

Angels Keep Watch
The Transformation Begins

By
Randy Gonzalez



A Sterling Striffe Adventure



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"Stay alert, you're not alone. Keep watch over yourself. Don't forget what you sense. Don't let your mind wander off. Be vigilant as long as you live. Your strife defines how you live your life." Sterling Striffe

A Sterling Striffe Adventure

腕時計を保ちなさい (Maintain the Watch)

Angels Keep Watch - The Novel

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Randy Gonzalez

- CD-ROM – EBOOK -

Chapter 1: Moral uprightness without wavering

“God tests me in the forest of my despair,” Sterling Striffe made his gloomy assessment. “God let’s them. Evil ones, driven by blood lust of an ancient oath.” He kept watch. “Ours is an ancient code too. With Bushido we fight back by moral uprightness. Rectitude or justice is our guiding light.” His mind raced to her. “Warrior to warrior, she comes for me.” He could feel her heartbeat, her pulse, her hot breath on his neck. They were connected through time, space and spiritual essence. “Despair, dejection, denial opens the portal to the darkness of my heart.” A shiver shot like a bullet. Coldness touched the heart.

“While God tests us with cosmic games?” I heaved back at him. Not wanting to joust, but understand. Does God let evil have its way with us? “Her motive is revenge, Doc, pure and simple. She seeks justice too to balance rectitude.” Outside, the weather went grey, like his eyes. Darkness unfolded.

“God plays a good chess game,” he sighed with heaviness on his shoulders. “Knights are the key pieces, moving on a checkered path.” He smiled, turned from the cabin window. “The Queen, however, is the most powerful player in the game. Women, my weakness, my trial and sacrifice. Queen checks Knights.”

“You taught her to be a warrior, Doc,” I reminded. “You created her.” My voice hushed, listened.

“Yes. A warrior knows what’s right.” He stared out, sought her, held her in his mind. “Feel the pain, learn and live with it. Find the treasure of great price. Give the sacrifice.” He slumbered in thought. “My feelings search my soul. Morality teases my murky recesses.” His sturdy image reflected in the window. “Life’s filled with strife. My poor wife, Nova. Our last embrace, three years ago.” His transformation had begun. “The other one pulls me to her. Her kiss is death.” He tensed. “We share the code of bushido. Our bondage was dangerously passionate. For her, I fear the blood oath.”

“You loved her very much”, I offered, hoping to console. “Your feelings run to your depths.” I could only wonder what he saw in his mind. She’ll always be a part of you, Doc. Nova liked it here in North Carolina. I miss her too.” Her lineage descended from Conquistadors, a warrior class, a noble heritage.

“Yes,” he answered in a whisper, thinking of her. “My god, I wish she were here.” His voice fell low.

“Our safe house’s a secret place,” I replied. “A refuge on solid rock.” I sipped fresh brewed espresso. A steamy aroma floated. “How about a dry vodka martini? You’re favorite drink.” I thought he needed a good shot of something. “Rusty packed some Russian Vodka for you.” Ghosts chased him, while a CD player sang a version of O Fortuna from Carmina Burana. The affect was ominous. Snow fell outside.

“Uh, no Martini yet. Thank you.” He answered. “Women, God’s greatest creation. Like the one I loved and lost. No woman like her. And this one, who comes in darkness, she knows I feel her presence. She won’t forgive me.” O Fortuna tempted the darkening atmosphere. The landscape closed in.

Our senses were probed by external entities. A strong presence reached out. She was near, at least in the mental realm. Animals became silent in fear. Non-terrestrial forms got noisier sensing despair. They fed, festered and flourished on the deadly sins. Maggots on death, they gnawed. Hissing, screeching and growling spoke out. A foul smell permeated the air. The ritual continued. He mourned what neither he nor she could have. Once, they had a blissful union of a man and a woman. Now, she was coming to kill him. I felt a shiver of remorse. Moral retribution was near. Had she cornered justice, or its twin, rectitude?

“You did what you had to do, Doc,” I pointed out. “Plus, we needed time here to wait for her next move. A day to get our strategy in focus. Our target was always elusive. She’s got away many times. But, she wants a relic of great value. So, a reckoning is coming, boss.”

“We battle against hidden enemies,” he replied. “She leads them. They don’t play by rules, Jackson, my old friend.” He chuckled with pain apparent. “You know as I do, doing what is right, with moral compassion in the face of death. That’s our creed. When death comes, nothing will stop it. Death will demand answers. All we have is what we believe and what we’ve done. She and I are about to test those things.” He smiled through a frown. “We’re in her web of deception. There are triangulations there. The rule of threes follows close.” He struggled with the past. “It’s all about rules of engagement and survival. That pertains to the essence of morality in this quest. What is the price of what we seek? She wants a treasure. The Holy Grail, the lost Ark, what? Myla Trench aims to kill me for what I did.” He sank into himself, “Do I want her instead of the treasure?” His mind assessed the martial principles of engagement. Angles of attack, angles of opportunity and angles of execution. He knew how to fight demons.

Jackson Armstrong Hammer was my full name. I prefer the last name pronounced “Hay-mar” to cut down on the jokes. Describing him was another matter. Of average size height, his mind was much bigger. A rugged handsome face spoke of confidence and readiness to command. In excellent physical condition for his age, he was prone to action. He had what I called a hard charging nature. His hair was cut close and had a grayish tint. A trimmed salt and pepper goatee added to the affect. Standing there, he wore an olive colored turtleneck sweatshirt, khaki trousers and brown hiking boots. He could’ve been on a safari. Draped loose about his broad shoulders hung his tan belted trench coat. A brown fedora was cocked to one side of his head. An expensive Cuban cigar was clenched in his teeth. Mysterious in nature, he projected a sense of power. Swashbuckling and daring, he was every bit a noble warrior. His mind embraced ancient teachings of the martial arts. Taught by gifted masters, there was a time when he disappeared for secret studies. Upon returning from the Far East, he’d changed. He’d experienced things beyond the normal senses, in the realm of the supernatural. He had mystical insights and become the master. Myla Trench was his apprentice. The teacher was being challenged by the student.

