

TURNING POINT

A MARK LANDRY NOVEL



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MILLER

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By Randall H. Miller

PROLOGUE

Time was running out for Mark Landry.

He glanced down at his watch. Less than an hour to find and isolate the target. Still six more floors to go. Innocent lives on the line. He cursed what had to be the slowest elevator in the world.

This is when most people—even experienced operators—would start to feel the walls closing in. Breathing becomes shallow. Pulse rises. Despair and panic bubble to the surface. Some would abort mission and accept failure. But Mark Landry was built for these moments. He was a world-class operator at the top of his game. At times like these, he shined like Michael Jordan at the buzzer. Always taking—and making—the winning shot. Trying not to think about the inevitable day when he'd miss.

“Guten abend,” Mark said with a nod and a smile. The elderly couple smiled back. He extended his arm to keep the door from closing on them as they exited the elevator. They moved slowly. The woman mumbled something about what a nice young man he was. Her husband looked the stranger up and down, then shrugged. Mark waved goodbye to her as the doors slowly closed.

Lady, if you had any idea what I'm about to do when I find this guy, you would have taken the stairs.

He looked up watched the floors slowly tick by. Three. Two. One. Basement. Ding.

Focus. Get ready to click. Get ready to click.

“Clicking” was how Mark described initial recognition of potential threats. If his hotel room looked the slightest bit different from how he had left it—click. Someone in the crowd doesn't look

like they belong—click. The car behind him is following too closely—click. A person of interest narrows their eyes, inhales sharply or suddenly move their hands toward their beltline—click, click, click. Clicking was the spark that got the ball rolling. It was a visual and mental snapshot, like the first frame of a movie. Once Mark clicked, he could rapidly assess the threat and choose the best course of action to neutralize it.

“Clicking is an esoteric skill that improves with each high-risk experience,” one of Mark’s black-ops instructors had taught him many years earlier. “You get better and better the more you are forced to perform under pressure. Your brain creates more memory files with each experience. On subsequent missions, your brain will automatically access those files when considering solutions. Unless, of course, you die. Then it won’t. Just remember, he who clicks first usually wins. Action beats reaction. Especially when you’re up close and personal.”

Mark, a former U.S. Army Ranger and special operations veteran, was deadly with a rifle. But he didn’t thrive behind the scope as he did in close quarters battle (CQB). Basic sniping is simply a math challenge. You apply quantitative skills to solve a problem. In contrast, CQB scenarios are much more opaque and unpredictable. Often, there are multiple possible solutions. It is more art than science. And if choosing the right action at the right time is an art form, Landry was the Leonardo da Vinci of his organization. He was a sight to behold when the shit hit the fan.

His instructor was right. The more experience Mark gained, the better he got and the more he was able to compress into those critical first seconds—more data processing, more and faster consideration of options. Now, in the prime of his career, whenever Mark Landry clicked, events would seem to unfold in slow motion.

The elevator doors crept open.

A lone young man in his mid-twenties with closely cropped hair stood inches away. He cautiously looked Mark in the eyes. Then he made the mistake of subtly turning his head ninety degrees to the side before snapping his gaze back to Mark.

Click.

That was sloppy. What or who are you looking at, my friend? Maybe a quick "witness check" before trying to get cute with me? Or maybe you're not alone and were letting your partner know it's show time. And was that a neck tattoo peeking out from under your collar when you turned your head? The guys I'm looking for are sporting plenty of those. That's enough for me. You're about to have a bad day.

Before the man's eyes could refocus, Mark grabbed him by the shoulders and delivered a crushing head-butt to the bridge of his nose. He then yanked the threat into the elevator and greeted him with an explosive knee-strike to the solar plexus. Holding the bent-over thug by the back of his belt with both hands, he pulled hard and launched the threat head-first into the mirrored elevator wall. Blood splattered. The unconscious body crumpled to the floor.

Mark leapt to the side, pushed his back up against the inside control panel, and drew the Sig Sauer P226 9mm from his waistband. He held a razor-sharp curved-blade karambit above his head with his free hand. The first guy had been either unarmed or too slow to deploy any weapons he might have had. The next guy—if there was one—might be better prepared. And the crashing noise of the first guy's head colliding with the elevator wall would have tipped him off that trouble had just arrived.

