

THUNDERBIRD RISING

A MAXX KING THRILLER

JOHN H. THOMAS

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To my mother who inspired me to read, my father who encouraged me to write, and my wife who convinced me to seize the day.

*I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
And what to answer when I am rebuked.*

--- Habakkuk 2:1

PROLOGUE

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 10TH, 2001

Maxx grunted as he knelt on the dirty tile floor of the ferry terminal and helped Gabby repack the things that had spilled out of her backpack.

Gabby's long hair was pulled back into ponytail to stay cool. Her face was flushed from a long, active day and the unusually hot late-summer weather. She nervously cleaned her sunglasses as she tried to keep the sweat off. She was torn between staying partially hidden behind the dark glasses and the need to watch the people around her.

"Have you seen anyone who looks like they're paying attention to us?" asked Maxx. Gabby shook her head briefly and half grinned, showing her perfect white teeth. "Hopefully, we lost them this time. I still don't know how you picked them out of the crowd before."

"It's my finely tuned bullshit detector," said Gabby as she pointed at Maxx. He laughed a little too loudly and looked around the mostly empty terminal. Her sense of humor, especially during stressful moments, was one of the many things he found appealing about their relationship.

"I know you use it regularly with me, so it's always in tip-top

condition.” His knees popped when he stood up to start toward the ticket turnstile to board the ferry. “Too many heavy squats at the gym,” he muttered.

“That or old age,” she added. “Speed it up, grandpa.”

As soon as they walked on the ferry, they grabbed a booth inside the passenger area. Maxx wanted to sit by the doors where the walk-on passengers boarded, allowing him to quickly spot anyone who might have followed them. It was possible to drive onto the lower deck, but he’d been on the ferry often enough to know it would be nearly impossible for anyone following them to get into the vehicle line in time to make the rush-hour crossing.

It was still hot and very bright as the sun moved toward the Cascade Mountains to the west. No one would think it was unusual for a couple to be wearing Mariners caps and sunglasses. The air-conditioned ferry was a welcome relief after the draining run down to the ferry terminal from Pike Place Market.

After the last of the passengers and cars boarded, the ferry gave a short blast on the horn and pulled away from the dock. For at least the next hour, more if no one knew they were onboard, they’d have some time to recharge and plan their next moves.

They watched West Seattle pass by the large picture window on the Wenatchee as the ferry accelerated quickly to cruising speed. The ferry was busy, passengers wandering around the decks to admire the view of the mountains and the sun glistening on the water.

“I’m going to grab something from the snack bar,” Maxx said. “I hope they have an all-you-can-eat buffet, because I’m going to put them out of business.”

“Grab us some waters and protein bars. We don’t know when we’ll get another chance to stock up,” Gabby said as she rolled her eyes. She knew Maxx was always looking out for his

next meal. She'd brought a box of protein bars in her backpack this morning when they left, and Maxx had devoured them all before lunchtime.

"Save our seats. I'll grab us some supplies and take a quick tour of the boat to see what I see. Aha, no pun intended." He smirked, picked up his backpack, and walked toward the café.

He doubted he'd been able to lighten the mood much as he watched Gabby lower her cap over her eyes and snuggle herself deep into the corner of the booth.

Maxx grabbed as much of the food and bottled water from the café as he could safely carry in his gorilla-sized arms. His backpack was already full, so it was a juggling contest. He really wanted beer instead of water, but he wanted to stay alert in case they needed to start running again. He had been making a solid effort to cut back on his drinking, and it felt like it was paying off.

They'd been evading people all day, and although he wasn't completely sure why they were being followed, he had a basic idea from one of the guys he'd been able to apprehend earlier this morning when all of this began to blow up. Gabby had downloaded some sensitive files from the computers at work, and someone very badly wanted the thumb drive she had used to copy the data. They needed the information quickly and were willing to do anything to recover it. Only someone very foolish or very desperate would try and grab Gabby when Maxx was within striking distance.

All of the day's efforts at evasion had led them here, and while Maxx doubted that they'd been followed onto the ferry, he'd prefer to avoid another confrontation. It would be better if he and Gabby found somewhere safe where they could review what was on the thumb drive.

As Maxx began to walk back toward Gabby, he saw a group of several young Asian men come up the stairs from the vehicle deck. The group had split up and were clearly looking for

someone while trying to remain casual. Luckily, none of them had spotted him yet, so he nonchalantly sat next to Gabby.

“Don’t look, but they followed us onboard. Somehow they must have gotten a car.”

“I see them,” she said. “If we split up for now, it’s less likely that they’ll be able to grab both of us.” Gabby took most of the food and water and put it into her backpack, making sure her Glock could be reached quickly, then handed Maxx the thumb drive. “Hang on to this, grandpa. I’m going to hang out in the ladies’ room.”

She stood up and pulled her hat lower over her eyes. Maxx casually slipped the thumb drive into his boot for safekeeping.

“If we get split up and it’s not safe to get back together, text me or meet me at Anthony’s Bar in a couple hours.”