“It’s gonna be more than a reunion, Boss,” I added, noting his striking profile. Women found something attractive about him. Brilliant, dangerous, intriguing, women of all types enjoyed his presence. “She’s gonna tangle you in a cocoon of silken possessiveness. Spider venom carries death. Are you jealous of her liaisons, the same way she’s jealous of yours?” There was some kind intensity between them.

“No,” Striffe answered without convincing me. “Obsession is a dangerous possession.” He had a suave and debonair manner, rugged swagger. Women were drawn to him. Lust troubled him. Subtle seductiveness caused flirting looks. He knew things others were afraid to know, that was enticing. At the same time, he simply was not afraid of evil. Warriors are like that, tough and tender, but wise and understanding. Fearless, but not perfect. That would be too much for any mortal. “She and I are alike.” He said. “I taught her well and she was a good student. The master and the apprentice are now equal. Yet, she holds for me taunting temptations mere mortality. Can’t waiver with this one.”

“I noticed an eerie grey fog rolling in,” I said as darkness began to fall. Shadows moved. “We must be vigilant, Boss.” I pondered the moves she’d make. He nodded in agreement. “You know her better than I do,” I added. “She wants you in that web of hers. That’s for certain. She’ll get what she wants.”

The sunlight fought with darkness, he showed no fear. I followed his example. Stillness gripped the late afternoon confines of our secluded outpost. The invisible nature of the wind whispered through the thick foliage. There was the sound of howling of things unseen. Autumn leaves waved their multiplicity of colors. An angry dangerous presence beyond the imagination was out there. To deal with it, he knew that victory came by staying close to your beliefs. Being human though, he also knew he was fallible by virtue of his own arrogance. Moral uprightness would fail to prevail. Fear would surface somewhere.

“Life is a blessing,” he said after brief silence. “It holds purpose, meaning and struggle. Life is also a curse. We’re the faithful do what we do to keep the balance, maintain the watch and resist evil.” His smile was sly, but strained by sadness. “When Nova left, a part of me died, Jack. I felt death inside ripping the fabric soul.” He tugged at the pistol in his shoulder holster. “Her other self inflicted a festering mortal wound. My heart will never heal. Mistakes must be avoided this time with her. We must do justice in a world where human cruelty knows no boundaries.” He thought about the denizens of the mind’s darkness. “The were-beasts are vicious and harpy’s horrid. Yet, the bat-serpents, the old flying dragon, they suck the blood life from our bones. They know the way we live is a clue to the way we die.” His thoughts shifted. “She’s a worthy adversary without equal.” Not just here, he thought of all women as equals to men. He admired them for being confident, capable and complex. Myla was definitely that kind of woman. In fairness to him, she would have said that he was always strong, tender and masculine. Myla saw him too as once a sensitive and caring lover. “Get ready my friend for a fight. We didn’t have time to fully secure the perimeter or the cabin.” His non-anxious presence transformed into a calm cool demeanor. He knew our stay would be short. Electronic countermeasures went into action. Intruders were in the forest.

“There’s always enough madness to keep us busy at our chosen task,” I responded, noting the blackness of my coffee. I sensed what was going on outside. The small white cup and saucer balanced precariously in my palm. Noises intensified around us. “Right now a Cuban cigar would be good.” He produced his cigar case and offered me one. I declined. Outside, like my coffee, the sky was black. Fall struck back in the delicate balance. Death was in the air. “You only live twice. The first time is all training. The second time is for an eternity based on what you learned the first time. One depends on the other. Right?”

“Very good, my friend. I appreciate that.” He turned and cocked his head in my direction. “She’s here. Or, at least some aspect of her is present. And, we know we have a mole as suspected. Who else knew we were here at the new sanctuary? None of our counterparts, the Company or the Agency. Just you, me, Rusty, our faithful pilot, and who else?” He adjusted himself back to his surveillance position. “Our real-estate lawyer, Dewey Cheatum. Known for his ego, greed, outlandish and flamboyant lifestyle. Not to mention questionable business practices, money laundering, sleeping with enemy and so forth. She seduced him. She’s good at that. He was much too easy a prey.” He sounded jealous? Striffe and Trench knew each other too well. She liked a chess game as much as he did. They’re in checkmate.

“How do you know for sure she’s here?” I asked. “Could be a deception. A sleight of hand.”

“I don’t. Nothing’s ever a sure thing. Especially with her.” He answered. “I feel her thoughts and know that she’s near.” His mannerisms were subtle and precise, trained and focused. Slowly, he reached for the long-range binoculars. Striffe peered through the looking glass. Reflections looked back.

“Anything out there?” I quizzed, sipping the hotness of the coffee. “Our systems are going crazy?” I watched him press a button on the binoculars. The electronic components came alive. “By this time, the late afternoon daylight will put us into the darkness. Cool temperatures outdoors will be a challenge.” The forest was a threatening array of colors and shadows. A rainy drizzle banged the tin roof.

“Yes, something. She’s dangerously unpredictable,” He offered. “And, she got to him. He’s the only other person. Our initial suspicions were correct. The lawyer sold us out. Who else in our group could she have gotten to? He’s the weakest link. She seduced him no doubt. All the indicators are there.” He thought for a second about his own weakness for her. “We suspected Cheatum was unreliable. Myla would use him. We’ll have to deal very coldly with the lawyer. We’ve tried to anticipate her strategy. Every move has been watched. She remains elusive and her web is far reaching.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “we’ll deal with him when the time is right.”

“Right now, I feel her. She’s near and grows stronger.” His answer showed intense feeling. But, that smirk of his, instantly put me at ease. “One of our contacts has her under surveillance in Toronto at the Reverend’s communal complex. Another is watching her movements in Mexico City. All is being monitored via the Albatross station.” He paused. We both knew this. “But, she or something like her is here. A fourth aspect, perhaps. Regardless the battle continues against hidden powers. A war in the unseen regions of the dimensional convergence. The Legerdemain Protocol stays active. Such is the cloak and dagger realm in which we work. We protect the veil that separates the natural from the supernatural.”

