

WATCH DOGS™ //n/Dark Clouds

A novel by John Shirley

Inspired by the Ubisoft Game

For all fans of Ubisoft and Watch Dogs

Watch dog, n

1. A person or group of persons who acts as a guardian against theft or illegal practices or waste.

2. A dog trained to guard property.

3. An individual who sees behind the curtain and is prepared to step forward when the need arises.

CHAPTER ONE

He had been on Aiden Pearce's trail for weeks.

Walking along the waterfront in an early November mist, under a reticent sun half-shrouded by a silky gray screen of clouds, Mick Jeremiah Wolfe was glad to be back in Chicago. Despite the cold and the mistrust and the frustration, it felt *right* to be here. He'd grown up in "Back of the Yards", the neighborhood fringing what had been the old stockyards, and Wolfe felt Chicagoan from his ice blue eyes to the bottom of his booted feet. He still wore the Army boots, and Delta Force jacket—but the Special Forces jacket was shorn of its shoulder patches and insignia. They'd taken all that away from him, after the dishonorable discharge.

Six years "in-country"—first Afghanistan, then Mali and Somalia. Three Purple Hearts, two Bronze Stars, Two Silver Stars. And then...a dishonorable discharge for being stupid enough to listen to the low but insistent voice of his own conscience...

He should have gone with major league cynicism like the other guys.

It is what it is, he thought. For now.

Just find Aiden Pearce...

Wolfe was walking along North Lake Shore, striding along between the freeway and the old red brick buildings, hands in his pockets against the sting of the rolling mist coming off Lake Michigan. Wolfe stretched, a little, as he walked along, trying to look like a relaxed guy out for a good stretch of his legs. The rolling mist tried unsuccessfully to cloak the cars humming between him and the giant inland sea they called a lake. To his left were the old brick tenements that had been turned into upscale condos, apartments with doormen. That view of Lake Michigan was worth money.

The north wind was picking up, out there, clearing up the mist, ruffling the waves. There were sunken ships concealed within the Great Lakes, Wolfe knew; well preserved ships, some of them going back two hundred years. They were unseen monuments to the sunken dead.

And not so very far from here, inland, was another kind of monument to the lost dead: in a Back of the Yards cemetery lay the bones of his father, Colin Wolfe, killed by a bomb blast. Murdered, all those years ago. And why? Because he hadn't bought into the universal cynicism. Killed—and by whom? The triggerman had been shot two weeks later by another thug, in a stupid fight over a woman. There wasn't even a hope of revenge for his father...who'd made the mistake of listening to his conscience...

Only a fool listens to his conscience...

Wolfe glanced up at a light pole, and saw a ctOS camera just under the lamp, swiveling to watch him go by. He smiled at it, giving it a mock salute and continued on his way.

Wolfe didn't mind ctOS in theory. But he knew it could be misused...

He'd like to "misuse" it himself. Or anyway, he wanted to use it for his own agenda...

The City Operating System, ctOS, was liked by most Chicagoans—so far. It fine-tuned the traffic lights to keep traffic flowing; it sent help almost instantly if there was a crash. It monitored electricity use, switching off what wasn't needed; it identified areas of waste, of congestion of every kind. It watched out for crime. It was capable of taking emergency data directly from cell phones with the ctOS crisis app...

But applications like that also made it vulnerable—especially to Aiden Pearce, if the word on the street was right. According to Wolfe's contacts, T-Bone Grady and a man named "Blank", Pearce was the notorious "vigilante" of Chicago hacking. He'd spent his teenage years in street gangs, but in his twenties, Ex-street thug, Pearce had vanished into the fabric of Chicago, like a sort of avatar of the city, becoming a legend. He'd wreaked his revenge on his enemies...and slipped away into some unknown corner of the Chicago demimonde. Some people thought he was dead; some were skeptical he even existed.

"That guy? Naw, he never existed. Just a story made up by the power structure to justify its own house cleaning..."

Wolfe had heard that claim more than once. But he knew Aiden Pearce was real—he'd known him, when Wolfe was a boy and Pearce a young man, in the Yards. Pearce had been a friend of his father; a friend to Irish liberation causes, just like Colin Wolfe... It was just a matter of finding him. T-Bone had put him onto Blank who had contacted Pearce and set the meeting up.

Now Wolfe was fifty steps from his destination, up at the corner. No one was there yet. Nothing but a piece of paper spinning in a momentary whirlwind.

