

CHAPTER 1

USA TODAY
MARKETPLACE
PAGE 6; SECTION D

Lucas Electronics reports fourth quarter earnings in excess of previous projections owing to its newly acquired SysCom Corporation. The Silicon Valley software manufacturer has been on the cutting edge of systems management programs, which have threatened Microsoft's primacy since the beginning of this year.

CEO Wallace York credits former CEO and founder, Robert Lucas, with laying the foundation which allowed the company to expand. Lucas, who left more than a decade earlier under a cloud of secrecy, seems to retain a hand in the company's management. Inside sources suggest to *USA TODAY* that Lucas' hasty departure was the result of a deal struck between the former electronics CEO and officials of the United States Department of Justice regarding the company's alleged racial discrimination advancement policy.

Lucas Electronics closed up 3 1/8 yesterday to 56 1/4.

Twenty Nike-clad feet pounded the springy surface of the court, but the trampling of the ten men was dimmed by the crowd's roar.

"Jackson! Jackson! Jackson!" the crowd chanted in unison, goading their champion along. If any fans boldly rooted for the Washington Bullets, they found themselves quickly drowned out in the sea of pandemonium overflowing the Baltimore Convention Center much as a boiling pot peaks, exceeding the confines of the vessel. Those who insisted on cheering for a dogged D. C. team, often as not were subdued by the delirious Bayliners fans. The police detachment, usually well trained for riotous confrontations, proved incapable of providing protection for the errant Bullet advocate.

Verging on mayhem, it portrayed Baltimore Basketball at its best.

"Scott Jackson certainly has had an outstanding night in Baltimore," ESPN commentator Mark Simms noted rhetorically, stating the obvious in a media which routinely exaggerated the simple and understated the important.

“Twenty-seven points in the first period, thirty in the second. D. C. closed him down in the third, keeping him to seven,” replied Buddy Hawkins, the “color” expert for the station with whom Simms had worked for more than eight years, an eternity in television broadcast journalism.

“But it hasn’t been the case in the fourth period, has it?” Mark prompted him with a meaningless question.

“Certainly not,” answered Buddy smoothly picking up the line of conversation as easily as he slipped on his loafers. “Thirty-three points in the fourth with a little less than a minute and a half remaining. Baltimore’s called their last time out, apparently so Coach Tucker can tell them how he wants the remaining time used.”

“It’s not like they’re behind,” Simms almost blurted out his excitement. Sports announcing was generally nothing more than routine for him at this stage of his career, but on occasion something would happen on the court or diamond or field which reminded him why he picked this particular vocation with its recompense in bad food, motel living, constant travel and three divorces.

“Not hardly,” replied Hawkins. “Washington is thirty-two down, having lost two of their starters in an auto accident earlier this week. The question now is whether Tucker will give Jackson his shot at setting a new record and what the Bullets can do to stop him, if anything,” he added absent mindedly after watching yet another dismal performance by the team representing the nation’s capital. Even more humiliating for the D. C. Bullets, it was the Baltimore Bayliners, an expansion team, delivering the beating.

“Oh, I don’t think there’s much chance the Bayliners’ coach will keep him from setting a new record.” Simms almost prefaced his comment with, “Are you kidding?” If Randy Tucker didn’t give Scotty Jackson his chance at the record, the fans would burn the arena to the ground.

Despite the glass cage from which the broadcast originated, the noise level from the maddened crowd virtually precluded them speaking at a normal volume.

“Maybe. You’ll recall Scott’ll be a free agent after this season,” Hawkins said over the microphone for the benefit of the viewers, rather than his partner. “Beating Wilt Chamberlain’s 1963 record of 102 points in a single game will put the Bayliners in a real bidding war with other teams in the NBA.”

“Yeah, but I think the temptation for Coach Tucker will overwhelm any direction he may be receiving from the front office to the contrary.” Simms didn’t add the other part of the equation to the formula. The fans had bought tickets fully expecting the spectacular. The last thing the owner, Karl Paulson, wanted was to cheat the fans and cut his own throat by doing so.

“Maybe,” Buddy expressed his doubts with the single word.

* * * * *

Every time he’d seen a Hollywood production of something like this, the ducts had been stainless steel, gleaming from refracted light and clean enough to eat from.

Reality in Baltimore’s Convention Center cooling and heating system was something else. The interior doubtlessly hadn’t seen an inspector since installation. Crud lined all four walls of the tube and what wasn’t covered in filth, was coated with insects, nests and webs. What with the various obstructions, it was only by accident, or more likely because of ventilation leaks, the system had any effect on the temperature within the structure.

