

Flashdrive

PJ Grondin

Prologue

Tuesday, August 10, 1992, 7:25 PM

The scowl on his face conveying his displeasure, Colonel Alton Woodburn glared at the enlisted man casually standing in front of his desk. The brash, young sergeant had walked directly into Woodburn's office without knocking. He had no official business with the colonel because he would have requested the meeting through proper channels. During working hours, a staff member would have stopped the enlisted man, but all of the colonel's staff had left for the day. The interruption invaded the solitude he normally enjoyed, wrapping up his day's work and reviewing plans for the next.

His immediate gut-feeling at the intrusion was anger. Anyone with half a brain knew that you didn't violate the colonel's space without an appointment unless you were one of a handful of Woodburn's superiors. But those men, mostly generals, would summon him to their offices, not make the trip to his. This soldier, a sergeant, was much too low in the chain of command to stroll into the colonel's office unannounced. As a sergeant, he would know better. He would also know that he was in a world of trouble.

Woodburn's brain shifted gears with warning flags waving, turning his thoughts to incidents of enlisted men killing their superiors over some obscure grievance. He wondered if this young man – *Tate*, according to his

uniform's nametag – had some beef with the Army or just had some bug up his ass. Maybe he wasn't playing with a full deck. Regardless, Woodburn leaned back in his overstuffed chair and folded his hands on his desk, outwardly relaxed, as he used his knee to open the desk's center drawer just enough to expose his Beretta M9, the semi-automatic pistol that he kept within easy reach.

The man in green BDUs (battle dress uniform), the working uniform of the day, smiled, not moving his eyes away from the colonel's. He slowly, without permission, eased himself into one of the guest chairs in front of the colonel's desk.

The quiet office suddenly boomed with Colonel Woodburn's voice. "What the hell do you think you're doing," the colonel made it a point to look at the man's nametag, "Sergeant Tate?"

The colonel's visitor continued to smile and stare. He slowly reached into the front left shirt pocket of his uniform and extracted several papers and what appeared to be photographs. He held the small stack in his right hand and leaned back in the chair. The bright fluorescent lights of the office highlighted the features of his face, which made his smile appear menacing, even antagonistic, as if he was whacking a hornet's nest with a stick.

To the colonel, the soldier was no more than a kid, maybe nineteen or twenty years old, his face having slight Eastern European features. Being a sergeant meant that he had been in the Army for about four years, maybe more; therefore, he would have to be at least twenty-two. Regardless, he had work to do, and this intrusion would cost the kid dearly.

"Son, I don't have time for games here. Who's your company commander?"

The soldier's smile tightened as if the colonel was telling jokes that weren't funny, but he was obliged

to play along. He sat forward on the chair, his back erect, and addressed the colonel. “Colonel Woodburn, sir, before you get all UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice) on me, I have something that you should see.”

Sergeant Tate tossed the stack of pictures, face-up, on the desk in front of Woodburn. The pictures spread out in a hap-hazard manner, exposing portions of each shot. The top picture was of the colonel’s wife watching their two children as they played at a park. The colonel’s brow furrowed, not understanding why this soldier had pictures of his family.

“What are you doing with ...”

“Keep looking, Colonel.”

Woodburn looked back down at the pictures, slowing taking in each one, trying to find the purpose in his visit. There were ten pictures in all. Six were of his wife and children at different locations around the base or in town. The seventh was of an inexpensive casket sitting in a sterile-looking room with a lead seal on the latch. The lead seal was broken so that the casket could be opened. The eighth through tenth shots were pictures of the inside of the casket.

Colonel Woodburn recognized the room. He also knew the type of lead seal that was on the casket and the significance of the seal being broken. The room was used by Army Specialists who received the bodies of men killed in action or who met their demise through some other mishap while on active duty. The specialists groomed and prepared the bodies for burial prior to release of the deceased soldier’s body to the next of kin.

Sometimes the physical work of making the soldier presentable to their family was easy, when little or no external trauma caused death. Other times, the work was nearly impossible, when death was the result of a roadside bomb or a large caliber round to the head. But the colonel knew that the men who performed these

reconstructions were professionals. The most difficult part of the job was the actual presentation of the remains to the family. It was always a deeply emotional, gut-wrenching experience in the best of circumstances.

The photos before the colonel were not sickening in that way, but they caused the senior officer's stomach to tighten. His eyes flew up from the pictures to the man sitting confidently in his office. His brain worked overtime. *How did this kid get these pictures? Why were pictures of his family included?*

In a voice more controlled and less commanding, the colonel asked, "Where did you get these?"

The smile was still plastered on Sergeant Tate's smug face.

"My turn to talk." He took a deep breath. "I want in. Not only do I want in, I'm taking over, and you're going to do exactly what I say, at least when it comes to our business relationship."