He glanced up again, hearing a whirring sound as another ctOS camera tracked him. Theoretically it was possible to hack into the ctOS—word from Wolfe's DedSec contacts had it that it was the electronic "alchemist's stone" that Pearce had used to unlock every corner of Chicago. But the Blume Corporation had redesigned it, lately, to frustrate the Aiden Pearces of the world...

Wolfe suspected that, even if half of what T-Bone Grady had told him was right, Blume Corp and the other power brokers in Chicago underestimated Pearce. Chances were, he could still break into ctOS. Pearce still had DedSec contacts —white, gray, and maybe a few black hat hackers. He made deals with them; in turn, T-Bone claimed, they dealt with Blume's new firewalls.

What if my coming here warns Pearce off? If he's tracking me on that camera...

But Wolfe was hoping that Pearce didn't yet know he was being tracked by anyone. If Pearce did see him—would he recognize him? Would he know him for a friend? Or assume he was an enemy?

For all he knew, Aiden Pearce was pointing a gun at him right now, with his finger tightening on the trigger.

The wind rose, the mist swirled, the cars hummed—and then he saw someone walking down cross street toward the corner. The man had red-brown hair, wore an open knee-length brown leather coat, a brown leather baseball-style cap embellished with a cryptic symbol; he wore dark glasses, though there wasn't much glare out here. He had a dark kerchief down around his neck. The man's profile looked familiar.

It had to be. It was Aiden Pearce.

Blank had come through. The derelict had claimed he could get a message to Pearce. The message would be gotten to him via a “drop” on the street, instead of being transmitted—most transmission was too risky, too much chance it could be monitored. The message contained simple coordinates: a Chicago street corner, near the Lake Michigan shore. And five words: *Deep in the Back Yard*.

It was a code that had been used twelve years ago, when Pearce was getting out of the gangs. Pearce had gone from gangbanger to rogue criminal. He worked for himself, picking his targets and striking hard. And some of those targets, not so very long ago now, had pulled Pearce in too deep— and gotten his niece killed. Her murder had been like a pebble rolling down Chicago's

rugged hillside...starting an avalanche of crushing stone. A bit farther back, when Pearce was a gangster, Mick Wolfe had been a runner for the Chicago gangs, carrying money, cash from a host of illegal deals.

The cops didn't pay much attention to a grimy twelve year old boy running through the streets with a back pack. If they'd looked in that backpack, they'd have found it packed with cash from dozens of dirty deals. Out of all that cash, Wolfe had gotten only five dollars a delivery.

Wolfe's father, Colin, had intervened with Pearce, asked him to take him out of the life. Pearce had gotten Mick off the street and back in school.

But not before Wolfe had learned the gang's basic code words...including the five words that Pearce used, back then, for his own operations. *Deep in the Back Yard*. It seemed he remembered them. Because here was Pearce.

Was it curiosity that had brought Aiden Pearce here?

Wolfe noticed a van behind Pearce, a gray van trolling the street, coming up slowly behind the vigilante. Was the van a vehicle protecting Pearce—or something else?

Pearce paused on the corner and turned to look narrowly at Wolfe. They were ten paces apart. Wolfe could tell Pearce was trying to remember who Wolfe was.

"Aiden! It's Mick!" Wolfe called. "It's been years but..."

Then his peripheral vision caught a flicker, at that van. He turned to look and saw the van's side door opening, a man leaning out. And the man was aiming a silenced pistol at Aiden Pearce.

“Aiden—get down!” Wolfe shouted.

A hissing gunshot, then another, as Pearce reacted to Wolfe’s shout and threw himself down. But even from here Wolfe caught the flash of splashing blood.

Wolfe dug under his coat, pulled his .38, aimed it at the van—but it was speeding away. The license plate had been removed. It was roaring off down the street and if he fired he might hit one of the other cars.

Wolfe put the gun away, got out his cell phone instead, and dialed 911...and frowned. His phone was crackling, the call not going through. The screen on it said *no signal*.

No signal—now? Here?

Wolfe ran to Pearce, and went down on one knee by him. “Aiden!”

Aiden Pearce was sprawled face down on the sidewalk. A small pool of dark scarlet was spreading around him. There was blood all over the back of Pearce’s head. And he was just lying there, completely still...

Wolfe got to his feet and tried his cell phone again. Still no good. He looked around, saw people in cars staring as they drove past. He waved his arms at the drivers. No one stopped.

Got to get help for Pearce. How?

