

Chapter 2

Monday, June 18, 2016, 6:58 AM, Paterson, New Jersey

Landon Blackburn parked his shiny black Lexus LS-16 and scanned the immediate area in the garage. He knew that Marshall Pollard, the founder of Nadir Consulting, chose this location because of the building owner's commitment to security. Yet Nadir's activities created powerful enemies. After years of operation, managing real threats and containing imagined fears became nearly impossible. With the expansion of third-world countries and their impact on the oil market, there were more ruthless players vying for the world's decreasing energy supply. That made the situation complex and potentially dangerous. He set the alarm and locked his car.

In the old days, he toted a briefcase that was handcuffed to his wrist. This prevented inadvertent loss of sensitive documents that revealed Nadir Consulting's nefarious activities. Modern computer communication techniques eliminated the need for paper documentation or transporting discs. It was far safer to transmit encrypted documents from one computer to another over Internet communications.

He checked the immediate area again and dashed to the elevator. After using the palm scanner, he stood under the floodlight in full view of the surveillance camera and waved to the security officer who monitored everyone entering or leaving the building. Even with all the building's security, he looked over his shoulder. For two weeks he felt like an actor in a fifty-year old B-grade movie who suspected that a stalker followed his every move.

It took an eternity for the elevator to respond, and he studied his fuzzy image in the stainless steel elevator door. *You're slipping, Landon. There was a time when you stood tall and proud in front of these doors—eager to get to work. Now your hair is thin and gray and your shoulders droop. Now you conjure unrealistic fears and coming to work feels confining—no—stifling, like walking into a prison cell.*

You've become a pitiful old man. When the elevator doors opened, he stepped inside and used a plastic card key that verified his identity. This automatically authorized a trip to the sixth floor and Nadir Consulting's office suite. The door closed, and the elevator began its ascent. Enclosed spaces made him nervous, and he used a handkerchief to wipe the perspiration from his forehead and scalp.

The elevator door opened to a broad marble tile lobby, and the smoked glass doors advertised Nadir Consulting etched in six-inch letters. He entered his eight-digit identification number on the door's security panel. This activated a relay that unlocked the door. Landon stepped inside and waved to Nadir's only female employee, Tanya Jackson, a slender African American woman who worked as the manager for front-office activities. She had no way of knowing the real purpose for Nadir Consulting or the existence of undisclosed back-office activities. Although Ms. Jackson's job performance exceeded Mr. Pollard's expectations, security mandated her replacement. This protected the firm's real business from discovery.

"Coffee this morning, Mr. Blackburn?"

Landon felt the pacemaker stimulate his weakened heart, and he unconsciously rubbed his chest. "My doctor says to avoid the caffeine, but thanks. Is Mr. Pollard in yet?"

"You know him. He practically lives here. Oh, there's a man in the lunch room who's waiting to talk to Mr. Pollard."

"That's interesting. I didn't know we were expecting a guest. Do you know why he's here?"

"He's reviewing our employee handbook, sir. I think Mr. Pollard hired him."

Blackburn squinted. "Hmm—Mr. Pollard didn't say anything to me about someone joining us."

"Oh, Mr. Pollard wants to see you as soon as possible. Perhaps he'll provide an explanation."

"Okay, Tanya. I'll scoot over and see what he wants. Did you finish the background checks on the charity executives that I asked you to do last week?"

"Yes, sir. The folders are on your desk."

"Good, I'll look at them later then decide on whether to distribute the funds."

Tanya pressed the button for the inner office door security lock, and he entered a darkened hallway that led to four offices, a lunchroom, an executive washroom, and a storage room. In his office, he saw the eight folders that Tanya mentioned in the center of his mahogany desk but decided to see why Pollard wanted him. He took a crystal

glass from a countertop and walked across the hall to the lunchroom for some ice and bottled water.

Landon stood at the lunchroom doorway and looked at the man Pollard chose to augment the Nadir staff. The new employee concentrated on several employment forms, filling in the required information with an expensive-looking ballpoint. The man sat at the table, and his broad shoulders and straight back cut a striking first impression. His dark blue pin-striped business suit seemed molded to his upper torso. Landon estimated that he was at least six foot tall and perhaps in his early forties although his clean-shaven face and angular jaw made him look younger. The guest looked up from the paperwork that included a company handbook and government tax and health insurance enrollment forms. His steel blue penetrating eyes advertised an intimidating hardball demeanor that made Landon nervous. *Is this out with old and in with the new?* Blackburn produced a fake cough to attract the man's attention then walked toward him.

"I'm Tanner Frye. You must be Mr. Blackburn." The man stood and offered a handshake that caused Landon to wince.

"Yes, Mr. Frye, you're correct. My first name is Landon. I see that you have our employment documentation. I didn't realize we were going to hire anyone, and your sudden appearance here comes as a surprise. No doubt that's what Marshall wants to see me about."

"I'm sure we'll get along just fine," Frye said with a smile that revealed his bright white perfectly aligned teeth. "Hey, is it always this quiet around here?"

"We are very efficient. The work that we do is exacting and demanding. For us there's little reason to have a larger staff. It allows us to concentrate on our business because there's no need to manage other people."

Frye just nodded.

"Anyway, let me see what this is all about. We'll talk again soon." Blackburn tossed a few ice cubes into his glass and filled it with water then went across the hall and used his special rap on Pollard's closed office door to indicate who was seeking entry.

"Enter," a gruff voice said from the other side of the door.

Blackburn opened the door and could only see Marshall Pollard's bald head over the top of the high-backed office chair. "All right, it seems like you have everything well in hand," Marshall said over the telephone. "Just pay attention to the details and keep me up to date." Marshall turned slightly and pointed to the leather chair across from his desk. Landon sat and sipped from his glass while he waited for Pollard to finish his telephone conversation. "I know you've

never failed, but that's why we pay you. As you know failure can be disastrous." Marshall listened for a few seconds. "It's simple. It's my job to harass you, Franz. Just keep your men in line and perform the mission according to plan."

Marshall put the telephone receiver down and turned toward his colleague.

"So Operation Dervish has started," Landon said, pulling on his salt-and-pepper beard as he always did when he became nervous.

"Yes, just as we planned. Be ready to sell the petroleum futures contracts so we can get paid for the risk we're taking."

"When I deem we'll get the maximum profit, I'll execute the sell orders. Marshall, I won't leave my desk even to go to the bathroom."

