



COMING OF AGE
Volume 2: Endless Conflict

by Thomas T. Thomas

Hope for Peace, Prepare for War

The Italian proverb says, “Hold your friends close, but your enemies even closer.” Sometimes you must hold family closest of all. As John Praxis and Antigone Wells benefit from the life-extending techniques of regenerative medicine to enter that unknown space beyond the traditional enfeeblements of old age, they discover that the endless conflicts of family, business, and politics still pursue them.

In her efforts to secure financing for the revived Praxis Engineering & Construction Company, John’s daughter Callie has brought a viper into the nest who will follow them through two generations. But the Praxis family has vipers of its own, as John’s second son Richard returns from Texas to install new intelligent software that will spy on their operations. Along with these local adversities, the family must also cope with political reverberations from the Second Civil War, dislocations from an untimely Bay Area earthquake, and the disaster of a mid-continent volcanic eruption followed by political collapse and foreign invasion.

Volume 2 of *Coming of Age* is a tribute to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of personal challenges and social changes. John, Antigone, Callie, and their family members become strangers—both to themselves and to each other—in a world that is only partly of their own making.

COMING OF AGE
Volume 2: Endless Conflict

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The Story So Far ...

In the middle of a trial over Praxis Engineering & Construction's responsibility for defects in a new hospital project, Chairman of the Board John Praxis suffered a massive heart attack. Sometime later, the lead attorney for the plaintiff suffered a stroke. Both were candidates for innovative stem cell therapies: he got a new heart with muscle and nerve tissue grown on an armature of synthetic collagen; her brain was seeded with new nerve cells that replaced those killed by the aneurysm. While each patient recovered slowly, they met in the rooftop garden of the medical center and developed a personal relationship.

John and Antigone returned to a world on the edge of collapse. The country's inflation had gone into overdrive, and when the Chinese, Japanese, and other holders of U.S. debt refused to buy any more and sold their assets, when the oil-producing countries refused the falling dollar as payment, and when international bankers forced restrictions on U.S. growth in return for monetary support, the country started to fall apart. In the midst of the crisis, John and Antigone adopted new, healthier lifestyles—his through jogging, hers through Okinawan karate—and tried to remain hopeful in navigating their respective organizations—his construction company, her law firm—through the collapsing economy. They also renewed their personal contact outside the hospital when John retained Antigone as his personal attorney.

As the country fell apart, John's sons Leonard and Richard chafed under his renewed leadership and considered his every move to save the company as the desperation of a sick old man. Yet between his own and his daughter Callie's shares, John retained a controlling interest in PE&C. Richard as chief financial officer with access to the accounting system formulated a plot that would make Callie seem to have embezzled massive amounts from the company. This nullified her support and enabled the boys to remove John from the company. At the last step, John brought in Antigone as Callie's defense counsel, and she negotiated a settlement that preserved John's and Callie's fortunes as the company collapsed. Soon after, Antigone's law firm was also forced out of business.

While John's wife Adele succumbed to alcohol-related illness and eventually slipped away, his grandson Brandon was pulled into the U.S. Army through his ROTC commission. After an abortive foray to block the distribution of an arms cache in Arizona, Brandon was sent for combat training in California and then joined the federal government's attack on the secessionist capital, Kansas City. The Second Civil War was well under way.

John spent the nine years of the Second Civil War in San Francisco, where he worked as buyer in a plumbing supply company and helped out as the neighborhood handyman. The fortune he rescued from the family construction business had been invested in a national program that sold public property to private individuals—in his case, the Stanislaus National Forest—in order to raise needed revenue. Antigone was trapped on the other side of the border during a visit to her sister Helen in Oklahoma. She passed the Oklahoma bar and set up a practice inside the new Federated Republic. Callie Praxis went to Europe, married an Italian count with shady business connections, and raised her daughter Rafaella, who was eight at the end of the war. When Callie's husband

died in suspicious circumstances, her fortune was held hostage by his wicked Uncle Matteo. Brandon Praxis saw many battles and become a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army. Leonard Praxis and his wife retreated to a cabin high in the Sierra Nevada, where they died in a military strike into Northern California. Richard Praxis and his family moved to Texas, where he worked for a computer company developing software that brought about the economic collapse of the old United States.

Callie returned to San Francisco and discovered that John was now suffering from a hormone imbalance, the treatment of which the underfunded California Medical Service had ruled as “age inappropriate.” With an armistice and peace pending, she took him to the Mayo Clinic inside the Federated Republic for his second round of stem cell therapy. Antigone discovered she has kidney disease and the best place for her treatment was also the Mayo Clinic. There John and Antigone were reunited and renewed their romance.

Once cured, they returned to San Francisco with Callie to restart the engineering business and rebuild the country’s infrastructure. Unknown to John and Antigone, however, Callie was using seed money from her husband’s mafia connections to fund their projects. Brandon was demobilized and came to the new company to serve as their ruthlessly effective head of security. Their success also attracted Richard Praxis, who had new software that would accelerate the rebuilding programs and also grant him cyber access to their engineering business. At the same time, Uncle Matteo sent ex-policewoman Mariene Kunstler to represent his interests in the business, and she immediately spun her own web of control over Praxis Engineering’s projects and clients, as well as running her own side businesses. Mariene was introduced to Richard’s new software and instantly intuited something wrong about it. She promised to keep her mouth shut so long as he agreed to share information with her.

With the war over, the State of California attempted to reclaim its interest in the Stanislaus National Forest by charging John with negligence and damaging public property. Antigone stepped in and defended his title under the National Assets Distribution Act. He will take complete possession of the land in thirty years—if he lives so long.

John and Antigone agreed to have a child through in vitro techniques, and he had a silver pendant made that encoded their combined genomes. On a romantic visit to the Loire Valley, he gave her the heart-shaped pendant in the garden of the Château de Chenonceau, sealing their love.

**Part 4 – 2030:
Life and Death**

1. The New Watchdog

Rome was the last stop on their extended vacation. Antigone Wells had started to think of it as her honeymoon with John—but without a marriage ceremony to kick it off, nor the certainty of a marriage certificate to carry them home. Still, the fact that they were now expectant parents—but without the inconvenience of a pregnancy—helped her sustain the illusion.

On a summer morning that was already growing in heat and humidity, Wells chose to wear a loose blouse of dazzling white cotton, a full skirt which floated around her bare legs and ended just below the knee in bands embroidered with colorful yarns, and light leather sandals open at toe. She looked and felt like a peasant girl and seemed to blend right in with the locals.

