabody ran his hand through his tousled brown mop of hair in frustration, dejectedly looking at his tablet. “I just don’t have anything yet, Flint.” He looked up hopefully at the large wall clock. “But we’ve still got over three hours.”

Three hours. Not a helluva lot of time, Flint thought.

He studied the message again, searching for some hidden clue in its meaning.

Reaper 6 @ 1800 hours. Prepare for the Age of Reason<500MM Xxxxxx

He jerked as if he'd been zapped with a defibrillator.

"I've got an idea," Flint said loudly, "It's crazy, but it's something."

ELEVEN

“Look at the message,” Flint said, pointing to the desktop monitor where Peabody had mirrored the screen.

Reaper 6 @ 1800 hours. Prepare for the Age of Reason<500MM Xxxxxx

“So?” mused CJ. “We’ve all looked at this message a hundred times already. I’m not seeing anything new.”

Turning to Peabody, Flint queried, “Sherm? You’ve pinpointed five of the six locations so far, right?”

Peabody nodded apprehensively.

“Just out of curiosity, those locations all correspond with the lower case x’s, don’t they?”

Peabody glanced at his tablet. “Yes. Yes, they do.”

“So I’m guessing those five are secondary in the hierarchy of this group. But the location represented by the capital X also responded to the message as if it were on the recipient chain, didn’t it?”

Checking again, Peabody confirmed that in fact, it did.

Flint narrowed his eyes, looking at the others. “I believe that the capital X, the as-of-yet unidentified locale, is also the originator of the message. I think the capitalization distinguishes it from the other locations. I think its response is sort of like the carbon copy function on an email. Just sending itself a copy.”

Peabody nodded slowly, the idea taking hold. “Well sure, it’s possible. It could be that’s where the message originated from.”

Flint spread his palms to the group. “Perhaps if the same location *sent* and

received, the message will make targeting that location easier, Sherm.”

Peabody chewed his lower lip as he began keystroking commands into the desktop. “Give me a little bit and I’ll see if I can run it down.”

“Excellent work, Mr. Stryker,” Malloy said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with our operatives in those five cities to determine our success rate in finding the sabotaged bodies.”

“God, this is awful,” CJ grimaced.

“I know. Imagine six bodies loaded with killer pathogens and explosives out in the public,” Flint said.

“No. That’s not what I meant,” CJ said flatly.

“What?” Flint asked, looking at her quizzically.

“If you’re right about this, you’ll be even more insufferable than you already are.”

Cinder alternated his gaze between Flint and CJ as if he were watching a tennis match. “Is that even *possible*?”

LATER, Flint and CJ stood in Malloy’s office as he was surveying messages from Linchpin field operatives on his desktop.

“The good news is, we’ve pinpointed the five weaponized corpses and identified the funeral services at risk. Some excellent database work spearheaded by Mr. Peabody cross-referenced funeral parlors who’ve had employees go missing in the last few days. This information coupled with funerals scheduled for 6:00 p.m. did the trick. Explosive and biohazard teams are in place with cell phone jamming equipment and containment units for the bodies. New York, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Seattle threats have all been effectively neutralized.”

“What about Cinder?” Flint asked.

“Mr. Porterhouse is in charge of facilitating the disabling of the explosives. All of them will be brought to our lab outside of Atlanta, to be handled there.”

“Will the families ever be able to bury their loved ones?” CJ asked. “I know

under the current circumstances that's the least of our worries, but still . . .”

“At this point, Ms. Jeong, no one knows. We hope that eventually the remains can be returned to their loved ones, but it's too early to say.” Malloy glanced at the display and tutted, “Apparently Mr. Peabody still hasn't positively identified the sixth location.” He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes, sighing loudly. “I suppose I'd better prepare a protocol for the worst-case scenario in case this body is detonated. You two had better leave me to it.”

CJ and Flint excused themselves and left Malloy in his office. As they walked slowly down the hallway headed back to the Communications Center, CJ busied herself on her mobile.

“What are you looking at?” Flint asked, sneaking a glance at her mobile. “Are you admiring those photos of me without my shirt on? I know you keep them on your phone.” He grinned broadly at her as she screwed up her face in disgust.