Then he heard a siren. Maybe someone else had seen the attack, called an ambulance. *Sure got here fast, even for ctOS.*

The ambulance was screaming around the corner, screeching to a halt on the street close by the fallen Aiden Pearce.

It was barely stopped before the medics were out, two burly black Emergency Medical Techs in blue and yellow uniforms—on their shoulders patches read *CFR: Chicago's Fastest Responders*.

A third man jumped out of the back of the ambulance—a lanky white guy in an ill-fitting uniform. The EMT rushed up to Wolfe, a hand outthrust like a football block, making Wolfe step away from Aiden.

“Stay back, sir—”

“He’s been shot, he’s going to need a compress, blood clotter, quick! They fired twice—”

The man was still backing Wolfe up. “Thank you, sir. If you have any more information, give it to the police, they’ll be here pretty soon...”

“Sure, sure. But...”

This medic sure had dirty fingernails for a guy who worked in an ambulance.

There was a name tag on his uniform. *P. COLLINGSWOOD*, it said.

“What hospital are you taking him to?” Wolfe asked.

“Lakeside Hospital, just a few blocks away, sir.”

Wolfe looked past the EMT and saw the other two already had Pearce on a portable gurney. They were wheeling it toward the back of the ambulance, lifting it in. Pearce was still lying face down. He had a cell phone clutched in his hand. Had he called these guys himself somehow?

Wolfe had seen a lot of medical technicians at work, here and overseas in Delta Force—he'd never seen anybody go about it this fast. They didn't seem to be following procedure.

The first two Emergency Technicians got in the front of the ambulance; the third EMT was jumping in the back, slamming the door from the inside—and the ambulance was moving away even before the door was completely closed.

Wolfe made a mental note of the number on the side of the CFR vehicle: 103.

The vehicle did a tight, tire-burning U-turn and then drove away, careening down the street at top speed.

He heard another siren—a police siren.

Wolfe stared at the puddle of blood on the sidewalk and thought, *No way I'm staying here to answer police questions.*

He had an unregistered gun—and there were a whole lot of questions he didn't want to answer. He turned and strode away, not too fast, slipping between the nearest buildings at the first opportunity.

He looked around the corner of the buildings, back to the site of the shooting. A cop car was just pulling up. Officers were getting out, gesturing at the blood, then looking around in confusion.

Then an ambulance drove up, and stopped in the street by the patrol cars.

Wolfe watched as an EMT got out, and he could read the body language of the EMT and the two cops pretty clearly.

Puzzlement. They seem surprised to find no one there.

#

“But you’re sure this is the hospital they’d have come to?” Wolfe asked.

“Yes, I’m sure of it,” the Admissions Nurse told him. She was a squat, thick-bodied woman in a pink-white uniform with a lot of dyed blond hair piled up on top of her head. She sniffed a lot as she talked to him. Allergies.

Wolfe glanced nervously around the admissions lobby. “This place is only, like, three blocks from the hospital...why would they take him anywhere else? You’re saying he’s not here at all?”

“That’s what I’m telling you, sir! No gunshot victims have been brought in, no one of that description. No one like that at all...”

CHAPTER TWO

I should get out of here. Fast.

Wolfe knew instinctively that his witnessing the shooting made him a target as well. And this hospital lobby was too exposed.

He turned and walked across the lobby and out the door into a slight drizzle of cold rain. He looked around for that van, for anyone who seemed a threat. And for a moment...*everyone* seemed like a threat. That black mailman who was glancing at him as he walked by; that taxi driver pulling up, probably just waiting for a patient leaving the hospital; that lady walking her dog. They all seemed inexplicably sinister in that moment.

Wolfe chuckled at his own nervousness, going quickly down the steps to the sidewalk. He glanced around again, and saw no one else except an old lady with a walker—and decided he probably didn't have to worry about her.

Still, he was going to have to watch his back awhile.

He set off down the sidewalk, thinking.

So if Pearce isn't here...where is he? What the hell is going on?

The EMT had told him that Pearce would be taken here, to this hospital. But no one had been brought here by ambulance for more than half an hour. And last time someone had been brought in, they'd had a broken leg, not a bullet wound. And no one Pearce's age, or color had come in by ambulance. The lobby admissions nurse had been the fourth hospital worker Wolfe had asked. He'd asked the nurses in the ER, he'd even asked a guy mopping up the ER waiting room.

No one named Pearce—no one fitting Pearce's description. No gunshot victims at this hospital. Yet the ER routinely got patients in through the CFR ambulance company.