Wait for it. Wait for it.

Approaching footsteps tapped on the concrete floor in the long basement hallway. They slowed as they came closer. Mark heard anxious breathing. The tip of a long hunting knife broke the plane of the elevator door first, followed by a black glove and an exposed wrist. Mark dropped his center of gravity and brought the karambit down with everything he had. The razor sharp blade

passed through its mark like it was air, instantly relieving the threat of the hunting knife along with the tips of several fingers. The broad blade and bits of flesh wrapped in black leather seemed to float in the air for an instant before falling to the floor. The man stumbled forward. A thin stream of blood sprayed against the far wall. Mark could feel his CQB instructor's presence as he executed his next move. "The only way to fight is with everything you have—no holding back," the instructor had always stressed. "Hit first. Hit hard. Send shockwaves through the nervous system. Get his brain to shut down before he even knows he's in a fight."

Mark charged the disarmed man and hip-checked him with all his weight. Then he stood in place and cocked his arm. The thug bounced off the wall and stumbled face-first into a devastating elbow strike to the side of the head. Lights out. He joined his friend on the elevator floor. Mark looked down at the bleeding man then refocused his attention on the basement hallway. He heard rapid footsteps getting quieter. Someone was running away. He reached down and used a piece of the broken mirror to peer into the hallway without exposing himself. A figure wearing a red jacket scurried down the hall.

Red jacket. That's him.

The figure stopped at the end of the hall and paused. He looked confused and unprepared, as if he had no idea what to do. *Good*, Mark thought to himself. The target finally entered the last room on the right. That was the boiler room, according to Mark's recollection of the floor plans—assuming they were accurate.

No other way out. He's stuck. And stupid. Get control of him quickly while he's still in shock and can't think straight.

Mark stood off to the side and swung open the unlocked door. He raised his 9mm and peered over the sights to scan the parts of the boiler room he could see.

Clear.

He sidestepped enough to expand his field of vision and stopped to scan again.

Still clear.

He continued scanning the boiler room in small slices, hoping to get his eyes on the threat from the hallway. He would cross the threshold and enter the room blind if he had to. But doorways are called “fatal funnels” for good reason—the unseen guy on the inside has the advantage. Had the figure in the red coat understood that, he would have hidden and tried to draw Mark into the room. That would have been his best chance, especially if he had a weapon. Instead, he picked an awful spot and stayed there until he was almost looking down the barrel of Mark’s gun.

The target must have been unarmed and figured his best shot was to fight his way out. He screamed and charged at Mark with a mop tightly gripped in both hands, swinging it wildly. Mark stepped back and let the threshold absorb the blow. The mop handle snapped, and half of it skipped down the hallway along the concrete floor.

Mark stepped forward and kicked the man in the side of the knee with all his might. The thick heel of his hiking boot connected with an audible crack. The knee joint broke clean and the leg folded sideways. The lower half dangled as if skin was the only thing left connecting it to the rest of the body. The threat went down and screamed in agony. Mark stepped over him and quickly cleared the boiler room. Then he shut the door, holstered his gun, and dragged the target to the center of the room by his good leg.

The young man continued to scream in German while Mark bound his hands behind his back with a long extension cord that he found coiled up in the corner.

“Wer bist du?! Was willst du?!” *Who are you? What do you want?*

Mark ignored him and wrapped the remaining extension cord slack several times around his head and open mouth as a gag. It would not silence him, but it did bring the volume down considerably. Mark needed to think. He had work to do.

The captive switched to English and repeated the same questions. Maybe he mistook Mark's silence for not understanding German. "Please! Who are you? What do you want? I swear I'll do anything—just tell me what you want!" he pleaded.

Mark pulled out his phone and started a secure video connection with a number he knew from memory. He moved to a dusty work bench in the corner and rifled through the top drawer. "Yeah, I got him. Tell me when he's watching," Mark said calmly into the phone as he found a hatchet in the bottom drawer. He looked closely at its edge. Sharp enough. Mark approached the prisoner. He held the cellphone up so he could hear and looked at the hatchet as he waited for the green light.

"He's watching," said the voice on the other end.