"Son, we don't have a business relationship."

"We do now, and the first thing you're going to do is stop calling me 'son.' If you do as I say, not only will you keep your illustrious military career intact, you'll be rich beyond your wildest dreams, and you can move on to more important things, like a serious political career."

Woodburn gave the kid a sarcastic laugh. He thought the young man was out of his mind, thinking that he could simply walk into his office and make demands. But he did have some brass. And he had some leverage. Maybe he could be useful.

Recovered from his initial shock at seeing the pictures, the colonel, in a confident tone, said, "Maybe I can use you within our group. You've obviously stumbled onto something that you ..."

"Shut up and listen!"

The rebuke took the colonel by surprise. His anger spiked. He opened his mouth to speak but found himself looking into the business end of an AN1911 forty-five caliber pistol. Tate's face was beet red. "I said shut up!"

Woodburn did just that.

The sergeant calmed down but kept the gun pointed at Woodburn's face. "Now, slowly close that drawer. Don't even think about pulling out that pee-shooter."

With the drawer closed and the colonel's hands palms down on his desk, Tate continued. "The reason your family is in those pictures is for insurance. If you don't do exactly as I say, well, they will get hurt." He paused as a forced smile returned to his face. "But there's no reason for all this unpleasantness. We're just going to take this operation to the next level and beyond. Your organization is doing well, but it is small time and sloppy. You're going to get caught if you don't make some changes. If I had any scruples, you'd be on your way to Leavenworth right now. Lucky for you, I don't. Also lucky for you, I have a head for business." His smile widened. "Stick with me, Alton, and we'll be filthy rich ... and powerful."

Woodburn looked down at the pictures of his wife and children. His stomach churned as his mind raced. Then he looked at the three pictures of the open casket.

What have I done?

* * *

Two weeks prior to Sergeant Tate's surprise visit with Colonel Alton Woodburn, Tate had received an unexpected call to perform one of his more unpleasant duties. According to the Duty Officer who made the call, the body of Private First-Class Daniel Alderman was

shipped to the mortuary at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The Casualty Officer's Assistant on call who was supposed to prepare the body for delivery to the Next of Kin, the NOK in military parlance, had called in sick. In reality, the young soldier was hungover from a night of hard drinking. Sergeant Tate, newly transferred in from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was the next name on the duty roster and was called in to prepare the body for delivery to his parents.

Tate hated this part of his duty. Sometimes the job was easy, the soldier's cause of death being something that was outwardly difficult to detect. Other times, the bodies were mangled, burned, partially dismembered, or worse. It was Tate's job, and the job of his peers, to make their fellow soldiers as presentable as possible to their NOK. When the call came that day, he rolled his eyes and immediately tried to dodge his duty. Before he could think of an excuse, the Duty Officer told him that there was no one else available. He was it.

Without further discussion, he showered, dressed in his BDUs, and headed for the mortuary. Standing in front of the plain, basic casket, he bowed his head to gather his wits and to steel himself for the task at hand. After inhaling and holding a deep breath, he broke the lead seal on the casket and opened it.

His eyes widened in disbelief. It took a moment before he realized that he hadn't exhaled, unable to reconcile what he was seeing with what should have been in that casket. Taking several steps backwards, his butt hit against the metal desk where all the administrative forms were kept. He opened the lower left drawer and removed a Canon 35mm camera and took several pictures of the inside of the casket. He reclosed the casket and reassembled the lead seal on the casket's latch. With the exception of the lead seal, which he couldn't repair, he put the casket back in the condition

that it was in when he entered the room. He could only hope that whoever came into the room next didn't realize the seal had already been broken.

He sat at the desk to think about his next move. His mind worked overtime. Where he should have seen a dead soldier's body parts, he saw dollar signs. He began to formulate a plan, one that would make him rich. He just had to figure out all of the players in the scheme. Most importantly, who was in charge? No matter. Tate had already decided that it was soon going to be his operation.

Chapter 1

Wednesday, August 11, 2020, 8:30 AM

The flash drive arrived by Express Courier with the usual receipt for a deposit to Ian Tabler's investment account in the amount of \$30,000. It was the standard fee paid by FlashGamz LLC to beta testers of their new products long before the gaming systems ever hit the retail market. The package looked similar to other packages that Ian had received. Ian and his younger brother, Jonah, were two of a handful of testers regularly contracted by the company to help work out the bugs in the code for fast-moving, complex games that kept millions of kids – and adults – glued to their TV screens and computer monitors for hours on end, tracking down and killing imaginary enemies, or finding rewards after an arduous journey through a fictional kingdom. The initial payment was supplemented by a large bonus if the testers found flaws that smoothed the performance and improved the quality and playability of their video games.