“Flint, you can be such a *pig!*” Flint laughed as she continued. “If you must know, I am reading a little more about the Guidestones. According to a marker at the location, the Guidestones were created by ‘a small group of Americans who seek the Age of Reason.’ Pretty strange stuff, if you ask me.”

“Yeah. Not your run-of-the-mill focus group,” Flint added. “Any time you advocate wiping out 92% of the world's population, that puts you in a category all by yourself.”

They both glanced simultaneously at the wall clock. The minutes were rapidly melting away. Soon, it would be time to implement Dr. Malloy's worst-case protocols.

“I wish Sherman would hurry up,” CJ said worriedly. “This standing around waiting is driving me crazy. I've never felt so helpless.”

“Me too,” Flint agreed. “But listen, if anybody can figure this out, it's Sherman. I know he's quirky—offbeat, or whatever—but the guy is amazing.”

“I know he is Flint, but we're talking about an *End-of-Days*-type event here. This is not about running down some idealistic terrorist with a political grudge. We're talking about some group that wants to change the whole destiny of humankind. I'm worried this may be over Sherman's pay grade.”

Flint shrugged. “Maybe. But he’s the best hope we’ve got right now.” He put his hand on CJ’s forearm, turning her towards him. “He *did* find five of the six so far. We’re *close*, I can feel it.”

CJ’s eyes teared up as she stared into Flint’s face. “But Flint—in this case, *close* won’t cut it.”

Suddenly Flint’s mobile buzzed. Glancing at the screen he said, “Speak of the devil.”

TWELVE

“Tell me something good, Sherm,” Flint demanded as he and CJ stood before Peabody.

The tech guru cleared his throat. “I’m sorry it took so long, Flint. There were a lot of back-door hacks I had to . . .”

Flint held up his hands. “Cut to the chase, Sherm, we gotta know what we’re gonna do—and sooner rather than later.”

“Sorry.” Peabody lowered his head, his voice barely audible.

Flint winced. He saw the uber-shy young man’s face and knew he’d hurt his feelings. “No, Sherm, *I’m* sorry. But we have to do something—*soon*—or it will be too late.” Flint studied Peabody’s face and he knew he was processing his anxiety, and he hoped it would be quick enough.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Peabody replied, handing Flint and CJ each a sheet with the information they needed. “You’re going to need to requisition the Sikorsky to get you there. It’s about an hour and a half drive from our headquarters here in Atlanta—in Elbert County, Georgia. The Sikorsky can get you there much quicker.”

Flint and CJ were aghast. Flint almost shouted in disbelief. “The whole time they’ve been right here in our backyard?”

“That’s right. ‘Hide in plain sight.’ That’s always the way, isn’t it? Wherever is least likely,” Peabody said.

“But Elbert County, Georgia? Sherman, it’s hardly a bustling metropolis,” CJ said.

“No time for a Chamber of Commerce comparison, CJ. We need to move—*fast!* Thanks, Sherm! You’re a genius!”

WITHIN TWENTY MINUTES, the two of them were airborne in Linchpin’s Sikorsky S-97 Raider helicopter, headed towards Elberton, Georgia. The pilot and co-pilot knew the urgency of their mission, and they had the copter at full throttle. Wearing headphones to drown out the noise of the engine and rotors, Flint and CJ reviewed what they knew.

“There’s a huge funeral scheduled for 6:00 p.m. in the Elbert County Stadium—the ‘Granite Bowl,’” Flint shouted into his headset. “It’s the area’s largest sports venue used by local sports teams and seats about 20,000, and it’s made completely out of granite.”

“So who’s the funeral for? Why does he merit an outdoor funeral attended by thousands of people?” CJ asked.

“According to Sherman’s intel, the lucky corpse is Wendell Cone, a wealthy philanthropist who’s lived in the area all of his life. Very involved in the community and spent a lot of money in the area. It was always suspected that he might have been one of the people behind the construction of the Guidestones.”

Flint continued, “He died late last week after a long bout with pancreatic cancer. He was well-known by everyone in town, and there’s a rumor going around about an announcement that ol’ Wendell left stipulations for a ‘special gift’ for all those who attend the funeral.” He arched his eyebrow at CJ. “Since he’s a billionaire, I’m sure everyone thinks it’s money.”

CJ shook her head. “So, greed will be the thing that potentially costs everyone their lives today, and causes them to be the carriers for a toxin that could kill millions.”