Mark focused the cellphone camera on the prisoner's distraught face until he could hear muffled screams coming from the phone's speakers. Then he panned out to a wide shot and strapped the phone to his forehead. The rest of the broadcast would be his POV.

"Who are you?!" he begged one last time. "Sprechen! Say something! Please!"

Why bother?

Mark Landry looked down and slowly raised the hatchet above his head.

CHAPTER ONE

Blue Mass

Detective Sergeant Luci Landry poked her husband in the rib cage with her elbow. When Mark turned his head, she motioned toward the pulpit with her chin. He paused before slowly raising two fingers to cross himself. She nodded once in approval and winked at him out of the corner of her eye.

Mark Landry had discreetly removed the phone from his pocket and glanced down to check for messages from Billy, his longtime special operations partner and right-hand man. Their primary mission was to find and eliminate Oleg Borodin, a career Russian intelligence operative who had had a run-in with several of Mark's operators in Boston two months earlier. The unexpected collision—why Borodin had been in Boston remained a mystery—had turned deadly and put the Russian spymaster under the very microscope he had spent his long career trying to avoid. The National Security Advisor and President wanted Oleg dead. Mark and his team were now trying to make that happen.

They were also tasked to clean up a string of traitors. Billy was in Silicon Valley, about to roll up a private defense contractor who had been selling secrets, known as ECI (exceptionally controlled information) in the cyber world, to a foreign intelligence service. The insider threat (or, as Billy called him, the “cyber dipshit”) had been under close FBI surveillance and it was now time to make him disappear. That meant that the already overworked federal agents would be pulled from the case and quickly reassigned to another one. Mark Landry's team would take things from there. The fewer witnesses, the better.

Luci nudged Mark before he could finish checking his messages. The screen was blurry anyway, and he hated wearing the glasses he increasingly needed. Work would have to wait.

Mark leaned forward and turned his head sideways so he could see the twins sitting on the other side of his wife. Five-year-old Carlos and Amanda were originally uninterested in attending the Blue Mass with their parents. Luci tried to entice them with a chance to meet the Cardinal—a man who personally knew the Pope! No interest. How about the Governor? He could be President one day. Nothing. She didn't bother mentioning that the mayor of Boston would be there too. The only mayor they cared about was Andy, the mayor of their own town and a close friend of their parents. But he was more of an uncle to them than a mayor. Mark sat them both down the day before the service, when Luci was not around.

“Guys, your mother is retiring very soon. That means this is her last Blue Mass. So you are both going. It will mean a lot to her to have the whole family there.”

“Can Murphy go?” asked Amanda, referring to the family's German Shepherd.

“If it were up to me, yes. But you know Murphy is away for training and won't be back until next week.”

“Then how can you say it's the whole family?” Amanda asked with a proud smile.

“Did I mention there's going to be bagpipes? If we get there early, you can choose our seats. I'd suggest an aisle right in the middle of the church where they have to march right past you.” The kids' eyes and mouths popped open. “So why don't you go pick out your clothes for tomorrow evening? Or do you want me to do that?”

Mark had zero sense of style or occasion when dressing the kids. He just grabbed whatever fit and matched—or didn't match—and told them to throw it on. Carlos never seemed to notice, but the threat of having Daddy pick her outfit was enough for Amanda. She grabbed Carlos by the hand and whisked him away without another word.

The Cardinal was standing in front of the altar. He clasped his hands and rested them on his round potbelly. It seemed as if he had a basketball under his scarlet cassock. He smiled warmly and

looked out over the sea of blue covering every inch of the pews in the cathedral. A sucker for regalia, he paused to admire the golden embroidery, medals, bars, and stars that adorned the first responders' dress uniforms. He did his best to look happy and send the crowd on its way inspired. But despite his best efforts, there was a touch of melancholy about him as he prepared to make his final remarks.

“I am in awe,” he began. “No matter how many Blue Masses I am blessed to deliver, I am always in awe. But it’s not for the reasons you may be thinking. It is not because of the pomp and pageantry—although God knows I love those things.” He gestured toward the three-peaked biretta sitting atop his bald head, nodding thanks in response to the polite laughter. The police, fire, and emergency medical personnel—along with many of their family members—listened closely, hungry for encouragement during a time of low morale. “I am in awe because of what you do for our communities every day—serving your fellow citizens at great risk to yourselves, in the face of some of the most grotesque threats imaginable.”

