

by Jerry Levy

Duty

Sunday Night

Paul

Paul Soder had priority status but waited for final call before boarding his flight from Dulles airport to O'Hare. A flight attendant blocked his path with a raised finger and pointed to a soldier in a T-shirt and camouflage pants who was straining to cram a bulging backpack into the overhead bin. The front of his shirt pictured a screaming eagle next to a grinning skull. Paul had a momentary vision of a black bird with angry red eyes and bloody claws. "This will only take a few seconds," the flight attendant said as she reached up to close a few bins. *Just a few seconds*, Paul thought. *About the time it takes to hit speed dial; sip some coffee; ask a question; fire a gun.*

The Day Before

Amelia – Saturday morning

The hotel room was not comfortable. The mattress was too soft, the couple in the next room had been too boisterous, and worst of all, the coffee machine in the room wasn't working. She used hot water from the tap in the bathroom to make her black tea and sipped it through a sugar cube in her cheek while she watched the morning news. It had rained early in the morning, but the exuberant weather lady predicted a warm, sunny day in Chicago. *Good, the Park will be crowded*, she thought.

After showering, she toweled her long black hair, applied makeup, made more tea, and reviewed her plans: stop by Daniel's apartment, take the bus to Michigan Avenue, and have lunch with some people at the Park Grill near the Cloud Gate sculpture. They had called

yesterday to remind her not to be late. An early morning text message had said, *Meet you at noon!!* The reminders irritated her, but she did have a reputation for always being the last to arrive. *Not today*, she silently promised.

With still damp hair, she pulled on her skinny jeans. She usually wore looser clothes—the tightness around her thighs felt awkward. “It’s ok, you’re on vacation,” Daniel had said when she tried them on. “Don’t worry, you’ll look like all the other tourists.”

She slipped into a white blouse that set off her olive skin and hazel eyes. Her locket dangled on a long chain as she turned from side to side to admire her appearance in the closet door’s full-length mirror. The surface of the locket was hammered silver made to resemble an old coin. She opened it to look at the photo of her parents in the apartment that no longer existed, in the building reduced to rubble, in the neighborhood that was deserted except for a few barking dogs fighting over bones.

She sat down on the bed and strapped on a new pair of Ecco sandals with a reinforced sole, perfect for city sidewalks. She loved the faux snakeskin pattern on the sandals, white with streaks of black. She slung a Dooney & Bourke satchel purse over one shoulder, also a new purchase from the Water Tower mall. “I don’t think Mother would have approved,” she murmured to the mirror. And then, *I wish you were here to scold me*, she thought.

Amelia ate breakfast, but the butterflies in her stomach dampened her appetite. *Maybe, I’ll feel better by lunchtime*, she thought for a moment, *and then again, probably not*.

Joseph— Saturday morning

Joseph double-knotted the frayed laces of his worn running shoes, careful not to pull too hard, and started his daily jog toward the Chicago Botanic Garden; his house in Highland Park was just ten minutes away. Joseph locked the front door and once again admired the prairie-

style stained glass panels. The triangular shapes reminded him of a flock of birds in-flight, inspiration for his morning run.

The sidewalks were still damp from an early morning shower. He inhaled deeply, enjoying the smell of wet stone and damp earth. Water dripped from overhead branches onto his head and shoulders. The early rain had washed away the humidity, and the summer sun had not yet warmed the air, so it felt cool and refreshing, perfect for jogging. The solitude allowed his mind to wander without interruption. Some of his best ideas germinated on these runs.

He would meet later today with Janell, his agent, to discuss his new book on alternative investments: hedge funds, real estate, and commodities. He wanted to add another chapter on the use of alternatives in bond portfolios to lower the risk of rising interest rates. Janell was not too keen on the idea because it would delay the Publisher's timetable, but Joseph had argued that this was a hot topic and would make the book more marketable. He mentally prepared himself for the confrontation with Janell and vowed not to be distracted by her charm. *Or those incredible legs*, he mused.

