

**Available on Amazon.com
in July 2011**

THE PERFECT CANDIDATE

FINAL DRAFT (#10)

June 2011

Christopher Metcalf

The Perfect Candidate

THE PERFECT CANDIDATE

Copyright © 2011 by Christopher Metcalf

www.christophermetcalf.com

Tree Tunnel Publishing, LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author.

The Perfect Candidate

Prologue

Patient was the killer.

He was stealth and strategy and confidence. Most of all, he was composed. No question or hesitation in his resolve.

His target was deserving of death. Deserving of much worse than the brief moment of pain he was soon to endure. But there simply wasn't ample time to perform a procedure proportionate to his many offenses. This kill needed to be carried out in an expert fashion that left no trace of evidence. This job demanded nothing less than a flawless execution -- a bad pun, but still.

Planning was over. It was time. Peering around the corner, the killer reviewed the scene. No change in the last half-minute. Nothing much had changed in the four minutes since he silently entered the structure.

He evaluated his target one final time. The target was comfortable, seated with legs propped, at ease in his blissful ignorance. His attention forward, seemingly absolute. The man was oblivious to his surroundings, hypnotized by the television his eyes were glued to. Two empty bottles on a side table provided evidence of his chemical-induced stupor. He had left himself unprotected. Vulnerable.

The Perfect Candidate

The killer reached up and turned the dial on the thermostat to 72°. Significantly cooler than the sweltering 90-degree-plus evening temperature outside. His extensive surveillance and reconnaissance of the location revealed useful details such as the obnoxious noise produced by the aged air conditioning condenser unit when it kicked on. Right on cue, the rattle and hum outside was immediate. That noise would conceal the sounds of execution.

Consummate preparation brought the killer here this evening at this time. His patient, exhaustive observation of the target and location identified this precise window of opportunity when the man would be alone, defenseless.

The killer was silent in his approach. He had removed his shoes outside to further dampen the fall of his feet on the floor. He held the target's own gun gripped in a gloved hand as he stepped closer. His advance recon of the building had uncovered the gun in the bedside dresser. It was perfect.

Peripheral vision confirmed what he knew already. No one else was here. No witnesses.

The killer was in position, just behind the oblivious target. His approach undetected. He had practiced this kill, trained for this moment. Silently, he stepped to the right to gain the proper angle. No hesitation now. In one fluid motion, the killer leaned to the right and forward to allow his outstretched right arm to move around the target and bring the barrel of the gun up until it made contact with the unsuspecting man's chin. Not the chin per se; the area between the chin and Adam's apple. The submaxillary

triangle, for those familiar with human anatomy, like the killer.

The target tensed as the cold barrel jammed into his skin. But there was no time. No time to move or scream or plead. The trigger was levered and the bullet exploded up through and out the top of the man's head. The killer simultaneously stepped forward and to the right to avoid the skin, skull fragments and brain matter that followed the bullet up to the wall.

A fine mist of blood droplets was still settling as the killer moved the gun from under the corpse's head down to a lifeless hand. He placed the gun into the dead man's right hand with the pointer finger inserted into the trigger space. He then aimed the weapon at the television a dozen feet in front of the chair and applied the pressure required to pull the trigger.

The television tube suffered a quick death just as a running back avoided tacklers and stepped out of bounds on the sideline. To anyone examining the scene, this second bullet would be interpreted as the first shot fired. The gunshot also left microscopic amounts of gunpowder residue on the man's hand. Proof the deceased had indeed fired the weapon.

The killer then brought the gun and sagging hand back up under the deceased's chin and released them. The appendage and gun slid naturally with gravity's help down to the dead man's protruding belly where it now rested.

The count in his head was up to 11 seconds since the first shot. Right on schedule. The killer quickly exited the

room the way he had entered 21 seconds earlier. The accomplished killer stepped out the sliding glass door next to the kitchen table onto the patio and closed the door behind him. He slid his shoes back on and listened to the sounds of the night before moving. Nothing.

Once on the backyard lawn, his movements were precise. He jogged diagonally across the yard and climbed the fence at the corner. His motions sure and fluid, as if he'd done it hundreds of times.

Once over the fence, he continued his trek into the blackness of a clearing and then onto a quiet street. He removed the leather gloves and put them in his back pocket for the moment. They would be disposed of properly in a dumpster a quarter of a mile away. The dumpster sat in an alley behind a small shopping center. Situated in the middle of the center was his destination, his alibi.