The City renovated and loaned their stylish convention center to the NBA team until the Bayliners’ home court could be completed. Two extraneous circumstances conspired to delay

the construction of Baltimore's own facility. Baltimore got the nod from the NBA for their own team before it had a proper location, promising to have a bond issue on the ballot within sixty days of the agreement. Baltimore fulfilled their end of the arrangement, but the voters failed to cooperate, denying the bond issue. Instead, the port city waited until the State of Maryland Legislature introduced legislation and it could make its way up for a vote. The ballot passed—there never was much doubt—and construction could proceed.

The building's erection seemed on course, if a little late, until the second calamity. The Brotherhood of Steel Workers and Sheet Metal Cutters struck the job in protest for the company's policy of hiring non-union labor. The Brotherhood took the electricians, plumbers and carpenters off the job with them in a show of solidarity.

Negotiations fared poorly until Karl Paulson, the Bayliners' owner, announced his intentions to relocate the team where they would feel more welcome. The philosophy of striking is sacrosanct to labor unions, but Baltimore basketball proved to be their true religion. The plumbers, carpenters, electricians and metal workers showed up the following day to work. Because of the dedicated work of union employers, Mr. Paulson acknowledged in a press conference, the facility should be completed in the spring.

In the interim, the Baltimore Convention Center filled the void neatly. While the exterior of the facility lacked excitement, attempting to cut *avant garde* geometric patterns into a more rustic, sedate skyline, it proved ideal for the team's needs.

The interior, however, fulfilled the expectation the architect hoped to achieve with the pseudo nouveau-deco exterior. Augmented by sky walks, the facility became accessible to Camden Yards and the NFL Stadium located in the same neighborhood of downtown Baltimore. Fortunately for the Bayliners, the City completed a 36,000 square foot addition to the center.

Although the ceiling was a bit lower than professional teams preferred, the NBA agreed to an allowance based on the team's extraordinary exigencies.

The bundle tied to his right ankle by a thin nylon rope further retarded his progress. Only a couple of feet long and less than six inches wide, its weight produced a burden he would have rather done without, but one which he couldn't discard and still accomplish the assignment he'd been sent to do. The furtive figure congratulated himself for having the foresight to wear a light jumpsuit over his casual attire. Not only did it alter his identity to any curious onlooker, but protected his clothing from being soiled to the degree he'd draw attention to himself.

The noise from the spectators below filtered upward along with the heat generated by their massed bodies, both rising to greet him in the shaft. The screaming muffled any noise he made; the temperature added to his general discomfort.

The duct suddenly turned left and down fifteen degrees, compelling him to spread his legs and use the toes of his sneakers to slow his forward slide; his sweaty hands unable to find a grip along the smooth, steel sides. His progress stopped abruptly, abutted against a metal grating covering the opening to the vent. The shaft he selected allowed him an unobstructed view of the scoreboard. At the orifice of the shaft the volume generated from the crowd below increased to a deafening level, actually causing him to cringe until he acclimated himself to the cacophony.

Baltimore is really killing those clowns from D. C., he thought unconsciously reaching down along his side to haul the container up next to him. The double half hitch securing the synthetic line to his leg gave way to his tugging and once the rope loosened from the canvas sack, the disassembled rifle glided easily from its cloth pouch. His fingers worked with the confident deftness born of hours of practice since he selected the mark most advantageous to the

KRP's requirements more than a month earlier. The barrel fit snugly into the polymerized stock and fastened securely with a set screw. The scope snapped in place with a twist on the optical device and the silencer screwed quickly into the threads along the business end of the weapon. He slid the assembled weapon up alongside him, allowing the barrel to nose out the opening of his perch.

He wasn't particularly concerned someone below could spot him. The intensity of the game drew every wild eye in the arena to the gymnasium floor. Yet, even if one of the nameless, cheering faces in the crowd became bored by the action on the court, the intense lights between him and the audience masked his presence at least as much as the silencer would suppress the sound of subsonic bullets leaving his rifle.

He worked the bolt and opened the breech. Satisfied the five rounds in the clip were correctly seated, he eased the semi-automatic rifle bolt forward chambering the first shell.

Figuring out how to get close to his target proved much easier than finding the type of ammunition he intended to use. The Knights finally obtained the porcelain bullets through the combined efforts of other members. The KRP manufactured the items when they found it impossible to obtain them on the open market without drawing a lot of curiosity from the Feds.

