

No Justice, No Peace

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First few chapters preview

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Chapter 1

Jackson looked past the yellow police tape at the body lying in the street, another black man's body devoid of life in broad daylight, getting soaked in the persistent drizzle. Off to the side was the white officer, who had shot the man lying in the street, being debriefed by the ranking lieutenant while fellow officers kept the growing crowd away from the shooter.

Voices were getting louder from the crowd, but no apparent family member related to the victim was present nor anyone who was with the man before he was shot.

Jackson pulled a monocular from his pocket and focused on the name tag of the shooter, seeing it said "Benson."

He jotted the name down and the number of the squad car he had driven along with the current date and time and tucked the notebook back into his pocket to keep it dry. He looked around to see if he could spot anyone who witnessed the incident.

Off to the side were a teenage couple under an umbrella surrounded by a small knot of people, several bigger men keeping officers at bay.

Jackson edged over to the group and eased up next to one of the men, black of course, standing between a Tampa police officer and the couple. He nodded at the man, not bothering to look at the white cop as he made his way toward the couple.

". . . no, he wasn't doing anything at all. He was walking carrying two bags of groceries, not bothering anyone," the young woman said pointing to the twin bags spilled on the ground.

"Then what happened?" Jackson quietly prompted, drawing glances from several of the assembled.

Jackson Richards was a freelance reporter and Internet blogger standing six feet tall with a slight build and medium brown skin. His features were thin but pleasant, and his voice

was smooth and soothing.

The young man picked up the story, tipping the umbrella toward the man lying in the street. “He was walking along when the cop car drove up, and the cop rolled down the window. We couldn’t really hear what was said, but the brother raised his hands, still holding his bags when the cop got out of the car.”

“He wasn’t doin’ nothing, just holding the bags when the cop put his hand on his gun and shouted that he wanted to see some ID,” the woman said.

“The brother lowered his left hand . . .” the young man began.

“Was he still holding the bag?” Jackson interrupted.

“Sure was,” the woman replied.

“He reached down to put the bag on the ground, and when he reached for his back pocket, the cop shot him four times!” said the man.

“He didn’t have anything in his hand?” asked Jackson.

“Hell, naw. And the first thing the cop did when the brother hit the ground was to look around to see who was watching. When he saw us, and that old man over there, he shouted for us to keep back,” the young man said, nodding toward an elderly man talking to two police officers on the other side of the street.

“Did the officer touch the body?” Jackson asked.

“He checked the brother’s neck, but he didn’t do anything else. That cop in the white shirt took the man’s wallet when he arrived, but there’s no sign of a weapon, and they couldn’t plant one on him with all of us watching,” explained the young man.

“I do some online reporting for some black news sites, would it be all right if I contact you later about the entire incident?” Jackson asked. He then saw the young woman pull on the man’s shirt as she whispered in his ear.

Jackson waited patiently while they made up their minds.

“Do you have a card? We can get back to you—maybe,” the man said, holding out his hand.

Jackson gave the man his card and watched as the couple read his name and the Web site.

“Yeah, maybe we’ll give you a call,” the man said.

“Thank you. I would appreciate hearing from you. It’s always best getting an observant, uninvolved party to help tell

the real story, not the one the cops want to tell,” Jackson said, watching the two nod in agreement.

“This is your cell phone number?” the woman asked.

“It is. Call me anytime.”

Jackson slowly edged away from the couple, nodding to the same brother keeping the cop at bay, meandering through the crowd, eavesdropping.

The crowd had grown larger in the short amount of time Jackson had been on the scene. The humidity was cloying, the air almost liquid. The temperature, in the nineties, jacked up the discomfort, and crowd, overwhelmingly black, was getting louder and angrier as the minutes ticked by.

Once he'd seen and heard enough, Jackson headed back to his rental car parked several blocks away. When he got into the car he turned his custom police scanner on in time to hear the call for the coroner's office dispatch to the site to pick up the body.

Jackson fired up his tablet and waited for it to log online. He made a quick stop at the Tampa Police Department page and did a search for Officer Benson, finding out his first name, Earl, and that he was a six-year veteran of the force. He then logged into a secret, highly encrypted site that his tablet could only access because of a special app that managed the highly encrypted traffic.

He logged in then created an incident report with the date, time, and officer's name, planning to get the victim's name and background information once it was released. He added some brief notes on the locale and then logged off.