The killer didn't dwell on the job just completed. It was simply a function necessitated by the target's irresponsible, dangerous actions. The reckless man had placed too many in danger with his selfish desire for dominance. His predilection for violence and abuse of power had signed his death warrant. Threats against innocent bystanders and those beyond reproach required decisive action. His recent escalation of terrorizing behavior to include death threats toward those who dared oppose him was simply the last straw. He had crossed a line.

There would be repercussions. There always were. There would be tears and pain and glowing sermons even though this target had alienated or offended most everyone in his sphere of influence. Even those who were now free

from his oppression and constant torment would be in pain for a period. But it would pass. This was, at its core, a righteous kill. But the killer knew that was for someone else to decide. He had merely done a job, a service.

He reached the shopping center in a comfortable minute and 49 seconds. The gloves were placed in the dumpster under several broken down cardboard boxes and full plastic garbage bags. Twenty three seconds later, the killer entered his destination through a back door propped open with a pencil 12 minutes earlier. A good many pubescent and adolescent boys, heads down playing games, populated the video arcade. A smattering of young girls waited for the boys' attention. A few adults could be seen, mostly playing pinball and electronic darts. The chubby shopping center security guard sat on a stool talking with the arcade's manager as the killer walked past. No new faces in the room since he slipped out the back door.

The killer took in the room in a flash, cataloging hundreds of details as he stepped over to the Galaga machine. Before dropping his quarter into the coin slot, he surveyed the room again. One of the young girls looked his way and smiled.

Didn't need that. Last thing he wanted right now was a pre-teen girl crushing on him. He smiled back though. If nothing else, her look of longing reinforced his alibi. The killer turned back to the game and proceeded to kill hundreds of alien ships. They all deserved their demise.

Chapter 1

Tuesday, November 10, 1987 – Dallas, Texas

“Damn. This is really happening.”

Lance said it as much to himself as he did to Geoffrey Seibel. The older man was seated across the small conference table Lance stood leaning over. He took a quick survey of the facts, the new reality enveloping him. Two men alone in the room, a table between them. A threat with a definitive and immediate timeline had been issued. Elton John singing a classic in his head. Oh, and Lance held a gun to Seibel’s head.

Lance Priest was undeniably the worst shot in his family. Worse than his little brother, his mother and even his aunts. But even Lance wouldn’t miss from this distance with the gun’s barrel making a little circle-shaped indentation in Seibel’s left temple.

He just wished Elton would wrap up the song. He needed to think, to plan. Sometimes songs just start playing in his brain at the most inopportune times. Like this one.

He would be running soon. In a matter of minutes, he’d run for his life, burst from the room, from the building and break into a full sprint once outside. His lungs would ache; his legs would scream at the pace he pushed them down

streets and alleys in downtown Dallas. But right now Lance needed more information. He'd missed too many details already today.

In the seconds preceding the current situation, Lance had gone out of body to look down on the scene from above, formulated a plan and executed it to perfection. It surprised the heck out of him how well it worked. Lance was simply faster with his gun and turned the tables on Seibel, if that was even the dude's real name. He didn't linger on the fact he held the gun to the guy's head. It had just worked out that way. He pushed the barrel deeper into Seibel's temple. The song was into its final chorus. What now? He needed to think. The seconds hesitated, time slowed.

He'd basically lied his way here today. Hell, truth be told, and it wasn't often told by Lance Priest, he'd fibbed and lied and B.S.'d his way through most of his 21 years. A half-day of whoppers and white lies told to others during the Foreign Service Officer oral assessments was nothing. It was fun.

That is, up until about two minutes go when Seibel pulled out a gun and put in on the table. He followed this surprising action with the equally surprising words, "You will be of no use to your country or anyone for that matter unless you can survive the next 72 hours." Damn. Didn't look like Lance could lie his way out of this one.

No time to think about where this all started. Lance could cram a lot of thinking into a second or two, but this was going to take time to figure out. Time he didn't have if what Seibel had said moments earlier was true. Lance had

apparently walked into a shit storm and now had just over four and a half minutes until two brutal killers somewhere else in the building started chasing him, hunting him, like an animal. It would be a whole lot easier to think, to devise a plan, if the guy sitting in front of him with a gun to his head wasn't smiling like he knew a secret. It was slightly unnerving.

Seibel turned his left wrist that Lance held pinned to the table to look at his watch. "Four minutes and 29 seconds. You need to move Mr. Priest." He smiled as he said the words. He almost giggled really. The guy did know a secret.

Lance snuck a glance at the clock on the wall over Seibel's head. Something about the clock wasn't right. He'd noticed it when he came in ten minutes earlier. It didn't belong there.

