

The Bolden Directive (opening chapter)

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This is a work of fiction.

Prologue

April 16, this year.

Squinting into the brilliant afternoon sun, Jack realized he couldn't get to his reserved seat on the makeshift stage without drawing even more attention. He almost made it on time, as the retirement ceremony began just two minutes ago. He had no choice but to stand in the thick green grass at the edge of the portable aluminum stage, sweating and trying to catch his breath, until the playing of the National Anthem ended.

This was not his event.

He had arrived just moments before, balancing his black airline roller bag by the long black handle with one hand. His flight bag swung gently from the other hand before he slowly lowered it onto the turf, in a feeble attempt to be invisible. The seventy-five yard sprint from the curb to the grassy, open area had been awkward at best. He forced himself to walk the last hundred feet to the rear of the attendees, to minimize any commotion. But his jog, with the two heavy bags in hand, had been in full view of the dignitaries on the stage. They must have been amused.

When everyone rose for the national anthem, he left his bags and crept up to the side of the stage, behind the Department of Defense flag, and caught his breath.

He wasn't out of shape by any means, but he certainly wasn't twenty anymore. His seat was noticeably open on the outdoor stage, a temporary structure positioned parallel to the eastern edge of the Potomac River. To make matters worse, he was still dressed in his airline uniform, which made him look more like a French cruise ship captain than a military officer. He should have been dressed in his Air Force Colonel Class A's.

But there had been no time for that. He got word of the ceremony only three days prior and had already left home on a regular trip pairing. Thus he didn't have his Air Force uniform with him anyway. Fortunately, he had been able to rearrange his schedule, swapping the Tokyo Narita to Washington Dulles leg with another captain. As a check airman, he had much more flexibility than a regular line pilot.

But his flight's late arrival—thirty minutes behind schedule—required him to dash off the airplane and bolt through customs ahead of

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the rest of his crew. Then he ran to the airport's baggage claim area to hail a cab for a very expensive ride straight to Bolling Air Force Base—just in time to be late.

He hated being late.

Major General Gary Mitchell "Snootch" Nogrady was the first to notice him and couldn't help but chuckle. He knew, more than anyone else, how Jack hated to be late. He didn't often see Jack frazzled and sweaty. The two-star general had known him since they were eighteen year-old "smacks" at the Academy back in the late seventies.

Although they talked frequently and traded emails, Jack hadn't seen Snootch in almost a year and was shocked at how bad he looked, even from twenty feet away. Deep half-moons underlined his sunken eyes. Sure, he was smiling—it was his retirement celebration—but clearly Snootch was not well. Nonetheless, Jack smiled back and shrugged his shoulders, conveying better late than never.

When the opportunity presented itself, Jack glided to his seat with the rest of the dignitaries, mostly three- and four-star generals. He was the only non-general officer on the stage. The only other two-star was the incoming Defense Intelligence Agency Director, Robert "Ferd" Guessferd. Jack didn't know him. There were also four men in power suits, most notably the Director of the CIA and the Vice President. Jack had worked with the Director many years ago when they were just intel weenies. But to have the Vice President show up: *Cool*. That explained the look he got from the two men in suits behind the stage, guarding the VP's back, or "six." Normally a VP wouldn't show up to an event like this, but he and Snootch had a long history when the VP was a junior congressman on the House Intelligence Committee and Snootch was a lowly Captain staff officer. Jack had never been star struck by a person's elected position or national celebrity. He always judged people by their character and intellect. Yet it was certainly unusual sitting on the same stage as the Vice President of the United States, he thought.

He saw the DIA logo on the front of the podium and it still made him chuckle. Unveiled in the mid-eighties, it was the globe encircled by an ornate ribbon. But the employees called it a world wrapped in red tape.

The DIA in the mid-eighties was a place with a muted mission, a disgruntled and uninspired workforce—career bureaucrats. Internally, DIA stood for *Do It Again* or *Disabled in Action*.

As Snootch moved up in the organization over the years, he slowly changed it into a thriving and effective intelligence-gathering organization. It was no surprise to anyone when he was put in charge a few years ago.

Jack slapped Snootch's shoulder as he plopped into the open

seat—the one reserved for him right next to the soon-to-be-retired Major General Gary Mitchell Nogrady. Of course, he never used the “Snootch” cognomen when anyone outside their old inner-circle was present.