Maxx headed for the stairwell down to the vehicle deck, planning on getting behind the guys who were following them. It would also give him a chance to see the kind of car they were driving, because they couldn’t abandon it on the ferry even if some of them walked off to try and corner them.

The stairs down to the car levels were tight and steep. Maxx moved quickly to keep from getting trapped in the narrow space if one of the pursuers happened to spot him. It was a full ferry with plenty of places to hide among the cars. He knew it was unlikely anyone else would be walking around down on this deck during the crossing, making anyone down here a potential threat.

Figuring he would be less likely to be spotted if he was seated in a car, he looked for any cars that might be vacant but open. The last thing he wanted to do was set off someone’s car alarm by checking doors. Trying to act as casual as he could, Maxx sauntered toward the front end of the ferry, looking for suspicious persons and any open car doors.

About to give up, he noticed an old, rusted Rambler that might work. The car had manual-style door locks, and the

knobs were up, indicating that the doors were unlocked. Moreover, he couldn't imagine anyone would spend money putting in an alarm on a car that was one small step from being towed to a junkyard.

The Rambler also happened to be the first car on the ferry. He'd be able to spot anyone coming and could have plenty of time to jump out before they saw him.

Maxx quickly opened the passenger door on the sedan and slid into front seat. He needed to adjust the rear and side mirrors to watch behind him. That way he would notice men chasing him or people starting to come back down to get in their cars early. He'd have to get out before the owner of the car came back.

He also couldn't risk going back up to the passenger decks, because they'd see him when he walked up the stairs. His best chance of getting off the ferry undetected was hitching a ride on one of the cars or trucks before it left then jumping out when they stopped at the light in Bainbridge.

Maxx rummaged in the glove box and backseat to see if there was anything that might work as a disguise. There wasn't much, but the owner kept a bunch of old tools in the glovebox, probably in case they had to do emergency car repairs, Maxx thought.

He switched out his Mariners cap for a beat-up John Deere cap and put on a pair of women's sunglasses that made him look like a professional wrestler in drag. He knew Gabby would get a hoot out of his new look. Hell, he was cracking himself up. Oversized sunglasses were becoming part of his go-to disguise repertoire.

He pulled out his cellphone and found it had virtually no signal out here on the open water. The phone didn't have any texts or messages from Gabby either. When he tried to send her a quick message to let her know where he was hiding, it unsur-

prisingly didn't go through. All he got for his effort was an error message.

As he was checking himself out in the rearview mirror, he noticed someone moving behind the wheels of a semi-truck on the driver's side of the car. He didn't think it was his imagination, but he ducked down and pulled his hat lower. He had two choices, and neither of them were very appealing. He could either act like he was asleep and try and bluff his way out of the situation, or slide out and try and sneak toward the back of the ferry.

As Maxx decided to open the door and make a run for it, there was a soft tap on the window behind him. He turned to look as a tall man stood up in front of the car and waved at him over the hood. Maxx recognized him. It was the Chinese guy from the bar who had started this nightmare a week ago.

His other hand held a pistol with a suppressor attached. He pointed to the side of the car, where another man appeared. Both men held their guns at their sides, but Maxx had no doubt they would use them if he tried to get out of the car and run.

The short man standing next to the car door pointed to the door lock. "Open the door. Let's have a friendly conversation, and you can return the information you stole," he said.

"It's not my car, and I don't have any of your information. Besides, my mom told me I'm not supposed to talk to strangers, and you seem very strange," Maxx answered. While he was talking, he discreetly checked to make sure all the car doors were locked.

The man tested the doors on the passenger side to see if they'd open. When they didn't, the taller man moved from the front of the car to the driver's side and tested those doors.

The tall man said, "Make this easy for everyone. We can either sit somewhere peacefully and talk, or we can strongly encourage you and your girlfriend to come back to Seattle to

meet with Mr. Xi. He's anxious to recover the information you took. It won't do you any good anyway."

"Or here's another idea. Why don't I sit here and honk this horn until a hundred people show up and see you standing here waving guns around?"

"I don't think it'll take that long before my short friend, Mr. Jones, puts a dozen rounds through that window. But I have a better idea. You sit here, and we'll go get some additional transportation and come back." Both men quickly inserted something in the handles of the doors and returned to the truck behind the Rambler.

"What the hell are they talking about?" Maxx grumbled. He tried to open his door, but the handle wouldn't move. He tried the window, which wouldn't open either. He reached over and tried the driver's side door and window, getting the same result. Somehow, they had managed to jam all the doors and windows, trapping him inside.

Maxx really got a bad feeling about being locked in the car when the semi that was parked immediately behind him started its engine. He turned around and watched in surprise as the tall guy waved at him again. This time, the guy's not-so-friendly wave ended with a raised middle finger.

The truck shifted into gear. It occurred to Maxx that maybe they didn't need the thumb drive anymore. Either he'd been mistaken about its importance to them, or they'd caught Gabby already.

The truck moved forward quickly and smashed into the rear bumper on the Rambler. Maxx could see the parking brake was already engaged, but that didn't stop the truck from pushing the car forward, all four tires screeching in protest.