But no time for those thoughts now. He didn't have the time to process every detail. Ten minutes. Man, his life had changed in those few rotations of the hands on a clock.

Rewind. He went out of body and back to 11 minutes earlier. Lance walked out of a large conference room on the fifth floor of a nondescript federal office building on Commerce Street in downtown Dallas. Gathered in the room behind him were U.S. Foreign Service Officer candidates who had passed the written exam portion of the process and traveled to Dallas from around the region for group and individual oral assessments.

The Perfect Candidate

They had been placed in pretend situations during the morning and asked to come up with responses. They had all participated in a full-group exercise followed by smaller group sessions. Lance's small group had been tasked with handling the repercussions of a deadly tourist bus crash as members of the U.S. embassy staff in Zimbabwe. Lance had dominated the session by literally making stuff up on the spot, like usual.

After lunch, the next phase of the day was individual interviews. Lance was ready. He lived for moments when he was challenged to create stories and characters and build backstories, traits, wants, needs and desires. Lance was a born liar. Leopards have spots. Fish swim. Lance Priest lies.

He walked down the hall to a room marked "3" with a piece of paper taped to the door, took a breath, opened the door and entered. He was only mildly surprised to see Seibel and the liar who called himself Marsco sitting behind the lone conference table. Drew Marsco wasn't his real name. Lance was sure of that. The man, who had sat in on Lance's small group session earlier this morning, had been in Tulsa on a rainy Saturday at the University of Tulsa eight weeks earlier when Lance and 40 others took the Foreign Service Officer Written Examination. Marsco, not his real name obviously, was across the room watching Lance most of the time instead of filling out answers on his exam. And in Tulsa, the guy wasn't wearing a wig, fake mustache and glasses like he was now. Bad disguise.

The two men didn't get up and didn't speak as Lance entered. He closed the door behind him, stepped forward and sat in a chair facing them. Seibel's eyes drilled into

him. Seibel was a different person than the jovial and dapper gent who greeted all the candidates this morning. In fact, as far as Lance could tell, this was the fourth different persona Seibel had played today. Lance was impressed. The changes Seibel manifested at different times during the day were subtle – hunched back, drooping mouth, bright shining smile, a locked, furrowed brow. Lance seldom encountered people who could “chameleon” like he could. Seibel was good.

“What color is the wall on your left?” Seibel asked pointedly.

Lance responded immediately. “Green, like the one on my right and behind you. The wall behind me is yellow for some reason.”

“Are my shoes loafers or wing-tip?”

“You’re all wing-tip, all the time.”

“Where is Grisham from?” Seibel asked. Grisham, or whatever his name was, had led the small group exercise Lance had participated in this morning.

“He said Billings, Montana.” Lance returned Seibel’s glare.

“But you don’t believe him.” Seibel’s left eyebrow rose.

“He is from somewhere east and north. Not Montana. No doubt.” Lance replied.

“Why would he lie to you?” Seibel’s right eyebrow rose to join the left one.

Lance let the question hang in the air and smiled. “I think the question is why did Grisham, Sarah, Mackenzie, Waters, you and Mr. Marsco here lie to me.”

“What do you mean?” Seibel’s eyebrows furrowed.

“What do you think I mean?” Lance asked.

“How did everyone lie to you?” Seibel’s eyes now squinted.

“First things first, none of those are their real names.”

“How so?”

Lance’s smile widened. “People aren’t born with names. They are given them. They become them. A Jim is named James at birth but ends up a Jim. Michael stays Michael instead of becoming Mike. Elizabeth becomes Lisa or Liz. Either way, you become that name. It’s who you are. You carry it with you, wear it. When people lie about their name it is easy to tell. It doesn’t fit. I see it all the time on the car lot.” Lance sold used cars part-time at a dealership when he wasn’t in class or studying or running. Yes, a used car salesman.

“So just the six of us lied to you, not the rest?” Seibel just smiled.

“Just five lied about their names. You have lied every time you’ve opened your mouth, but not about your name.” Lance smiled.

“How could you tell they lied about their names? Exactly please?” Seibel inquired.

Lance shrugged his shoulders. “Sarah gave it away with her eyes first thing this morning. She simply had no

investment in the name. It wasn't hers. Grisham worked too hard to be Grisham. Said it too many times. Mackenzie doesn't wear glasses and didn't need them. They were just glass, no magnification. You could see it from the side. Just like you could see the lie in his name. Waters simply didn't dress the part. And the gentleman playing the role of Drew Marsco here decided to put on a wig and mustache today to disguise himself."

