

Read the first chapter of *The Midas Bomb* and get started in the conspiracy

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Chapter One

Sunday morning, 2:05 am...

Near the pier at the end of West 23rd Street a stooped figure sat at the edge of the water and stared down at the eddies in the Hudson River. His arthritic hand softly caressed the matted hair of his dog as he thought of better times. The slapping of the waves against dirty pylons played soft percussion to the muted sounds of traffic in the distance. The water was slick with moonlight.

The old veteran Walter Jones yearned for a drink.

Off the end of the pier a hand came out of the water, half in shadow, as if an ancient, drowned mariner had come home to port. Dark blood was on the hand and the face that followed it in spite of the solvent properties of the toxic water. Oxygen starved lungs took in pungent, cold air.

Colin Murphy fought for his life.

He now knew what his ER patients felt like. He could imagine the nurse announcing: “Three gunshot wounds, two of which are still bleeding. BP 90 over 60. Shock setting in.”

The self-diagnosis was his way of admitting that he didn’t know whether he was going to make it. He wanted to. Dylan Thomas’ haunting lines were like timpani rolls in his head as he gulped for air. Yet he raged not only at the dying of the light. He cursed the SOB that shot him, hoping that he would live long enough to find him.

Yeats, Thomas, Swift, Joyce, Shaw—a host of poets and dramatists had plumbed the depths of the human condition, from despair to bawdy humor.

They all had one thing in common, thought Murphy in Gaelic. They’re dead Irishmen. As I will soon be.

Although he was a strong swimmer, the slow but continued loss of blood sapped his strength. Arms and legs felt like lead weights that tried to drag him down into the cold, murky water. Hyperthermia might win out over the blood loss or drowning. He called on every reserve of strength that he had.

Before he hit the water, before the bullets tore into him, he had been in top physical shape. Jogging, laps in the pool, time in the weight room—they all paid off. Where others might have sunk below the gentle waves of the Hudson, he managed to keep afloat.

He went from pylon to pylon, trying to find a way up. Finally, a crude ladder. Someone had hammered horizontal two-by-fours into one of the pylons. He painfully pulled himself up and fell onto the dock, spent and ready to meet his Maker.

An odd thought to have, he told himself. How do you know it won't be fire and brimstone for you, lad? Mum always used to say in jest that you were going straight to hell, and the parish priest backed her up in every mass you ever attended.

He sprawled on the dock for several minutes. Then redolent breath and a wet, cold nose brought him out of his stupor. The dog whined. He heard the clumping of heavy heels on old boards and opened his eyes enough to see old cowboy boots with the leather worn and the stitching barely holding them together. He couldn't turn his head higher to see the man's face.

“Crackles, let the fellow sleep. He found his drink for tonight. We need to find ours. Come to think of it, maybe he's got some on him.”

Walter rolled the doctor over and started to frisk him, looking for a bottle. Colin didn't have the strength to resist; he was too weak.

“Son of a bitch! Crackles, this bro's been shot. We gotta find someone to help him.”

The dog barked its approval and then licked the doctor's face.

“Yeah, I hear ya, but problem is, this ain't Iraq. I can't just call the medics in for one of my wounded boys. This here is the Big Rotten Apple. Nobody's gonna believe this street bum.”

The dog whined again and tugged at the drunk's sleeve.

“OK, I know, civic duty and all that. Still, it might just be a waste of time and get me on the wrong side of the law. This guy's on Death's doorstep. He also might be Mafia or someone just as bad. Maybe we should just skedaddle.” The dog barked again

in protest. “All right, you convinced me, you mangy mutt. We may regret it, but let’s see who we can find. Better yet, you stay with him, while I try to round up some help. Keep him alive, boy, you hear me now?”

The boots clumped away until all Murphy heard was the low whining of the dog as it nestled beside him. The waves against the pylons below continued their soft percussive background to a troubled night. Once the dog got up and put his nose to the breeze. A low growl followed. But then he grew tranquil and curled up beside Murphy again.

The doctor slowly gave into the darkness that invaded his mind.

Dylan Thomas never had three bullets in him, he thought. No matter how hot my rage, I’m not melting those babies. Maura, where are you?

* * *

Across the city, Michael Alan Hopper, Navy Seal, spoke quickly into his cell phone.

“Ash, I may have picked up a tail. Worst comes to worst, I left a memory stick for you in the glove compartment of the rental car. Car’s in a parking garage near Tribeca Square. You know the one.”

The woman at the other end mumbled something and Hopper hung up.

He was finishing this current tour of duty on loan to the Department of Homeland Security. A strange assignment, but it made his wife happy. It meant that he had time for her and the kids. It also meant that he was usually home in their bed every night.