“Yet, certain forces keep watch,” I added. “We’re not alone in this fight.” There were times of doubt.

“No, but sometimes, we’re on our own,” he said with a discouraging tone. “Celestial forces, emanations of that realm beyond the senses, fight to maintain the balance against the opposition. Give and take, push and pull, win and lose, the adversary fights with futile options. Legerdemain, light of hand, hand of light, it’s all sleight of hand. As for her, she’s a cunning cold calculating professional.”

“For most people,” I added, “habit becomes obsession and establishes a pattern. From patterns, actions become necessities, with inclinations are prone to error due to human nature. Motives and mistakes are why, eventually, she will get caught.” In the next second, he was distracted by something else.

“Nova’s always on my mind, Jack.” He said. “I placed her on a pedestal, relishing in the diversity of her contradictions as a woman. Our passion was brief. She was a work of art. The Black Widow became a widow because she lost a husband. I became a widower in the loss of a wife. She killed the love of my life. So, we will trap her in her own web and expose the politicians she controls. A sacrifice will have to be made.” To him politicians were not to be trusted and useless to the Republic.

“I most heartedly agree, Boss,” I answered, still wondering what was going on outside. That was the first time I heard him make reference to the Black Widow’s loss of a husband. Was he conceding to her?

“Later,” he said, restraining his emotion, “I will deal with the politicians she corrupts.” Dr. Striffe most often contained himself around elected officials. Or, people like them who thought they were important. “Only a few good leaders remain. That’s why what we do is so important. Politicians are self-perpetuating and greedy. Their agendas are hidden and deceptive. Some, like the Congressional Intelligence Committee meddle in things best left to professionals. They should keep their big mouths shut.” He blamed a few for leaking information that led to his wife’s untimely death. There was too much pain there for him. We both knew the history here. A politician says the wrong thing at the wrong time. Information gets to the wrong people and bad things happen. A terrorist on the loose, a CIA connection, and unsubstantiated news stories reported endlessly. Subsequently, the death of a loved one occurs. Wounds don’t heal easily. He lost his wife and that was part of his strife. “Many will be sacrificed for the few. Casualties of war.”

“So, what else is new in the world of politics and the news media?” I asked, not showing my apprehension. I thought the Black Widow was closer. “Suffice it to say, a medical missionary goes to a region in a foreign country in Central America. There’s a mysterious plane crash, shot down over a jungle by terrorist with connections. I will help you do whatever you need to do.” He dearly missed his wife. I watched him make adjustments to the electronic binoculars. He distracted himself.

“Thank you, my friend,” he answered, manipulating the overly technical device. The binoculars automatically calculated distances, configurations, infrared analysis, movements, and so on. They could penetrate the shadows of dense forest foliage. He noted, “Our portable equipment is alive, interacting and comparing data between the binoculars and the computer system.” The forest was filled with life forms.

“While this analysis is taking place,” I said, staring at the fireplace thinking. Logs lowly turned to ashes in the blazing flames. “Shouldn’t we get moving to higher ground?” I was reminded of what he said earlier. That belief is the way to wisdom and understanding. Correct beliefs lead to correct understanding. In the end, that brings us into closer communion with higher powers. My belief now, glancing around the cabin, was to get out fast. “As a temporary sanctuary, the cabin is not as highly secure as I would like.”

“We didn’t have time to deploy a complete defense system.” He replied. “We could’ve made the place a fortress. Too late now. Be patient a little longer.” His mind was chasing her, or was she chasing him?

“Yeah I know.” I agreed, trying to reassure myself. “Being busy with distractions, we deployed in haste. The alarm system’s basic. The ground sensors on the perimeter, a 100 yards out, were hurriedly placed. The windows were bullet resistant to some degree. Yet, there are always vulnerabilities to an attack.” The electronic equipment was good. Nothing is foolproof. Compact and configured in silver colored metal briefcases, the Observa-Track Surveillance System scanned intruder behavior. All of it sat on a heavy oak table across the room. “I feel something’s moving while being led by something sinister. Evil disguises itself in very seductive ways, you know.” I felt it; he felt it and she knew it. Dr. Striffe was already ahead of the equipment. With the binoculars, he continued to check outside. Mentally, he was calculating their moves. A digital readout flashed information in green tinted projections. The data appeared on the inside lens of the binoculars. Sensors were alert and so was his mental acuity. Good and evil waged undying strife. Glowing eyes stared from the wooded darkness.

With the device, he examined various objects, shadows, shapes, colors and movements of creatures. The scanning mechanism examined the intensity of illuminations in the shadows. Dark spots in the woods were assessed for the presence of human form. Data continued to flash back and forth between the binoculars and the computer system. Various configurations were analyzed. Humans were not the only ones present. Demonic shadows, apparitions and ghostly forms arrived. Time to go stealth. Blend in and adapt.

“Not easy to trap a woman. Women are far more clever.” His mind was in high gear, as sensors relayed messages to the computer. “Easier to trap a man. We’re too susceptible, drawn to seduction and not that complicated. We are easily distracted.” He paused with admiration for her. “God didn’t give us enough blood to operate major organs above and below the waistline simultaneously. This is an age-old battle in which she’s has mastered. But, I have anticipated her moves. The transformation begins.”

“No argument from me on that,” I said. No one could question our motives. Most people didn’t know we existed. Those who knew didn’t want to know. Some ran their mouths too much. I thought for a moment. Sterling Striffe may have entered another one of his altered states. What was he really thinking, and what did he see out there. Among the fading points of light and darkness, a faint glimmer still held sway. The other realm was closing in. I patted the top of my brown crew cut. The bristles around the sides felt prickly. “We are less complicated.” I chuckled. “That’s the great thing about being a man.”