The truck was in low gear and continued to push the car toward the front of the ferry. Maxx watched the two guys climb out of the truck cab and walk quickly in the other direction. His

only chance was if somehow the large chain that was strung across the front of the ferry was able to hold the force of the truck pushing into it. Otherwise, both the car and the truck would end up going ass over teakettle into the water.

When the front of the Rambler pressed against the heavy marine chain, Maxx heard the truck engine behind him beginning to strain with the effort. He leaned back in the seat and strained as he kicked at the passenger-side window to no effect. He had extremely strong legs but didn't have leverage at this angle even when stretched across the bench seat. He was quickly running out of options to escape and needed to calm down and think instead of knee-jerk reacting.

If the chain didn't hold against the pressure, he was going to be trapped in this car as it quickly sank to the bottom of Puget Sound with a twenty-ton truck landing on top of him. Being trapped underwater was his worst nightmare. Heart racing, he put on his seatbelt, braced for impact, and hoped for the best.

The car began to shake madly as the truck continued to press forward. With groans and screeching metal, the old car came apart at the joints before there was a thunderous crash. The cable snapped apart into sections, damaging the cars next to the Rambler.

With nothing to obstruct the Rambler and the truck behind it, they accelerated off the front end of the ferry. Any chance of the car floating was quickly eliminated when the truck landed on top of it, pushing it under the water, while the truck floated briefly on the surface. The 6,200-ton ferry loaded with more than 150 cars was still moving at 18 knots, and both vehicles were easily pushed aside by the bow of the ship. Passengers on the upper decks that had heard the truck engine and the chain snapping watched in stunned disbelief as the two vehicles disappeared beneath the murky water.

As the sun set over the Olympic Mountains, an emergency

call from the ferry captain went out to the Coast Guard, and the ferry rapidly came to a stop in the middle of the Salish Sea.

The rescue began in earnest, but they never were able to recover Maxx's body.

RUBY TUESDAY, SIX DAYS EARLIER

It was late in the season for the Mariners, but they were a lock for the playoffs. Maxx didn't have tickets but decided to take advantage of the late-summer weather and make the long walk from his office to Pioneer Square. He would catch the game with the crowd at one of the neighborhood bars. It felt good to stretch his legs and relax after a long day in the office.

With all the excitement about the team, it seemed every bar near Safeco Field had standing room only for the locals and fans who had flown in from Tampa Bay. Maxx found a tight spot for himself at The Double Play, "Home of the Mariners," as the sign in the window proudly proclaimed. Oddly enough, he had noticed the sign was not on display most of the time. Some years it was the "Home of the Seahawks," if they were playing well.

He didn't really think the bar was the home of anything but a lot of fair-weather fans, of which he was one. He was not ashamed to admit that he liked the Mariners but didn't follow them like a "true to the blue" fan. This bar did carry a good selection of locally brewed beers that he had sporadically enjoyed trying, although he was partial to whiskey.

Even though Maxx grew up on a farm on the east side of Washington, he had not really followed the Mariners until he'd been stationed for a couple years at Fort Lewis, the Army base in Tacoma south of Seattle in between assignments to the Middle East. Mariners tickets were generally cheap, and he could either catch a bus from the base or hop on the train to get to the stadium. It was easy to get lost in the crowd and enjoy the weather and occasional beer. Maxx was a loner, and baseball was an easy game for a loner to enjoy. No one hassled a single guy at a baseball game.

The seat he'd found was at the end of the bar where he could watch a couple of the games, but no one would ask him to move. People didn't usually approach Maxx anyway. He considered himself easygoing but had been told others didn't see him that way. It was either due to his size at 6'4" and as big as bear or the scowl he frequently wore when he was thinking about something deeper than baseball.

With all the problems he'd run into lately, he seemed to be wearing a permanent frown.

"I'll take whatever you have on draft from Redhook," Maxx mouthed silently to the nearest bartender. There was no point in trying to yell his order over the noise of the cheering crowd when the Mariners got a hit. He grabbed a drink menu and began to look for a whiskey he could savor while he was relaxing, planning to nurse it for an hour or two while the game played. He felt good about his promise to Gabby to cut back. One day at a time. He still had some things he needed to finish up back at the office before heading home.

He'd called Gabby before he'd left the office. She'd been working late again, so he didn't expect to see her until tomorrow. They were still new in their relationship, and both were trying to give the other plenty of room to figure things out. They'd come out of some messy situations, and Maxx's was still

not completely resolved. He was trying to sort it out while keeping his temper in check.

Things had seemed to be going so well for him a year ago. He had found a great woman, and it seemed like they had a lot of things in common. She was smart, a nine on her worst day, and had a great sense of humor. He had met Natalie at a bar near his office, and they had shared a fondness for whiskey, tech advancements, hiking, and about every other topic they talked about except for politics. She was from a liberal family in Connecticut and had her views cemented while attending the sociology program at the University of Washington. With so many other interests in common, they steered clear of anything too divisive. It was easy at first.

After three months of an increasingly satisfying romance, they had moved into an apartment on Capitol Hill and kept the romance growing, even including the workday. Maxx had started a tech surveillance business four years ago that took off. He'd made friends with some of the retired military people who worked at Seattle PD, the local FBI and ATF offices, and they started sending some contract work his way.

