

# CHAPTER 1

(1970)

The flaring Zippo lighter momentarily blinded George Ashton, but illuminated the dashboard of the parked 1966 Ford station wagon. The clock read 11:10. Within seconds, the pungent odor of marijuana filled the car.

"Hey man, what the hell are you doing?" George's voice quivered with apprehension.

The man sitting next to him took a drag on the joint, so that his face became faintly visible, high cheek-bones shielding the dark eyes from the sudden smoldering glow. "What do you think I'm doing, Little Wing? Have a hit, man, it'll help you relax...you're way too uptight." Brady Keyes reached over and waved the joint under George's nose.

George pushed it away. "You're a crazy asshole, you know that, Brady?"

"Never laid any claims to the contrary." Brady drew in another big hit, held it, then continued with his exhaling breath, "Speaking of assholes, at least it wouldn't take a John Deere tractor to pull a pin out of mine."

Sudden headlights danced through bare branches to their left, imprinting an eerie spider pattern on the interior of the car. They both froze as the car paused at the stop sign before crossing the intersection in front of them.

"So, I'm a little nervous," George replied. "Anyone would

be, except for you, and it's a matter of public record that you're crazy." He watched the shrinking taillights continuing down the lonely stretch of highway, then waved the joint away. "I'd like to have a semi-clear head when this comes down, okay?"

"Fine. Far be it from me to waste good weed on an ingrate like you."

"Look, Brady, I don't mind being a foot soldier in the revolution, but this gives me the creeps. Maybe you don't feel like you have much to lose, but I do."

Brady swiveled in his seat and stabbed an accusing finger at George. "Then why the hell did you get involved with us in the first place? Why didn't you stay in the Delta Grabba Thighs, or whatever the hell you pinheads called that fraternity? You could be spending the night chug-a-lugging beers with young Republicans and pulling panty raids on sorority chicks."

"Hey, I never actually joined the Delts, I just had a few friends there. They're not all jerks."

Brady laughed and George's cheeks burned with embarrassment. "Listen, I believe in what we're fighting for," he said. "But nobody mentioned anything about highway robbery when I joined, you know?"

The other man took a final hit and exhaled. "You knew we weren't going to be playing patty-cake with the government. You volunteered for this job, as I recall, and this is our only chance to pull it off." He stubbed out the joint in the ashtray. "So quit your goddamn whining and do what you're supposed to."

"But—"

"Just be cool and everything will work out fine."

Two more cars passed through the intersection. George pulled out his own lighter and flicked it on. The clock read 11:25. "I thought they'd be here by now," he said, attempting a nonchalance he didn't feel.

"Tanya said they left the museum at ten. If they averaged fifty, they'd arrive here by 11:15, but they might have stopped

for cigarettes or something. Don't worry, Little Wing, they'll be here."

"And then what?"

"Just be cool," Brady said again.

George persisted. "What are we going to do with all this art we're supposed to boost? I don't know too many people who'll buy hot impressionist paintings."

"We're told only what we need to know. We've been over that."

"Yeah, so if anybody gets caught...but you know, don't you, Brady? I know you get it on with Tanya."

"Forget it."

"If I'm going to risk my life, I'd like to know what it's for, okay?"

Brady gave him a sideways glance, then sighed. "Tanya's got a fence in Hong Kong who'll leak them slowly into the Asian market. We won't get anywhere near what they're worth, but it'll be enough to keep us in guns and butter for a while."

George shook his head. "You're crazy, you know that? And I'm crazy for being here."

"Hey, you had to know."

"Maybe I'd better check on the guys."

"Go ahead, if it'll make you feel any better."

George picked up the army surplus radio/receiver and clicked the mike button. "Green Two, Green One here, come in," he said barely above a whisper, then strained to pick out a voice above the static. "Green Two, can you hear me?"

The reply came a few seconds later, from the van parked a half-mile up the road to their left. "Yeah, George, I can hear you fine."

George heard faint laughter in the background. He turned to Brady. "I think those jerks are stoned." Brady snorted and shook his head. George couldn't tell if he was angry or laughing. He clicked on the mike again. "What are you guys doing?"

The voice on the other end choked down laughter. "Noth-

ing, George. Just waitin' on the man, you know." Before the mike clicked off, George heard all three of them bust up.

"Damn it, Steve, if you guys are high, somebody's going to fuck up and this thing'll go down bad...can't you stay straight for two hours?"

"Hey, cool out, man. We're fine." Steve sounded quite sober until he added, "Fine as wine in the summertime," and burst out laughing.

Brady turned away from the passenger window and made a grab for the radio. "Give me that thing." He clicked on the mike. "Raimus, if you or those other two idiots do *anything* to jeopardize this mission, I will personally shoot all of you, you hear me?"