Although Joseph's main duty as an adjunct professor at DePaul University was research, he taught a few classes during the week for the Graduate School of Business. So, they agreed to meet on a Saturday at a restaurant in Millennium Park, a few blocks from Janell's agency. That was fine with Joseph. He rarely had time to spend an afternoon in the city. After the meeting, he hoped to catch the Edward Hopper exhibit at the Art Institute. *Unless I get a better offer*, he thought and grinned. A squirrel peeked at him from around a tree. Joseph raised his thumb, pointed an index finger at the squirrel, and silently mouthed, *bang*.

Amelia – Saturday afternoon

Amelia stepped down from the bus on Michigan Avenue in front of Millennium Park. She had a protective arm around her purse as if what Daniel had given her was fragile. “Here’s a present,” he had said. “You’ll find it useful.”

The meeting with Daniel had taken longer than she had expected. Her armpits were damp from anxiety, and she wiped beads of perspiration from her forehead before entering the Park Grill restaurant. The maître d’ at the front desk greeted her with the trace of an accent in his voice that she recognized; his swarthy complexion, warm brown eyes, and graying moustache reminded her of an uncle back home. He asked the name of the party and tapped it into the reservation system.

“Here it is. They are seated on the patio.” He extended an arm and bowed his head toward her. As Amelia moved past, he whispered something that made her smile, but only for a moment until apprehension about this meeting washed over her.

At the table, three other women greeted her with disapproving frowns.

“Look who’s here and only ten minutes late. Are there any last-minute changes? Is Daniel still coming?”

“Thanks for gracing us with your lovely presence. We weren’t sure you were coming.”

“Did Daniel give you anything?”

Amelia flopped down into the bistro-style chair and stashed the purse under the table. “Don’t be angry with me. Yes, he did, but it took longer than I’d expected. This big purse is a killer.” She barked a laugh and turned to look at the Cloud Gate sculpture behind her. Groups of tourists took selfies against the background of the surrounding buildings under a brilliant blue sky, all reflected on the mirrored surface of the sculpture.

Joseph – Saturday afternoon

Joseph's train arrived at Ogilvie Center ten minutes later than scheduled, a common occurrence on weekends. He had been looking forward to the short walk to the restaurant and was irritated that he had to take a taxi to be on time. He used the opportunity to send a few text messages.

He waved at the Park Grill maître d' when he saw Janell sitting outside on the patio. Her magenta sleeveless dress caught his eye; it made her ebony skin glow. As he came up behind her, he saw she had an empty wine glass next to a pack of cigarettes.

"I see you're indulging in all the vices today—alcohol, nicotine, and me." Then Joseph put his hands on her shoulders and kissed the nape of her neck.

"You're not a vice, Joseph; you're more like a guilty pleasure." She grinned up at him and offered a cheek. "I like that summer tweed jacket. You should wear that with a blue shirt for the book photo. Of course, we'll have to keep to schedule before the season changes, or you'll need a different jacket."

"That's what I love about you, Janell. You never give up. But you're so charming, no one could possibly be offended."

"Don't go all pouty author on me, darling. Would you like a glass of wine?" She motioned to a nearby waitress and tapped her glass. "He'll have one of these. That okay, Joseph? Joseph? Stop ogling that brunette; she's too young for you."

"Sorry, yes, I'll have what you're drinking." He had been distracted by a woman at the next table whose white blouse emphasized her striking almond-shaped eyes. He watched her finger a locket which flashed in the afternoon light as three other women at the table seemed to berate her. His phone buzzed. He fished it out of his jacket pocket and looked at the name on the screen. "Janell, do you mind if I take this call?"

Paul – Saturday afternoon

A few people jogged or rode bicycles, but for the most part Paul was the only one walking on the path behind his condo in Leesburg, Virginia. That suited him—he was not fond of small talk. He liked to keep to a rigid schedule on his way to lunch at King Street café in Alexandria. He passed some deer, almost invisible in the woods, their heads down, nibbling on the tall grass. They ignored him.