Additional detail wasn’t necessary. Everyone knew he was talking about the horrific video released the previous day by the Trinitarios—a predominantly Dominican gang of narco-terrorists. With production value reminiscent of the so-called Islamic State, the video opened with a captured Massachusetts State Trooper strapped to a chair in the center of a room. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all painted bright white. The camera panned out to reveal two figures dressed in blue jumpsuits and clown masks with bright red hair—each holding a Louisville Slugger baseball bat. *Insane in the Brain*—a well-known rap song by Cypress Hill—started to play in the background as the clowns commenced their “batting practice.”

Mark had zoned out through most of the Cardinal’s homily. It had been some comparison between first responders and Saint Michael—the archangel who leads God’s armies against Satan in the book of Revelation. Saint Michael was also the patron saint of paratroopers. Now the Cardinal

was mentioning him again. Mark perked up at the reference this time. Jumping out of airplanes at Fort Benning, Georgia was how his career had begun twenty-five years earlier. He briefly paid attention before retreating back into his own thoughts.

Fort Benning, Georgia. Airborne school. Lawson Army Airfield. All chuted up. Ready to waddle across the tarmac, board a C-141 Starlifter and make his first jump. Hurry up and wait. Two nice old ladies who might have been nuns wandered among the troops, smiling and handing out what looked like little square pieces of silver. One of them held out her hand and asked Mark if he would like one. He reflexively placed his hand under hers to accept the gift.

It was a small silver medallion. Engraved on one side were the words “Saint Michael, Protect Us.” On the other was the archangel’s image with a sword in one hand, a shield in the other, and his foot on Satan’s windpipe. Mark remembered how the Georgia sun glittered off the sword and shield as he stared into the palm of his hand.

Although raised by a nun and a priest after his mother gave him up for adoption at birth, Mark had never been a religious man. But he remembered glancing back and forth between his hand and the U.S. Air Force plane he was about to jump out of and wanting all the good luck he could get. He remembered quickly running one end of his dog tags through the small loop on top of the medallion and wearing it like a good-luck charm around his neck. He could hear it jingle as he adjusted his equipment one last time. He recalled the adrenaline spike at the moment of truth when he hooked his static line to the interior of the aircraft and shuffled out the open cargo door at fifteen hundred feet above Fryar Drop Zone.

One thousand. Two thousand. Three thousand. Check canopy!

Fear gave way to elation when he found himself on the ground with all his equipment and body parts intact. Afterwards he taped the Saint Michael medallion to one of his dog tags so it wouldn’t make noise, and it remained there for his next twelve years of service in the U.S. Army’s

75th Ranger Regiment. Then he met a man named Dunbar and was offered the opportunity to join a clandestine unit known as the Family. He accepted and removed his uniform—and lucky dog tags—forever, as a snake sheds its skin. What followed was eight years of global special operations missions, most of which would remain classified for quite some time—perhaps forever.

Mark looked at Luci. He adored her smooth, coffee-brown skin. She was gorgeous, intelligent, kind, and passionate. She was a fantastic mother and wife. But she was a horrible singer. She nudged him in the ribs again—this time much harder—when she heard him chuckle at her singing.

He thought about how much his life had changed when he had retired at the twenty-year mark. He and Luci had been off-and-on sweethearts since their teenage years. When he retired and returned home, they rekindled their love and got married. The twins came immediately thereafter. His personal life had changed drastically, his professional life not so much.

Mark started working for Dunbar again at Imperium, a private security company where he ended up doing many of the same things he had done for the Family. The money at Imperium was spectacular and the operational tempo much slower at first. That all changed when Dunbar retired—after which he seemingly disappeared from the face of the earth—and tapped Mark to take command of the organization. He accepted the baton and ran with it. When the opportunity came to ditch all private contracts and dedicate Imperium to working directly—secretly—for the National Security Advisor and President of the United States on “special projects,” Mark jumped in with both feet. Who wouldn’t?

