

The Blacker Death

Larry Enright

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For those who survive

FIRST EDITION

Chapter 1

Only three things in life are guaranteed: you're born, you die, and somewhere in between, if you keep playing the odds, you'll get lucky. What makes me such an expert? Nothing really. My name is Bam Matthews, I'm an FBI agent, and in forty-eight hours, give or take, I'll either be damn lucky or stone-cold dead. Guaranteed.

It started a few weeks ago. I was working layup vehicle Bravo on the floating-box surveillance team following Gyro the Greek through the sewer they call North Philadelphia. No disrespect to North Philadelphia. The whole city's a sewer as far as I'm

concerned. That's why I moved to Jersey. I've got my own private cesspool there.

Gyro was supposed to be meeting a Brooklyn mob lieutenant at the Hyatt down in Center City. That's the place they used to call the Bellevue-Stratford before that outbreak of Legionnaires' disease back in '76 killed twenty-five old soldiers, guys who'd made it through a war, only to die from an enemy they couldn't see.

Anthony Garotto was the guy who ran that Brooklyn mob. It was one of the richest and most violent gangs in New York. The question I had was why would he send one of his lieutenants all the way down to Philadelphia to connect with a loser like Gyro? Gyro owned a couple of sandwich shops and pizza joints in Northeast Philly that fronted for a two-bit drug operation, small potatoes for a New York mob. The intel we had was that they were looking to expand in baby steps beyond the five boroughs into the Philly market. I wasn't buying it, but I had no better ideas, and I had my orders. So, there we were on a tip from one of our best informants, parked in my 1978 Gremlin at the corner of Germantown Avenue and a war zone waiting for the target to make the intersection. He was heading down to Center City the smart way, through the slums, where any self-respecting FBI agent tailing him would stick out like a sore thumb. Not too shabby for a guy who spiced his pizza with pepperoni and smack.

"This car is a piece of shit," said my partner, Billy Driscoll.

Billy was a lot younger than me, but then most agents were. I should have retired years ago, but other than my job all I've got is a dog who can beat me at checkers, an old farmhouse in Jersey with a sixteen penny nail I drove into the kitchen wall to hang my piece at night, and this Gremlin that I've kept running for thirty-six years.

"It's a '78," I said, blowing a smoke ring out the window. "That's the last year they made them. That makes it a classic."

"That makes it a piece of shit. And do you have to smoke?"

"Yeah, I do. It's part of our cover."

"And what's with the Hawaiian shirt? We aren't Five-0."

"It's my favorite shirt."

I loved that shirt. It was my one-and-only drinking shirt. It was also the only shirt I owned loose enough to wear my vest underneath.

"Why don't you just tape a COP sign to the door?" Billy said. "Two white guys sitting in a piece-of-shit car in a black neighborhood in the middle of the day? We stick out like a sore thumb. Look at that guy staring at us across the street. He fucking knows."

"Nice mouth."

I stuck my head out the window, whistled, and gave the guy the finger. He shook his head and

walked away.

“What the hell, Brian? You’re going to blow the whole deal,” Billy said.

“Look, Junior. First off, how many times do I have to tell you? Don’t call me Brian. Nobody still alive calls me that. You can call me Detective Matthews, or just Matthews, or Bam. You can even call me Grandpa if you want, but if you call me that again, I’ll ram my fist down your throat and pull out your heart. You got that?”

“Yeah, sure,” Billy nodded.

You’ve got to put these kids in their place. They need to know their boundaries. At least that’s what my ex-wife always said. It didn’t work with our kids. I haven’t seen or heard from either of them in years.

“And second,” I said, “two white guys in a black neighborhood sitting in a car parked in front of a liquor store in broad daylight, looking like a couple of pimps short on cash. What’s that look like to you?”

“Holdup?”

“Bingo. We’re the white trash from two blocks over come to rob that old black dude there in his liquor store.”

“Pretty smart, I guess,” he admitted.

“You guessed right.”

The call came in on tac 3 as Gyro’s white Caddy ran the red light and disappeared down the side street.

Alpha’s got him. Move the box to station four.

"Where's four?" I said, pulling out into traffic and pissing off some inconsiderate driver who didn't want to let me in. "The sheet's in the glove compartment."

Billy swiped his finger across his smart phone. "Sixth and Girard. Looks like we've got the east side on Girard."

"You've got the grid in your phone?"

"I keyed it in at the briefing this morning."

"Is that right?"

"It's a surveillance app I wrote. I submitted it for approval a month ago. I could get a commendation or a grade increase out of it. I call it Grid-Lock. It works for both floating and stationary box setups. Cool, huh?"

I laid on the horn when the SUV in front of us slowed down for a yellow light.

"I can load it on your phone and show you how to use it later," Billy said.

"The sheet's in the glove compartment. Double-check it."

"Why?"

"Because I said so, kid."

Billy checked the sheet. "Sixth and Girard. We're east side on Girard. Like I said, Grandpa."

I jerked left around the SUV into oncoming traffic, forcing the lady coming right at us to hit the brakes. I swerved around her back into my own lane and gunned it, making the next light with the street to myself.

"Want me to drive?" Billy said.

"No, I don't want you to drive."

"You're sure you're okay? You're not having a stroke or anything are you, old man?"

"Smart ass."

I gave up on Germantown Avenue, cut across to sixth, and slowed down.

"What are you doing?" said Billy. "The mark's coming down sixth."

"I want a good look at him."

"You'll blow our cover. We'll have to pull out of the box." Billy reached for the mike.

I grabbed it out of his hand. "Don't do that."

The Caddy ran another light and caught up with us a block north of Girard with no way to get around. I slowed down and adjusted the rearview mirror, got a good look, then tilted it toward Billy.

"What do you see, Junior?"

"A scumbag who just made us."

"Look at his eyes. Look at him rubbing his hand on his shirt."

"He's nervous. So what?"

"He's not nervous. He's afraid," I said.