But New York City never seemed like home to him. He always felt uncomfortable here compared to other big cities in the world. Even the best, like Paris, Boston, or San Francisco, made him feel claustrophobic. The impersonal and oppressive skyscraper canyons of Manhattan were the worst of all. His wife Jin-Kyong understood that, even though she was a city girl.

He grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, about as far from the ocean as you can get without being in the middle of Mongolia. Even before he started to help his father and brothers with farming chores, he knew that he yearned for something else. That yearning led him to enlist. The Navy soon discovered that he had very special talents and a quick mind. He also had his good share of luck, barely escaping death in both Afghanistan and Iraq, again far from the ocean and in the middle of the action. The service even indirectly provided him with a wife that understood him.

Their little house in Clifton, New Jersey was not exactly country living, yet it wasn't city either. He had his summer vegetable garden when he was home long enough to take care of it and around the borders and window boxes of their little house his wife happily tended to her camellias, roses, and other annuals and perennials. She would have liked to live in the city, yet she was also happy that he and the kids were happy. And she could see the skyline of Manhattan from their little patio on a clear night.

Marriage is all about compromise, he thought. Jin-Kyong has more than met me half way in my choice of career and place to live. I compromise by going to church with her and the children and taking them to Seoul every other year so she can see her family.

He was thinking of his family as he entered an alley to cut over to the next street. He seemed to have lost the tail. He had never seen the person, but he had a sixth sense about such things, a sense that was magnified walking through a cold city at 2 am.

Time to be home, Michael. Home to your family.

He stopped and looked both ways, back to the street he had come from and out to the other end of the alley. Shadows swallowed the moonlight on its way down from the tops of the skyscrapers. The smothering darkness made him nervous. He took out his cell and made another call.

“I think I lost the tail. I’m going to double back and pick up the car.”

When Michael looked back up the alley again, a small, shadowy figure entered from the street. He knew instinctively that this was the person that had followed him. The newcomer had a dirty wide brimmed Aussie-type hat and a soiled gray raincoat that reached all the way to the ground.

A disguise? Or just a street person that picks up discarded clothing? But then he wouldn't be a tail, would he?

The tail stepped boldly towards him, yet lightly, as if he were floating across the pavement stones. The raincoat fluttered a little in the breeze and gave the approach a phantom quality that raised the hair on the back of his neck.

Easy, Michael. You've faced worse than this scarecrow figure. Keep your head about you, man.

“Can I help you?” he asked as the figure approached.

The figure had stopped some six feet away from him. He initially didn't look all that threatening and said nothing. The hat hid his face in shadows. The two stood still for a moment. Then the figure spread his arms out to his sides, accentuating the appearance of a scarecrow.

Hopper became angry. Expecting the worst, he started screaming expletives at his tormenter that were buried in a lecture about muggers and what he would do to them. He hoped that his nemesis was a thief that had nothing to do with the photos on the memory stick.

Hopper suddenly lunged at the man. The latter ducked aside, hitched up the raincoat, did a complete turn, and kicked Hopper in the face. The crunch of jaw bone made the night turn to day and added to his anger. His throat stab missed its mark. A well aimed kick to the solar plexus was deflected. He was too slow!

The years have taken their toll. I should have retired.

The stranger retaliated with a quick kick to the groin that Hopper didn't even see coming. When he fell, writhing in pain and cursing his stupidity for being out-manuevered, the mugger calmly walked over to the side of the alley where bricks were stacked by a dumpster. One brick was carefully chosen.

The last thing the Navy man remembered was its trajectory as the scarecrow swung it towards his head.

Jin-Kyong!

The bleakness of the New York City canyons closed upon him forever.

* * *

In a different time zone the moonlight made a fickle companion to the dirty silver paint of a Mercedes CE. The small group gathered around the car reminded ICE agent Alicia Castro of a witches' coven. A corpulent Nazi type played the role of the alpha male while the other Las Vegas sheriff's deputies remained quiet.

"They told us to call you," he announced.

No explanation of who the "they" were. Do I care?

"I haven't got all night. Let me see him."

Another deputy popped the trunk of the Mercedes.

The stench was terrible. Vomit, feces, and urine. Javier Delgado, wanted for murder and many counts of smuggling illegal immigrants, looked uncomfortable in the trunk. The foul cadaveric release was the result of a slow and painful death by garroting using a piece of wire that was still beside him.

Since the forensic team was still on its way, she put on gloves and searched the man. She only found a small slip of paper in an inside coat pocket—that was all. On it was a telephone number.

The next morning in the office she called the number.

“You have called the Phoenix Foundation. The person you wish to speak to is unavailable at this moment. Please leave a message at the sound of the tone. Thank you.”

She hung up before the tone sounded. She had heard of the Foundation.