With more work than he could manage, Maxx hired a part-time assistant. Natalie's previous experience at Microsoft and TechCom checked all of the boxes. Her looks and intelligence rapidly led to a partnership both at the office and in their personal lives. They often joked that their relationship was a made-for-TV sitcom, except he was not handsome enough to play the lead.

Things went great for a year or two until the time together became too much. They began to spend more time apart after work and found reasons to focus on different assignments. It was a story as old as time, except Natalie was the one who found someone she preferred to be with, and Maxx was left wondering what happened. The breakup was painful, but the hardest part for Maxx was when he discovered she had been

siphoning off clients and embezzling funds from the business. When she left, she had taken most of the money from the bank account and left him on the hook for a lot of the outstanding debts.

It had been tough losing a woman he trusted and then having to deal with the flotsam of a once successful business that had been turned upside down financially. People who had trusted him with delicate assignments were now hearing a lot of concerning things from Natalie that were flat out lies. She not only blamed him for their financial issues but insinuated that he had trouble controlling his anger and had physically abused her privately. It had been hell for six months trying to re-stabilize his world, and his business still struggled because of the clients Natalie had taken.

Of course, all of this was bad, and Maxx had made it worse by drinking to escape the pain. The drinking felt good until he had too much. Then his anger took over.

Maxx thought he was heading toward the bottom three months ago when he and Gabby had met. He had to drop off a report at the police headquarters downtown and was having a cup of coffee to take the whiskey edge off in the non-Starbucks next door. He had been enamored by her British accent and wide smile when she'd ordered tea. They'd started talking, which led to a date and more. They had been taking things slow because they both had recent relationship baggage.

But Maxx felt he was recovering for the first time in a year. He had stopped the day drinking and was being more careful about letting his temper get the upper hand.

Today he'd found out he was past due on a project he had never heard of. Natalie had committed to an IT project for a Chinese holding company. The project included steep penalties for nonperformance. He'd already missed deadlines and didn't even know where to begin.

When a group of three young Chinese guys pushed to his

end of the bar, it was all he could do to keep his temper in check. They seemed to recognize him, but maybe he was the type of person they liked to mess with.

He really wanted to watch the game and nurse a shot of whiskey. Instead, he kept getting bumped from behind and overhearing occasional derogatory comments. He had been quick to learn more than a handful of swear words from Gabby, whose parents had immigrated to the United States from Hong Kong. It confused people that a Chinese woman with a strong British accent was from Seattle, and Gabby used the cultural confusion to her advantage every chance she had.

After a particular aggressive push from behind, Maxx's patience was exhausted. Trying to keep the situation from escalating, he turned around and politely said, "Gentlemen, I don't think you realized it, but you keep bumping into me, and I'd appreciate it if you'd be more careful."

He intentionally stayed seated so he wouldn't tower over the short man directly in front of him who was already close to eye level.

"Our apologies," the tall guy said. "My colleague will be more careful about where he places his hands next time." He smiled at Maxx, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. He nodded and said something in Chinese to the third man.

The third man nodded at Maxx and leaned in closer so he didn't have to shout.

"Perhaps you should leave, and then we will not have to worry about bumping into you. You look rather delicate and could get hurt by my little friend here."

The smile he put on showed too many teeth, resembling a shark.

Maxx couldn't believe they were threatening him, so he made another attempt to avoid a confrontation. "I might not have been clear enough. Stop bumping me. Move away before someone gets hurt." He gave them one of the dead smiles that

they'd been giving him to make sure that they got the message that he was done being polite. He had little doubt that they'd be on the losing end of this fight if it got physical.

"No offense was intended," the tall man said loudly so that people around could easily hear him. "Can I buy you another drink to smooth over this misunderstanding?"

"That won't be necessary. I still have this one to finish, and then I'm going to head out before it gets too dark."

As he looked at his drink, the third man stared at him with a smirk on his face as he slowly inserted his middle finger into Maxx's glass.

Now Maxx understood why the tall guy had spoken so loudly. He wanted everyone to think he'd been trying to diffuse the situation. Anything Maxx did in response now would look like he was overreacting. He couldn't let this slide though. They were intentionally provoking him. And the beer had scraped the thin veneer from his self-control.

Not to be outdone, Maxx stood up and glared at the tall man.

"Perhaps you'd like to step outside, and I'll show you the directions to the nearest hospital as you requested. It seems you and your friends are rather prone to accidents and need to be prepared." He smiled broadly.

People sitting closest to them in the bar moved away as Maxx and the group stood and moved toward the front door. It was clear they were leaving together, not like a group of friends but as people trying to keep their front toward a potential enemy. Maxx could see several people watching them in their peripheral vision. The bartenders had seen enough fights to know when there was the potential for violence on the horizon.

When they stepped on the sidewalk outside, the convivial sounds of the bar dropped off dramatically, and they left the need for coded messages and innuendo behind them. The tall guy looked at Maxx and snarled, "You bit off more than you can

swallow. You think you're a tough guy, but you're going to find out that you're a paper tiger."