All he had to do to keep things happy at home was promise Luci that he wouldn’t travel too much and that his role would be managerial—no door-kicking. Those days were gone. His job was to lead the organization and he promised not to put himself in harm’s way unnecessarily. Not when they had two kids to raise and the rest of their lives to spend together. He was doing his best to

honor those promises, but it was not always easy. He did what he felt he had to do to get the job done. Sometimes that meant bending the rules or completely throwing them out.

The Cardinal, Governor, and Mayor led the procession down the aisle through a thin cloud of incense. Luci locked arms with Mark and rested her head on his shoulder for a moment. He kissed the top of her head. They both smiled at the twins' glee as the Boston Police Gaelic Column of Pipes and Drums marched past them and out the front doors of the cathedral. The crowd soon spilled outside where police cruisers and unmarked sedans lined the streets.

"I'm going to ask the Cardinal to bless the kids," said Luci.

"Okay. I'll be down there," Mark replied, pointing to a spot on the sidewalk below. He reached for his phone as he weaved through the crowd and descended the front steps. Billy picked up on the first ring.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

"Did you take out the trash yet?" asked Mark.

"Did you go to confession yet?" quipped Billy sarcastically. They had worked in the dark underworld of black ops for over fifteen years together. Billy was the closest thing Mark had to a brother. They could say anything to each other.

"Confession? I don't think so."

"Not enough time or not enough guilt?"

"Both. Give me a quick update. I don't know how long I have."

Billy briefed Mark on his current op. The "cyber dipshit" would be leaving his job any minute with a USB full of classified information. If history was any guide, he would run several surveillance detection routes (SDRs) and do errands to kill time. Then he would enter the shopping mall's public bathroom to make final preparations before heading for the designated dead drop

where he would leave the USB. The team was in place. Billy was looking forward to wrapping things up and heading back to Boston. When he finished talking, Mark was silent for a moment.

Should I ask him? Yeah. Just throw it out there and see what he says. Maybe he wants to talk about it—maybe not. That's up to him, but I gotta at least ask.

“Are you going to stop off at home on the way back? You have some time before London.”

Mark's words hung in the air as the phone went silent for several seconds.

“No. No, that's not going to be necessary.”

Billy had been married to his high-school sweetheart for as long as Mark had known him. They had always seemed madly in love, but things had changed once Billy retired from the Family shortly after Mark. The painful separation of deployments was gone, but so were the emotional exuberant homecomings that always seemed to add fuel to their long-burning romance. She left him immediately after their only daughter graduated from college. There would be no counseling. There was nothing to work on. It was over. Mark left it at that. Billy would talk when and if he wanted to. He pivoted back to the mission.

“Let me know when this guy is wrapped up so I can brief the boss,” Mark said, referring to the National Security Advisor, a former Senator named Johnson. “Then I'll see you back here at the office before we go to London.”

“We? You're gonna go on this one?”

“Hell, yeah. Why should you get to do all the fun stuff?”

Mark slipped the phone into his pocket and quickly scanned the area out of habit. Much of the multitude had followed the pipers down the street. The crowd outside the cathedral was thinning. Luci appeared at the top of the steps with Carlos and Amanda on either side, each holding a white-gloved hand tightly. When she saw Mark looking up at them from the sidewalk, she gave him a wide smile. He smiled back and they started their descent down the long marble steps. Mark

took a deep breath of the South Boston air and held it in for a moment. Someone nearby was baking fresh bread.

Mark followed them down the stairs with his eyes and counted his blessings, just as Agnes (his adoptive mother) and Father Peck, the only father figure he had growing up, had always reminded him to do when he was stressed.

One, two, three blessings coming my way right now. The three most important things in my life.

Mark felt for Billy. He couldn't relate to the relationship difficulties that seemed to plague so many couples. He and Luci had their disagreements and maybe a few small things they'd change about each other if they could. But they were still madly in love and trusted each other. They were the lucky few. Mark had never questioned Luci's love, loyalty, or honesty. And he doubted that he ever would. She was the one person in the world he could trust with all of his heart.

But that was about to change.

CHAPTER TWO

Trash Day

Scotty Bukowski reached down to remove the USB drive from his desktop and dropped it into the rolled-up cuff of his jeans. Not the ideal place for valuable national security information, but it was only a temporary storage location. Then he laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his leather chair. He darted his eyes back and forth a few times and casually glanced over his shoulder to confirm that nobody had been watching. After a few deep breaths, he tapped his wristwatch.