Jack exhaled. He was still in the same uniform he'd been in since he dressed for work some sixteen hours earlier at the Narita Radisson. He needed a shave, or at least wash the grime off of his face.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the Director,” a young lieutenant's voice announced through the portable loudspeakers. Everyone began clapping as Jack took it all in. The event had at most a hundred people there, with half of the attendees in some sort of military uniform. He knew that most would be asked to carry their folding chairs back across the grass to the curb on their way back to the huge Defense Intelligence Agency Headquarters building looming a few blocks to the east, safely and innocuously inside the fence at Bolling.

The CIA director stood from his chair two down from him. Jack smiled at him, with a “hey, old friend” nod. The middle-aged man silently but enthusiastically mouthed “Coach!” while pointing an imaginary gun at Jack, and moved up to the microphone.

What's his name? Weber. Gary Weber. Boy, it's been a while. Jack then continued turning his head all the way behind him, and took in the incredible view of the small waves hitting the immaculately manicured rip-rap on the shore of the Potomac. Across the wide river was Reagan National Airport, busy as usual. The departures were northbound, up the river. Any passenger with a keen eye, seated on the right side of a departing airplane could see that some sort of festive event was occurring just beyond the shore, across the wide river. However, they wouldn't know that a two-star general was retiring and the vice president of the United States was there.

Gorgeous. A perfect day in D.C. Jack thought about how beautiful the city was. But he could also never forget that awful event that happened just a few miles from there, some twenty-five years ago. The horrible memory of that dreadful day that he lost his wife came flooding back. *Has it been that long?*

The director spent about ten minutes describing in gross generalities all of the accomplishments that Snootch had made. But of course he couldn't really talk about the details due to national security concerns. His overused punch line “I'd tell you, but then I'd have to kill you” still could have been entertaining, but the man was a horrible stand-up comic and made Jack wonder how this man made it all the way to the leader of Central Intelligence.

Snootch whispered, “Glad you could make it. Jeez. Bull fight?

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Train wreck?" He then offered Jack a mint.

Snootch was referring to Jack's red eyes and the grimy sweat covering his five o'clock shadow. Even in jest, Snootch was always analyzing and observing. As Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, it was hard not to.

Jack took one, scratching the stubble on his chin. "Thanks, Snootch. Nope, just a quick hop from halfway around the world. I sure would love to lean into a toothbrush for a few delightful minutes. Why the outdoor ceremony? Isn't this a bit odd?"

"Yeah, it was originally planned for the big stadium conference room in the DCIA building. Then they thought it couldn't handle the crowd because of the Veep showing up. So we moved it to Building 259 down at NRL. Big and secure, but not fancy enough. The Veep wanted it outdoors, which caused all kinds of headaches from a security standpoint—more because of the DCI exposure. But if the Veep wants it outdoors, we put it outdoors." Then Snootch looked him straight in the eye. "Seriously, I am so glad you could make it, Coach. Listen, I get one more ride in the staff car after this is over. Come to the house?" It wasn't a question. It was an order, an order from Jack's oldest and dearest friend.

"Don't you have a bit of pomp and circumstance to endure?"

"Seriously, Coach. We have to talk." The emphasis on the word "Coach" was an admonition.

Jack looked in his eyes. The man was sick. Maybe it was the strain of the job. No, he decided. There was something physically wrong. He'd known him too long.

"O.K. Sure, Snootch." *Uh, oh...*

Clapping and laughter erupted. Both of them missed it, and decided to pay better attention. This was about Snootch, after all. A few minutes later, the CIA Director introduced the Vice President who made a few remarks then invited General Nogrady to stand and receive a medal. He already had a chest full of them. Most of the medals were for actions that few people would ever know about.

All stood when the retirement orders were read by the Vice President. Typical retirement ceremony. Lots of clapping and little substance.

When the ceremony ended, everyone remained in place until the VP and the Director walked back through the green lawn and got into their respective staff cars. The VP had five. The CIA Director had just one. Snootch slapped Jack on the back, saying "I'll make this quick, Coach" and proceeded to shake hands and smile with anyone and everyone who was there. The first person's hand he shook was a young airman, who

could easily have been a son of his. Snootch was a good man, Jack reminded himself. Jack had always been the subordinate of the pair, particularly during those tough years following Kate's death—and that was so very long ago. Her death happened only a few miles from here, he recalled, and at about this time of day. Even now, the thought of her death took his breath away. He hated this beautiful city, the place where his wife had died so violently.

“Coach, good to see you!” It was a voice from behind.

Jack wheeled around and saw a Brigadier General—and old friend—extend his hand.

“Jeez, if it isn’t Joe Kim. Are you *ever* going to retire and move to Hawaii like you always said you would?” he gibed.