Randy Tucker's gray head came into sharp view as the rifleman placed the scope to his eye and peered down at the floor. The famed Bayliner coach earned his spot with Baltimore two years before, resigning as Lake Forest's commander, when NBA prospect Scott Jackson, then a senior at Lake Forest, let it be known he intended to sign with whichever team saw fit to hire his college mentor. Detroit, Houston, and LA offered six, seven, and nine million a year for Tucker's services, but only Baltimore parted with fifteen million, dumped their current head coach during the team's configuration, and gave him a free hand in running things his way—as

long as Jackson remained with the Bayliners. By dialing back the magnification, he could see the entire team with Tucker. Scott Jackson nodded his passive understanding to the spittle sprayed words coming out of the Coach's mouth. Tucker's normally florid face radiated a deep scarlet and his pot belly, over which stretched a starched white shirt, jiggled with each punctuation of his words.

* * * * *

"Goddamnit, Willie! You have got to keep those animals off Scott long enough for him to get this done!" The gum popped in his mouth with each word pronounced. The flavor only lasted through the first quarter, but he only allowed himself a single stick a game when he was ahead, a good luck charm left over from his college coaching days. If losing, Tucker had a regrettable habit of chewing a new piece every few minutes, throwing the ABC chewing gum at unsuspecting refs. The fans loved it.

"Fair enough," Williamson's Southern drawl rang clear over the din of the crowd. "Ceptin' those guys are gonna come huntin' for Scott, sure as shit. They know they've lost. What they want is to keep Scotty from doin' to them what Wilt did thirty years ago. If we don't stop them, that boy'll get hurt."

Tucker's head snapped up to look at Willie Williamson's seven foot frame. Black like Jackson—not an oddity in the Afro-American dominated NBA—he would have been a superstar in any of the other franchises of the league, but elected to remain with the Bayliners so he could continue to play with his friend. The Southerner's slow way of speaking belied a tactically oriented mind that went into overdrive on the floor of a basketball court.

"Whatca thinkin'?" Tucker's teeth tingled from chewing the rock-hard ball of gum.

“I’ve only got two fouls. Means I got three more coming. It means I can take three of them with me before they kick me out. Least wise, if I’m careful about it,” he grinned, putting an arm around his teammate’s shoulder.

* * * * *

His target identified, the gunman shifted his gaze to the other bench more out of curiosity than need. The optics functioned perfectly and either he’d achieve his goal or he wouldn’t. Regardless, he would further his own personal objective; thereby, those of the organization.

* * * * *

“Get that son-of-a-bitch! Get him!” snarled Washington’s coach, Harold Huffman, the so-called “weak man of the NBA.” His days coaching professional basketball were numbered and to allow Jackson to set a new record would only hasten his inevitable departure.

“If we pull off, they’ll score on us, coach. Bigger than shit,” suggested one of his starters.

“I don’t give a big rat’s ass. We’ve lost this one; we are NOT letting him set a record against us in the process,” he ordered. “Jemal. You, Rodney and Mike. Jackson gets the ball, you’re all over him.”

“We’re apt to foul him, coach.”

“Look at the clock, you dumb shit! He’s not going to have enough time to score all the points he needs with the time remaining shooting fouls!” he shouted, momentarily believing he was the only one on the team who could see the situation clearly. “As soon as they feed him the ball or as soon as he gets past half court, I want you three on him. Give him the opportunity to pass, but not shoot. If you don’t get this right, we’ll probably have to walk home tonight.”

“You the boss,” Jemal said, assuring the coach they wouldn’t let him down.

* * * * *

“And what a great kid Scotty Jackson is,” Mark Simms continued the prattle while the two teams huddled to receive directions from their coaches.

“I’ll say,” agreed Buddy Hawkins. “He and Willie Williamson spent the morning at John Hopkins with kids who have terminal diseases. Brought them each a basketball signed by all the team members.”

“I understand they plan to spend some time at the burn hospital when they play Salt Lake next week,” added Simms.

“Like you said, great kids. Paulson really knew what he was doing when he picked those two up.”

* * * * *

The warning buzzer beeped bringing the gunman’s attention back to the job at hand. He shifted his weight slightly, moving the barrel of the rifle to cover mid-court. From the periphery of the magnifying device, Bullets and Bayliners danced onto the court and into his field of view from their benches. Washington would throw the ball in. By dialing back a little further the magnification of the scope, he could catch most of the game. Accomplishing his mission ranked only slightly more important than getting it done before the game’s end. He might as well settle back and enjoy some of the competition.

* * * * *

“Maybe they’re as stupid as they look,” Willie called over to Scotty Jackson. Washington kept the ball in their possession just as long as they could, riding the shot clock as long as possible before surrendering the ball to Baltimore on a technical foul.

“What the hell,” replied Jackson. Sure he wanted to break the “Stilt’s” record—that was only natural—but whether he did or didn’t this day wasn’t an obsession for him, unlike the riotous Bayliner fans. *What the hell, there’ll be other chances to beat old Wilt.*

“You ready?” Williamson nodded in the direction of the sidelines as the referee handed the ball to their teammate.