So where had the ambulance taken Aiden Pearce?

That ambulance had come *fast*, after the shooting. Maybe that was the assassin's mop up team. Maybe they hadn't been EMT personnel at all...

Chicago's Fastest Responders...

Were they dumping Aiden Pearce's body off a pier right now?

Wolfe walked around the corner, toward the luxury car he'd "borrowed" that morning, electronically hot wiring it from a closed car lot. He'd had to pay

a tagger to spray paint the lot's security camera lenses over, before he'd stolen the car. Sixty bucks to the tagger, and it was worth it...why not swipe a comfortable car?

He looked around, saw no one watching the car, which was parked half a block from the Emergency Room. It seemed there was no APB on it yet; might continue that way all day, with luck, if no one inventoried that car lot.

He used the universal car-door remote he'd rigged up, signaling the car's locks. It chirped in response, unlocking, and he hurried to it. He got in, triggered *start*, and drove away, careful not to go too fast or too slow. He didn't want to attract the cops.

The car had a GPS system, voice activated. "Chicago's Fastest Responders, nearest office," he told it.

The GPS responded, informing him that the office was less than a quarter mile away.

He took a right, drove down a boulevard for a couple minutes, and there it was,

CFR: Chicago's Fast Responders: Ward Office 6.

He parked out behind the sprawling one-story cement block building, and went in. "Not taking any more applications today," said the ginger-haired, freckle-faced man behind the counter. The man was poking at a smartphone as he spoke.

"Applications?"

The clerk glanced up at him. "You aren't here for the job?"

“No. Um—a friend of mine was picked up today by CFR. Trouble is—there’s some, uh, miscommunication about what hospital he was taken to.”

The guy sighed and rolled his eyes. “Not my responsibility.”

Wolfe fished a twenty dollar bill from his pants’ pocket, folded the bill and tapped it on the counter. “Just take a minute.”

The twenty vanished. “Whatever. Where was this?”

He told the counter clerk the street corner and gave Pearce’s name—though that might not be the name found on Aiden Pearce, who probably had as many I.D.s as he needed.

The clerk peered into a computer monitor. “Nope. Nobody picked up on the waterfront at all today. Nobody on that corner, nobody on that street. Mostly we’ve had guys picking up gunshot vics over at Washington Park. As usual.”

“Nobody by that name anywhere?”

“Nope.”

Wolfe kept asking questions and kept getting nope, nope, nope and no. CFR denied ever picking up anyone on that corner, at that time or any other time today.

“And we got no employees named Collingswood. Not one.”

“And the ambulance number? One-oh-three?”

“Not in use today. Being serviced.”

“Serviced. Right.”

Wolfe turned and walked silently out.

Aiden Pearce had been shot. Then he had disappeared, as if he had been taken away by a ghostly ambulance, and spirited to a ghostly hospital.

Either that, or those guys had been with the assassin...and Pearce was dead. So maybe he was a real ghost, now, instead of the ghostlike vigilante he'd been. A real ghost—for good.

Wolfe decided he wouldn't believe that till there was proof.

He walked out to the corner of the building, preparing to go back and borrow the illegally borrowed car one more time before he abandoned it...

And that's when the dark Crown Victoria pulled up in front of him. Wolfe knew an unmarked cop car when he saw one.

#

Aiden Pearce was quite alive, but was almost wishing he weren't.

It was the burning pain in his head. It was the throbbing; it was the nausea. That's what made him wish he were at least unconscious.

The bullet, he was told, had only nicked his skull. But it had given him a concussion, not a terribly severe one that required hospitalization, but no concussion is good. Scalp wounds appear to bleed a lot of blood, more than they really do, so he'd gushed out impressively.

"Doc" Morrsky, a onetime doctor who'd had his license pulled for selling Oxycodone, had done the diagnosis and stitches, telling Pearce, "Yeah, you're okay, just a scratch and a concussion."

He hadn't offered Pearce any Oxycodone. Right now, Pearce wouldn't mind a few hundred milligrams.

Pearce was lying on a bed in one of his safehouses, on the South Side. His head ached as if it had been shot a moment ago. One of the EMTs had given him a local anesthetic. It wasn't quite enough.

He could hear Pussler in the next room, yapping to his girlfriend on a cellphone—Pussler the fake EMT who'd kept Wolfe back, at the site of the attempted murder.

"Hey baby, I got some cash, I got a job today, we can score for sure," Pussler was saying.