Ian, age fifteen, and Jonah, a year

younger, had already amassed savings and investments in excess of three-quarters of a million dollars each. A mathematics and physics prodigy, he sported an IQ that was nearly off the charts. In addition to his math and science skills, he was an economics wizard. He had religiously invested the proceeds from his testing services and more than quadrupled his and his brother's net worth. He split the earnings with Jonah fifty-fifty. Both boys were well on their way to becoming multi-millionaires.

Ian placed the deposit receipt in a flex folder in his desk drawer. Along with the receipt and the flash drive were testing instructions. He knew the drill. In order to identify bugs in the software, the testing protocol had to be followed precisely. Today's instructions required that the boys be ready to run the program at 10:30 AM so that all the testers were running the program at the same time. This stressed the system and gave everyone the opportunity to identify programming errors.

Ian handed the flash drive to Jonah, who took the device without a word and plugged it into the USB port of a computer that they didn't use for the game tests. A few seemingly effortless keystrokes and the computer went to work. While the computer whirred and the unit's fan kicked on, Jonah

stared straight ahead. He didn't make a sound and didn't even acknowledge that his brother was in the room.

Ian read the instructions aloud so that his brother could hear. "It says that we have to be ready to start the test at 10:30 AM eastern standard time with all of our preliminary checks completed."

Jonah spoke for the first time all morning. He replied with a rapid series of numbers in a monotone, "One-zero-three-zero-one-one-three."

"That's right, 10:30 AM. Can we handle it?"

Again, Jonah spoke rapidly without any emotion, using only numbers. "Two-five-five-one-nine."

Ian smiled. It took him years to figure out that his severely autistic brother was communicating with him through numbers – kind of like a personal language code. It was even more challenging because his brother used only single-digit numbers, zero through nine, to spell out words by their number assignment. The letter 'A' was 'one,' 'B' equaled 'two.' That pattern worked through the letter 'I' – 'nine.' But after I, the code changed. The letter 'J' to Jonah was 'one-zero,' which made following his spelling difficult. But Ian learned the subtle changes in Jonah's voice cadence, which eventually

made it easier to decipher his brother's replies.

The only word, other than numbers, that Ian had ever heard his young brother speak was "Mom."

Ten years ago, the boys' mother had disappeared. No one knew where she went or why she left. None of her clothes were missing from her walk-in closet, but she left her car, her purse, and her medications. According to the boys' father, she was allergic to peanuts and bee stings. And she had high blood pressure. Ian wondered more than once why she hadn't taken her medications with her. But they most likely would never know the answer to any of the questions left in her wake.

Jonah, like his older brother, had a high IQ, but his social skills were non-existent. A savant who demonstrated no emotion except screams of apparent fear whenever anyone tried to approach him, he communicated using only numbers and spoke only to Ian. His life was restricted to the family compound, not by any rules or physical confinement. He just could not function around people. That included his father, Nicholas Tabler.

The computer beeped. Jonah removed the drive and handed it to Ian, who plugged it into their main gaming computer. After Ian

made a few mouse clicks and some rapid keystrokes, four large forty-two-inch computer monitors came to life. Two of the monitors displayed the new game's introduction the other two displayed the computer code that generated the game's images. The boys had one of each type of display in front of them.

Jonah, expressionless, stared straight ahead at the bright colors of the game and the black and white numbers, letters, and special characters that seemed to flow rapidly down the screen.

Ian smiled as he watched his brother absorb the code. He turned back to his own screens and read the name of the game.

Assassin – Best in the Business.

* * *

Armand Vega, United States Senator from Georgia and the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, commanded the attention of the five men and one woman in the cramped conference room of the Savannah office of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

The three agents, their supervisor, and their director sat expressionless, tension etched on their faces. The sixth man was Michael Jess, Senator Vega's personal assistant. The air in the room, a mixture of fresh paint and industrial strength floor wax,

made the atmosphere all the more uncomfortable. All five, the agents and their supervisors, were newly assigned to Savannah, coming from posts all around the country. They were hand-picked to replace the agents who used to be a part of the Savannah D.E.A. office, but were now facing charges ranging from corruption, extortion, and theft to attempted murder. The newly assigned agents expected the Senator to tell them that they would be under the watchful eye of their government, especially the committee headed by Vega.

Director Carl Erkskin called the meeting to order. "We all know the recent history of this office. You men, and you Ms. Ellis, were hand-picked to replace the agents who are no longer with the organization. We will have our meeting after this briefing by Senator Vega." He turned to Vega and motioned with his hand, indicating that he had the floor. "Senator?"