"I would be, too, if I was in his shoes."

"That's not the look of a guy on his way to make the biggest deal of his life."

"Then, what are you saying it is?"

"I'm not saying it's anything. I'm just telling you what it's not."

We made the light at Girard and turned left.

Gyro the Greek went right.

The radio squawked.

Charlie's got him. Move the box to station five.

I handed the mike to Billy. "He's headed over to Broad. It's a straight shot from there. They don't need us anymore. Call it in. Tell them we think he might have made us. Let them know we're heading for the Hyatt. We'll take the lounge. It's just off the lobby."

Billy didn't like it, but I didn't care. I needed a drink.

We made good time and found seats at the bar in a little place called Flanagan's tucked away in a corner of the lobby near the elevators. I was just downing the last of my scotch when Gyro appeared at the entrance and surveyed the room. I had already done that. His buddy from New York wasn't there. He put down a boxy-looking case he was carrying, took the end seat, and ordered a double. His hand shook like a leaf as he slugged down his courage and walked out.

"What do you think is in the case?" Billy asked.

"I don't know, maybe he brought a pizza."

"Do we follow him?"

"We've got the bar, remember?"

"Where do you think it's going down?"

"Not here. He just came in to steady his nerves, unless you think that little performance was a celebration of his big deal."

"I'm going to take a look around the lobby," Billy

said, making a move to get up.

I clamped a hand over his arm. "Sit down, Junior."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"There's nothing going on here."

"This is our post."

"It's a fucking bar."

"First off, it's not a fucking bar. It's one of the classiest dives in Philly. And second, let me ask you something. How many bad guys have you killed in the line of duty?"

"None."

"How many firefights have you been in?"

"None. You know that."

"Six months out of Quantico and you're just itching to pull that trigger, aren't you? You're like Billy the Kid with a badge."

"I just want to take a look."

"I'm going to tell you a little story, Junior."

Billy yanked his arm free and got up. "Tell it to the bartender, Grandpa, and have another drink while you're at it. I'll be right back."

I let him go. I probably shouldn't have, but I did. The kid had good instincts and a good heart, but that was about it. I ordered another scotch.

"You guys here on business?" the bartender asked.

"Isn't everybody?"

"FBI, right?"

“What makes you say that?”

“Your vest is showing.” He pointed to my top button lying on the bar.

I picked it up and put it in my pocket. “I left my sewing kit at home. Got a safety pin?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” The bartender slid a coffee cup full of pins and sewing needles my way.

I picked out a good one and slid the cup back. “Thanks. You just earned your lifesaving badge, Boy Scout. Name’s Bam.”

“Rico,” he said, shaking my hand. “I used to be one of Philly’s finest. Retired now. You’d be surprised what people come in here asking for when the hotel’s convenience store is closed.”

“Shouldn’t you be sitting on a beach somewhere?”

“I like to drink, and I can’t afford it. So, I water down your booze and skim what I want off the top.”

I laughed. “You didn’t happen to notice anybody come in here earlier from out of town, did you?”

“Everybody that comes in here is from out of town.”

“I’m not talking about everybody. I’m talking about maybe three or four guys, probably in suits, white, clean cut, packing heat, and if you looked at them, you’d know right off the bat which one was the guy the others were protecting.”

“Yeah, they were in here about an hour ago. Four of them. The head guy had a drink and they left.”

“Are they staying at the hotel?”

"They didn't say and I didn't ask."

"What *did* they say?"

"Their boss said he was hungry."

I asked Rico to describe them to me and he did.

"Who monitors the security cameras?" I said, nodding toward the one mounted on the ceiling in the corner.

"Nobody, but they're recording everything. All the common areas are covered. You want me to make the call?"

"Thanks." I got up and left a twenty on the bar.

"The office is in the lobby behind the information desk," he said. "I'll let Cynthia know you're on your way."

I left the lounge and walked across the lobby toward the elevators. Nice place. I'd been there a long time ago, but I didn't remember it looking that nice before. Somewhere along the line, they'd restored it and turned the first eleven floors into offices, leaving hotel rooms on floors twelve through eighteen. On the nineteenth floor there was a fancy restaurant and the main hotel check-in. I went over to the information desk and flashed my badge to the woman hanging up the phone.

"Hello, Cynthia. I'm the guy Rico just called you about," I said.

She nodded. "Right this way."

She led me into a back office where a bank of screens lined one of the walls above a desk, and motioned for me to sit at the computer.

"This is the main menu for all our cameras," she said. "I've haven't used it since they went over it in training. Do you want me to get the manager on duty? She knows more about it than I do."

"No, I'm good. Does this thing have a printer?"

"Yes," she said, and showed me where to click to freeze the frame and where to click to print. She told me she had to get back to the desk, so I let her go.

I clicked on the icon for the lounge. There were three cameras listed, so I picked the one hidden among the bottles behind the bar. The live feed came up on the screen in front of me. Rico was talking to a nice-looking lady in a red dress, a real businesswoman. I clicked on the clock next to the bar icon and set it back two hours. The screen changed. Rico was washing glasses. The place was empty. I fast-forwarded until the guys he'd described to me arrived. The head guy was a tree trunk, a walking jewelry store who wore a thick gold chain around his neck with a good luck cornetto dangling on his hairy chest. He ordered a glass of red wine, took one sip, and they left.

I froze the screen on a good headshot, printed out a few copies, and went looking for Billy. He was near the front doors with a couple other agents. One of them was Assistant Special Agent in Charge, Ralph Fink, the guy running the op. We had five assistants at our field office. In the chain of command, they were second only to Special Agent in Charge, Charles Evers.

"We need to seal off the hotel and move in," I said. "Now."

"Why?" said Fink. "The meeting hasn't gone down yet."

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Gyro checked in at the front desk on nineteen and took the elevator down to twelve. He's in room 1205. I've got men across the street with a laser microphone and camera aimed at his window. I've got a warrant to record everything. I've got men at every exit. Everything's going according to plan, Matthews. I'm not going to let you blow this op because you've got a bad feeling."