Pearce sighed. Was Pussler, a junkie ex-actor, as much as Morrsky was an ex-doctor, the best he could do?

The other two guys had been the real deal, EM techs from CFR in Pearce's pay—guys Pearce now owed five grand each. Since Pearce had been skimming cash, through hacking, from a couple of gangsters who had no clue who was doing it, he would be able to pay them off. And goofy on dope or not, Pussler had gotten the job done. He was one of Pearce's go-betweens on the street; he'd been on call, had gotten the pre-loaded emergency text, and he'd responded quickly. Because Pearce had suspected someone was stalking him, shortly after he set out for the meeting. So he'd told Pussler to get with the ambulance escape team, and stay close for a getaway with good cover, if he needed it—he didn't expect to be shot.

Stupid, he told himself. *Shouldn't have risked it.*

If someone had set him up—who was it? Pussler just didn't seem that complicated—and for some reason Pearce trusted him. There was Clyde

Merwiss—a programmer who worked with Pearce sometimes, had for about four months...But he hadn't known about the meeting.

So—had Mick Wolfe set him up for the gunman?

If Wolfe had set him up, he was a better actor than Pussler. Mick Wolfe had seemed glad to see him. Had even tried to warn him.

Had, in fact, saved his life. Wolfe's warning had given Pearce a chance to duck from the line of fire, so he'd only caught one round, and only glancingly.

Luckily the gunman had seen all that blood splash from the scalp wound and thought he'd done better than a graze...

Pearce had done a hack into the cameras on the street, before getting out of his own car and walking down there; he'd checked to see who was meeting him; who it was, exactly, who knew that old code phrase.

The street camera had shown him a vaguely familiar face. He'd used the ctOS facial recognition system, and it confirmed: Mick Wolfe. Colin's boy, whom Pearce had last seen when Mick was in his early teens...

Pearce took out his smartphone, wiped some dried blood off it, and then went to his ctOS penetration mode...

Time to find out what Mick Wolfe had been up to.

#

"*What'd* you say your name was, officer? Actually—could I just see that badge again?"

A big pink-faced man with a flattop and a square jaw, the detective growled to himself but reached inside his gray suit jacket and pulled out his

gold badge again, held it up in his scarred, beefy pink hands. “*Tranter*. Lieutenant Tranter. That enough stalling?”

Wolfe memorized the badge number.

“Sure, detective.”

Tranter put his badge away. “Now fork over your I.D., wise guy.”

Wolfe only had one set of I.D. so far, besides a driver’s license. But he wasn’t exactly wanted for anything. He pulled out his military I.D., hoping the detective was sentimental about soldiers, and passed it over.

“This Army I.D.’s expired.”

“Yeah. I was discharged.”

Tranter handed it back. “I’m investigating a shooting. An...alleged shooting. You were at the hospital, asking about someone who may or may not be involved in the shooting.”

“And you found me here? Man, ctOS is fast.”

“It is. Facial ID. Camera on the street, in the hospital and out front here. Your I.D. card confirms it. But...*weird* thing is, when you got close to that corner, ctOS cameras snowed over. Just lost the picture! We didn’t see what happened after that.”

“Not my fault the cameras fritzed.” This was interesting. Cameras had gone down, when he’d gotten closer to Pearce. That wasn’t Wolfe’s doing. Was it Pearce’s? Had Pearce blocked the local camera feed?

Tranter was looking Wolfe distastefully up and down. Taking in the unshaven jaw, rumpled clothes with disapproval. “Where you going at this instant?”

“Me? Tell you the truth, I was going to commit a misdemeanor. I was going to pee behind the building. Man, I *got* to go. They wouldn’t let me use their bathroom in there.”

“You weren’t going to that car parked in back?”

“Me? No.”

“So the Acura’s not yours?”

“Naw. I look like a guy could own a nice new car like that? I heard freckles inside talking on the phone about his new Acura. Leasing. You wouldn’t believe what he’s paying.”

Tranter nodded, but it was not necessarily a nod of agreement. It might be a “this dude is full of crap” nod.

“What’s your interest in Pearce?” Tranter asked.

“Me? Oh, he was a friend of my dad’s from when we lived in the Yards. I’m trying to find a job, thought he might get me one. Went to meet him on the street—that’s the spot he asked for. But he never showed. Someone said somebody’d been shot...”

“Who said that?”

“A bum. High smelling guy with a big brown beard.”

Better keep all these lies straight...

“I can check your whereabouts, you know. Where you been around town?”