In the fifty years since Ronald Reagan was elected President of the United States, a radical change in law enforcement occurred. Police departments in major cities and small towns alike became virtual paramilitary forces. Their arms, uniforms and tactics became those of anti-insurgency units trained in war, no longer simply civilian forces to uphold the law. And along with these changes came a corresponding change in the legal system where prosecutors, lawyers and judges became a direct conduit for nonwhites to be immediately incarcerated in a profit-driven prison system regardless of the evidence, that is, when the nonwhite “offender” wasn't simply killed outright.

Despite national outrage, far too many in positions of power turned a blind eye to the activities of increasingly belligerent local police forces. And here America stood: a land of infinitely greater peril for any man of color, with young black men thirty-five times more likely to be shot and killed by a police officer than any white man.

The wealthiest four hundred families in America had been running the country using their lap dogs, the Republican Party, for decades. For nearly two generations they had propelled over half of the nation's wealth into those families' hands. And though Republicans hadn't seen the inside of the White House since the disastrous eight years under George W. Bush, they were doing their best to keep the country moving toward an oligarchy-run police state.

Conservative organizations like The American Legislative Exchange had been crafting laws for "Red States," extending the privilege of the non-consequential murder of black men and teens to white civilians. Laws like those grouped under the title "Stand Your Ground" were frequently used by whites in Red States like Texas and Florida where the killing of blacks was excused because white shooters felt threatened by the mere presence of a black male, and the juries all went along with the notion. White police officers and civilians had their automatic "get out of jail free" card for the murders merely stating, "I feared for my life."

The ubiquity of the dumbing down of America, which began with Richard Nixon having declared war on the intelligentsia, continued unabated. Elementary schools had been scoured of any classes that provoked analysis of the issues of the day, the same with high schools across America. Students were deprived of any classroom exercises that taught cause and effect, now with testing standards designed to graduate students just smart enough to make change at McDonalds.

College was only for the moneyed elite, or athletes who made the colleges and universities that great sports revenue and were often cut loose dumber than when they enrolled.

Republicans also made sure that middle and underclass Americans scrambled for the few remaining jobs across the country, having presided over changes to the trade laws and

tax codes that eliminated 46,000 manufacturing companies in a single decade. The number of jobs sent offshore were legion, leaving the United States absent the manufacturing capacity that once ruled the world. The world's economy was laid low by the criminal greed of the white elite bankers.

Whatever the machinations of those driving American culture forward, Jackson was invoking serious respect in online and broadcast media for his sober, factual coverage of the nation's police shootings. And though some local departments tried to refute some of the rather obvious conclusions in Jackson's reporting, even the FBI largely agreed with the statistics published in Jackson's blog, "Jackson's Real Deal."

In the fifteen years since the events in Ferguson, Missouri, little had changed despite a worldwide condemnation of the killing of unarmed, innocent boys and men of color with the now-familiar "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" and "I Can't Breathe" refrains when history tragically repeated itself. Jackson's Real Deal contained thousands of comprehensive reports of police-involved incidents of violence against the very people they were supposed to protect.

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Jackson Richards grew up in the northern suburbs of Chicago. He came from a family of culturally invisible African Americans. He was raised by his mother and father, both of whom had respectable, upper middle class jobs. His mother was the accounting department head for a medium-sized hospital while his father supervised a crew of engineers for the regional transit authority.

He attended public schools, and along with very respectable SAT and ACT scores, he easily scored an academic scholarship at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign campus in journalism, specializing in digital media. He had no police record, he had never been arrested. He didn't own a hoodie, nor did he sound like actor J.J. Walker when he spoke, except when it suited him. He favored jazz over rap and was an accomplished sketch artist by the time he graduated.

In his sophomore year of college, Jackson created a website

that aggregated over fifty college and university basketball and football scores, including game statistics, only stealing a half hour of his time each morning to aggregate. It became the go-to destination on his campus until word-of-mouth spread. Soon, he had two other students populating the content that he was able to pay out of local and national advertising as the site's popularity grew.

By his second year of online operation, he had to move the website off the campus network because it was drawing too much traffic. By then he was pulling in about \$5,000 in advertising revenue each month, mostly from beer and sporting goods companies. However, he struck gold in his senior year when ESPN Sports advertised televised college games on his site. By the time he graduated he had \$700,000 in the bank and a half dozen offers to buy the site, which he eventually sold to the ESPN Sports Network for more than enough money to retire on.