Seibel turned to Marsco whose real name is Braden, Stuart Braden, psychologist and talent evaluator. Braden is a human lie detector, or better, spy detector. And he was stunned, flabbergasted yet again by Lance's performance. Just like he'd been eight weeks earlier in Tulsa. The glance between Seibel and Braden was its own language. The psychologist shook his head, closed his notebook and placed it in his briefcase. He got up and walked out of the room without a word. Seibel followed.

Outside in the hall with the door closed, the two stood only inches apart. They had obviously been in tight spaces together. Seibel pulled a tiny recorder from his jacket pocket and whispered.

"Seibel, Geoffrey, NCS-SAD number 347 dash 9. Braden, Stuart NCS-SAD psych ops, number 4561 dash 7. November 10, 1987. Do I have approval to proceed with candidate number 1 dash 713, Priest, Lance P. age 21, Tulsa, Oklahoma?" The question was steeped in formality as if it were spoken for documentation purposes. And obviously it was.

Braden's reply was just as dry and formal; it too wrapped in government bureaucratic legalese. "Braden,

Stuart 4561 dash 7. Candidate Priest meets or exceeds all position and agency NDC requirements under Directive 718H. You are approved to proceed.”

Seibel snapped off the recorder, shoved it into his pocket and turned to re-enter the room. The door closed behind him louder than it should have, but the effect was nice. He moved back to his seat and after sitting, reached down beside him to pull something out of a small leather bag on the floor. It was a gun and Seibel put it on the table right in front of Lance.

“What is that for?” Lance kept his eyes locked on Seibel’s pale blue eyes. He also managed to keep his cool. He was annoyed at the moment. Not by Seibel or the gun. A classic Elton John song had started playing in his head while Seibel was out of the room. His personal mental soundtrack picked a lousy time to kick in. But there was no stopping a song once it started. It had always been like this.

“For shooting.” Seibel replied.

“Why is it on the table?” Lance nodded. His foot tapped to the beat of the song playing in his head.

“Do you recognize this weapon?”

Lance leaned down to get a closer look. “It looks like mine.”

“It is yours. Beretta 9 mm model 92 chambered for the classic Parabellum bullet with a 13-round magazine. A little light, but still a nice gun. Given to you by your stepfather three years ago and given to him by his uncle who lives in Fort Smith, Arkansas.”

“How did you get it?” Lance’s face showed nothing, but he had been knocked slightly off kilter by the gun appearing first of all. Seibel’s accurate telling of the gun’s life story was a gut blow. *What the hell?*

“Does seeing this gun now really surprise you?” Seibel was the ultimate in cool.

“Yes. How the hell did you get it?” Lance squinted and played the role of an angry young man. His foot tapped away. He fought the urge to go out of body.

“How do you think?” Seibel raised his hands slightly with the question.

“Obviously from of my bedroom closet.”

“Precisely. Off the shelf above your hanging suits, which were grey, blue, blue and seersucker. Your navy blue sports coat is missing a gold button from the left sleeve.” Seibel said this last line with concern, like he really cared about that missing button.

Lance tilted his head and squinted his eyes. “What the hell is going on? Who are you?”

“Are you sure you didn’t know we had been in your apartment?” Seibel’s look was telling.

“I knew someone had. You knocked the red koozee off the armrest of my plastic deck chair.”

Seibel furrowed his brow. “That sounds like some kind of code. But regardless, your instincts were right as I expected.” Seibel paused to gather himself, and for effect. He was something of a showman.

“Mr. Priest, you have been under surveillance for nearly two months. Your every action has been captured or documented in some manner. Quite an investment has been made in you already. But of course we expect a great return on our investment.

“We have followed you to school, to work, out on the town with your very few friends and back home again. We followed your early morning or late night runs, which never, and I mean never, follow the same path. A team followed your drive from Tulsa to Dallas yesterday and was quite impressed with your recon of the area surrounding this building last evening. We were in the room next to your motel room last night and beside your vehicle on the drive in this morning.”

“For what? Why?” The smile was gone from Lance’s face.

“Please let me finish,” Seibel raised a hand. “We have indeed looked into a great many aspects of your life, from your childhood in Florida and then Texas, right through high school and now college in Tulsa. We have interviewed people in your distant past you have forgotten. We have collected sufficient data to tell your life story. I have mounds of paperwork detailing the family history, education, health and finances of Lance Porter Priest.” During this last part, Seibel leaned forward for further effect. His face was within 18 inches of Lance’s blank stare.