“Light gave way to darkness and one became the other.” He got that feeling they were about to strike. It’s the kind that tightens in the chest. The hairs on the back of your neck tingle. At that point, you know something’s up. An experienced Army Special Forces Colonel, he called this the intuitive processes. When he sensed something was happening, he knew it was time to pay attention and focus. “I detect movement among the trees.” At the same time the computer set off an audible alarm. The portable screen flashed intruder warnings. “Evil does its best work at night,” he added, seizing a remote control nearby. A press of a button silenced the alarm noise. “Evil seldom likes the light to reveal its cloaked intentions.”

“They have breeched the 100 yards mark and moving quickly”, I said as calm as possible, reading off data on the computer screen. “From an old Marine to an Army reservist, we need to get going, Doc.”

“The art and science of the warrior rests upon the skill of strategy.” He stared without flinching into the woods. “One cannot live by the material elements alone. Spiritual discipline counts so far as heart and mind are one. We are defined by faithful adherence to a solid belief system. When tested, that belief must hold true in all events of life.” Scratching his beard, he offered little apparent concern that we were under attack. “There’s a tremor in the realm. Cosmic forces form legions of resistance. We’ll go soon.”

“Yeah, but right now my will struggles against the flesh” I reached for a light switch. “The moment of truth tests the faith. She could certainly test any man’s faith with her abilities.”

“You are correct,” he said. A faint crown of gray stubbles circled his head. “Torn between two agonizing forces within,” he added, adjusting the binoculars, “the strife defines painful expressions. The truth is about allegory and vanity. Choice is between the truth and the lie that caused all the pain. The seven deadly sins fight the holy virtues. We are them. They are us. Where does faith become reality? In the end, when everything is over?” That stoic sense of fatalness must be a family trait I wondered.

I felt colder as a tingle went up and down my spine. We knew the holy virtues of our warrior cult, restraint, valor, generosity, diligence, patience, kindness and humility, were in battle for survival with the deadly sins of human folly. I could feel attacks from greed, lust, gluttony, envy, sloth, pride and wrath. They kept watch constantly. The raging fire in the fireplace didn't help the chills. Shivers tingled my spine. Outside, the rain clattered on the tin roof. Bizarre sounds became more amplified. I stopped rocking in my chair. We held the silence as thoughts raced. Brace yourself, I thought, here it comes. My mind wandered off the center of focus. Does size matter in combat? What was I thinking? Of course not. It's the size of the fight in the fighter, the Doc would say, not the size of fighter. His seemingly glib sayings sometimes drove me crazy. However, I knew that's how he kept his sanity. He believed what he said, and clung to a stoic veneer. The real man was inside trying to get out.

I was a pretty good sized guy, with a weight lifters physique. But, sitting down, he seemed larger than life as he stood there ready and waiting. To me, he was bigger than life with a command presence that spoke volumes. Normally, I would be about head taller than him. Like an aging samurai, his rugged good looks showed me a man tested by life. He grew in wisdom and understanding. Dr. Strife always exhibited a calm and self-assured composure not matter what was going on. Such demeanor had attractiveness, which was one way to describe his demeanor and courage in the face of imminent danger. He just wasn't going to let anything push him around. For him, things like valor and patience were essential qualities. Those steel grey eyes could look right through you and into another dimension. He believed life was an illusion in which it only mattered whose side you were on. The good one or the bad one. Didn't matter what happened while you waited for death. Or, how cruel thing were. All was a cosmic charade. The only important thing was making to the final parade. Everything else was just people, props and storyline.

"90 yards and closing," he pointed out. "The Black Widow thinks she's cornered us." He shook his head, looked down at the hard wood floors. "Our safe house has been compromised." He reached for his shoulder holster under his left arm and gripped his pistol. A special gun with a built in silencer, the weapon was a gift. An old friend in the Israeli Mossad gave it to him. This 15-shot subdued black metal .357 magnum auto pistol was Israeli designed. He was never far from his gun, or two or three.

Black Widow was Myla Trench's code name. A notorious woman of the world, she was ruthless, seductive, and disastrously beautiful. Psychopathic, she was capable of anything. He was obsessed with her. Ever since his wife died in a plane crash, he pursued the Black Widow with vengeance. He blamed her, but, at the same time, he was fascinated by her. They were polar opposites, yet, similar in some respects. She was as skilled a warrior as he. Neither were afraid of fighting each other. I suspected they were just afraid of knowing each other more intimately. They made choices for better or for worse. He had become a lonely man, and she knew how to exploit his feelings. Although seemingly bizarre, he needed her for the truth to be revealed in him. He would sometimes say that motives fall into two main categories, love or money. In this case, it was personal, not about money, but all about love. My thoughts shifted when I saw Dr. Striffe's right hand moved very slowly toward his right hip. There, tucked in a waistband holster, was his special P3 pistol. A subtle smile formed on his face as he got ready.

The P3 was a unique highly advanced gun. Our sci-fi guys designed it at Area 51. Based in part on nano-technology, the P3 used phased energy propulsion. The Phased Plasma Pistol fired a burst of energy so powerful that non-physical entities were instantly vaporized. They were blasted into another dimension beyond our present realm of reality. Physical entities and structures, on the hand, were incinerated to ashes. Pure silver plated coils and components served as the primary structural parts to enhance the functioning of the phased relay action of the gun. When fired, the burst of energy coming out of the barrel looked like a tiny ball of brilliant silver colored light. This was our equivalent of the “silver bullet”. The gun stored the equivalent of fifteen shots per charging. One drawback was the recharge time between each series of firing. A few minutes were required. Neither vampire, nor werewolf, or demon could withstand this kind of firepower. As his hand moved slowly to the gun, he continued to hold the binoculars steady with the other hand. He sensed their multi-dimensional presence. They sensed his and were afraid.

“75 yards and closing,” I commented, turning to a monitor. “Scanners are reading nine intruders, with an array of weapons.” I paused for a second and continued very calm with deliberate focus.