Jackson was smart, savvy. He approached everything he did looking at every angle he could think of before he chose the path to be taken, this included his romantic life as well. It was no secret on campus he was well off while he was in school, attracting his share of co-eds interested in his attentions and his money. But Jackson was no fool. He knew he was too young to be saddled with a wife or children while he was in school. Nor was he interested in forming a relationship with someone in school with the expectation that they would marry upon graduation.

When he did graduate, Jackson decided to take a rail tour around the United States. He first returned home to spend some time with his parents. Since it was summer vacation, his younger sister (by two years) was also home. The entire family took some time off together. They went to several concerts, the local amusement park where Jackson coaxed the entire family to ride the park's fastest roller coaster together, all-in-all, a good time was had by all.

Jackson discussed his plans to see the country by rail. His mother helped him plan out his route, sharing the task of researching the various long-haul Amtrak passenger lines, schedules and destinations. Over dinner they would all discuss

various historical sites, national attractions and notable cities, planning the best routes to take and when the best times for layovers would be in the cities along the way. As it was approaching the beginning of July, they decided that arriving at the nation's capital for the Independence Day celebrations would be a great kickoff for Jackson's tour.

Armed with what his mother insisted was the necessary count of socks and underwear, a snazzy backpack equipped with solar cells to keep his mobile phone and tablet charged by sunlight alone, and a year's Amtrak Ameripass, Jackson departed from Chicago's Union Station on the Capitol Limited with Washington, D.C. his destination.

Chapter 2

“Good morning everyone, it is 6:00 A.M., and the temperature has already reached 81° in Manhattan. Time for the news,” the radio announced before a hand slapped the button on the top of the clock to turn it off.

Andrew Simmons cracked an eye toward the clock knowing full well what it was going to show him. Simmons was one of the top urban planners working for one of the largest consulting firms in New York. In the eight years since he had left military service and joined the firm, Simmons had been all across the United States and in a dozen countries, first contributing to, then leading engineering and design projects in urban planning. His expertise was public transportation infrastructure, which didn't much surprise his old friends from the army. His advancement through and deployment after US Army Sniper School was characterized by methodical planning and execution, often literally, of his missions. His missions inevitably paired him with white spotters, but his accuracy and attention to detail gave him a reputation of unbroken success without mishap, injury or a team member's death.

Now, he lived on Long Island and commuted to and from the firm's tony office suite in Soho reading the morning's news on his tablet during the commute.

Although he was staying home to get some work done in peace without everyone constantly asking him questions on this or that project, his attention was caught by the news of the shooting of another innocent, unarmed black man in Tampa by a white cop. He breezed through the story, did a search for more information about the incident and inevitably landed on the Jackson's Real Deal website. He read the reporting of the facts posted, including the shooter's name, noting that an internal

investigation by the Tampa Police Department was underway.

Simmons shook his head after he finished reading, finding that the majority of the news coverage was just rehashed information from the initial Tampa newspaper report. His anger over the continued injustices fellow black males faced in the U.S. never showed. Neither did his feelings about the racist nonsense he faced in the military. His response to the racist crap he faced in the army was to be better than any other man he competed against and to do so without comment, letting his actions do all his speaking for him.

Once he left the service, he parlayed his Bachelors in Engineering into a nice gig with the company he still worked for, and with his same methodical way of doing things, worked his way up through the ranks. He was now one of the top three consulting engineers for the firm. In addition to making a very respectable seven figure salary, he brought in over one hundred million dollars in revenue per annum. This fact alone gave Simmons a great amount of freedom, specifically the freedom to manage his own time without interference.

Just as he was getting out of the shower he heard his mobile phone ring.

Dripping water across the bedroom, he grabbed the phone off the night table and answered.

“Hello?” he said, wiping water from his body with the towel he grabbed along the way.

“One Shot! What’s up, killer?”

“Get the fuck out! Is that really you?” he replied.

“In the flesh, so to speak.”

The caller was a voice from the past, Anthony Dawson, former USMC sniper who later went to work for the CIA. The two initially met in the African Congo where their individual assignments chanced to bring them together in a bar in Tanzania before Dawson was dispatched to Uganda and Simmons was off to Rwanda, both tasked to eliminate particularly vicious warlords with a penchant for killing hundreds of their own people at the drop of a hat to keep “order.”

“Brother, you are a hard man to find, or at least you were at first. Found out where you worked, called up and told them I was a buddy from way back and sweet-talked your number

out of the nice chick who answered,” said Dawson, chuckling.