But Lance’s mind wasn’t blank. It was working, collecting, cataloging. Processing.

The Perfect Candidate

Lance sees people the same way he views, or better, devours maps. People are maps of their life. The decisions made, hardships endured, lies told and hidden are like roads and topography and landmarks all there on and below the skin. And like maps, Lance can memorize every detail.

His knowledge of human anatomy had been memorized from a number of reference books on the subject. Looking at Seibel, he watched his favorite of the 20 facial muscles -- the procerus -- do its thing. Located right there on the bridge of each human's nose between the eyes, this small muscle helps people flare their nostrils or furrow their eyebrows to look angry. A great little muscle.

He took in every feature, every facet of Seibel's visage in a flash of a moment. He was 56, maybe 58. Weighed in at a solid 195. Blue-grey eyes, broken but distinctive nose, light scars on left cheek, below left ear and left side of his neck. Good-lookin' guy, but hard, tough, smart. Kind of guy you'd see on cigarette billboards. *A drill sergeant with a Harvard MBA.*

Seibel broke a slight grin and placed his hands flat on the table, again for effect. "But, here's the thing. I don't think we've uncovered even a quarter of who you really are Mr. Priest. Your ability to both create and maintain stories, identities and advantageous relationships is..." he searched for the correct word, "extraordinary. I think that best captures it. Your capacity to lie, to create intricate fabrications, is nothing short of remarkable. You are very, and I mean very, talented. So, after all this time and investment in man hours and surveillance technology and

psychoanalysis we have come to the conclusion that you make an excellent candidate.”

“For what?” Lance was damn sure it wasn’t Foreign Service Officer.

“Please let me finish,” Seibel lifted a finger this time. “You are an excellent candidate to help us do great things in the service of your country and the cause of freedom around the world.”

Lance just looked at him and waited for more. “Are you done? Can I interrupt now?”

“Excellent. You really are extremely adept. You picked up my cadence. You read my body language and decided it best to play stupid or dumb, of which you are neither.”

“You lost me.”

“I highly doubt that. Mr. Priest, you are indeed very impressive, especially for a 21-year old who should be more interested in sports and girls and partying than getting yourself into this situation. But for some reason, you have chosen in your life to play a series of roles and characters that require you to live a number of well-constructed and intricate lies. You are a student, a salesman, but most of all a chameleon. You are adept at change and flexibility and creativity. And that makes you something and someone we can use.”

“We?”

“Not just yet Preacher.” Seibel let the word, his in-depth knowledge of Lance’s life, including his ironic nickname, hang in the air. He leaned back a few inches and

gestured toward the gun. “I am guessing you know how to use that weapon.”

“I have shot it a few times.” Lance told the truth. He didn’t tell Seibel that he was a lousy shot, really bad. Broad side of the barn bad.

“Good. You will want to take it with you.”

“Where?”

“That is entirely up to you. Where you go and what you do can keep you alive.”

“Alive?” Lance whispered. His procerus muscle pulled his eyebrows together.

Seibel reached back down into the leather bag and pulled out a manila file folder. He moved the gun to the side and laid the folder on the table. He spun it with a flourish and opened it. On each side of the folder was a sheet of paper and a photo of a man paper-clipped to the side. They both looked tough, weathered and mean. They weren’t Americans.

“These two men are veterans of many challenging incidents, primarily in eastern Europe, although they know the United States well from several assignments. They are possibly the best hunters of men to come out of Europe over the last two decades. They have been extremely useful for both sides. Hired guns if you will, mercenaries. They are an excellent team.”

“And?” Lance waited for more. This thing had moved from interesting to a little scary.

“And, can you disappear Mr. Priest?”

“Disappear? From where, here?” Lance tilted his head.

“Where is not the question. The real question is when, and when for you is right now.” Seibel replied.

“What do you mean?”

Seibel paused for a moment, a dramatic pause. The smile faded from his chiseled face. “I will tell you this, all of this, only once. Listen carefully. These men are here, in this building in fact on another floor.” He stopped and looked at his watch. “In six minutes and 24 seconds they are to be handed a file like this one that contains your photo, name, address, driver’s license number, social security number and last known whereabouts. Which of course, is right here in this room.”

“And?” Lance was spinning, but didn’t miss a beat. His foot still tapping in rhythm.