When Paul had been deciding between two condos, he had favored the one in Leesburg with a wooded trail behind it. “Forget Leesburg,” his brother had lectured when Paul had asked him for advice. “The condo in downtown Alexandria is a better long-term investment. Besides, the trail goes from Alexandria to Leesburg, so what the hell’s the difference? You go from A to B, or from B to A? You were a math major for Chrissakes, it’s the same damn thing.”

“Actuarial science, not math,” Paul had replied in his monotone. “You’re missing the point. Alexandria has restaurants and coffee shops when I get there. If I start walking in Alexandria, here’s no place on the trail in Leesburg that serves food.”

“So pack your lunch and eat on the trail, or wait until you’re back in Alexandria.”

Paul thanked his brother for the advice and ended the call. *Not the same at all*, he thought, *Why does his brother refuse to admit it?*

A wasp buzzed past his ear and flew into a nest hanging from an overhead branch. *There are wasps in Fig Newtons*, he had once told his brother who at the time had a mouthful of cookie and had almost choked. “You’re a liar,” his brother had screamed. Paul had showed him an encyclopedia article about wasps pollinating figs, but his brother had said that didn’t mean they were in the cookies. That incident became a metaphor for their relationship. Paul would make statements of fact, and his brother would shrug them off. “Oh sure, Paul,” he’d say if they

argued. "And there are wasps in Fig Newtons." That had so infuriated Paul when they were kids, that he'd walk away in disgust.

Paul glanced at his watch to confirm the trip had taken 36 minutes and brushed past a customer exiting the café. A waitress waved at him and pointed a thumb over her shoulder. "The cook just finished a big order; he'll start yours next." He nodded without smiling and strode to his usual table in the back, away from the other diners. He counted to three, sat down, and took out a cell phone and tablet PC from his backpack. After reading a few text messages, he slid the phone into the outer pocket of his cargo shorts and powered up the tablet.

After entering the passcodes for three layers of security, he clicked on a program called Ares. An icon appeared in the lower right-hand corner of the screen: a matador with blue pants and jacket, pointed black hat and shoes, a red cape over one shoulder, and a sword held at shoulder height pointing down. Paul opened another window with the *NY Times* crossword puzzle. He had filled in half of the answers by the time the waitress brought his food.

"Here you go, Paul, the usual: two eggs over easy, but not runny, rye toast that most people consider burnt, hash browns crispy on both sides, not too soft in the middle, and a strip of crunchy bacon. Just like every other meal I've ever served you." The waitress' hand moved to pat him on the back, but it stopped in midair. Looking down at Paul hunched over his crossword, she sighed and walked away shaking her head. *What would it take for him to notice me*, she wondered. "Damn it, Sal, get a grip and stop acting like a freakin' love-sick teenager," she muttered to herself.

"Thanks, Sally," he said while continuing to work the crossword, although Sally had already stalked away. The matador icon started to rotate, and the red cape glowed. Paul jumped up with his device in one hand and his coffee cup in the other. He angled around a few tables and backed into the tiny rest room. He set the cup on the edge of the sink and locked the

door. The room stank of cigarette smoke; Paul cursed the previous occupant. Perched on the commode, he clicked on the glowing icon.

Ares had divided the screen into four panels, each with a different view of pedestrian areas in Millennium Park. The upper left showed the Cloud Gate sculpture, surrounded by tourists posing for photos. Below that was the Crown Fountain with its reflecting pool between two glass brick monoliths that projected digital faces. The upper right view showed the Jay Pritzker Pavilion and band shell. In the fourth panel, the Park Grill and its adjacent patio faced McCormick Plaza. With his eyes riveted to the screen, Paul placed a call to the office.

Amelia – Saturday afternoon

Amelia had an unobstructed view of McCormick Plaza from the restaurant patio. While her friends talked in hushed tones, she scanned the crowd until she spotted Daniel approaching the patio. He nudged his backpack with a bent elbow and continued in the direction of the Cloud Gate.

