

Read the first chapter of *Full Medical* and get started in the conspiracy....

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Prelude

In the Virginia countryside, Saturday, May, 2053...

The escape from the Center was only a partial success. The three had been carefully planning it for a long time but bad luck happens. At least, two of them believed it was just bad luck right up to the point when they died. The third knew better; she still died.

It all began just past 3 am. The three ran quietly out from under the trees to the tall wire fence topped with barb wire and high voltage lines. The young man known to his comrades as FS2 was familiar with high voltage. He had made a point of studying lots of things, as they all had, although he liked the technical stuff better. He knew exactly how to throw the coiled wire that he carried so that it would short out that whole section of fence, and it worked just as he had planned. Bright sparks filled the night sky, just like he predicted. The Guardians within the Center would be alerted, perhaps thinking there was an intruder from outside, though that didn't matter. They would be

over the fence and speedily on their way before the Guardians either came to investigate or got the electricity in that section of the fence back on.

All three were young and athletic, so they climbed up the fence with the agility of caged monkeys. They weren't unlike those friends from the zoo either – they had felt caged for months. And threatened. At the top the young man known as HJ1 took the wire cutters out of his pocket and snipped through the barb wire and the high voltage lines. The woman, SW1, headed down first, then FS2, and finally HJ1. At the bottom they all clasped hands.

“Have a good life,” SW1 told the other two.

The two men smiled and kissed her on the cheek.

“It'll be a life on the run,” said HJ1, “but I don't care. At least we're outside the Center.”

The other two nodded in agreement. They all thought it was better than the alternative.

“Yeah,” said FS2, “and now it's time to move out, kids.”

They split up and headed off into the Virginia countryside, running at first, and then slowing down to a fast-paced walk. They had bottles of water and snacks in their backpacks, enough for a good 48 hours. However, they weren't going to get far unless they found transportation. But they knew where to find it.

The police had reports of stolen cars from three different locations that early Saturday morning. It was the plan the three escapees had all agreed upon. None of them had ever driven any kind of vehicle before. However, they knew the theory and didn't

find it difficult. A few banged fenders and bumpers were irrelevant in the long run, anyway. They also all knew they would have to steal other cars as they moved away from the Center; otherwise the Guardians might find them.

FS2 headed north, keeping off the thruways with their autopilot signals. He was wiry and the shortest of the three. His unruly mop of red hair would make him stand out in a crowd but he had no money to buy hair dye. Instead, he put on an old baseball cap he found in the back seat of his stolen car. He drove methodically, concentrating on the road, learning the controls as he went along.

He was known for his bad temper, though he usually managed to keep it under control. That control came in handy as he passed through the back roads of New Jersey. The other drivers on the road seemed aggressive and dangerous to him, some waving their fists at him, others making obscene signals. He got good at doing the same back at them. It was a rush. He was free.

HJ1 headed south, into southern Maryland. He had the build of a football running back and the craggy good looks to match. Although all of them would be off the scale in any standard intelligence test, he wasn't nearly as smart as the other two. What he added to the team was patience and steely determination during their planning sessions.

His vehicle was a stolen behemoth, its past owner either having lots of money or poor environmental sensibilities. HJ1 didn't much care – he was comfortable in the car. The roads were practically deserted. He stopped once to take a pee, drink some water, and down a package of oreos. He then continued on into the Chesapeake dawn.

SW1 was the leader of the three. She was a striking beauty, even in this day and age when physical imperfections could be treated by either the geneticist's magic before birth or the surgeon's tools after. At 1.8 meters, she was a statuesque brunette with the pouting looks of a cinema sex queen. She was quicker and more creative than the others, so she got the farthest after they split up.