“I forget, did I leave you holding the bag on that bar tab?” Simmons replied, also laughing.

“Not at all. Just was thinking about you the other day and decided to see what you’re up to.”

“Cool beans. And you, still in the family business?”

“Now that’s a good question. But if I had to tell the truth, no. I left all that spookiness behind. Hey, I’m in New York for the next couple of days, how ‘bout I buy you dinner and we can catch up? You have time in the next day or so?”

“My time’s basically my own this week. How about tonight?” Simmons asked, mentally checking his calendar.

“Good enough. How well do you know the city?” asked Simmons.

“Name a place, I’ll find it.”

The two set up the time and restaurant, then concluded their call. Simmons was more happy than curious about Dawson’s call. The two belonged to a select fraternity of men who had precision killing in common. He breezed through the day, checking out the requests for quotes on an engineering project for the city of Detroit and one in Dubia.

The day passed quickly, and when Simmons looked up from his work, he saw that he had to get a move on if he wanted to be on time.

When he arrived at the Italian restaurant not far from the UN Plaza Hotel, he saw Dawson hanging out just off the entrance.

The two hugged then quickly went inside out of the heat. Simmons gave his name to the hostess, who crossed off his name in the reservation book and took them to a table. A waitress was there as they sat who quickly took their drink orders after she set a basket of warm bread on the table.

Once she was gone, Simmons said, “Damn, Dawson. You’re the last person I expected to hear from these days. How the hell are you?”

Dawson sat back and took a sip of water before answering.

“Pissed off and ain’t gonna be talked out of it. You see that shit in the news today about that kid murdered by a cop?” he asked.

“Yeah, first thing this morning.”

“You know how many that makes this year? And the year ain’t even half over.”

Simmons shook his head. “No, how many?”

“Thirty-four.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. You ever check out Jackson’s Real Deal online? He’s got a running count for every year since the site went up. Today’s was the thirty-fourth killing of an unarmed black person this year.”

Simmons was silent for a moment, then said, “That’s the one page I generally don’t click on. But I have checked it out.”

“It piss you off, One Shot?”

“Hey, call me Andy. No one needs to know,” Simmons said in a low voice.

“I get you, no offense, man.”

“None taken,” Andrew said bumping fists with Dawson.

“Yeah, it took a little while before I started answering to ‘Tony’ when I got out.”

“How long have you been out?” Simmons asked.

“Six years in September.”

“What have you been doing since?”

“Logistics for OpFor International. It pays better than the old family did, and I don’t have to wear the Ghillie anymore. I wear what I want, and most of the time I get to sleep in my own bed at night,” Dawson said then paused while the waitress dropped off their drinks.

They clinked glasses and sipped in silence.

“So tell me, what is it you do today?” Dawson inquired.

“Mostly civil engineering. I have a team that solves problems for municipalities around the world. I guess I’m out of the country about two to three months a year. We do traffic, water infrastructure, green tech, most anything you need in a town or city to support the population,” he explained.

“You like it?”

“Yeah. It’s like problem solving on a macro level. Plus, it’s never boring.”

“You miss the life at all?”

Simmons looked into Dawson’s eyes and slowly shook his

head. "I'm through doing Uncle Sam's dirty work."

"I hear ya' brother. You still keeping sharp?"

"About once a month. Why?"

"Just wondering."

Simmons burst out laughing startling Dawson.

"Man, you are still some piece of work. You call me completely out of the blue, suggest we get together, and then don't have a damn thing to say? Brother, just spit it out, you in some kind of trouble? You need money? All you have to do is ask, we've eaten the same mud and bled the same blood. What's mine is yours."

"Hey, you know that goes both ways. But it ain't nothing like that. I have something I want to talk to you about, but I'm not sure how to lay it out. There's risk involved for me and maybe for you," Dawson said quietly.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Risk to me? How?"

"Hey, I said maybe." Dawson paused and took a good swallow of his drink then lowered his voice even more and said, "I hear there's a movement growing that's focused on ending these murders in this country," then paused to see Simmons' reaction.

Also lowering his voice, Simmons said, "That would be some trick. They've been killing us ever since the first black foot landed on the shore. That ain't going to be easy. You know there's been a handful of vigilantes who've popped cops. But they all got caught or killed. Plus, most of the cop killings just got whole neighborhoods roused and more than a few folks shot in revenge."

The conversation paused when the food arrived, and they dug in.

A few minutes later, Simmons asked, "So how's that going to be done? How do you change a half-millennium tradition?"