She and John went sightseeing in the most ancient part of the city, centered between the Piazza Navona and the Pantheon, ending up hot and exhausted at the latter. John explained from his background in the construction business that the building was more than nineteen hundred years old and had been in nearly continuous use. That was why the little square before the entry porch was several feet below the surrounding street level.

“The city has literally grown up around this place,” he said. “Layer by layer.”

Inside the great bronze doors, after they crossed a stone threshold that he said had “felt the booted feet of Caesars and the slippered feet of Popes,” he showed her the soaring, sand-colored interior of the rotunda.

“It’s the largest dome of unreinforced concrete in the world,” John said, “made lighter by the inner coffering.” From where he was pointing, Wells understood him to mean the waffle shapes stamped into the ceiling. He explained how, by tracing the curve of the dome down past the belt of blind windows and balconies at the dome’s base and then inward toward the floor, the structure enclosed a perfect sphere more than one hundred and forty feet in diameter.

It was beautiful—and delightfully cool. Wells rushed forward, to the very center, where she could stand under “the oculus” and look up into the open sky far above.

“What do they do when it rains?” she called back to him.

“Mop the floor, I guess,” he replied, coming up to her.

They toured the chapels and tombs around the perimeter, then turned to leave by the bronze entrance doors. As they walked out through the shadows of the portico, a woman came toward them from between two of the close-set pillars.

She was brown skinned, wore her dark hair long and in ringlets, and had outlined her eyelids with too much kohl, like an Egyptian priestess. She was dressed not unlike Wells herself, except the woman’s blouse was torn and dirty, her skirt went down to her ankles, and she had a woolen shawl pulled over her head. She carried a baby on her right arm, and her left hand was stretched out begging for alms, or spare change, or whatever she was asking for in a language that didn’t sound like Italian. She kept pointing at the baby and murmuring.

John smiled politely and leaned in to hear what the woman was saying.

That was when Wells saw a flash of metal, reflecting the bright sunlight out in the square. The flash came from between the folds of the woman’s shawl and the baby’s dangling feet. Operating blind beneath her burden, the Gypsy woman was wielding a

knife, apparently trying to stab John, or perhaps to cut away his trouser pocket—which would be as good as stabbing him if he moved any closer.

Wells reacted instinctively. With one hand she pushed back on John's chest to force him away from the weapon. At the same time she performed a hop kick: her hind foot shifted forward, moving under her center of gravity, for balance, while her forward foot lashed out to strike at the wrist of the hand holding the knife. Her leg moved so fast that her skirt billowed around her knee and immediately closed behind it with a *whump!*

The baby and the arm holding it went flying in one direction—with the arm actually detaching itself from the woman's shoulder underneath the shawl. The hand with the knife went in the other direction, passing across and becoming momentarily pinned against the woman's body. Well's forward foot came straight down with a loud *slap!*

That put her in a tee stance, ready for the next move. The slap of sandal leather on pavement echoed the clatter as the baby—actually, a wooden doll—and the false arm nailed to it landed on the flagstones five feet to the side.

The Gypsy woman recovered instantly, spinning into a crouch and swinging the knife back across her body in a wild, thrusting arc that missed by less than an inch cutting open Wells's stomach. The woman snarled, flipped the knife expertly in her hand, and prepared for a lunging, overhead strike that, given the short distance between them, would drive down, puncturing Wells's sternum and passing through to her spine.

But after all these years of training, Antigone Wells was quicker than any street-fighting Gypsy. Her forward foot came straight up, her bent rear leg unfolded until the knee almost locked, to give the kick added speed, and the ball of her flying foot arched back from the stiff leather of the sandal's loose sole. Her skirt went *whump!* again, and the foot caught the woman on the point of her chin, while the sandal's leading edge cut into her throat. The woman's cry became a strangled "*Yawp!*" and she performed a backflip that landed her at the base of a pillar. Her head struck the stone and she folded up.

Wells walked over, kicked away the knife where it had fallen, lifted the woman's head, and touched her neck. Her throat was bruised with a raw blood line where the sandal had left its mark, but she was not deeply cut. Her carotid gave off a strong pulse. Behind her head, the pillar showed a fresh bull's eye of blood on the gray stone.

Only now were people beginning to react to the ruckus and move toward her and John. Not wishing to spend the rest of their vacation in an Italian jail, Antigone Wells took his arm, pulled him through the ring of people gathering around the Gypsy woman, and ran across the square, up the sloping ground, and off into a side street.

* * *

John Praxis wasn't exactly sure what had happened. Apparently, Antigone had suddenly gone berserk, kicked a baby and then the woman holding it, possibly killing both, and then dragged him away from the scene of the crime. He knew Antigone was an expert in some form of karate, but he had never actually seen her in action.

When they finally stopped running, she pushed him up against a brick wall and frantically felt the sides of his body, up and down, from armpit to thigh.

"Are you hurt?" she kept asking insistently.

"Am I hurt?" he repeated in a daze. "You just killed a woman and her baby!"

Antigone stopped, drew back, and stared at him. "That was no baby. A doll—a distraction, while she tried to slit your pockets with a knife."

“You *saw* a knife?” he asked doubtfully.

“Didn’t you?” she replied.

Praxis thought back to the scuffle. All he had actually seen was Antigone’s kick at the baby, the baby flying off to one side, then a flurry of arms and legs that ended with the poor woman thrown back on her butt and striking her head on a stone pillar. It left a bloody mark. If a knife had been involved, then how was the woman holding it? Her free hand was in sight the whole time, outstretched for money.

“I . . . can’t be sure,” he admitted.

He reached into his trouser pocket, to draw out his handkerchief and wipe his face. His fingers went down, past the pocket’s bottom, and out into the open air, right through the torn cloth of his pant leg. He stared down at his fingers, wiggling them inanely.

“Oh,” was all he could say.

“She had a knife,” Antigone said quietly. “It was hidden by a doll hung on a false arm. I was afraid she would cut you.”

“Is she dead?”

Antigone grimaced and shook her head. “It takes more than a sock on the jaw and bump on the head to kill someone like her.”