Seibel couldn’t help but smile at this kid, this consummate liar. “They will be given the assignment to find and apprehend a wanted package -- you. They are very good, very capable. Our preferred method of capture is alive and unharmed, but they will be given sufficient leeway to complete their assignment since they are apprehending an armed individual.” The words hung in the air like a flashing neon sign.

“Leeway?” Lance, still cool, smiled back at Seibel. This was now definitely scary.

“They will be authorized to use any and all means, including deadly force.”

The Perfect Candidate

“Jesus.” Lance sat back in the chair and ran his hands through his hair.

“He won’t be able to help you, unless he knows a good hiding place or is armed to the teeth. And after reading through your life story, I don’t think you’d call upon him anyway.”

“Why? Why me?”

Seibel continued in his formal manner. “Mr. Priest, you are apparently a gift sent to us by someone or something that wants you to contribute to the betterment of mankind, at least American mankind. I can tell from my short time with you and my hours and hours of examination of video, audio and dead trees that Lance Priest is a patriot. You have a deep respect for your country. You came close to joining the military out of high school but couldn’t handle the structure. You are truly a very promising candidate. Maybe one of a kind. But you will be of no use to your country or anyone for that matter unless you can survive the next 72 hours.”

Maybe he should already be running for his life. Elton’s song was only halfway through. It was making it a bit hard to concentrate on what Seibel was saying.

Chapter 2

He should be scared. Scared to death. Maybe convulsing, bending over to hurl his lunch. He should be sweating bullets -- another bad pun, but still.

But he wasn't. He wasn't scared or nauseous or sweating. If anything, Lance was excited, like those eager moments before the starting gun fired prior to the 800-meter race at the Oklahoma high school state track meet. Right now, in this moment, Lance was more alert than he'd been in years, maybe ever.

Lance could feel every joint in his body, every surface or fabric touching his skin. Even with the song playing in his head, he was able to concentrate on his senses. He was about to go out of body, could feel it coming on.

He couldn't see them, but Lance could sense the layers of reality comprising the situation he now found himself in. Like sitting across the desk from the school principal in 9th grade telling a lie-filled epic tale with dozens of moving parts, he knew there were multiple agendas in play here. Seibel was much more than a well-dressed bureaucrat. Each word spoken by the man carried numerous meanings.

“Seventy-two hours. Three days?” Lance shook his head as he said this. He also pushed his chair back a few inches, readying himself.

“Three days,” Seibel pulled a business card from his suit jacket and set it on the table next to Lance’s gun and looked at his watch again. “Here is a number that you are to call at precisely 2:17 p.m. three days from now. The number will be active for only 10 minutes and only I can answer it.” With that, Seibel sat back in his chair. “I hope to hear from you then.”

“That’s it? I just leave now?”

“You have 5 minutes and 20 seconds head start. I would use it.” Seibel was relaxed.

Lance corrected him without looking at his own watch or the clock on the wall. His internal clock was keeping time like it does when he runs. “It’s 5 minutes 11 seconds. Again, why are you doing this?”

“Now is not the time to ask why. Now is the time to fly. Good luck Preacher.” Seibel was done with his performance. He had just told a 21-year old kid that two killers were about to hunt him down, but at least he did it with a smile.

Lance’s next few moves were sudden and surprisingly confident despite the desperate situation. Seibel watched every infinitesimal detail of Lance’s actions. Assessing everything.

First, Lance stood, scooting the chair back as he did so. He grabbed the gun with his right hand. Even though he hadn’t held it in a year or fired it in two years, he

pressed the clip release and popped the magazine out the bottom of the handle. It was fully loaded and had been oiled. He shoved the clip back in and swiped the card from the table with his left hand, shoving it into his right breast jacket pocket. Seibel remained completely passive.

And then Lance reached for the file folder. This changed things.

Seibel smacked his left hand flat on the manila folder. It was a loud slap. Definitive in its intent and effect.

“I’m afraid I’ll need to keep this.” Seibel smiled up at him.

Simultaneous to stretching out to the folder with his left hand, Seibel did a deceptively fast thing with his right. The motion was swift and smooth and utterly natural as he reached his right hand to lift his suit jacket and grab the handle of a gun resting in a holster midway between his armpit and waist. He didn’t pull the gun, but was ready to. His eyes never left Lance’s.