“Don’t move, Jack.” His gaze was serious. “Be very still. It’s behind you. Doubt let it in. She opened the doorway and sent us a gift. They strike like rattlesnakes.” In a split second, the gun was out. He moved so fast action blurred. “God plays his games and let’s these things tempt us.”

With his right arm extended, he peered at the beast and pressed the trigger. A blast of white-hot energy exploded from the gun. I felt the heat trail just above my head. A sizzling sound right above my neck rung in my ears. I thought of bacon being fried on a hot skillet full of boiling grease. This was a multi-dimensional hideous entity with a ghostly appearance. Right after the sizzling sound, there was a loud pop, as though someone had stuck a needle in a balloon. I jerked my head around to look at this thing. The beastly apparition had wolf-like features snarling of death and decay. The smell wasn’t that great either. I caught a glimpse of the demon fading away into blackness. The beast vanished while hissing curses at both of us in various uncommon tongues and bizarre words. You simply can’t have doubts in combat.

“Back to blackness of the grave, into the convergence,” I yelled with contempt. The demon’s eyes glowed red as it disappeared and shouted curses. “Remain confined until the end.” I had whipped around with my pistol but I was too late, too slow. “They sure don’t like those guns.” My smile was betrayed by a sigh of relief. They’re always there, hiding in darkness, waiting for an invitation. Myla’s playing tough.

“Good thing for you,” he said, “I’m a good shot. God forbid it gets a foothold in your mind. The Were-beast demon is nasty like a harpy. Rips your mind into shreds of doubt and fear, discord and strife.”

“Thanks,” I answered, rubbing my forehead. “They will devour your soul. Where did this present evil come from? How did it bridge time and space? Necromancers?” I offered. “Myla, no doubt had a hand in summoning their presence. You shouldn’t mess with dead things.” I glanced at the computer screen. “Fifty yards and closing.” The message blinked frantically, as though the computer was trying hard to get us out of there, but felt as though it wasn’t being heard. The menace of the Were-beast was gone for now. “I think they’re going to surround us. We need to make a move.” He nodded and we moved. Always have an escape route, he would often advise.

“Striking distance, brace for impact, they’ve fired on us.” he called out, back at the window scanning the terrain. “Time for a discreet exit through the basement. Alert Rusty we’ll need the chopper, a SAC team and start tracking our movements,” he said calmly and then dove for cover near the fireplace, rolled behind the couch, and kicked over a lamp stand. Rusty was always ready. The thought of her brightened him up

I grabbed my old Colt .45 customized auto-pistol from my side, and ducked under the huge wooden dining table. With the remote control device in my left hand, I pressed a series of buttons. That locked in a coded signal to the computer. A destruct order was activated. At the same time I sent a signal to the local airport. In the next instant, one of the intruders had fired a rocket-propelled grenade. The explosion tore the porch off the front of the cabin, tilting the structure as the foundation started to collapse. Although the windows withstood the blast, the support beams were cracking. Another blast ignited the propane tank along one side of the cabin. A huge fireball erupted followed by a wall of flames that engulfed the roof and the walls. We slid down the stairs into the basement and ran toward the escape tunnel.

By late tomorrow, the newspapers would report that a remote cabin burned to ground due to faulty wiring and a propane gas leak. The local police would find no bodies in the ashes. With the owners, us, supposedly out of the country, insurance claims would be filed through appropriate representatives. All this, courtesy of a SAC unit, or a special Search and Cleanup Team. Those guys were good. The whole place would be sanitized. A doorway to deception would open. Three rounds from an RPG, a rifle propelled grenade launcher, ruined a perfectly good hideout. Even our escape Jeep, parked next the front porch, was now scrap metal. On the brighter side, the bad guys actually did us a favor financially. They helped increase our cash flow for the end of the year. Given the value of the cabin and the surrounding property, the insurance company would eventually pay off an amount in excess of \$1,000,000 to the M.A.G.I. Investments Group. Our real-estate lawyer, if he lived that long, would want to sell the property at a profit. By the end of year, we will actually make money on the whole incident. Unless he makes a deal with someone, which ends up costing us money. Is this a great country or what? M.A.G.I. was very profitable. Meanwhile, we knew Ms. Rusty was on her way. She was indeed a rescuer.

“The tunnel’s dark, damp and cramped,” I complained. “You always have to have an escape plan, right? So why does it have to be cold? My pants are getting soaked from crawling through this wetness, the mold and mildew.” He ignored me and kept moving. Being a big guy, I could barely squeeze through the basement escape hatch. Once again, we escaped yet another assassination attempt. As we inched our way through the tunnel, we heard the crushing sound of the cabin collapsing on its foundation. A combination of a sudden rushing wind, a heavy impact and ground shaking motion could be felt through the tunnel. Seventy-five yards from the cabin, the Doc unbolted the latch and pushed open the metal cover. We surfaced very carefully and scanned the terrain with night-goggles. Being wet was uncomfortable in the cold. The rain was now a steady downpour. I couldn’t wait to see that fiery red headed pilot. I knew he was probably thinking about her. He had not made any moves in that direction. At any rate, he tossed his black backpack out to the ground. We low crawled to cover in a thicket of trees and underbrush. From our vantage point, we assessed the outside of the cabin and surrounding grounds.

Prior to the cabin's collapse, the computer and all other equipment had disintegrated. This effectively destroyed any classified information and associated materials. Our safe house was a heap of burning debris. I could hear the distant sound of sirens down on the main highway. They were still quite a distance from the smoldering ruins. Once here, they wouldn't venture far from the remains.

"I count nine targets," he whispered, peering through his reddish tinted goggles. "Looks like eight males and one female." He paused for a second. "Sure looks like her, the Black Widow's here, maybe. The shape, the dark black hair, and the walk seemed the same. Could it be the Black Widow has moved in for the kill? That's gutsy. She's doing the job herself. What do you think?" He turned slightly in my direction. "One of the eight could be a second female, a backup to the Black Widow, can't be sure."