The car she stole was from a nearby shopping center. She had walked around the parking lot for over an hour until she saw an early morning shopper, a nurse, who looked something like her. SW1 swung the woman around just after she had placed two bags of groceries on the front seat. She decked the surprised woman with a left hook that would have made any boxer proud, leaving her victim sprawled on the pavement. She then drove sedately to Dulles Airport where she used the woman's national ID card to buy a ticket and get on a plane. No one checked to see if the fingerprint, retinal pattern, and DNA information recorded on the ID matched those of SW1, a slipup due to the early morning hour. Besides, she was leaving the US, not entering it. The airport security was focused more on detecting terrorists entering the country. Their computers simply registered that a certain woman whose profession was nursing was bound for Manila.

The three young escapees from the Center were all young, strong, and very intelligent. Their only problem was not possessing enough practical information about the everyday workings of the complicated world existing outside the Center.

No, it was not their bad luck. The men and women who had organized the Center anticipated many events and tried to assure the most favorable outcome for themselves.

Their wards had been kept in the dark on purpose. They knew that any escapee would make mistakes, making him easy to find. It was only a matter of time.

Chapter One

Lexington Park, Maryland, Sunday...

Old Bob stared into the lifeless eyes of the corpse. The hour was just past 8 pm but the evening was still warm, so he wiped some of his sticky sweat off with a sleeve that was even dirtier than his brow, wondering if he were dreaming at the bottom of the bottle again. It was a late spring night in the little southern Maryland town of Lexington Park.

In the US of May, 2053, the number of homeless had reached a hundred-year high. It was partly due to a bad economy but mostly it was due to the fact that there were just not enough good jobs in the world for all the people in it. Bob Martin was just one of many who had no job, no benefits, and no home. Most of the time he preferred it that way, or just didn't care. Alcohol was his drug of choice to wipe out his ability to care about anything. But that night he couldn't remember drinking anything all day, so he cared. It made him depressed and hungry.

He had just lifted the lid to the trash bin behind Cindy's Olde Towne Family Restaurant. It was usually good for some edible scraps, especially after the dinner hour

when the customers graduated to dessert, coffee, or after-dinner drinks and the dishwashers, Josh and Ray, started throwing out the garbage.

He backed away quickly from the eyes, suddenly wishing for a drink instead of food. He hadn't seen a dead man for a long time now but he knew those eyes did not belong to the living.

He had looked into his first dead eyes as he had searched a dead raghead for ID near a little town on the Iraqi-Syrian border. He would see many more as a soldier in five years of war in the Middle East, both on his side and theirs. His was the third major war there of the new millennium. The most recent one started in 2038 and his years in it had not been good for his mental health, although his physical health hadn't started deteriorating until he began to hit the bottle. Until then he was just another muscular marine who brought a fistful of medals home to a family that didn't care. *Especially Julie. Fuckin' bitch was already sleeping with Jimmy before I landed in Norfolk.*

The drinking had only started with the divorce and loss of custody of his children. Now he had no idea where Julie or the kids were, although he wished he had Julie there to ask her what to do. *The old Julie, not the slut that was screwin' around while I fought ragheads over there. The old Julie, she was the smart one.*

He found a partially filled pint bottle of cheap bourbon in one of the deep pockets of the soiled tan raincoat he always wore. A quick nip gave him courage to approach the trash bin again. He tugged at the rings in his ear and scratched his mohawk, pleased with himself. Another sip emboldened him enough so that he could lift the lid again. *The*

problem with this corpse is that he's naked. Big naked mother fucker. Maybe a yachtsman?

Lexington Park had a few pleasure boats visiting from time to time although their owners usually ate in the new yacht club over on the Patuxent River. Cindy's mostly catered to the locals, fly boys from the Naval Air Station, and the less mobile vacationers, like those who rented summer cottages.

It was a nice town, away from DC and Baltimore with their teeming millions, their crime, and their cloying, swampy humidity. Here there was not much traffic, not much crime, and not many politicians and lawyers. A little more freedom, too. He hadn't renewed his national ID card in years.