"I really don't think of myself as tough," he said. "But the people I put on the ground usually have that opinion."

He moved off the sidewalk and stepped around the corner into the alley, making sure to keep enough distance because he could see the three of them trying to position themselves in a circle around him. He hadn't seen any evidence of guns on them as they had moved outside, but he was certain they were carrying knives. And anyone who didn't respect a sharp, quick blade was a fool. Maxx had enough scars to prove that he knew how to survive and win a knife fight.

He took off his windbreaker and wrapped it around his left hand and forearm.

"Last chance to walk away, gentlemen. When this kicks off, you're going to wish your mothers had taught you to be more polite to strangers."

"You talk too much," the third guy with the shark smile said.

He brought his leg up for a jump kick but quickly realized he'd made the first mistake, as Maxx stepped inside the kick quick as a snake. Even though Maxx was built like a gorilla, all the years he'd spent in wrestling, sports, and life-or-death combat had taught him to move quickly with overwhelming force when someone underestimated him.

He put his hip into a full uppercut that caught the shark hard enough to knock his teeth out. The man's head snapped back like he'd slammed chin first into an anvil. Even though he was shaken, it didn't stop him from getting in a couple quick hits to Maxx's face before Maxx stunned him with an unexpected left hook.

Maxx could feel the short guy moving in on his left side. He didn't know where the tall guy was going, but it didn't feel like he was stepping in yet, so he juke left to keep the body falling

between him and the incoming movement. This proved to be enough of a distraction to give the short guy's attack a misstep. Indeed, he'd produced a knife in the last few seconds and was aiming for Maxx. He was very quick, but not quick enough.

Spinning, Maxx snapped his knife into his left hand. He carried a knife on his left forearm that snapped into his hand with a flick of his arm. Enemies assumed his right hand was his strongest and tended to move to what they thought was his weak side. By wrapping his jacket around his arm, he effectively hid the motion and the blade.

He drove the wickedly sharp four-inch blade into the short guy's side and grabbed his knife hand by the wrist in a vice-like grip, his thumb pressing deep into his nerves. The double shock caused him to drop his knife.

Maxx pulled out his blade and pushed it in again all the way to the hilt. He could tell he'd hit an artery this time as blood sprayed out of the wound. Keeping him wrapped up as he weakly tried to pull out of his grip, Maxx looked around the alley for the tall guy, who was nowhere to be seen.

The fight had happened so fast and was so quiet that no one could have heard anything over the sound of the crowded bar, traffic, and the baseball game. Maxx had blood all over his shirt and jacket, which were luckily the deep-blue color of the Mariner uniforms, so they looked wet and deeper blue. He saw some water sitting in buckets further down the alley by the back door of the kitchen and walked in that direction. He did a quick look around and didn't see any cameras, but he knew that wouldn't matter once witnesses started talking to the police. He wasn't exactly a forgettable person, and the bartenders had watched him leave. The guy who had taken off was probably calling 911 and giving them his description.

Either he could walk away now and try to explain the circumstances if they caught him, or he could call 911 and

report the attack. If he called it in, he could pretend to be an anonymous witness and make it sound like he was the victim.

In better times, he would have trusted the police to sort the situation out in his favor, but he'd been in enough trouble lately that he had little confidence that they would. When Natalie started making accusations against him without any evidence, he had developed a deepening distrust of authority figures. With his recent record of public altercations, he knew things would tilt quickly against him.

The other part of this situation that really weighed on him was how they had seemed to choose him and intentionally escalate a confrontation. Fights usually had a point when they crossed the line from grandstanding and name calling, but in retrospect these three guys had kept pushing the conflict like they wanted violence. He couldn't think of any reason they would have singled him out of the crowd.

After Maxx washed off the blood on his hands and windbreaker, he made his decision, pulling the burner phone from his zippered pocket and dialing 911. He told the operator that he'd witnessed two Asian guys jump a large white guy in the alley on the other side of the street. He said the guy took off running in the opposite direction that he planned to go and was trying to hail a cab, so they better come quickly. He thought some misdirection might buy him time to get to the nearest bus stop. He could jump in the back of the bus where no one would notice him, another Mariners fan downtown for the game. He was a long way from home but was sure he'd be able to make it far enough to dispose of the burner phone, dump the bloody knife, and call his attorney to figure out next steps.

As observant as Maxx usually was, especially during times of stress, he didn't see the woman in the leather jacket and oversized sunglasses talking to herself and watching him walk

away in the reflection of the window across the street. If he had noticed, he might have wondered how she fit into the picture.



She'd known it was going to get messy as soon as she saw Haoyu and his two toadies walk into the bar and head over to Maxx like he had a homing beacon on. They either had followed him here like she had or placed a tracking device on him. Either way, they were done watching him passively and were now intent on removing him from the equation too. She knew some of the intelligence agencies had considered removing Maxx, only they had planned to do it with more subtlety. Of course, the agencies had access to Maxx's military record, so she wouldn't have underestimated him like the Chinese team.