Leaning to the right, Amelia dragged the purse from under the table and put it on her lap. She unzipped it and reached inside to release the safety on a Glock machine pistol. Her friends searched inside purses and bags for their weapons. She knew Daniel and three accomplices were on their way to position plastic explosives near Cloud Gate and the Crown Fountain.

Amelia pushed the purse off her lap and jumped up. Her locket brushed the pistol barrel. She threw it to one side, steadied the pistol with two hands, and turned to aim it at a couple sitting at a nearby table.

Paul – Saturday afternoon

Paul's call routed into the Ares war room. Several people wearing headphones with microphones stood in front of a large wall-sized monitor. The image on the giant screen showed the same four views of Millennium park as Paul's tablet.

Paul said. "I'm calling from the privacy of a restroom in an Alexandria diner. As soon as I saw the Matador icon flash, I called in. What's the status?"

"Paul, this is Yannie. CCTV surveillance has picked up some facial images that Ares has matched with known terrorists. Their movements are being tracked and evaluated. The probability of an attack is 30 percent. Wait, it's jumped to 90 percent. Ares has detected weapons." Yannie reached for the thunderbird talisman that shared a chain with her ID tag.

Paul said, "Thanks, Yannie. In the same calm voice, he said, "Release the Matadors."

Yannie dropped the talisman. She typed "MATADR ENGAGE" then her password on the keypad in front of the monitor. That caused a similar prompt to appear on Paul's tablet. He typed in his password.

Yannie and others watched a red bull appear over eight suspected targets. Four in McCormick Plaza and four near the Cloud Gate. Paul said, "Hold the line while I make another call."

Ares guided the Matador drones. Ninety seconds after the order to engage, all eight targets were struck by lasers and became motionless. Preliminary estimates indicated minimal collateral damage. Yannie looked at the chaos reflected in Cloud Gate. She was reminded of a Brueghel painting, something about the triumph of death. *Not today*, she thought, *not today*, and rubbed the thunderbird between her fingers.

Paul's voice came back on the line. "Initiate a full alert and mobilize the closest SWAT team. Get them direct access to Ares CCTV monitors. Alert the other section heads. Contact

local law enforcement and the Mayor. Tell them that we have a terr-act in progress. You know the rest of the drill. And make sure our people are on-site for crowd control and media coverage.” Paul put his phone on mute, swallowed some coffee, then cleared his throat and pressed the unmute button. “Please arrange immediate transportation for me to the DC office.”

Paul heard Yannie say, “A limo is on its way. They’ll pick you up outside in ten minutes.” But he ended the call without a reply in his haste to book a Sunday night flight to Chicago.

Sunday Night

Paul

Paul found his economy class seat and silently counted to three before easing down onto the worn cushion. He preferred business class, but at this short notice, none were available. He glanced at the man next to him in the aisle seat whose waistline spread over onto Paul’s side of the armrest. Paul hated to be touched, particularly by strangers. The smell of cigarette smoke permeated the man’s clothes. Paul breathed through his mouth to avoid the stale odor.

“Hi, my name’s Glen, Glen Raus,” the man said and offered his hand as if he was giving Paul a prized possession. “Chicago your home base, or you going there on business?” Without waiting for a reply, he confided, “My company sells security systems and I’ve got a large installation in Chicago. Yessiree, I finally closed this one, and I’m feeling pretty good about it. Hey, we should celebrate—if I can get someone to bring us an adult beverage here in steerage.”

“I’m Paul Soder.” He looked at the offered hand without much interest. “I don’t drink on airplanes.” Paul knew his short responses were often interpreted as rude or unfriendly.

“No worries, you can have a Coke or whatever. Did I say my company is in the security business? Big demand for that sort of thing, particularly in Chi-Raq. No offense if you’re a native.”

“None taken.”