Praxis wondered how much experience Antigone Wells actually had with jaw socking and head bumping. Enough to know a thing or two about survival probabilities, apparently. What he still could not quite believe was the speed of the fight. He had never visited Antigone at the *dojo* she attended in San Francisco, never watched her sparring with other students, and only once or twice had he seen her performing a *kata*, or fighting form, in cleared space in the living room on Balboa Street. He had gathered—from nowhere in particular, from general knowledge, or from that one glimpse of her careful practice—that Antigone’s brand of karate was something slow and thoughtful, like *tai chi* or yoga. Something graceful and feminine. The reality was fast and brutal and left bloody marks.

He knew it would be dim-witted and chauvinistic of him to harbor hurt feelings about the incident. But still, his pride was vaguely injured. When John Praxis was growing up, men were supposed to be the strong, protective types, while women were supposed to shriek and cower in moments of danger. That was just the way the world worked. He never expected that, when the knives came out in a street fight, he would be the oblivious partner walking around in a daze, while the lady on his arm would spin around three times and turn into Wonder Woman.

He didn’t regret that Antigone had saved him, not at all. But still, he felt somehow diminished. The best he could manage was, “Thank you, m’dear, for saving me.”

She tucked a stray bit of hair past her ear. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

* * *

On the second anniversary of the Treaty of Louisville, Brandon Praxis flew to Washington to honor the fallen among the troops he had led.

Because the country’s capital remained in Kansas City, the entire District of Columbia had become a National Heritage Park. Some of the country’s best museums were already located there, including the Smithsonian, the Air and Space, the Museum of Natural History, and the National Art Gallery, and it was considered inappropriate as well

as too expensive to move them all to a new setting. Now the public buildings of the former federal government joined them as tourist attractions.

The White House had become a history center with exhibits on the country's foreign wars and invasions, from 1812 to Afghanistan. The Presidential Emergency Operations Center under the East Wing was dedicated to the Cold War and Atomic Era, while the Situation Room in the basement of the West Wing celebrated the country's response to the September 11 attacks.

The U.S. Capitol building became an art gallery, with traveling and rotating exhibits in the hallways, amateur theatricals staged in the House and Senate chambers, and noontime concerts in the Rotunda—although the acoustics were terrible, with a nine-second reverb delay that had to be compensated with arrays of sound-damping loudspeakers.

Brandon and every other former U.S. soldier understood that the nation would have only one monument to the Second Civil War—the Oval Pool in Oklahoma City, which serially hologrammed the names and images of the Federated Republic's dead. But Arlington National Cemetery was still intact and functioning, and a section had been set aside for the men and women who had fought and died on the “wrong side” of the war.

He had bought a wreath, a simple circle of cypress leaves with a cluster of two white roses for his own 2nd Battalion and three red roses for the 3rd Combined Arms Division of which they were a part. No one else would understand the symbolism—except for the two hundred and eighty-three soldiers resting here, lying among comrades from other units, other battles.

As Brandon approached that section of the cemetery on foot, he recognized a familiar face. Frieda Hammond was wearing a black business suit and carrying a long white flower, perhaps a lily.

“Hello, Major,” he said quietly.

“Colonel. You remembered, too.”

“Of course.”

They walked down the row of graves, and he laid his wreath on the first name he recognized: SP4 Corporal John J. Sparto, who had died defending his burning tank on the northern bank of the Ohio River. That had been an awful death. Sparto deserved the wreath.

“So many of them,” Hammond said, “for such a cocked-up war.” She laid her flower on the next grave, Chief Warrant Officer Eugenia Sparrow.

“I’m sorry,” Brandon said. “I don’t recall exactly what happened to her.”

“Helicopter crash,” Hammond replied. “During routine transport.”

“Oh! Do you remember them all? Each death?” he asked.

“Of course ... it was my job,” she replied simply.

Another thing there would never be, Brandon realized, was a Tomb of the Unknown. With DNA analysis and better recordkeeping, each soldier could now be accounted for. Rumor during the war had said that the only MIAs were soldiers who actually chose to disappear. Brandon doubted that. War offered too many ways to atomize the human body beyond recovery.

When they reached the end of the row and had run out of names that even Hammond could recognize or remember, she turned to him, gave a sad smile, and saluted.

“See you next year, Major?” he asked.

“Probably not. You say good-bye and move on.”

“That’s the way of it, I guess.”

* * *

When John Praxis got back to the office after his vacation—more like a honeymoon—with Antigone, he learned that his daughter had totally changed around the company’s computer system. The installation was so deep and invasive that they finally had to hire an information technology manager to keep everything together and running properly.

Her name was Penelope Winston, but she introduced herself as “Penny,” and she was young enough to be his granddaughter—maybe even a great-granddaughter. She was pretty enough, in the no-makeup, face-scrubbed, farm-girl fashion, with curly red-brown hair, blue eyes, snub nose, and freckles. She showed up at the Friday lunchtime executive meeting wearing blue jeans, a black tee shirt blazoned with the motto “I can EXPLAIN it to you but I can’t UNDERSTAND it for you”—which Praxis found vaguely disturbing—a military camouflage jacket, and combat boots. The whole outfit was two notches below San Francisco standard for the old casual Friday, plus it was snarky. This was unfortunate because she was giving a major demonstration of the new system’s capabilities that day.

She was halfway through her introduction and already hip-deep in a technical language filled with search strategies, heuristic learning types, minimax decision making, constraint propagation, and core resources when Praxis put up a hand to interrupt the flow. “Excuse me,” he said. “Could you start over, for the slow children in the room?”

Antigone, sitting immediately to his right, caught his eye and grinned.

Callie, across the table, leaned back in her chair and looked troubled.

“Yes, sir,” Winston replied. “What is it you need to know?”

“Tell me, in simple terms, what this thing does that we didn’t do before.”

“Well ...” The young woman frowned. “It pays attention. It’s basically an artificial intelligence, although we don’t use that word anymore. It will help coordinate your business and govern your recordkeeping functions like accounting, finance, personnel, and project scheduling—the backroom stuff.”

“Does it replace the operating system, accounting package, and whatnot?”

“Oh, no! It’s an overlay to the system. It doesn’t replace anything. It augments and monitors. Think of it like having a real-time operator who watches everything and asks the right questions.”

“Does it talk?” Praxis asked. “Don’t artificial intelligences speak English?”

“It’s merely an analytical engine,” Winston said. “But, but if you want, I suppose we could put in a synthesizer and teach it English. We’d need a separate port for that, too.”