I peered through my night-vision goggles. "I'd say, that's her. Boy, you sure hacked her off. She either flew in from Mexico City or Toronto, one of the two. Given her vanity, she may have cloned herself. She's a pro, and I wouldn't underestimate her." I made quick adjustments to enhance magnification. "We could take out three or four them." My gosh I thought, she was here and still fatally beautiful.

"Not here," he answered, feeling sad for her. "Let's lure them away. A tactical withdrawal from the scene." Dr. Striffe wanted the pleasure of secretly neutralizing them. "Let's get them down to the grist mill by the river. I'll deal with her there. The SAC team can do a better cleanup and disposal job there."

Was he really going to do it? We watched them carefully examine the debris. They picked over smoldering chunks of wood. Deducing we were not there, the breath taking woman with long black hair became angry. She cursed loudly. Motioning wildly with her hands, the others assembled around her. His high-powered black auto-pistol was out of the holster and firmly in his right hand. My old Colt .45 was also ready. I slowly attached a matching black silencer to the heavy gun. Warriors avenge things.

"Time for action," I whispered to the Doc. "They won't take us without a fight! Old Marines die hard."

"Let the transformation begin," he smiled back. "We'll execute Plan B." He winked and then headed into the woods. He whispered back to me as he left, "The old gristmill down by the river. Let's go!"

"Plan B?" I whispered. "When did we move from Plan A to Plan B?" He was ninja-like and gone.

"God makes the mysteries of life," he said vanishing. "Our job is to uncover as many as we can."

We moved into the darkness of our surroundings. The nine intruders sensed our presence and moved in our direction. Hounds to the hunt, their black clothing seemed eerie. With red goggled eyes, they were fast in picking up our trail. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I felt a sacrifice was going to be made. Him or her? For now, the Colonel wanted to take them deep into the national forest. The abandoned gristmill, where the public was not allowed to visit, was appropriate. We would eliminate them one by one. Jogging in a crouched position, we took twists and turns. Up and down overgrown trails, he followed the rushing stream to the southwest. We made no sounds and we could hear them not far behind. They picked up speed in a careless manner. Our pursuers ran faster and faster through the thick blackness of the night. Slowed by dense vegetation, they pressed onward after their prey. The moon hid behind cloud cover. Lightning shot through the darkened sky. Thunder rocked the surroundings. I knew at some point, Rusty, our outstanding pilot, would soon come to the rescue. She never failed us. Always faithful.

“You sure did a number on her,” I said, as we paused to assess their distance. Vegetation slowed their progress. We pulled them deeper off the beaten path into a remote area of the woods. “Their movements are not subtle or stealthy. They were far too noisy. Our senses pick up every sound.” There was slippery wetness everywhere. The rain chilled the air. “Perhaps it’s the hunger of the chase or the foolishness of over-confidence that accounts for their clumsiness.” And, then again, we were not alone, as we had help. They had help. Lined along the thicket of shrubs and brush, we felt the powerful presence. Just out of the corner of my eyes, to each side the pathway, I caught a glimpse shadowy figures. There was a pale light of reflection. Forces on our side kept watch from the dimensional convergence. “Our friendly forces are here.” I noted. The presence stayed focused on the dark shadows that moved toward us. Striffe saw them too. He glanced in my direction, smiled and shrugged. How could we lose? The murky blackness and its ill intentions held back at the encounter of such a powerful array. Guess I was more grateful than him. “You’re still angry,” I added under my breath. He nodded in agreement.

The old gristmill was just up ahead. We were on the slimy path leading to the rustic remains. Rundown and decaying, the old structure had been closed to the public. Warning signs told us to keep out or risk prosecution. The message was muted on the face of rotten wood. Chipped paint and faded letters struggled to be serious. Down the steep wooden stairs, and then across the stone walkway, we entered the structure. Dampness made everything slippery. I opened the front door with a forceful shove. We inched inside with pistols close to the ribcage. Backs hugged the wall, senses were alert and eyes scanned the interior. Striffe backed in behind me and carefully observed the grounds. The shadows and the sounds around us became threatening. We knew they were not far behind. Striffe’s gun had changed appearance since we left the cabin. His pistol took on a distinct new look of high-tech design. A metal stock had been added to the butt of the gun. An extended barrel attachment gave accuracy. At the end, a thin silencer was affixed to muffle each round. Snapped into position above the slide mechanism was a small night-vision scope. An extended magazine gave the weapon 33 rounds. The whole weapon had a water-resistant black finish. Each bullet was pre-fragmented. The rounds were encased in a metal jacket with a hollow point. They were designed to maximize an explosive force. Tissue destruction inside the body was the objective. A life-threatening cavity would enhance incapacitation. Placement and penetration were essential.

“I’ll stay angry for a long time to come,” he said whispering. “Their presence is all around us. Testing the perimeter, carefully closing in, they encircling us.” He felt the wrapping of their web. Their movements strained old wooden planks with creaks and rubberized slippery sounds. “Concentric circles. Pull them into an ever-tightening circle of distraction and misdirection. Get them in close and personal so they never see it coming until it’s too late.” Abruptly, two red-eyed black faces peered from opposite corners of one window on the first floor. At that point, the Colonel pulled his ninja act. There was a sudden orange-red flash and muffled burst. Two shots from his pistol-rifle. Two heads exploded spewing fragments in the air. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked overhead. An echo of howling madness came from the woods. Were-beasts charged the madness of the clutching darkness. A psychic feeding frenzy was under way. Crosses and holy water? Only in the movies. “Keep watch,” he said in another whisper.

“Rules of engagement and survival,” I acknowledged, as fatal wounds felled two assassins. The darkness was highlighted by a crimson display of brain, bone and blood. The two corpses collapsed on the outside sidewalk. Lifeless forms slid into the black mud and grey rain. Eerie silence fell upon the shadows. The Colonel was a good shot. Yet, would he kill her later?