“Someone has to watch the store. We’re running out of old school talent.”

“You can’t tell me the new kids aren’t up to the challenge.”

The general shook his head. “Sure. They’re smart enough. But they think it’s all done with electronics and software. You and I know that HUMINT [human intelligence] is where the bacon is fried. All these kids want to do is get techie with it.”

Jack got serious. “Hey, Joe. What’s the deal with his retirement?”

“All I know is it was sudden. Seems like he was run out on a rail.”

They both stared at the two-star general who was working his way through the dwindling crowd, saying goodbye.

No one would ever guess that Jack and Snootch had once streaked through the Air Gardens together when they were teenagers at the Academy, many years ago. Five times through buck naked and you’re an “ace.” The ace connotation was fitting, yet it all seemed a bit passé these days. Jack was an ace, many times over. Never caught; he had the knack. Snootch, the now-retiring director of defense intelligence, never made it—he always got caught by some upperclassman or an officer, even when he tried it late at night. Sure, it was a game, a prank. But getting caught was not enjoyable; not in the least. In fact, that’s why being an ace carried such distinction back then. The punishment usually involved some peer humiliation, a lot of push-ups, and walking “tours,” or simulated guard duty for hours at a time while everyone else was at Arnold Hall drinking watered-down beer and eating cardboard-flavored pizza.

As Jack looked at Snootch, thirty years of memories came rushing back. From a skinny freshman—a Cadet Fourth Class—to the head of Defense Intelligence. Hard to believe. Even harder to believe was in knowing the kinds of decisions that Snootch had to make while holding that position. Yes, Jack knew all about those decisions, because he himself

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had been ordered by Snootch to do a few things that could have resulted in his own demise or foreign incarceration had things gone south. It couldn't have been easy for Snootch to send his best friend out on high-risk missions.

Yet Jack wasn't even a real spook—just a “spoo,” i.e. a “spook of opportunity” or “rent-a-spool” as Snootch had once said. A drop here. A pick up there. He often never knew the content, nor did he want to know. Most of the time, he spent his reserve days in the military underneath florescent lights compiling data into information. It was droll, miserable work. But as the great NFL fullback Larry Csonka once said, “It's a necessary evil.” It did get Jack a promotion to Colonel in the Air Force Reserves, but even to this day he wondered whether it had been worth the hassle and the occasional risk. No one at the airlines had a clue what he did on some of those long Hong Kong and Taiwan overnights.

Yet he learned much later that Snootch had probably *saved* his life by getting him reassigned after his new wife's death. Kate, a.k.a. “K-8” was a dear friend of Snootch, in addition to being Jack's wife. Behind the scenes, Snootch got Jack out of the cockpit and into a temporary desk job as an intel officer for the year that followed her death. It happened just a mile or so north of where they were now gathered.

You can't grieve and fly airplanes at the same time. Jack knew that all too well now. But as a twenty-four year old, he thought he was bullet proof. Snootch was always more controlled than Jack, which is why he made it to the top of the intel world. “Flying can wait—you need to get your mind straight first,” he had told Jack a week after his wife's sudden death.

Snootch, Kate, and Jack had all graduated together from The United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Snootch was Jack's best man at the wedding at the Cadet Chapel, the day after graduation. Interestingly, Snootch actually saw more of Kate over the first two years after graduation than Jack did, since Jack went off to undergraduate pilot training (UPT) and Fighter Lead In. Neither Kate nor Snootch went to UPT. So by the time he got Jack settled in at DIA, Snootch had a two-year leap on him as to how things were done in the intel world. He made sure that Jack's new bosses kept him busy, to keep his mind off of his horrible loss. Then a year later, Snootch worked out a deal with the Manpower and Personnel Center to let him get out of the Air Force so he could fly for the airlines while completing the rest of his Air Force commitment doing reserve duty as an intel officer. It was an unusual deal for a regular Air Force officer, but Snootch was a guy who could make things happen.

All of those memories came back now.

At last, Snootch and Jack got into the staff car and headed towards the Wilson Bridge and Snootch's home just south of Alexandria, Virginia, about fifteen minutes away. As he crossed the newly-completed replacement bridge, he took in the beautiful view of the nation's capital to the north. Such a beautiful and horrible city.

Jack looked around the back of the black Lincoln Town Car, finally asking, "How do I get back to Dulles?"

Snootch looked at the driver, a young airman. "Lenny, what time are you off duty?"

"Sir, I'm available as long as you need me," came from the front.

"Would you mind giving this fine man a run out to Dulles—"

"—Comfort Inn in Herndon."