"Check your surveillance."

Fink scowled and brought the radio up to his ugly mug. "This is team leader. Eyes and Ears, what's your status?"

All's quiet here. We've got some movement in the room. The curtains are closed and the TV's on. Sounds like a porno channel. I think he's whacking off.

"Satisfied?" said Fink.

"Garotto's wiseguy got here an hour ago."

"How the hell would you know that? We don't even know who he is."

I handed them the photos of Tree Trunk and his goons. "Take a good look. This isn't a meeting. It's a hit."

Fink directed his anger at me into his radio, "Send in the maid. Now."

"You're too late," I said.

"Then, what's the movement in the room?" asked Billy.

"Remember that funny-looking case Gyro had?"

"Yeah?"

"It probably had his dog in it."

Fink got back on the radio. "Units three and four move into position. I want you ready when the maid goes in."

"You can change the sheets on Gyro's bed, Ralph. I'm sure he'd appreciate it, but I think he's already checked out."

Fink was a jackass, but he meant well.

"Floors two through eleven are offices," I continued. "If you don't find him dead in the room, I'm betting he walked down one floor to eleven for the meet. His body will be in one of the empty ones."

Fink sent one of the other men to the information desk to find out which offices in the building were vacant. He left Billy to watch the lobby and got on the elevator.

I waited until the doors closed and pressed the UP button.

"Where are you going?" Billy asked.

"In case you hadn't noticed, Fink didn't assign me anywhere."

"Why don't you hang down here with me?"

"I'm hungry," I said.

I got on the next elevator and took it up to nineteen. There was a swanky restaurant up there called XIX. That's nineteen in Roman numerals. Nice

place, windows all around with a view of the city, except in one corner where there was bar, a mirrored wall, and a few cozy booths. It was the kind of spot where nobody could sneak up behind you. That's where I found Tree Trunk and his three buddies. I sat down at the table next to them and looked through the menu.

"You guys order yet?" I asked. I had their undivided attention. "I was just wondering what's good here."

"The Crab Cake Benedict," said Tree Trunk. "It's got a nice dill hollandaise."

His buddies laughed. Nothing like a wiseguy with his own audience. I wondered if he'd said something funny to Gyro before sending him off to the great unknown.

"Nice, like to die for?" I asked.

"Yeah, to die for."

They laughed again.

"Nice enough to come all the way down from Brooklyn for?" I put the menu down and met his stare.

"Who wants to know?" he said.

I was pretty sure he wasn't going to whack me right there before enjoying the Crab Cake Benedict he had driven all the way from New York for, but the way his goons shifted in their seats made me think they were readjusting themselves to make it easier to draw on me without spilling their water glasses. I figured it was as good a time as any to flip

my badge.

"Matthews," I said. "FBI."

In my experience, when a scared animal knows it's trapped, it starts scrambling for the exits. Tree Trunk didn't flinch.

"Does Mr. Garotto know you're here?" I said.

His lip curled a little. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that lying is a sin? You could go to hell for that."

"After you, cop. What do you want?" Tree Trunk said.

"I just want to know what you're doing in town."

"None of your business."

"That bulge in your jacket makes it my business."

"I got a permit."

"Mind showing it to me?"

He took it out of his wallet and handed it over.

"Carmine DiPasquale," I read. "Visiting relatives, Carmine?"

"We're in town for a show."

"I guess you don't get down here much."

"Whatever," he shrugged.

"I'm only saying that because otherwise you'd know that there's no firearms reciprocity agreement between New York and Pennsylvania. This piece of paper doesn't mean shit down here."

It's not hard to spot a perp's uneasiness after you've seen it so many times. There's a slight shift in

facial expression, the voice changes a little, and the hands, always watch the hands. I didn't see any of that in Carmine. He was a stone-cold killer.

"You're making a big mistake," he said.

I could tell by the way he bent the silver-plated spoon in half that he was serious.

"It isn't my first," I said, "and it won't be my last." I pulled my service revolver from my back holster. "Hands on the table gentlemen. You're under arrest."

Tree Trunk was unimpressed by my .38, but Smith and Wesson weren't my only backup. Billy and two other agents converged on the restaurant in response to the silent alarm I'd activated on my smart phone. God bless the United States of Technology.

"Read them their rights and take them away, Junior," I said. "For starters, we've got carrying a concealed weapon without a valid permit."

Billy ran through the Miranda litany while the other agents cuffed my four lunch companions. The waiter arrived with the food, and the XIX maître d' came over. I apologized for the excitement, and told him I'd take Tree Trunk's Crab Cake Benedict and pay for the others. Carmine was right. The sauce was to die for.

An hour later when I got down to the lobby, they were carting Gyro's body away on a gurney. Billy was hitting on Cynthia at the information desk. It wasn't hard to see why. He had Gyro's case. I pulled

him away, so we could speak privately.

"Did you get her number?"

"I gave her my card. She said she'd text me."

"What's in the case? A dog?" I asked.

"Cat," he said, holding it up so I could see into the one open side.

A scruffy-looking calico looked back at me and meowed.

"Shouldn't the evidence guys have this?"

"They dusted it for prints and released it. They don't want the cat."

"Where'd they find the body?"

"1105, just like you said, one floor down. Want to take a look around? The Philly cops are still up there."

"Not really. Preliminary cause of death?"

"Heroin overdose."

"No shots fired?"

"No. Just a bunch of drug paraphernalia."

"No sign of a struggle?"

"Nope. Just this." Billy showed me the photo of the body that he'd taken on his cell phone. Gyro was lying on the floor with a flower on his chest and a needle in his arm.

"Nice touch. Did the CSI guys get this shot?"

"I guess, why?"

I held up the surveillance photo and pointed to the flower on Tree Trunk's lapel. "Look familiar? It didn't make it to lunch. Make sure they test the one on the stiff."