“Everybody’s gotta be somewhere,” Flint said grimly.

“So, is Cone the guy who was behind the construction of the Guidestones, and who was ultimately responsible for this plan to wipe out most of humanity? What a cold, devious bastard!”

“Possibly,” Flint acknowledged. “It’s hard to figure that the flunkies left behind would be as committed to the plan as some geezer who knew he was living on borrowed time.”

“I guess crazy isn’t restricted to those with lots of money,” CJ said. “There’s always a dedicated few True Believers willing to help others make the Ultimate Sacrifice—willingly or not.”

They rode in silence as the chopper sped towards its destination. Once they were about ten minutes out, CJ leaned into Flint and said, “The plan still to land east of the stadium and locate the body?”

Flint nodded. “I don’t think we’re gonna have any trouble locating the body. They’ve got the body lying in state on a special-constructed catafalque, with the ceremony scheduled to start at 6:00 p.m. sharp. According to news reports, people have staked out seats in the stadium since before noon. It’s standing-room-only even now, and we’re still about thirty-five minutes till showtime.” He studied her worried face. “It will be a stampede, and hundreds will be killed in the crush if the people panic.”

“It’s a Catch-22,” CJ replied. “Thousands will be killed outright if we don’t stop it from exploding. Both options suck. Seriously.”

As the pilot banked right, the stadium came into view, and his voice crackled over their headsets, “Target just ahead, sir, ma’am. We’ll put down just to the east of the stadium. There’s a concert pad there.”

Flint and CJ looked at the huge crowd gathered in the stadium. Over 20,000 curious faces, their hands shielding their eyes from the late afternoon sun, watched as the helicopter positioned itself to land. Flint wondered if this would be the last lazy, sunlit afternoon they would enjoy, or if he and CJ could stop the potential slaughter just minutes away.

They all watched as the helicopter lowered itself onto the pad on an elevated levee near the stadium. The steady thrum of crowd noise intensified as the copter doors opened and Flint and CJ dashed out, headed for the gate to the stadium.

As they approached the gate, a middle-aged security rent-a-security-guard approached them and asked, “Can I help you, folks?”

Ignoring him, Flint and CJ sprinted past the guard and bypassed the gate

heading for the catafalque. Two more security guards approached, their hands moving towards their sidearms. “Hold up! No one approaches Mr. Cone until the ceremony starts.”

Moving quickly, CJ disarmed the larger of the guards and rendered him senseless with a quick elbow strike to the face. The other guard, too busy watching CJ, never saw Flint’s punch until it was too late.

“You’re really something, Ms. Jeong,” Flint grinned.

“Oh, you say the sweetest things when our species is facing extinction,” CJ responded with a mirthless laugh.

They rushed to the casket, a huge, silver model with a brushed finish. There were several men, all wearing dark suits, positioned around it. As Flint and CJ approached, one of the men held up his hand and motioned for them to stop.

“Hold on here, who in the hell do you think you are?”

Flint drew his Glock 19 and placed the muzzle squarely on the man’s forehead and replied, “I’m the man who’s going to blow your brains all over that nice silver casket unless you get the hell out of my way.”

THIRTEEN

The man's eyes were wide with shock as he stammered, "Uh—please, go ahead," as he and the others scrambled to get out of the way.

CJ had her Glock on them as well, motioning them further away from the casket. "You should all step away from the casket." They all stepped back several paces.

Flint glanced at his watch. Just minutes left now. He ran to the casket and attempted to yank open the lid. *Locked.*

He turned and pointed his Glock at the men and shouted, "Who has the casket key?"

A tall black man raised his hand, carefully reaching into his coat pocket with this other hand. "We were instructed to open the casket at five minutes till 6:00 p.m." He handed the key warily to Flint and stepped back.

Flint's Precog was blaring in his head like a silent burglar alarm.

TWO MINUTES TILL DETONATION.

Flint hurriedly used the wrench to unlock the lid and flipped it open. There, surrounded by satin, his weathered face frozen in a waxy state of repose, lay the earthly remains of Wendell Cone, billionaire philanthropist and terrorist from beyond the grave. Flint thought, *I'd say he looks so natural, but there's nothing natural about any of this.*

CJ cautioned him, "Flint, be careful, he may be booby-trapped. And —"

"It's a chance I'll have to take," he interrupted breathlessly. "You use the jammer, and I'll see if I can find the phone."