Marshall laughed. "I know. You're very good at timing the market."

"With the volume of oil we control with those contracts, a few seconds could mean thousands of dollars. What was it you wanted to talk about?" Landon asked.

"Did you see Tanner Frye in the lunch room?"

Landon studied Marshall's face for betraying expressions that might reveal hidden intentions. "Yes, I saw him. It looks like you're planning to hire him."

Marshall pushed a manila file folder toward Landon. "Here's his background information."

Landon picked up the file. The first page contained Tanner's picture and a summary of his work history. Beads of sweat surfaced again on his scalp and trickled down through his thinning hair to his neck. The end of the file folder betrayed his shaking hands and nervousness. "Unless we're planning to expand our operations, it means you're planning to get rid of me. What am I—suddenly disposable or a security risk?"

"No—no, it's nothing like that. Actually, it's time for me to go," Marshall said with a grimace. Landon noticed the slight narrowing of Marshall's eyelids and wondered whether he was telling the truth.

"Marshall, we both signed on to this job for life. We know that the only way out is a solemn celebration in a funeral home."

"Yes, that's what I'm trying to tell you. It's me that's leaving. I'm dying, Landon. It's metastatic cancer."

Landon's eyes widened, but the end of the file folder stopped oscillating. "I am sorry, Marshall, I had no idea. How long have you known this?"

“I subjected myself to a battery of tests a month ago. And yes, I’ve had a second opinion. You’ll naturally take over my responsibilities. Mr. Frye will assume yours.”

“Does he understand the importance of what we do and the need for absolute secrecy?”

“Tanner engineered the great currency squeeze that nearly bankrupted Malaysia six years ago. That says a lot about his intelligence, ruthlessness, and loyalty. Take some time and study his qualifications.”

Landon knew Marshall too well to believe he was discussing all of this in a casual manner. “How long before . . .”

“How much time before the cancer gets me?” Marshall offered to help Landon phrase the question.

Landon nodded.

“The doctors tell me I have a few months at most. But I don’t want to live my last days all drugged up in a hospital bed. When the time comes, I’ll put an end to my suffering. That way you won’t have to worry about me revealing what we’ve done here over the last thirty years.”

Landon nodded again. “It takes courage to do that, Marshall, but it removes any doubt about continuing the firm’s work for the industry without any possibility of unwanted exposure.”

“I’ll do my part when the time comes. Don’t worry about that. For now, we’re facing a busy day. I’ll get started with indoctrinating Tanner while you stand by to liquidate our petroleum contracts.”

Landon tossed back the last few ounces of water and stood. “I know that there’s little room in our firm for sentimentality, Marshall, but I want to thank you for years of leadership and helping me to amass a fortune without enduring any legal entanglements.”

Pollard held up his hand. “Enough said about this. We have more important things to do today than dwell on my infirmities. I’ll send Tanner over in a few minutes so he can get an idea of what we really do.”

Landon nodded and recognized the significance of Pollard’s stiff-arm that was suddenly thrust at him. “Yes, of course you’re right.” He headed for the office door with the file folder. “Do you want me to tell Tanner that you’re ready for him?”

“Yes, thank you. I might as well begin his indoctrination. Who knows how much longer I’ll be useful.”

Landon closed the door and relayed the message to Tanner Frye who was just completing the last of the employment forms. He returned

to his office and logged in on his computer. He began rechecking the trading instructions that would soon be released to three dozen eager commodity brokers who would independently execute the precise instructions that should net the consulting firm several million dollars. He stopped halfway through the list and leaned back in his chair.

This doesn't add up. When did Pollard go to the doctor? Why is he handpicking Tanner without telling me or getting my input? He fingered his beard again as he examined everything Pollard just told him and how he phrased it. *For a man who's terminally ill, he's controlling his emotions extremely well. Maybe he's lying.* Landon felt the sweat rolling down his neck again.

Marshall Pollard stood when Tanner Frye entered his office and marched across the room with an outstretched arm offering a handshake. Pollard instinctively backed away. "You must forgive me, Mr. Frye, I have aphenphosmophobia—a fear of being touched. It's something I cannot control. Please, don't take it personally."

"We all have our defects. I can't stand high places," Tanner said as he sat in the wing-backed leather chair diagonally placed from Pollard's desk. "I guess running a small company like this one helps you."

Pollard nodded. "That's not really the reason we have a limited staff, but it does keep me from spiraling into an intense anxiety attack." He approached and sat on the corner of his desk closer to Tanner but out of arm's reach. "I mentioned that Nadir Consulting serves a hidden master. Your appearance today indicates your desire to make a lifelong commitment. There are several things you must understand before you make this commitment. Listen carefully."

"All right."

"You were chosen because of your business acumen and your military experience. Your resume says you had four tours of army service in Iraq."

"That's correct. I was in Special Forces, and several times I participated in activities in Iran that didn't make the newspapers."

"The position you're considering is unique and may require activities similar to what you experienced in the service."

"I'm older now, but I'm still physically fit. Let me assure you I'm not squeamish. I'll do what it takes to get the job done."

"If I continue this conversation and reveal what impact we have on world affairs, you cannot leave this office without accepting who and what we are."

Tanner nodded. "I'm not a stranger to quasi-legal activities, and for the right money, I'm willing to join your organization."

“I know that, but it will cost you your life if you suddenly have a change of heart.”

“Proceed. I’m ready to commit, especially if there’s five million dollars a year in it for me.”

“The financial rewards change a bit from year to year, but it hasn’t been below four million for twelve years now.”

Tanner nodded. “Let’s begin then.” Marshall Pollard inhaled deeply, allowing Frye a few more seconds to change his mind. “From now on you are committed.” He looked at Frye’s face for any sign that he might have second thoughts about joining Nadir Consulting. He took a manila folder from his desk drawer and sat in the matching chair facing Tanner Frye.

“Thirty years ago, a consortium of petroleum industry producers, refiners, and distributors created a fund to safeguard their energy market share and expand their profit margins. Nadir Consulting received those initial funds. They essentially gave us a free hand to do what was necessary to achieve their objectives. Since then, not one memorandum, not one telephone call or additional payment came from the industry. Officially, we don’t exist. And because of that, they’ll be able to duck any serious congressional or criminal investigation.”

“Does that account for the shiny front office and involvement with charities and foundations?”