“Then could it attend our board meetings and make its own reports?” The possibility of having a robot system large enough, smart enough, *complex* enough to run a whole company intrigued him—even though he had been stung by one when he worked for the plumbing company. “Does it have a name? Do we call it ‘Hal’?”

“Well, sir, it has an IQ about equal to a dog’s,” she replied. “A really smart dog, a working dog, like a border collie—and with the same kind of fixed focus and attention span. But it won’t converse like a human being. And it doesn’t play chess or do psych evaluations.”

"Then we'll call it 'Spot,' " he said. "Or 'Rover.' "

Penny Winston looked over at his daughter Callie for help.

"It's just a machine, Dad," she said. "It simply follows rules, or algorithms, that refer to an extensive database of prior examples—something like a person drawing on vast experience. But it doesn't actually think—although it can learn and add to that base of experience."

"Do you trust it?" he asked her seriously.

"More than some people I can name," she said.

"Until it does something terribly wrong, I suppose."

* * *

Antigone Wells had come to treasure the weekly trysts with John. It was usually on a Saturday morning, but sometimes Sunday, when the two of them went out for lunch together as a couple—just them, without Callie, her daughter, other family members, or PE&C associates, and no business talk allowed. This particular morning they had gone to Café de Young, attached to the art museum in Golden Gate Park, and after the meal they walked it off by touring the galleries. They were holding hands like a pair of teenagers—until they came to one piece in the exhibit hall of American sculpture.

Wells felt John's hand leave hers as he stopped in front of a standing, larger than life marble figure of a woman. She was naked except for a sheet clutched around her waist. At first, Wells thought he was captivated by the coldly erect stone breasts, which was what you would expect from a man. Wells dismissed them as less than impressive.

"What a face!" John whispered. "Such a load of anger!"

Antigone Wells came back around and peered up into the face, which was bent slightly forward. It was a stern face, certainly, with eyebrows drawn together and full lips slightly pursed. But rather than anger, Wells read the expression as more consternation, confusion, or dawning realization. She looked down and, between the figure's sandaled feet, saw locks of hair and an old-fashioned straight razor that was cocked open. The title of the work, carved into the base, was "Delilah."

"Have you dealt with many angry women?" she asked. Now that Wells thought of it, the figure with its long hair and hint of darkness, even on the creamy marble, reminded her of his daughter Callista.

"Adele could have that look sometimes," John said. "I often thought it was directed at me."

That was his wife, the woman who died. A drunk, as Wells remembered from their consultation long ago about having her committed.

"I don't know what she had to be angry about," Antigone Wells said now in John's defense. "She had a good life, didn't she? Married to a successful man. Three talented and successful children. Big house in the smartest neighborhood—"

"We made a lot of sacrifices to get there. I think she would have settled for less."

"Most women do," Wells said sadly.

"But not you," he said, taking her hand.

She pulled the hand free. "You don't know what I've had to give up, either!"

With that, she walked away. Wells would let him come after her—or not.

But his footsteps followed quickly, and he called to her softly, "*Tig!*"

She turned into his arms. "All right. You get to keep your hair."

Then she waited three beats before adding, "This time."

* * *

Brandon Praxis had been called to a meeting in the corporate headquarters by someone he'd never heard of, a woman named Penelope Winston, "of the IT Department." He didn't recall PE&C ever having one, but he took it as a sign that the company was growing and expanding.

When he arrived on the third floor, his aunt saw him in the long hallway, gave him a funny look, and pointed toward the far end. "She's waiting for you in the media room," Callie said.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We've all had to go through it."

"Go through what?"

"You'll see."

In the conference room he found a young woman in her mid-twenties or maybe even younger, dressed rough in patched jeans and a tee shirt that said, "Forget the Clowns, Send in the Engineers." But she was really cute, with tousled hair and big, bright eyes. She looked him up and down and gave him a grin.

Suddenly he was aware of his own clothes: khaki work shirt with button-down pockets and shoulder straps, tactical pants with side pockets, and steel-toed boots. He didn't look much different from any working engineer called in from a job in the field, except for the M9 bayonet in a sheath on his right hip and the ammo magazines in those extra pockets.

"You must be the soldier," she said. "I'm Penny Winston, your new in-house tech wizard." She held out her right hand without getting up from her chair.

He was already moving to sit on the opposite side of the black-glass conference table but changed direction and leaned over to shake hands. She used his change of momentum, just like a judo throw, to pull him around and steer his butt into the chair beside hers.

"More comfy this way," she said.

She tapped on the tabletop, invoking touch-sensitive symbols he couldn't read because of the angle, and a window opened in the webwall across from them. Rather than the Skyped face of another person, it showed a blank screen with a blinking cursor, like an old-fashioned text application. He didn't recognize any of the pictograms and pull-downs across the top of its frame.

"Hello, Rover," Penny said to the room.

The screen stayed blank for a moment.

Then it typed, "H ... ello, Winston!"

"Who's Rover?" Brandon asked.

"That's what Mr. Praxis insists on calling your new software support system," Penny said, waving at the wall.

At the same time, the screen cursor did a line return and typed, "I am Rover. Who are you?"

"This is Brandon Praxis," she answered for him.

The screen did another line return, gave that unnerving pause, then spilled out a paragraph of facts including his full name, position in the company, pay grade, New Social Security Number, home address—an apartment in a South of Market high-rise—three contact numbers with the proper descriptives, and curiously enough, his blood type,

O-negative. It finished with “Grandson of John Praxis. Nephew of Callista Praxis. Former U.S. Army officer, official rank of captain at demobilization. Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star, campaign ribbons for Memphis, Louisville, Pine Barrens, Atlanta. Honorable discharge but without veteran status or pension benefits.” Then it stopped, did another line return, and waited with blinking cursor.

He stared at the screen. “That’s a neat party trick.”

Penny tapped the table again, and the cursor turned into a square—the universal “offline” symbol. “Rover is here to correlate and compare data, to help run the company,” she said.

“It’s an intelligence,” Brandon supplied with a grimace. They’d had problems with those in the service. It turned out that, in the field, under pressure, “almost genius” could be the same thing as “amazingly stupid.”

“Think of it as a failsafe,” she replied. “Rover has already made three passes through all the company accounts and discovered a number of anomalies.” She tapped the tabletop again, and the cursor changed. “Tell us what you found in the Security Department,” she said to the screen.

The cursor blinked thoughtfully, then asked, “What is at 255 ... 51 Industrial Boulevard in Hayward in California?”

