

When plotting the theft of another man's property, particularly if said property is as precious as the only son of a United States federal judge; one must be prepared, if caught, to suffer the consequences.

Prologue

On 19 April 1995, six years before nineteen Muslim extremists commandeered commercial airliners and flew them into select high-profile east coast targets, domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh, obsessed with teaching the United States government a hard lesson, constructed a deadly truck bomb. He packed agricultural fertilizer and diesel fuel into the back of a rented Ryder box truck and detonated the lethal cocktail it in front of the Albert P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. One hundred sixty-eight civilians and federal workers, including nineteen children, lost their lives.

A week later the federal government responded to the rising threat of domestic terrorism with a clandestine, pre-dawn meeting held inside the Presidential Emergency Operations Center, a bomb-proof subterranean bunker located beneath the East Wing of the White House. Seated at the long conference table in comfortable swivel chairs, wall-mounted large screen televisions silently playing the major news networks in the background, the President of the United States sat with department heads of the intelligence-gathering community. Represented were the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Security Agency, and the United States Attorney General's Office; the meeting's agenda: to develop a definitive plan of action in response to the ever-increasing nuisance of 'homegrown terrorists.'

In accordance with the government's official policy "...we do not negotiate with terrorists...", and after ninety minutes of haggling the pros and cons of circumventing the United States' constitution, a consensus was reached and course of action outlined.

The president of the United States picked up a pen and affixed his signature to a highly classified National Security Directive, and in so doing modified former President Gerald Ford's 1976 Executive Order forbidding the intelligence community of the United States government from engaging in assassinations, both at home and abroad.

POTUS returned the pen to the table, leaned back in his chair, rubbed sleep-deprived eyes and drew in a deep breath. "May the people of this great nation never discover what we have set in motion here today," he said with a weary sigh, "and may the good Lord above forgive us...one and all."

Washington D.C.'s political war machine never had much subscribed to the power of prayer, so even before the president's signature had a chance to dry, the shadowy movers and shakers inside the beltway went to work. They recalled a coterie of Special Forces operatives from overseas, and to further compartmentalize the operation, trained those individuals at a top secret desert facility know as *Paradise Ranch*, located deep within the mysterious—and according to official government channels, nonexistent—Area 51 northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada.

A man named Phoenix had been one of those elite warriors.

Chapter 1

RJ Clayburn sat on the porch chain-smoking. He knew cigarettes were nothing more than a slow form of suicide, but didn't care. For the last fifteen years of his life Clayburn had welcomed death as an escape. He listlessly watched two kids pedal their bicycles down the tree-lined street, remembering when he could do that, ride a bicycle.

His thoughts returned, as they often did, to the accident that had left him wheelchair-bound; to the dark imagine of Colton Blaine standing on his doorstep on that cold rainy night. He often wondered if he had simply closed the door, not invited Blaine inside, would that have slammed the door on the bad karma that seemed to follow the Clayburn household. Would his life have turned out different?

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Colton Blaine's senior year in high school had not been a happy one. His mother had passed, and while death relieved her suffering, it had not softened the blow for Colton Blaine. The organs cancer had not sucked the life out of, chemotherapy and radiation treatments had. During the last months of life, Eva-Lynn Stokes withered to a gaunt, ninety-eight pound emaciated shell of her former self. And if the loss of his mother wasn't trauma enough for then teenage Blaine, two days after the funeral, on his eighteenth birthday, Blaine's cantankerous, lazy, pot-smoking stepfather shoved a hastily-packed military surplus duffle against his chest and unceremoniously evicted him from the trailer.

It was a cold, rainy October night when Blaine pedaled his bicycle up his best friend's driveway and knocked on the door. Drenched to the bone, his worldly possessions slung over his shoulder, Blaine demurely asked if he could set up housekeeping in the shed attached to the back of the Clayburn's garage. Richard James "RJ" Clayburn mumbled something about 'loser', and then waved Blaine inside.

Sleep in the garden shed indeed! Mother Clayburn shooed Blaine off to a hot shower while she whipped together a plateful of leftover meatloaf, roasted garlic mashed potatoes and gravy, with a side order of creamed corn and broccoli. When Blaine returned to the kitchen there was a steaming mug of hot chocolate next to the heaping plate.

Blaine spent the first few nights snuggled inside a sleeping bag on RJ's bedroom floor, but by the end of the week, Mrs. C., queen of garage sale and thrift store shopping managed to procure a serviceable daybed and chest of drawers. And not unlike a puppy brought home from the shelter, Colton Blaine was adopted into the Clayburn household and eventually moved into the unused attic bedroom.

With a lot of help from Mrs. C. and RJ and younger sister Sara, Colton Blaine squeaked through his senior year and managed to graduate in the bottom third of his class.

At six foot four, two hundred sixty-five pounds, Blaine was a blonde hair, fair skinned, blue-eyed Teddy bear off the field, but quickly earned a reputation as a fearsome, hard-hitting Youngstown State University Penguin defensive lineman, able to crush offensive rushers with ridiculous ease.