“Yes, indeedie,” he laughed, faking one of his guards with a hip, then the other before slithering around behind the third. The ball rocketed to the designated spot on the floor even as Jackson shed himself of D. C.’s defenders. Scott scooped up the leather sphere, drove the length of the court and stuffed the ball through the hoop. A lack of resolve painted on his friend’s face initially struck Willie as odd. Rather, Jackson’s countenance glowed with joy—the exhilaration of the game and his role in it. His exultation sparked an inferno within the rest of the team.

The Bullets took the ball out and passed it to their most skilled ball handler. His slow progress up the court indicated an intent to stall the game for as long as possible. As if shot from a cannon, Williamson hurled his form into Jemal Christiansen’s body and was immediately rewarded with the shrill rip of the ref’s whistle and a damning finger pointing at him, yet the clock stopped all the same. There was no reason to rush the extra shots and the D. C. victim of professional violence sank both for two.

Washington immediately turned to defense, three of them on Jackson and two trying to block the throw in bounds. That left three other potential Baltimore receivers and the Bayliners picked off a wild throw by one of the Bullets. Mike O’Keef quickly found himself covered by Willie Williamson. The Bayliners guessed correctly the Bullets next move, and when he faked a jump upward, Willie ran right over him. The familiar whistle blew again and the finger pointed him out as the culprit.

A wary and bruised O’Keef made his two to the patient, polite applause of the crowd while it awaited the Bayliners next move. The pass in bounds went not to Jackson—which the auditorium and the opposition expected—but to Williamson who pounded the planks to the far

side of the court, leaving the remaining Bayliners and the three Bullets guarding Jackson in his wake. The two remaining defenders saw the brightly colored figure race toward them, promptly forgot their coach's orders, and instinctively migrated to the top of the key to challenge Willie Williamson's offense. The Bayliners put on the skidders a foot before the two defenders and leaped into the air, the round ball poised for a shot at the basket. Both Bullets leaped to defend against the feign and only when they had taken flight did they recognize their error. Williamson flipped the ball back into the ready hands of Scott Jackson who had outstripped his guards in a foot race down the court. Alone, just outside the 3-point line, he seemed to linger leisurely in the air for a moment before making his next move.

* * * * *

"What's the call, Buddy," this colleague prompted his friend with ten seconds left on the clock, filling the dead seconds it took the refs to hand the ball to the Bayliner player and put it into play. The announcers greedily gulped expensive television time not consumed by commercials.

"Easy. Get the ball to Jackson." In a normal conversation, he would have considered Simm's inquiry an exceedingly stupid question, but such trivial questions and answers had become common stock of the trade.

"Here we go," Simms announced unnecessarily. "Mike Walker has the ball, looks to Jackson who has more coverage on him than the President's Secret Service protection screen, and throws to Williamson. The big Bayliner heads down the court. Farthing and Manchester are on him, closing the distance between them and Williamson. Williamson crossing half court, three steps into enemy territory, looks like he'll take the shot with five seconds remaining, he's up . . ."

“My God, he flipped the ball backwards,” breathed Hawkins into the microphone, at the act which seemed both magical and excessively impulsive.

“Jackson coming up the court has the ball, he’s up, he shoots, and . . .,” he paused while the sphere arched the distance to the basket and America could hear the sound of the buzzer ending the game in the background. “Where’s the ball? Where in the fuck’s the ball!”

Hawkins slapped a hand over his colleague’s microphone to keep him from transmitting another obscenity. “Jackson’s down,” Buddy announced the concern evident in his voice. The camera man who first fixed his focus on the basket shifted to the crumpled form on the floor. “We have no indication of what could be wrong. Randy Tucker, the coach of the Bayliners, is racing over to the stricken Jackson and bending over him with teammate Willie Williamson’s by his side.”

The arena deteriorated with wild noise. Wrapped up in their disappointment, the audience seemed unaware of the frantic movements on the floor. A dozen or so police officers on hand to get the teams safely into the locker rooms after the contest ringed the fallen form and motioned to the paramedics to aid them.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” Simms added, genuine concern in his voice. “It reminds me of that thing that happened...when was that 1989...’90?”

“Hank Gathers,” added Hawkins quickly. “Opening round of the play offs. He played for Loyola Marymount. Same thing in 1992 with Reggie Lewis. That’s just the basketball side of it. Flo Hyman, an Olympic volleyball player, was similarly stricken,” he added for good measure.

“What causes it?” Simms controlled his emotions and used his voice to buy time for the cameras to get into position.