“Well, looks like quitting time,” he said to no one in particular. Scotty powered down his system. Then he tidied a few things on his desktop and scribbled a few notes on the to-do list in his cubicle.

Drying his hands, he looked at himself one last time in the mirror before exiting the rest room. He practiced a smile and tried to ignore the boiling lava in his stomach. It was not very convincing. He reminded himself that this was not the first time. Just take deep breaths and walk out the door.

Walking across the main lobby of CMS Cyber Solutions, Scotty pretended to whistle. He waved to a coworker and turned toward the exit. There were three employees in front of him. The security guard charged with returning their personal items—cell phones, backpacks, purses—was taking his time. He spent his nights trying to make it as a stand-up comedian and often used the captive audience at the exit to test out new material. Scotty stood in line patiently with his hands on his hips. Ahead of him there was some mumbling followed by polite chuckling.

Scotty held up his employee badge, not for the guard as much as for the security cameras. The guard knew who he was, but if the company didn't record ID checks on all employees entering or exiting the building, the oversight could jeopardize lucrative U.S. government contracts.

The guard held up Scotty's backpack and cellphone. "These look familiar?"

"Yeah."

"All right, then. Here you go," the guard said, handing them over. "Next time try not to look so guilty."

Scotty froze. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Two weeks off when the rest of us got to work." The guard smiled broadly. "You going anywhere special?"

"Oh, that. No, not really. I'm just going to try and get some stuff done around the house and relax. You know how it is." He slung the backpack over one shoulder and slipped the cell phone into his front pocket.

"Actually, I don't. The only two weeks I ever had off was for rehab. But I hope you have a great vacation anyway," offered the guard with a thumbs-up sign.

Scotty managed a polite chuckle and mumbled his thanks on the way out the door. He headed for his car in the far corner of the secure lot. He tried not to walk too fast as it might attract attention. Halfway there, he felt that he was walking too slowly so he picked up the pace. Inside the car he gasped for air as he fastened the seatbelt.

The exterior guard raised the gate. Scotty exited, turned right, and melted into the current of mid-afternoon traffic. The clock on the dashboard read 3:35 p.m. He had two hours to kill before he needed to make the drop. He would fill the time with errands just in case he was being surveilled.

Scotty spent forty-five minutes browsing in the Apple store at the mall. Then he passed half an hour walking around the ground floor before heading toward the food court and restrooms on

the second floor. The door to the men's room was surrounded by construction scaffolding and two workers appeared to be preparing for a project. Scotty froze and one of the workers spoke to him as he zipped up his overalls.

“Go ahead if you got to. We haven't started yet. Plenty of time. We're paid by the hour anyway,” he said, opening the door for Scotty to enter.

Scotty said thanks and nodded. As he passed through the scaffolding, a full body scan confirmed that he was unarmed and free of surveillance devices. The only items on him besides his wallet were the key to his car, his cell phone, and the USB he had smuggled out of the office. The only other person inside was a custodian wearing light blue overalls and a ball cap, whistling as he mopped the floor in front of a line of urinals. Scotty ignored him and headed straight for the stall farthest from the entrance.

He peered through the gap on the hinged side of the stall door. It had appeared that the custodian was about to finish when Scotty walked in, but now he was changing the water in his mop bucket and cleaning a different part of the floor. Scotty decided to wait a few minutes to see if he would leave. But when the custodian finished mopping, he kept whistling and moved on to wiping down the sinks. Scotty looked at his watch and felt beads of perspiration developing on his forehead. He wiped them off with the sleeve of his dress shirt and took a deep breath. The custodian didn't hear the subsequent groan coming from the stall.

“I'm gonna be about another ten minutes in here if you boys wanna go get a cup of coffee or something, okay?” the custodian called out to the construction workers after pushing the door open a few inches. Then he started wiping down the hand drying machines mounted on the wall next to the sinks. Scotty flushed the toilet and peeked through the crack again as he fastened his belt.

After pumping the remaining few drops of soap from the dispenser, he reached for the faucet. The custodian abruptly stopped whistling and did the same at the adjacent sink. He smiled at Scotty in the mirror. “How you doing today, Sir?”

“Fine, thanks.”