Billy did a thumb dance on his phone.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm texting Fink to let him know."

I nodded. "While you're at it, tell him to check Gyro for a cell phone. Get his call records. I'm guessing there's one from Carmine telling him to come downstairs."

"Got it."

"You ready to head back? I think I'm going to call it a day."

"Naptime, Grandpa?"

"You can walk, if you want, Junior. Your call."

We took the stairs to the second floor and headed for the sky bridge to the parking garage.

"You're in pretty good shape for an old guy," Billy said.

"I try."

"You shouldn't drink so much, though."

"I know."

"Tell me something. How come Fink is higher up than you? You've got the seniority."

"I drink too much."

We stopped at the entrance to the glass-enclosed walkway that spanned Chancellor Street to watch a commotion ahead. Billy still had his FBI vest on. Somebody noticed and called out to him for help. We pushed through the crowd to where a man was passed out on the floor. They were giving him plenty of room. He was as red as a beet, and there was blood on his face and sleeve. Billy knelt down to

check him out.

“Did someone call 9-1-1 or were you too busy taking selfies?” I said.

“I called them,” said a few people.

Every once in a while something like that happens to reassure me that not everyone is a jerk like me. It’s the kind of thing that gives me faith in the human race.

The guy on the ground was dressed in a pretty nice suit, except for the blood smears. He opened his eyes and started flailing around when Billy touched him.

“Take it easy, sir,” Billy said. “Help’s on the way.”

Billy loosened the guy’s tie and collar and opened his jacket. The poor bastard coughed up blood all over the kid.

“I don’t think he’s been shot or stabbed,” Billy said, accepting the offer of my handkerchief to wipe it off.

“Keep it,” I said, when he tried to give it back. “Did anybody see what happened?” I asked the crowd.

Of course, everyone answered at once. That’s just how it goes, but it sounded like the guy just keeled over on his way from the garage. I started taking down names and phone numbers, and letting people go. God forbid they miss their hair appointments or workout dates.

The ambulance pulled into the garage below us

and in a few minutes, EMTs and paramedics were on the scene. We identified ourselves. Billy gave one of them his card. A cop showed up just after that. When we asked if he needed us, he said no, so we left.

I dropped Billy at the office. He didn't want the cat. I didn't want the cat either, but I took him anyway. I brought him home, gave him some milk, introduced him to my dog, Shep, hung my piece on the nail in the kitchen, and lay down for a nap.

Chapter 2

When the phone started ringing, Shep barked and woke me up. He was parked by the front door in his favorite spot. I was stretched out on the sofa in the living room. The cat was wrapped around my neck like a wool scarf. I picked up the purring little sack of fuzz and set him on the floor. He jumped back up in my lap when I sat up to answer the phone.

“Matthews,” I said.

“It’s me, Bam.”

“Billy? What’s up?”

“I’m in the hospital, the fucking hospital.”

I stood up, dumping the cat on the floor. "What happened?"

"They've got me in isolation, Bam. The guy at the hotel died. They think he had Ebola."

"What?"

"Ebola, Bam. Everyone on the ambulance crew is quarantined, everyone who treated him in the ER, and me because I came in direct contact with his damn blood. I'm going to fucking die because I helped a guy with Ebola."

Two words. Two little words: "Keep it." That's what I'd said to Billy because I didn't want my bloodied handkerchief back. I would have just thrown it away anyway.

"Jesus. Are they sure?" I said.

"No. They have to run tests, but he had it. I know he did."

"Where are you?"

"They took me to Cooper Hospital. The EMTs and docs got all the good spots at Jefferson in Philly. I'm going to die in fucking Camden, New Jersey, Bam."

"Shit," I said, looking out the window at my friendly neighborhood groundhog poking his head out of a tunnel he'd dug under the hedgerow in the side yard. He and I had been having a disagreement of late over property rights.

"Even if you've got it," I said, "there's a good chance you'll pull through."

"The doc said the odds are maybe fifty-fifty since

I'll get the best treatment available. Fifty-fucking-fifty, Bam. I'm going die."

"Sit tight, kid. I'm on my way."

I hung up the phone, undressed right there in the living room and put everything I'd worn that morning including my favorite Hawaiian shirt into a trash bag that I tossed into the front yard. I found the pump bottle of hand sanitizer that I kept in the downstairs washroom for the guests I never had and washed my hands, my forearms, and my face. I collected every liquor bottle in the house except my scotch and took them to the upstairs bathroom where I filled a bucket with the booze, stood nude in the tub, and poured it over my head. Shep thought I was crazy. I followed that with a shower chaser, a clean set of clothes, and a stiff drink. No, I wasn't paranoid, not much.

Feeling a little better about my chances, I hunted down my garden gloves and dragged the sofa out the front door into the yard, added the trash bag and gloves to the pile, doused it with gasoline and set it on fire. So much for naps. The last step was a Clorox rubdown of the inside of the Gremlin that turned the cloth upholstery a camouflage green. Classic touch for a classic car.

I was washing the outside of the car when a fire truck came up the driveway. The house sits about five hundred feet back from the road on thirteen acres, a lot of it wooded now since the only thing I plant there is myself. It's pretty secluded actually,

but I guess the neighbors saw the smoke and were worried. I recognized the guy who got out of the truck with half his turnout gear on. He was a volunteer, like everyone else on the town's squad. Nice guy. He worked in the feed store up in town. He and I shot together once in a while at the local range.

"Hey, Frank," I said. "How's it going?"

"Bam," he nodded, looking at my smoldering sofa. "I hear they've got laws in this county about open burning."

"I heard that too," I said.

"Isn't that your sofa?"

"Was. I had a bug problem."

"I guess that's one way to get rid of them."

"Are you going to the range tomorrow?" I asked.

"Not sure. The wife wants to go down the shore."

"Well, maybe next weekend. Listen, I've got to get going. There's a guy I have to see in Camden."