There were plenty of military around, as the whole southern tip of Maryland was filled with them. The crew, for example, who flew that new fangled Navy radar plane that looked like a flying saucer copulating with an airplane. *Well, not so new anymore. But it had been pretty new when I was in the service.* There were other Navy personnel who flew the new spy plane that could spot a farmer taking a pee from 18 klicks high and sift out of the ether the lowest level spread spectrum communications signals that the new Iranian stealth fighters emitted. They were in and out all the time, testing the new planes and shaking out the old ones after maintenance. There were a lot of goings on over at Dahlgren and St. Inigoes, too, and not just Navy.

He supposed they were all good people though, in general, and for understandable reasons, he didn't want much to do with the military anymore. He supposed that somewhere, in some computer in the Pentagon, there was a database with his DNA,

fingerprints and retinal pattern, taken when he entered the military, rather than be drafted. *Maybe I can apply for veterans' benefits when I'm older and see if I can get into a VA nursing home some time before I die. Then I'd probably need my national ID card from the Department of Homeland Security, my taxpayer's ID card from the IRS, and my military ID card from the Department of Defense, so I can get my Medicare ID card from the Department of Health and Human Services.*

Bob walked out through the alley, deep in thought, still trying to figure out what to do about the corpse, when he crashed into John Milton, county sheriff, who was coming out the front door of Cindy's. The sheriff was heavysset, so he didn't suffer much from the collision, although it made him angry.

"Bob, if you'd lay off that shit, you wouldn't be running into normal folk," John observed. He tried to wipe away the spot of cheap bourbon on his uniform.

"Sorry, John. How you doing? Where's Dolores?"

"At her mother's, if it's any of your business."

"Guess it isn't but you got no cause to get riled. I'm just trying to be pleasant to someone I crashed into and spilled good drink on. Just a carefree bachelor tonight, then?"

"That's the way it is. Now let me go home and nurse the heartburn produced by Cindy's Mexican meatloaf." Sheriff Milton strode off down the crumbling sidewalk.

Bob stared after him, remembered what he had just seen, and abruptly made the decision to pursue the sheriff. He usually tried to avoid the law. However, the sheriff had

often been kind enough to let him sleep it off in a warm cell on cold winter nights. He felt comfortable with the man, as comfortable as he could be with anybody, he guessed.

He caught up with the sheriff as he was opening the door to his patrol car. He froze a moment at the sight of the sawed-off but then recovered his nerve.

“See here, I got a problem, John.”

Sheriff John Milton was as straight-laced as they come. He still had his marine haircut, which hid the fact that his crown was starting to go bald. He was sandy-haired and blue-eyed. His family was local and a member of it had fought in every war the nation had participated in, beginning with the French and Indian wars from before the country's independence. Considering that history, it was strange that no one from his family had ever died in a war. Many had come close. He seemed to remember the story of a great-great-granduncle that had been killed during shore leave during World War II, though. Now this Milton felt the country was fighting in another war, a war involving rampant crime in the cities, from the hoodlums and gangs, and terrorist attacks everywhere, from chemical plants to shopping malls.

Milton had once been a cop in Philly. He awoke one morning in a hospital with worse wounds than he had ever received during the last Middle Eastern war, Bob's war. Three weeks later he accepted the job in St. Mary's County and moved to Lexington Park, as a temporary replacement for the sheriff who had died of a heart attack. When he won the election the following November, he made the town his permanent home.

“Bob, you’ve got lots of problems. Most everyone understands where they come from and leaves your sorry ass alone but, I swear, I’ll haul you in for vagrancy if you push me. I’m off duty, man.”

“I know, I know.” He scratched his crotch and wondered casually when he had peed last. “But I don’t have a cell phone. How could I inform Sam or George?”

Sam and George were the sheriff’s two deputies. The three of them were usually enough to keep the peace in the small county, although some of the towns, including Lexington Park and St. Mary’s City, also had a small police force.

“OK, so what’s to inform, Bob? And it had better be good.”

“There’s a body in the trash bin.”

Even though Bob had said it with a straight face, the sheriff smiled at the report.

“You don’t say? You seem sober enough but I bet you’re imagining things.”

Bob managed, however, to convince the sheriff to take a look. He led the stocky law officer to the back of Cindy’s and pointed to the bin. Milton opened the lid and looked into the dead eyes of the corpse.