"Good question. When you ask fifteen different people you get fifteen very different answers. Academics intellectualize the problem and talk about changing societal paradigms. But the shit hasn't changed, so where's the intellectual imperative been? You talk to the militant crowd, and they want revolution and killing whitey. That shit ain't gonna do anything but get a whole lot of black folks killed. I read *The Spook Who By The*

Door and Siege way back when. This country has too many guns and crazy white folks to pull the triggers for that to be a winning strategy.” Dawson paused.

“So, your people have an idea how to change America’s pastime of killing us?” asked Simmons.

“Not sure yet. What’s that line from Macbeth? ‘If it were done tis done then twere well.’ And yes, I’ve read a book or two.”

“Whatever the—the cure, for lack of a better term—there’s got to be a shock and awe component to it,” Simmons observed.

“No doubt. That’s the reason I looked you up. You were hands down the best mission planner I ever met. One hundred percent mission success rate, no one has ever hit that number since.”

Simmons shook his head, “That’s because I was determined that Momma Simmons’ favorite boy always came home. Are you looking for shooters?”

“No, at least not yet. These folks are trying to see what can actually change in the US because everything that’s been tried in the past hasn’t done a damn thing. But it’s past time for a change. What I’d like you to do is toss some ideas around to see if you can come up with something, anything, that would make white cops stop killing us.”

Simmons barked out a laugh. “Yeah, wouldn’t that be the shit! Hell, man, I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Just think about it. We’ll get together in a few weeks and see what you might come up with.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Simmons said already trying to figure out where to start.

Their conversation swung around to the more mundane: lives, loves, dreams, etc. Simmons found out that Dawson lived in Texas, not far from the OpFor training compound, just west of San Antonio. Neither was married, although Simmons had a close friend with benefits who was his usual companion when he had a business event to attend or when he needed a night out, the arrangement suited them both.

Dawson worked hard and played hard. He hadn’t settled down, at least not so far.

When they finished eating and were standing outside the

restaurant, they exchanged email addresses. Dawson pulled Simmons into a hug saying, “You are definitely a sight for sore eyes, One Shot. Stay frosty, I’ll catch up with you the next time I swing through town.”

As he walked to the garage, Simmons went over the conversation, spoken and unspoken. If one was stupid, the whole visit appeared to be recruitment for a paramilitary vigilante team. But Dawson wasn’t stupid, and neither was Simmons. They would more than likely be bounced out of any mission like that, that is if they didn’t desert first.

But it was a good intellectual exercise, how to stop a practice that had been going on as far back as when whites themselves arrived on the continent. A practice so imbedded into the fabric of the country that it persisted essentially unchanged for over four centuries. How could you stop white cops from murdering innocent, unarmed blacks? There was little consequence the police faced, maybe sitting behind a desk for thirty days and some additional paperwork. But since the law, the prosecutors, the fraternal orders and far too many judges were enablers in the murder of innocent blacks, the legal route was a useless path to justice. For the last generation, those Stand Your Ground laws had extended cover to ordinary citizens who shot blacks with the shooter merely having to tell juries (if charged at all) that “they feared for their lives” and they were almost all automatically found not guilty of any wrongdoing.

What would stop a rogue white cop from pulling the trigger? Could anything stop him from pulling the trigger?

A good number of people had debated the idea, probably ever since blacks were first brought to the continent. Surely freed slaves who were automatically assumed to be runaways dealt with the topic daily.

More recently in the previous several generations the arguments swung away from more laws and increased accountability, which proved useless, to revenge killings of rogue cops. Sneaking up on unsuspecting officers and opening fire had a precarious success rate at best. And even if the officers were killed, the blowback to the black community was just more innocent people killed by twitchy cops bent on revenge.

It was something Simmons had been thinking about off

and on for quite some time, often triggered when he read about another innocent black man, child, or woman killed by a white cop. When it got down to it, he was willing to do most anything to make it stop.

Chapter 3

Jackson carefully observed the news coverage of the Tampa shooting investigation over the following two weeks, publishing updates in his online database of police-involved shootings, and noticing that the record of the Tampa shooting had been accessed over three hundred thousand times since it had been posted.

The Tampa Police Department, the mayor, and the district attorney were under enormous pressure to indict Officer Benson as soon as possible. Demonstrations at City Hall were staged daily with protestors arriving at sun up and lasting well into the night. The growing frustration of both blacks and whites concerned with social justice was so evident, the district attorney was under pressure to indict regardless of the grand jury's findings.