Hawkins shrugged until he remembered he wasn't on television, only reporting for it. The crowd finally noticed the gurney rushing onto the court accompanied by other paramedics and the frantic movements of people engaged in a life and death struggle. "Genetic problem. Some sort of enlarged aorta ruptures when athletes are engaged in strenuous activity for long durations. Usually you see it in people who are much larger than their parents. Some say Abraham Lincoln would probably have died from it had he lived . . ."

"Excuse me for interrupting you, Buddy. They're loading Jackson on the gurney now," Simms announced solemnly. "Is that confetti falling from the ceiling?" he asked confused at the seeming incongruity of celebrating with an unfolding tragedy on the floor below them.

"I don't know," Hawkins answered truthfully watching the array of monitors for some clue to Mark's question. One showed a tight shot of Jackson on the gurney before the paramedics covered him with a blanket. "Is that blood on the front of Jackson's jersey?" he asked himself, but voiced it aloud.

"What's that about blood?" Simms asked, entranced by the descending snowfall of paper dropping from the rafters.

* * * * *

The City of Baltimore's citizens have long demanded protection from enemies, foreign and domestic. Affixed to the middle of the escutcheon tucked away in the police partners' imitation leather wallets was the Battle Monument of the city celebrating her residents' successful defense in 1814 against the British Army. Two coats-of-arms further adorn the officers' badges. The upper left and lower right quarters belonging to the family of Cecilius Calvert and on the opposing quarters a facsimile of white and red crosses of the Crossland family, Lord Baltimore's maternal ancestors. Thus armed, the members of the City's Police

Department protect the inhabitants of slightly more than seventy-eight square miles and a little less than eight miles of waterways.

The first attempt at an organized policing agency did not happen until fifty-five years after granting the township. The municipality's leaders decided to appoint constables in 1784 to maintain order in the community. The officers of the law proved capable to the task for seventy years, but eventually the State's Legislature passed an ordinance providing the city with a more modern and appropriate form of security. The BPD came into existence.

To overcome overt Southern sympathies in some quarters of the city during the American Civil War—John Wilkes Booth began his acting career in Baltimore—and to thwart possible secessionist activity, the Union government placed the fledgling department under the immediate direction of the more supportive State Legislature. Further reform didn't occur within the department until the appointment of General Gaither, the department's first Commissioner, at the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century.

The Department organizes the City into nine districts which are further broken down into sectors and posts. Majors command each district, each varying numbers of officers under their direction depending on their specific mission. Sectors, on the other hand, are supervised by sergeants and posts manned by patrol officers. District level enforcement, services, vice, drugs, and investigations are not necessarily allocated on a sector or post level corresponding to the uniform patrol division, but maintained at a divisional level of the organization in order to more effectively serve the needs of the city.

Two hundred years of departmental history patrolled Baltimore's boulevards with Detective Glassenhauer and Sergeant Ho. The ghosts of those men—and more recently,

women—who gave up their lives to defend the populace stood watch with them. They weren't about to let down their end of a two century partnership.

The safe keep of the plain, beige, four door sedan kept most of the Chesapeake's moist, penetrating winter wind from inflicting its wrath on the vehicle's occupants. They made no pretense of immunity from nature's vengeance. It merely meant that in comparison to those scurrying about on the street padded with so many clothes they appeared aquatic creatures on dry land, the homicide team remained relatively snug.

“Things sound as if they're heating up in Bosnia,” Martin Glassenhauer snapped the radio off in disgust. A naturally gregarious man, always in the company of other trendy types in their late 20's and early 30's, his partner wondered why the lithe Black detective elected to become a police officer, rather than pursuing a more stable profession.

“What did you expect?” Sergeant Ho inquired with only enough vocal inflection to show interest in the topic, lest it die before the two could explore it. To do so would subject them to long moments of silence during which time the partners would frantically search their minds for something to discuss in order to while away the hours. Ho often said police work was ninety-seven percent boredom and three percent sheer terror. Even in the Central District, the heart of the city, hours of monotony hung heavily on many cold, winter nights.

“I expected nothing more, I suppose, considering the current President is likely to continue the policies of the previous ones,” he explained. “One doesn't walk away from a proven success story.”

Ho's hooded head nodded stiffly, as if to acknowledge Martin's assertion. The heavy cold-weather garments over the heavier bullet-proof vest constituted nothing short of survival

imperatives in the event they had to get out of the car quickly. Riding belted to the bench seat for eight hours at a time could only be described as restraint bordering on uncomfortable.

And Sergeant Ho had no doubt they'd thud down the potted streets the entire shift. The sad truth for the investigators, from their bored prospective, was criminals didn't commit crimes with anything approaching regularity during cold winter nights as they did on hot, humid ones in July.