“I’ll be damned,” said Milton. “I apologize, Bob. This is worse than one of your drunken visions.”

“You see, you see? Dead and naked. Male hooker, you think?”

“More likely pimp,” suggested Milton. “He’s pretty fat. Or just big, anyway.” He turned the body around to where he could see that the back half of the head was gone. “Explosive hollow point. Lots of firepower to waste on a pimp. I saw stuff like this in the military, Bob.”

“You and me both. Maybe he’s military.”

“No, I know who he is. I just saw him on the newsnet. I was watching it at Cindy’s. He’s that Johnson bastard. No, actually, our victim here looks younger than the guy on the newsnet. He’s also trimmer, if you can believe that, and has more hair. Maybe he’s Johnson’s younger brother. Help me get him out, Bob.”

“Shouldn’t we put on rubber gloves or something?”

Milton reached into his coat pocket and handed the drunk a pair of latex gloves. He put another pair on himself. They soon had the body laid out in front of the trash bin. Milton took off his gloves, took out his wallet, and handed a twenty to Bob.

“For services rendered, Bob. Go have a snort at the cost of the government. I’ve got to call in Claude Turner. You don’t want to be here.”

Claude, the county coroner, was Bob’s brother-in-law. They hadn’t spoken since the divorce. The drunk thanked the sheriff and hobbled off.

Claude was not very happy to be called away from his beer and TV. It was also a twenty minute drive up from St. Mary’s City. When he arrived he was astounded to see the cadaver.

“Hank Johnson sure doesn’t look so menacing tonight,” he observed.

“If he’s Hank Johnson,” said Milton. “I just saw him on the newsnet, by the way. Kind of creepy, seeing him naked here now.”

“Naked and dead.” Claude turned the head around. “Not death from natural causes, I’d say, whoever he is. I’ll need to phone Patty to bring the standard equipment. Lend me your phone.”

“Yeah, just tell her to not give anything out to Bouncer, OK?” Bouncer Mann ran the local newsnet post as well as being a freelance writer for some of the major nets. Milton actually liked the kid although he thought he was way too nosy.

“He’s probably screwin’ that new gal of his anyway,” commented Claude. “He knows there’s no news on a Sunday night in Lexington Park. Or St. Mary’s County for that matter.”

When Patty Smith arrived, she was driving the county coroner’s van. She drove right into the alley next to Cindy’s and met them in the parking lot in the back where the dumpster was located. She didn’t look too happy about being called out on a Sunday evening either. She was a good-looking, athletic redhead who had been a soccer star at the University of Maryland. She had gone pro but her career ended with a knee injury that left her with a permanent limp. She was excellent at the forensics stuff, though, so much so that Milton thought she was wasting her talent staying in rural Maryland.

“Hell of a way to spend Sunday evening, John,” she said, climbing into the dumpster. “And this guy’s nothing to look at anyway. Looks like some damn football player. All brawn and no brains.”

“Especially now,” said Claude. “Wouldn’t want you to ogle him anyway, honey. Professional detachment and all that. Besides, he might be big time.”

John caught Claude looking at Patty’s thin waist and naval where a huge syntho ruby was encrusted. Patty was in good shape. He gave Claude a wink.

“I’d have to be pretty horny to get turned on by a corpse. And quit looking at me like I was the only coed at a frat party. I was vacuuming when you called and I didn’t bother to change. You should be ashamed. You’re both married.”

“Ma cherie, c’est vrai, but we’re also not dead,” said Claude. “I certainly would like to watch you clean house some time.”

“Fat chance. Anyway, my first guess is that this Mr. Universe was killed somewhere else and then dumped here. We may not find much, unless there’s something that indicates where he was really killed.”

“Well, he might have come in on one of the yachts today,” suggested Claude.

“Already checked that,” said Milton. “Three boats in today are all local summertime people. No big Washington honchos. No new people over on the Potomoc side either. And none of the locals are connected with the present administration.”