Wolfe shrugged. “Suit yourself. I really got to pee. You going to give me a ticket if I pee right here?”

“What? You’re not peeing here!”

“Okay. I’ll just grip myself and squeeze it shut.” He grabbed his crotch. He didn’t want Tranter to put him in the back of his unmarked cop car and run that license number.

“And don’t do that either!”

“Can’t hold it much longer, detective.”

Thinking about it, Wolfe was pretty sure that if Tranter had already run the plates on the Acura, he’d find out it wasn’t registered or leased to anybody; he’d figure it was stolen, and Wolfe would already be in handcuffs for just being a suspicious person heading toward a stolen car.

Tranter must not have seen any ctOS footage of him getting into that car, either. They hadn’t followed up on him that far. But they *would*...so Wolfe needed to get out of here, first chance.

Third time today he had to get out, fast. At the scene of the shooting, at the hospital, now here. He was feeling like a rabbit. He was still too much a soldier to feel okay about that.

But there was no way he was taking on a Chicago police detective, hand to hand—at least, not today.

“So you heard from a ‘bum’ there was a shooting where you were expecting to see Pearce...”

“Yeah! He saw the name of the ambulance company—if there’s one thing these old alcoholics know, it’s ambulance companies. I had an uncle used to drink all weekend, and one time—”

“Okay, Wolfe, shut up and listen. I’m going to be checking you out. I’m gonna need an address, cell phone number, driver’s license number and if you push it I’ll get your fingerprints.” He took out a small notebook and pencil, wrote down some numbers from the military I.D., and handed the card back. “Come on, start with the address.”

Wolfe gave him the right information—he could always change motels.

“Okay,” Tranter said, putting the notebook away. “Here’s the thing—this Pearce is the subject of an ongoing investigation. Very bad-guy stuff. Do not, repeat, do *not* pursue finding him. Word I got is, the guy is dead anyway. We expect his body to turn up on the shore of the lake any time now. We got patrol boats out watching for it.”

Sounds like bullshit to me, Wolfe thought. *Me and this cop are dueling liars.*

Tranter went on, “So, waste of time for you to look for the guy. You don’t want to get mixed up in his stuff. Tell you something, you know what the best thing for you to do is, right about now? Go to the bus station, use their restroom, then buy a ticket for a long, long ways away, and use that ticket fast. You know what I mean?”

“Sure do.”

“And no peeing in this parking lot! Now get your ass out of here.”

“You got it, detective. I’m gone. Heading for St. Louis. Or maybe Los Angeles...Never been to Los Angeles. I’ve got a cousin there—”

“Yeah, whatever, just get the fuck out of here.”

Wolfe turned and walked off, hurrying like a guy who needed to urinate.

Hurrying felt right anyway, just now.

#

Pearce used his newest signal-riding program to disguise the source of his smartphone inquiry. It picked up on a wifi PC receiver some distance off, and made it look like that was the source. If he triggered any red flags with his search he didn’t want to be traced to this safehouse. Not when he’d already come within an quarter inch of having a bullet through the brain once today.

There was Wolfe’s data, now. Military record came up first.

Mick Jeremiah Wolfe. Army, Special Forces, Delta Force. Decorated. Six years deployed...Middle East, North Africa. Classified missions. Electronic Technician. I.T. specialist; microwave transmission tracker...Expert on Satellite Surveillance enhancement...

Classified? That was interesting.

Two stints in a field hospital with wounds from small arms fire. Then volunteering each time to return to operations.

Kid seemed to have done his dad proud.

But...suddenly the record got ugly. Arrest for suspicion of embezzlement of federal funds. Started with a not guilty plea in the military court. Insufficient evidence. Prosecuted for assault, perjury. Pled *Nolo Contendere* for those charges.

What assault? There it was: fistfight with an officer, assault, perjury, resulting in...a year in the United States Disciplinary Barracks up north of Leavenworth. Military prison. And then...

Dishonorable discharge.

Not so proud after all. "Oh kid, what did you do?" Pearce muttered.

Who was this officer he'd gotten into the ruckus with? *Verrick*, the document said.

A *Major* Verrick. Definitely not a good idea to punch out a Major when you're a mere NCO.

Pearce remembered a dirty-faced boy, maybe thirteen, running up and down the sidewalks. Every so often the boy would see Pearce on the corner, ask cheerily, "What's up, Aiden?" Young Mick Wolfe wanting to seem like an important guy on the street.