“Exactly. The front-office business requires little time and attention and shields our real purpose.”

“I don’t understand. If they aren’t involved, how do we get paid? I can’t believe you’re getting enough money from foundations to support their objectives and pay us.”

“Mr. Frye, we’re in the unique position. While we aren’t on petroleum industry payrolls, we still need the means to fund our operations. We initiate many of the energy-related events that occur throughout the world. In effect, we create the future and use the capital markets to whipsaw the commodities market gleaning substantial profits. In the process we achieve petroleum industry goals.”

Tanner Frye considered what he just heard and understood the ramifications. “So officially, we receive a small salary for our foundation efforts and tuck the other money in offshore bank accounts.”

“Right again. Everything hinges on maintaining anonymity and using restraint with the money we’re paid,” Pollard said.

“I understand prudence with hidden income. The last thing I want to do is to get into trouble with the government because of income tax, but what about enjoying this money?”

“You’ll see that our responsibilities justify the luxury that we enjoy. Often duties require extensive travel, and we don’t book in coach or do we have to worry whether the hotel staff changed the bed sheets since the last guest. We’re strictly first class at all times.”

Tanner nodded in agreement. “What do you expect me to do?”

Pollard smiled. “The first thing you have to do is to secure your position within the firm.”

“I thought by agreeing to learn about Nadir’s activities, I had employment.”

“Mr. Tanner, we have a small staff here for a reason. Right now with you here there is one person too many.”

“Is Mr. Blackburn leaving?”

Pollard handed the manila folder to Frye. “He doesn’t know it yet, but he’s serving his last days with Nadir Consulting. Your first mission is to ensure that he leaves and is incapable of doing the firm any harm.”

“You want me to kill him?”

“Only if you want his job; otherwise, your days on this planet are numbered. For you it boils down to a ‘me or thee’ situation.”

“What guarantee do I have that you won’t turn against me?”

“None. Just know that Nadir Consulting employed Mr. Blackburn since its inception. This action against him isn’t personal. He has known all along what the firm requires of him.”

“Does this mean he’s not performing well?”

“His work here within the firm is exemplary,” Pollard said. “I just can’t trust him anymore. He’s changed. Lately, he developed a nervous tick and began second-guessing the impact of our activities.”

“Guilt feelings, perhaps?”

“Yes, I do believe that’s it. Strange—after decades of facilitating many activities that were clearly illegal and gaining tremendous wealth, he’s thrown it all away. I hired someone to follow him. You have the investigator’s report in your hand and a summary of items that justify my concern. You’ll see that suddenly he became a practicing Catholic. This started about a year ago.”

“And you’re afraid he’s revealing the consequences of firm activities in the confession booth?”

Pollard nodded. “Understand that in all the years I’ve been working with him he never attended church or talked about his religious beliefs. Now he’s preoccupied with it.”

“Anything else?”

“He’s always looking over his shoulder, muttering to himself, sweating and lately he’s been visiting a psychiatrist. It’s all in the

investigator's report." Pollard said as he handed him the folder. "I don't want him to read this. Understand?"

Frye nodded. "With the two of you working together for years, isn't he suspicious about my sudden appearance?"

"He certainly was. I told him that I have terminal cancer, that he would replace me and you would be working for him."

"How soon do I need to act?" Frye asked.

"Every day that you delay causes me to doubt your value to the firm. I'm afraid the effect is cumulative."

"Do you have any advice on how I should perform my first mission?"

"Nothing other than the obvious. Whatever you do, don't put yourself or the firm at risk."

"Do I have to present my plan to you before I implement it?"

"Absolutely not. I'm not in the hand-holding business, and I can't be involved in any way."

"What about the priest and the psychiatrist?"

"Aside from the damage to our firm and billion dollar losses, the oil industry's reputation is at stake. Our anonymity guarantees our survival. Nothing is more important than that." Pollard looked at his watch then stared at his new colleague, forcing Frye's nod that indicated he understood the consequences of a breach in security and the implied instruction associated with the priest and doctor. "Do you have any other questions?"

"Only one. May I call you Marshall?"

"Mr. Frye, you may call me by my first name when you're no longer a provisional employee."

Tanner suppressed the urge to extend a handshake toward his new boss. "Thanks for the opportunity to work here, Mr. Pollard."

Pollard only nodded. "You've got a lot to learn about our operation. I suggest that you get started." Pollard looked in the direction of his office door, indicating the meeting was over. He waited until Tanner Frye closed his office door before donning a pair of white cotton gloves. He sprayed industrial-strength disinfectant on every surface his new employee and Landon Blackburn touched.

Monday, June 18, 2016, 4:20 PM, Gulf of Oman

Franz Puzkas looked out the window of the Russian-built Mil-17 military helicopter that pulled back to slow forward motion and trimmed rotor speed allowing a slow descent to the deck of the *Xibu*, China's enormous ultralarge crude carrier. The helicopter, leased from an international dealer, retained the distinctive white-and-red-stripe

color scheme of the Iranian Red Crescent, the Middle East equivalent of the Red Cross. The same aircraft provided relief operations for the beleaguered citizens of BamBom, Iran, after the 2003 earthquake. Twelve eager commandos in full body armor carried Kalashnikov, AK-47 automatic rifles. They waited as the pilot turned slowly to align the helicopter's door with the ship's bridge then landed thirty feet from the access ladders.

The *Xibu's* captain barked orders and three of the ship's crew members appeared with revolvers to prevent access to the bridge and the ship's controls. Puzkas started his stopwatch and gave the signal to the assault team leader who opened the helicopter's door. Three of the ship's crew members' chests turned crimson from short rifle bursts from the helicopter as the assault team jumped to the ship's deck. The shooting prompted the radio operator to follow the captain's standing order and transmit an emergency message requesting military assistance.

Three attackers headed for the ship's bridge while the remaining force disbursed to subdue the remaining crew. Franz Puzkas adjusted the helicopter's satellite uplink to broadcast live video to Paterson, New Jersey, and the Middle East news network, Al Jazeera. He pointed the portable television camera to the port side rail broadcasting the plight of the surviving crew to the world. The assault team barked harsh commands while they pushed and shoved helpless men toward the starboard side of the ship where they bound or handcuffed them to the railing.