The Tampa Bay Times reported that while under suspension, Officer Benson was in an undisclosed location in the city while the investigation moved forward. A fluff piece on his family reported that they had been relocated to another location, presumably out of town.

Jackson noted both facts in the online record, dated for today. When he was done, he perused the national news looking for any new cases of officer-involved shootings. He knew statistically that there were three or more such shootings every day in the United States. His online database had collected more than seven thousand shootings since he put the site up online. And even though several departments in the federal law enforcement community readily admitted the fact that Jackson's records were better organized and better researched than most of theirs, still, many police-involved killings simply never made it into the national news.

Just as he was about to log off his site, Jackson received an alert notifying him that the Tampa Grand Jury was due to release their findings on the officer-involved shooting after the close of business the coming Friday. Jackson chuckled as he read the bulletin. They always do that, he thought, trying to bury bad or controversial news when everyone was on their way to their weekend.

He clicked on his travel agency link and looked into flights to Tampa over the next few days, scheduling a Friday morning flight. That would give him a little time to nose around before the district attorney's press conference.

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Officer Benson was tense, having spent the previous week essentially a prisoner in a hotel on the outskirts of Tampa. He had been sequestered by the Chief of Police as the grand jury got closer to releasing their findings.

Police Chief Daniels immediately sent a dozen officers to Benson's home to maintain order, making sure that everyone in the house stayed safe. He then suggested that Officer Benson send his family away for the time being, and that Benson himself hide out away from the press and anyone else.

Just after Benson had eaten lunch, the phone rang.

"Yeah, hello," he said, remembering not to use his name.

"Daniels. How are you holding up, son?"

"I'm fine if I don't turn on the damn TV. It ain't too friendly out there, Chief," he said nervously.

"Well I'm calling to set you at ease, Earl. The District Attorney is not going to indict. He called to give me the heads up and to post up some officers around City Hall. I'm sending two extra cars to guard your home to keep anyone from throwing rocks at the windows or whatever."

"So how long do I have to hole up over here? It's driving me nuts. If the DA isn't going to indict, I should get back to work, right?" Benson said hopefully.

"Let's see how the local news coverage goes once the DA makes the announcement. It's not like you're there on your dime. Be patient, it'll all blow over soon. It always does. How's

the wife and kids?” the chief inquired.

“They’re fine. Susan and my mom have been taking them around to all the parks around Orlando, they’re supposed to go to Disney World in the morning. I really miss ‘em,” he said morosely.

“Why don’t you join them for the weekend? And we’ll see what Monday or Tuesday looks like,” offered the chief.

“Hell no! I want to go back to work. You can’t let these civilians pressure you, the DA’s going to say that I did nothing wrong! This isn’t right!”

“I suggest you calm down, son. Or did you forget who’s running this department? Maybe you’re thinking that you’d be happier working somewhere else?” Daniels said letting the threat hang out there.

After a few moments, Benson said, dejectedly, “I hear you, chief. But I ain’t leaving town just in case everything calms down over the weekend. I want to be ready to come in as soon as you tell me the coast is clear.”

“All right, Earl. I’m not going to make you leave town, but you keep your head down. I’ll keep you posted and have someone keep an eye on your house. Stay cool, it’ll all be over soon,” Daniels said then hung up. Seconds later, he ordered additional coverage on Benson’s home and dispatched another patrol car to circulate around the hotel where Benson was staying.

The call had gone out earlier for additional off-duty officers to gather at Police Headquarters for a special afternoon briefing. The plan was to deploy the additional officers around City Hall to direct traffic and keep any demonstrations orderly.

Chief Daniels started the briefing promptly at three o’clock with the room filled to overflowing.

“Okay, let’s get started. Everyone have their deployment chart?” Daniels asked looking around the room.

Seeing hands raised, he continued. “We’re closing surface streets to vehicular traffic for a two-block radius. Any authorized traffic will be directed in and out on Kennedy Boulevard, but no vehicles any closer than a block away from the building. There will be no demonstrators or the press any closer than across the street.

“I want all press credentials scrutinized and for each member of the media to provide at least two pieces of picture identification before they are allowed through security screening. CNN will be allowed to broadcast the video feed to everyone else who wants it. I don’t want a shit load of cameras blocking up the place.”

One of the officers near the back of the room raised his hand.

“Yes, what is it?” asked Daniels visibly annoyed at the interruption.