Brandon knew full well what that facility did, because he’d set it up personally. The address was in a warehouse district just north of Interstate 92 with a short and relatively uncomplicated storm drain leading out to San Francisco Bay. He was naturally hesitant to describe what actually went on there—not to an unknown cyber system, and certainly not to the pretty girl with the blue eyes sitting next to him.

“It’s basically ... well, a training facility,” he said. “For my security officers.”

The cursor blinked at him. “Sixty-five square meters is small for training.”

“It supplements our main facility in Menlo Park,” Brandon explained.

“Personnel office, material storage, and staging,” Rover replied.

“That’s right. Did you find any more ‘anomalies’?” he asked.

“Yes, two chemical fume hoods installed at that address.”

“My officers have to know how to work with CS gas.”

“Two-chlorobenzylidene malononitrile. Tear gas.”

“I don’t know. I suppose that’s the formula.”

“And fourteen drums of perchloric acid.”

Brandon paused. He wondered if the machine had a camera on him and was smart enough to read body language. Or could it detect stresses in his voice, like a lie detector? He glanced sideways at Penny, and found her looking at him with a gentle, expectant smile. Whatever the Rover software suspected, it hadn’t let her in on the joke yet.

“We use it for cleaning and etching metals,” he said flatly.

“As in ... removing the serial numbers from weapons?”

“Something like that.” Brandon shrugged. “Occasionally.”

“Three thousand liters of acid? ... I do not understand.”

“Well, what do you *think* we do with it?” he asked in exasperation.

The cursor winked at him thoughtfully. Then it typed, “Manufacture of ammonium perchlorate. A component of solid rocket fuel.”

Brandon sighed. “You got me! We manufacture propellant for our rocket grenades and other munitions. It’s not exactly legal without a license, but ...” He glanced at Penny.

She looked like she was chewing on something, trying to smile but still in doubt. She tapped the offline again. “Getting you in trouble is not the purpose here,” she said quietly. “We’re not the cops.”

“Thank you. But then, what is the purpose?”

“We’re helping the new system understand what it’s seeing through your accounting, billing, contracts, scheduling, and other operational indices.”

“I understand. Is there anything else?”

She unmuted the intelligence long enough to confirm that it had no more questions. Then she tapped again for silence. She turned to face Brandon and stared deep into his eyes. “You know,” she said slowly, “I looked up perchloric acid as soon as Rover flagged the account. It’s a powerful corrosive, way too dangerous for amateurs to handle—especially in manufacturing explosives.”

“Uh-huh?” Brandon’s face didn’t move. “So ... what’s *your* take on the situation?”

“That acid eats through almost anything. So I would guess you’re making something—a *lot* of somethings—just disappear. Things that are not exactly legal to have around.”

“That’s a good guess,” he said. “But, for your own peace of mind, as well as deniability, you really don’t want to take your hunch any further.” He paused to see how she reacted to the warning.

Her eyes went wide for a second; then she nodded. But she did so without the telltale squint that might indicate an element of either calculation or cunning. She was merely accepting his advice.

“Do you think your machine believed me,” he asked, “about making rocket fuel?”

She thought for a moment, then nodded again. “The numbers might almost add up. But sooner or later Rover will notice that you also buy those grenades and the rest off the shelf. It’s a very bright machine.”

“What should I do?” he asked.

She considered. “Leave a big hole in the data stream. Don’t file any reports about how many rounds you actually fire on the job.”

“We never do,” he assured her.

“What? Fire any bullets?”

“No. Kiss and tell.”

2. Red Handed

Pamela the Myrmidon was at least a dozen years older, and her bobbed and lacquered blonde hair now had a frost tip, but her tough, athletic body could still fill out a business suit with wide shoulders and a short skirt, and she could still crack walnuts with her bare hands—a trick she demonstrated at Christmas parties after three vodka sours. John Praxis’s daughter had found her by chance, working as cashier in the food court at Nordstrom’s, and immediately offered her a job. So Pamela was back at the PE&C reception desk, which was still located in the hallway opposite the door with the pebbled

glass on the third floor at Sansome Street. If this desk wasn't armored, at least the woman behind it certainly was.

When Pamela brought a man and woman into Praxis's office, the frown on her face indicated trouble. But all she said was "Police Detective Blount and Assistant District Attorney Brown to see you, sir."

They might have been fraternal twins, male and female, with sober faces, short dark hair, thick necks on hefty torsos, and navy blue suits. The only difference seemed to be that Ms. Blount's jacket had brass buttons, epaulettes, a gold shield above her left breast, and a bulge where a pistol hung under her left armpit, while Mr. Brown's business suit was conventionally unadorned.

"They just flew up from Los Angeles," the receptionist added. "They *don't* have an appointment."

"I see," he said. "Thank you, Pamela." His watchdog receptionist reluctantly withdrew. Praxis turned to study his guests. "I'm surprised you didn't call me on the webwall first," he said. "I might have been out of town."

"Some things still have to be done in person," Brown said.

"Subpoenas, injunctions ... reading Miranda rights," Blount supplied.

"We came prepared to serve you and other company officers," Brown finished.

"I see," Praxis said cautiously. "And this would be regarding ...?"

"Your award of the Long Beach Freeway renovation."

"Yes, we just received the notice. Is something wrong?"

"The decision was improperly influenced," Brown said.

"To the tune of half a million dollars," Blount observed.

"Are you telling me Praxis has to *bribe* people to get jobs?"

The two just stared at him, like a pair of owls in daylight.

"That's ridiculous," he said. "We run an honest business."

"We have one-half of the conspiracy already in custody," Brown observed.

"The person taking the bribe, Melissa Willbrot, working with the Board of Public Works," Blount explained.

"I've never heard of her," Praxis said. He could feel his eyebrows drawing together. "I'd have to check our records, but I don't recall that the request for proposal came from any such agency. Which one was it, again?"

"Board of Public Works. Willbrot was their staff counsel," Brown said.

"She was on the review committee," Blount offered. "She was very influential."

"Very enthusiastic," Brown corrected his partner. "Perhaps too enthusiastic."

"I think we'd better include my president in this," Praxis said. "And the head of my Legal Department." Then he rang for Pamela to round them up.