Outside, the darkness was held back. A faint light brightened slightly, as though a veil had been pulled to one side. An inner sanctum was opened. Fighting back, an oozing oily blackness seeped through cracks and under the door. Something moved in my direction. A shadow to my right. Door hinges creaked. I fired multiple blasts from my trusty .45 caliber pistol. Someone slumped against the door and it swung wide open. A black clad body fell through the doorway. There were three holes near the center of the chest, below the throat, to the left of the sternum. A blood trail ran at an angle out the door, down the walkway and into the stream next to the mill. Three down and six to go.

I felt as though the two of us outnumbered the bad guys. And yet another opportunity arose. My senses alerted my mental tracking system. Rainwater was leaking profusely through the roof in various places. Drop after drop hit the top of my head in a subtle annoying way. Someone was now above me walking very stealthy. Out of the corner of my left eye, I caught glimpse of the Colonel’s trench coat moving slowly, opposite from where I last saw him. The reflective shine of light from a hidden source illuminated a shadowy presence over my head. Angling both arms straight up, I fired three shots in rapid succession. A gurgling groan of agony followed with subsequent silence. Rotten wooden planks began to weaken and buckle under the strain of a collapsing body. Crashing through the layers of shingle and boards, a minion fell two floors to the ground. And, the intruder landed hard with a heavy thud. Two rounds left in the old Colt. I ejected the magazine and reloaded another, discarding two perfectly good .45 caliber bullets. I was not risking a reload in a firefight. Four down and five to go. The were-beasts were not happy.

The crashing body had broken the wooden planks of the floor where it smashed from the rooftop. A strange shaft of light, a beam from above, illuminated the body in a grayish hue. I inched closer, as a snail traverses the edge of a razor blade, both halves fully intact, careful to use peripheral vision in all directions, and knelt down. The sanctity of life, one half death and one half-life, sprawled in lifeless form. You make your choices. The shadows held their breath. Powerful and brave looking men, clad in the armor of celestial battle, stood their ground and watched the shadows. The fabric of dimensional constraints strained against the binds of reality. Three holes, just below the left side of the sternum, hit at a sharp angle and shredded the heart to ribbons of muscles tissue. Blood had oozed across the stomach and down the sides. I caught movement out of the corner of my right eye. The Colonel was cat-like with extraordinary and mysterious abilities that often defied the imagination. But, the intruder at my feet was definitely dead. I checked the carotid artery, and then pulled the goggles and mask off the face. Taken back for a second, I quickly noted it was a woman. The mask of sanity hides the nightmare within. She was attractive with short tight cut brown hair, almost like a crew cut. Her eyes glared coldly straight up. No emotion could be seen the mask of death. Her mouth hung open in a shocking gasp. The sudden impact of what happened was a surprise. What a shame, a wasted life.

“The next move is still theirs in this chess game,” He advised under breath. “We understand the rules of engagement and survival.” That’s what life, and all its complications, is about.

First rule, assume you’re already dead. Once you realize that, nothing else matters. Then move on to win. There’s no award for second place. Be calm, focused and control anxiety Believe you will prevail. Rid yourself of self-doubt. Remember, no partner stays behind. Always question what is the truth and whom do you trust. The answer is, in this world, when it comes to human nature, trust no one. If you’re dead to this world, nothing and no one can hurt you. Second thing, use all your senses to fully apprehend your surroundings. Go beyond the boundaries of the mind. He has taught me well. Other rules come later.

There was movement underneath the floor structure. Another assassin had entered the game. The movements were slow, skilled and deliberate, as he crawled from under the foundation of the old mill structure. From a lower hatchway, which led to a drainage trough, he and his partner entered the main floor area. As though he were a large snake, he slithered into a crevice in a nearby corner. Preparing to strike with his accomplice he waited. They covered each other’s movement across the room. Smells of moldy decay, dampness and age permeated the atmosphere.

The gristmill had been built across a crevice over the river that ran through the county. Remote and quiet, it was an excellent place for an ambush. It was also a good place to make a stand. Either way, the public would never know what went on here today. There was creaking sound outside, as a huge paddle wheel turned. A stream raced toward the river and rocked the old wheel in slow counter-clockwise fashion. Elevated on large stilts above the river, access to the mill could be gained by following the stone steps downward at a sharp angle toward the river. Our two present intruders had used this approach as their assault plan. We had no idea where the ringleader was at this point in time. She was probably holding back, waiting and watching with the dark forces that supported her deadly intentions.

“I almost hear your thoughts in the flash of an instant,” I said to myself. The Colonel stared back through the darkness of the room. I was transforming too. He was still training me the ancient ways.

At that precise moment, one of the intruders leaped up. He arched his body as a serpent ready to strike. Fangs unfolded for the attack, he opened fire in my direction. Bullets ripped through the wall behind me. Boards ripped and window glass shattered. Splinters and shards showered the immediate vicinity. I rolled to one side and hit the floor. I fired several shots at my attacker. One shot hit his shin, splitting the bone. Another one hit his knee bringing him to the floor. The third shot hit the temporal region of the right side of the head. He collapsed face down. His backup jumped up at the same time. He fired his muffled machine pistol in a reckless arc. Crazy by the sudden split-second action, the second intruder went wild. Misdirected bullets tried their best to find me. I was not there. Before I could adjust my sights on the second intruder, he collapsed and fell on top of the first one. He was hit twice in the back of the head. The shots were fired from across the room. The Colonel stepped from the shadows. I waved back to let him know I was okay. He was a silent vigil keeping watch with calm stillness. Six down, three to go, and our side was winning. Failure was not an option. That was part of the first rule. Evil did not have to play by any set of rules. I wondered, where was the moral uprightness in the things we did?

“We had plenty of enemies to go around,” he said in a hushed voice. “Some here definitely have a score to settle. The Black Widow now has two bodyguards left to get the job done.” He knew these guys, from their tactics, were definitely human. The others, the hybrids, the fallen ones, they would do business a lot differently. As they slipped through the dimensional convergence, they got far more devious and deceptive. So, the Colonel moved with skill and ease, invisible in the presence of these enemies.