Verrick. The name rang a bell. Pearce did a simple search for the name in Chicago, along with Army, and came up with Roger Verrick, the new head of Blume Security for Chicago. He was also a significant shareholder in Blume and a supposed innovator in security technology. A cross check confirmed it—the same guy. There was his picture: curly brown receding hair, lined face, nearly lipless smile, broad shoulders. Former Major in the US Army, Delta

Force, his family had long term investments in Blume, he'd joined the corporation after retiring from the military about a year and a half ago.

That was some pretty damn quick advancement at the Blume Corporation, right out of the box. But then Verrick had inside connections through his family. And maybe he'd brought some military tech out with him to sweeten the deal. Had he smuggled out classified tech? It was possible. That possibility was something to remember.

If Verrick was the new head of Blume Security, he would be very aware of Aiden Pearce. Pearce didn't have a big problem with the Blume Corporation—in fact, he relied on the company—but there had been Blume factions who had gotten on Pearce's bad side; factions who had connections with the Club. Namely the Chicago South Club which was otherwise known as the Irish mob—formerly run by the late, not-so-lucky Lucky Quinn. Quinn's son was rumored to be planning to take the Club over now...

Had this been a Club attack on him, today? Was Verrick connected with the Club? Could be that Verrick arranged the attempted hit through Mick Wolfe. Maybe Verrick had found out Wolfe had known Pearce and after making a deal with Wolfe, he'd gotten a thug from the Club to take a shot at him.

But if Wolfe had been setting up the hit, why warn the target that someone was about to shoot him down?

Maybe he'd had a change of heart at the last moment.

Pearce's gut told him that Mick Wolfe hadn't been involved in the attempted hit, though. There had been astonishment in that voice when Wolfe

had warned him. Wolfe had seemed genuinely surprised by the assassination attempt...

But how had they known where he was going to be, if not through Wolfe? Could be that someone watching for “the vigilante” had spotted him driving through the area, and made a call. The tail had responded to the call, and started following him. That faint tingling in the back of his neck had warned Pearce; the van seen once too many times in the rearview mirror...

Before he’d parked and walked over to where he was to meet Wolfe, Pearce looked around for that van, and hadn’t seen it. He’d decided it was safe, but just to be sure he put his phone on camera scramble, once he got onto the block where the meeting was to be. He didn’t want ctOS to know exactly where he was.

He had known he was taking a chance—an unusual chance, going out there. But though the message’s sender hadn’t identified himself, Pearce had suspected that the code phrase had come from Mick Wolfe. He’d heard the kid was back in town—not such a kid, an ex-soldier in his mid-twenties now. And Wolfe was probably almost the last person alive who knew that code phrase.

Pearce felt he owed something to Mick Wolfe. Because the bomb blast that had taken Mick Wolfe’s father out of the picture was just another crime that had been, indirectly, Aiden Pearce’s fault. Back in the day, when Pearce was a teen in the South Yards gang, Colin Wolfe had warned Pearce that he was going to the police to give evidence. Colin had been his friend—and he’d given Pearce a chance to cover his tracks, move to another territory.

But a fellow gang thumper had warned the bosses that Colin was going to rat on one of their operations. Same guy who got the job of taking care of the “rat”.

And—*boom*. The whole top of Colin Wolfe’s house had been blown away, dissolving into a ball of fire and raining debris.

After that, Pearce had done what he could to befriend the kid. He’d come around, from time to time, talking to Mick for the sake of his father, trying to get him to agree to stay out of the gangs. He couldn’t be seen with the boy in public a lot but he’d taken him with him on a rented cabin cruiser, out on Lake Michigan, more than once—until Mick had moved to another ward, when his Ma remarried. Pearce had lost touch...

Maybe the kid knew that Aiden Pearce had inadvertently caused his father’s death. Not really Pearce’s fault, when you thought about it—but still: Maybe Mick Wolfe wanted to punish Pearce for it.

After what happened today, I shouldn’t trust Mick Wolfe...

But Pearce’s instincts told him that Mick Wolfe wasn’t his enemy. And the kid had managed to find him, when no one else had. Which meant that Wolfe was pretty damned effective.

If there was confirmation that Wolfe hadn’t set him up, then *maybe* Wolfe could do some work for Aiden Pearce.

Pearce was going to have to keep his grazed head down, keep it all on the extra down low awhile, until he found out who’d tried to assassinate him.

It occurred to him that it might not have been a case of someone just spotting Aiden Pearce and dropping a dime. It might've been one of his own people—someone he worked with, around town. There was a handful of people he trusted...