"It's always these little brush fires that get people killed," Ho heard the voice of Sergeant Major Chester Ho escape the thin lips affixed precariously to the flat, round face. Dad was always pontificating about something or another around the dinner table. The Sergeant was surprised how indelible the memories remained.

"That's right," Glassenhauer replied. "Wasn't your father killed in one of those things?" he asked with the delicacy of a semi running over a kitty on the highway.

"Uh hum," Ho responded contemplatively, unwrapping a piece of gum and sticking it alongside a glob which had already lost its flavor.

"Gulf War number two, wasn't it?" Martin asked, not to rip open scars of wounds healed long ago, but curious enough to probe. Department rumor—and he considered cops worse gossips than little, blue-haired ladies—was Ho's dad had been a regular John Wayne type, killed on the second day of the shooting war back when his partner was still in the Academy.

"Not much to tell," the Sergeant snuggled further into the warmth of the insulated car coat.

How did you talk about someone like Sergeant Major Ho? Do you speak of his heroic actions in combat or coming home riotously drunk from the NCO Club and listening to him and

mom fight about his drinking while garrisoned. The only thing, the Sergeant remembered, they ever fought about. Just how does one describe the death of a flawed god of war?

“It was a dark and foreboding night...,” Ho began, but immediately stopped, fearing the levity of the Sergeant Major’s life would denigrate his memory. Instead, the Sergeant began anew, more simply. “The situation was partially fluid on the second day. Iraqi troops were evaporating with common regularity, but here and there were pockets of resistance. A platoon got caught up in a bullshit place, Abu Dahila, surrounded by a heavy company of the Iraqi elite who were where they weren’t supposed to be. Dad just did what came natural and rounded up every free man he could and went out there to rescue them. Wasn’t even his company. Just soldiers needing help.”

Martin assumed correctly that his partner left huge holes in recounting the story. On the other hand, he didn’t wish to make a pest of himself by prying too deeply. After all, he only intended to continue the conversation, not to make Ho uncomfortable.

“Didn’t he get a medal or something?” asked Glassenhauer cautiously.

“Yes, he did,” came the reply. The ribbon, medal and citation for the Congressional Medal of Honor adorned a place of esteem on the mantle above the tiny fireplace in Mom’s small apartment. *A faint remembrance to go along with the sympathy of a grateful nation*, she thought most ungratefully.

“Must have been some soldier,” intoned Martin.

“Yes, he was,” Ho answered. “The Sergeant Major was always winning a medal for one thing or another as far back as the Panamanian invasion. Never got so much as a scratch. Air Borne, Green Beret, Ranger, you name it. Nothing ever happened to him until that night. I guess he used up all his luck,” was the answer, added upon reflection.

“Ever find out what happened?” Martin allowed the wheel to slip through his fingers after taking a left turn.

“Naw,” Ho replied. “Them. Us. Who knows? Army doesn’t talk about that shit. Only that it happened and please come get your medal. Like a prize in a box of Cracker Jacks without the pleasant reminiscence or peanuts.” The response held a dim edge of bitterness.

“You ever...?” Glassenhauer thought of his partner as the curious kind and unlikely to let something like a parent’s death pass without taking a good, long look.

“Some,” the Sergeant replied cautiously so as to give up little information without telling Martin to mind his own business. “I looked into it some. Dad had lots of friends in the Green Machine, still does, and they helped as much as they could, but...”

“Henry 2-5. Henry 2-5. Baltimore Convention Center. Baltimore Convention Center. See the paramedics there,” the box squawked in the radio car. Henry 2-5 designated the Baltimore homicide investigation team of Glassenhauer and Ho.

The sergeant, senior partner and passenger for the first half of the shift, leaned forward, pulled the microphone from its holder, and depressed the transmission button. “Henry 2-5, Baltimore Convention Center, 10-4,” Ho acknowledged the call.

“Odd,” mumbled Glassenhauer turning right on Pratt Street.

“What’s odd?” the Sergeant looked up from writing the call on their log.

“Why call us? Hell, they have roughly a small police department stationed there at the Center. Probably the last thing they need is someone looking over their shoulder,” he grumbled.

“Maybe the gangs have taken to shooting each other at sporting events,” his partner replied evenly.

Most of what Ho and Glassenhauer handled daily was gang related one way or another. Either one gang shot at another over the rights to sell drugs in a certain district of town or another gang hunted members of a third for a violation of gang rights, real or imaginary, or some bystander got in the way. It didn't really matter. Someone died just the same and Billie and Martin, or one of the other homicide teams, were dispatched to the scene of the crime. Gangs, they had long since concluded, were just another name for schoolyard bullies who romanticized their antisocial behavior behind a facade of violence. It was just as well for the criminals that the Constitution was a short leash holding the police at bay. Left to its own devices, it would quickly become **COPS – 1; BAD GUYS – 0**.