ONE MINUTE TILL DETONATION.

Grimacing, Flint reached slowly into the casket, slowly edging his hands along the cushioning, feeling for the mobile. *This is really creeping me out.*

“Shit!” CJ shouted, “the battery must be dead on the jammer—it’s not working!”

This just keeps getting better. Why didn’t I check to make sure it had a full charge? What kind of espionage agent does that?

“I’ll have to see if I can find it in time to destroy it!”

Beads of sweat popped out on Flint’s brow, precious seconds ticking away as he tried to jostle the late Mr. Cone as little as possible. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see CJ fiddling with the jammer, frantically trying to get it operable. A lone trickle of sweat ran down his nose and dropped onto Cone’s face, the dead man completely unperturbed by the annoyance.

THIRTY SECONDS TILL DETONATION.

Flint felt a familiar twinge from his Precog. Focusing intently, his hands underneath Cone, Flint felt the smooth hard outline of the mobile. It was underneath the coffin’s satin lining. He ran his finger alongside the device until he felt ripped fabric where whoever had placed the phone had cut the lining.

Throwing caution to the wind, Flint scrabbled desperately for the phone, trying to snatch the phone from its hiding place without jostling Cone’s body too much.

FIFTEEN SECONDS TILL DETONATION.

Finally, his hand found purchase of the mobile. His Precog filled his mind like a shrieking banshee. He seized the phone and wrested it from the casket.

“Flint! It’s not working! It’s too late!”

6:00 PM—DETONATION.

OR NOT.

FLINT HAD INSTINCTIVELY TURNED AWAY from Cone’s body, expecting

a millisecond of pain before his consciousness was ripped away by a fiery blast.

Instead . . . nothing. His Precog had silenced instantly when he had grabbed the phone. He still heard the birds chirping in nearby trees and the constant buzz of crowd noise in the stadium.

He slowly looked around. He saw that CJ had knelt into a protective crouch, and was gradually daring to peek from behind her hands. The men in the dark suits who had surrounded the casket had flung themselves to the ground and had covered their heads with their hands.

The mobile was an older model Android LG phone. He gingerly tapped the screen and saw the message, *NO SERVICE*.

His hands shaking uncontrollably, his breath coming in shaky, quivering breaths, Flint dropped the phone to the ground. He ground the phone into the pavement and then stamped his foot again and again until the phone was shattered to pieces. To be certain, he picked it up and ripped the pieces apart, cutting his fingers in the process.

No service. Jesus!

WITHIN MINUTES, an explosives and hazmat team from Linchpin had arrived on the scene, quickly cordoning off the area and moving the crowd out of the stadium in a semi-organized fashion. A med-tech from Linchpin had wrapped Flint's hand and was in the process of checking his vitals. Flint attempted to brush the tech away, insisting, "I'm fine. Seriously." He glanced at CJ, who had a blanket over her shoulders but was shivering as if she were in the throes of the worst flu attack imaginable.

Dr. Malloy wove his way through the crowd and came to them, his face somber but relieved. "Good work, you two! Not to put too fine a point on it, but that was cutting it close."

Flint laughed, shaking his head. "Doc, we were saved by pure dumb luck or a technical glitch, whichever way you want to look at it."

Malloy nodded. "Perhaps Providential intervention played a role as well,

Flint. Let's not discount that."

Through chattering teeth, CJ agreed. "I'm never missing church again. I thought we were all dead. And I mean *all* of us."

"Me too," Flint replied. "I'll never bitch about cell phone dead spots again."

"Sometimes it's better to be lucky than good, Mr. Stryker."

"I guess so, Doc. I . . ."

Flint felt a series of quick pokes on his left shoulder. He turned to see a short elderly woman with a walker jabbing him persistently. He turned to face her and saw the quintessential grandmother, her wrinkled face framed by bluish-tinged white curls in a tight perm. Cloudy blue eyes sparkled behind trifocals, and her dark blue dress, accented by a single strand of pearls, indicated she was wearing her Sunday best.

"Yes ma'am?" Flint said pleasantly, stooping slightly to get closer to her level.

"Sonny. I don't know what all happened here, but I heard it was something about a bomb, and you kept us all from gettin' blown to Kingdom Come."