She thought the short guy might have seen her in the bar, but things had happened quickly after that so she doubted he would have had time to mention it to Haoyu. She had followed them discretely out of the bar but had turned the other direction and crossed the street so none of them would have seen her face. She'd been able to watch the confrontation in the reflection of the storefront but had missed a few details when it was over from start to finish in under a minute. Maybe thirty seconds.

Using an earpiece and throat microphone, she was able to call it in when Haoyu took off while the third guy was still falling down. "It's Grey. King is leaving. Black Knight is heading north on Second Avenue. Do you have a tail ready for Knight? I'm going to follow King."

"Copy. How do you want to handle the cleanup?" the monotone voice on the earpiece replied.

"Give me a three-minute head start then call 911 and report it in case the Chinese are monitoring," she said quietly. "In the

meantime, call Jameson at Seattle PD and let him know to hold off sending a response until then. We don't want Star's prints or description logged in officially. I want it to look like a ghost hit."

Keeping Maxx out of the spotlight would have two benefits. Haoyu was going to be very suspicious when Maxx wasn't named as a suspect. Getting Maxx thrown in jail would have been Haoyu's plan B if they didn't kill him in the alley.

It would also give her a chance to intercept Maxx and take him out of play herself. He'd be looking for more Chinese guys to follow through and would never suspect a petite Hispanic woman with a rhythmic Spanish accent was the person he should be concerned about.

She watched Maxx wash up quickly in the water bucket in the alley, make a phone call, then head toward the train station. She knew that was a move to throw off anyone who might try to track him out of the alley. He had to be leaving some blood spots intentionally to give a false trail, expecting the police to be here soon.

When he turned the corner, she walked casually across the street to see what the situation was and make sure a few more pawns were taken off the board. The Chinese team had decided to move now, so the time must be getting close for them to act.

When she walked up to the guy with the knife wounds, it was obvious he wasn't going to make it for another three or four minutes until the police and maybe an ambulance arrived. There was already enough blood pooling around him that he'd gotten a major artery nicked. Seattle had first-rate emergency services, but he was as good as dead.

The short guy was a problem though. He was still breathing, and while he might have a concussion, he'd likely recover and be able to identify Maxx. She didn't have to worry about Haoyu, who would stay in the shadows and never publicly step forward, but this short guy was a pawn they would push in

front of the PD and the media. She had to stop him from acting as a witness pointing to Maxx.

She grabbed the third guy's knife and placed it in the hand of the short guy, so it'd at least look like he was the attacker. They'd be missing Maxx's knife at the scene, but that was a detail she'd clean up later. In the meantime, she took a syringe from inside her jacket and injected it into the short guy. It was a nonlethal dose of LSD to show cause delusions and psychosis with the added benefit of showing up neon on the toxicology screen the police would run.

While it wasn't fatal, it would scramble his memory enough that he'd have a difficult time remembering what was real and what was imagined for the last couple days. She could have made it fatal but figured it would be more problematic for the Chinese to have to explain why one of their guys was dead and the other guy was on drugs and looked to be the killer. The additional confusion would act in her favor.

Sirens echoed from about a half mile away. With these details taken care of, she began jogging in the direction Maxx had gone.

BAND ON THE RUN

Once Haoyu had seen the big, ugly American pull a knife from his sleeve, he knew it was time to leave quickly. Even if the idiot Jiang managed to ultimately win, which he doubted very much, there was going to be police, witnesses, and a lot of questions he didn't have the time or patience for. They had clearly underestimated the American, and he would take care of the oversight when it was on his terms.

He quickly moved in the opposite direction of the bar, away from downtown and toward the docks. He had a driver waiting a couple blocks away in an out-of-service taxi, and no one would think twice about someone jumping in a yellow cab. As he walked quickly toward where he knew the car was parked, he turned on the throwaway phone he always carried for emergencies. He doubted any intelligence agency tracked his phone, but it was better to assume they did and be wrong. He was acting the part of a foreign businessman and kept his primary phone dedicated to communication to support his cover story.

He called the number he had memorized for his contact. Of course, no one would answer the voicemail dead drop, but it was a clean method to relay deniable information.

“We underestimated him. He didn’t seem to know who we were, but he was prepared. He could be more involved than what his partner suggested. That may be why he hasn’t completed the project we commissioned from his company. He may have figured out it was a ruse.”

He continued to walk a route to make sure he wasn’t being tailed. An extra minute or two would make no difference, but it would be better to spot any tails he might have missed at the bar.

“Make an anonymous call that routes through Seattle’s 911 system. Report three men fighting with knives and possibly a gun outside the bar. That will get the police to respond quickly and keep the American occupied for a while until we can make plans to tie up this loose thread.”

After Haoyu rounded the last corner, he could see his taxi waiting in the lot half a block away. The street was empty, but he still took the time to stand in the doorway of a print shop and watch for anyone who might follow him around the corner.

“I don’t believe I’m being followed, but let me know if that changes. Also, make sure that we are continuing to monitor the woman.”

“TechCom is still a day or two from being able to decipher the code, but they could get lucky. Also, if her boyfriend is alive and able to escape the police, he may call her and give us an idea where he’s heading. We need her to keep working on the project and not get distracted. The best way to do that is to intercept him before he reaches her.”