* * *

When Antigone Wells entered John's office with Callie to hear from the representatives of Los Angeles's Police Department and District Attorney's office, she pulled a chair around behind his desk so that she could sit beside John, whisper in his ear, and offer him legal counsel without having to talk to him across the desk. This way, she could also face his two accusers as his confidante and attorney. She put a restraining hand on John's arm but kept her touch light for the moment.

She listened in silence while they preferred charges of bribery and conspiracy to suborn a public official against Praxis Engineering & Construction Company, its

principals, and its executive-level officers, including everyone sitting in the room. When the two were finished, it was time for Wells to swing into action. She gave John's arm a light squeeze for reassurance.

"I'd like to note for the record," she began, addressing Brown and Blount, "that neither of my clients present had any participation in or knowledge of the alleged acts."

The ADA and the detective ducked their heads together and whispered. Then Brown lifted his. "Your contention is so noted," he said.

"We will immediately start an internal investigation," Wells continued, "and will surrender the guilty party to you for prosecution. In the meantime, Praxis Engineering retracts its bid on the freeway project—" She heard both John and Callie draw breath at that. She tightened her grip on John. "—and cancels any extant agreements and subcontracts. We will also post a bond with the City and County of Los Angeles, with Caltrans, and with the F.R. Department of Transportation to cover the costs of rebidding. Will that be acceptable?"

More huddling. "Yes," Brown said.

"And finally, as my clients are principals in this firm and integral to its continued operation, I would suggest they pose no flight risk. Can we dispense with the formality of your taking them into custody?"

Brown drew an envelope from his inside breast pocket and handed it to her. "So long as you will acknowledge that they have been properly served and will appear in court on the date specified therein."

Wells opened the envelope, scanned the subpoena, and observed that it listed both John and Callie as well as a number of unspecified John and Jane Does. The date was for a month hence—plenty of time for her to investigate, file motions, and get to the bottom of whatever it was that had happened.

"So noted," she agreed. She laid the document on John's desk.

At her nod, he summoned the receptionist to escort the two visitors out, but he signaled for Wells and Callie to remain.

Antigone Wells moved around to one of the guest chairs in front of his desk.

When the door was firmly closed, John looked first at his daughter, then at Wells, and asked, "Any idea what all that was about?"

Callie sat slumped, arms folded, face creased by a deep frown.

Wells bit her lower lip. "They must have something solid, if those two will identify this Willbrot woman to us so openly. Some hard evidence. Maybe even a confession."

"Callie?" John prompted.

"Kunstler," his daughter said.

"She worked on the bid documents, of course," Wells observed. "But then, so did two or three of our engineers, some of the clerical staff—"

"She went to Los Angeles," Callie said. "Alone. She met with people, made contacts. None of the other staff did that."

"Do you have reason to suspect she might have bribed this woman?" Wells asked, glancing sideways at John, who met her eyes. "In my review of them, I thought our bid documents looked reasonable, in line with—"

"Let's say I have no reason to suspect she *wouldn't*," Callie offered.

"I don't understand," John said. "Why would she do that?"

“Because,” the daughter said, “Mariene likes to win.”

“But ... you brought her into the company.”

“Yes, because I thought I knew her.”

“Not well enough, evidently.”

Wells had a sick feeling in her stomach. First, the Praxis grandsons in the Security Department and their unindicted felonies—assault, murder, destruction of property, obstruction of justice, and conspiracy to commit all of the above. Now, the friend and protégé of Praxis’s own daughter and the suspicion of underhanded business dealings—subornation, bribery, conspiracy. What kind of mob family had she joined? And where would it end?

She quietly moved her chair back away from John’s desk. Just a few inches. But he noticed the gesture.

* * *

When Penny Winston was called into the media room by the spooky new receptionist, she found the chairman, John Praxis, the president, Callista Praxis, and the lawyer, Antigone Wells, all seated at the table facing the webwall. Callista had Rover’s text box open and was clearly trying to get information out of him—without success. His previous responses alternated between null signs, question marks, and requests for restatement.

Callista caught sight of Penny. “Well, hell, about time,” she said. Then her head jerked in annoyance.

“What?” Penny asked.

“Your tee shirt ...”

The front lettering read “What part of $t\sqrt{1-v^2/c^2}$ don’t you understand?” It was the Lorentz transformation governing time dilation in special relativity. The shirt’s back, which was covered by her jacket, showed a saddle-shaped universe compressed into a globe, like the yin-yang stitching pattern on a baseball. That represented distance dilation, which was the flip side of the transformation. With all these engineers in the room, she figured someone had to have studied cosmology. Apparently not.

“It’s just science,” Penny said.

“Yes, but that’s hardly business attire.”

“Could we get back to the subject at hand?” John Praxis suggested.

“What’s the problem?” Penny asked. “Rover’s not responding?”

“I need to find out who authorized and distributed a sum of money,” Callista said.

“Oh, that would be in accounts payable,” Penny replied. “Rover?”

The cursor in the window blinked its ready status.

“We already looked there,” Callista said. “He’s got nothing.”

“It wouldn’t be a regular account,” Antigone Wells said. “It’s probably not even a company check.”

“Well, what *do* you know?” Penny asked reasonably.

“Someone in the company paid half a million to bribe an LA County official.”

“Whew!” Penny whistled. “And you want to know who, right?”

“It might not even be money,” Wells went on. “A bungalow on the beach. Or a couple of fast cars. The actual bribe could be impossible to trace.”

“But I can find those *things*,” Penny said, “if this company bought them.”

"The district attorney was very specific about the amount," Callista replied. "It sounded like a lump sum."

"District attorney, huh?" Penny said. "So the cops are already involved?"

"Yeah, we're all going to jail," Wells said, "unless we find the perpetrator."

"It *could* be cash," Callista said. "But try looking for smaller amounts, odd thousands, taken out over—"

"Wait a minute!" Penny held up her hands. "Start from the other end. What was the bribe for?"

"Favorable review of our bid on a big highway project," Wells said.

"So it's got to have come from a marketing account," Penny said.

"You'll never find it there," Callista said. "I've already looked."

"Yeah, but you have to know what to ask for," Penny said. "Rover, display the annual budget allotted to the marketing department, subheadings only."

Out popped a table of accounts and amounts. The total budget barely topped a million dollars.

"Sum expenses alongside, year to date," she instructed.

The table repeated with a parallel column of amounts paid out for each heading. They showed that only half of the total budget had already been spent.

"Anything added or missing?" she asked the people in the room. "Bogus accounts? Bogus amounts? Expenses shown as paid that you know for a fact have not been made?"