Flint reddened. "No need to thank me, ma'am. I was just doing my—"

"Thank you? Hell, I'm not thanking you, boy. I just wanted to know, does this mean we're not getting any money?"

Flint stood gaping at her until a Linchpin operative hustled her away. He turned to see CJ and Dr. Malloy trying to suppress grins as they watched her being led off.

"Come on, CJ, Doctor Malloy. Let's see if we can find somewhere in this town I can buy both of you a drink."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, the three of them were safely seated at Cooter's Grille, a small, dimly-lit bar with \$1 bills stapled on every conceivable inch of wall space.

"What do you think? How much money is taped to the walls in here?" Flint asked, arching his neck to survey the legal tender posted everywhere he looked.

Malloy replied, “Actually, it would be fairly simple to calculate the amount, Mr. Stryker. A \$1 bill is a little over two-and-a-half inches deep and just a bit over six inches long. And then you take the square footage of each room, and . . .”

Flint’s mobile buzzed. The screen displayed UNKNOWN.

Who could that be, calling me on my Linchpin line? Especially an UNKNOWN number?

He tapped the answer button. “Stryker.”

A syrupy Southern voice he didn’t recognize said, “Hello, Mr. Stryker.”

“Who is this?” Dr. Malloy and CJ perked up, puzzled looks on their faces.

“You don’t know me, Mr. Stryker, but now I know you.” The voice paused, silent on the line.

“What do you want?” To CJ he mouthed, “*Get Sherman to trace the call.*”

As if he’d read Flint’s mind, the caller said, “Don’t bother trying to trace my call, Mr. Stryker. We won’t be talking long enough for that. My advice would be for you to listen carefully.”

“Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Good.” The voice paused sighing loudly. “You know, it was very rude of you to interrupt Mr. Cone’s funeral. Mr. Cone was a lovely man, who had such a heart for helping others. He should have been honored as he desired.”

“A *lovely* man?” Flint scoffed. “Cone was going to be the biggest mass murder in the history of the world! Genocide on a global scale! There was nothing lovely about him!”

The voice hissed, “You shut up, you idiot! You’re not even worthy to speak his name!” A long pause, and then the voice continued, “At any rate, you have caused an unfortunate delay in our plans, but rest assured, we will move forward, albeit at a more measured pace.”

His face twisted in fury, Flint shouted into the phone, “You crazy bastard! We won’t rest until we find you and the rest of your lunatic cult! You’d better sleep lightly because . . . *I. Will. Find. You.*”

Another long silence, and then the voice purred, “Oh, you won’t have to find me, Mr. Stryker. When the time is right, I’ll find you.”

The call disconnected.

Flint pulled the phone away from his ear, staring blankly at the now-black screen. He turned to see CJ and Dr. Malloy staring at him impatiently.

“Well?” CJ spread her hands in exasperation, “What was *that* about?”

He took a long swig on his Stella Artois and looked at CJ and Dr. Malloy.

“Seriously. How did that automotive recall center in India get my number?”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader:

I hope you enjoyed *Deadly Undertaking*, thanks for taking the time to read it. The *Flint Stryker Thriller Series* currently has six books planned for the initial story arc featuring the adventures of Flint Stryker and his cohorts from Linchpin.

There will also be a 3-book series featuring the Linchpin leadership trifecta – Seven, Serafina, and Doctor Malloy. You won't want to miss those. I love my man Flint, but these guys come at the job from a totally different perspective than Flint does. You'll also get a deeper understanding of their relationship with Flint and each other.

Following is a brief teaser from Book 1 in the Flint Stryker series, *Lessons Learned*. Enjoy the preview and then head on over to Amazon and get yourself a copy. I'd appreciate it if you'd leave a review as well. Reviews are important to authors and your comments and insights help me to write the kind of books that you enjoy.

Best wishes,

A.G.

SYNOPSIS OF LESSONS LEARNED

BOOK 1 OF THE FLINT STRYKER THRILLER SERIES

Murder, kidnapping, and involvement with a secretive organization that deals with unusual domestic terrorism sounds like an interesting career choice, right?

BUT SUPPOSE you want nothing to do with it?

SOON-TO-BE (and long-overdue) college graduate Flint Stryker discovers that life after college would be like nothing he ever imagined. Gifted with a unique special ability that puts him on the radar of two mysterious organizations, Flint had no idea a hard-partying slacker would be in such demand.