Two more were underneath us. The Colonel pulled his vanishing act again. With the wave of his hand, the visual realm around us grew dark. Enemy thinking became clouded, as if a heavy fog had fallen. Penetrating the enemy’s movements, passing by without a trace, he circled behind. They didn’t see it coming. One crashed through a window and the other kicked open a rear door. Together, their machine pistols blazed muffled spurts of deadly projectiles. A trail of bullet holes traveled in a coordinated arc around the confines of the mill’s interior. Both assailants had calculated their concentration of firepower, but not their fire control discipline. The sound of two metallic clicks told me both guns were empty. I had already dropped through the floor. Hanging from a piling underneath the mill, I wondered where the Black Widow was. With one hand extended, hanging on tightly with the other, I fired four shots. The bullets blasted through the floor planks. I calculated the footsteps by listening carefully to their movements. One shot ripped through a calf muscle causing the leg to buckle. As the intruder fell to the floor, three shots followed to the mid-section, hitting the lungs and heart. There was a heavy thud. The assassin was out of the action. I ejected the spent magazine and reloaded the last one.

Hanging from his knees, the Colonel’s legs were wrapped over a rafter. Dangling like some trapeze artist, the Colonel viewed the scene in an upside-down position. In his right hand, the rifle-pistol zeroed in on the second killer. A red dot from the laser sighting system appeared on his kneecap. He looked down in apparent amazement. Frantically, he jerked his head back and forth in an attempt to locate the source. The red dot found its way up the torso to the center of the forehead. Just as he was about to move, in a split second of indecision, a muffled sound echoed from above. The bullet traveled a precise trajectory and punched a hole through the front and out the back of the cranium. The intruder jerked backward suddenly, stiffened by the sudden trauma. He fell hard to his left side flattened against the wall. The Colonel swung in an arc and landed comfortably on both feet. Glancing around the room, he looked for the last of the assassination squad. Eight down, one to go. And, I only had eight rounds left. That should be sufficient for the job at hand. Time to finish this I thought to myself. Were we in checkmate yet?

We didn’t get a precise sense as to the whereabouts of the Black Widow. She would not have called it quits, even with the loss of her team. Fighting to the death was crucial. The passion was too intense. Critical issues hung in the balance. The Colonel stared down at me as I clung to the piling making. What was he waiting for? He made a couple hand signals, which indicated he was going to circle the perimeter. I nodded agreement and eased myself down to the rocks below. I slipped and lost my balance. Once down, I moved backward toward the embankment under the mill. Cover and concealment were necessary. I could feel the chill through my clothing. The material clung coldly to my skin. A presence was near.

There were no sounds from the woods. Water ran over rocks in the river. The sound seemed louder than normal. My breathing was echoing in my ears and my heart pounded. Then I felt there was someone else breathing close by. I knew where the Colonel was. He was still above me in the mill. I didn't check the embankment right behind me. The foundation was dark. A blob of blackness appeared to grow there. A Formless entity molded to the configuration of the understructure. Then, out of this speck of darkness, she emerged. Clad in a black skin-tight latex jumpsuit, she slowly removed the mask and hood. She shook her head from side to side. Jet-black hair formed around her face. A cruel thin smile appeared. Tall, thin and mean looking, she stared at me. A demonic molten contempt peered from greenish hysterical eyes. She was as I knew her before, darkly sensual and terminally beautiful. Her left hand, with thin sharp pointed black fingers, held a Russian Makarov pistol. A muffled extension protruded from the barrel. The Black Widow was left-handed. A detail I tried to remember from her dossier. Seconds ticked by. I thought I could hear the mechanism of my watch clicking. Face to face, gun to gun, man to woman, here we were. This was the moment of truth. Cosmic forces kept watch. Where were they? Why didn't she shoot me? Was she going to torture me first? Why didn't I shoot? Where was the Colonel? Paralyzed by a spider's venom, I'm dead I thought. I waited for the muffled sound of a silencer cloaking a bullet.

I dove to my right, squeezing the trigger multiple times. The slide locked back and the gun was empty. She fired at the same time. Bullets zipped by my head and shoulders. Every round I fired went directly at her, but they found no target. Her skills were good. She spun to dodge each bullet, hit the ground and rolled to a standing position. I fell in the river and floundered to the shoreline. Crawling, I was confronted by her quickness. With me as her target again, she shook her head and took aim. Without warning, her gun was knocked from hand. A swift kick from behind took out her right knee. A hand blocked her turning maneuver, holding the arm out of range. A sharp chop struck the side of her neck. She collapsed to the ground, momentarily stunned. The Colonel signaled me to get out of water, as the Black Widow came back to life. She charged him with limping movement. Thrusting her dagger to his heart, she gave a fierce yell. The Colonel moved at the angle to her attack. He deflected the knife with one hand. His other hand came upward across her neck. With a reverse grip, he sliced the carotid artery with a razor sharp knife. She staggered a short distance screaming profanities. Blood spurted in an arc, and she crumbled to the ground face down. Her body protested with violent jerking movements, and then she was lifeless. Nine down none left. Essential to the first rule of survival, you don't leave your people behind. Everyone gets out.

Cautious and still looking around for more assailants, Doctor Striffe knelt by her body and rolled her over onto her back. For a brief moment he seemed sad. Wiping blood from the blade, he put the stainless steel dagger in the sheath in his boot. I crawled out of the water and gathered my soaking dignity. As I approached the scene of the Black Widow's demise, I couldn't believe it.

"Our most important precept is to ensure justice," he said, looking up at me. "Beware the deceptions. Bearing the strife of life is never easy. Being forthright in our actions means no malice. Yet, I have a painful coldness in my soul right now. I have to remind myself about what we believe. It helps with the pain. Rectitude is moral uprightness without wavering." (Continued On CD_ROM in Subsequent Chapters!)

Please visit the online trailer for Angels Keep Watch at:

YouTube.Com

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gvb2dpx6pyA>

Or, MeFeedia.Com

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