"—Comfort Inn, say, at about ten tonight?"

"Yes, General."

"Thanks, Lenny." Then he looked at Jack. "Where to, tomorrow, Coach?"

"Just back to San Fran, and I'm done. It started as a six-pack [six-leg, trans-Pacific trip] back and forth to Japan. Good thing I'm a check airman and could shuffle my schedule to have an overnight here. You sure didn't give me much notice about this retirement thing. But I don't leave until nine PM tomorrow night, so we can do some serious 'debriefing' with adult beverages. You've earned it, bud."

"I'm glad you made it."

"Me, too." Then Jack lowered his voice. There was no beating around the bush. "O.K. what's going on?"

Snootch replied immediately and with no emotion. "Leukemia. Pretty aggressive."

No. Jack felt a jolt go through him. "Aw, crap, Snootch. I'm so sorry."

"The simple lesson is blow your retirement savings early."

Jack didn't smile.

"Hey, it's O.K. I'm just still chasing after Rhonda," he added, musing about his own deceased wife. "But I ain't dead yet. I start chemo tomorrow."

"I was wondering why I got so little notice for your retirement ceremony."

"Yeah, I got the boot as soon as the diagnosis came in. All my personal stuff from my office is already boxed up in the garage. It's like I was never there. Some day you need to help me go through those boxes." He gave Jack a hard look. "The boxes in my garage," he repeated.

Jack changed the subject, "Who's this General Guessferd guy?"

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“They call him ‘Ferd.’ On name alone, it sounds like he’d be a good guy to work with. But the word is he can be a real ass. He’s been hiding over at NSA for years, doing deep black work. No one here knows him very well.”

“Yeah, I met everyone but the VP—who bolted right after it ended—and that Ferd guy. But it’s clear the two of them know each other. I saw it in their eye contact.”

“Yeah, the Veep and Ferd got to know each other when he was a junior congressman on the select intelligence committee.”

“But you knew the VP back then. Didn’t you run across Ferd?”

“Nope. He’s an enigma, which is actually a requirement for this job. If you’re a finalist on American Idol, you’ll never be DIA Chief.”

They soon arrived at his modest house and went inside. Jack left his roller bag and flight case in the staff car.

Jack noticed that all of Rhonda’s collectibles and artwork were still in the house. It was as though she was still there and would peek around the corner at any moment. But it had been almost three years since Rhonda died. Jack had stayed with Snootch for almost three weeks after her death, having traded trips and rearranged his vacation time. It was the only time Jack had ever seen Snootch cry. Two guys, both widowers before their time. Jack, a widower a quarter of a century ago. And it still hurt.

Snootch opened the closet next to the garage door and flicked a switch on the inside wall. But the closet light didn’t come on.

Unconcerned, he reclosed the door and asked, “Wanna beer?”

For a good hour they talked about everything, and about nothing. It’d been a while. Over the past year, Jack had come into town to do reserve duty several times, only to find that Snootch was “unavailable.” Snootch had never been one to let the action come to him. Even though it had been a year since they last saw each other, they talked as though it had been just yesterday. Throwing back a few beers, Snootch excused himself and walked out to the staff car to bring Lenny a bag of Doritos and a couple cans of Coke. The young airman was playing Angry Birds on his phone. Jack went off in a different direction to the bathroom. Washing his hands, he looked in the mirror and saw a man over fifty, sorely in need of a shave and some sleep. He saw the scars of a man who never fully recovered from the loss of his wife some twenty-five years ago. He also saw a man who just found out his life-long friend was dying. He couldn’t bear the thought. He washed his face which made him feel a little better.
Life doesn’t end, it just fades.

He returned with a forced smile, and they talked for another half an hour about nothing in particular. Then it got quiet. Snootch, closed his

eyes for a couple of seconds then looked at Jack, quite seriously. “I have something to tell you, Jack.”

“Haven’t you told me enough?”

“Twenty-five years ago this May the fifth, Kate died.”

“I know. I wish it had happened on some other day. *Cinco de Mayo* never had the same ring to it.” Jack still vividly remembered getting the call from the Park Service Police, “Mr. Bolden?” they had asked. He corrected them as “It’s Lieutenant Bolden. Speaking,” then he heard the news that changed his life, “I’m afraid we have some bad news, sir...”

Over the phone. Twenty-five years ago, Jack had been told that his wife Kate, had been murdered—and he got the news over the phone. Sure, it was a procedural mistake, but a mistake nonetheless. When he hung up, he was completely alone in the world. Never had he felt so utterly alone. That was so long ago, yet it was like yesterday.