"About a new sofa?"

"Something like that."

Frank looked up at the sky. "Looks like rain. I guess I'd better let Mr. Perkins know everything's under control here. He was worried about his hay field."

"Tell him thanks for calling it in, and thanks for stopping by, Frank. I appreciate everything you guys do."

"Yeah, take care, Bam."

I waited in the Gremlin while Frank got the fire truck turned around, and followed him down the driveway to the main road. He headed back to the station in town, and I turned right toward the entrance to the highway. The car smelled like a swimming pool even with the windows open, but once I got onto the four-lane, I cranked it up and turned the Gremlin into a wind tunnel.

My cell rang when I was about halfway to the hospital. It was the office. I let it go to voicemail. I have a hands-free hookup, but I'm not a fan of distracted driving, especially when it's me. When I got to the Camden exit, they called again. This time, I pulled off to the side of the ramp and answered it.

"Matthews."

"Where are you?" said Fink.

"Camden. On my way to see Billy. What's up?"

"Are you coming back to the office?"

"I don't know. Should I?"

"That depends. Do you want to hear what Carmine has to say? His lawyer is due at three."

"I'll be there."

I hung up, got back into traffic and drove to the hospital. They had Billy in an isolation unit on the fourth floor that they'd set up after the Ebola scare broke earlier this year. It had its own air treatment system, double doors to get in and out, and lots of gadgets. It was all just an expensive toy until Billy showed up. Then it became the toy they all wanted to play with. Billy was sitting on the edge of the bed

in a hospital gown, staring at the wall. A couple of the docs were inside with him, wearing green space suits and fiddling with the wires coming out the back of what looked like an iron lung. Two others were sitting at a desk outside the glass, watching the monitors. I flashed my badge to them.

"How's he doing?" I asked.

The one with the "J. Williamson, M.D." nametag got up and gave me that "We did everything we could, but he's not going to make it" look.

"We don't know yet," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"That means he was exposed to someone who might have been infected with Ebola, but he's not showing any symptoms. We're still waiting on the blood tests of the deceased, and we'll be monitoring Mr. Driscoll round the clock."

"Didn't you test Billy's blood to see if he's got it?"

"Mr. ...?"

"Matthews. Agent Bam Matthews. Billy's my partner."

"Agent Matthews, it can take up to three days post-onset of symptoms for the Ebola virus to reach detectable levels. Your partner doesn't even have symptoms yet, so we're days away from knowing anything."

"How long till the symptoms show up?"

"Two days, maybe more."

"How many more?"

"The incubation period can be up to three weeks."

"So, he could be in here for three weeks and not even have it?"

"That's correct, but better here than on the street."

"What are the symptoms?"

"Fever is the most obvious one. A temperature of 100° or more is a good first indicator that there might be a problem. Other symptoms are headaches, muscle pains, weakness, diarrhea, vomiting, loss of appetite, things like that."

"Like the flu?"

"More or less, but that's just the beginning. The gentleman at the hotel had progressed well beyond that to hemorrhaging and internal organ malfunction."

"So he had it?"

"Not necessarily."

"What else could it have been?"

"Any number of things. Once the blood test comes back, we'll know for certain."

"What about the autopsy?"

"I understand they're still setting up a secure facility for the autopsy. If it is Ebola, it will be tricky and very dangerous to the doctors performing it."

"Can I go in there? I want to see him."

"I'm sorry. That's not possible."

"I read that Ebola is only transmitted by contact with an infected person's blood. I also read that

you're not contagious unless you're showing symptoms."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't take every precaution."

"So, loan me a spacesuit."

"CDC and hospital protocols don't allow it, Agent Matthews."

"You mean your insurance won't cover it?"

I knew I'd hit the nail right on the head. I could see it in his face. They were worried I'd sue if I got it too.

"We have an intercom and a privacy booth set up for visitors," he said. "You're welcome to use that."

I didn't see any reason to ruin the guy's day. He was just doing his job. So, I stepped into the soundproof booth, put on the headset, and said hi to Billy. He got up and came to the window.

"I want to go home, Bam."

"Yeah, I know, kid. Just hang in there. Doc said this is the best place for you right now."

"I don't want to die."

"Billy, you're not going to die. Even if you've got it, which isn't a sure thing, you're young, you're in good shape, and you've got good people looking out for you."

He wasn't feeling the vibes. I could tell. I wasn't feeling them either.

"Do they get ESPN on that thing?" I nodded toward one of the monitors.

He laughed, "Yeah, right. That one pings every

five seconds like a fucking submarine.”

“I’ll see what I can do about getting you a big screen TV and cable.”

“Get me a computer while you’re at it. I’m going crazy in here with nothing to do.”

“You got it. I’m on my way to the office to talk to Carmine and his lawyer.”

“Did they tie him to the hit?”

“Don’t know. You want me to stop back and fill you in?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you tell your folks?”

“My dad is flying in from California tomorrow.”

“He can bunk with me, if he wants. I’ve got a couple spare beds.”

“He said he found a hotel nearby, but I’ll ask him.”

“All right, kid. I’ve got to get going. Be good and no banging the nurses.”

Dr. Williamson stopped me by the elevator and handed me an envelope with a packet of papers inside. “Mr. Driscoll said you were nowhere near the deceased, but I want you to read through these anyway. It’s important information on the disease. There’s also a digital thermometer in there. I want you to take your temperature twice a day. If it’s 100° or more, call me.”

“Anything else?”

“Try to keep your distance from people for the time being. Especially avoid any intimate contact. If

you experience any of the symptoms, if you even think you might be experiencing them, call me. My cell number is on the top sheet. This isn't a trivial matter."

I took the packet. "Okay, Doc. I get it. How many rooms have you got here in the Hotel California?"

"Just this one."

"So, if I come down with it, you'll ship me off to Philly?"

He shook his head. "They're already at capacity. We'd set up something for you here."

"What if more people turn up on your doorstep with symptoms?"