As senior data scientist and group head in the Homeland Security anti-terrorist section, there’s a lot Paul could have said about security, particularly the closed circuit TV and surveillance system most people had no idea existed.

Paul opened the airline magazine. He took a pen from his shirt pocket and paged to the crossword puzzle. While the salesman prattled on about himself, Paul tried to concentrate on the crossword. He gave up, flipped through the magazine and found an article titled, “Three perfect days in Lisbon.” He ignored the words and focused on the accompanying map. He had an obsession about maps. Something about the geometry of the streets connecting parks, monuments, museums, historic residences, and restaurants, always fascinated him.

His younger brother had teased him about it. He remembered the time his father had brought home a map of some Midwestern city from a sales trip. Paul was probably twelve at the time, his brother about seven. While he was sitting in the living room on a sofa set back a few feet from the wall, his brother had crept in and crawled behind it. “Ass-burger’s got a new map,” he had screamed and jumped over the sofa onto Paul. He used to hate that nickname, a garbled attempt to say Asperger. Without thinking, Paul had pushed him away with more force than he had intended. His brother had landed on a toy truck and cut his chin which had required a few stitches and had earned a stern rebuke from his father who then took away all his maps for a month.

Paul turned off the overhead light to feign sleep. Going back home always brought back memories of his first career as an actuary. He had started out analyzing data and looking for

systemic fraud in health claims submitted by unscrupulous physicians and health facilities. The work was tedious for most people. He enjoyed looking for patterns in the data.

He found he had a talent for it and developed modifications and enhancements to the company's programs. The reduction in losses from fraudulent claims was, in the words of his manager, "Eye-popping." That success accelerated his career. Soon, he directed a team of actuaries. Other insurance companies asked to license the new software which became the national standard.

Many companies using the program realized substantial savings in their Medicare supplement plans. That caught the attention of the branch of the Department of Health and Human Services responsible for Medicare and Medicaid. They contacted Paul which led to a three-year consulting project. The results saved tax payers billions.

Near the end of his contract with HHS, Paul received a call from someone at the Department of Homeland Security who was vague about what they wanted to discuss. At the first meeting, they asked about analyzing real-time data from CCTV cameras, specifically patterns of aggressive behavior. That piqued his interest. Once Paul had received a high-level security clearance, they called him for an interview.

Paul was at first overwhelmed by the prospect of working on the Ares Project for Homeland Security. It seemed so far afield from his previous work. The Secretary of Homeland Security asked to meet with Paul and told him, "We may not be able to solve international terrorism, but safeguarding citizens within our own borders is a top priority for the President. Frankly, he made some campaign promises that are critical to his credibility. He told me to make it happen or to start looking for a new job. I told him I liked this job just fine and to leave it to me."

Paul counted silently to three as the plane's wheels touched the tarmac with only a slight bump. He exited the plane and didn't make eye contact with the flight attendant who wished him a pleasant journey. Several CCTV cameras looked down from unobtrusive corners in strategic locations of the terminal. Most people would hardly give them a second thought. Paul knew that they all linked to government computer servers. He stared up at the CCTV cameras wondering if his team was tracking him.

Carrying a stale croissant in a greasy bag and a paper cup of tepid coffee, he exited the arrivals section of the terminal and looked for his limo. The driver was maybe five feet, 110 pounds, and had at least two inches of lift on her black platform shoes. Her gray slacks and blue blazer were nicely tailored. When she bent at the waist to open the door, Paul saw the brown strap of a shoulder holster.

He avoided looking directly at her, counted to three, and sat down in the back of the limo. A conservative talk show blared from the radio. He asked the driver to turn down the volume. The host was attacking the liberal establishment for the growth of terrorism in the US. *Terrorist attacks have spiked*, Paul thought. That was why the government CCTV program was created. The cameras decreased response time. More importantly, the data analysis, image recognition and drones prevented some attacks and reduced collateral damage for those that couldn't be avoided.

"My instructions are to take you to the Fairmont Hotel, is that correct, sir?"