The assault team descended into the *Xibu's* engineering spaces and overpowered the ill-prepared engineers. Blood, from the heads of two maneuvering room watch standers, sprayed control panels. The assault team leader wiped the bone fragments, hair, and brains from panel instruments to read gauge and switch labels. He switched the main engines from remote control to local. This action prevented engine control from the ship's bridge. Using the push-button controller, he adjusted the engine's speed to maintain four knots. This was the minimum speed that permitted effective steering and control by the ship's rudder.

In the steering compartment, another member of the assault team turned the steering control from remote to local, preventing bridge operation of the ship's rudder. He repositioned the ship's rudder fifteen degrees from dead center. He closed the hydraulic system supply and return valves effectively locking the rudder in position. He could feel the floor angle changing as the ship leaned to port while it responded to the rudder forcing a turn to starboard. With no one to alter the *Xibu's*

speed or rudder position, the ship would turn in large clockwise circles blocking all ship traffic in the Strait of Hormuz.

In the ship's radio room, another assault team member demanded that the ship's radio operator broadcast a prepared message:

Islamic people of the world, unite and defeat western imperialism. Together we may do Allah's will. With one act we brought the great lapdog petroleum industry to its knees. What then can we do if we unite as brothers in a great Islamic nation?

Franz Puzkas pointed the television camera toward the bow as the assault team strapped a dozen fifteen-pound packages to the ship's deck. Three minutes later, the assault team returned to the helicopter. Puzkas clicked his stopwatch and shut the door just as the last commando jumped aboard. "Not bad, only eighteen minutes and twelve seconds for the whole operation."

"Let's go," he said to the helicopter pilot over the headset. "Get us to Al Fujayrah as quick as you can."

The helicopter's rotor speed increased and lifted the helicopter from the ship's deck. It turned and accelerated to the west where the assault commandos would disburse in the United Arab Emirates and neighboring Oman.

Monday, June 18, 2016, 7:39 AM, Paterson, New Jersey

Landon Blackburn could tell by the knock on the door that someone other than Marshall Pollard sought entrance to his private office. He turned from the array of computer screens and television monitors to direct his voice over his shoulder to the closed door. "Come in."

"Mr. Blackburn, Mr. Pollard said that I should join you to witness an ongoing operation."

"Yes. It's a pity you've missed the live action. Operation Dervish just concluded, but you may watch the short video I just recorded." Blackburn pointed to one of the video monitors. "I'll replay the clip for you."

"Operation Dervish? That's a funny name."

"We sponsored an attack on a huge oil tanker and disabled the crew. You'll see the ship that's turning in endless circles just like the religious zealots that twirl as they meditate. Now others will pray until this runaway oil tanker is safely under control. Better bring the chair around so you can see the effects of our morning's operation."

Frye noticed the digital clocks that recorded time in Qatar, London, and New York City then repositioned a chair to look over Landon's shoulder. "This is an impressive setup you have here."

Blackburn only nodded and started the video of the marine assault in the Strait of Hormuz on one of the four television monitors. "Our Middle-East operatives landed on the *Xibu*, the world's largest crude oil transport ship. At the moment, the ship is steaming around in circles right in the middle of the channel. This not only threatens the *Xibu* and its three hundred thousand tons of crude oil but blocks other ships from entering or leaving the straight. The ship's crew members are either dead or restrained on deck."

"Aren't there military ships guarding the straight?"

Blackburn brought up a map of the area on another flat panel computer display. "The United States and British navies patrol, but their ships stay out of the choke point to prevent being part of the navigation problem. Our men used a helicopter disguised as a Red Crescent aircraft and flew under their radar to avoid detection. It took approximately twenty minutes to take over the *Xibu*. Those forces you're worried about are just starting to respond."

Frye saw the commando team's assault on the large ship and its crew. He grimaced when three of the ship's crew fell to the deck from the gunfire that left crimson splotches on their chests. He peeked at the adjoining computer monitors that displayed rows and columns of numbers.

"We try to limit the casualties during our operations. The captain of this ship made the wrong decision by resisting against an armed force. Does it bother you that we're responsible for these deaths?"

"From Pollard's briefing, I'm aware of Nadir Consulting's purpose."

"I mean, does it bother you personally?"

"In business, I'm as aggressive as they get, but I haven't been involved with any scheme that required or directed gunfire. So I haven't thought about it much. What about you?"

"I have to admit it tugs at my emotions, perhaps more than it should." Landon bit his lower lip. "I didn't have much time to look at the file that Mr. Pollard gave me this morning, but I noticed you've had experience trading commodity futures and options. Trading currency contracts was your area of expertise. That'll come in handy here."

"I see that you're tracking petroleum, gold, silver and U.S. dollar commodities," Frye said, pointing to the computer screens.

"Over the past few months, we've purchased petroleum futures contracts on exchanges from around the world. For example, the

New York Mercantile Exchange sells one thousand barrel contracts. By spreading our purchases over time, using different contract periods, different market exchanges all over the world and using false names for establishing the accounts, we control a considerable amount of oil.”

“What’s Nadir’s definition of considerable?”

“Precisely, one million three hundred thousand barrels of oil, but that will change by the end of the day.”

“Because of the assault on the ship?”

“Exactly. Before the assault, all of our contracts were already making money. Right now, we’re three quarters of a million dollars ahead. Now with our manufactured crisis, those countries, companies, and speculators will respond to the crisis and drive the price up.”

“So with every dollar increase in the price of a barrel of oil, Nadir rakes in one million three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Yes, it’s quite possible that we’ll earn five million dollars or more before we start a sequential dumping of the contracts.”

“How will you know when to sell?”

Landon flipped a few switches, and instantly, three television monitors showed Middle Eastern, British, and U.S. cable news programs. “I simply watch the news reports, get updates from our assault team leader, and watch the change in market price.”

“What are the packages the commandos are strapping to the ship’s deck?” Frye asked.

“They’re intended to look like explosive charges. We’re not really interested in destroying the ship and causing a huge environmental problem. We really want to maximize worldwide fear to affect speculative interests and drive up market price. As you know, the market price moves because of supply and demand, but with oil, there is a considerable psychological component.”

“You mean perceived risk and fear?”

Landon nodded while he kept his eyes glued on the updating computer screens that showed changes in contract prices.

“Well, this sounds easy enough. You sell the contracts based on the first indication that the ship is out of danger.”

Landon smiled. “If things go as anticipated, that’s right. It’s still subject to unknowns. If the American or British navy personnel successfully prevent the oil tanker from colliding with another ship or breaking up if it runs aground, I’ll be selling later today.”