They stared and studied, then one by one shook their heads.

"So, either your marketing people are able to subsist without spending any money—like some kind of air fern—or their regular accounts didn't supply the half million used in the bribe."

"It had to come from within the company," Callista stated.

"Rover," Penny instructed, "do a regression analysis of the entire corporate budget, variance between projected and expended, year to date. Note any outliers beyond ten percent. List and sum the outliers."

The screen showed a scattershot diagram, dot by dot, drew a slanted line through the mass of dots, and circled those that lay pretty far outside the main pattern. It then listed the affected budgets and the amounts at variance. The total, combining both over and under variances, came to about two hundred thousand.

"Any of those look different from what you'd expect?" she asked.

"Are we really leaking two hundred kay?" the elder Praxis asked.

"Small potatoes," the daughter told him. "The year is young yet."

"Do you think any of those are hiding your bribe?" Penny asked.

"Not even close," Callista said. "Unless you pieced 'em together."

"Rover, note all high-side variances and sum," Penny instructed.

The screen listed the different headings too fast to note, then gave a total that was more than half a million, but not by much.

"Is anyone in the company in a position to skim a little bit here, there, and everywhere?" Penny asked. "That is, and not get caught?"

President and chairman looked warily at each other. They shook their heads at the same time.

"That would be a neat trick," Callista Praxis said.

“The managers involved would scream,” John Praxis added.
Penny shrugged. “Then we must deduce the money didn’t come from here.”

* * *

That evening when Antigone Wells returned with John Praxis to the house on Balboa Street, she could tell from the street that something was wrong. A white card about fifteen inches square was nailed to the front door, and she could read the title while still on the sidewalk: “NOTICE OF EVICTION.” Not until they climbed the steps to the front stoop and read the fine print did they learn the house had been sold at a sheriff’s auction two weeks earlier.

Wells was thankful it was just her and John. Callie and her daughter had moved out some months ago, taking an apartment closer to downtown and to Rafaella’s elementary school. It would have been bad for the little girl to come home in the middle of the afternoon and find the house sold—or even find the sheriff’s deputies still there, nailing up the notice and denying her entry.

“Nice of them to tell the owners,” Praxis grumbled. He tore the card down, folded it, put it under his arm, and unlocked the door.

“I’m sure it must be some kind of mistake,” she said. But when they got inside, Wells reached over and took the card from him. It was still a public document.

“What?” he asked. “I’m throwing it away. It’s all just bureaucratic nonsense.”

“That’s still an official notice. It belongs on *somebody’s* door—just not ours.”

“You’re right, it’s *my* house. Bought and paid for. I don’t even have a mortgage, so they can’t foreclose on it.”

That reminded Wells of something. “But *do* you own it, John?” she asked. “Think back a bit.”

Two years earlier, when money was tight and they needed to post a performance bond on the War Memorial Opera House—one of their first big projects—Praxis had put the house on Balboa Street up as collateral. As Wells remembered it, the appraised value had just about covered the ten percent in real money that the engineering firm needed to raise in order to get the five-million-dollar bond.

“Right, the opera house,” he said. “But we’re fine on that job. Ahead of schedule, in fact.”

“I’ll look into it in the morning,” she said. “Maybe it was the bank that made a mistake. Now that *can* happen.”

“But then ... are we even allowed to stay here tonight?”

“No one around to stop us, is there?”

In the morning, it took three calls to the bank for Antigone Wells to discover that the performance bond had been quietly cancelled. With the opera house project more than ninety percent complete their client, the San Francisco War Memorial and Performing Arts Center, had not questioned the cancellation when they received notice of it some weeks earlier. The person who authorized the action had elected to withdraw the value of the bond in cash, in the form of a readily negotiable cashier’s check, and release title to the property held as collateral.

“Who signed the authorization?” Wells asked.

“Praxis Engineering’s vice president of marketing,” the bank official said. “I can’t quite make out the signature.”

“Mariene Kunstler?” she suggested.

“That could be it,” he agreed.

After she got off the phone, Wells went in to see Callie and explained what she had discovered. “What I don’t understand,” she said, “is where Kunstler got the authority to do all this.”

“We gave her power of attorney,” Callie said.

“Why, for heaven’s sake?” Wells asked.

“Mariene needed to be able to sign for the company—contracts, joint ventures ... performance bonds. It simplified the bidding process and let her make deals on the spot.”

“A powerful tool to give someone who’s not even bright enough to know when she’s signing away the chairman’s house,” Wells observed.

“She might not have known about that. The bond was before her time.”

“She could have checked the address. It might have rung a bell.”

“I think the deed showed only city block and lot number.”

“Anyway, now we know where she got that half million.”

“Yeah, pretty clever. Sneaking it out from under our noses.”

“Except she got caught. Let’s call her in here so we can nail it.”

“She’s in Upstate New York this week. Scouting out a water project.” Callie checked her watch. “Lunchtime back there. I’ll try giving her a call.” She paused with her smartphone to her ear, then said, “Hello, Mariene. It’s Callie. Please call me when you get this. Thanks!” It was obviously a message to Kunstler’s voicemail. Callie clicked off.

Antigone Wells had listened carefully and could detect no hint of storm clouds in the message, none of the anger she knew the younger woman must be feeling now. “Keep it light all the way,” she advised. “Just bring her back, give her a reason to meet with you, and we’ll arrange to include those officials from Los Angeles.”

“Easy enough,” Callie agreed. “She’s overdue on justifying her expense reports.”

* * *

Mariene Kunstler looked at the message waiting on her smartphone’s display. She recognized Callie Praxis’s number, of course. She even punched in and listened to the woman’s innocent request for Mariene to call her back. She listened to it twice. No harm in that, because the voicemail service lived on Mariene’s side of the connection and so was untraceable.

She heard nothing suspicious in Callie’s voice or wording. She might even have called her back—except that *would* have been traceable. Come to think of it, the phone itself had been bought for Mariene by Praxis Engineering & Construction, which paid for the account. She knew from her police experience that they could initiate a trace of the phone’s location without even bothering to ring it. Almost by reflex, she switched off the device’s power button, located the nearest waste container, and threw it in.