Haoyu knocked on the driver’s window of the cab as he hung up the phone. “Excuse me, are you able to take a fare?” He could hear several police sirens heading in the direction he had come from. Time to put some distance between himself and the bar quickly.

“Sorry, I’m out of service, champ,” the cab driver answered as he pointed to the sign in the window.

“I’ll pay you well for a quick trip to the zoo,” Haoyu said, delivering the code phrase with agitation.

The driver nodded apologetically and took down the out-of-service sign. Haoyu climbed in the backseat of the cab and pulled the battery from the phone.

“Head toward the airport,” he said. “Can you monitor the police scanner with your radio?”

“I’m listening on my earpiece,” the driver answered as he headed toward the highway speedily but without driving recklessly.

After they had driven several miles south, Haoyu snapped the cheap burner phone in half and dropped the pieces out the window of the cab. The driver pointed toward his ear and watched Haoyu.

“The first police that arrived are calling for an ambulance and the homicide team. Two males, one is unconscious and the other dead. It looks like they were in a fight outside The Double Play. A third suspect might be involved, but they don’t have a description yet.”

Haoyu knew where one of the 911 calls came from but was puzzled who else had called it in. Hopefully he hadn’t been identified as the third suspect and would remain a mystery person of interest.

“Any more description of the two men at the scene?”

“Both Asian,” the driver said as he glanced at Haoyu in the rearview mirror.

The American had survived the attack, making things more complicated. The boyfriend had been a potential threat before but was now an active risk, and he’d clearly seen Haoyu. If he worked for an intelligence service, they’d have no doubts there was a high-level action occurring in the U.S. that was worth a murder. This would set off alarm bells all over the world.



Maxx headed south toward Safeco Field for a few blocks to blend in with the Mariners fans and game traffic. He was much less likely to stand out in a crowd if the police were able to put together a description of him from the bar and the tall Chinese guy who might report him. He took a moment to stop at one of the vendors selling gear on game day. Paying cash, he bought a cheap pair of oversized sunglasses, a couple new ball caps, t-shirts, and a Seattle hooded sweatshirt, proclaiming it was “Rain Town USA.” The sunglasses and hoodie were the perfect tourist disguise.

After going a few blocks, he started picking up his pace, moving east toward a more industrial area. He needed to find a place to switch out his blood-stained clothes and get rid of the burner phone and knife. He ducked down a side street and stepped behind some cars that looked to be abandoned. He took off his shirt and used it to wipe off what blood he could, burying the shirt and jacket under some rags in a dumpster.

He went another block north, crushed the burner phone, and dropped it along with the knife down a sewer grate after wiping off any fingerprints. No one would find those among the mountains of mud and junk that had to be down there already. That was the best he could do for now.

Maxx returned to the underground bus station. He knew better than to go inside because they usually had some undercover transit cops stationed there. But if he was close enough to the station, he could hop on the back of a bus, heading away quickly. The drivers usually didn’t pay attention to the passengers in that area because all the rides were free. He kept looking to see if anyone was following him, but so far he felt like he was making a clean break from the scene at the bar. Riding buses would also make anyone trying to follow him easily stand out,

since it would be obvious if anyone got on or off the bus with him.

While walking the last couple of blocks, he called his attorney but had to be careful about what he said over the cell line. He knew from his friends at some of the three-letter federal agencies that they monitored much of the cell traffic, and there had been a big push to expand these programs with the increase in terrorist activity since the Gulf War.

“Hi, Delores, it’s Maxx. Is Daryl in now, or is he out on the golf course again?”

“He’s around here pretending to work,” she said, “probably playing that video game *The Sims* on his computer again. I swear he’s a twelve-year-old boy in a man’s body. Let me put you through.”

She transferred the phone call while Maxx hustled across an intersection.

“Hey, Maxx, how’s it going?” Daryl said when he picked up the phone.

“I’m glad to hear the retainer I pay you every month is allowing you to live the lifestyle of the rich and famous.”

“Damn it, I can’t believe Delores outed me on the video game case that I’m researching!” he said as he laughed.

“Two things, I was heading downtown for the Mariners game and heard a lot of sirens. I was wondering if you could check and see if it’s something I should be concerned about and then give me a ring back.”

“Do I look like the local news?” Daryl responded. “You know I’m going to bill you for this.”

“Yeah, I know, but you have access to some of the inside information at SPD, and I might or might not have left my concealed carry license back at the office, and I might or might not be carrying a lawfully licensed pistol.”

“Since this might or might not be a legitimate legal issue, I’ll check for you. What is the second thing?”

“I was going through old files at the office today. It looks like Natalie had taken on an assignment for us before she left and never told me about it. Now I have some deliverables that are coming due. The agreement is not on our standard contract and looks to be on the client’s paper. I hope she at least had you review it. It was with a company called AI Ventures based out of Wuxi, China.”

Daryl paused for a few seconds. “I remember that contract. I recall telling Natalie to be sure to cover some of the terms with you, because they were unusual. And they were very aggressive about the penalties for nonperformance. I can pull up my notes.”