Preacher watched Seibel’s right hand movement with his peripheral vision but kept his eyes locked on Seibel’s. The gun in his own right hand was currently down at his side. This was suddenly an old west showdown. No doubts now, this was really happening. Lance was closer to death than he’d ever been, but felt more alive than ever. *Damn.*

With his eyes locked on Seibel, Preacher’s mind slowed the world around him to stop-motion. He went out of body, above the fray for a clearer picture. In his mind’s eye, he looked down on the scene from a vantage point near the ceiling. His ability to see the world below like

examining a map had simply always been a part of him. He couldn't actually see anything more than he could from behind his hazel eyes, but the visual acuity process taking place in his unique mind gave him another, more detailed view of the world around him. Preacher sees things others don't.

From above, he saw himself leaning over the table with a hand on the file folder. He saw Seibel sitting with his left hand on the same folder, his right hand hidden under his jacket gripping the handle of a gun.

Preacher looked for details, for the clue he needed. He saw it. The folder. A flash bulb went off and lit up the room with a burst that showed Lance his next move, his next series of moves. His plan was formulated and ready for execution. Two whole seconds had passed.

Back inside his head, Preacher executed the next three motions naturally with lightning speed and no forethought. He lifted his left hand from the folder while slightly lowering his shoulders -- a microsecond of resignation. Seibel's reaction was to relax his own left shoulder just a fraction.

Still locked on Seibel's eyes, Preacher saw the shoulder ease in his peripherals. This was his cue. He suddenly grabbed Seibel's forearm and violently slid it to his left, to Seibel's right. The secret to this move was the folder. Seibel was strong and tried to resist the movement, but the manila folder's paper cardstock made it slick as all hell sitting there on the printed vinyl wood grain of the tabletop.

The effect of Seibel's left arm being jammed to the right was a twisting, a wrenching of his body, made even more so because he was seated. It pinned Seibel down for the tiniest moment. A moment was all Preacher needed.

Now, if Preacher had only grabbed the arm and shoved it sideways, he might have just pissed Seibel off. But simultaneous to the arm slide, he swung the gun from beside his right hip up to where the Beretta's barrel met Seibel's graying temple. The entire sequence of motions, from the slight fade upon releasing the file to gun barrel pressing against flesh, took less than a second and a half. Funny how life can change in a second or two. It makes 10 minutes seem a lifetime.

Seibel kept his eyes locked on Preacher. When his arm had been suddenly gripped and shoved across his body, he squeezed the handle of his Glock 17 but didn't get it out of the holster before the younger, faster and stronger man had a cold barrel pressed against his temple. *Damn.*

The older man's reaction was another surprise. He smiled. He friggin smiled.

The smile broadened and became quiet laughter. "Excellent," he whispered, giggled really, between laughs.

Lance wasn't sure of his next move. He had no idea his manila folder forearm-slide plan would work so well. Standing with a gun pointed at a man's head, he needed to think. Elton was thankfully into the song's final chorus and musical crescendo. His foot still tapped the beat.

Lance couldn't help his next action. He leaned in close to Seibel's ear. But before he spoke, he did a strange thing.

He winked at the clock on the wall, particularly the small round hole where the 12 should be. From the angle, Seibel couldn't see the wink.

"I should pull the trigger," Lance lied. He had no intention of making a mess like that. "I don't know who you are, but you are one messed up dude for doing this. Let me get this straight, you watch me for two months, invest hundreds of man hours, record my movements, follow me down here to Dallas and then decide to sick two killers on me to bring me back in a body bag. Seems like a waste." He smiled at the clock, "I think I might be doing folks a favor by putting one in your brain."

Seibel was not shaking, not nervous. "You need to be challenged right? Well this little test will challenge you. Especially your survival skills."

Lance leaned back to look Seibel in the eye. "You can stop this. Pick up a phone and make a call. Stop it." Lance raised his voice well beyond a whisper.

"No stopping. Operation is live," Seibel removed the smile from his face for this last part. "You need to think through your next actions. You need to be gone, now. These men are not known for their mercy."

Lance's next action was decided for him by something and someplace deep inside. He didn't know its source. But this unpredictability, this embrace of chaos, this need for instability, was a vital and driving force in his life. Always had been. Lance thrived in unsettled situations.

He moved the gun five inches from Seibel's temple and squeezed the trigger. The clock took a direct hit. A

pretty good shot for him. The explosion in the small room was deafening. Seibel's eardrum took the brunt of it. He cringed but took no aggressive action.

Preacher also got the proof he needed. The gun was indeed loaded with real bullets.

Lance stood up while keeping the gun leveled at Seibel's head. He gestured to the clock with a nod. "No witnesses now. I should do it."

"Go ahead. No one's stopping you." Seibel was serious. "You can surely make up a beautiful lie about shooting in self-defense. I have no doubt."