“I’m going to drop down to channel nine and see if I can raise a Smokey before he kills somebody,” Gizmo said, and then dialed in the emergency channel and called for the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

For eight consecutive years Silver Fox and Gizmo had consistently won safety awards for annually logging over 100,000 incident-free miles while hauling dry freight between Buffalo, New York, and the greater Warren-Youngstown metropolitan corridor. Things were about to change.

One of the Cadillac’s rear seat passengers bounced forward and cajoled the driver to nudge the little red VW ahead of them out of their path. The teen driver instead whipped the stolen Cadillac into the left lane and almost clipped the back of the box trailer in the passing lane.

Gizmo couldn’t dial the CB back to the trucker’s channel fast enough. “Silver Fox,” he screamed into the microphone, “he’s coming up on the outside. Damn fool’s going to pass you on the shoulder!”

“I’ve got my eyeball on him,” Silver Fox said. For a moment he thought about crowding the aggressive driver into the median strip, but decided it wasn’t worth anyone getting hurt over so eased off the throttle instead.

RJ’s eyes darted between the inside and outside mirrors, and at one point he even turned in the seat and looked over his shoulder out the rear window. The Cadillac was gone. “I have no idea where that knucklehead went,” he said aloud.

The Caddy pulled alongside Silver Fox, two wheels on the shoulder, two riding the medium and kicking up clumps of grass and roadside debris. When it pulled alongside the cab, Silver Fox turned to give them his best scowl.

The passenger window rolled down and a boy no older than fourteen leaned out. He pointed the stainless steel 9 mm Taurus he’d found in the locked glove box he’d pried open, and fired two shots at Silver Fox’s rig, the weapon almost bucking out of his hand.

“Holy bat shit!” Silver Fox screamed as his front left tire disintegrated. He slammed on the brakes, and fought for control of the rig as he steered away from the carload of future wanted poster candidates.

Hidden in the truck’s blind spot, the Clayburns’ subcompact was sucked into the trailer’s vortex like a dust bunny to a Kirby. The tiny VW disintegrated in a shower of sparks and the high-pitch screech of sheet metal being violently ripped apart. The cargo-laden trailer rolled over the subcompact as effortlessly as a Humvee rolls over a sand dune.

Mrs. C. was pronounced dead at the scene. RJ was placed on a life-flight helicopter and flown to St. Elizabeth Hospital’s trauma center, where he languished in a coma for weeks, Sara and Colton Blaine at his side. Once he regained consciousness he was transferred to a rehabilitation facility, where he spent the next two months learning how to function as a paraplegic.

Although his physical injuries were catastrophic, RJ Clayburn’s head injury had had the most profound effect on his personality. Already derisive, sarcastic and condescending, RJ became even more mean-spirited and unpredictable, exacerbated when under stress. He treated those who cared about him most with the greatest contempt, as if they had been driving the tractor-trailer rig.

RJ did, however, temper his tongue when in his cousin Johnny’s Clayburn’s presence; because Cousin Johnny was the only other person who harbored as much anger about how his life had turned out as did RJ. That and Cousin Johnny twice had knocked RJ out of the wheelchair when he got too lippy for the older Clayburn’s liking. Sara and Blaine, however, remained favorite targets of RJ’s acerbic tongue lashings.

It took several years before the Clayburn’s \$1.5 million dollar wrongful death/personal injury lawsuit against Erik Marshal (aka Silver Fox), and the Gordon Brothers’ Trucking Company wound its way through the courts.

RJ, Sara, and Blaine arrived at the courthouse in anticipation of finally, after five long years, seeing the light of day.

And a short day it was.

During a status conference hearing in Mahoning County Common Pleas Court, Judge David Seymore had exercised sound jurisprudence. He dismissed the Clayburn family's lawsuit, citing for the record the truck driver's attempt to control the runaway semi did not hold him culpable in the eyes of the law. Nor, vicariously, was his employer responsible for the behavior of the hoodlums in the Cadillac.

A week after the accident the stolen car had been located partially submerged in the Mahoning River near the Division Street Bridge, a known dumping ground to police for stolen cars. The judge had gone so far as to commend Silver Fox's driving skills, noting for the record that while unfortunate for the Clayburn family, Marshal's quick actions probably saved many other lives. Two weeks after his twenty-fourth birthday, RJ Clayburn sat in the courtroom gape-mouthed, while Judge Seymore awarded summary judgment in favor of the defendants—case dismissed.

Happy belated birthday RJ.

RJ watched in shocked disbelief as the defendants *walked* from the courtroom glad handing and slapping one another on the back. He turned his malevolent glare on the judge as he, too, stepped from the bench, black robe billowing behind like a full sail, and *walked* from the courtroom.

Nearly twenty years had passed since that day, and RJ's cancerous yearning for revenge still burbled below the surface. It was not rage in remission; it was metastasized evil waiting for opportunity to knock.