“I have something I want to tell you. I feel I have to.”

Jack sat back in his chair, took a swig of beer, and said, “Go.”

“Kate’s murder was no random act. It wasn’t a drive-by shooting. She was targeted and murdered intentionally.”

Jack looked confused. *How would he know this now? How long has he known?* “Seriously? K-Eight? My Kate?”

“Yes. I thought this was something I shouldn’t take to my grave with me.”

Jack was stunned. After a pregnant pause, he managed, “I should say not.”

They stared at each other, with Snootch hesitating then knowing what would follow, offered, “Look, nothing like this is cut and dry. Remember when we lifted the prints off the shell casings?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, over the past five years we’ve gotten very good at matching prints against millions of people around the world.”

“Who was it?”

“You see, twenty-five years ago nothing was computerized. Now, everyone is ID’d. Back then, when Kate was working for the Foreign Technology Division she was about to blow the lid on some illegal microprocessor shipments to Taiwan. Remember ChipPro?”

Jack nodded. “Sure.”

“That was her. She discovered it when she analyzed the time and employee productivity estimates at ChipPro’s Sunnyvale ops. They made a critical error in trying to hide their productivity—some sort of raw materials uptick with no corresponding uptick in output, plus doctored shipping records. The FBI caught a batch of thousands of eight-bit

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microprocessors—big power back then—being loaded into a Taiwanese-bound pallet. They were going to be transferred by boat to Guangdong by Chinese smugglers. Two days after this intercept, Kate was dead in her car at L'Enfant Plaza.”

“You’re saying she was killed over some microprocessors?”

“Yeah. But it was more about who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar than the actual microprocessors.”

“Who?”

“The Chinese.”

“No, who, specifically?”

“At the time, he was a thug inside the Chinese Embassy.”

Jack glared at him rather than asking “Who?” for the third time.

“His name is Cho Chu. Kind of like ‘Choo Choo’ but his first, make that, his last name is with a long ‘O.’ And he’s now the Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Toto Motors, the biggest car maker in China and third largest car manufacturer in the world.”

“Are you friggin’ kidding me, Snootch? How the hell did he go from thug to CEO?!?”

“He was a patriot for his country. He’s also quite smart and industrious. And obviously he never pissed off the wrong people. We’ve had a file on him for years, but we just got his prints when we started requiring them with customs entry into the U.S.”

Jack let the news sink in. He tilted his head up and looked at the ceiling then asked, “How long have you known?”

“Honestly, Coach, I just found out. Look, there’s no statute of limitations on murder, but all we have is a print on the shell casing found near the murder scene. The bullet was never found. The injury was nonspecific to an exact caliber match. We would never get an extradition, much less a conviction. I’m only telling you this for closure, so you can quit looking at every yo-yo on the street wondering which dirt bag in our midst did it.”

Jack closed his eyes. He was a pragmatist and knew the news would not bring Kate back. Yet he waited for that warm fuzzy to pass over him, the contentedness he would soon feel by knowing the murder had been solved.

But it didn’t. So much for closure. He thought about this man, Cho Chu, now a captain of industry, who made it to the top by assassinating people in the name of his own country.

“Snootch. Thank you for telling me.” Then he tried to change the subject, “Look, I have to fly back to San Fran, but then I’m off for a week before I’m back flying, doing line checks. I’ll run back and help you with

this chemo.”

“Changing the subject means you are already scheming to go after him. I suggest you just move on and let God judge him in the afterlife. And, regarding your coming back here for some hand-holding—no thanks. I’d love to see you, but this is a battle best waged alone. I’ll get through it. Then you can come out when I’m ready to play golf again. Listen,” he said at last, “sometime you’ll have to help me unpack some of the boxes in the garage.” Jack saw him raise one eyebrow ever so slightly.

Jack nodded, but thought that was kind of an odd request—and the third time he mentioned those boxes. They stood, hugged each other like lifelong friends would.

Jack went out through the garage, clearly noticing the boxes stacked neatly in the center of the garage. As the garage door dropped, he waved, got into the back seat of Snootch’s staff car, and the driver took him back to his hotel.

Jack thought about his life at age fifty. He wasn’t going to just fade away. Call it revenge. Call it deferred justice. This man, Cho Chu, was marked. Jack had spent the last twenty-five years wondering what might have been, had she not been gunned down on that horrible night. Now he knew what he had to do. And he was going to need to pull together a team of old colleagues to make this work.

Major General Gary Mitchell “Snootch” Nogrady died the next day, one hour into what should have been a routine chemo treatment. His body was cremated immediately. Only then did the notifications begin.