“DC? Why DC?” asked Patty.

Milton explained the corpse’s uncanny resemblance to Henry ‘Hank’ Johnson, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. Patty nodded her understanding. Johnson had been in the news a lot lately. Both he and his boss were carryovers from the previous Republican administration.

“Well, if he’s any kind of Republican, he’s not from around here. This town has been Democratic for as long as I can remember.”

As Patty had prophesized, there was nothing on the body or in or around the trash bin that was useful. They took the body to the morgue in St. Mary’s City.

Milton sat and watched as Patty helped Claude with the autopsy. Her training was in criminal forensics. Still, she had picked up a lot from Claude and didn't seem to be squeamish about the procedures. After Patty washed down the body, they started with the usual fingerprints and retina scans.

"Bullet entered the top of the head and exited his lower jaw," droned Claude for the benefit of the recorder. Later he would download the file to his computer which would use its voice recognition software to turn what he said into an official coroner's report, correcting his grammar as it did so. "Probably 38 or 45 Jersey expander. There are some titanium fragments along the path. Death was instant."

"Cause of death?" asked Milton.

"That's pretty obvious," said Claude, momentarily turning off the recorder. "You think there's something else? You stick to your business, John, and I'll do mine."

"No sense in getting hot under the collar," Patty told Claude. "John just wants you to be thorough. Shouldn't we at least do a tox workup?"

"Shit, Patty, it's Sunday evening. This case is closed, except for knowing who the guy really is. It's certainly not Hank Johnson, as much as he looks like him. Hank Johnson is a lot older. You should take the fingerprints and retina scans and work on that, John. We can get DNA later."

"Now who's butting into who's business?" asked Milton with a laugh. "I tell you what, you do the full workup. Then I'll have a better description to send out."

"All right. Given that there might be political nuances, we'll do the whole thing. Let's just get him right-side up."

“Easier said than done,” said Patti, lifting a heavy arm of the corpse. “This guy’s a ham.”

“Wait!” said Claude, taking the arm from her. “Get me that magnifying glass.”

“He’s a shooter,” guessed Milton.

“Maybe not a willing one,” said Patty, handing Claude the magnifying glass.

“Certainly looks clean to me.”

“No, there’s an injection track right here.” There was only a slight red mark where he was pointing. “We’re definitely doing the toxicology workup now.”

An hour later they had the results. Milton stared at the computer screen, a little confused by all that he saw.

“What’s your call, Patty?” Claude asked her.

“You haven’t given me much practice with this, Claude, though I’d say you’ve got a man who OD’d on heroin.”

“You’d be wrong. The heroin didn’t kill him but it sure as hell put him under for a good while. And this isn’t the poor grade you might buy ten blocks from the White House. It’s rich man’s stuff. No sign of the usual impurities.”

“So he was out when they shot him,” observed Patty. “Why not just give him more heroin? Or, on the other hand, why not just blow his head off and forget the heroin? It’s high class stuff with a high class price.”

“I saw stuff like this in the last war. The Ayatollah’s intelligence services would interrogate prisoners using high grade heroin from Turkey or Afghanistan, and then blow their heads off and dump the bodies where the Allies could find them. Sends a message.”

“Do you think this is someone sending us a message, Claude?” asked Milton, a tired frown on his face. “How do we read it?”

“No, I don’t think anyone’s sending a message to us, in particular. I think someone reading this report will get a message.”

Just then there was a knock at the door. Milton went to the door and opened it, then backed into the exam room, hands held high. Three men and one woman followed him into the room, all with automatics covering Milton and the other two. The woman went over to the corpse and turned the head to look at the face.

“It’s him,” she said simply.

“Who are you?” demanded Claude.

“Since the information will do you no good, I’ll tell you.” She flashed a badge which only Milton had seen before when serving as a Philadelphia cop. “DHS, at your service. I’m afraid that you already know too much.” She gestured to the smaller of the three men. “Kill them.”

John Milton barely had time to wonder what it was that he knew when the bullets began tearing through his body.