“Actually, I’m surprised you didn’t have the game on. If you had, instead of trying to pump me about my father, we might have some idea what’s going on,” Sergeant Ho noted.

“Christ!” mumbled Martin. “You know I hate basketball. The only thing I can think of worse than B-ball is hockey. That shit’s really boring.”

“Blasphemy!” his partner replied in mock disgust, hands thrown heavenly. “What kind of Black, Protestant, healthy heterosexual, narrow-minded, tight-ass male do you want to be taken for?” The Sergeant’s head shook in shame for Glassenhauer. “Next, you’ll be telling me you like to spend your time listening to the opera or ballet or some such.”

“*Pirates of Penzance* is not a NBA franchise team,” Martin reminded his senior passenger.

“Jesus, Martin. They’re going to take away your male membership card. Suck it up a little. Before long there won’t be a beer hall in Baltimore that won’t bar the door when they see you coming,” remarked Ho.

“If you’re so hot on watching sweaty guys run up and down a court, how come you’re not at the game?” Martin slowed for a stop sign before running it.

“I had a ticket,” allowed the Sergeant. “But the Captain decided you needed a babysitter, and I was indispensable. I gave it to my Uncle Ernie. At least it didn’t go to waste.”

“There’s the ambulance,” Glassenhauer nodded his head.

“Pull up next to it. With any luck, they’ll have the poor bastards loaded and another homicide team will have already arrived and we can help direct traffic for a while before we go get something to eat,” rambled Sergeant Ho, more interested in dinner for the time being than solving yet one more street crime.

Martin nosed the unmarked four-door next to the emergency vehicle pulled into the service area reserved for such possibilities. The interior light to the ambulance illuminated its interior and surrounding pavement. Ho could see frantic activity inside the ambulance suggesting the importance of whatever was going on inside the vehicle.

“You guys homicide?” a burley, stereotypical Irish, uniformed officer blocked their way momentarily.

“Sergeant Ho and Detective Glassenhauer,” Martin handled the informal introductions, holding up the customary badge of office. Most often there was little time and less need for more.

“Crime scene’s inside. Christ what a mess. I bet we’ve had a couple of hundred people track through it already. We got it cordoned off as quickly as possible, but reconstructing it’s going to be a bitch,” he observed with a voice of experience. “I’ve got a dozen or so of my guys there to do just that. Victim’s in the meat wagon. He didn’t look good,” he added confidentially, lowering his voice. “The rest of my people are looking for a suspect, but shit...I mean we’ve got

thousands of people leaving this place to go home and only a handful who knows something went wrong and I've got even fewer people to hold onto them. No way...no way we could contain the area better than we have and kept the witnesses here."

"Witnesses to what?" inquired Ho patiently.

"What? Oh, shit! You don't know," he said, just realizing he was the first person they had spoken to since being dispatched to the scene.

"Know what?"

"Scotty Jackson. Someone shot Scotty Jackson," he reported, finally filling in the blanks for the detectives.

Ho tried to appear serene, what the Sergeant loved to refer to as "Asiatic inscrutability," but the nervous eye twitch gave lie to that facade. "Check on the victim while I have a quick look at the scene."

"Right," replied the younger investigator.

"One more thing," the uniformed officer pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. "These things came fluttering down during all the excitement. I didn't pay any attention to them—thought they were part of the celebration they intended to give him—but one of my guys grabbed one and gave it to me," he added handing it over to Ho.

The Detective Sergeant read the phrase before handing the scrap to Martin. "Doesn't mean anything to me. What about you?" Ho asked Glassenhauer.

He took the paper. "None. Let me check on Jackson and I'll catch up with you," he said moving to the back of the ambulance without waiting for a response.

"Lead on," Ho ordered the blue suit.

“Ladies first,” the Irish cop opened the door to the coliseum for Ho. For the first time in a week, someone acknowledged Billie’s gender.

* * * * *

“Here it is,” Secretary of Commerce Newbold handed the National Security Advisor the printed summary, as well as his personal copy on a flash drive. “This should cover things nicely ... one more time,” the Secretary added with a touch of irony in his voice.

John Demiss unconsciously fingered the Census Bureau’s findings for this last decade. “Are the numbers what we forecasted?”

“Plus or minus. Hell, not enough difference to make a tinker’s damn,” he snorted, taking a long pull on his whiskey glass. “Twelve point six percent,” he added. “A clear twelve point six percent is what you wanted and what you got, John.”

“Christ, this makes me nervous,” confessed Demiss.

“Me, too,” Newbold shrugged at the helplessness he felt. “Me, too.”