"We're trying our best not to let that happen."

I handed him the list with the names and numbers of the people who had been at the scene. There were twelve of them. "You might want to cancel your afternoon tee time," I said. "These people were with the guy when we found him."

The doctor looked at the list. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The wrinkles on his forehead did all the talking for him. I told him I'd see him later. I took the elevator down to the garage, found the Gremlin, and left.

It's hard not to think about dying when death is staring you in the face. Billy was just a kid. He didn't deserve this. Nobody does. The more I thought about it, the madder I got, and by the time I'd pulled into the parking lot at the Six, I decided I was going to find out what the hell that guy with Ebola was

doing at the hotel.

The Six, that's what we call 600 Arch Street in Philadelphia, our field office. We share the building with IRS and the Secret Service. It's right across from the Federal Reserve Bank. I think I've spent more time at the Six than I have at home. Ask my ex. She'll tell you that's why we broke up. She wanted someone who could be there more than once in a while. That wasn't me. Never will be.

When I got to my desk, it was before 3:00 p.m., so I made a few phone calls. The first was to a buddy of mine at West Detectives. If anyone knew what was going on with the stiff, it was Detective Jimmy Barnes.

"Jimmy," I said, when he answered the phone. "It's me, Bam."

"Hey, Bam. Long time no see. Still humping sheep in South Jersey?"

"Nah, I've moved up the food chain to larger mammals."

"I hate to do this, brother, but can I call you back later? I'm up to my elbows in shit here."

"Just a quick question."

"Okay. Shoot."

"Have you ID'd the stiff from the Hyatt?"

"That's the shit I'm wading around in. His name is François Birot. He's Belgium's head guy at the U.N."

"What was he doing in Philly?"

"Sorry, man. You said one question, and I've

really got to go.”

“No problem. Thanks, Jimmy.”

“Hey, sorry about Billy.”

“He’s not dead yet,” I said.

“I’ll call you later, okay? Let’s have a drink and catch up.”

“You got it.”

My next call was to my college roommate at Penn, Tom Stalter. He’d gone on to become a heart surgeon, then got tired of looking inside sick people and took a job with the CDC a few years back. I hadn’t seen him since he moved to Atlanta, but I still had his cell number.

“It’s me, Tom,” I said, when he picked up.

“Bam? Is that you?”

“Yeah. How’s it going?”

“I’m doing good. What’s up?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Are you calling about what’s going on in Philadelphia?”

“That’s right. Can you talk?”

“Not on the record.”

“I don’t care if it’s on or off. They’re holding my partner in isolation right now.”

“Sorry, *compadre*. We won’t know anything until the blood and tissue samples arrive.”

“How long till you *will* know something?”

“A few days, less to rule out the usual suspects. We’re fast-tracking this one.”

“A few days?”

"I know. It seems like forever, but you have to understand our position. First, the man is already dead. Second, we've gotten some serious egg on our face lately with procedural lapses, and reporting a false positive would destroy what's left of our credibility. We're going all out on this one, Bam: real-time PCR assay, ELISA testing. They're even setting up a lab to isolate the virus."

"I don't know what the hell you just said, but it sounds like you guys think it's the real deal."

The line seemed to go dead for a second before Tom said, "Yes, we do."

"What do I tell Billy?"

"I don't know, Bam."

"What are his odds?"

"If he's got it, not good. The World Health Organization puts the official mortality rate at ninety percent, but that's without proper care, and it's based on historical numbers. We've gotten better at this since the seventies, so Billy's chances are not that bad, but not by much."

"Would you give him fifty-fifty?"

The deep exhale on the other end of the phone told me everything I needed to know about Billy's odds of making it.

"Thanks, Tom. Will you call me when you know something?"

"Sure, Bam. Will do."

"Okay, see you around."

I waited until Tom hung up and slammed the

phone down. I don't like feeling helpless. Never have. I picked up the phone again and got the operator, who connected me with procurement. I ordered a thirty-six inch flat-screen TV and a laptop to be delivered to Billy, and asked the guy in charge down there to set it up with the hospital for Billy to get connected to cable and the Internet. I gave him a purchase order number and told him to charge it to Fink. It was almost 3:00 p.m., so I headed for the interrogation room, itching for a fight.

Carmine and his lawyer were inside with Fink and Roberts, our chief interrogator. Roberts had worked in the Philadelphia District Attorney's office before coming over to us. As a former prosecutor, she knew what questions to ask to get what she wanted. She didn't bully. She didn't coerce. She just asked politely and let the facts do their work. I closed the door behind me and sat down next to her.

"Okay, everyone's here," said Fink. "Let's get started."

Carmine's mouthpiece tried to take over the discussion right off the bat. "These charges are ridiculous, Agent Fink."

"Mr. Grasso, this is Special Agent Matthews," said Roberts. "He was the arresting officer. Agent Matthews, this is Mr. Grasso. He's representing the four detainees."

"Nice to meet you," I said.

Grasso ignored me and went after Fink again. I guess he smelled blood on the weak link in the

chain. "I'll have your badge for this, Fink. Illegal search and seizure, harassment, ethnic profiling..."

Roberts stepped in again. "This conversation is being recorded and anything you or your client says can be used as evidence in any subsequent trial. Is that clear, Mr. Grasso?"

"Yes, perfectly," he replied, sitting back in his seat.

Roberts one. Grasso zip.

She looked at Carmine. "Mr. DiPasquale, do you understand?"

"Yeah, whatever," he shrugged.

"That's a good look for you, Carmine," I said, pointing to his orange jumpsuit. If looks could kill, Fink would have been under arrest right then for my murder.

Carmine gave me a quick chin flick.

"I'm sorry you missed your show," I continued. He looked at me like I was talking gibberish. "Maybe they'll give you a refund on the tickets if you tell them why you couldn't make it."

The light bulb finally turned on in Tree Trunk's thick skull. "Fuck you," he said.