“That would be perfect,” Maxx answered. “Give me a ring when you get the information from SPD.”

He ended the call as a double bus pulled up to the curb, and he found a seat in the back. A few people got on the bus with him, but none looked like a potential tail. Of course, they could be shadowing him in a car, but they’d be easy to identify in this heavy downtown traffic. The bus was using the dedicated bus lane, so it was pulling further and further away from the vehicles around it.

Maxx had grabbed a bus schedule from the kiosk at the last stop and looked for a place where he could switch back toward home by making a couple of connections. It looked like a good place to switch directions would be by Pike Place. He could walk over a couple of blocks and be in time for a bus to the University District if he hustled.

When the bus pulled into the stop, Maxx waited until all the other passengers had either gotten on or off. As the door was starting to close, he squeezed out on to the busy sidewalk.

He walked over to the drugstore window and watched the bus pull away in the reflection. There were a couple people who had been on board moving in the same direction he was, but they looked like office workers heading home. Only one

woman had gotten on the bus at the same time he had, but she'd been waiting at the stop when he'd arrived, so he discounted her as a possible tail.

After practically running to the next stop, only a group of teenagers boarded with him. Again, no one suspicious, so he was beginning to believe he was out of the target neighborhood that the police might be watching. He might have been lucky... It depended on if they were working off a description of him. Even with a quick change in clothing, he didn't think he'd be overlooked if a police bulletin went out. There weren't many people his size.

Maxx had always been larger than the other kids his age. It was a story his mom loved to tell to anyone who would listen. She had announced she was carrying twins even though the ultrasound had shown that it was one very big boy. His parents had already agreed to name him Max if he was indeed a boy or Maxine if he was a girl and the doctor had been wrong. But after being in labor for six hours, she had finally delivered a healthy twelve-pound, six-ounce boy.

When it came time to fill out the birth certificate, his mother had jokingly said they needed to add an extra X at the end of his name since he was extra-large. Unfortunately, his dad hadn't realized she was joking. Thus, Maxx's nickname became "Extra Large." He had easily lived up to that nickname as he grew up, and the moniker had caused more than one embarrassing moment.

His phone began to vibrate in his pocket as he sat watching the other passengers on the bus and the traffic behind him. The caller ID showed him that it was Daryl, which was a quicker response than he'd expected, and he wasn't sure if that was good news or bad news.

Maxx answered and said, "I'm on a bus at the moment, so I'll have to listen to you."

"No problem. About your first question, there was a fight

down by The Double Play bar, and a couple of guys are going to the hospital. There was a third guy the police are looking for who was apparently known to the other two. Also, a fourth guy might be a witness. Do you know anything about that?"

"Hmm, no, I hadn't gotten that far south," Maxx lied. "Did they give any descriptions?"

"All four were Asian, likely Chinese nationals from the IDs and witness statements."

Maxx was silent as he thought about that information. Clearly something was wrong with the information, but it was to his benefit for now.

"You still there?" Daryl asked after a few seconds.

"Oh right. I was thinking about the second question I'd asked you. Some coincidence about that being a Chinese contract."

"I emailed you my notes. I recall telling Natalie at the time not to take the job. She said you needed the money for some bills. The bottom line was they had some concern about employees from TechCom they were in the process of recruiting and wanted you to do some surveillance and deep background work. It sounded very sketchy to me, and although not illegal, not very ethical."

"She was right. We did need the money, but I wouldn't have taken that kind of work. I know too many people at TechCom, and if word got around I was helping them poach employees, it would cause me to lose more business than what I stood to gain from one contract."

"That isn't even the strangest thing about this," Daryl continued. "You know at least two people they wanted you to review, your girlfriend Gabby and her boss, Dale."

Maxx was confused now. He had been retained to do a thorough background review of Gabby before they had met. Natalie had not mentioned this assignment to him, and Gabby had

never told him that she was considering leaving TechCom to go to work for a Chinese company.

“I’ll look through your notes and get back to you with a plan,” Maxx said. “Obviously, I can’t fulfill that contract now that I’m in a relationship with Gabby. But I don’t want to get sideways with this company and end up paying nonperformance penalties.”

He hung up the phone as he got off the bus and walked the last couple of blocks to his apartment, his head reeling. Maxx’s Spidey senses were tingling. There was something very odd about this...before he even considered the events of the last couple hours.

When he opened the lobby door, he recognized the woman from the bus stop, who stood up from the couch. She was short but built like a gymnast with broad shoulders and long, muscled legs. Her face was an oval, her features—brown, almost black eyes, high cheekbones, full lips—bunched into the middle. She wore a dark mid-length skirt, white blouse, and a blue blazer, which made her look like she’d stepped out of a midlevel attorney’s office.

“We need to talk in private. Let’s take a ride,” she said, walking over confidently and offering Maxx her hand. “I’m a big fan of your work.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John lives in the Seattle area with his wife and the world's sweetest cat: Karmann. Raised in a nomadic military family, he is annoyingly curious, a consumer of whiskey, and a political junkie at heart, but his greatest interests are his family and their collective adventures. And, for the record, he enjoys swimming in the ocean — even if it's with sharks.