Armand Vega stood before the group of agents, exuding confidence, looking at each person in turn, making sure they were listening. He could see something in their eyes, as if challenging him to tie them to their predecessors' crimes. But he wasn't there to make that connection. He wanted this team of agents to know that they were starting with a clean slate, but they were also starting with a

handicap. Their funding had been slashed significantly. There would be no more seed money for drug buys, and their every move would be documented. They were under the microscope, as was their supervision. In fact, the entire D.E.A. was going to feel the pain of the illegal actions of a handful of crooked agents.

Vega could have handed the task of delivering this message to a number of underlings, but he wanted to make a point – he wasn't going to shy away from the public and private outcry against his desire to cut funding for what he called “the failed War on Drugs.” In fact, he was going to announce his efforts to every news outlet in the country.

He looked towards his aid, Michael Jess, whose eyes darted towards the clock on the wall, reminding the senator that they were on a tight schedule.

Vega's stern expression conveyed that his message was serious. Everyone in the room knew of the problems that plagued this office. There was a very public trial about to begin that would undoubtedly result in the conviction of three former agents and a Chatham County district attorney. A superior court judge who had been the ring leader of the group would not be tried because he was murdered outside the courthouse as he was led away in handcuffs.

Vega wasted no time. “You are here to restore the integrity of this office. You were handpicked for that reason. The expectations are high, and you *must* live up to them. It isn’t going to be easy because funding has been drastically cut and oversight has been increased. You will feel the weight of that oversight daily. It will make your job more difficult, but in the end, if you play your cards right, this could enhance your futures within the D.E.A. or any other federal agency to which you might wish to move.”

He paused for a moment, meeting the stares of those seated before him. When he spoke again, there was added weight to his words. “Not only will there be heightened oversight, but I will be watching you. I’ll be getting reports from Director Erkskin.” He turned and locked eyes with Erkskin momentarily. “My staff and members of the Finance Committee will be reviewing those reports and making decisions on future funding based on what we see and hear.

“Lastly, you all know that I personally believe that the ‘War on Drugs’ is a total waste of time and money. We’ve spent billions to battle this problem, and we’ve gotten nowhere. In fact, we’re losing ground every year. We have to take a different approach, or we’re going to pour billions

more down the drain. This team was hand-picked to clean up a big mess. Maybe in the process of your cleanup, you can convince me that I'm wrong.”

Vega looked at each pair of eyes seated before him, then turned and walked out the door of the conference room. It was 10:30 AM.

Michael Jess led the senator and two interns traveling with them towards the front door of the D.E.A. office building on Commerce Drive in Savannah, Georgia. As they walked out the door into the sunshine, Michael Jess said, “We have to be at the airport in twenty minutes. The jet is waiting, ready to go.”

Vega stood on the steps in front of the office building. As they waited for the car to arrive, he recalled that this was the very spot where D.E.A. Agent Jarrod Deming had been shot and killed just months before as he was about to announce that he and his fellow agents had entrapped dozens of innocent young men and women while enriching themselves in a scheme that sent shockwaves throughout the Drug Enforcement Administration. He was deep in thought when he heard a buzzing sound, almost like a swarm of bees. He noticed that Jess was frowning and looking up in the sky. He turned his head as the buzzing grew louder.

Then he spotted the drone rapidly approaching the group. The first pops were unmistakable. It was the sound of small arms fire.

* * *

Ian and Jonah Tabler maneuvered the attack drone with their game controllers as their computer monitors displayed a set of crosshairs on the horizon of an imaginary land. Their mission had just been relayed to them. They were to eliminate the leader of a foreign terror group. They were given the coordinates of the location where the leader was in a meeting with his top lieutenants and was set to emerge from that meeting at 7:00 PM. The program stated that the meeting was outside of Kabul, Afghanistan.

Ian said, “Man, these are some awesome graphics. It looks so real.”

Jonah didn’t respond to Ian’s remark. He just kept guiding his drone towards his prospective target. Suddenly the crosshairs started flashing bright green on both of their screens. Jonah reacted first and hit a button on his controller. Bright flashes flew from the front of his drone as he unleashed his deadly attack. A split second after Jonah commenced his attack, Ian fired his rounds. His screen mimicked Jonah’s, sending a deadly load of ordnance at their target.

The four images on the screen fell to

the ground. The attack was a complete success. Ian maneuvered his drone towards the target area to see if more targets were identified by the program. As he tapped the buttons and the mini-joystick on the controller, his two computer screens went black. Jonah's also went dark. Ian looked at his brother, who stared straight ahead at his darkened screen. He said, "What the ...?" As the words were leaving his lips, he smelled an acrid burning scent in the air. He looked around the room to see if they had an electrical failure. But the lights on their computers were still on. He was about to reach for the flash drive when a two-inch flame engulfed it. Ian jumped back. Jonah just stared. In less than two seconds, all that remained of the drive was a pile of ash.