“And if the ship cracks in half?”

“I’ll simply slow down the sales to maximize the profits. Either way we’re positioned to make a considerable amount of money.”

“We’re chartered by the petroleum industry, beside the obvious temporary price swing, what do they get out of it?” Frye asked.

“Once the world captures the news event and the various market mavens broadcast the potential impact on supply, retail prices for natural gas, gasoline, and other refined products will increase. Fear will probably perturb the precious metals and currency markets as well.”

“But the crude oil price will drop if the ship is saved.”

“Yes, and retail prices will drop, but not to the original price. By adding to the world’s supply of angst and fear, consumers will accept the slightly higher price.”

Frye nodded. “What about the postoperation consequences?”

“We always make it look like an act of terrorism. Since the oil-producing countries also gain from higher crude oil prices, they understand the process. They either take the responsibility on the chin or promise to investigate and help track down terrorist’s groups acting within their borders. Actually, very little gets done. Eventually, the people forget, and the incident gets added to the list of other Middle-East events.”

“I understand. This type of thing has happened so much that the world’s collective conscience is numb.”

“In time you’ll learn about our investment network and our trading patterns. Any questions?”

“Yes. What about the commandos? Can they be trusted?”

“They’re handpicked by Franz Puzkas. He takes care of our foreign operations, and he knows what’s at stake. Occasionally, he’ll change who he uses and retire anyone who steps out of line. So far it hasn’t been a problem because the ones selected live like kings with fifty thousand dollars for a few hours work.”

Frye noticed that the helicopter left the ship’s deck. The onboard camera operator panned to the tanker’s stern, revealing the curved wake trailing behind the huge transport ship, then the video ended.

“Mission accomplished?” Tanner asked.

“Yes, due to our broadcast to Al Jazeera, the petroleum futures contract prices are on the upswing in Europe. Our markets will open in a few minutes and with the speed of worldwide communications petroleum trading will be furious.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Not much, just help me keep tabs on the world events. Once we’re sure that a rescue operation is successful, we’ll initiate the automated trading sequence to sell the contracts and reap the profits.” Landon showed Frye the controls for switching the satellite feeds for the various business and news programs throughout the world.”

“What else am I responsible for?” Landon asked.

“You have to monitor every nuance of world events and their potential effects on the petroleum industry. If there’s a threat, you’ll work with me and Mr. Pollard to develop an operation that nullifies it. That will come later.”

“How much more is there?”

Landon smiled. “You’ll see. Basically, you’ll be involved with whatever it takes to protect petroleum industry interests and Nadir Consulting’s security.”

“I know it’s a little late to worry about this, but do you find the stress gets to you after a while?”

“Unfortunately, for me, I do suffer from stress-induced attacks, but that goes with the job,” Landon said, subconsciously placing a hand over his heart. “After all, with the salary Nadir offers, you’re expected to do the job without grumbling about personal discomfort or inconvenience.” Blackburn switched the channel to Al Jazeera that started broadcasting the story about the attack on the *Xibu* supertanker. The video they broadcast showed the crew members being handcuffed to the ship’s rail and the placement of packages along the ship’s deck. Blackburn smiled. “Petroleum just jumped twenty cents. It looks like the fuse is lit on the fireworks. If you have any questions, better ask them now because we’ll really need to keep abreast of the latest events.”

“I only have one question, Landon. What’s it like to work with Mr. Pollard?”

Landon pondered the question and twisted the hairs on his beard. “Marshall Pollard is the most dedicated and intense person I’ve ever met. He demands perfection from himself and leads by example. Together we made plans for many operations over the years. He’ll encourage your input and listen then debate with you until an optimum plan is developed. Once you accept that, working with him isn’t bad at all. Just remember two things.”

“What’s that?”

“Never try to touch him, and above all, never cross him.”

Chapter 3

Monday, June 18, 2016, 9:52 AM, Tarrytown, New York

The new Weare Enterprise corporate headquarters became the crown jewel in the group of twelve buildings in Tarrytown's new corporate center. Due to the company's exponential growth, the old brick office building in Westchester, New York, outlived its usefulness. His parents, the founders of Weare Enterprises, pressured local and county politicians and made the ultramodern commercial facility a reality.

Jonathan entered the new glass and chrome building and showed his identification to security guards. After scanning his body for weapons, they allowed access to the bank of elevators that took him to the senior executive offices located on the tenth floor. He was among the few sons in the country that had to make an appointment to spend time with his mother, and he learned from experience not to be late.

Busy, aggressive, and impatient, Suzanne Weare retained controlling interest in the company that her husband, Howard Weare, started and nourished with decades of worry, sweat, and toil. While some fifty-eight-year-old women might sit back and play mahjong with aging crones, Suzanne Weare snapped the whip over contract lawyers and executives—a process necessary for managing and expanding Weare Enterprise's vast holdings. As a result, the company's profits grew every year, and the giant corporation's financial war chest contained enough assets to buy out all but the largest companies in the world.

Her marriage to renowned investment banker, Howard Weare, merged his financial expertise with her commercial real estate development skills. The resulting corporation, Weare Enterprises, became a Wall Street legend in ten years. Occasionally, other corporate executives tempted the couple to sell their controlling interest in the company, but often Howard and Suzanne Weare used their financial

clout to take over the pursuers' companies by purchasing enormous quantities of their stock on the open market. Eventually the capitalist bloodhounds learned their lesson and chose not to participate in hostile takeover attempts against Weare Enterprises.

The couple rose through the ranks of capitalist royalty, but their reign only lasted a few years. Howard's aorta ballooned and ruptured without warning during a weekly game of handball designed to keep him physically fit. Suzanne Weare, burdened with additional corporate responsibilities, mourned the loss of her husband, but quickly filled his shoes. She managed the empire with a succession of business decisions that awed corporate executives, who like vultures, tried to scavenge a portion of the decapitated corporate carcass.

Jonathan saw his mother through the glass door that separated her from her secretary in the outer office. With a telephone pressed to her ear, she acknowledged his presence and raised a single finger in the air, indicating that she needed another minute to end the conversation. He last saw her six months ago when he cycled through town on one of his missions to monitor her health. He remembered how guilty he felt when his father died four years earlier. At twenty-four and fresh out of college, he thought his parents would last forever. Self-absorbed and embroiled in establishing himself as a functioning adult, he never thought about losing either of his parents. His father's death altered his behavior. He spaced his visits accordingly and vowed to rescue her from the frenetic corporate lifestyle. Maybe he could divert death's early invitation to the mortuary and the loss of his remaining parent.