Mariene was no longer registered at her hotel in Batavia, New York. She had flown out of Buffalo Niagara International Airport six hours earlier and was now in transit through JFK International. And the ticket she held was not in the name of Mariene Kunstler or anything like it. Instead, it matched a South African passport, credit cards, and pink-banded driver’s license she had cut from the lining of her second suitcase before heaving it—along with her PE&C business and credit cards, original travel documents, and the company-logoed fountain pen she carried—into a random dumpster near to where she made the taxi exchange between La Guardia and Kennedy. She had learned long ago to have nothing in her possession that was either personalized or monogrammed—no

jewelry, no note cards or accessories, no underwear—so that any identity she needed would pass the closest inspection. And the photograph inside every passport clearly showed her Black Widow tattoo. She was a professional.

And because she was a pro, Mariene had arranged for ongoing contact, using coded words and fallback numbers, with every person in whom she had the slightest interest. That morning she had routinely called Bernardo Gorgoni, Melissa Willbrot, and the half dozen other people with whom she had conducted illicit dealings in her role as PE&C marketing head. All had checked in fine—code word “sunny day”—except for Willbrot, who hadn’t picked up her messages in two days on either her primary or secondary service.

Was that enough to cause someone like Mariene Kunstler to drop to the floor and roll, shred her current persona, and disappear sideways into the great, wide world?

Probably not for someone *like* her, which was why other people who tried to do what she was doing eventually got caught. But not her.

Now her only problem was figuring out how to get back in touch with Matteo di Rienzi, explain this mess, and not get herself killed over it.

* * *

After one whole day without hearing from Mariene Kunstler and leaving three more messages on her smartphone, Callie Praxis contacted the hotel in Batavia and learned that the woman had checked out some hours before getting her first call. Kunstler’s onward travel plans were not known to the concierge.

Callie then contacted the clients whom Mariene was supposed to be interviewing about the water project. They confirmed that, yes, she had been present for the initial briefing. She never came back for the follow-up session. She had left no contact information. They were mystified.

Two days later, Callie contacted both the Batavia and Buffalo police departments, asked if they had any female bodies turn up in the morgue, and gave them Mariene’s description, including the spider tattoo. Did she want to file a missing person’s report? they asked. Not yet, she told them.

Three days after Mariene Kunstler had gone missing, Callie called the bank that had issued her company credit cards, asking about recent activity. They reported nothing since she checked out of the hotel in Batavia. Callie told them to cancel all the cards and send the final statements to Praxis Engineering & Construction. She made the same call to the service that handled Mariene’s smartphone, which reported no activity either by cellular network or internet connection since Callie’s own calls. The device had disappeared from the network somewhere on the concourse at Kennedy International in New York City. Callie canceled the service and requested the final billing be sent to her company.

Then she called in Antigone and discussed how they should present their findings to the Los Angeles Police Department and District Attorney’s office. Wells suggested that both she and John should make depositions in the case. They could discuss their suspicions there. Their company had already formally withdrawn from the Long Beach Freeway project, so they could act as disinterested parties.

“Do you think we can get Dad’s house back?” she asked Antigone.

The older woman whistled. “You mean, extract the payment from this Willbrot person and buy back into the performance bond, as if nothing has happened?”

“Well ... whatever ...”

“Callie, the money’s gone—or tied up in court for a couple of years of trial and appeal, which is the same thing as gone. The house has been legally sold and the new buyer wants to occupy. We’ll have to go long just to square things with the opera association. Not to mention keeping you and John out of jail as Kunstler’s knowing accomplices.” Wells shook her head. “Count your blessings at this point.”

Still, the attorney looked troubled.

“What is it?” Callie asked sharply.

“Dealings this complicated don’t tend to happen just once. So I hired a confidential investigator we’ve used in the past for background checks and other business. I asked him to backtrack Mariene’s projects and her personal contacts, her old expense reports, her bank accounts—”

“Bank accounts? How could he get into—”

Wells looked at her levelly. “You don’t want to know. In any case, he’s come up with a number of peripheral contacts, unexplained trips and expenses, and large sums of money transmitted and received. He says he’s ready to put together the outline of a whole secondary business that Kunstler was apparently running—hints of blackmail, extortion, kickbacks—in and around the projects she was getting for us.”

Callie wondered what a search of her own bank records and private contacts would reveal of her dealings with Uncle Matteo. She was thankful she did not have Antigone Wells as an enemy.

“So,” Wells pressed, “do you want my investigator to document any of this?”

“What? Create more evidence Dad and I would have to testify about?”

“Something like that. If you want to have the big picture—”

“Let’s wait until we get through the Willbrot thing.”

“All right. Then I’ll tell him to hold off.”

On the fourth day after Mariene Kunstler disappeared, late in the evening and from her home phone, Callie Praxis contacted Uncle Matteo. As soon as the pleasantries about health and family could be dispensed with, she asked him directly, “Where is she?”

“Whom do you mean?” he asked blandly.

“The Kunstler woman—if that’s even her real name.”

“I don’t know. Where did *you* see her last? Isn’t she working for you?”

“Apparently not. She stole half a million dollars from us, bribed a public official, and has since disappeared. It will take six months for us to clean up the damage she’s caused.”

He sighed. “It is getting hard to find good help these days.”

Callie let herself get angry. “She was a cop, for God’s sake!”

“She was many things, Contessa. ‘Cop’ was the least of them.”

“She was working for you, too, Matteo.”

“But only in an advisory capacity.”

“And if that came out in court ...”

“It would hurt you more than me.”

Callie realized that was the truth. She had no leverage against the man.

“Do you want me to send you another executive? One a bit more discreet?”

“Oh, no, Uncle. Please, no!”

“And if I should insist?”

Almost no leverage. She thought of her nephew Brandon. “Then he or she might disappear after the first job interview,” she said quietly.

“I understand. Then you shall never see him—or her.” He hung up without the usual courtesy of *ciao*, *buona notte*, or *a domani*. That left Callie to ponder his last statement, which could be taken either of two ways.

About the Author

Thomas T. Thomas is a writer with a career spanning forty years in book editing, technical writing, public relations, and popular fiction writing. Among his various careers, he has worked at a university press, a tradebook publisher, an engineering and construction company, a public utility, an oil refinery, a pharmaceutical company, and a supplier of biotechnology instruments and reagents. He published eight novels and collaborations in science fiction with Baen Books and is now working on more general and speculative fiction. When he's not working and writing, he may be out riding his motorcycle, practicing karate, or wargaming with friends. Catch up with him at www.thomastthomas.com.



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