Part I: Blytheville, Arkansas

Chapter One

April 16, forty-two years ago.

One eye squeezed shut, the perspicacious second grader hovered his other eye over the microscope and squinted into the single eyepiece. Young Jack Bolden twisted the black, grooved knob back and forth until the small organisms appeared. He had been given only two days with it and wanted to check out every possible small living creature he could see during the weekend. He had been puzzled at the look that Mrs. Roberds had given him before school let out when he asked if he could bring it home and use it over the weekend. What had she said to him? “Wouldn’t you rather play baseball or something this weekend?”

His response was quick and almost contumelious. “Why don’t you want me to learn more about microorganisms? Maybe *you* should teach baseball and let the recess monitor teach *your* class?”

He got the same look that he got from his mother occasionally and didn’t push it any further. She didn’t say anything to him, just turned and put it in its Styrofoam container and slid it into the cardboard box. At last, she said, “I don’t have to tell you that it’s very fragile.”

He nodded then grabbed the box and scampered away.

As soon as he got home, he set up the microscope on the kitchen table and began his investigations. He started out with blank glass slides and was amazed at the life already on them. He dipped one of the slides in Clorox then looked again. No movement. It shocked him. How many squiggly micro-animals did he just murder? That was the first time he had knowingly killed anything. It almost made him cry. He pulled out the glass slide and washed it off in the sink. He didn’t want to kill any more creatures, no matter how small they were. They had done nothing to him.

Convinced that he cleaned off all of the Clorox, he wiped the wet slide on his bright green nylon gym shorts then again with his off-white

tank top t-shirt and wandered out the back door, the screen slamming back against the frame making a familiar *schwhap*.

“Where are you going?” his mother asked from the den.

“To the ditch to get some specimens,” he replied, yelling back into the tiny orange brick house.

“Well don't get all dirty. And it's getting dark. I have to run and pick up your little sister. Then we're having dinner. So don't wander off.”

He said, “I won't” but his voice trailed as he turned.

The Bolden home was perfect, as far as he was concerned. He didn't know he existed in the lower middle class. The tiny frame house was on the very edge of the small town, its chain-link fenced backyard facing a large field, freshly plowed for the new season. Beyond the cotton field was a big ditch that had snakes and turtles and ducks—and provided a natural border to the B-52 base where the huge jets sat in the distance, their tall tails sticking up everywhere to the northwest. He got an air show every day from his bedroom window. He knew he was the luckiest kid in the world.

At only eight years old, he could already distinguish the pointy-tailed B-52s as the older “D” models and that the base was supposed to get some of the newer “H” models, the ones with the tops of their tails cut off. He could also recognize the KC-135s, the flying gas stations that refueled the B-52s when they had to go bomb the Russians.

Blytheville Air Force Base represented a link to the vast world beyond the confines of the tiny farm town—that and of course *I Dream of Jeannie*. Some day he would be a pilot. And a doctor. Oh yeah, and an astronaut too, just like Gus Grissom. His teachers told him he could be anything he wanted to be, and he wanted to be many things. All he had to do was study hard. That was no problem.

He walked along the edge of the field out towards the ditch, and looked at the huge dirt clods. He remembered how the huge tractors had tilled the field last year; the first run created big chunks of dirt, essentially flipping over the soil, burying last year's cotton twigs and stems, everything that was left over after the cotton pickers harvested the white puffs from the bolls. The tractor would soon be coming through again soon to turn the big clods into smaller ones. Maybe he would be home when the crop duster would fly by and spray some white stuff on the field. Last year he sat on the edge of the field for hours, hoping the distant crop dusters would do “his” field.

As he walked away from the straight row of tiny homes that lined the edge of the huge cotton field, he heard some kids playing at a neighbor's house, but didn't bother looking back. They were all two years

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older than he was—fourth graders, their age in double-digits—and knew they wouldn't let him play with them anyway.

So he kept on walking, careful not to get his white Converse All-Stars sneakers dirty. The sneakers were the latest fashion, the kind the NBA players had, high-tops. It was cool to leave the top three eyelets open, but he opted to tie them all the way up so he wouldn't twist his ankle on a dirt clod. Shoes could be washed, he reasoned; a sprained ankle would hurt for days.

After about ten minutes he reached the ditch and carefully guided himself down to the muddy edge. He knew there'd be no snakes yet as it was still too early in the season. He took the glass slides out of his pocket and dipped them in the murky, green sludge next to the edge of the water. Then he dipped the mason jar into the stagnant water and held it up to examine it in the receding sunlight. It was virtually opaque. Perfect.