“Sir, do you know what the grand jury is going to recommend? Is that why this show of force?”

Daniels shook his head, a wry grin on his face. “Even if I did know, there’s no way I could tell anyone before the announcement by the DA. Regardless of which way the grand jury goes, a whole lot of people are going to be pissed off, it’s our job to maintain order. That’s your job and responsibility, keep peace on the streets.”

A captain raised his hand. “Will we be issuing riot gear? I don’t want my troops to be caught with their pants down if it gets out of hand—”

“Things aren’t going to get out of hand!” Daniels snarled. “Everyone hear me? I don’t want anything to happen that causes a shit storm in the press. You all get me?” he spat out. “You all know the plan. The van will be circulating with helmets, shields, and the usual riot gear. If you need it, it’ll be there. Are there any other questions? No? Then let’s get to it.”

Even as the Tampa officers were deploying, a crowd had already gathered at City Hall. Jackson Richards was queued up with the rest of the media representatives, waiting for access to the building. He chitchatted with several of the talking heads from the local television stations, getting a sense of their perspectives, and the likely way the coverage would go depending on the grand jury’s recommendations. Several of the media people were aware of whom Jackson was, but had never met him. Jackson was bemused when two of them asked for his autograph. Fortunately, where they were queuing was on the shady side of the building in the day’s heat, with the temperature hovering in the low nineties with humidity to match.

At half past six, the members of the media were let into the building in a single file, and had to pass through metal detectors and serious scrutiny of their credentials. Jackson watched as more than a few were turned away, very upset at being denied admittance.

Jackson and the rest were conducted to the room where the DA would make his statement. There were eighty or so people all talking to each other, speculating on the grand jury's findings. The consensus was that given the witnesses who had been all over television in the days after the shooting, and their description of the officer's actions the odds were running five to one on the DA handing down an indictment.

The media representatives were confined to the room without anyone from the DA's office showing up until an hour later, at least the air conditioning had the room comfortable. And when the mood of the assembled was threatening to explode in frustration, District Attorney Nelson Parker entered with a phalanx of suits trailing behind him.

As he took his place at the podium with the others flanked him from behind, Parker organized his notes and cleared his throat.

“Good evening, everyone, I'm District Attorney Nelson Parker, thank you all for coming. In the grand jury's examination of the facts presented, the testimony of twenty-one witnesses, including that of Officer Earl Benson, transcripts of the police radio traffic and three calls to 911, with more than one hundred exhibits, the grand jury has recommended that no charges be filed against Officer Benson—”

The room erupted with shouted questions, rising to an almost painful din. Seconds later, the crowd outside was dimly heard as someone in the room must have texted the finding by phone. The shouting continued several minutes after Parker raised his hands indicating his desire for order. When the room began to quiet down, members of the media waited for Parker to resume.

Once the room went silent, Parker continued. “As I was about to say, the full grand jury report will be posted on the city's website next week. Until then, I have very little to add at this time other than to state that as far as this office is concerned,

the investigation into whether or not to charge Officer Benson is concluded, there will be no charges filed.”

Jackson listened as questions were thrown at the DA, who either said that the information sought would be available online next week interspersed with more than a few “no comments.”

After fifteen minutes of DA Parker’s stonewalling, Jackson made his way out of the building only to be met with a wall of sound that was almost a physical assault on his person. Even though the crowd was on the other side of the street, their shouting was deafening. The officers around the building looked nervous, questioning the prudence of not being issued their riot gear. Even with the S.W.A.T. van parked in the loading dock, the officers knew just how quickly things could get out of hand.

Jackson walked into the street and into the crowd. Several people asked him what was said, and he told them, raising his voice to a shout to be heard over the din. He kept moving, quickly leaving the crowd behind and walked back to his hotel.

Once in his room, Jackson grabbed a bottle of water from the room’s fridge, turned on the television, and tuned to one of the local stations. He figured he was too late for any special bulletin but was content to wait for the 11:00 P.M. news. He pulled his tablet out of his bag and connected to the hotel’s public Wi-Fi. Once connected, he logged into his server and began to update the information on the grand jury finding, thin as it was. He then saw several interviews of the victim’s family and friends. The victim, Robert Wilson, was described by everyone interviewed as a good churchgoing man with no criminal record whatsoever. Community leaders from the black church in Tampa pleaded for calm knowing that were there to be massive demonstrations, any kind of civil disobedience or violence would visit more misery on nonwhites in unhealthy measure.