IT ALL HAPPENS in one strange day, a day filled with opportunities, dangerous deceptions, secrets revealed, a painful choice, and an unexpected outcome, that puts Flint Stryker on a collision path with danger, death, and ultimately - retribution.

SINCE WHEN DID CHOOSING a career become a life or death decision?

LESSONS LEARNED PREVIEW

Garrett Riggs gasped uncontrollably for breath. His body's reaction to near-drowning was overwhelming panic. Coughing and retching, he expelled more water than his lungs were meant to accommodate. So, this was what waterboarding was really like – it was more terrifying than he could ever have imagined.

Spluttering, he begged, “Please... no more,” before spasming into another helpless coughing fit.

His tormentor only snatched him again by his hair, yanking his ashen face towards him to meet his stare. “Perhaps you can end all of this, Mr. Riggs, by telling me and Mr. Sebastian here about the conversation you overheard when you were so ungraciously snooping on us earlier. Hmmm?”

His hands duct-taped behind him, tied to a chair, Riggs could do nothing but gape at Professor Alastor Huxley and his graduate assistant, Estebe Sebastian. Rivulets of water streaming down his face, his hair plastered to his forehead, Riggs blubbered, “I’ve told you over and over, Professor, I only overheard you and Estebe in the hallway that evening as I was leaving the language lab. I had fallen asleep after cramming for my finals and was headed back to my apartment.” He swallowed hard, his teeth chattering as he continued, not meeting their eyes. “The two of you were in your office whispering, and well, naturally I was curious... so I stopped and listened. I shouldn’t have done it, I know, but I overheard some stuff that caught my attention. I swear I have no idea what you were talking about!”

Sobbing, Riggs hiccupped and coughed again sending a spray of water and snot onto Huxley's jacket. The Professor rolled his eyes and dabbed at his jacket with the rag he was holding – smearing the sputum in an attempt to wipe it away.

Huxley smiled to himself. It was always the same, wasn't it? Whenever the cold reality of imminent death presented itself, those threatened always went to extraordinary lengths to attempt to save themselves. He could see Riggs' swollen, bloodshot eyes, and knew that it wouldn't be long before that last glimmer of hope was dashed. The acceptance of impending death would overrule and that hope would extinguish itself as surely as a quick puff extinguishes a candle.

Sighing deeply, Huxley looked sympathetically into Riggs' pallid face. "Mr. Riggs, I'm quite sure you meant no harm, I truly am. But you see, Mr. Sebastian and I were discussing some very sensitive matters. We mentioned the names of several persons no one else was meant to hear."

Riggs shuddered, his breath catching and tears streaming down his face.

"That is why my office door was closed, Mr. Riggs. We were having a *private* conversation. A *very* private conversation..." He tutted and shook his head. "Sadly, you happened by at a most inopportune time – for you, unfortunately."

Huxley saw it then. Riggs' pale green eyes went dull as if someone had thrown a switch. That was it – the hope was gone, replaced by the finality of his situation. He rose and went to the cabinet by his desk, removing a bottle of bourbon, unscrewing the top as he spoke.

"I think it would be appropriate for you and me to have a few drinks together." He paused, grinning at Riggs. "Well, actually, Mr. Riggs, you will be the only one drinking, and I'm sorry to say you're going to be drinking quite a lot – too much actually. Then it will be a good time for you to do a little late-night swimming. I hope you won't have had so much to drink that you might... *drown.*"

Sebastian grabbed Riggs by the face before he could react and forced his mouth open as Professor Huxley began pouring the alcohol into his mouth. Gagging, Riggs swallowed and coughed up some of the bourbon as it burned his

throat. “Please, I-I...”

“Shush, Mr. Riggs,” Huxley purred. “It will do you no good to fight this. As you know, Mr. Sebastian is an All-Conference wrestling champion, and I feel sure he’ll be able to ‘encourage’ your participation in our little drinking game. So, let’s enjoy it, shall we? Fortunately, as a bourbon aficionado, I have a well-stocked liquor cabinet, and the night is young, so – as they say... ‘*Salud*’”

His eyes wide with fear, staring into the grim face of the graduate assistant, Riggs began what he knew would be his first and last night of college binge drinking.

ORDER LESSONS LEARNED [HERE](#).