Grasso shook his head at Carmine to keep him from saying any more. "No more questions, no more chitchat until we straighten this out," Grasso said.

Carmine scowled at him, then at me. We had ourselves a good old-fashioned stare-down.

Roberts opened the file on the table in front of her. "In Pennsylvania, it's a third-degree felony to

carry a concealed weapon without a permit. Penalties include a fine of up to \$15,000, up to seven years in prison, or both. For your reference, counselor, that's Pennsylvania Revised Statue 18. Your clients will be charged with violating this statute."

"It was harassment and an illegal search."

"Nevertheless, that will be the charge when your client goes before the judge Monday morning," said Roberts.

"That's it?" Grasso asked.

"Unless there's something else you want to tell us about, Carmine," I said.

"Fuck you," Carmine said.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that it's not nice to talk like that?"

"And fuck your little dog too."

"My little dog's ex-Philly PD. I'd stack him up against you any day, pal."

Tree Trunk was pissed and Grasso couldn't stop him. "This is bullshit," he said, pointing a meaty finger at me. His hands looked naked without all that jewelry. "You were fucking harassing us at the Nineteen, Matthews. You violated my civil rights."

"Your civil rights? Do you even know what that means, you prick?"

Fink tried, but there was no way he was going to stop me.

"I was hungry," I said. "I stopped in for lunch. I asked you what was good. You recommended the

Crab Cake Benedict, remember? It was great, by the way. I ate yours. I didn't think you'd mind. Then one thing led to another. That's not harassment, just good conversation gone bad."

"Bullshit. You came there looking for me. You knew I was from Brooklyn."

"I hate to tell you, buddy, but your accent is a dead giveaway."

"Yeah? How'd you know about Tony?"

"Tony? Who's Tony?" I was playing him like a banjo in the Mummer's Day parade.

"Garotto," he said. "Anthony Garotto."

"Oh, that Tony. The mobster. The lowlife you work for?"

When a Tree Trunk falls in the forest and nobody's around, does it make a sound? I can tell you, it makes a hell of a racket when somebody is around. Carmine started f-bombing that it was entrapment, that I had tricked him, that I was a scumbag, and that he would get me for it. And we were getting it all on tape.

Grasso finally stood up. "This interview is over. My client has nothing further to say."

"He's pretty much said it all," I replied.

Fink buzzed for the guards and they took Carmine and his mouthpiece away.

"You just can't keep your big mouth shut, can you?" Fink said to me.

"I thought it went pretty well."

"Baiting a suspect on the record with his lawyer

present? That's not helpful."

"What did you expect from me?"

"I expected nothing from you. I expected to hear Roberts conducting the interrogation."

"Well, you expected nothing and that's what you got. Why didn't you say anything to them about the murder?"

"There's no point in saying anything until we've got our act together. You should know that."

"We've already asked the D.A. to go for the maximum sentence on the weapons offense and request no bail because of the flight risk," Roberts said. "That will give us more time to collect and process the murder evidence."

I liked Roberts. She was a stand-up kind of girl trying to make it in a testosterone-filled boy's club.

"Did anyone show up to claim the body?" I asked.

"No," Fink replied. "Gyro had no wife or kids. He had a business partner, but he didn't want anything to do with the body and wouldn't talk to us."

"Do you want me to lean on him a little?"

"I don't want you leaning on anyone."

"Okay. What have we got so far?" I asked.

Roberts slid the file over to Fink, and he read from it. "DiPasquale, Carmine Anthony. Age thirty-seven. Born, Brooklyn, New York. Dropped out of high school at age fifteen when he was arrested for assault. He nearly beat a student to death over a

cigarette. He was held at Rikers Island for three months before they released him to the custody of his parents. We think that's where he met someone who hooked him up with Garotto. When he got out of jail, he started running numbers for one of Garotto's boys. His parents died when he was sixteen. Murdered."

"Tough way to grow up fast," I said.

"Don't feel too sorry for him. He was charged with the murders, but released when the one and only witness disappeared."

"And they never found him?"

"They found him, all right. In the East River." Fink went back to the report. "He graduated to muscle, worked his way up the ladder, and now he's a top lieutenant in Garotto's organization. Plenty of arrests, no convictions."

"This doesn't make sense. Carmine doesn't have the brains to broker a deal. Why would Garotto send him down here if it wasn't to whack Gyro?"

"Maybe it was a hostile takeover," said Roberts.

"Of a two-bit operation in Northeast Philly?" I said. "Why?"

"The intel said they were working their way slowly into a new area to avoid heat. It's happened before, Bam."

"I don't know, Roberts. It doesn't smell right."

"Our informant said it was a business deal," said Fink. "We have no reason to believe otherwise."

"We'll see. What else have you got?"

Fink continued, "The toxicology results won't be back until next week, but the medical examiner said it's not your typical heroin overdose case. There were no needle marks anywhere on his body except where the syringe was hanging off his arm. No skin discoloration. No signs of abnormal enlargement of any internal organs. They'll be testing the liver and kidneys, but he doesn't think they'll find the usual evidence of a long-term addict. There was no sign of a struggle, plenty of prints though. We're processing them now."

"So, it's murder. We knew that already."

"The ME's not willing to go that far, at least not yet. It could have been Gyro's first time shooting up. Maybe he didn't know what he was doing, how much he was taking."

"Yeah, right. He didn't read the heroin dealer owner's manual."

"It does happen," Roberts said. "People get curious and do stupid things."

She was right. People do stupid things.

"What about the security cameras?" I said. "They cover all the common areas."

Fink slid a copy of a floor plan over to me.

"We've got Gyro entering and leaving his room," he said. "We've got him walking to the stairwell, and that's it. We found him in that office right there, 1105," he pointed, "next to the stairs. There are no cameras on the stairs and the one on eleven above the exit door was spray-painted black."

"Did you find the paint can?"

"Not yet."

"What about Carmine? Do you have footage of him?"