Upon the foundation of what that percentage represented, however, lay the security of Demiss’ position. That conviction alone caused him to take part in a conspiracy, which originated nearly thirty years earlier and transcended not only three decades and six presidencies, but political affiliations, as well.

“And the actual numbers?” Demiss asked.

“The CD, John. The paper printout is the same thing everyone gets. The CD is the raw data before our computer program launders the results. I told you that already,” Edward said, his feathers a bit ruffled by the National Security Advisor’s question.

“Easy, Ed. I just want to make sure *I* don’t fuck this thing up,” admitted the NSA, “Not you.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re going to want to be careful with that thing. It’s potentially more lethal than a nuclear device and the fallout would be a hell of a lot worse, that’s for sure,” Newbold paused to gather his breath. “Five point eight, seven, nine, three.”

Demiss nodded his understanding of the whole number spoken by Newbold, a comprehension knowing neither party lines, nor political patronage. He felt certain his knowledge brought with it the greatest burden shouldered by a man since Atlas – at least Abraham. Certainly, rewards followed for accepting the hardship. *Justifiably great compensation.* His steady—insiders said totally predictable—rise in the Washington bureaucracy to his current position was one such restitution. The security of his position regardless of whosoever temporarily occupied the White House (as MacArthur had so aptly put it) was another. Actual power in *realpolitik* came from knowledge, not affiliation. John Demiss’ knowledge—by happenstance, but his nevertheless—offered him position, security, and access others could only dream of in their lifetime.

The early 1970’s had not provided an auspicious start for fresh-from-Harvard John Demiss Junior into the world of politics. His father’s political currency bought by him through numerous contributions to the Republican Party, first in Oklahoma and later nationally, had been cashed in on behalf of his son. John Sr. was sorely pissed off that the best the Party could do for his boy was some bull shit clerk’s job in the White House. “By God!” he had sputtered at the Chief of Staff, “I’ve been contributing to the Party since Eisenhower and you insult me by making my boy a clerk! Sonofabitch! I should have supported that dip shit McGovern!”

“And if you had, you wouldn’t be sitting in the Rose Garden now,” the administrator of the President’s domestic affairs assured him. “Look, John, this is just a passing phase. You said

so yourself, he's just a boy. With a couple of years under his belt and with me as his mentor, why he'll be just the type they're looking for at State."

John Sr. looked at the Chief dubiously.

"Tell you what, John. I'll make him Assistant Administrative Adjutant to the White House's Chief of Staff. Now, that will beef up his resume a bit," he threw the father a sop.

John Sr. was not pleased, but he was pacified. Besides, he didn't really want to support those Commies in the Democratic Party.

John Junior's job entailed nothing more difficult than arranging the place cards on dining room tables, but only after the Assistant Protocol Officer decided where they went and gave him a detailed map of the tables. Oh, he had one other job. Under the direction of two levels of supervisors who did little more than tell him when to do it, John Demiss Jr. changed and indexed the reel-to-reel tapes containing conversations recorded in the White House. After the first two weeks, it proved as boring as all his other government-related duties.

That is, it had been monotonous until he came across the tape marked: Oval Office 5APR71, indicating the conversation took place on April 5, 1971, as it was written at that time. He duly listened to the conversation in order to cross-index it properly. The Chief of Staff once told him the President had a mania for an accurate record of his time in the White House in order to record his place in history for a later date. John Jr. thought that just meant private citizen Nixon could write his memoirs for a tidy profit. As a consequence, he listed it by topic: RHT 214; by date: 5APR71; and by participants: the President of the United States, the Surgeon General, and White House Counsel, John Dean.

Once established, the procedure left little room for error. John Jr. filed the topic card right behind the thousands of those dealing with the Republic of Vietnam, the date was

sequential and only required filing by location of the recording, and a separate card recorded each of the participants. The process was almost stupid-proof (evidence of which was seen by who was delegated the responsibility) and mistakes—except intentional ones—seldom made. John Demiss Jr., twenty-two, graduate of Harvard in Political Science, and part-time graduate student at American University got the topic, the location, and two out of the three participants right. He also got a copy of the tape out of the White House in his crumpled lunch bag and, in so doing, secured his future. In all, an acceptable functionary's day.

Ironically, what he thought he possessed and what the selected few in the inner circles of subsequent administrations later convinced themselves he owned was not nearly as potent as the conviction itself. As with most widely accepted ascriptions, their power lay in the fact that when elitists accepted them as truth, they quickly establish themselves as a hidden locus driving government policy. The administration, particularly with its mania for secrecy during the Nixon Era, became fertile ground for the germination and growth of a minor error into an accepted principle of expediency.