“Can I ask you another question?” he asked, adjusting his Oklahoma ball cap.

“Sure,” Scotty answered cautiously, without looking at the other man.

“I already know the who, when, and what. But I want to know why.”

Scotty nervously dried his hands on the front of his pants and tried to smile. “Why what? What are you talking about?”

“Treason. I’m wondering why? I’ve been around long enough to know that there’s lots of reasons. MICE, right? Isn’t that the acronym? Money, ideology, coercion, and extortion. Or is the E for ego? I always forget that part. Anyway, what’s your excuse? Why did you sell out your country?”

Before Scotty could answer, Billy grabbed him by the throat and slammed him backwards into the wall, taking care to stun the “cyber dipshit” but not hurt him. Billy still needed him for now.

“Actually, don’t bother answering that because I really don’t give a shit. You did it. For whatever reason, you sold out your country. And now, if you want any chance of living, you’re going to do exactly what I tell you to do. Understand?”

Nothing. The traitor was in shock. A deer in the headlights.

Billy reached over and turned on the faucet with his free hand. He splashed the traitor’s face with cold water and slapped his colorless cheeks a few times. “Wake up and stay up. Wake up and stay up. It ain’t over for you yet. You got a chance, but you gotta do exactly what I say, okay? If you do, you’ll be okay. Trust me,” he lied.

Billy released his grip from Scotty’s throat, reached into the front pocket of his overalls and removed a small USB drive. He placed it on the sink. “You can start by swapping this out.”

Scotty grasped the edge of the sink and tried to steady himself. “Swap what out? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The crack of Billy’s open-handed slap across the face echoed throughout the empty restroom. “Do not fuck with me! You know damn well what I am talking about. Now, let’s try this again. Take that,” he said pointing to the USB he had placed on the sink. “And swap it out with the one you just pulled out of your ass.”

Scotty’s jaw dropped and his eyes opened wide like those of a Looney Tunes cartoon character.

“Then you’re going to make your dead drop like normal. After that we can talk about what to do with you. But believe you me, any chance of you ever having any semblance of a life will disappear like a fart in the wind if you mess this up. Got it?” Billy put his hands on Scotty’s shoulders and pulled him close. “Do you understand me?”

Scotty’s eyelids slammed shut and he exhaled slowly. As he did, the wet spot on the front of his pants grew. Urine ran down his leg and a puddle started to form on the restroom floor. Billy stepped back and looked at Scotty with a mixture of disgust and contempt.

“I just mopped that, asshole.”

...

An hour later, Billy was on his way to the airport. Mark was at home and had just put the kids to bed when his phone rang. “Tell me something good.”

“We can scratch another traitor off the list. That’s good, right?”

Mark kept his voice down as he walked into his kitchen. “Sounds good to me. How did it go?”

“Good. He made the drop without a hitch. Since you’re such a busy man, I’ll spare you any further details. Suffice it to say nobody will ever see or hear from him again.”

Mark had known Billy long enough to know he was smiling as those words came out of his mouth. “Okay. Sounds good to me.”

“That means in his current state, the chances of recidivism are zero,” Billy added.

“Yeah. I got that part. Are you on your way to Boston?”

“Yup.”

“I’ll see you when you get here.”

Mark grabbed a frosted mug from the freezer. He poured himself a beer and joined Luci on the couch. She was fast asleep. He turned off the television, took a long sip of his beer, and thought about the traitor Billy had just disposed of. National Security Advisor Johnson had made himself crystal clear. Black Hat Hackers, leakers, and enemy cyber warriors around the world needed to receive the clear message that the U.S. intelligence and special-operations communities will find them wherever they are and treat them like the enemy combatants and terrorists that they are.

According to the American interpretation of international laws of war, digital attacks constitute direct participation. And direct participation makes one a combatant. Thus, the gloves were off. Cyber operators used to stay up at night worrying about federal agents in windbreakers, FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) warrants, criminal indictments, frozen accounts, and restricted travel. Soon they would add grave bodily injury, public humiliation, and all the horrifying ways they could be killed by intelligence operators to their list of worries.

Things were better this way anyway. Maybe not for Scotty Bukowski himself, but at least those who shared his name wouldn’t have to live with the stigma of having a traitor in the family. Billy had spared them the unrelenting media coverage and social harassment that would have accompanied a trial. The threat was eliminated. Done. End of story. Next slide, please.