On his way back, he saw three boys in a tree—his tree! What were they doing in his backyard, inside his fence line? As he got closer he could see one was climbing out on a mid-level branch, trying to get to a bird nest. Jack started to jog, but unsure of the reception he would get when he got there, decided to walk and not mess up his specimens. Maybe they would be gone by the time he arrived.

Jack focused on the gang leader and recognized him as J.B. Brown. He had a yard-long stick in his hand and slowly brought it back as he pulled himself closer to the nest. He moved with the grace of a leopard stalking a wildebeest.

Jack wanted to yell, “Get out of my tree!” but fully understood the concept of an ass-whooping. He continued to walk towards the house, albeit more slowly now.

Suddenly, J.B. slammed the stick down on the nest, the entire branch swaying from the force of his attack. The nest disintegrated and tumbled down through the trees, the tiny eggs falling to the grass below at a noticeably higher speed. “No!” Jack yelled, but none heard him because they were all yelling at the mother dove, which had been hit and was trying to fly away but was instead spiraling down to the ground. The older boys quickly scampered down the tree, onto the green grass in his yard and over to the bird, which was still frantically trying to fly but was clearly wounded.

A vitriolic rage erupted inside Jack as he ran the remaining hundred yards, gliding across the massive dirt clods. Mason jar in hand, its contents already emptied, he let it fly. The fist-sized jar arced well over their heads and impacted midway up the roof of the house with a deep thud and simultaneous chime of glass exploding in an outward Brownian wave.

“Leave it alone! Get out of my yard!” Jack's deep blue eyes focused on J.B. as he bounded the fence, his hands firmly grasping the top, horizontal pole, legs whipping over the side. The boys moved in closer as tiny Jack sprinted towards J.B., out of control, at full throttle. He dove into J.B., swinging.

And missed.

J.B. merely sidestepped, watching the flapping projectile sail past, land in the grass, and roll.

“You monster. What did you do?!” He started to get up, but the boys pushed him down; he was clearly no match for the trio of ten year olds.

J.B. walked over to the bird and scooped it up. It was clearly alive, but one of its wings was partially extended. He walked a few steps towards Jack, smirked, turned and threw the bird with all of his might over the fence and into the plowed field.

The bird never moved during its final, parabolic flight.

Jack bolted up with incredible speed and flew head-long into J.B., surprising him. They went backwards as a single heap. Jack, never having fought before, began swinging his arms at J.B., who quickly regained his composure and pushed him aside then quickly got to his feet and kicked Jack in the gut, knocking the breath out of him.

At that moment, “Boys!” erupted from behind the screen door. It was Mrs. Bolden and she was all business. The boys sprinted away before she could swing open the screen door, thinking distance was the key to survival.

Jack knew he was going to die, right then and there. Why couldn't he breathe? He was trying to. He just couldn't. Several years later he would know that it was caused by an acute blow to the *celiac plexus*. But at this particular moment he started to panic, grasping for her—anyone really. Then his diaphragm recovered slightly and he sucked in a little bit of air. He uttered something, but it was unintelligible. Then he caught a full breath, and did everything he could to not cry out like a baby.

“Are you OK? I'm going to call Annie Brown. That boy is not going to get away with bullying you.”

“No,” was all he could manage to say. He rolled on his side, away from her as she approached. She knelt down and touched his shoulder. He raised the back of his hand to her, indicating he was OK then stood up slowly and walked towards the back gate, never facing her. Otherwise she would see the tears.

As he got to the fence, he said, “Don't call Mrs. Brown. It's over. He knows he messed up.” He walked out about fifteen rows into the field

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and located the dove. He dropped to his knees to get a closer look. It was indeed dead, though he didn't need to really confirm it. He had witnessed its lifeless body tumble through the air.

He waved off his mother from twenty-five yards away, who turned and went back into the house. He heard the screen door close with a *schwhap*. He looked closely at the bird. He had never seen one up close before. The eyes were solid black and non-responsive. He poked at it. Nothing. He touched the wing then slowly pulled the wing out and examined the shape, the airfoil. It was fascinating. All of the rigidity was near the front of the wing; the rest was feathers. He rolled it onto its back. The power must come from the bird's chest. He looked at the bird as he would a machine. He thought about whether there was a bird heaven. Then he got angry again. He looked around then picked it up by one of its legs and brought it back to the house, laying it on top of the metal garbage can at the corner of the building. *This is not over.*

When he got in the house, he was instructed to clean up for dinner, which he did. When his father got home, they sat down for spaghetti, which he devoured. Mrs. Bolden told her husband about the fight, and Jack's dad looked over at him for confirmation.