Her well-tailored maroon business suit hid the extra pounds that she carried, and he noticed that even at her age she looked stunning. A face-lift removed sagging jowls and the wrinkles, while a professional hairstylist converted snow-white strands to a sandy blond color that nearly matched his hair. When they stood side by side, there was no doubt that he was his mother's son. His blue eyes, high cheekbones, angular jaw showed the mother's gene prevalence in Jonathan's features.

Suzanne put down the telephone and gestured for her son to enter her office.

"Well, I must say this is a surprise," she said nearly crushing Jonathan with an exuberant hug and a kiss that smudged his cheek with ruby red lipstick. "This has to be one hell of an idea for you to bail out on a Hawaiian vacation and leave the hordes of young women that follow you around with their tongues hanging out."

"I was with some old college friends, but you're not wrong. One of them organized the whole trip to . . ."

“To get you in bed so you’d fall in love with her so she could get closer to the money,” she said, completing his often repeated sentence.”

Jonathan flushed. “Yeah, it happened again.”

“Your movie star profile only makes you more desirable. You’ll find the right woman one day. Find one with brains. That attribute is likely to remain intact while sagging boobs and butts lose their allure.”

Jonathan blushed at her frank advice about sexual attraction that breached the gulf of intimate knowledge normally avoided in mother-son conversation. “Mom, I know you’re usually swamped, but I have to warn you that this may take some time, and it shouldn’t be interrupted.”

She looked at her son’s face. His eyes, suddenly filled with vision and purpose, reminded her of her husband. Howard was a dreamer who created an empire by taking decisive action. “Hmmm. I’ll see what I can do.” She buzzed her secretary and gave an instruction to hold all calls. “There, I think I can give you thirty minutes. Now tell me about this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have a huge proposal for you. I realize that’s what’s needed for you to commit—”

“Money.”

“Yes, and lots of it.”

“You’ve never come to me asking for money before. That’s to your credit as a man. I can tell by the look on your face that you’re inspired. So go on. Give me the one-sentence summary.”

“One sentence!”

“I told you before, good ideas sell themselves. If you can’t make the pitch in one sentence, it’s either a crummy idea or you’re not the right salesman. But we’re wasting time. Begin.”

“I want to build a plant that manufactures fuel.”

Suzanne raised an eyebrow. “Manufactured from what?”

“Air, water, and heat.”

“Air and water are easy enough to get, but heat takes fuel. It sounds like you’re trying to invent perpetual motion.”

“What if I told you the heat I’m planning to use is both abundant and once accessed, it’s free?”

“Free! If you’re talking about solar heat, you must realize that our engineers can’t find cost-effective solar panels to justify the expense. Jonathan, if it was that easy, there’d be solar panels everywhere.”

“No, Mom, I’m suggesting we tap into earth heat and use that free energy to make fuel. Essentially, we’d duplicate the earth’s process

for making hydrocarbon-based fuels. To me it is the obvious answer to the world's energy problem.”

“Geothermal power is nothing new. They built a few plants out west—California I think. Again, if that was the answer, there'd be geothermal plants everywhere. Why, even the environmentalists tolerate those plants.”

“Mom, those plants only made electricity. I'm talking about making natural gas, gasoline, diesel fuel—anything that's formed by hydrocarbons.”

“I don't understand the role air and water play in all this.”

“They're the source of the hydrogen and carbon,” Jonathan said.

Suzanne squinted and stared at the ceiling deep in thought. “If this can really be done, it's as good as creating gold.” She stood and walked over to the huge window that provided a scenic view of the Hudson River while she mulled the consequences of chasing her son's inspiration.

“Mom, the chemical combination of hydrogen and carbon isn't difficult to achieve. It requires designing various systems to combine these basic elements correctly to build the desired molecule.”

“If I understand you correctly, it's a matter of designing the systems large enough and duplicating the chemical reaction countless times to make enough fuel.”

“Yes, Mom, that's it. It becomes a matter of scaling up the process and reaping the profits.”

Lost in thought, she continued to stare at the Hudson River. Finally, she turned toward him. “Have you considered the repercussions on society and the world's petroleum producers? Building your conversion plant might be easy, but fighting the established industry is another matter. They're not going to roll over and let you break their rice bowl.”

“I'm aware of that, Mom, but just because they'll make it difficult doesn't mean it shouldn't be done. For decades, our government leaders talked about reducing our dependence on imported oil and being held hostage to hostile governments, yet nothing gets done. The issue with the environmentalists is another battle.”

“That's primarily because the oil industry essentially owns most of the politicians,” Suzanne countered. “It's a fact of life in the United States. How are you planning to get around the established system?”

“Mom, I really don't know right now.”

“How much will this cost?”

“You're really considering it!”

She shook her head. “A good salesman would just answer the question.”

“Sorry, eh—I figure it will cost upward of two hundred and fifty million dollars.”

“You figure?”

“Mom, I just had this inspiration three days ago. I’ll put together a financial analysis for what’s required that will include breakeven and profit projections.”

She scribbled a name on a piece of paper. “Talk to my accounting manager on the eighth floor and tell him I sent you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“If I provide the money for this idea of yours, you’re going to owe me a lot more than thanks. I expect you to work your ass off to make this happen.”

“I’ll do that, Mom.”

“On your way to the elevator, tell my secretary to give me two minutes more, then I’ll take my calls again.”

Jonathan went to hug his mother, but she pushed him away. “We’ve done the mother-son thing already. This is business—big business.”

Jonathan smiled and rushed for the door. When he left the outer office, she placed a call to the accounting manager.

“John, Weare Enterprises is interested in making another investment. Please find five hundred million dollars we can use. Oh, my son is coming to discuss this with you. Don’t tell him how much we’re earmarking for this project. As soon as my son puts together a viable proposal for our new venture, I’ll make a presentation to the board of directors. Meanwhile, just find the money.”

When she was sure he understood her instruction, she hung up the telephone and returned to the panoramic view of the Hudson River. *He may look like me, but he’s got his father’s drive and passion for innovation. That’s something that shouldn’t be ignored.* “I may regret this decision, but it’s time he learned to play with the big boys.”