Mark considered his next two major near-term missions. He’d been tasked by National Security Advisor Johnson to take care of a notorious Greek hacker who had been holed up in the

Venezuelan embassy in London for the past year. Johnson explicitly told him to send a message to all hackers and leakers, one they would never forget. Exactly how he did that was left up to Mark. His team had a solid plan. No worries on the London mission.

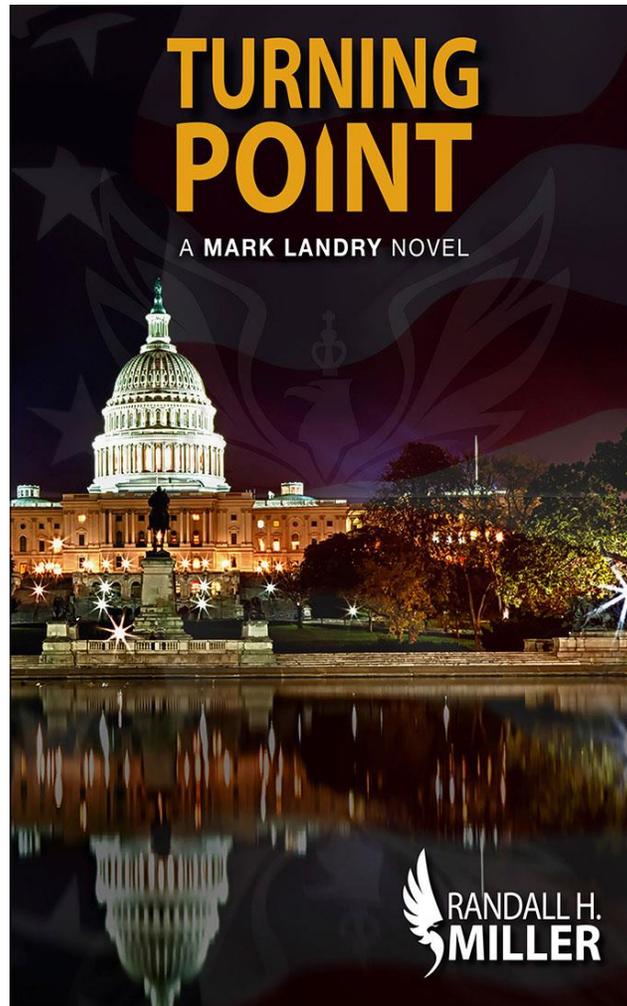
After that he would travel to Berlin to collaborate with German intelligence and continue the hunt for Oleg Borodin, a powerful yet murky figure in Russian foreign intelligence operations. Mark was having trouble sizing Borodin up because so little was known about him. He needed help. That meant spending time with Heike, a top-notch German spy and assassin with whom he shared a personal and professional history. He was uneasy about working with her again but couldn't quite put his finger on why.

Mark and Heike had worked and played intimately together, but that was a long time ago—before Mark married Luci and became a father. He had seen her briefly in Boston recently, but the interaction had left him confounded. Something had seemed off. She had seemed frustrated, even a little angry. Perhaps she was jealous that although they did similar work, Mark had managed to marry and had a normal life on the side while she was still single. Or maybe he was overthinking it. Whatever it was, he was sure he could handle it.

He shifted his thoughts to the woman whom nobody else knew to be his birth mother, Senator McDermott of Connecticut. To further his own interests, he had manipulated her to cross the aisle and cast the sixtieth vote to confirm Judge Midas, a controversial man to say the least, for the Supreme Court. Mark knew the fallout would be bad, but he had no idea it would be this bad. The last time they spoke, she had been holed up in her Washington apartment for weeks, avoiding the cameras and the public as much as possible. She had been barely responsive on the phone. Mark worried that she'd been through so much in her life that maybe she lacked the strength to get through this nightmare and snap out of it. Could her emotional tank finally be out of gas? No, she just needs more time. She's still got plenty of sand left in her hourglass, he told himself. Plenty of

time for her to heal. Plenty of time to one day honor her wish and publicly acknowledge their secret family ties.

He was wrong.



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