Deciding to grab a bite while he waited for the local news to come on, Jackson took his tablet down to the hotel restaurant, and while he ate, caught up on the news and sports around the country. The news about the Tampa grand jury recommending not to indict Officer Benson was already all over the news sites online, though none had anything new to report. Jackson was convinced that he was in for breathless speculation from talking

heads with absolutely nothing factual to report.

After a fairly good meal and a couple of beers, Jackson returned to his room to watch the coverage of the DA's announcement and to see whether or not someone from the police department went on record. He chuckled when every local channel announced that the mayor was unavailable for comment then got upset when the head of the local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police spouted off the usual bullshit about the police departments around the nation were the "thin blue line" that kept law-abiding citizens safe on the streets and in their homes. When he had exhausted the local coverage, he switched over to CNN wanting to see what the national coverage looked like.

He was about ten minutes into the show when there was a special bulletin banner splashed along the bottom of the screen. His interest perked up when he saw that the bulletin was about an explosion in Orlando.

When CNN broke for the local reporter, Jackson saw that the epicenter of the explosion was a house destroyed due to a suspected gas leak. The local video showed the remains of a two-story frame house whose ruins were completely engulfed in flames. There didn't appear to be any damage to the homes on either side of the one on fire, but the burning rubble of the exploded house was only about three feet high above ground.

He was only listening with half of his attention until the newswoman making the on-scene report disclosed the owner's name and identified her as the mother of Officer Earl Benson, the officer just cleared of any wrongdoing in the Tampa shooting investigation.

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Office Benson was in his underwear, laying down watching a movie when the phone in his hotel room rang. Picking it up, he heard the chief saying his name before he could speak.

"Earl, Earl, are you there?"

Sitting up, fearing someone had done something to his home, Earl answered in panic, "What's up, chief?"

"Have you been watching the news, son?"

“No, I was catching a movie. Why? What’s wrong?” Earl said, now completely freaked out.

“Was your family visiting your mother in Orlando, son?” Daniels said soberly.

“You know they were. Why, what happened?!”

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but it appears there’s been an accident. There’s been an explosion at the house, the fire department says it was gas-related.”

Benson nearly dropped the phone as all strength drained from his body. His mind just couldn’t process what the chief had told him.

“Earl! Are you there, son?”

After a moment he said, “I’m . . . here.”

“Is there any chance they were out to a late dinner, somewhere out of the house?”

In shock, Benson was able to reply, “No, Susan always had the kids in bed by nine o’clock.” He paused, trying to get himself together. “Did they find anyone yet?”

“No, the Orlando PD said that until they get the fire completely out, there’s no way to be able to tell. Son, do you want me to send someone over there? Whatever you need, just ask. I could stop by—“

“No, no—I’m going to go home and get a few things and go there. I have to know—“

”That’s not a very good idea, Earl. There’s nothing to know until at least tomorrow. Let the locals do their job. Your being there isn’t going to help them, or you. I know telling you to get some rest is a waste of time, but I don’t want you going off half-cocked. I want you to stay put. The Orlando PD will be calling me with any updates, I’ll keep you posted, son. You hear what I’m saying, stay put. Do I have to put someone in the room with you, Earl?”

Earl was just shaking his head, trying to get his mind wrapped around the possibility that his entire family was dead. “Yeah—I hear you.” Benson paused, then asked, “You gonna be in tomorrow?”

“Of course, son. I want to make sure I know exactly what’s going on.”

“I’ll see you in the morning. I want to know what they find.

Otherwise, I'm going to see for myself.”

“I understand. I'll be in by seven.”

Earl just hung up the phone, grabbing the television's remote flipping around until he landed on CNN, showing the home on fire in a window onscreen while the talking head in the studio was rehashing the Tampa DA's announcement, mentioning that the home on fire was that of Tampa PD. Officer Benson's mother, April Benson. He then tried calling his wife's mobile phone and listened as it rang then went to voice mail. He left word telling her to call him as soon as she got the message, and then almost threw the phone across the room before getting hold of himself.

When Daniels got off the phone he called the front desk of the hotel and inquired whether the room across Benson's was available. When informed that it was, Daniels booked it and informed them that a couple of officers would be by shortly for the room.

When he concluded that call, Daniels then called on his two best protective detail officers and dispatched them to the hotel to keep an eye on Benson's room, to make sure no one tried to get at the officer, and to make sure Benson stayed put.