Wednesday, June 20, 2016, 10:47 PM, Clifton, New Jersey

Tanner Frye parked his car across from Father James Beck’s condominium building. He scanned the immediate area and realized that if there were surveillance cameras, the low level of outdoor lighting made it unlikely that they could capture his image. Aside from a few teenagers speeding around a corner squealing tires and chucking a beer bottle out of a cherry-colored pickup truck’s passenger window and a young couple strolling casually hand in hand, the neighborhood was quiet. He slipped six cartridges in his unmarked .44-caliber Smith &

Wesson revolver and slid it in his sports jacket side pocket. He waited while the couple shared a passionate embrace and disappeared down a path that led between nearby condominium buildings. Frye looked at his image in the rearview mirror and, out of habit, straightened his blue-striped tie. Leaving his car unlocked, he headed directly for the building's front door and the stairway that would take him to the second floor and the priest's front door.

He took a second to catch his breath, allowing him to burn off accumulated adrenaline that caused his heart to thump hard in his chest. He listened at the doorway and heard a crowd cheering. "Way to go, Yankees," a man with a husky voice added to the distant tumult.

Frye pulled the .44 from his pocket and clicked the safety. The revolver, now ready to deliver its lethal punch, felt cold and slippery in his sweating palm. He rapped hard on the priest's door transmitting a degree of urgency.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Who's calling on me at this hour of night?"

Frye heard a soft shuffling of slippared feet as Father Beck padded toward the door that opened two inches with the security chain in place. Frye saw a single blue eye peering at him from a man whose long gray hair hung in disarray over his forehead.

"I'm from the next building in 302. I'm caring for my mom who's very ill. She's calling for a priest. Please come!"

"Did you call an ambulance?"

"No, I'm afraid there's nothing that can be done for her. They sent her home to die. Please, there isn't much time."

"Certainly, it'll just take me a minute to get dressed."

"Thank you, Father." The door eased closed, and Frye heard the priest fumbling with the door chain. "Please hurry." Frye added for effect.

The door opened wide. "You might as well come in," Father Beck said as he waddled toward the bedroom shedding his robe, revealing his blue boxer shorts and a white tee shirt with a small hole near the neckline. Frye stepped inside and closed the door but moved quickly to catch up with the rotund priest.

"Just take a seat in the living room. It's important to your mother that I look like a priest when I appear before her."

Frye scanned the living room and saw a personal computer through an open door. He grabbed the priest by his hair and forced the gun against the man's ribs.

"God is watching you, my son," Father Beck said nervously.

“Yes, Father, I’m sure he is. He also watched you, and it’s time for you to pay for your sins.” Frye pushed the middle-aged man into the office.

“It is not up to you to judge me, my son. Because I believe in Jesus Christ and I repent in earnest, God forgives my sins.”

Frye forced the priest into the office chair and pointed the Smith & Wesson pistol directly at the priest’s head. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

Father Beck’s eyes, now wide with terror, studied his attacker’s face. “I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

“That’s what all the pedophiles say.”

“You’ve got the wrong priest. I never touched any child or human being inappropriately.” Sweat poured from Father Beck’s scalp and trickled toward his eyebrows. “Bishop Congel purged all those troubled priests who committed unsavory acts from the diocese years ago.”

“I’m sure he did, but he missed one.”

Father Beck made the sign of the cross. “I swear I never touched or harmed anyone.”

“You know, I really believe you, Father. Pity, I hoped my actions here tonight would help avenge the victims of forgiven believers.”

“Forgiven believers?”

“Dwell on that thought, Father.” He forced the revolver’s barrel into the terrified man’s mouth and pulled the trigger. The back of the priest’s skull exploded, spraying blood and bone fragments on the lime green wall. Rivulets of blood dripped down the wall.

Frye placed the revolver in the dead man’s right hand and repositioned Father Beck’s arm to support evidence of a suicide. He pushed the office chair aside to allow access to the priest’s computer and looked at the list of the Internet sites the priest normally used. He merged those with a list of hardcore pornographic sites. He switched to the e-mail software, selected Bishop Congel’s e-mail address, and pecked out a message of regret.

Dear Bishop Congel,

Above all I should know of the importance of confessing sins. Now my sins are too much to bear, and I can no longer live with the guilt of my actions when I was much younger and I let the temptations of the flesh overcome me. I recognize that taking my life is a mortal sin and that I will burn in hell for all eternity. I deserve no less for those who trusted me without question and whose trust I misused.

I truly am sorry for those who I have harmed and for the embarrassment that I bring to the diocese and the church. I'm equally sorry for disappointing you, my friend and dear colleague.

Pray for me,
J.B.

He wiped his fingerprints from the keyboard and rolled the dead priest directly in front of the computer screen. He looked at the scene without remorse. Destroying a good man and a good man's reputation meant nothing compared to the consequences of suffering widespread knowledge of Landon Blackburn's confessions. Tanner Frye checked his appearance in the living room mirror for evidence of spattered blood. Finding nothing obvious, he headed for the door. Now it was a simple matter of returning to his car and driving away without being noticed.

Thursday, June 21, 2016, 1:03 PM, San Jose, California

Jonathan Weare located Clarkson Laboratories, Marci Ingram's place of employment. To avoid placing her in a difficult position at her office, he decided the best way to contact her was either after work or during lunch. After waiting two hours, she emerged for a late lunch, and he followed her and two of her colleagues to an outdoor café. He studied from a distance trying to gain some familiarity with her before introducing himself.

Apparently, they ordered by telephone to save time, and the waitress placed their lunch in front of them within a minute after they sat down. Marci gobbled down half a sandwich and sipped from her bottle of gourmet water while her female acquaintances babbled endlessly. She noticed that Ms. Ingram had little interest in the conversation because her sparkling blue eyes had that faraway look as if her mind contemplated the structure of the universe or some equally weighty problem. She refocused on the topic of discussion and responded to a question as she flipped her blonde hair away from her right eye. The slight gesture advertised her latent femininity because unlike so many of California's women, she paid little attention to makeup and maximizing personal beauty. She blotted her lips with a napkin, said a few words, and stood as she threw some money on the table to cover her portion of the lunch. Jonathan moved quickly to intercept her before she disappeared into the lunchtime crowd.

"Ms. Ingram."

She kept walking toward the café door.