Lance smiled down at Geoffrey Seibel, super spy. Top secret and classified CIA legend in his own time. Master of his own universe. "Bang. You're dead Geoffrey. Enjoy your time in hell. I'm sure I'll be joining you soon." Lance smiled for another reason as well. The song was finally over.

Seibel could only shake his head. He was the sole witness to the birth of something special, something truly unique. Something he would have to harness and train and release into the world. But something he knew he could never control, never break.

Lance grabbed the folder from under Seibel's hand and stepped back from the table. He shook his head and jammed the gun into his pocket. The expected footsteps ran down the hall. Who ever it was, took a position just outside the conference room. Lance stepped sideways and raised his hands. The door smashed open and the man playing the role of Grisham expertly entered the room by

rolling to his right. He rose with both hands holding a gun pointed directly between Lance's eyes. He didn't look much like a State Department trainer.

"Stand down," Seibel held out the palm of his left hand. Grisham looked from Lance to Seibel and back.

"Where is the gun?" he demanded. A strange accent accompanied the question. Sounded a little like German.

Seibel spoke in a voice irrationally calm for the situation. "There's no time for that now. He needs to be out of here in four minutes. His clock has started. He is active as of now." Grisham lowered his gun a few inches. Lance somewhat brazenly walked directly at him, stopping just an inch from the gun.

"What the hell did I get myself into?" He asked. Grisham only looked over Lance's shoulder at Seibel. Lance leaned his head to the left to block Grisham's view and continued, "I came down here for the Foreign Service Officer oral assessment and now I've got four minutes head start on a couple of European killers."

Recognition flashed in Grisham's eyes and he lowered his gun. "Krachovs?" he asked Seibel.

"Yes." Seibel nodded. "No time for chit chat."

Grisham stepped out of the way and holstered his gun. Lance noted that he had missed the bulge of the gun during the day. How did he fail to spot that on both of these guys? What else had he missed? No time now to be ticked off by this oversight, but he told himself it wouldn't happen again.

Grisham motioned to the door. “Then you’d better run kid and don’t stop. Get out of this building and out of town. Stay low, keep running. They never stop tracking once they have a scent and they don’t have the word quit in their vocabulary.”

“Great, friggin great. Thanks a bunch, assholes,” he pushed Grisham aside with enough force to nearly knock him to the floor. He turned back to Seibel from the doorway to give him a middle-finger salute. He was a 21-year-old kid after all. “Just be by the phone Geoffrey.”

“Three minutes 20 seconds,” Seibel tapped his watch.

Lance took off like a bat out of hell down the hall. People stood in doorways and at the front reception desk. Everyone on the floor had undoubtedly heard the gunshot. He saw someone else with a gun and was even more pissed at himself for missing all the hardware. He hated missing details.

When he burst out the door into the waiting area, Sarah, or whatever her real name happened to be, was seated in the same chair she sat in this morning as they chatted. Except now she was white-knuckle gripping both arms of the chair. This was out of her league and pay grade. “*Oral assessments!*” he huffed as he ran out the door and down the hall to the elevator. The surprised and shaken look on her face told it all. She only thought she was in the know on this exercise. It looked like the rules for the day’s session had changed. Still, she bit her lip.

Lance kept the count going in his head as he reached the elevator lobby. Seven years of running track and

cross-country in middle and high school had given him a fairly static cranial timepiece that counted off the seconds quite accurately. He could do it in the background while his mind wrapped around other issues, like how to stay alive. He counted 22 seconds since running out of the conference room. That meant just under three minutes until Boris and Boris get their assignment. He turned from the elevator and threw open the door to the stairs. Five flights should take about 30 seconds. They actually took 28. Two and a half minutes to go as he burst into the mostly empty ground floor lobby.

He didn't have time to pause and think and examine all the angles. If this was a normal situation, he would stop someone, maybe the security guard, ask for the time and comment on his watch or shoes and started a conversation that led to a stranger telling Lance everything he needed to know about him. He would catalog the story, the details, and use them somewhere with someone else, as someone else. It wasn't stealing. It was borrowing. Telling lies was all about the details.

But he needed to move. No time for spinning a web of lies. He'd gotten himself into something that he couldn't bullshit his way out of. Words wouldn't do it this time.

He should have been scared, petrified even. He felt anything but. Instead, from the moment he'd grabbed Seibel's arm and put the gun to his head, he'd never felt more excited, more alive. This was indeed real. This was a challenge, something he'd been waiting 21 years for. No time for grand statements and eloquent thoughts. *Damn. This is fun.*