George had to strain to make out Steve's reply from the set against Brady's ear. "Don't worry, man, we're under control. We're just having a little smoke to relax. You're the one who's always saying it's the only way to cope with reality."

"I don't care if you're shooting horse. Just make sure you're up to the job. Understand?"

George heard Steve's indignant reply: "You just worry about yourselves. We'll hold up our end. Wait. Wait...hey, man, I think this might be them."

Brady clicked the mike. "You sure?"

There was a brief silence before Steve said, "This is it, Green One. Look sharp!"



Steve Raimus watched, wide-eyed, as an unmarked Buick sedan passed in front of their van, followed by a large delivery truck. Steve had parked facing the highway, in the shadow of a large oak tree and out of sight of the road. He set down the radio and started the engine. He didn't switch on the headlights as he pulled onto the highway behind the truck.

Sitting next to him, Rick Vanbrough opened the window to get some air. "Holy shit, man! That was some righteous weed!"

Bobby Teegarten leaned forward from the back of the van. "I can't believe we're doing this. That Brady Keyes is one crazy fucker." He was shivering, maybe from the cold air being blown through the window, or maybe from the tension. "Those paintings are gonna be hotter than two-dollar pistols."

Rick could never resist an opportunity to needle Bobby. "I didn't hear you object when Tanya asked you to volunteer for this."

"Screw you, hophead," Bobby replied. "You're only here because Brady always gets the best dope."

"Shut up, you assholes," Steve snapped. "This is some heavy shit going down. Pay attention."

Following the truck, now about a hundred yards ahead, Steve saw the Buick's brake lights glow as the vehicle slowed for the stop sign. A moment later, the taillights of the truck brightened as well.



Sixty seconds after Steve announced they were rolling, George saw the headlights of two vehicles approaching the intersection. He reached for the keys dangling from the ignition of the Ford, then hesitated.

Brady leaned forward in his seat. "Come on, man. Let's go. We've got to time this perfectly."

"I want to be sure it's them."

"It's them. Let's go!" Brady leaned across, reaching for the ignition.

"All right, all right." George started the car and pulled into the intersection, then killed the motor. By the time the Buick pulled up to the stop sign, he was in front of the Ford, opening the hood.

The Buick's headlights picked out the station wagon like a floodlight. An angry voice called from behind the glare: "Get that piece-of-shit beater out of the road!"

"Hey, man, take it easy." George shaded his eyes, squint-

ing into the headlights. "I'm not superman, you know? How about a little help pushing it to the side?"

A few seconds of silence passed, then George heard two car doors slamming.

Two uniformed security guards cut across the blinding light. "Jesus," said one of the men. "These hippies need help finding their asses in the dark." The speaker was burly, white, mid-to-late forties, and with a well-developed beer belly suspended, defiant of gravity, over his belt. The second guard was smaller, and black.

The big guy glanced at the Ford's open hood and then turned to George. "So, what's wrong?"

"I'm not exactly sure," George said.

Both men stepped up to the hood; neither noticed Brady slipping out of the passenger door. He circled around the back of the Ford and stepped into the puddle of light, shotgun leveled. "Nothing's wrong, so long as you do as you're told."

For a heartbeat, the security guards simply gaped at Brady, with his six-foot, two-hundred pound frame draped in a fatigue jacket, dark straight hair spilling from under a black stocking cap and cold eyes staring back at them.

The driver's hand dropped to his holstered pistol. "What do you think you're doing, punk?"

Brady pointed the shotgun directly at the driver's head. "Don't even think about it, unless you plan on wearing your hat on your shoulders from now on."

"Cool it, Pete," said the smaller guard. "It ain't worth it."

"Your friend's right," Brady said. "Just unbuckle your holster and let it slide to the ground. Both of you. Now." He nodded at George. "Cover them."

George pulled out the .38 special he'd been assigned and aimed it in the general direction of the guards, trying to keep the barrel from wavering. The big guy, Pete, glanced back at him and then slowly unbuckled his gun belt and let it drop. George went up from behind and kicked the holster out of reach. Pete glared. "You punks actually think you're going to get away with this?"

Brady jabbed the shotgun at him. "Shut up and do as you're told, and nobody'll get hurt."

"Fuck you, you long-haired faggot."

Ignoring the insult, Brady motioned for George to deal with the smaller guard's sidearm. As George approached, he could see a bead of sweat trickle down the black man's neck. He tightened his grip on the .38 in order to quell the trembling of his hands, keeping the pistol pointed at the guard as he scuffed the second holster away with his foot. As George looked up again, the security man glanced over his shoulder, back at the truck.

Brady noticed it, too. He yelled toward the truck. "Everything okay back there?"

For a few anxious seconds, they heard nothing. Then Steve said, "A-OK, man."

Brady yelled back, "Well, shake a leg, before more company arrives."