"We've got him and his men entering the elevator in the lobby, and we've got them getting off on eighteen and going to their room. They left the room a few minutes later and took the stairs. We don't know if they went up or down. There are no cameras on nineteen and the one on eleven is out of service."

"Why no cameras on nineteen?"

"The manager said they had gotten complaints from the restaurant patrons and people who rent out the space for wedding receptions so they had them removed."

"How long?"

"How long what?"

"How long between when they left the room and showed up at the restaurant?"

"We're still trying to nail that down. We've got the time-stamp on the footage, but the waiter wasn't sure and the hostess had no idea. It could be anywhere from five to forty-five minutes."

"Did you interview the cook?"

"The cook?"

"Yeah, the cook. Maybe no one else in that place keeps track of time, but he'll know exactly how long it takes to make Crab Cake Benedict, and I can tell you when it was delivered. We can narrow it down

from there. I put it on the company card, by the way."

Roberts cleared her throat to keep from laughing while Fink jotted down the note.

"What about the flower?" I asked.

"He said he doesn't remember any flower," said Fink. "The lab boys are doubtful we can come up with anything to tie it to him."

"Did Gyro have a cell phone?"

"He did. His call log showed one incoming call. We tracked it down. It's a house phone in the hotel lobby."

"Any footage covering the house phones?"

"No."

"So, we've got opportunity but no motive, and nothing but circumstantial evidence so far?" I said.

"Pretty much," Fink replied.

"What about the tickets?"

"What tickets?"

"He said they were in town to catch a show. Did he have any tickets on him?"

Fink looked down the inventory sheet and shook his head. "Not on them, and not on the list of room contents."

"Did you find their car?"

"No car."

"Maybe you should have someone call around to see if they had tickets waiting for them at the door."

"What's the big deal about the tickets?"

"Did they have any luggage?"

"No, they didn't," Fink said.

"So, no play tickets to the play they were going to see, no bags for the night they were spending at the hotel, and only one room for four guys. Makes perfect sense to me."

I told Fink I had some things to take care of, but I didn't. I just wanted to take a walk and get some fresh air. Roberts and I got into the elevator together.

"Sorry, I stepped all over your interrogation, Roberts," I said.

"That's all right, Bam. You did okay. How's Billy?" she asked.

"Not good."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't know, maybe take a run over there. It might cheer him up to see a pretty face."

"What about you? How are you doing?"

"I'm all right. I just get tired of putting sticky notes on Fink's thick skull."

"What do you mean?"

"If the only evidence is circumstantial, we've got to break Carmine's story so it looks ridiculous to a jury."

"You know you're wasting your time with Carmine, right? We've got no motive, and unless they turn up a witness or direct evidence, the D.A. won't even charge him. The best we can hope for is jail time on the weapons offense."

"With liberty and justice for all. Hey, do you want a cat?"

"Not really."

"Well, think about it. He's dumb, but he purrs a lot."

I left the building and walked to the Christ Church graveyard at 5th and Arch Streets, paid my two bucks, and found a bench inside. I did some of my best thinking around dead people. Ben Franklin is buried there. He's a good one. Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve. I'm pretty sure he said that. It was one of his thirteen virtues, one of mine too.

I spent the rest of the afternoon there, watching tourists and wondering how this world got so messed up that someone with as much ruthless business smarts as Anthony Garotto would handpick a bozo with as little brains as Carmine DiPasquale to drive down from Brooklyn on a business deal and in fifteen minutes whack the guy he was supposed to be dealing with. It made as much sense to me as Billy's getting Ebola. It was an African disease, not something that shows up in a swanky Philly hotel.

I hadn't come up with any answers by 5:30 p.m., and I was hungry. I walked down the mall past the Liberty Bell looking for a hot dog stand. Three panhandlers later, I found one out in front of Independence Hall. Two chilidogs and a Coke were a big step down from Crab Cake Benedict, but I ate them just the same.

I headed back to the car and drove to the hospital. Billy dragged himself away from his

hospital dinner to say hi.

"What's on the menu, Junior?" I asked.

"I don't know, some kind of meat."

"I see they got the cable hooked up."

"Yeah, thanks. They dropped off a laptop too."

"You keeping busy?"

"More or less. I could use a set of free weights."

"I'll see what I can do."

"How'd it go with Carmine and his lawyer?"

"Could have been worse." I filled him in.

"A fucking murderer, and he'll get a \$15,000 fine.

That's not justice."

"We're still working on it."

"I should be out there helping."

"You want to help?"

Billy nodded, "You bet I do."

"Can you access our network?"

"I logged in to check my email earlier, so I guess so."

"Then, put your little laptop to good use. Find out all you can about Gyro: his family, his friends, business associates, everything. There's something we're missing here, something big."

"You got it, Grandpa."

I stopped at a pet store on the way home and picked up a couple cans of cat food, a food dish, cat litter, a litter pan, and a catnip toy. If none of his friends wanted Gyro's body, they sure as hell weren't coming for his cat. I didn't really want a cat either, but sometimes you just go with the cards

you're dealt.

He and Shep were waiting for me at the door when I got home. Looking at them sitting there together, Shep wagging his big tail and the cat purring a mile a minute, made me think I should revisit my beliefs about cats and dogs getting along. The three of us ate dinner in the kitchen. I nuked what was left of a soggy hoagie from a couple days ago. Shep had his usual dried food covered in beef gravy. The cat ate something that smelled like the back alley of a second-rate seafood place.

I set out the litter pan on the screened-in back porch and showed the cat how to work the screen door if he wanted to go prowling. It was pretty simple. The door swung both ways. Most times, I left the inner door to the kitchen open in case it got cold and Shep wanted to come inside. I set it up that way for him so he could come and go as he pleased. He liked to wander in the woods, but he never went far. I guess somewhere inside that dog's head was his own invisible fence.

The cat watched Shep push through the door into the backyard and disappear into the woods. He stretched out on the rug, and I went to bed.