“Ms. Ingram,” Jonathan said again, this time a bit louder.

“Marci, you oughta pay attention to this one,” one of her friends said. “He’s kinda cute.”

Marci turned and held her hand up to ward off Jonathan’s approach. “Don’t . . .” Marci said but looked again at the young man approaching her. “Save the come-on. I don’t have any time for a relationship, and you’d do well to hit on one of our world-class babes.”

“Ms. Ingram, I’m not coming on to you. I want to talk to you because you’re an expert nanochemist.”

“How did you find me?”

“I read some articles about nanochemistry and that you’re one of the few experts in this new physical science. I know you work for Clarkson Laboratories and you’re on the cutting edge of developing new chemical processes.”

“Thanks, but what’s your interest in what I do?”

“What I have to discuss is business that shouldn’t be discussed at your place of employment.”

“So you followed me.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Is everything okay, Marci?” one of her friends asked.

“Yes, I think so, Jeannette. Go back without me. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Okay, but don’t forget about your two o’clock meeting.”

“Thanks for reminding me.” Marci turned to Jonathan. “All right, mister, it’s been a bitch of a day. You’ve got a minute—no more.”

Another one-sentence sales pitch, Jonathan thought. “Ms. Ingram, my name is Jonathan Weare from Weare Enterprises. I want you to help me change the world.”

“I’m already trying to do that, but this ought to be good. Go on.”

“I want you to thrust nanochemistry out of the laboratory and bring it into full-scale production.”

“To produce what?”

“I want to produce hydrocarbon-based fuels from air and water.” He paused while he studied her facial expression and to hear her response.

She just returned a quizzical look, and that indicated he needed a bit more to engage her curiosity.

“From my limited understanding of nanochemistry, I’ve learned that we have the capability to make any molecule—any compound. I want to make fuels.”

“Well, Mr. Weare, ‘we’ certainly can do that on a small scale, but I’m afraid that so far it’s like spending a dollar to make a quarter.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it takes energy—usually a great deal of energy to form what we want.”

“Yes, but it also takes money, materials, and labor to find the right location, pull crude oil from the ground, store it, ship it thousands of miles. Then it has to be refined into useful fuel or other products. What I’m proposing eliminates all those front-end expenses.”

“Look, Mr. Weare, nanochemistry is in its infancy, I can’t—”

“Wouldn’t it be more economical on a large scale basis?”

“Yes, but that’s what we’re working on now. We have a few devices that help with recombining basic elements, but these are just prototypes. Even then, what you propose still requires energy.”

“What if I told you that I have a source of free energy?”

Marci laughed. “Then what do you need me for? It seems like you’re all set to change the world on your own.”

“The energy source I have is free, but not portable. We need your knowledge and skills to build an energy conversion plant.”

“What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Stealing you away from Clarkson Laboratories and making you wealthy beyond your wildest dreams.”

“While we’re busy changing the world?” Marci laughed again but stopped when she saw how serious he was.

“Bill Gates changed the world by accelerating the computer industry. Why can’t we do the same for the energy industry?”

“You really believe in this project.”

“Yes, Ms. Ingram, I do—and so does Weare Enterprises. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have flown all the way from New York to talk to you in person. I’m not a crackpot or a dreamer.”

“I’ve heard of Weare Enterprises, but I don’t know much about them. You say they’re backing you financially?”

“Yes, to the tune of a quarter of a billion dollars.”

“Aside from having the same last name as the company, what’s your connection to Weare Enterprises?” Marci asked.

“My parents founded the company. My mother is the principal shareholder and directs its operation.”

Marci took a few seconds to ponder what the zealous stranger said. “I hope you don’t expect me to quit my job this afternoon.”

“No, I expect you to ask a lot of questions. Hopefully, I’ll have the answers and you’ll see what I see. If that happens, you’ll make the decision to help me without any arm-twisting on my part.”

“What role do you envision for me in your world-changing scheme?”

“You’ll have an ample budget to develop conversion equipment and a staff to help you do it. I know that new engineering developments usually take time and multiple prototypes before becoming economically viable. The process I have in mind and the need for vast renewable fuel sources can’t wait for a twenty-year development program.”

“Okay, I have to admit that it sounds interesting and very challenging. I’ll think about this, but we need to talk more.”

Jonathan pondered the best way to meet with her again. “Whatever you suggest will be fine, but I’m trying to assemble a team so I’m pressed for time myself.”

“My day ends at seven, I’ll call you.”

Jonathan gave her his business card. “I’ll be waiting for your call. Thanks for taking the time to listen to me.”

“Well, Mr. Weare, I have to admit you did capture my attention, but I have a lot to lose by leaving Clarkson Labs.”

“Remember Bill Gates quit Harvard for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Don’t miss your chance.” Jonathan Weare shook her hand. “I’ll wait for your call. Perhaps you’ll be interested in the team that I’m assembling to make the future.”

Chapter 4

Saturday, June 23, 2016, 11:22 AM, Scottsdale, Arizona

Jonathan Weare followed the rental car's Global Positioning System instructions to find the subdivision and the home of retired engineer Collin Rhodes. He drove by block after block of nearly identical tract homes that offered little variation in size and style. It made him wonder how anyone with three drinks under their belt kept from walking into the wrong dwelling. He turned right at a T intersection and followed the house numbers. He stopped in front of a beige-colored home with a two-car garage.

To the right of the driveway and front door, a portly middle-age man bent low advertising two inches of posterior cleavage as he pulled windblown debris impaled from his cactus garden. Jonathan rolled down the passenger-side window and stopped the engine.

"Mr. Rhodes?"

The man grunted as he stood up straight and turned to see who called him. "Not to my friends—they know me as Collin." Jonathan noted Collin's white mustache and goatee that contrasted his ruddy complexion and framed his beaming smile.

Jonathan left the car, shook the man's hand, and introduced himself. "I wonder if I may have a moment of your time."

"Lately, I've had nothing but time. No one wants a paunchy old-timer who's past his prime. What can I do for you?"

"If you're the same Collin Rhodes whose efforts correctly positioned the California geothermal plants, I've got a project that I think you'll be most interested in," Jonathan said.

"You've got the right guy. Say, instead of baking our brains out in this sun, let's talk about this in the air-conditioning over a cold glass of lemonade or a beer if you prefer."

Jonathan nodded and followed Collin into the single-story house.