The interior light of the truck came on and two more guards climbed out with their hands up. Steve emerged after them, holding a pistol. He herded the men around the back of the truck.

"I didn't know any of you assholes appreciated art. I thought you just got stoned and played grab-ass with each other," Pete growled.

His partner winced. "Will you please shut up?"

"I will not shut up. These faggots ain't gonna do anything. Come on, Harlen, let's kick their asses right now." Pete glanced at George, whose hands were now shaking visibly. "See that? These pukes are scared shitless." He clenched his fists and took a step forward. "We can take 'em."

Brady flipped his shotgun, slamming the stock into the guard's jutting chin. The man staggered backwards onto the hood of the Buick, then slid to the asphalt.

Harlen started toward him. "Jesus, Pete!"

Brady shouted, "Stay put, Harlen. Show me you're not as stupid as your partner."

Steve's voice sounded from the darkness behind the truck. "Just open the goddamn door!"

Brady glanced over and jerked his head at George, though his shotgun never wavered from Harlen. "Go see what those idiots are doing."

George hurried to the truck and saw Steve holding one of the guards up against the door, his gun pressed against the base of the man's shaved skull. Bobby was scuffling with the second guard. Rick circled them both, trying to grab the guy from behind.

Steve had his target pinned, so George stepped into the fracas and thrust the .38 under the fighter's nose. "Just relax, man."

The guard gave up. "I thought you hippies were into love and peace."

George gave the man just enough attention to keep the gun pointed in the right direction. "We have to get those paintings into the van, now! Move it!"

Steve shrugged and slammed his captive against the van. "This asshole won't open the door."

The guard jerked his bald head, twisting his face away from the steel panel to which he was pinned. "You're just going to have to shoot me."

George cursed under his breath. As soon as these guys got a load of the Rick and Bobby comedy show, they'd know they were dealing with amateurs. Instinct took over—disguised as a sudden, dizzying spurt of adrenaline—and George growled, "You either open the door, or you get to clean up what's left of your partner's head." He jabbed the .38 at the fighter's skull. "Your choice."

Before the bald guy could answer, a deafening gunshot split the night, sounding from somewhere in front of the truck. A flicker of headlights signaled the approach of another car. Things were happening too fast. George's ears were still ringing from the blast, and he panicked. He hauled off with his left fist and hit the fighter, snapping the man's head back. With some surprise, he watched as his target slumped to his knees, then crumpled to the ground.

Steve still had the bald guard pinned against the rear of the truck. George yelled, "Cold cock that son of a bitch!" He

turned to Rick and Bobby, both of whom were gaping like stunned trout. "Help him!"

He left them to it and ran back to the intersection. Brady and the smaller guard, Harlen, were staring at Pete, who was lying in front of the headlights with a shotgun-sized hole in his chest and blood soaking over his oversized stomach.

"What the hell happened?" George demanded.

Brady snapped, "What does it look like? The fool woke up and tried to play hero."

"Jesus, Brady."

Brady glared. "You think I should just go ahead and give Harlen my driver's license, too?"

George flicked his eyes at the approaching headlights. "There's a car coming, man. We've got to get out."

"Did they get the paintings loaded in the van?"

George shook his head. "Those truckers are putting up a fight."

"We're not leaving empty handed," Brady said. "Go get the paintings."

George glanced down the road again. "What about that car?"

"We'll make 'em help unload the truck."

"Fuck the truck," George pleaded. "We've got to go now!"

Behind them, doors slammed and an engine roared into life. Both men jerked their heads towards the sound, and George caught a brief glimpse of Steve behind the wheel of the van, squealing the tires as he threw the vehicle into reverse, then grinding into first gear and roaring around the truck toward the intersection.

Rick shouted out the passenger-side window, "We're screwed, man. We're out of here."

Brady aimed the shotgun at the van. "Get those paintings, you assholes!"

Steve leaned over to the passenger side and shouted, "Forget it, man. There's two cars coming!"

George grabbed at the barrel of the shotgun. Brady spun away from him, stepped back and aimed it directly at his chest. For a few shocked seconds, George simply stared.

"George, get in the fucking car."

As suddenly as it had come to him, the adrenaline drained away, leaving George rubber-kneed. He wanted to pass out and sleep, preferably for a week. He climbed into the station wagon and started the motor. Brady went over to Harlen and with a murmured, "Sorry, bro'," whacked him on the side of the head with the shotgun. Then he ran back to the Ford and jumped in the passenger side. "Hit it, man."

George jammed the transmission into drive and floored the gas, heading south. He glanced to his right to see the tail-lights of Steve's van growing fainter as the others fled to the east.

After a few minutes of silence, he spoke up. "Brady, we're college students, not highwaymen...what did you expect?"

Brady's voice was almost inhuman, and chilled him to the bone. "Just drive," he said.