Jack said, "I'm fine. He won't be bigger than me forever."

"When it comes to fights, run if you can. If you can't, be sure you get the first punch in before he knows what hit him," his dad said. His dad then finished the short lecture, "And contain him until he's no longer a threat. Fights aren't like in the movies. The guy that gets the first punch in usually wins." When his dad gave him advice, it was staccato and accurate.

Jack nodded. And that was that. Topic concluded.

Almost like on cue, at two AM, Jack got up quietly and dressed. He laced up his Converse, this time leaving the top three eyelets open. He walked through the darkened house, opened the fridge, the light blinding him temporarily. He grabbed the glass ketchup bottle. It was half-empty. Then he tip-toed over and opened the back door, being careful not to make it *schwhap* when he closed it. He had never been outside this late before. The air base, a couple miles away, was glowing orange from the ramp

floodlights, but was otherwise eerily silent.

He went to the garbage can and grabbed the dead bird off the lid by its legs. The air was cold and damp as he glanced up at the sky full of stars. It was a bit spooky to be out at such a late hour, yet he never reconsidered his plan. He glided between a few homes, then crossed the parallel street and went straight to the garage of the Brown's. His heart was pounding, so he waited until he calmed down a bit. There was no need to rush. Their dog was always put out in the back yard at night. However, if the dog was awakened, his plan would be foiled. In Blytheville, Arkansas, in the late sixties, nobody locked their doors at night. Their garage door didn't have both a screen door and a regular door. It was a single door, with two small windows at eye level, slightly offset, a post-World War II style. Bird and ketchup in his left hand, he twisted the door knob with his right hand ever so slowly until it released. The door didn't creak at all when he slid inside into the darkened kitchen of the enemy.

He left the door ajar and walked through the tiny home through the kitchen, into the den, and down the hallway to the first door on the right. He had been to J.B.'s birthday party last year, just like the other neighbor kids, so he knew exactly where the room was.

He stood silently in the doorway, and at once, felt completely at ease. The streetlight was illuminating J.B. He was on his back, toes sticking out of the sheet, legs spread apart, one arm at his side. The other arm was hanging slightly over the bed.

He made two slow steps to the bed and laid the dead bird between his legs, on top of the sheet. Then he slowly poured a half-bottle of ketchup on top of the bird. He took his time, breathing steadily. When he was finished, he simply turned and left. At this point, he didn't care if he woke him. Yet the impact of the discovery would probably be more pronounced if he wasn't there when it happened, so he crept out of the house and just as carefully closed the door. He walked normally down the driveway to the street then trotted home.

The whole mission had lasted only fifteen minutes, tops. Once he got home, he threw the empty ketchup bottle into the field, reminding himself to go get it later and examine the ketchup under the microscope now that it would no doubt have some organisms growing in it by tomorrow. Only after climbing back into bed did he realize the extent to which he would go to punish the guilty. Though he certainly didn't realize it at that moment, this trait would stay with him throughout his life. It was an inflection point, not the first, but one of many he would have that would shape the person he would become as an adult. Nonetheless, he tossed and turned for the rest of the night, waiting for the phone to ring or for the

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police to show up.

But nothing happened.

The next morning, he began his microscopic research again. None of the ten year olds showed up. He expected something, a phone call from J.B.'s parents to his parents, perhaps.

On Monday morning, he was standing outside the school doors talking to his friend Ross Dueber. Duebs looked beyond Jack, who turned to see J.B. walk right up and hover over him. J.B. was a full two inches taller than Jack.

"I'm going to beat you to a pulp," J.B. announced, leaning in slightly.

But before the word "pulp" was finished, Jack brought his fist from his side in a straight line to J.B.'s throat. It happened so fast that it was over before it started. J.B. dropped to the ground, clutching his own throat.

Jack leaned down on a knee and calmly said, "If anyone touches me, *you* will die. Got it?"

J.B. began coughing.

Eight year old Jack stood tall and looked around. The kids all gathered around. Jack put his white, high topped Converse tennis shoe squarely in the jaw of J.B., who began to cry uncontrollably. Humiliated, he ran home and his seat in Mrs. Simon's class remained empty for two days.

Interestingly, no one saw a thing.

The Bolden Directive is available at all online bookstores including Amazon (US, UK, Germany, France), and Barnes & Noble. Autographed copies are available at <http://www.TomSyl.com> and at select bookstores.