"Yes, but I want to take a slight detour. You can exit at Ohio." Her accent and name on the license, Cosmina, piqued Paul's interest. "I'm just curious, were you by chance born in Romania?"

"Yes, in Bucharest. Have you been there?"

"No, but I had a math professor who got his degree at UB."

Normally he would not initiate conversations with strangers, but something about Cosmina had allowed him to ask a personal question.

She smiled, which made him relax a little more. “You are very straight forward. I admire that in Americans. It’s too bad most of your politicians are full of bull—ah, hot air. I am now a citizen of this fine country, so of course, they are now also my politicians.”

The ride to downtown Chicago was quick in the light traffic. The limo exited the expressway at Ohio. He asked Cosmina to take Wells South and make a left at Monroe. At Dearborn, he asked Cosmina to pull over and pointed out the window. “See those large, black-metal doors on that building? There’s a cow path behind them.”

“Really? A cow path? I have never seen a cow in downtown Chicago. Except those plastic ones many years ago.”

“No cows, just the path.” He told her about the farmer who kept an easement over land he sold in 1844 for his cattle to pass from his farm to pasture. “The path is a strip only 10 feet wide and 175 feet long. The farm and pasture are long gone, but the easement remains under the building that was erected over it.”

“I’ve never heard of that. Thank you, sir. She smiled, but he did not smile back. Several seconds later he wanted to smile, but the moment had passed. *I’m like a CCTV camera*, Paul thought. *I silently record what’s happening but take no action.*

He did not tell Cosmina that behind those doors was an arsenal of Mobile Anti-Terrorist Attack Drones—MATADR. *It’s an apt acronym*, he thought. *Each drone has a laser that much like a sword can inflict cutting strokes, or when needed, a final coup de grace.*

Yesterday afternoon those doors had swung open only 18 inches. A few people walking by had said it looked like a flock of angry black birds swarming out of the top.

As the limo pulled in front of the Fairmont Hotel, Paul noticed barricades at the end of the block and several trucks with the initials WGN, CNN, and other news stations logos stenciled on the sides. The trucks' satellite dishes were like giant prying eyes. *The media vultures are still here*, he thought. *Millennium Park is just a few blocks away.*

"I'll pick you up tomorrow morning at 9:00," Cosmina said. "The morgue is on West Harrison Street, a fifteen-minute drive from here. Please call me at this number if you need anything, no matter the time." She handed him a business card. "The Secretary sends condolences to you and your family and hopes people remember the happy times with your brother."

The happy times, Paul thought. There weren't so many happy times when he was growing up, and his brother teased him endlessly. That had changed when Paul left home to attend the University of Illinois. His impulsive younger brother had gotten into one scrape after another and called on Paul for support. At first Paul was a reluctant ally. In time, he came to feel like a trusted confidante. The roles were reversed when he asked his brother for advice about a girl in one of his actuarial science courses. "You totally have to ask her out, ass-burger," his brother had chided. "What are you waiting for, a perfumed note on your desk?"

The brothers came to rely on each other. Paul remembered the time his brother called from the island of Madeira to tell Paul he was madly in love with a Portuguese travel guide and intended to marry her. Paul had listened and with great effort had not offered logical arguments against the union. The marriage never came off and his brother offered no explanation. *That's how we got along*, Paul thought. *I silently recorded his indiscretions without unleashing harsh judgment.*

Paul felt his phone vibrate with an incoming call. He took it from his suit jacket, recognized the number and decided not to answer. Then his eye flicked to the Matador icon. He grimaced, closed his eyes and massaged his forehead.

When Ares had identified Millennium Park as a potential target, Paul remembered that his brother would be at the Park Grill—Joseph had texted from his taxi on the way to the restaurant. Paul's first duty was to call the war room. Then he hit speed dial and sipped coffee to steady his nerves. His brother Joseph answered, "Hey ass-burger are you keeping the world safe?" Then the sound of gunfire had exploded in Paul's ears.