Had one of them found out where he was going that day?

If so—they'd gotten paid for turning over that information.

And it was up to Pearce to find out who was getting paid—and who was paying that bill...

Because now he had a payment to make of his own.

Or to be precise, *payback*—for someone creasing his skull with a bullet. And in Chicago, payback is a bitch.

#

"Tranter. Come in."

"Mr. Verrick. Okay to talk about just anything in here?"

"Yeah. I just had the office swept." He'd had the office checked for bugs that morning. Of course, there were guys like Aiden Pearce supposedly able to listen in on your office phone without putting a listening device directly in it...through some form of wireless hacking. But even Pearce would have to be close to get that done. And they were on the thirty-ninth floor.

It was a big, corner office in the new Blume building, with a view on the lake—anyhow, you could see a piece of Lake Michigan if you leaned over and peered past the John Hancock Center.

Major Roger Verrick, US Army retired, had a nice layout, here, and he reveled in it. He had a big mahogany desk, wall-windows that cornered together nicely, a Picasso lithograph over the leather sofa, a wet bar, and a top grade espresso machine.

Looking at Tranter standing just inside the closed office door, Verrick shifted in the expensive ergonomic chair—he'd hurt his back in an IED attack that'd flipped over the humvee, in Somalia, and it had never perfectly healed, despite the operations.

"You look a bit rattled, Tranter."

"Yeah. The, uh, arrow missed its target, Mr. Verrick."

"*Did* it? Which idiot did you hire? Never mind, don't tell me. We had good intel—only a moron could blow it. Pearce is rarely out on the streets in plain sight these days. How'd our man manage to miss?"

"Someone on the street warned him."

"He missed—so why didn't he take another shot?"

"He took two, thought his second shot nailed Pearce right in the head. Only...he seems to have gotten up and walked away. We're not sure how he got out of there. I guess he could be dead but until it's confirmed...we got to assume a miss."

"Who warned Pearce?"

"Some guy he was going to meet. I didn't know about that. I mean, who it was..."

“Wait. That sounds like you had an encounter with this pain in the ass who warned Pearce.”

“Yes sir.” Tranter looked crestfallen. “We knew Pearce was planning to be in that neighborhood. We didn’t know why. This other guy was on the security camera. We didn’t think he was, you know, important. I didn’t want to just drag him in, make any more noise on the street than we already had. But we found out he was from the same neighborhood—I mean, the Yard. Grew up around Pearce. So...maybe he was more important than we thought...”

“So he was the one meeting with Pearce. And he was the one who warned him. And you were the one who talked to this loudmouth and...let him go.”

Tranter cleared his throat. “Yes sir. He seemed like a...harmless bozo. Maybe a PTSD case out of the war.”

“Indeed. Hold on—the war? Which war?”

“Uh—I don’t know. I saw his Army I.D. Guy was Delta Force.”

“Delta Force?” Verrick sat up straight, ignoring the spike of pain in his back. “Tranter. What was this soldier’s name?”

“Uh...Wolfe. Mick Wolfe.”

Verrick closed his eyes. “Oh my God. *I knew* I should’ve had him killed up Leavenworth.”

“Sir?”

Verrick gave Tranter his coldest stare. “Tranter. You want to keep getting that extra money every month?”

“Yes sir. I do.”

“And you want to continue living, right?”

Tranter stared coldly back at him. Tranter might be corrupt, but he was tough, and Verrick could tell that Tranter wouldn't easily stand for that kind of threat.

But Verrick meant it. First of all, he'd made a deal with the Club—it was important that Pearce go down. But then there was Wolfe. Talk about a loose cannon. He had made a big mistake deciding not to have Wolfe killed in prison. He'd been afraid it would awaken suspicion, and people might start looking at Wolfe's testimony over again. They might start taking Wolfe seriously once he was dead. So Verrick had let him live, confident that destroying the man's career would destroy the man too.

But here he was again, turning up like a bad penny. Maybe trying to use Pearce to get at his former commanding officer, Major Roger Verrick.

And Verrick wasn't going to make any more mistakes. He silently vowed to take out anyone who got in his way from now on. There was more at stake here than covering his ass. From his point of view, the destiny of the world was in the balance.

“You better get on it, Tranter,” he said at last. “I have a lot of people backing me. They'll snuff you out like a twenty-cent birthday candle if you fail. *And you will not fail.* You will see not only that Aiden Pearce is killed...but Mick Wolfe as well.”